For The Day I Take Your Hand
by quirkysubject

Summary

If you could go back in time. If you had the chance to change that one thing. If you could find out what if.

Would you?

Notes

The whole thing is a merry mix of fact and fiction. Wherever possible, I adhered to the timeline and version of events as depicted in the published biographies of the band, so this
deviates in many ways from the movie. Also, it’s an AU setting, so things change as the story progresses.

No Major Character Death! But this story is set during the early years of the AIDS-crisis, so things will get depressing and scary.

Please heed the tags! This is rated explicit mostly for sex, but there’s also violence and other mature themes. I’ll put warnings in the end notes of chapters, but in general please proceed at your own discretion. If you want more details about a particular warning or are unsure whether to keep on reading at certain points, feel free to e-mail me at quirkysubject@posteo.de. If you just want to chat, great, please also email me, I’ll be thrilled to hear from you!

I tried to write Brian, Freddie, John and Roger as rounded characters, not as saints. So they might be occasionally stupid, unaware, egocentric, wrong, backwards or unlikeable. Their sentiments regarding gender, sexuality, politics etc. might not always be the exact same of someone born in, say, 1999.

ETA: This story is now being betaed by the lovely MeriJasmin! Hooray and thank you so much! 😊

Merci beaucoup to Toinette93 for the French dialogue, title finding and general cheerleading!

ETA: I mean it when I say please read the tags (and the rest of the preface). My interpretation of the characters might differ from yours. That's normal. Please don't be too disappointed when that happens.

This is entirely from Roger's POV so the only version of events you're going to get is his. And he's not an objective observer, but a very flawed human being.
The night is warm enough to sit out back in the garden well into the night with only a sweater around the shoulders. A scary portent of climate change perhaps, but a blessing for two old fogeys plagued with rheumatism and all those other little ailments of age.

“You just never get used to it, do you?” Brian breaks the silence that’s been lying comfortably between them like a well-worn old blanket. “I feel I should, after all this time, but…”

“No. It just doesn’t stop feeling wrong.” Then Roger shakes his head, frowns at himself. He’s not a sentimental one. “Which is bullshit. Everyone dies. It’s how it is.”

“And yet.”

“And yet.” There’s no point denying it.

Silence stretches between them once more. Again it’s Brian who speaks up first. “Do you ever think about how it would be if you could go back? If you could save him somehow?”

Only every single day of his life. “Sometimes,” he admits.

“If you could go back... if you could save him, somehow... would you do it?”

Why is Brian asking him these things? This is not what they do on a night like this. On a night like this they sit and they drink. They don’t talk. All that there is to say on the matter has been said years ago, a hundred times. “’Course I would”, he grumbles.

“If you could... if you could save him... would you do it?”

Brian’s eyes are dark and intense in his pale face.

“No, I mean, really.” Brian sits up and turns towards him, elbows on his knees. ”If the Doctor landed here right now in his Tardis and offered you to come back with him – would you do it?”

Brian’s eyes are dark and intense in his pale face.

“Yes, but...” Roger shrugs. What on earth is the matter with Brian? But it seems important to him, so Roger decides to indulge his friend and thinks about it seriously for a few seconds. “Yes. But I wouldn’t even know how. I mean. What could we do? Lock him up in a cupboard all through the late 70s and 80s?”

Brian shakes his head. “I don’t know, Rog. I don’t know. I’ve just been thinking that... I’ve been thinking that if we’d have been there for him more, maybe...” He trails off for a moment, taking a deep breath. “I think we lost him long before he got sick.”

Roger swallows hard. Of all the things he doesn’t want to think about, that is one of them. “It was a disease, Brian. A horrible disease that he got long before any of us could realize how dangerous it really was. It’s not our fault. It’s not his fault, either.” The words are stale like cardboard in his mouth. They both said them too often over the years.

Brian’s voice is very quiet. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Yeah. I know.”

"Do you remember that time in Munich when he was in a really bad way? Well, we all were, but..."
Roger just raises eyebrows.

Brian's smile is a little sad. "Right, got to be more specific. It must have been around the Works recording, winter '83 or '84. Miserably cold and dark. We were in such a foul mood, just venting at each other, constantly threatening to walk out and quit the band and at some point it just broke out of him. 'You all have family, wives, children...'

"'...what have I got?' Yeah, that was..." That had been awful.

"I think he felt that way for a long time."

Roger sighs, scrubs a hand through his hair. He hates dwelling on these things. "Yeah, I guess." He looks around. "Have we got any more beer?" If Brian wants to talk, he'll need some fortification.

Brian ignores him. "So would you", he asks again in that irritatingly pedantic manner of his. "Go back, I mean. If you had the chance."

Roger throws up his hands. "What, go back to relive the best time of my life and save my best friend's life in the process?" He shakes his head. "Nah, I’d rather sit here with you, nursing my arthritis and complain about young people these days." He laughs. "Of course I’d fucking do it."

"You promise me?" Brian holds out his hand. He looks completely serious, like Roger's answer means the world to him.

Roger narrows his eyes. Something is going on. Something weird that he’ll probably regret in the morning. He hesitates for a second, then he shrugs and shakes Brian's hand. What’s the worst that can happen, really? A fruitless, exhausting exercise in what-ifs that’ll leave them both worn out and miserable by the morning.

Brian gets out of his chair. "There's something I've got to show you."

+++ "Holy fuck!"

Brian stands by in silence, waiting patiently for Roger to get over his little meltdown. To be fair, Roger has been going on in that manner for a good ten minutes.

"Tell me you're not serious, please?"

"Very serious", Brian says for the fifth time and looks at his watch. "Look Rog, can we move on?"

"Move on to what?" His best friend has just gone round the twist. Completely mental. Or set Roger up for an elaborate joke, which... no, not Brian, and not on this date.

"To the part where I explain what we're going to do with it."

"With your..." Roger takes a deep breath. "...your time machine." Saying it out loud somehow makes it worse.

Brian looks like he's having a migraine. "I never used that term."

Yes, Brian's term had been so complicated it had taken Roger five whole minutes to get that his best friends was trying to tell him he built a time machine.

In his garden shed.
"The machine doesn't produce or manipulates time as such, it..."

"Brian, for the love of God, shut up, please." Roger takes a deep breath. "Alright. Let's pretend for a minute that I'm taking this seriously. How on earth would you even manage to build something like this?” Whatever the thing actually does, it looks impressive. A lot of time and thought must have gone into it.

Brian shoots him a disdainful look. “I read. I thought. I did a lot of maths. For 30 years. Then I called John. And we spent the last five years building it.”

“What, John?” Roger hasn’t seen or spoken to him in ages. Have he and Brian been collaborating all this time? Without even mentioning it to him? “Where is he?”

“Home.” Brian fiddles with his ring. “Don’t take this the wrong way, it’s got nothing to do with you. He’s just a bit… I saw him maybe five times in all those years and we’ve barely spoken a word that wasn’t technical jargon.”

Roger takes another walk around the machine. “Look, Bri, it’s not that I don’t trust you, but… this whole story sounds just a bit bonkers. Two eccentric old codgers building a time machine in their backyards?” And then electrocute themselves trying to go and use it, he adds mentally. The papers would have a field day.

“Oh no”, Brian says, grinning widely, “it sounds completely bonkers. But there’s more to us than being old and eccentric.”

“Oh yes, let me see: arrogant, conceited and convinced of their own genius?”

“Clever”, Brian says. “Creative. Dedicated. And obscenely rich. Well, I was. Before I started on this insane project.”

“Expensive?” It looks welded together from scrap metal and discarded 90s computer sets with cables and wires sticking out everywhere.

“Do you have any idea what an hour of computing space on Summit costs?”

Roger doesn’t even know what Summit is. He shakes his head.

“I’ll spare your sanity and not tell you. It’s all done anyway.”

“Brian, is this whole tour just your long-winded way of asking me for money? Are you broke? Because you could have just said, it’s not like…”

Brian grimaces and waves his hands about until Roger falls silent. “Oh stop it. I’m not starving. And even if I were, it shouldn’t matter after tonight.”

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Roger sits down a three legged stool covered in old paint splashes and stretches out his bum leg. There are certain kinds of conversations he shouldn't have to have at his age. “Is this your final goodbye before you take off for Pluto?”

Brian looks at him for a long time with his deep, knowing eyes. “Not me”, he says.

One second. Two seconds.

"No."

"Yes."
“You’re not serious.”

“I’m dead serious.”

“You want me to… You want… Brian, what the fuck?”

“It sounds crazy, I know, but I’ve actually spent a lot of time thinking this through.”

“I bet you have.”

“It works. It really does. I can show you the equations if you like.”

“Yes”, Roger says. “Please, show me the equations. That’ll be tremendously helpful.”

And then Brian actually shoves a binder, three inches thick, under his nose, full of numbers and symbols and diagrams as if any of that would make any kind of sense to a normal human being.

“I was being sarcastic”, he yells, batting Brian away. “I don’t know what any of this means!”

“It’s not that difficult. Well, the quantum mechanics is a bit tricky, but I can walk you through it if you…”

“No. No, I do not want. I… Jesus Christ. I want another beer.”

“Only got ginger ale out here, I’m afraid.”

Roger downs half a bottle in one go before he speaks again. “Brian. I love you, right? You’re my best friend. And the smartest person I know. But how do I know you’ve not just gone off the deep end?”

“Hm. You can’t, can you? You could take me to a psychological assessment but those are terribly easy to beat, I’m afraid.”

Roger does not want to know how Brian knows that.

“The problem is that I can’t demonstrate it to you. It doesn’t work like that. Because the moment I do something to change the past, the future adjusts and we won’t remember we ever changed the past.”

“Oh, okay.”

“But we can do a thought experiment.” Brian is beaming.

“Oh god, can we please not?” He’s read a number of Stephen Hawking’s books (well, started to read them anyway) and he’s only ever been willing to follow those for a few pages. Sure, it all starts out simple enough with twin astronauts and whatnot, but then they all start talking about naked singularities and models of entropy and Roger decides it’s not actually worth the trouble. Give him morally complex dystopian sci-fi any day, but leave the actual Astrophysics to the people with the weird hair.

“See that beetle over there?” Brian points at a small black bug scuttling along the floor. “If I sent it back, say two minutes in time, what do you think would happen?”

“It would… vanish? Into the past?”

“Ah, but things don’t just vanish. They can’t! It’s against the Second Law of Thermodynamics!”
“So what?” As far as Roger is concerned, laws are a bit of a nuisance. It’s not like they’re compulsive or anything.

“So what?! It’s a fundamental law of…” Brian recollects himself, remembering who he’s speaking to. “A fundamental feature of nature. Of reality. It cannot be broken.”

Roger shrugs. “Alright.”

Brian glares at him, like he’s expecting a little bit more awe. Then he decides to move on. “The thing is, when I send something back, it’s not like in Doctor Who. The beetle itself doesn’t actually move. It simply goes back to being the beetle it was two minutes before. Same time, same place.”

“And then three minutes later it gets picked up again and put in the machine and sent back? But then it would be stuck in an endless loop.” Oh god, why is even debating this? That’s what spending time with Brian does to you. Messes with your head.

Brian claps his hands together. “Yes, very good. But that doesn’t happen. Because it can’t happen. Time always moves on. The beetle can’t vanish. Thermodynamics, remember?” He looks very excited. And altogether mad. And Roger is alone with him in a darkened garage, miles away from the next neighbours, with lots of sharp and electric implements lying about. Not that he’s actually worried, Brian couldn’t hurt a fly even if it deserves it, but maybe it is time for them to get back to the house. Maybe it's time for a chat with Anita. Does she have any idea what her husband has been up to?

“Brian…”

“If I sent that beetle back, two things would happen. First, the beetle would still be in here, and second, we wouldn’t have sent it back.”

“We wouldn’t have sent it back?”

“No. The loop, remember?”

“Brian, this is... Are you sure you don’t have any beer here? I’ll settle for whiskey, too…”

“No, listen to me, please. This is important. As I said, there cannot be an infinite loop. So, the past would have changed its behaviour in a way that would have prevented me from changing it in the first. Like, maybe the beetle would have run in the opposite direction. Or maybe there’d be a power outage at the wrong time, or I had a heart attack or...”

“A heart attack?”

“It’s just an example. Look, what we call reality is really just probabilities in the quantum field. There is no preordained future as a mechanistic worldview would suggest. Of course, some futures are more likely than others but–”

“Yeah, I get it.” He doesn’t, not really, but Brian won’t stop until he says he does so this saves everyone a lot of time.

“So there might be some loops. Lots of them, even. The bug would be picked up and sent back again and again until", Brian pauses dramatically until he's sure he has Roger's full attention, "it finally hits on a reality in which it isn’t. And then time goes on, because it has to. And our reality, the one we live in, would adjust accordingly, without us even being aware.”

Roger barely manages to hang on to that thread. “So maybe you did send the bug back?”
Brian laughs. “Maybe I did, yes.”

“And if you tried it again, it might give you a heart attack?”

“I never should have used that example.”

“But that’s important. You’re saying that one way time protects itself is to kill what threatens it.”

God, he can barely believe the things that come out of his mouth.

“Time is not a person, Roger. It doesn’t have murderous impulses.”

“Metaphor, Brian. I’m using metaphor.”

“The thing is, a heart attack is just one of many, many possible outcomes. Very unlikely on one hand – pretty much assured on the other.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Have you heard about multiverse theory?”

“I spent a good part of the 70s getting drunk with you in pubs. Of course I have.” Also, he’s watched more than his fair share of sci-fi. He thinks for a moment. “So you mean that there is always one universe in which you have a heart attack.”

“Yes. And you too.”

Roger needs a smoke. As he lights up, Brian gives him a disapproving look but is too caught up in explaining his mad theory to protest.

“When I send something back, there’s a split. There’s one universe where I do it. And there’s another universe where I don’t do it. And the universe where I do it eventually rights itself, by creating a different reality in which I didn’t do it either.”

“So the time travel deletes itself?”

“Yes!” Brian beams at him like he’s a dog who’s just managed to fetch a stick the first time. “That’s why there are no paradoxes.”

Alright, alright, I get it.” Not really, but he doesn’t want Brian to go through all that again. “So how on earth can you possibly know all that?”

“I thought about it a lot.”

“But…” Roger stops and massages his temple. His head hurts. “Look, if what you told me is true”, which it isn’t, it's insane, he adds silently, "you’ve never actually tested the whole thing. Or you might have, but not in this universe?”

“That’s correct.”

“But you want to put me into this... mad machine!” He points at the massive construction of wires and scrap metal with what looks like a 1920’s style cockpit in the middle. “And because time doesn’t want me all up in her business, she might just decide to zap me, put an end to it right then and there!”

“John and I have checked the wiring itself hundreds of times. There’s no danger of you being zapped.”
“There are lots of ways to kill a man in his seventies, you know.”

“All highly unlikely. Besides. I have tested it.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’m me.”

That argument is more convincing than it has any right to be.

“And because of… echoes.”

“Echoes?”

“Yes. When you go back, there are echoes from the former future. Emotions, images. Not memories, obviously, because it isn’t about your past, but traces of your alternative lived experience. And when I think about going back – having gone back – it…” Brian shrugs. "It just rings true.”

“So what does it feel like? I mean, you have to come into yourself, into your past being at some point, don’t you?”

Brian nods slowly. “It’s like… Have you ever meditated?” Brian doesn’t wait for him to answer. “No, stupid question, of course you haven’t. But you know when you’re lost in thought or fantasy? And then something happens to bring you back into the present, into your own body? Like that, only 10 times stronger. A bit disorienting.”

“Are you sure you didn’t just have a spoiled piece of soy steak or whatever it is you eat these days?”

Brian doesn’t dignify that with an answer. Instead he says: “Of course, I’ve only gone back a day or two. I think. 44 years might feel a bit more… intense.”

Roger stares at him. “You’re serious. You actually, seriously think you’ve gone back in time.”

“Yes.”

“Goddamn you.” Roger laughs and shakes his head. “Alright, so tell me this. Why haven’t you gone back and saved him then?”

“Maybe I have tried. Maybe this is loop 15 or something.”

“Is that why I’m feeling so old?”

Brian laughs. “I doubt it.” He puts the tips of his fingers together. “Thing is, if I did, it obviously didn’t work, because otherwise I wouldn’t be here, with the machine. There wouldn’t have been a need for it.”

“But…” Roger tries to keep up with the logic. “But maybe we’re just in the parallel universe where you didn’t. And it worked in the other.”

Brian shrugs. “Possibly. But I don’t think so. Because I don’t think it can be me.”

Right. Roger almost forgot that he’s supposed to be the beetle. “Why not?”

“What could I have done, really? Even if I hadn’t married, didn’t have kids, I never could have
kept up with him. I never could have been... what he needed.” He takes a moment to collect his thoughts. “If I went back, I might have a vague sense of what is coming, a feeling that I have to protect him. Echoes, remember? But what would I do with it? I mean, I’d still be me, fundamentally, so I’d probably just start to lecture him – and we both know what effect that would have.”

The opposite of what it’s supposed to do. “Couldn’t you try to find Jim a few years earlier? Get them together a lot sooner?”

Brian rolls his eyes. “It’s what the Doctor might do, yeah. Because he can plan these things, he’s fully aware of who he is and what he’s trying to accomplish. I wouldn’t be. I would be...”

“...the same clueless guitar nerd you always were.”

“Only with a vague sense that I’m failing my life. Well, more than I did anyway.”

Yeah, best not revisit that quagmire. “What exactly do you think I would do”, he asks, genuinely curious. “Because I’d just be the same reckless womanizing egomaniac I’ve always been.”

“I can’t answer that for you but...” Brian looks to the ground as if he’s steeling himself for something. “With you I can see a different version of events sometimes. Always have, even back then.” He looks up at Roger. “Don’t you?”

Only every night before he goes to sleep and every morning when he wakes up. “That’s... Jesus, Brian why are we talking about this? It’s... I never...” He shakes his head.

“Ah”, Brian says softly. “I had wondered.”

Roger gapes at him. “Are you kidding me? Jesus, no we never... no. No.”

“Okay.” Brian spins an empty bottle of ginger ale between his fingers. “But did you want to...”

Roger gets up so quickly the stool clatters to the floor and his hip snaps painfully. “I’m not talking about this. How dare you... fuck you!”

“Sorry. Sorry, that was out of line. Forget it. Sit down, please.” He rights Roger’s stool for him and waits until he sits back down. “I’ve just been thinking a lot about when it all started to go wrong. And that was when all of us, not just me and John, but you as well, got families and just couldn’t be with him as we were before. I mean, think about the summer of ‘79. You two were hanging out all the time, going to Wimbledon together, attending all the hippest parties... and then one year later, Felix was born and... well, you did what everyone would have done, you spent time with your family.”

“Not enough”, he says with a rueful laugh.

“Yeah, I know all about that. But that was the time when that really shitty string of boyfriends started. When Prenter took over. When the coke wasn’t just an occasional indulgence anymore. When things started spinning out of control. And I can’t help thinking that what he really would have needed at the time was... someone by his side. Someone he could trust. Someone who could keep up with him, who wouldn’t be afraid to lock horns with him, but who wouldn’t try to cage him either. And there’s really only one person I can think of.”

“Christ on a bike, Bri.” He rubs his hands over his face. His eyes wander over to the ominous machinery that takes up most of the space in the shed. “You... you really want to do this, don’t you? You actually expect me to sit in that weird little machine of yours and let myself be sent back
to… where exactly would I go?

“I was thinking around late ’77. It’s when we just started drifting apart. John and I were both already married and you and Dom were getting serious as well. The US tour that year, I think it was the first one where we all spent more nights apart than together. And looking back, I think it hit him hard.”

The mention of Dominique sets off another path of thinking in Roger’s head. “Wait. If I go back and – I can’t believe we’re seriously discussing this, but I’ll try to ignore that for now – and, say, for some reason something happens so I never meet Debbie, and we never have children together…”

“That is one possible outcome, yes.”

“Are you out of your mind? Do you seriously think I’m going to sacrifice my children? My wife… alright ex-wife?”

Brian has been trying to cut in from the very beginning. “Jesus, Rog, calm down. Of course not. Nothing will happen to your family. Do you really think I would have suggested this otherwise?”

“You said: reality adjusts. So if I don’t have Rufus and Lily and Lola – what exactly will happen to them in this world?”

“Nothing. Because it never will have existed.”

“If you think even for a moment that that is an acceptable answer this is the last time I have spoken to you.”

“Rog.” Brian’s voice is very soft. He waits until he has Roger’s full attention. “Remember. When you decide whether or not to go, there will be a split. In one world you will go back in time and, yes, this reality will adjust. That might affect your family, but it might not. We don’t know that.” Before Roger can butt in, he quickly continues. “But in the other world, you will stay here. You will go home and be with your family and your children and all will be as before. Both these things will happen, one way or the other.”

“So it doesn’t even matter what I do? Then why am I even here? If everything’s going to happen, what does it matter how I decide?”


Roger balls his fists in an effort to stay calm. “Brian, I’m this close to having you institutionalized, so could you please…”

“I mean, philosophically speaking, it doesn’t matter. Both versions are equally true, so there no reason to fret. On the other hand: this decides which version of events you get to live. Which gets the spotlight. Imagine your reality as a maze of diverging paths. The paths all exist and you’ll walk all of them. But you’ll only remember one.” Brian rubs his fingers over his lips, thinking. “Of course, another version of you will remember another path but, in general…”

“Brian.” He puts his elbows on his knees and looks Brian directly in the eyes. “If I agree to this crazy thing, which…” He shakes his head. “Promise me, you promise me nothing will happen to my family.”

“I swear it.”
There won’t be a reality in which you vanish me in the time machine and I get caught in some loop or kill my own grandfather or whatever, and you’ll be locked up in an asylum and my family will never know what happened to me?"

"That is the one thing that will not happen. It’s impossible. As I said, the Second Law of…"

"Yeah, shut up. If I hear that one more time I’ll sock you."

Brian bites back a smile.

Roger eyes the machine again. It really doesn’t look very confidence inspiring. “I can’t believe I’m actually considering stepping into that thing.”

“It’s not very comfortable, I’m afraid. But the travel itself takes no time at all.”

“How long do I have to decide?”

Brian checks his watch. “Half an hour.”

“What?!”

“Well, I don’t think we have to keep it strictly before midnight, the actual date isn’t that important, but…”

“You want to do this tonight?”

“Yes. What did you think?” Brian looks honestly puzzled.

“That I’d have some time to think about this mad scheme? Because you had 30 years to get to grips with the idea, I had all of an hour!”

“Seeing as I’m the brains and you’re the brawn of this operation, that seems alright to me.”

“I won’t even have time to say goodbye to my family!”

“You said goodbye to them before you came here, didn’t you? And…”

“Why.” Roger puts his hands on his hips. “Just give me one good reason why it has to be tonight.”

“Echoes.”

“Echoes?”

“Yes. The echoes will be strongest tonight. We’ve spent an entire evening reminiscing about him, the memory is etched into every cell of your being. If you want to have a chance of changing the past, you have to go tonight.”

“How can you possibly know that.”

“It’s based on a phenomenon called quantum entanglement. It has been predicted by Albert Einstein and experimentally proven and…”

“And you’re a die-hard romantic who just wants it to be tonight.”

Brian presses his lips together. “It’s a very elegant proof.”

“What do you do if I just walk away?”
“Burn this whole thing to the ground.” He nods at the machine, at the shelf in the corner that’s stuffed to the brim with binders full notes. Thirty years of work.

“You wouldn’t at least try it yourself?”

“No.”

Roger thinks for a moment. “But there’s one reality where you do.”

“Yes. But it won’t be this.” He looks down at his hands. “I realize I’m asking you to do something I won’t do myself. It’s not because I value the life you lived any less than mine. It’s simply because I can’t see myself doing much good, for anyone. You know I’ve struggled with many of my decisions, and of course I’ve thought about going back and... and fixing things. Not getting married at the worst possible moment, not having children when the touring schedule was still so heavy or right when my marriage was falling apart...”

“Not giving up your research for Rock ’n’ Roll?”

“Not that. Never that.” Brian smiles. “I might create a life in which I live up to my own standards a bit more. But I can’t see myself saving him. Or righting any other big wrongs. And if I have one chance of using that thing, I want it to make a splash.”

“You know, and I hate to be noble and all, but... aren’t there even worthier causes? Killing Hitler?”

He just throws out the first thing that springs to his mind.

Brian gives him that look that says ‘Could you at least try to work with me here?’ He lists off the reasons it wouldn’t work one by one. “I’d have to find a contemporary of Hitler, someone who’s still alive, who’d believe me, who’d be willing to go back, who’d be in a position and the right mind set to do it. What do you think, should I just advertise for the job on Facebook?” He shakes his head. “The person who goes back is still fundamentally the same as they were then. All he’s got are a few faint memories, echoes, to guide him. It’s not like he’s suddenly a man on a mission. Besides. Who says that killing Hitler would prevent the Holocaust or the Second World War? Maybe his second in command was even more ruthless and a better strategist. What if this would cause the Germans to win the war?”

“Yes, okay, I...”

“I’m not finished. Remember, even if those atrocities are prevented in one world, they still happened in all the others.”

“One world saved, though.”

“Yes, but...” Brian hesitates and collects his thoughts. “This whole crazy idea only got started because of him. It was just a fancy at first of course, a distraction to help me get through my depression, to give my mind something to do except beat tear itself to pieces. It took me years to get to a point where I thought that this could really work. But I never would have started on it if it hadn’t been for him. It feels wrong to use it for anything else.”

“Such a romantic.” He’s always been like that. A brain almost too big for his skull and the softest of hearts constantly derailing its logic.

Brian looks like he’s got a toothache. “Maybe”, he grumbles.

“So what do you think will happen to you?”
“To me?”

“Yes. When I go back and change history and reality adjusts?”

“I’ll wake up in whichever reality you created. I hope it’s not going to be a nuclear wasteland because you’ve accidentally started World War III.”

“What do you think it will be?”

“Hopefully, I’m going to be with the three of you, locked in a shouting match because you’re all too pig-headed to realize that clearly our new song needs more guitars.”

Roger grins, but it’s painful and wobbly and there’s a pressure between his eyes. He turns around, hands balled into fists and takes a deep breath. “God, I hate you”, he whispers before turning back around. “I’ll do it.”

+++ He wishes he’d had a drink or five more. It’s always easier to make a fool of yourself when you’re drunk. But now he awkwardly lowers himself with creaking joints into Brian’s weird machine in the full possession of his mental faculties. He feels ridiculous. He feels scared. He feels ridiculous for feeling scared, because there’s no way this crazy pipe dream is going to work anyway. It’s like when he played at being a NASA Astronaut with his cousin Carl when he was ten: lying cooped up in a ‘cockpit’ of chairs and blankets, feeling the excitement rise as Carl started the countdown, wondering if the boosters would ignite, if he was going to die in a blazing ball of fire. Of course, then as now, it’s not actually real.

But still.

He thinks about his children, his grandchildren, about Sarina. Would he meet them again? Would he recognize them if he does (no, of course he wouldn’t, that’s not how this works). Would he miss them, somehow, would he miss this life?

Would anything change at all? Or would he fail and watch Freddie die all over again?

“You ready, Rog?”

Brian is pushing several buttons on a console and then the whole thing roars to life. Roger’s heart beat shoots up and his hands dig into the armrests of the seat. Oh man.

This is insane. Absolute bat-shit crazy. This is New Orleans 1978 all over again. But they had a great fucking time then, didn’t they?

And it won’t work anyway. There’s going to be a lot of excitement, maybe a rain of sparks, and then he’ll climb out and spend the rest of the night promising Brian he’ll never breathe a word of that embarrassing episode ever again. And then they’d get horrifically drunk.

He nods.

Brian nods.

Then there’s nothing.

Chapter End Notes
If anyone feels the need to explain the physics or philosophy of time travel to me in the comments, please don’t :D Except if you’re Brian May, then I’m all ears. (Seriously, if you’re Brian May, for the love of god, stop reading now.)

Song for this chapter: These Are The Days Of Our Lives, obviously. (There won’t be songs for all chapters, but every now and then when I think of something)

This was sort of the prologue, thanks to anyone who put up with the quantum mumbo-jumbo. With the next chapter, the story starts properly.
“No, it’s true, I swear, kicked right through the bloody drywall. Just like that.” Roger mimes the action, which has Bev giggling into her drink. “Only then his foot got stuck and he stood there, tottering on one leg, looking like a complete tit.”

“Did you help him out?” The music is so loud that she has to lean in close to him.


“Some friend you are.” She crosses her arms and gives him a scolding look. The movement does wonderful things to her décolleté. Her dress is cut low enough that he can’t help wondering if they’ll pop out if she bends down.

“Yeah, funny that, he said almost the exact same thing. Only not as polite.” He gives her his best cocky smile, the one that Dom sometimes calls ‘the menace’.

Of course, Dom is also here tonight, so he can’t really…well, he shouldn’t really…

“I bet he did.” Bev looks up at him though her long lashes. Her cherry red lips curl into a pout. Fuck it, he’ll probably get away with it if they’re quick.

Roger shakes his head and pretends he didn’t hear. He leans in a bit more until he’s so close to her he can smell her coconut shampoo. “Hey, I can barely hear myself talking, it’s so bloody loud in here. You want to go somewhere a bit more quiet?” He doesn’t bother pretending much that it’s conversation he’s after. These days, i’s really not necessary.

"I know just the place." When she walks past him, her tits brush not so accidentally against his arm.

“There he is!”

Dammit!

Roger turns around and there's Freddie, beaming and waving at him. Roger tries his best not to look like a man who was just about to follow some girl out for a quick shag.

Because Freddie’s got Dom in tow. Of course. These days, nine nights out of ten, Roger doesn’t even see him after a show because he’s out with his new crew. But tonight of all nights, he teamed up with Dom. Roger's beautiful French girlfriend weaves elegantly through the crowd, a glass of champagne in her hand. Really, he’s happy to see her like 99% of the time, but right now…

She brushes a quick kiss on Roger’s cheek.
“Fred, Dom, hey. Er, this is Beverley, she er…” Fuck, what is it she said she did?

“I write for the Star”, she says, with much more aplomb than Roger can muster, and shakes hands with Freddie and Dom.

“Love your dress”, Dom says.

“And yours”, Bev trills. “Anyway, I was just saying goodbye to Roger here.” She gives him a small pat and a wink. “Any chance I get an interview with the great Freddie Mercury”, she asks without much hope.

“Oh, fuck off, darling”, Freddie says, not unkind, and shoos her away.

She shrugs. “Maybe I’ll have more luck with that elusive bass player of yours.”

“Oh, that I want to see.” Freddie chuckles.

“Maybe try dressing up as a caddy”, Roger adds to general amusement. John’s newfound love of golf has been the source of near-constant ribbing.

“Yeah, they all have very different weak spots.” Dom is all smiles when she says it. Roger doesn't look at her. He has no idea how much she really knows. She never actually says anything.

“Well, pleasure to meet you”, Bev says. She holds out her hand, and when Roger takes it, she slips him a small note. Right in front of his girlfriend – damn, that woman has nerves!

He can’t say he doesn’t like it.

“Bye then”, he says, best poker face in place.

“Thanks for saving me from the clutches of the press”, Roger says when Bev has taken off, the hem of her short skirt swinging around her shapely thighs. He puts his hands on his hips and smuggles the note into his trouser pocket.

“Yes, god knows what might have happened if we hadn’t stepped in”, Freddie says, and then, when Roger's glare turns murderous, quickly adds: “You might have even have given an interview.”

“Oh shut up. I give great interviews. They love me.”

“Didn't Rolling Stone compare News of the World to a Leni Riefenstahl movie”, Dom throws in, a gleeful smile playing around her lips. “Oh, and then they called you ‘equals in incompetent musicianship’, I remember that very clearly.”

“Dominique, what a ray of sunshine you are”, Roger says. “How lovely to remind us.” He'd ranted about it for days when that bloody article appeared.

“I think it’s good for you bunch of stars to get taken down a peg every once in a while.” She pokes a pointy finger into Roger’s chest. “You especially, chéri.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter what bloody Rolling Stone thinks. After all, people were crowding into the streets after the show, still chanting We Will Rock You.”

Dom grins. “They were. Made me want to take up a pitchfork and start a revolution.”

“That’s probably just your French genes coming through”, Freddie teases and then starts singing
"Allons enfants de la Patrie, la da da dee daat arrivé!" He elbows Roger in the ribs. "Allez!"

Roger rolls his eyes and shoos him away. Freddie can be so annoying. Especially when he’s high, which he definitely is.

Freddie pouts. “God, you're boring.” He turns to Dom. “How can you stand him?”

“Oh, he's got his advantages.” Her expression is cool and aloof - saucy winks are not her style - but the twist her French accent puts on her words is enough to cheer Freddie up.

“Oh la la”, he sings songs and pretends to check Roger out. “You must tell me all about that!”

Dom can't quite keep her grin off her face. She puts an arm around Freddie's shoulders conspiratorially. “Hmm, where to begin...

Roger just stands there, arms crossed, waiting. If his beautiful French girlfriend wants to sing his praises he's not going to stop her.

“First of all, he's got this massively big, beautiful... what do call it in English?”

Roger grins, his mood improving steadily. “Don't be shy, you know what it's called”, he teases.

“…mansion, that’s it.”

“Technically I don’t own it yet…” The lawyers are taking forever with the contracts.

Freddie groans and throws up his hands. “You're a horrible, horrible tease, I hate you.” He pretends to sulk for about a second, but quickly gets bored of it. “What else?”

“Hmm.” She pretends to think about that for a moment. “I like blondes”, she says finally.

“Oh darling.” Freddie puts a hand on her arm, looking worried. “I hate to break it to you, but…” He leans and whispers so loudly that Roger can hear it two feet away: “He bleaches his hair.”

Roger can't help but grin. Freddie is funny. Annoying, but funny.

“Don’t worry, love”, Dom assures Freddie. “I’ve seen both the carpet and the drapes, so it’s not exactly a secr… Rog, are you okay?”

He wheezes as he tries to control his coughing fit without having champagne spewing out of his nose. “For fuck’s sake, Dom.”

Dom looks puzzled. “What? Isn’t that the expression?”

“Yes”, Freddie says in between giggles. “That is exactly the expression.” He looks absolutely delighted.

Fantastic. Roger's already looking forward to the crew making pointed comments about interior design whenever he’s in earshot for the rest of the fucking tour.

Freddie beams at Dom. “Dominique, we must have a girls’ night when you get back!”

Yeah, absolutely not. “Alright, ladies, enough of this.” Roger slips am arm around Dom's slim waist. “How about we get out of here and I show you my massively big, beautiful, er, hotel suite?”

“Mine’s bigger”, Freddie says innocently.
“I was speaking metaphorically.”

Freddie waves him off. “Ah, fuck off and get fucked, my dears.” In one fluid motion, Freddie swats them both on the bum and snags a full glass of champagne from a passing waiter. “I’m going to go find myself a real party.”

He makes to take off in the direction of Paul Prenter and Joe Fanelli, but Dom stops him with a hand on his arm. "Actually, Roger and I have to start making our way to the airport."

Roger checks his watch. Is it that late already?

Freddie's face falls. "You're leaving tonight? Why haven't you said, love?"

"But I did. We talked about it only last night. You and the boys were making a big production about seeing me off."

Dom has a month long business trip ahead of her, accompanying her twat of a boss to Japan. As the band plays in Virginia tomorrow, they decided that they could all ride to the airport together, wave her off, then get on their private plane.

"Oh, we will, of course", Freddie says, all thoughts of parties momentarily forgotten. "Where are Brian and John?"

“Brian was moping at the bar over there”, Roger waves in the right direction, “and Deacy took off with Veronica at the earliest opportunity. Probably trying to make another baby.”

“Not even John can knock up a woman who’s already pregnant”, Dom says.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean he won’t try.”

Freddie grimaces. “Ugh, stop talking, now.”

It turns out that Brian and John haven't forgotten about their plans and are already waiting for them along with Chrissie, Veronica and 2-year old Robert, fast asleep in his stroller. If your father plays in a rock band you probably learn to sleep through just about anything.

Brian looks annoyed. "What's been keeping you?"

"Secret meeting", Freddie shoots back.

"Only for really attractive people", Roger adds. "Sorry."

Veronica whacks him with a (blessedly fresh) nappy until he apologises and offers her and Chrissie honorary club memberships. "Can't do much about your husbands, though", he whispers conspiratorially. “There are limits.”

"Yeah, I hate to spoil all the hilarity", John says, "But Dom has got a plane to catch, doesn't she?"

Once they’re all in their cars and on the way to the airport, Roger settles back. He takes in Dom’s elegant profile against the city lights, her slim legs crossed at the ankles. "This is quite a massively big, beautiful car, isn't it", he says speculatively. They already had their goodbye sex back at the hotel before the show, but they won't be seeing each other for almost a month.

Dom regards him with one arched eyebrow. "I've seen bigger."

"Liar."
She crosses her arms and turns towards him with her best Mona Lisa smile.

He reaches out and trails his fingers along her arm. "For old times’ sake?" They did have sex in the back of a limousine a couple of times when they first got together and the ride to the hotel just seemed too long to bear.

She licks her lips and gives him a long heated look. "I'd love to, but..."

"But what? Are going all respectable on me?"

She points out of the window on his side. "God forbid. But that's the airport lights over there."

Damn. He forgot that the stadium is basically next door. "We could be quick?"

"Not that quick." Then she's suddenly really close. Her scent surrounds him and her fingers are hot on his cheek. "On rattrapera ça à mon retour", she whispers and locks him in a brief searing kiss that has him go cross eyed. "Promis." His French is not that good, but he's pretty sure he got the gist of it.

And then the car stops at the side of the road and Dom pulls away from him.

"You're a bloody witch", he hisses and tries to make himself presentable before the driver opens the door.

"You started it."

They bicker like that until they’ve caught up with the rest of the band and their entourage.

Then the world drops from under his feet.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, this chapter is essentially one massively big, not particularly beautiful dick joke. Not sorry.

In the car, Dom says something along the lines of: “We’ll make up for it when I’m back. Promise.”

I’m not going to translate the Marseillaise ;(
The ground is coming on way too fast, it knocks him off his feet, forces the air out of his lungs. He tries desperately to keep standing (don’t fall, he mustn’t fall), but his hands are already clutching the ground, desperate for a hold.

He can’t see, can’t hear and his mind is a swirling mess of light and sound, bouncing off each other in dizzying shapes.

“...hear me? Roger! Please, what...”

The voice floats through the rushing in his ears, coming and going and coming again.

“Roger? Can you hear me?”

He nods and the whole universe moves. He clutches his head, trying to contain everything inside. There are other voices, familiar yet distant. Hard floor under his knees. Gentle hands are on his face, coaxing his head up.

“What is it?”

“I don’t... I don’t know, I...” The voice fills his throat, his mouth, his entire body. He opens his eyes and she’s there, he can see her so clearly like a spotlight is illuminating all her features. She looks so young, just like the day he met her. Of course she does. They’ve only been dating for a year. Haven’t they? Her hands are on him and she’s talking to him, but it’s like they’re separated by a veil, like he’s listening to her through a glass wall.

“Roger. What’s happening? You’re scaring me.”

There are others right behind her. Brian and Chrissie and... But Brian’s with Anita, why is he...

Roger blinks several times, forcing his eyes to stay focused. A wave of nausea sweeps through him, an icy-hot wave of misery wracking his body. He squeezes his eyes shut and breathes deeply.

“Alright, get help, we need...”

He reaches out blindly and lands a shaking hand on Brian’s arm, just before he can move away. “No. No, I just...” He forces his eyes open. God, it’s so bright in here. “I just need a minute, I...”

“Roger”, Brian says and he looks so young. So young. Shouldn’t he be in his garden? Tinkering with... something? “You look like a ghost. We have to get a doctor or...”

“No!” He cannot leave, he cannot be taken away, he must stay here and protect them, all of them, otherwise they will go away and bad things will happen and...

“Alright, alright, calm down.” Dom puts both her arms around him and her warmth, her scent, the rhythm of her breath bring him a bit back to himself. The sharp, intense surge recedes and leaves him feeling raw and shaky.

He tries to get a grip, then he blinks his eyes open again. They’re in the airport in Philadelphia.
He’s 28 years-old and he’s playing in a band called Queen. They just played a concert at the Spectrum and they have a massive hit in the charts.

And his best friend is dead.

No.

No, that can’t be true. Freddie is crouching right behind Dom, looking well and healthy and not at all like he’s dying, not like when... To his horror, he feels the sting of tears in his eyes.

“Roger, have you taken something?” Deacy is there too. Roger stares in disbelief. He hasn’t seen him in years. Or was it just before they got in the car? “Rog?”

Roger shakes his head. God, this is messed up. His eyes wander back to Freddie’s face, and it hurts, it hurts so much. He forces his eyes back to Dom. God, she’s beautiful. Her eyes are huge and dark and there’s a line of concern on her smooth forehead as she searches his face. He reaches out and trails two fingers along it, smoothing it out.

She smiles faintly, but it doesn’t reach her eyes. “What is it, chéri?”

And he’s been terrible to her. Lying and cheating and leaving her alone with the baby for weeks on end while...

No, that’s not... where on earth did that come from?

Her jaw sets. “Alright, this is getting scary. We’ve got to get help.” Next to her, he can see John nod.

“No, no, no, I’m good, I’m just...” His mind is racing. It’s like he’s watching several movies at once, only they keep blurring into each other. He grimaces, tries to ignore everything that isn’t right here and now. “I’m just... more tired than I thought, I guess.”

None of them look convinced. He concentrates as hard as he can on looking like he’s got it together. Keep his eyes away from Freddie, that’s the trick. He realises he still on his knees on the floor.

“Come on, help me up.”

Dom and Brian exchange a worried glance. Good lord, has Brian always been so skinny? Not important. Focus. He tightens his grip on Brian’s arm and begins to pull himself up.


It’s difficult standing when the ground won’t stop spinning, but he grits his teeth and wills himself to keep upright. “Thanks, mate”, he says, voice as steady as he can keep it.

John looks carefully relieved. “You scared the hell out of me”, he says.

“Feel a bit better”, Freddie asks.

Roger nods, without meeting his eyes.

“Okay”, Brian says. “Back to the hotel then. Gerry can you check us back in please?” The tour manager is already busy giving out instructions.

“What? No!” Then he realizes why they’re at the airport in the first place. “Dom, your flight! You
must get going or..."

"Forget about the flight, Rog", she says. "You don’t think I’m leaving you alone like this, do you? If I take a flight tomorrow morning I’ll still be on time."

A wave of affection washes through him. "I can’t... that’s..." He shakes his head. "Alright, let’s all get on the jet then."

"No", Brian says decisively. "You are not flying anywhere tonight."

"But..."

"If something happens 20.000 feet in the air we won’t be able to get you any help. You stay here. If you feel better tomorrow, there’s plenty of time to get you to Norfolk."

"I’m staying too", Freddie says quickly, and soon enough, all of his band mates have decided to stay and Roger has to close his eyes and breathe again to keep from losing it completely.

"Boys." Chrissie comes into view, a hand on Brian’s shoulder. “Gerry says he can get two standard double rooms in the hotel, but the suites are all taken. He’s going to try other hotels, but...”

And then his band mates, who these day refuse to stay in any suite that isn’t at least in the deluxe category, immediately declare they’ll all squeeze in together somehow, it’ll all be fine, no really I don’t mind sleeping on the floor.

It’s all too much. “Guys”, he says and shakes off Brian’s arm. “I’m...”

“Come on guys, give him some air”, Freddie says and shoos them all aside a bit.

Roger can’t deal with all this... all this stuff that is happening inside him. He’s barely holding the flood at bay that’s threatening to spill into his brain any minute, and every time his band mates say something, every time Freddie so much as looks at his direction, it’s another tear in the dyke. “I’ll stay here”, he says. “You go and...” Something hot and tight closes of his throat, like his body is trying to prevent him from getting the words out. “You go and fly to Norfolk. I just need some rest and then I’ll be good. Dom, you don’t have to stay if you...”

She shakes her head and taps her watch. “Too late”, she says.

“Alright, so I stay with Dom and see you all tomorrow.” Do not do this, his hysterical brain supplies, don’t let them go, you’ll only lose them again. Oh god, is that a premonition? Is the plane going to crash and this is his last chance to... No. Roger pulls himself together. He doesn’t have bloody premonitions, the reason being, they don’t fucking exist. He’s just stressed. And he’s not going to turn into a hysterical crybaby at the thought of spending a night apart from his friends. This is embarrassing enough as it is.

"Are you sure", John asks, but he's a bit distracted because Robert's woken up and is crying in Veronica's arms. Yeah, time for them to get out of here.

"I'll be fine", he says as calmly as he can over the screeching noises in his brain. "Off with you." He turns around quickly, an arm around Dom's waist and heads back towards the car.

+++  

“Are you sure it wouldn’t be better to see a doctor?”
Roger’s head is pounding and he’s clinging to Dom on the last steps from the elevator to his room. “I just need to get some fucking sleep”, he says. “Not some quack to poke at me and keep me up all night. Please?”

Dom nods slowly, resigned. “Right. Come on, then.” She fishes the key from her purse to get them both inside. He drops onto the sofa. He just sits there and waits, feeling completely drained. A glass of water is pressed into his hands and he drinks it up in one go.

Dom sits next to him, rubbing circles into his back. “Roger”, she says after a few minutes. “Did you take anything? That girl you were talking to, did she give you something?”

He shakes his head.

“You can tell me”, she says. “I’m not…”

“Just champagne. Too much champagne. And we played almost every night for two weeks.” Yeah, that must be it.

She sighs. “They’re working you all too hard. This is the third tour this year, and you produced an album on top of that… You’ve got to talk to the others, put in a bit of rest.”

“We’ve got the day after tomorrow off.”

“That’s not enough and you know it.”

“The schedule will ease off after New York.”

She glares at him. “You can be stubborn as a mule, you know that? You had a nervous breakdown, but…”

"I didn't have a… I was just a bit tired", he protests.

"…but god forbid, you should have to admit you need a break.”

He wants to dismiss her, tell her she’s overreacting, refuse to talk about the whole thing. But instead he pulls her into his arms, rests his head against hers. “I love you”, he whispers. “And I’m sorry.”

“Okay, now you’re scaring me”, she mumbles. “The only time you apologized to me in the whole time I’ve known you was when you almost hurtled us both down the side of a mountain.”

“You’ll never let me live that down, will you?” He might have slightly underestimated the steepness of the curve ahead, but they’ve both come out of it just fine. In contrast to the car which spent months at the garage.

“So what have you done now?”

He thinks about Bev and the card with her number on it that she slipped into his pocket as she said goodbye. About the fact that until now he had no intention of throwing it away. About that photographer he took home after the album release party and about the time he told Dom how much her missed her on the phone while this girl whose name he can’t even remember took a shower in the ensuite bathroom. About that brothel crawl in Paris.

More disturbing, however, are those other things, those things he hasn’t even done, that keep popping into his mind. Things involving marriage and children and model girlfriends he has never seen in his life. And yet it feels so real.
“I didn’t mean to scare you”, he says, like a fucking coward. A dull, leaden tiredness settles on him. “God, I need to sleep.”

She starts to pull away to let him get up, but he doesn’t let her. “Will you stay with me tonight”, he asks, face buried in her silky black hair.

“Of course”, she whispers. “Of course I’m staying with you.”

+++ 
He’s never dreamt as much as he does that night. Some dreams are disturbing and scary, or exhilarating, or sad, or just don’t make sense at all. But every single time he drifts out of sleep, it’s like he’s emerging from another, very real world that keeps trying to pull him back. And every time, Dom is there, her warm and grounding presence reminding him of what is real.

He wakes from the last one with a pounding heart and shaking hands and a grief so sickening he can taste it in his mouth. Before he can think about what he’s doing, he’s sat up and reached for the phone on his night stand. “Hi, connect me to the Hilton in Norfolk, please. Yes, I’ll wait.” He swallows hard to keep the nausea down until the hotel in which his band mates are staying picks up.

“Morning. Mr Alfred Mason, please.”

The phone rings for an eternity. The heavy, leaden dread in the pit of his stomach threatens to choke him. He’s dead. They’re all dead. There’s been some kind of horrible accident and he’s the only one left and now what is going to do? Oh God, why did he let them go?

“For fuck’s sake?”

Roger has never felt that happy to be sworn at. “Freddie.”

“What the... Roger?”

Roger laughs and rubs a hand over his face, feeling completely ridiculous and giddy with relief. “Just wanted to check if... are you alright?”

“Course I’m not alright, it’s... it’s eight in the morning you fucking wanker!” Freddie is yelling by the time he’s finished his sentence. Everyone knows you don’t call Freddie in his room, especially not before noon, which is why he never even bothers to unplug the phone in the first place.

And Roger can’t help but laugh, it’s like he’s taken a lungful of nitrous oxide (the only thing that made his year of dentistry school even a little worthwhile).

“I’m going to kill you”, Freddie growls. “If this is your idea of a joke...?”

Slowly, Roger comes down. “God, I... just wanted to hear your voice.” And then he lets himself fall back onto the bed, grimacing, because that was just the soppiest thing he ever said in his life and Freddie is never ever going to let him live that down.

“Rog.” Freddie's voice is serious now, a bit more awake. "Shit, I almost forgot. Are you alright?"

“Yes”, he says, because he obviously is. And besides, what else is he going to say? ‘I had this dream where you died a horrible death so I needed to check in with you to make sure you’re alive’? Yeah right.
"Feeling better?"

"Yes, yeah, a lot better. Bit tired still."

"Could be because it's the middle of the night", Freddie grumbles.

"Yeah. Sorry. Say hello to the others from me, will you?"

"Sure." There's a bit of a pause and then Freddie adds: “Arsehole” and the phone is hung up.

Roger lies in bed for another minute. Slowly, the euphoria fades and leaves a stretched, empty feeling in its wake.

The shower in the ensuite is switched off and it’s only then that he becomes aware it has been running in the first place. Or that the other side of his bed is empty.

Dom pokes her head out of the door, wrapped in a towel, strands of wet hair sticking to her face. “Hey”, she says, smiling when she finds him awake.

“Hey.” He stretches out his hand and she comes to sit next to him.

“Did I wake you?”

“No, don’t worry.”

“How are you feeling?”

He nods. “Good. Fine.”

She bites her lip. “I really have to get to the airport soon. But…”

He throws back the blankets. “I’ll come with you.”

“Rog…” She puts a hand on his shoulder. “You had a pretty rough night. And you have a show to play tonight. You need some rest.”

Images from last night threaten to rise to the surface. The last thing he wants is spend another minute in bed.

“Dominique.” He puts one hand on her cheek. “I’m fine. And I need to get to the airport anyway.”

She eyes him for a moment, then shrugs. “Well, you’re a grown man, not a toddler, so I’m not going to argue with you about this.”

He tugs slightly at her towel. “No. I can think of better things to do.” He’s not really feeling it yet, but they won’t see each other for almost a month and…

She firmly pushes his hand away. “You will not make me miss my flight. Again.” She holds tightly on to her towel and gets up. “I have to do my hair, and if you’re serious about coming with me, you have to get dressed.”

+++ "Alright, have a good trip. Don’t let that arsehole Branson boss you around.”

Dominique kisses him. “Sure, Rog. I mean, he’s only my boss, you know.”
“Yeah, I really don’t see how that…”

“Excuse me, Ma’am, Sir, I really must ask you to board the plane now.” It’s that annoying stewardess interrupting them again.

“We’re having a moment here, would you mind…”

“So sorry! Yes, of course I’ll come.” Dominique has angled herself so she’s standing a bit between Roger and the nagging stewardess. She doesn’t say, ‘Roger, shut up and let that poor woman do her job’, but the hand on his shoulder and the hint of steel in her voice do the trick anyway. Well, that kind of wrangling is her job. And she’s bloody good at it.

She takes the handbag Roger has been holding and presses a quick kiss to his cheek. After a few steps towards the gate, she stops and turns around. “If there’s ever anything…” She breaks off. “Call me, will you?”

“Yeah, sure. See you in LA.” She bites her lip, nods more to herself than to him, and then turns and disappears into the gangway.

"Roger?" Pete, their personal manager hurries towards him. He stayed behind to make sure Roger wouldn’t get lost on his own in Philly. "There's a plane leaving in two hours, but no first class seats available. There are some on the four o'clock flight, but..."

Roger has absolutely no interest to hang around the airport for hours only to be cramped into a full plane. "How far is it to Norfolk?"

"About an hour flight time."

"I mean by car."

"Oh." Pete looks worried. "I don't know. About 300 miles? But..."

"Alright. Get me a car, a decent one. I'm driving."

"Remember how I vowed to never get into a car with you ever again? One that you're driving, I mean?"

Why do people keep saying that to him? He's an excellent driver "Oh, don't worry. You take the plane."

"Roger, that's really not a good idea."

What had Dom said to him earlier? Oh yes. "I'm not a fucking toddler, Pete. Get me a car and a map, and we'll be alright."

"Gerry is going to kill me." He pauses for a moment. "Brian is going to kill me. And he'll be inventive."

"We'll just don't tell them, alright? Come on now, we don't have all day."

It's a slog through heavy traffic at first, but after a few miles, the city turns into suburbs and the traffic eases off. The rented Mercedes 600 can't hold a candle to his 308 GTB, but the V8 engine purrs along nicely as he speeds down the highway. Thank god it's not one of those boring American highways that just go on and on in a straight line forever. It used to drive him spare during their first tour when they were still getting from gig to gig in a bus.
He settles into the familiar routine of driving. The hum of the engine, the landscape passing by, the feeling that he can go anywhere he likes, it's comforting. But whatever happened last night – and it was something really fucking weird – it hasn’t just gone away. He’s not the brooding type, he prefers to jump into action, either deal with whatever’s bothering him or leaving it well enough alone and do something fun instead.

But now he feels like… like he’s lost something incredible valuable and has no idea how to get it back. Or worse, that he is about to lose it, and has no idea how to prevent that. His heart speeds up as that feeling from last night returns? Is he having a premonition after all? Maybe he should never have let Dom step on that airplane, maybe that’s what all this is about, that there will be a crash and…

The loud honk of an oncoming lorry tears him out of his fantasy. He swerves to stay clear of it and steps on the break, forcing the car to slow down.

This is such bullshit. He doesn’t believe in signs and omens and psychic bonds or whatever. Besides, there was a lot of disturbing shit in his dreams last night, but a plane crash wasn’t one of them.

He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out Bev’s card. His normal reaction would be excitement, both at her interest and her brazenness in slipping it to him in front of his girlfriend, maybe tinged with a faint shadow of guilt. Which wouldn’t keep him from calling her when they head back to New York next week.

But now, even the thought of her glorious tits in that obscene dress isn’t much of a temptation.

Dear lord, is he falling in love? Now, of course, he is in love with Dom. She’s great: smart, beautiful, funny – miles apart from anyone he went out with before. But maybe he’s entering some sort of higher level, something where you don’t even want to screw other people.

If that’s what that feels like, he’s not sure why everyone’s raving about it. It’s about as fun as setting up a savings account. Not bad per se, but not sparkles and butterflies either.

And besides, it’s not just about Dom. It’s also about the band, about Brian falling into a terrible depression, and John just shutting and leaving, and Freddie…

He lights up a cigarette, lets the smoke fill his lungs.

He didn’t see a plane crash in his dreams, but he did see himself, sitting at Freddie’s bedside, saying goodbye to a version of him that was so emaciated he could barely lift his hand to wave him off. And Roger just walked away, knowing he’d never see him again.

He’d just talked to Freddie on the phone this morning, but has an overwhelming urge to pull up at the next gas station and call him again.

Roger forces his hands to keep the steering wheel straight. No. Absolutely not. He’s made enough of a fool of himself already with that phone call.

Freddie is fine. Dom is fine. They’re all fine. They’re playing a sold out US tour (the second within a year) with two nights in Madison Square Garden, they’ve got an album and a single in the top ten, and they’ve got more money rolling in that even Roger knows what to do with. And despite the odds, they managed to do all that without absolutely hating each other.

Perhaps that’s what this is all about. Once you’re on top, the only place to go is down. He has seen it in other bands. Maybe his subconscious decided it’s time for a wakeup call – a fucking bizarre
one (that includes him directing some a sci-fi musical for some reason?), but the message is clear enough: Don’t take it for granted.

Roger pulls off the highway at random and cruises until he finds an empty parking lot right on the water’s edge next to closed up restaurant. There’s a pier and a narrow sand beach, but on this freezing November day the spot is deserted. He’s not dressed for a walk in this weather, but he gets out and stands on the low wall that surrounds the parking lot, looking out onto the dull grey water. Maybe it’s not about falling in love. Maybe it’s about growing up.

Which is even more alarming. It rings of afternoon tea instead of tequila shots at five in the morning, of lower back pain and arguing over the colour of kitchen fronts and turning up your nose at the loud music young people listen to. And, oh god, bloody gardening. If that’s what his subconscious wants, it can go fuck itself.

But then he recalls Dom’s face as they sat on the sofa together, how she held him through the night, how she was right there when he needed her.

That felt really grown up too. And it hadn’t felt bad at all.

Maybe that’s where he should start.

Chapter End Notes

Apparently Brian slightly underestimated the effects of time travel on unsuspecting drummers.

Yes, airports worked differently in those days. You could basically just stroll up to the boarding gate to say goodbye.

While researching Roger's cars, I found out he used to drive a green mini before he was rich. Look at this!

This article also mentions two of Roger's cars bursting into flame for no apparent reason, which makes me very suspicious of his driving. Oh, and apparently he and Brian got matching Mazdas in 1999, damn those two.

Alfred Mason was one of Freddie’s usual aliases. And Brian sometimes went under Chris Mullen, isn’t that so cute?
"No, Roger, I don't want to go."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't."

“But why?"

“Because I want a quiet night in with my wife.”

God, John is so useless.

"But it's New York!"

"Night, Rog." John slings his rucksack over his shoulder and walks out.

"Night, arsehole."

Roger kicks at the chair opposite him at the table. This is bullshit. What good is it trying to organise a good-old-fashioned guy's night out if your band mates are a bunch of pussies?

They have a whole night off, and all Deacy can think of is lounge around his hotel room. Of course, you can’t really say anything against family time, but come on. This is New York!

Brian meanwhile is still 15 feet deep in a discussion with one of the sound techs. These can last hours. Ever since Philadelphia he’s worked himself into one of his patented funks and has been pretty much useless off stage. He’s always been prone to brooding, but this is taking it to the next level. He’s started a bloody matchbook collection, for heaven’s sake.

And Freddie? When Roger suggested they all go out to a bar together, Freddie had just shaken his heads and announced that he already has plans.

Thing is, Roger has been a very good boy. He has thrown Bev’s number into the bloody lake, he’s called Dom every day, and when that really hot groupie offered to show him the rest of the tattoo that sneaked in tendrils down under the waistband of her low-waist jeans, he heroically declined.

Okay, so he’d taken a peek, but that was it.

But instead of the universe paying him back for his efforts (in the form of Dom coming for a surprise visit with a hot friend in tow eager for a threesome, for example), all he gets is bewildered looks from the crew when he declines another trip to a strip club and a near-terminal case of sexual frustration.

At least, less time spent with girls should translate into more time with his band mates. Going out, talking about everything and nothing at all, revelling in the fact that, fuck yes, they’re here, they’ve made it. Like they used to when this was all new.

Instead, John clucks, Brian mopes and Freddie...
Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Freddie getting up and shrugging on his jacket. It’s no secret where he goes every night. He never said it in so many words, but over the course of the last two years, the pretty girls in his tow have become pretty boys. And Paul Prenter, the lead organizer of his nights out, has never hidden the fact that he’s queer as a three-pound note. Roger wonders sometimes if the two are lovers – not that he wants to think about that in too much detail.

Probably not, though. Freddie has a new boyfriend every few months and Paul doesn’t seem jealous of them. But who knows how these things work in the gay world. Maybe they are clever enough not to bother with all that monogamy stuff.

How good for them.

Not that Roger is bitter or anything.

At least he has the weekend to look forward to. They’re going to play two shows at Madison Square Garden and John Reid as arranged for a couple of friends and family to be flown in for that. So come tomorrow, he should be fine. But god, he’s so fucking bored tonight.

Freddie is jittering with energy as he makes his way to the door, tousling Brian’s hair as he passes him. “Ciao, my darlings”, he calls out. He looks like a man who is going to have a damn good time and knows it.

God damn it.

“I’ll come with you.” Roger has got up from his chair before he’s even realized what he’s doing. His body does that sometimes, saying and doing things before his brain has quite caught up with it. It leads to occasional brilliance, but also embarrassment, injury and - twice so far - arrest.

Freddie looks at him with one raised eyebrow, his amusement barely hidden. “I’m afraid this won’t be quite your crowd, my dear.”

“Yeah, unfortunately, I don’t have a crowd, looks like.” He glances briefly around the almost empty room. Now that he’s had a few moments to think about it, the idea doesn’t sound half bad. It’s been ages since he’s been out with Freddie, and he knows how to party. At the same time, there won’t be any temptation for him to take someone home. On the contrary, being surrounded by hairy blokes slow dancing with each other all night might well turn him off sex completely, for a while at least.

It’s definitely worth a try.

Freddie, however, doesn’t look convinced.

“Come on, Fred, it’s not like I haven’t been to a… to one of those bars before.” Okay, so the one time had been an accident and he’d been too drunk to remember much. The other time had been on a lark with some mates from uni, but all they saw were a bunch of middle-aged queens sitting around and pointedly ignoring them, so they left after half an hour, feeling vaguely bad about themselves.

"Oh, but we're going to see Liza first. Musical theatre", Freddie whispers dramatically. "Think you can take it?" Freddie’s crossed his arms in front of his chest. He has his head thrown back a little, as if he’s trying to look down his nose on Roger despite being an inch shorter, the wanker.

Roger doesn’t back down. "About time we find out, isn't it?"

Freddie glares at him a moment longer, then laughs and struts towards the door without another word.
Great. Roger is certainly not going to run after him. He’ll find some way to have fun. He certainly doesn’t need Freddie and his entourage of poufs to keep himself entertained. Especially not in New York on a...

“Come on, then!” Freddie stands in the door and waves for him with one hand. He looks at Roger with a lop-sided grin. “Or are you scared?”

“Fuck off”, Roger yells and jogs after him.

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Roger steadfastly endures both the show and Freddie's fawning over Liza Minnelli. Her stage act is impressive - acting, dancing and singing all at once with seemingly no effort. Roger can appreciate it professionally. The music however... it’s just really not his thing. He's glad when Liza keeps the after-show meet and greet short and they can head off to the clubs.

The place doesn’t look like much, a non-descript brownstone house with a bit of neon flicker and banged up metal doors leading inside. There’s a dance-floor to the right, a bar in front and a seating area with sofas and even a pool table. It doesn’t look all that different from a regular bar, except that the guys are all wearing t-shirts two sizes too small and no one looks bothered by the lack of women.

When they arrive, a couple of Paul’s friends are already there, commandeering a group of sofas that sit on a small platform, a little secluded but with a great view of the dance-floor. None of Freddie’s crowd seem to know what to make of Roger at first, but Freddie ignores their questioning looks, so after a couple of minutes everyone eventually shrugs and gets on with the programme. The programme being champagne, Vodka, and a variety of discreetly traded pills and powders.

Roger sits on one of the sofas, ensconced by Freddie to one side and Joe Fanelli, who has joined his entourage under the official title of personal chef (which is surprising, given that 90% of their food intake comes from caterers, restaurants or room service). He’s been around on the previous tour, but Roger couldn’t remember ever having a real conversation with him. He had quickly labelled him Freddie's boyfriend and never given him a second thought.

Now, as Joe is evidently taking it up on himself to make the awkward straight guy comfortable in a group of strangers, Roger feels like a bit of a cad. While Freddie is flirting with some hunk of a guy everyone keeps calling Rosie for some reason, Joe is patiently explaining the who’s-who of the local scene and explaining the finer points of gay hook-up culture.

“That guy’s ‘straight’, see?” He points at a plain looking guy in jeans and t-shirt, a bit on the tall and lanky side, leaning against the bar.

“Straight?”

“No, straight like you’re straight, but straight like he’s looking to get his cock sucked without returning the favour.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a straight guy alright.”

“Hmm, but you guys don’t get away with it. He will.”

Roger considers that as he sips his third Vodka-Martini. “What’s in it for the other guy?”

Joe shrugs. “Some guys really get off on it. Being the dirty little secret. Look.” He nods at a skinny chap in a pair of PVC pants so tight Roger’s balls hurt just looking at him. He passes the lanky guy
and oh-so-accidentally brushes his shoulder on the way. Turning around, he mouths a sultry ‘sorry’ over his shoulder and disappears through a door at the far side of the bar. Two seconds later, Lanky Guy follows. “And that’s that.” Joe smirks and raises his glass at Roger. “I’m so good at this.”

Paul Prenter crosses over from the bar, balancing three drinks in his hands. The place is approaching the temperature and humidity of a steam room, but he’s still in his leather jacket. “Okay, so... What about him?”

Joe leans back in his seat, crossing his arms. “Ah no, I’ll pass that one.”

“Too hard to figure out?” But his goading doesn’t work.

“I stay out of his way, he stays out of mine. And I prefer it that way.”

Now that’s interesting. It isn’t often that someone says something bad about Paul. Everyone agrees that he is a great organizer and someone who easily makes friends wherever he goes. A bit hot-headed at times (the Irish blood, Rogers grandma would have said), but someone who could get along with pretty much anyone else. He always seems to know everyone who matters, and if he doesn’t yet, he will by the end of the night. Freddie has taken to him like a lost lamb.

But Joe refuses to talk about him, so Roger looks around, until he spots another guy, clad in the most tight fitting red shirt. “So what about that one.”

Joe’s sweet smile grows sharkish. “That one?” He winks at Roger. "Could be your type, eh?"

"Come on." Roger looks the guy up and down. He’s certainly fit in a sinewy way and no taller than Roger. His dark hair and sharp features remind him a little of Dominique – but of course he lacks a couple of important features in comparison. "I just don't get the point of getting off with someone who doesn't have tits. Might as well just have a wank."

Joe mutters something that sound like "hopeless" into his glass and rolls his eyes.

The red shirt gives Roger an unmistakable come-hither look. That is one thing where gays have the edge: making sex easy. It’s not that Roger has trouble finding girls, but – except in the case of professionals and sometimes even then – there is always some song and dance involved before things really get going. Here, he could probably just nod at some guy, head off to the loo and have his dick sucked without even knowing his name.

He shifts in his seat. The weeklong dry spell really has him grasping at imaginary straws. He sighs. Absent girlfriends, faithfulness and touring really don't mix well.

“Soooo, choir boy”, Freddie's attention is suddenly on him. Rosie has taken a trip to one of the back tables, giving Roger the first real chance to speak to Freddie.

“How are we holding up?”

Roger gives him a thumbs up. "Virtue still intact.” Even the trip to the loo had been uneventful (the couples making out in the darker corners of the hallway were easy enough to ignore).

"What a relief."

“Seriously, Fred, why is no one coming on to me?”

“Freddie.”
“Sorry?”

“In here, I’m Freddie. Or Melina, if you like.”

Right, the women’s name thing. Freddie was enchanted when John Reid first introduced him to that facet of queer culture. “Okay, alright. Does it bother you if I call you Fred, you know, outside?” Roger has always used Fred and Freddie more or less interchangeably. Like Brian and Bri. They all have a shortened nickname, except Deacy, of course, who somehow gained a syllable. Probably because if you try to shorten John you end up with something like Jay, which isn’t actually shorter.

“It doesn’t bother me”, Freddie says. “It’s just a bit... you know.” Freddie twirls his drinking straw through the air. “Car mechanics are called Fred.”

Actually, Roger knows a very good car mechanic called Freddie, but yeah, he knows what Freddie means. It’s a very blokey sort of name. “Right then, Freddie. Why is no one coming on to me. Should I be offended?”

“Oh dear.” Freddie looks at him with a pitying sigh.

“It’s not like I want them to. It’s just that all you guys get crowded.”

“I really don’t know how to say this, other than: You look so straight it hurts.” Freddie looks like he’s just delivered the gravest of news.

Roger leans close so his whisper will carry over the pulsing music. “Is it the hair?”

“The hair is just the glorious crown on that spectacle of heterosexuality that is you, my dear.”

“Funny, my dad always called it girlish.”

“Oh, so sorry, I forgot your dad is an expert on these things.”

“The press sometimes call me ‘puckish’, whatever that is. I always assumed they meant queer.”

Freddie shakes his head. “No, no, no, that’s not...” He sighs again, an aggrieved, weight-of-the-world-on-my-shoulders sound. “You”, he says, and he takes care to sit up and look straight at Roger as he delivers the words, “are a very pretty boy.”

“Thank you?”

“But your vibe is ‘touch me and I’ll break your fingers’.”

“Blimey. That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“And therefore the big bad guys who might want to take home a pretty boy stay away.”

“Huh. So...”

“And the twee fairies who like a finger-breaking tough guy, don’t understand what’s the deal with, yes, the hair. And the outfit. And quite frankly, your face.”

“My face? What's the... But that’s unfair! That’s stereotyping that is!”

“Also”, Freddie leans forward, grinning, “I’ve had Paul put the word out.” He gives Roger a few seconds to let that sink in, then breaks down in unfettered, snorting laughter.
“You’re such a fucking...” Roger tries hard not to laugh, but a few giggles come through. He smacks Freddie’s shoulder. “I don’t need to be fucking chaperoned.”

“Thought it would make you more comfortable”, Freddie says between hiccups and refills their glasses.

“Thanks. I guess.” It’s a nice thought, in a way. Freddie does always make sure to be the perfect host. “But really not necessary. I mean, as you just said, it shouldn’t have been a problem, what with my hair and my attitude and my face...”

“Oh darling”, Freddie says, settling back in his chair and picking up his drink. “You would have been eaten alive.”

Chapter End Notes

This is a great resource about living as a gay man in 50s to 80s America, particularly in New York. Lots of info about the club scene too, although this bar isn't based on any bar in particular.

So what do you think about Roger's brilliant new coping strategy?
They sell out Madison Square Garden. *Twice.* The audience has taken to showering Freddie with red roses after *Somebody to Love,* which pleases him so much he demands they all be picked up and put in the dressing room after the show. He returns the favour to the fans by appearing in a New York Yankees hat and jacket. Prior to that he had no clue who the Yankees were or what sport they play, but the fans had lapped it up.

The aftershow party is a big, almost stately affair. John Reid has flown in some family and friends for the occasion, which makes for a fun, if comparatively tame party, especially compared to last night. Mary is there, so Freddie is busy entertaining and impressing her. When she is around, not even the famous night life of New York can lure him away.

Roger's sister Clare is there too and she's brought her new boyfriend (Philippe, who is French, by the way. Not that she's copying his moves in any way), as well as two of his oldest friends: Seb, who he's known since grammar school and who's an absolute wizard when it comes to cars (give him a socket wrench and a can of beer and he'll get any old wreck purring like a cat) and his Cousin Carl, whose failed experiments with home-grown weed are the stuff of legend.

It's a fun evening, but eventually the night before catches up with him. The sun had already been high up in the air when they made it back to the hotel, and he'd been so wasted that it had taken him ten minutes to get the bloody door to his suite open (which had a lot to do with the fact that he's been trying to use his car keys). So he leaves his friends to themselves for a minute and wanders into a courtyard for a quiet smoke.

It's freezing, so he expects the place to be empty. But to his surprise, he stumbles over Brain, who's sitting on an ugly concrete bench and nursing a glass of bourbon.

"Hiding from that crazy girl who wanted a lock of your hair?" Fans can be weird.

Brian scowls. "No."

O-kay. Still not over the bug that's been eating at him. Roger shrugs and lights up, careful to sit downwind so the smoke won't bother his friend. Brian is Brian. If he doesn't want to talk, even the Spanish Inquisition can't make him open up.

But it's okay. The silence and the cold are soothing his beginning headache. Roger likes excitement and noise and people, but every now then, even he needs a break.

"Remember last time we were here?"

Oh. His Dourness is speaking.

"Yeah." It had been the first time they played MSG. No one's ever going to forget that.

"And my dad, after the show. How he said he's proud of me. He said..." Brian's speech is a little slurred. Not his first Bourbon then. "He said he gets it now."

Roger smiles. He's rarely seen Brian so happy like on that night. The handwringing that accompanied Brian giving up his research career for good had been agonizing. Brian himself had
doubted his decision long after they’d made it as a band, and the fact that – no matter how many records they sold – his dad still thought for a long time that Brian had thrown his life away, made it so much harder for him. “He should have said that the first time he heard you play the guitar. But better late than never, I guess.”

“Yeah.” Brian's voice sounds rough and tight, like he’s barely keeping tears at bay.

“Hey.” Roger throws away his cigarette and puts a hand on Brian’s shoulder. Brian exhales shakily. “Yes. Yes he fucking should have.”

“Been having a rough time lately, huh?” Roger never said he’s especially subtle.

Brian clenches and unclenches his hands a few times. “It’s just that I thought... Back then I thought I’d figured it all out. That everything was going to be fine.”

“Everything is fine. Isn’t it?”

Brian takes a deep breath. “Alright. Look. I’m not supposed to tell anyone yet, so you keep your mouth shut, alright?”

Oh god. Brian is leaving the band. Brian is fatally ill. Brian has received a call from NASA and is bound for the first mission to Mars.

“Sure,” Roger says.

“Chrissie is pregnant.”

“Shit! I mean wow!” Roger quickly corrects himself when he sees Brian’s face crumple and claps him on his back with more enthusiasm than he truly feels. “That’s awesome! I mean... it is awesome, isn’t it?”

“Ye-es.” Brian rubs two fingers over his lips and shakes his head. “Shit, of course it’s awesome. But come on. Look at me, us, here.” He waves one arm at the room, the drunk record execs, the semi-professional girls, the coke heads discreetly disappearing into the back rooms. “What the fuck am I going to do with a child?”

“Deacy manages.”

“Yeah, but come on, he's Deacy, he's... He’s different. I sometimes feel like he’s stumbled into all this by accident. He likes the music and the money, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he just handed in his resignation one day because he’s decided he’s had enough.”

“Don’t let him hear that. You might give him ideas.” It’s not that John isn’t dedicated, on the contrary. He’ll argue over minute details of shows and recording sessions with the rest of them. But sometimes it seems like he’d just really rather not be a rock star, which, by now, they certainly are. John is more the type to move to the country side, produce a dozen more kiddies and spend the rest of his life tinkering with electronics and playing golf.

Brian hums in agreement. “For some reason, all bands need a weird bloke playing bass. Never understood why. Must be a law or something.”

“Maybe we could teach Freddie.”

“Jesus, no, he’d fellate the bloody thing first time he goes on stage with it and then get an electric
“shock and die.”

“But what a way to go.”

“And we’d still have no bass player.”

They sit in silence for a moment.

“She’s due in June.”

“Good timing. Tour’s over by then.”

“Yeah, but then what? Another album, another tour, another album, another tour... and every few months I pop in to say, oh my, look how much he’s grown? I don’t want that.” He refills his glass and empties half of it in one go. “I don’t want to stop touring either.” The set of his jaw tells Roger he means it.

“Glad to hear that. Apparently all bands need some skinny bloke with big hair fiddling around with a guitar. Never understood why.”

But underneath the sarcasm there’s real relief. They are just where they always wanted to be, among the biggest gigs in the world, and Roger doesn’t see why they shouldn’t become the biggest. Except if all his band mates devote themselves to either fucking a groove along the East Coast or nesting with their wifeys, that leaves only Roger, and as this summer’s solo single experiment has shown, he just doesn’t have quite the same clout on his own.

Brian grins despite himself, but it doesn’t last long. “I just don’t know what the fuck I’m doing, Rog.”

“Well. If anyone in the world can figure it out, it’s you.”

“Yeah, thanks for the vote of confidence. By the way”, Brian sighs and sits up a little straighter, “Jim called regarding the John Reid situation.”

“Oh yeah?” The ‘situation’, as it's so delicately called, boils down to the fact that Freddie Mercury and Elton John are just too much for one manager to take care off. Not only do they both demand full time attention from their manager (and rightly so, considering how much they are paying the guy), the situation is complicated further by the fact that Reid and Elton are lovers on top of business partners, and so in the end, Elton is always first priority. The constant petty jealousies had gone on everyone’s nerve, so much so that the band decided they are better off without him.

Of course, getting rid of him wouldn’t come cheap. And whenever he isn’t distracted by the drama created by his love life, he is a crack manager who won’t be easy to replace.

“They worked out a deal. Expensive, but Deacy looked it over and said it’s fine.”

Roger shrugs. “Okay then.” If John gives his thumbs up, it’s probably the best deal they can get.

“We’ll all have to get together in the new year to sign the paperwork and then...”

“...we’re free!” Roger raises his glass in a toast. Seriously, never having to listen to an Elton-induced tantrum from Freddie is reason enough to throw a party.

“Yeah, free to do a whole lot of work by ourselves.”

“Aw, come on, it can’t be that difficult. We’ve got Jim for the legal side, John for finances and you
for worrying about stuff. That leaves me and Freddie for sex, drugs and Rock ’n’ Roll.”

A slight smile appears on Brian’s face. “You’ve got it all worked out then, haven’t you?”

“Yup. Come on.” He gets up and tugs at Brian’s arm. “Let’s get back inside before my bollocks freeze off.”

Chapter End Notes

BTW, this is what they looked like on stage around that time:

Aren’t they just perfect? Look at Freddie being all lithe, and Brian all Rock ’n Roll!
Las Vegas, 13 December 1977

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“I require champagne, caseloads of it, and not that utter dreck they sold you in Houston”, Freddie instructs a harried looking Joe Fanelli as his suite fills up with people. “Also Vodka, Stolichnaya, and some nibbles. Cold cuts and prawns. And don’t let them deep fry anything!” Joe stumbles backwards out of the room. “You never know with Americans”, Freddie says to no one in particular.

Roger lets himself fall back on the huge sofa. That prat always has the best and biggest suite. For all his modesty about merely being the lead singer, not the band leader, the privileges of being Freddie Mercury have been set in stone from the beginning.

To be fair though, he never refuses to a home invasion if the mood is right.

Coming into Las Vegas a day early had been a brilliant idea. Veronica and Chrissie decided to go straight from Houston to San Francisco for a breather and few quiet days, so Brian and John had a lot of time on their hands to come up with brilliant (and more and more hare-brained) schemes to game the casinos. They failed one after the other, of course, so they all lost a shitload of money, but in a fun way. As a consolation, John Reid managed to book Freddie into the very suite at the Aladdin where Elvis and Priscilla Presley stayed for their wedding, which had Freddie declare he’ll never leave the place again. And if Freddie won’t go out to party, the party would have to come to him.

But it ends up being the kind of intimate, low-key party they used to have on their first tours. Not 1000 of their closest friends and groupies and strippers and topless waiters and professional celebrities. Instead, Brian and Freddie take turns commandeering the record player (each turn taking inevitably accompanied by lengthy squabbling), while Roger and John end up on the floor playing poker with two techs, Jobby and Crystal, the stakes being various odd bits of Freddie’s they found lying around. Jobby actually looks quite fetching in a leather biker’s hat. Ratty, who looks after Freddie and John's instruments, has found himself a girlfriend (Phyll? Gyllie?), who is eyeing the proceedings from the sidelines, still a little too shy to join in.

Also there are Gerry Stickells, the tour manager, and his wife Sylvia, a formidable dancer, who Freddie seems to fancy a bit. Paul and Joe would join them once the food and drink is arranged.

And that’s it, that’s the party.

Roger lays down his hand and collects his pot: An art-deco hairbrush, a tiny lacquered box that in theory one could put stuff in but never did, and a gigantic golden candelabra (they aren’t quite sure if it’s Freddie’s or the hotels, but generously include it in the ante). He makes a come-hither gesture at Jobby. “Give it up, Jobs. The hat is mine now.”

Jobby makes a big production about how he’d never worn any garment so flattering to his complexion, but Roger nips that in the bud. “Nope. It’s mine. Get it over with.”

Just when Jobby has lobbed it at him, an enraged scream tells them they have been found out. Seconds later, the hat is snatched out of his hands. “How dare you, you rude bunch of philistines.” Freddie spots the box among Roger’s loot, makes a strangled noise and picks it up carefully. “This is 200 years old! It’s priceless and precious and none of you clots is to lay another finger on it!”
He’s raving and it’s quite impressive, but they all know the difference between an enthusiastic rant and a true tantrum, so no one's taking it seriously.

Crystal picks up the hair brush and puts it on the ground between them so the handle is pointing at Freddie. “Truth or Dare”, he yells before he’s drowned out by a chorus of boos and hisses. John throws a couple of playing cards at his head for good measure.

Freddie, however, drops to the ground in one fluid motion and props up his chin in his hands. The agitation is gone, the precious box (carefully) put aside. “Dare”, he announces dramatically.

Roger and John exchanges glances.

Crystal is a clever one. “Make Brian play Stevie Wonder's ‘You haven’t done nothing’”.

John cheers. Freddie scowls. “You have no idea how to play this bloody game, do you?” But he gets up and trudges in the direction of the record player, not without issuing a stern warning against touching his possessions.

“That should keep him occupied a while.” Crystal rubs his hands and starts collecting the cards.

“Let’s find some new stakes to play with, then. There should be...” Roger is cut off by the synth intro of ‘You haven’t done nothing’. “Holy shit!” He laughs and cranes his neck. “Has he knocked Brian out or what?”

Freddie saunters over to them and sits back down, smug like a cat in the canary.


“No, no, no, darling, that’s a trade secret, mustn’t tell.”

“You bribed him, didn’t you.”

“I’m not telling”, Freddie sing-songs and picks up the hair-brush.

“He bribed him”, Roger agrees. Freddie can be ruthlessly competitive when there’s a game to be won. “Probably promised him the next A-side.”

The hairbrush spins. It points at John.

“Wait. Are you guys serious?” He looks from one to the other. “We are not seriously playing, are we?”

“Well”, Jobby says. “You really should have said that before the hair brush pointed at you. No chickening out now.”

There’s a faint smell of blood in the air.

“Truth”, John says.

“Ach, boring”, Freddie whines. “I know everything interesting there is to know about you. And that’s not even very interesting.”

“What a pity. Can I go now?”

“No.” Freddie narrows his eyes, as if in deep concentration. “Do you pee in the bathtub?”

“What, would you rather know his favourite sex position you bunch of perverts? Fine I can ask that too if you...”

“Yes”, John says. “And it’s one of the few delights of my sad, boring life.” He grabs the brush, looking thunderous. It swirls and ends up on Jobby.

“Dare.”

“Get me a Scotch.”

“Righto.” Jobby scrambles to his feet.

Freddie flops onto his back in frustration.

Jobby returns with the Scotch – and a bottle of champagne as well for good measure. They all decide that champagne is very much called for.

Next time the hairbrush spins, it lands on Roger. He knocks back his champagne. “Dare”, he says.

“Well, seeing as this is apparently girl's night now...” Jobby thinks for a moment. "Serenade Crystal.”

“Better”, Freddie says, “You’re getting much better at this, my darlings. Although asking a musician – even if he's only a drummer – to sing still leaves room for improvement.”

The Only-A-Drummer who’s saved Freddie’s arse more than once with his back-up vocals when his voice was fucked during a performance sings a short but heart-felt rendition of his instant classic “My Bandmate Is A Twat”.

Crystal meanwhile looks at him expectantly and ready to be serenaded.

“Do I get a guitar or something”, Roger asks.

“Nope”, Jobby replies. “All serenading must be done purely by tugging on the heart-strings.” He looks so pleased by this little pun that Roger wants to smack him. But he sits down in front of Crystal instead. He briefly thinks about doing “Love of my life”, but that song is a little bit sacred and he doesn’t want to take away from that. And then he just knows the perfect song.

“Oh, my love”, he begins, closing his eyes for extra passion (and also so he doesn’t have to look into Crystals smirking face). “My darling, I’ve hungered for your touch a long, lonely time.” He suddenly becomes uncomfortably aware that the background music is gone. He is performing for the whole room. Oh well. In for a penny. His falsetto could give even Freddie a run for his money. “Time goes by so slowly, and time can do so much.” He opens his eyes and takes Crystal’s hand in his. “Are you still mine?” And Crystal, smug arsehole that he is, whispers ‘always’ at him before cracking up.

“How long’s the serenading to go on for”, Roger asks in between lines.

“Just a bit longer, darling.” It hasn’t been Freddie’s dare, but leave it to him take over. He watches the performance with rapt attention like it’s fucking Puccini.

“I need your love. I need your love. God speed your love to me”, Roger croons. This is kind of fun.

“Okay, okay, stop it before they send in a vet!” Brian has vacated his sacred spot by the record
player and come over.

Roger stops and cheerfully flips him off. The room explodes into applause. Roger does think it’s a job rather well done. He takes the opportunity spin the brush, very unsubtly manipulating it into pointing at Brian.

“I’m not playing, I’m not playing.” Before anyone can stop him, he’s stalked away to safety under the joint boos of the players.

“Coward”, Roger calls after him and spins the brush properly. It points at Freddie.

“Truth”, he says.

Huh. It’s just a silly game, but there are things Roger would actually like to know about his friend. It’s been ages since they properly talked about anything. But none of them should be asked with a dozen people milling about and listening in. His mind wanders back to nervous school dances when they’d played the game, all working up to the moment when they’d get to plant the first kisses. What kind of things did you ask then? It was either about who fancied who or about embarrassing stuff people had done.

“Have you ever fallen in love with someone you shouldn’t?” He’d heard the line on the telly somewhere and somehow it stuck.

Freddie’s face falls. “I…” He fidgets with the hem of his shirt, obviously uncomfortable.

Oh God, what a stupid fucking question. Freddie’s out to everyone in this room, implicitly at least, but there’s this rather complicated back story of Mary, and whatever happened with David, the first guy he’d dated and...

“Gotta say it”, John reminds him. “It’s the rules.”

“Yes. Yes of course.” Freddie bites his lips, a line of worry creasing his forehead.

“Look, that was a stupid question anyway. I’ll think up a new one, just…”

“What? No!” It might just be a stupid girl’s game, but that doesn’t mean Crystal would let Freddie off the hook now that things are getting interesting. “He’s got to answer the question you asked!”

“Actually he doesn’t”, pipes up a previously unheard voice. All heads turn to Ratty’s date, who blushes deep red.

“Yes, lovey”, Freddie encourages her.

“Well, if it’s something really secret and personal, and like, serious, the player can choose a secret bearer to confess to. And the secret bearer then decides whether to share this secret with the group or not. And if he doesn’t he’s bound to secrecy for the rest of his life.”

“That sounds totally made up”, Crystal isn’t convinced.

“Well, she is an actual girl”, Jobby says, always prepared to recognize a professional.

“Yes, that’s right, thank you, Patty.” Freddie beams at her.

“Melly.”

“Right. So.”
“Okay”, Roger said. “So you tell me and then I’m a secret bearer and the decision to tell the group rests with me? Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“Well, it looks like I have no other choice.” Freddie crawls over to where Roger’s sitting and puts both hands to Roger’s ear. The room falls absolutely silent apart from Pink Floyd doodling in the background. Freddie leans close, so close that his hair tickles Roger’s temple and his lips bump against his ear. Shit. He’s always had sensitive ears. Freddie licks his lips and for one brief wild moment Roger wonders if he’s doing it on purpose.

Then Freddie whispers: “There’s no secret. I’m just messing with them. The answer is no. Now look shocked.”

Roger’s eyes grow wide and he huffs a short breath of laughter. He shakes his head, hoping to look both amazed and shocked. He locks eyes with Freddie, who’s still just inches away. “Don’t worry”, he says in his gravest voice. “I’ll never tell a soul.”

As he gets up and declares his part in the game over, he overhears Crystal and Jobby whispering.

“What the fuck was that?”

“No idea, mate. But it was weird alright.”

“Yeah, something real deep, like,”

Roger ducks away onto the balcony before he cracks up and gives it all away. He lights a Marlboro and observes his friends through the glass doors. A tightness squeezes around his heart as he watches Brian put on a new record and Freddie leading Sylvia in a foxtrot (well, she pretends he leads). This is how it’s supposed to be. His friends, relaxed and familiar. And together. They used to have many of these nights, back when they weren’t all millionaires with their own limousines and they couldn’t rent whole clubs and fly in a chartered jet full of friends if the mood to party struck them. Not that he doesn’t want all that too. Just not all the time.

It’s the first time they have a night like this on the entire tour, and the tour is almost over. The band is pulling in two directions. Freddie, out and about, cruising the night life, and John and Brian, concentrating on their families. And Roger somewhere in between, hopping from one world to the next. How long is that going to work? Are they going to end up a strictly business band, seeing each other in the studio and for shows, but leading completely separate lives? Like a football team that only comes together for practice sessions and matches and the occasional victory celebration?

Everything inside him rebels at the thought. These are his best friends, closer to him than family in many ways. They’ve had the best times of their lives together, back when they were toiling on the pub circuit, hanging around each others’ cramped flats, constantly arguing over songs and then making up over pints in the pub afterwards.

Why does that all have to change just because they’ve got loads of money now? Isn’t money supposed to make everything easier? Maybe the problem is that it makes you need the others not as much. You don’t need to borrow a few quid because the rent’s due, you don’t have to pool small change to buy booze, you don’t even have to share a limousine from the hotel to the concert hall anymore. Maybe they’d upgrade to separate private jets next.

A shadow of those dreams he had That Night He Doesn’t Think About flickers up briefly, as it often does these days. Solo projects and other bands, years of barely keeping it together, long months of grief, John gone, Freddie...
No. No, it doesn’t have to be like that. They can make it work. He'll make it work.

Chapter End Notes

I'm afraid this story is getting a bit silly... >.< **Music: Righteous Brothers - Unchained Melody.**

I have no idea what Brian thinks of Stevie Wonder IRL, but in this story, he hates him (his music, anyway, it's not personal).

Pete Shelley came up with the idea for “Ever Fallen in Love (With Someone You Shouldn't've)” just around that time. He heard that line in a musical called “Guys and Dolls”. Maybe that was the musical Roger saw Liza Minelli in two weeks before...?

Melly’s Spin-the-Bottle rule is totally made up. But it’s the kind of rule we might very well have come up with when we played it as teenagers.

Queen coming together for gigs and then going their separate ways, like a football team, is how the time from 1977 onwards is described in Mark Blake’s “Is This The Real Life”. I thought that needed a bit of fixing.
Oakland, 17 December 1977

There’s a time for cosy get-togethers, and there’s a time for staying away from your crazy band mates because they all fucking suck.

They are in the home stretch. Frayed nerves and fatigue are taking their toll and Freddie’s voice slowly but surely bids its farewell. He’ll push through, just as he always does, but Roger’s throat hurts just from listening to him straining to reach the high notes. And of course he can’t just follow doctor’s orders and shut the fuck up when he’s not on stage. Instead, he spends almost the entire sound check arguing with Joe Fanelli over having bought the wrong brand of mineral water or something equally ridiculous.

But it’s not just their front man running on fumes. Yesterday, John smashed his hand through a window after methodically emptying an entire bottle of whiskey post-gig. The crazy bastard got nineteen stitches but still insists on playing the remaining shows. Brian meanwhile fumbled his BoRhap solo twice in a row. For a second he had looked seriously close to smashing his Red Special. And then the post-gig shouting match, which is usually a harmless whirlwind fuelled by pent up adrenaline, had turned ugly.

They all drive straight back to the hotel, stewing in silence. Roger’s idea for getting through the night is a date with the contents of his well stocked mini bar and the hotel’s pay-per-view (god bless America). But when Freddie knocks on his door around 2 am to say he’s headed for the clubs, Roger is more than ready for a change of plans.

The music is deafening, the guys dressed in heavy leather gear, and the smell of alcohol and sweat is laced with something sweet and chemical. This is not a bar for conversation. It’s a bar for sex and drugs, and because Roger can’t have the first, he makes do with the second.

He lets himself get swallowed up by the wall of sound, the sharp rise of cocaine tampered with shots of Vodka. He’ll pay for that tomorrow, but they’ve got the next days off before the final shows in Los Angeles, so he’ll live. Freddie, who usually can’t shut up after a gig, has barely said 10 words since they got here, just a few orders of booze and cigarettes shouted at Paul. It isn’t exactly fun, but it takes the edge off and will get them through the night.

“Loo?” Roger has to shout to be heard over the thumping bass.

Freddie waves an arm in the direction of a padded black door at the far end of the bar.

The first time he went for a piss in a gay club, Roger was a little nervous. But by now he’s experienced enough to know what to expect. He gets checked out at the urinal, of course, and occasionally people have sex in the cubicles, but that he can deal with. In some of the seedier clubs, people get it on in dark corners of the hallways as well, but in the dim lighting it’s easy enough to ignore it.
Before he started going to this kind of club, he expected them to be aggressive, make-sure-you-always-keep-your-arse-to-the-wall kind of affairs. And yes, if you have a problem with crude chat-up lines or the occasional grope, this isn’t the place to be. But it doesn’t feel dangerous. In fact, Roger revels in how easy it all is: Some guy would approach, either going directly for the kill or making some small talk. When Roger brushes him off with a shake off his head or point-blank telling him he’s not looking for anything, the guy either shrugs and leaves or just keeps chatting, no hard feelings. The best thing about all this is that Roger doesn’t have to impress anyone. He isn’t looking to take anyone home, so he can just drink his beer, shoot the breeze, maybe even make a fool of himself on the dance floor, without worrying about how he’s coming across.

Tonight though, the corridor leading from the main area to the bath rooms is crowded. At first Roger thinks that people are queuing up, but as his eyes get used to the scant lighting, he sees the shadows moving about in the recesses between support columns, on the sofas, against the walls. Now that the music has been dampened to dull, throbbing beats by the padded door, he can hear them too, harsh breaths and groans and whispers in the dark.

He moves on, winding his way through the crowd towards the outline of a door at the end of the hall. He passes an opening to his right, and when he turns his head, the scene is like something out of the fevered nightmares (or dreams?) of a Bible Thumper.

It’s an entire room dedicated to nothing but sex. And no one seems to care who watches or joins in. There are couples, threesomes, and a number of other configurations Roger doesn’t have the names for. The only light comes from some red fluorescent strips on the walls, but it’s enough to let him see that right in front of him, some guy’s arm has gone half-way up another bloke’s bum.

“Lost?”

A voice directly in his ear makes him jump. It’s Paul. He must have followed him down. To keep an eye on him?

“Nah, just...” He’s briefly distracted by a guy not ten feet away casually whipping out the biggest dick Roger has ever seen in his life. He stands there, slowly stroking it, like he’s inviting anyone to look his fill. He catches Roger’s eye and winks. Roger turns his head back to Paul. What was he about to say? “Just enjoying the show. If you’re going to San Francisco...” He lets his voice trail off. He’s not making much sense, but the main thing is to sound unimpressed. He’s not quite sure why Paul gets his defenses up like this, but he doesn’t want to appear rattled in front of the guy.

Paul raises his eyebrows. “Feeling the pull?”

Is Paul fucking Prenter coming on to him? That is so absurd it grounds Roger amongst all the craziness and he laughs. “Yeah, right. I was just about to ask if I could join in. Looks cosy, doesn’t?”

“’Scuse me?” The voice comes from somewhere around knee level. When he looks down, Roger stares right into the pissed off face of a guy who just seconds before must have been sucking off that slightly embarrassed looking bloke leaning against the wall next to him. A rapidly deflating cock is dangling just inches from his mouth, but that doesn’t faze him in the least. “Could you assholes take your small-talk somewhere else? Some of us are trying to fuck.”

Back on the main floor, topless dancers have taken up station directly on the bar counter. Whether they are over-enthusiastic patrons or hired professionals Roger can’t say, but their sculpted bodies and gyrating moves are something to behold. It makes getting a drink without being kicked in the
face a bit more of a challenge though. Roger gets himself a double Vodka Tonic. He feels he’s
deserves it.

“You guys”, he announces as he rejoins Freddie, “are completely insane.”

Freddie’s expression immediately perks up. “Oh dear. Are you terribly traumatized?”

“Traumatized? I fucking love it!” And, okay, maybe bravado makes him exaggerate a bit, but on
the whole, it’s true. The way those guys just go for exactly what they want (even if it’s having half
an arm shoved up their arseholes in front of a dozen onlookers) is kind of inspiring. No, inspiring is
definitely the wrong word. Impressive. Astonishing.

Maybe it’s easier not to give a fuck if the whole world already thinks of you as a pervert.

Freddie looks almost disappointed. Did he bring Roger here to shock him? To see if he’s going to
clutch his pearls and run the other way?

But then Freddie downs another shot, laughs, and slaps Roger’s thigh. “Just wait until we get to
New York next time”, he says, eyes gleaming. And then he adds in his most atrocious American
accent: “You ain’t seen nothing yet.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter rated (at least) R for graphic descriptions of sex.

OK, I spent way too much time researching hotel VCR equipment and when and
where pay-per-view became accessible. I didn’t have much success though, so I
decided to just make it up as I please. If anyone knows anything about this, please tell
me about it!

Thanks to everyone who’s been commenting so far. You guys make my day!
Dominique is here. Hallelujah, the draught is over, and the Lord be praised for limousines with separate passenger’s compartments. She’s flown in specifically to see the last concert of the tour in LA and Roger finds that absence does make the heart (and various other body parts) grow fonder.

The last gig is wild. Brian of all people somehow found a couple of dancing girls to come up on stage with them, and John Reid hops around dressed as an elf for the encore (which also sees Freddie riding piggy back on Father Christmas). The end of tour party has the slightly hysterical feel to it that only a chronic lack of sleep, the constant presence of booze and the knowledge of an imminent departure back home can bring.

Roger finds himself at a table with Dom and Silvia Stickels, John and two record execs whose names Roger can’t be bothered to remember. Freddie meanwhile, is sitting a few tables over, ensconced by his entourage, playing around sourly with his glass of champagne. This is not his kind of party, but John Reid made it very clear that the whole band is expected to make an appearance and shake hands with the company bigwigs.

Well, as far as pesky duties go, it’s tolerable. The beer is cold and the way they are seated allows him to keep a hand permanently glued to Dom’s bum without anyone else noticing. Still, he wonders how soon they can sneak back to the hotel. She’s wearing stockings tonight and it would be a fucking shame if they are too tired (or too drunk) to have fun with them by the time they return.

Dom grins at him when he gives her a little squeeze. “Excuse me for a sec”, she says and wiggles past him, not so accidentally brushing against his dick in the process. For a moment he wonders if that is an invitation to join her, but then Silvia gets up as well and they head off to the loo together. Girls are weird.

“Roger?” John has moved over so he’s now sitting directly next to him.

“Hm?”

“Listen. I’ve got to ask you something.”

“Sorry mate, I’ve run out. But Ratty’s still well stocked if you...”

John rolls his eyes. “It’s not about dope.”

“Okay?”

John looks around to make sure they are unobserved and leans a little closer. “Listen, I...” He breaks off and gathers his thoughts for a moment. “Is there something going on between you two,” he asks in a low voice.

What the fuck kind of weird question is that? Of course there is, she’s his girlfriend and they haven’t seen each other in ages. Why on earth would John...

“No, I mean. You and him.” He nods over to where Freddie is sitting.
“What?” Roger stares at John like he’s just grown a second head. He can’t seriously be asking...

John looks like he’s regretting starting this conversation already, but then squares his jaw and pulls through. “Are you fucking, is what I’m asking.”

“Deacy, have you been digging into Ratty's ‘special’ stash or what?”

“It’s a simple yes or no question.”

“It’s a fucking idiotic question.”

“Rog.” John is wearing the same expression he always has when the numbers in their accounting books don’t add up.

“Jesus, you’re serious.”

“Look, I don’t want to be an arsehole about it, but I need to know.”

“What on earth makes you think...”

“You still haven't answered the question.”

Roger just stares at him. “You are such a bloody...” He breaks off and shakes his head. Anything to put an end to this fucking conversation. “Fine. No, we are not fucking. There. Big fucking surprise, isn’t it?”

“Alright.” John leans back and looks pleased with himself. “I just wanted to know.”

“Are you even going to believe me? Or can I expect The Great British Sex Survey every Tuesday night from now on?”

John rolls his eyes. “Rog, you’ve been running off to gay bars with Freddie. A lot. You went to a bloody sex club with him the other night, what am I supposed to think? Of course it’s going to raise...”

“Wait. Wait, wait, wait.” Roger holds up one finger. “How do you know about the sex club?”

“Paul told me.”

“Paul told you”, Roger repeats slowly. That fucking gossip. Not that he’d specifically requested to keep it a secret, he’d just assumed... well, that there was a sort of code. Paul had certainly never blabbed to Roger about where Freddie is going. So why would he tell John?

“Yeah, Paul. You know, I really don’t care what you do, or who you do, it’s your business, but this might affect all of us and...”

“Oh, fuck off!” That draws heads, so Roger quickly forces his voice back down to a whisper. “It was a fucking lark, okay? No one fucked anyone.” That wasn’t quite true. A lot of lucky guys got fucked that night, but none of them was Roger. Or Freddie, for that matter. And certainly not each other.

“Okay.”

“Don’t know why you even asked if you’d rather believe fucking Paul Prenter.”

“I don’t. I...” John sighs a long suffering sigh. “Roger, the day I met you, you had sex in a janitor’s
closet with the wife of a 300-pound bouncer.”

“Did I?”

“While your own poor girlfriend was at the front desk selling tickets for the show. Of course the bloke found out and we had to smuggle you out the bathroom window so you wouldn’t get your teeth bashed in. So if there’s one thing I know about you it’s that you can’t keep it in your pants and...”

“Not ‘can’t’”, Roger protests. “More like ‘won’t’. There’s a difference you know.”

“So is it really that absurd to think you might have, er, ‘broadened your palette’?”

Roger grimaces. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

Deacy peers at him curiously. “So why the gay clubs then? Have you angered some mob boss and can’t show your face in any normal bar on the West Coast?”

Roger dithers a bit. It’s not that he’s ashamed of going out with Freddie, but he doesn’t want to bring up That Night He Doesn’t Think About any more than necessary. “It’s just that... look, I’ve been thinking that maybe I should ‘keep it in my pants’ a bit more. With, you know, Dom and me getting serious.”

John looks surprised and impressed. “Wow, that’s... that’s good, Rog.”

“Thanks for the seal of approval. I feel old already.”

“I’m younger than you.”

“Mentally.”

John doesn’t take the bait. “So you decide to honour your commitment to your girlfriend by visiting gay leather sex clubs? I’m sure that makes sense in your head, but...”

“It’s not all sex clubs. Or leather. A lot of them are like normal bars and discos. The drinks are good, the music is... loud and the people there really know how to have fun. And yeah, it’s all kinds of weird, but in the end, I have a fun night out without the risk of a playboy bunny accidentally ending up in my car. And also...”

“Also?” John pours him another drink. He’s not even trying to be subtle.

Roger sighs. “It’s just good being out with Freddie again. Like in the olden days, you know? Before he discovered the joys of gay sex and ran off to the clubs all the time.”

John grins. “Yeah. You two used to be a bloody menace.”

“You too though. Remember Birmingham ’74? When you...”

“We do not talk about Birmingham ’74.”

Roger lets it slide for now. “And even Brian once he really got going.”

“Yeah, but we could never keep up with the two of you.” He looks over at Freddie, who’s loudly complaining to Paul about something. “But I can see how you miss him. Hell, I miss him, and I want to strangle him most of the time.”
“I guess he’s making up for lost time. I mean, it’s not like he talks to me about this, but I don’t think he saw much of that world before David. And he was almost 30 back then.”

“Hmm. Well, it’s good to know you’ve got an eye on him.”

“Hang on. Are you considering me a good influence?” He narrows his eyes at John. “Are you trying to insult me?”

John grimaces. “God, I know. What’s the world coming to? But I mean... at least you’re on his side, you now. On our side.”

He follows John’s gaze to where Freddie is sitting with Joe and Paul. He doesn’t quite get what Deacy is hinting at. “Yeah, of course I’m on his...”

“Ready to go, chéri?” Playful fingers run through his hair. He cocks his head and looks up into the smiling face of his beautiful French girlfriend.

“So ready.” Before he gets up, he leans down and whispers to John: “By the way: We’re off to fuck. Me and Dom. My girlfriend. Just in case you want to put that in your survey.”

John throws a pen at him.

+++ 

“Got an early Christmas present for you.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” She leans over and pulls a flat packet from her bag. “I found it in a cute little shop in Nagano. I wanted to wait until Christmas – but actually I don’t want to wait until Christmas.”

He unwraps the package. A leather bound book with a pen attached to it on a string. “A notebook?”

“A diary, I thought.”

“Thanks, it’s really beautiful. But I don’t think I’m really a diary sort of person...”

”But you used to be! You told me how you'd write down bits and pieces every day.”

"Yeah, that was back when I had time.” When did he stop? He kept going during the first tours, but after A Night At The Opera it sort of fizzled out.

“You should go back to it”, she says in that matter of fact manner he loves about her. “You’re having the most amazing life, yet you can barely tell one gig from the other at the end of a tour. If you just write down one sentence every night – or morning – just the one funniest or most bizarre or frustrating thing you experienced that day, it’ll make an amazing read for your grandchildren one day.”

What a chilling thought. “I don’t think anything I’d write down there should ever be read by my family. Ever.”

She shrugs. “Just you then. Some day when you’re an old fart, remembering the good old days...”

He lets his hands wander over the leather cover.

“Plus, you always have those loose notes full of lyrics and song ideas flying around. And then you
fly into a rage because you lost half of them. If you just put it all in there…”

He kisses her. Sometimes, when she gets talking like that, it’s the best way to shut her up. “It’s a really nice present”, he whispers against her lips. “Let me show you my appreciation.”

“Again?”

“As often as you wish.”

She lies back on the bed and puts her hands behind her head, one foot propped up on his shoulder. “Then what are you waiting for?”

Chapter End Notes

I’ve only ever seen photos of Roger’s diary entries from the early 70s. Anyone know if he kept it up?

This might be a good time to point out that many of the anecdotes in the story – like Roger having sex with the bouncer’s wife – are made up. Not all of them though ;)

Any suggestions for what happened in Birmingham ’74?

So, that’s it for 1977. See you all in the new year. Which is going to be tomorrow, probably.
Gig tonight, Bingley Hall. Expect great crowd.

The Express are a bunch of fucking wankers.

Roger closes the diary and puts it in his duffle, feeling a sense of accomplishment.

It’s been a great year so far. Not only has he met Dominique’s parents and brushed up on his school French for the occasion and made a good impression, he also spent the first months of the year working through stacks of financial and contractual papers until he’d become an expert in the business that is Queen. He’s now a joint partner in three companies named Queen Productions Ltd, Queen Music Ltd and Queen Films Ltd (they decided to save their creativity for the music side of the business), and although the columns of numbers and dense legalese writing were so bloody boring they make him want to bash his head against a wall, he grit his teeth and pulled through because he’s a grown-up now.

And because renegotiating the deal with EMI resulted in enough cash to buy a small island. For each of them.

Jim Beach has been upgraded from lawyer to business manager, while Pete Brown and Paul Prenter stay on to look after the day-to-day stuff – and Freddie, of course. With Gerry Stickells as tour manager, their first challenge – the European leg of the News of the World tour – is running smoothly. Okay, so the Lesbian back stage show at the Paris gig had been more adult than grown up, but Roger still feels they’re off to a good start. Their niggling teenage years behind them, they’re now ready to enter the next stage as full-blown, mature rock stars. With the occasional mud wrestling contest thrown in.

The fly in the ointment is that Dom still refuses to give her job and join him on tour. It’s a bit ridiculous, really: he earns more than enough for the two of them, and if a pay check is that important to her, Queen Productions Ltd would be happy to employ her. Also her boss, Richard Branson, is a complete dick who has the all the artistic talent of a mole hill. Really, she could do so much better.

They make up for lost time whenever they’re together, but still, it’s incredibly annoying. What good is it, having a big, beautiful mansion in Surrey when there’s no one there to welcome you home? And whenever he complains to Brian or John about it, they just shrug and say “Marry her, then” (seriously, both of them, in the exact same tone of voice, as if they are matching wind-up toys). As if that would magically solve everything.

The door to the dressing room flies open and Freddie sweeps in. “Good evening, my lovelies! This is going to be an absolutely fabulous night.”

“You’re late”, Brian says without looking up, pointing at the set list they have to go through.

Freddie waves him off and picks up the outfit that has been laid out for him. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out why he’s late. Hair dishevelled, stubble burn on his neck, shoes half untied... Freddie is rarely so obvious. Joe Fanelli must be back from the States.

Roger kind of gets it (his own reunion with Dom has been nothing short of spectacular), but still,
he's annoyed. *Unprofessional*, that’s what it is. And he's not the only one who noticed.

“When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie”, Brian hums quietly, and Roger throws in a full-throated “That’s *amore*”. He’s hit squarely in the face with Freddie’s harlequin suit for his efforts. A freshly laundered one, thankfully.

“Hey, careful with that”, he says, and then, Godfather-style. “You wouldn’t want anything to happen to that, would you?”

But Freddie just shrugs. “Ah, burn it, throw it away, use it to clothe hungry Russian orphans, I don’t care.”

Roger and Brian exchange A Look. Freddie is very particular about his stage costumes in general and his precious Nijinsky inspired ballet outfits in particular.

But now, he reaches for something hanging on the clothes rail. “I think it’s time to try something new.”

+++  

“So, what do you think?”

“It’s quite...” Roger has no idea how to finish.


Brian helps out. “There is exactly one person in this world who can start with a skin-tight harlequin leotard complete with ballet shoes – and then somehow find an outfit that’s even gayer.”

“And in his boundless wisdom God decreed to make him our lead singer”, John comments.

Freddie twirls. “I look fucking beautiful”, he stage whispers and goes into a sort of plié.

He is still wearing ballet shoes. Accompanying those, however, is the full-blown leather look, complete with braces, incredibly uncomfortable looking shiny trousers and the black jacket he’s often worn over his leotard. It looks like a complete nightmare for the wardrobe people to take care of.

It also looks like something straight out of an SM-club, except that Roger hasn’t actually seen Freddie wear anything close to this in there. Of course, Freddie doesn’t actually wear ballet outfits in private either, so maybe that makes sense.

Or maybe he only dresses up when Roger doesn’t come along.

He pushes that thought aside. “Don’t they chafe”, he asks and points at the trousers.

Freddie wriggles his hips and winks at him. “Not in a bad way, darling.”

Roger is still trying to figure what chafing in a good way might be like when the door opens and Gerry rushes in. “Right, ladies, 40 minutes to go. Any last minutes primers?”

Freddie’s good mood translates directly into the set. Although it’s late in the tour, his voice is in excellent shape and an absolute joy to harmonize with. He loves playing to the home crowd and gets a little more personal with his ad-libs than he usually does.

“Hands up, those of you who thought we were gonna split up.”
It’s hard to see in the glare of the spotlights, but Roger’ll be damned if a single hand in the audience goes up. The press speculation has been annoying all of them, but no one got as riled up by them as Freddie.

“I didn’t think you believed it one minute. It’s those stupid fucking journalists. Don’t believe a word. You can stamp them to bits. Don’t waste your money on those papers.” The crowd cheers and Roger gives them a little push with his cymbals.

“Just believe in the music”, Freddie shouts, and the noise is unbelievable. Roger wastes no time and launches them into “Death on two Legs”.

No one seems to give a damn about Freddie’s newly evolved outfit. Roger wonders sometimes what people make of him. There’s a large gay contingent to their fans, of course, and they certainly know what’s going on. But the rest? The cute girls in first row, trading in their boyfriends for a night of Rock ‘n’ Roll? The hard rock guys, always going wild for “Liar” and “Now I’m Here”? The middle aged couples, swaying along to “Somebody to Love”? Do they think he’s a straight guy just playing with gay codes for the fun of it? Do they even recognize the leather look? Or do they all know and just don’t care, as long as it’s only on stage?

Freddie and Brian play “Love of my Life”, which is a bit of a breather for Roger and John. They wait it out in the doll’s house directly behind the stage, getting something to drink and a change of shirts. Usually, this is the time, when the crowd goes quiet, but not tonight. Tonight, they sing along to the sweeping two-octave melody. And Freddie, instead of trying to sing over them for this most personal song of his, just goes quiet during the bridge, letting them take over.

This is why live always beats studio. Those moments when thousands of people improvise their own choreography. You can lead them there, of course, you can prepare a set for maximum effect, whipping up and slowing down the crowd at the appropriate moments. But sometimes, there are those special moments, where things happen that no one could have anticipated but that everyone immediately knows are right.

+++

The two months after the final shows in London go by in a flash. Brian becomes a proud father to little James. Roger has barely seen him so incandescently happy before. It’s a bit disconcerting. He’s determined to spend as much time as possible with Chrissie and Jimmy before the touring and recording routine picks up again, which is kind of adorable but not without unintended side effects: When Roger visits two weeks after the birth, Chrissie takes him aside and begs (alright, orders) him to take Brian out even if only for a few hours before she beats him up with a toy rattle. They go to see David Bowie at Earl’s Court (interesting guy, but a really sloppy stage show) and peace at the May-household is restored. Then Roger spends two weeks on Ibiza with Dom, sunbathing by day, clubbing at night. He also happens to turn 29 and ushers in the last year of his youth in style – which includes skinny-dipping in Lake Geneva and Freddie swinging (and crashing) from a chandelier. He doesn’t remember much more, which means it must have been a good bash.

For the next album, they decide to leave England and record in Nice and Montreux instead, thus saving a buttload in taxes. Also, there is some vague idea that the tranquil town of Montreux is less distracting than London, while offering all the comforts of a Swiss mountain resort.

Turns out, the distractions are just different.

**Jazz Recording Sessions**

“Freddie.”
“Yes, dear?”

“Did you fuck one of the Tour de France guys?”

“Whatever makes you think that?”

“You disappeared for three days, came back beaming like someone screwed your brains out and wrote a song about the joys of bicycling. I bet you never even sat on a bike in your life!”

“On a cyclist, however...” John mutters.

“You’re a bunch of horrible, tattering, old gossips, all of you.” Freddie looks so pleased with himself, Roger has to chuck a drum stick at him.

+++ 

“Fat Bottomed Girls?”

Brian grimaces and tries to take the sheet back from Roger. “It’s just a working title. Once we’ve figured out the arrangement I’ll come up with something better, but for now...”

“Don’t you dare!” Freddie snatches the sheet from Roger’s hand and begins improvising snatches of the lyrics in a rough, down-and-dirty voice. “I love it”, he exclaims between lines.

John immediately picks up his bass and thumps out a rhythm.

“Guys”, Brian pleads while Roger improvises some harmonisations.

“Left alone with big fat Fanny, she was such a naughty... naughty... Na...” Freddie tries to keep a straight face and sing the verse, but bursts into uproarious laughter before he can finish.

“Didn’t know you had it in you, Bri”, Roger shouts over the wolf whistles of the crew.

Shaking his head in defeat, but with a smile on his face, Brian picks up his guitar.

+++ 

Roger takes a deep breath. “Please.” Okay, that has been weird. “There. I said it.”

“No, Roger.” Brian rolls his eyes. “Now, can we all...”

“It’s the best thing that’s ever happened in the history of the band and I’m stuck here in a cellar in bloody Switzerland with you wankers!”

“We’ve got a tour planned for October, we’re two weeks behind schedule...”

“Yeah, wonder why we’re behind schedule...” Freddie pointedly ignores Roger’s furious glare.

“...so we can’t have you ‘nip over’ to Wimbledon just because you want to look at some naked ladies.”

“50 of them! At the same time! On bicycles!”

John takes an interest in the discussion for the first time. “Wait, I thought Freddie was the one with the thing for bicycles?”

“Bicyclists,” Freddie corrects primly. “Although most them are awfully skinny. But they’ve got
stamina, let me tell you. And all that spandex...”

Roger stamps his foot. “I hate you. All of you!”

+++ “I’m a sex machine, ready to reload, like an atom bomb, about to oh-oh-oh-oh-oh explode—we’ll do an expanding harmony here”, Freddie explains without losing his track on the piano, “I’m burnin’ through the sky yeah, two hundred degrees, that’s why they call me—well, and then the bridge again, you all know that part, and then Brian can do his thing after that.” His fingers come to an abrupt halt and he spins around on his piano stool. “What do you think?”

“Not bad”, Roger says. It’s an album-worthy track, certainly, maybe even a single, depending how it develops during recording and production. “But it does have quite a subtext, doesn’t it?”

“Subtext?”

“I really enjoy cocaine?”

“Also: ‘Look, I’m having an orgasm’”, John chips in.

Freddie rolls his eyes. “Darling, there’s nothing sub about that, it’s just text.”

+++ “It’s shit.”

“It works.”

“It’s utter crap!” Roger stands up so fast the chair falls over with a satisfying crash. He gets himself a beer.

“It’s perfectly fine filler”, John insists.

Oh lovely. Well at least John bothered to show up in the studio.

“Yeah, well fuck you!”

+++ Album done. Might have one or two hits on it, but never got the drum sound right.

Can’t write songs anymore. V. annoying. Tired. Can’t wait to get home.

Chapter End Notes

The concerts they played at Bingley Hall in Stafford in the late 1970s must have been something special. In ’77 the crowd inspired Brian to write “We Will Rock You”, and the 1978 was one of the first where Freddie stopped singing during “Love of my Life” to let the crowd take over.
Here's a picture of Freddie's outfit:

(Thanks to MeriJasmin for the find 😊)
So they have an album. Roger is not a fan. Not being a fan of your own band kind of sucks.

It’s not that all of the songs are completely terrible. He just doesn’t particularly *like* most of them. And put all together into an album, he likes them even less. Worst of all, it’s his own contributions that he likes least. (Except Dreamer’s Ball. Dreamer’s Ball is the worst. He just can’t for the life of him understand what Brian was thinking with that one. Or why Deacy and Freddie didn’t veto it.)

He used to fight for getting his songs onto albums, not for keeping them off. Now though, he’d rather have included an alternate take version Freddie’s bike song than “Fun it”, that boring, run-off-the-mill instantly forgettable piece of crap. He tried bringing in synth drums to make it sound fresh and a bit funky, but somehow he just couldn’t make it work.

In the end, he’d simply given up and written all his frustrations into a song: *tired and lonely, uninspired and lonely, days seem long, just more, more, more of that jazz*. And then his bandmates made him play pretty much every instrument on that fucking song.

The only thing he's proud of is the cover art. It's styled after one of the graffiti pieces he found in Berlin earlier that year.

Something just didn’t click for him. Roger doesn’t know whether it was the wrong place or the wrong time or the wrong producer... Or maybe he should try to focus on some of his solo ideas. He’s had some songs floating around in his brain for a long time that don’t quite fit Queen.

But first the tour. And it looks like he’ll have to face it alone. Again.

“You're my girlfriend. I'd like to see you every once in a while.”

“And what would I do with myself all day?’ She’s lying on her back, stark naked, playing with the thin gold bracelet he got her for her birthday.

Roger shrugs. "Whatever Veronica and Chrissie do."

"Rog, they take care of their children all day. That is work, you know. And hanging around recording studios and dressing rooms gets boring after a while too.”

“Come on, you can’t tell me you wouldn’t know how to have fun in New York and Barcelona and...”

“...Buffalo and Cincinnati?"

He throws a sock at her and she giggles. “Alright, so maybe I’ll allow you to skip the Midwest.”

“How generous.” She soberes up again. “But I’m serious. I can’t just tag along after you like a pretty piece of luggage. I like my job, organising things, fixing things... I'm good at it.”

Suddenly, like in a blinding flash of light, Roger has a brilliant idea. “So you could be my PA!”

“No.”

“It’s brilliant! You can be fantastic and organized and important, and you’ll be with me and...”
“No, Rog.”

“And I’ll pay you double whatever that creeper’s paying you and...”

She puts one elegant finger over his mouth. “Roger, stop. I’m never going to work for you. Ever. Okay?”

“But...”

“You’re bossy enough as it is. I won’t be having you handling my paychecks.”

Roger pushes her finger away. “Jim would handle them”, he grumbles, all enthusiasm gone.

She cocks her head. “Why is it so important to you that I stop working?”

“I don’t know.” Roger throws his hands up. “How about because you could be with me?” Anger and frustration that have been stewing for a long time bubble up. “And it’s not like you need to. I make more money in a month of recording than you earn in a year!”

“Is that so?” Her voice goes soft, distant. “How nice of you to remind me.”

“Look, I just meant...” He scrubs his hands through his hair. Why does everything always have to be so bloody difficult? “You don’t know how it is.”

“Don’t I?”

“What do you mean?”

Dom shakes her head. “Nothing, just...” She sighs. “Rog?”

He turns his head towards her. “Hm?”

She rolls onto her side and just looks at him for a moment.

“What is it?” It’s unlike her to hesitate like that.

A half-smile plays around her lips. “Maybe I have a suggestion for you. But first, promise me you won’t run off and wreck your car if you don’t like it.” Her hair falls over her face and she takes a second to brush it back behind her ear. The bracelet slides down her arm, drawing his gaze down to her lovely breasts.

“Why would I do that”, he mumbles, distracted. They’ve just had sex like 15 minutes ago, but damn.

“Promise me?”

He rolls onto his side as well and reaches out to trace the outline of her arm, towards the bracelet, towards...

“Rog!”

“Okay, alright, fine, I promise.” He puts his hand flat on the bed between them. “So?”

“So.” She drums her fingers against her neck and bites her lips. Seeing her nervous makes Roger a bit nervous. But she doesn’t look concerned or angry. Maybe it’s about a sex thing.
He looks at her expectantly.

“I’ve been thinking about going off the pill.”

“Ah”, he says cleverly, after about an eon has passed.

“Do you have any thoughts about that?”

About a thousand, all jangled up and fighting for the front seat. “Yeah. Just.” He clears his throat. Oh god. “When you say ‘thinking about’, I mean...”

She gives him a look. “Nothing’s happened yet, don’t panic. It’s just an idea.”

He tried not to see it but looking back, it’s obvious that she’s been thinking about it for a while. Ever since Jimmy was born, certainly. And he is a cute one, but... “Do you really think now’s the right time? With, you know, the next tour planned, and the new album at all?”

“Will there ever not be a next tour? Or a new album?”

Point taken.

“Besides, it’s likely going to take a while. It never happens on the first try.”

“Hmm.”

She raises one eyebrow at him. “We’d have to do lots of trying.”

That at least gets a smile out of him. “Are you appealing to my baser instincts?”

“I might be.” She puts her hand over his. “You do want children, don’t you?”

“Yeah, sure. Just... Christ, Dom, this is...”

“All very grown up and scary, I know.” She sighs. “Look, it’s just... There’s never going to be a perfect time. But we’ll have to start talking about it at some point. I don’t mind waiting a bit more, but...” She sits up and swings her legs over the edge of the bed. “Just think about it, will you?”

“Sure.”

“And no reckless driving.”

“It helps me think!” But she’s already disappeared into the bathroom.

Chapter End Notes

Interesting times for Roger.

Next up is one of my favourite chapters. I really hope you'll enjoy it too, although things get rough for Brian again...
New Orleans, 31 October 1978

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He doesn’t think about it. In fact, whenever he finds himself in danger of doing so, he cranks up the music a little louder. Or pours himself a Vodka Tonic.

Luckily, the US tour demands his full attention. They don’t have the best start. It takes them a while to find a set list that works and the first few shows are riddled with small snags, which is not good for anyone’s mood. The album isn’t out yet when the tour starts and playing not just new, but unknown material is a challenge for both band and fans. In addition, Brian is guilt-tripping hard because he left Chrissie and baby James at home. He’s on the phone with them every night, but Roger can see that it’s eating away at him. Freddie has just come out of a messy breakup with Joe Fanelli (who had just a few months before upended his life and moved to London for him) and is on the cocaine trail a little too often for comfort. Not that Roger has a problem with the occasional line, but it makes him uneasy when it becomes too much of a habit. Hell, just a month earlier, The Who lost one of the best drummers of all time to drugs and booze. If it can happen to them...

The good news is that in Roger finds himself warming up to *Jazz*. Maybe not the album itself, but the songs are a lot of fun to play live. Even Dreamer’s Ball, which gets a lot more interesting with added kazoos. Deacy’s new hair style is another source of joy: It’s so close cropped that the crew guys start calling him Birdman and present him with a striped prisoner’s overall, which he gamely wears during the encores.

The main event that looms large in the background of the first gigs, however, is the launch party for the album. Shit or not, a Queen album deserves a Queen party and this year they set their eyes on New Orleans. Brian has fallen in love with the city on their very first tour and Jim Beach trades in his work studying contracts and accounts for scrounging around the French Quarter finding as many odd acts as possible to assemble into one big bacchanal. And he exceeds even Roger’s wildest expectations.

The Imperial Ballroom of the Fairmont hotel looks like a hot and brooding Southern jungle swamp. Waitresses in nothing but body paint snake their way across lianas, offering Cristal and lines of specially imported Bolivian marching powder. Bamboo cages with strippers are suspended from the ceiling. In the back rooms, girls and boys of questionable morals offer their hospitality to any takers. There are snake charmers, fire eaters, magicians, hermaphrodite dwarves, contortionists, mud wrestlers and one memorable 300 pound lady smoking cigars with her pussy.

Roger throws himself into the fray and allows the madness to swallow him whole. Until he gets rudely interrupted that is.

“Rog. Rog!”

“Deacy!” Roger throws out his arm to invite John into his new circle of friends

“Come on, I have talk to you.” John takes his arm and starts to pull him away.

Roger pulls back. He doesn’t want to leave and talk to John. John talks about debt restructuring and tax loopholes and the pros and cons of non-inverting amplifiers. And Roger’s just found the most amazing group of people. He’s already got an invitation to one of the backrooms from two lovely ladies called Mona and Lola – not that he’s actually going to take them up on it, of course. At least
he's not planning to. Not seriously.

John sways a little at the unexpected pushback, but quickly regains his footing and with one giant heave yanks Roger out of his seat.

“What the fuck, Deacy!”

“Rog, shut up.” John pulls him close so he can speak at a normal volume. There’s a cloud of expensive whiskey wafting about him. “It’s Brian. He’s run off and no one knows where he is.”

“So?” It’s a giant party, no one knows where anyone is.

“No one. Not Jobby, not Jim, not Gerry.” Oh. That is weird. “And when I last saw him, he could barely stand on his feet and was moaning about that Peaches girl again.”

Peaches is the protagonist of a mystery-shrouded night of... Passion? Mind altering drugs? Scrabble? No one knows for sure, but it happened the first time they’d been to New Orleans in ‘74. All anyone knows about her is that she inspired Brian to write the line “down in the dungeons just Peaches and me”, which fuelled a lot of speculation.

John goes on: “But Frank said he saw him staggering about outside, and when he went over to him, he turned around on his feet, basically fell into the next cab and rushed off downtown.”

Roger looks back at Lola and Mona in their tiny thongs. At least he would have liked to find out whether they intended to have a go at him together or in sequence. Or maybe they would have made out while he watched? That wouldn’t even have been cheating, would it?

He looks back at John and his earnest, concerned face. “I hate you.”

They stagger outside where Frank, one of their drivers is waiting with their limousine. “One minute”, John says and disappears while Roger settles into the back of the car. He helps himself to a glass of bourbon and takes a moment to think. He has a moral duty to search for his band mate, of course, especially since this is Brian and Brian is either completely brilliant or colossally stupid with not much in between, so he might be in serious trouble. But there’s no reason why Mona and Lola can’t join them. Yes, that’s a great idea. They’ll do their duty by Brian and he’d have company on the long, dark drive through New Orleans. Not bad. Not bad at all.

He wants run back inside and try to find the girls, but when he opens the car door, a bewildered Freddie stumbles right into his arms. “Roger?”

“Er. Hi.”

John follows after him and slides onto the jump seat while Freddie climbs off Roger and settles down next to him, looking vexed.

John presses the speaker button. “OK, Frankie, go in the direction you saw Brian take off.”

Freddie’s eyes narrow. “John, what the fuck’s going on?”

“What did he tell you”, Roger asks.

“That Glenn Hughes is giving a party at the Sheraton and invited me there. And that Paul is waiting in the car for me.” He still looks more incredulous than angry at the outrageous lie he’s been fed.
“Quickest way to get him here”, John says to Roger, as if he’s some sort of co-conspirator.

Roger quickly presses a double Vodka into Freddie’s hands.

“Should have known something was off when John knew about a fashionable party and I didn’t.”

“It’s for a good cause”, Roger says. He turns towards Freddie and whispers with his most wide-eyed, dramatic look. “Freddie. We’ve got to save Brian!”

It’s a make it or break it moment. After a tense second Freddie breaks out into laughter. “You, my dears, are even more insane than the folks in there”, he says and waves a hand in the direction they’d come from. “Mad as a howling mob of banshees, I like it.” He chugs the vodka and hands Roger the glass for a refill. “Where do we start?”

Later, Roger can’t quite sort out where it starts and what follows and in what order. There are just snatches, like still photographs and 3-second snaps of film playing in his head.

That blues bar where they almost lost John to a jam session with a grizzled old pianist who looked like he’s been sitting in that very bar, playing that very piano since 1842.

The fountain that Freddie dragged him into, splashing and gasping.

The biggest bong he'd ever seen in his life.

And the tequila. God, why the tequila.

He does know where it ends: In a park, under a copse of trees, where John tenderly holds back Brian's hair as he vomits his brains out. They must have found him at some point but when and where exactly is lost in the fog.

“She wasn’t there”, Brian whispers, wide eyed. “I thought she’d come to the party but...”

“So you decided to check every bar in the city to see if you’d run into her? Brian, you're a fucking moron.” John's body must contain more alcohol than blood at this point but you couldn't tell it from looking at him. The man has a bloody gift.

Brian just looks utterly miserable. “Just wanted to talk to her. Just talk. I... She always made me laugh.”

No one knows what to say to that. John pats Brian’s back, a little helplessly. Roger just works hard to keep his mouth shut. In his state, nothing productive is going to come out of it.

“Thanks for being here”, Brian mumbles after a while, clapping Deacy's arm. He takes a deep breath and looks around. "How the fuck are we going to get home?"

Freddie rolls onto his back and stretches his arms over his head. “I feel home.”

Roger giggles hysterically. He doesn’t know why.

"Shh, you're ruining the mood." The back of Freddie's hand hits him none-too-gently in the face. “Look at the stars!”

Roger plops down on his back next to him. A curl of Freddie’s hair tickles his ear. The night is so clear that even in the middle of the city he can make out the shimmering line of the Milky Way. He reaches up to see if he can touch it, to trace its long arch in the night sky.
Long fingers close around his wrist. Freddie pulls his hand closer to his face and inspects with a look of fascination on his face.

“What”, Roger asks.

“That looks absolutely awful.”

Roger shrugs and flexes his fingers. He's got used to the cycle of cracking and blistering and hardening up again. It used to be worse, back when they were playing their first big tours. Now it's just a matter of getting through the first two weeks. He should just keep up a steady drum practice, then he wouldn't have these problems, but after months in the studio he can't stand the sight of the bloody kit.

“Our soft handed drummer.” Freddie traces one light finger over his palm. “Is it very painful?”

The touch is hard to bear but not because our hurts. It's tingly and reaches down into his spine and up to his neck and it just doesn't stop. “No”, Roger whispers, “It's…” He tugs his hands away and clears his throat. “It’s going to be fine in a week or so.”

He rubs the palm of his hand to make the tingling go away.

Freddie looks at him for a moment then breaks or into a smile. “Just the opposite of my voice then.” Then his eyes snap back up to the sky. "A falling star", he says. "Quick, everyone make a wish."

John snorts. "That's an airplane, you idiot."

Roger breaks up into giggles again. It must be the bong.

"You don't have a shred of romance in your soul, John. I pity you." Freddie points at something else. "What's that one called, Brian?"

"The moon."

"No, I mean... will you shut the fuck up, Rog?"

Roger rolls onto his stomach. The wet grass on his face, the smell of the earth in his nose, the warmth of Freddie’s body so close to him. It’s grounding, real. He takes a few deep breaths with his aching ribs. God, he's just so bloody fond of them all.

"I mean that reddish one over there. Next to the cluster that looks like a dick."

"Everything looks like a dick to you", Brian mumbles, but he lies back as well and follows Freddie's gaze. "And that's not a star. It's Mars."

Roger hums Shostakovich under his breath.

"But if you look over there – it's Orion."

"Can you see Virgo, too?"

"Not this time of year." Brian raises his hand. "If you travel at the speed of light for 1500 years in that direction, you'll get to the Horsehead nebula." He sounds a bit more stable now. Clever Freddie, making him talk about stars and stuff.

"What's that?"
"It's where stars are born."

They go quiet at that. It’s the kind of statement that definitely merits some dignified awe.

"It looks red through the telescope because Sigma Orionis ionizes the hydrogen gas. Magnetic fields channel the gases leaving the nebula into streams that look like bright streaks against the background glow. And then the nebula itself, a primordial beast rearing its head above it."

"Bloody hell." Roger shivers.

"You guys", John says, "are so fucking high right now."

Roger throws a small pink pill at him he finds tucked inside his shirt pocket. How long has that been there? "Join us", he grins. "It's nice up here."

By the time Paul finds them and ushers them in the car ("You guys are supposed to give a press conference in six hours, for Christ's sake") the sun has risen and John is communing with the spirit of the trees.

Chapter End Notes

Song for this chapter: Kodaline - Brother (acoustic).

Some beautiful soul made a John Deacon Hair History chart so you can refer to "The Birdman":


Here's an article about that party. What exactly individual band members got off to that night is not known (although there are reports of trips to the French quarter). Except Freddie at some point autographed a strippers bum:
Also, here’s a pic of Roger from that night’s show, just because it’s so divine:

If you look closely, you can just make out the top of his tiger striped trousers.
New York, 18 November 1978

Chapter Notes

Diving deeper into the New York gay scene. Brace yourselves. Roger's going to meet some new people and is a bit clueless about sex and gender stuff. But he's doing his best.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This year, they stay in New York for a whole week, playing shows in Madison Square Garden and commuting to Uniondale and Philly. As a special surprise for the audience (and a small consolation for Roger having missed the 50 naked ladies), they get a couple of strippers to ride bikes around Freddie during Fat Bottom Girls. It’s a fun night, but having six naked girls running around backstage offering private lap dances while one is under a self-imposed vow of chastity (because one’s girlfriend can’t be arsed to take some time off work) is not good for Roger’s self-restraint. If John hadn’t taken him aside and pointedly asked him how Dom was doing, he might have taken one of them up on it. The tall black one was absolutely stunning.

So when they have Saturday night off, Roger is more than ready to follow Freddie into the wildest clubs New York has to offer.

There’s a queue stretching around the block, all men, all wrongly dressed for New York in November. But they drive right past the long line until the car comes to a halt at a side entrance. Paul exhanges a few words and the gorilla of a bouncer guarding the door and voila, they’re in.

There’s a lot of black, a lot of sweaty guys crammed onto a dance-floor, a lot of poppers traded freely. On a small stage, there’s a performance featuring a wiry guy in skin-tight leather leading some poor bloke with gold rings through both nipples on a leash. Roger finds it hard to look at, but even harder to look away. It looks painful and humiliating, but there's something sensual and intimate about it as well. If those were girls...

Off to one side is an archway that opens into complete blackness. It pulls Roger in like a magnet and once inside, the darkness yields to minimal lighting, single dramatic spotlights giving off just enough light to reveal the playground around him. There are stalls simulating johns with glory holes cut in the walls, a row of shoeshine chairs mounted on a platform with topless boys servicing their customers in their knees, a row of closets that offer complete darkness inside against the walls. And in the centre of the room, under a bright spotlight, is a sling suspended from the ceiling and next to it, on a wrought iron side table, an industrial sized can of Crisco. The sling is empty for now but it doesn’t take much imagination to understand how it’s supposed to be used. The music here is twisted, oddly featureless and it hits Roger like a blow when he realizes just how much like the middle part of Get Down Make Love it is. Holy shit, is this where Freddie got it from? Is this what they conjure up on stage every night?

He turns around, but there’s no trace of Freddie and Paul. He wants to look for them, but thinks better of it. Freddie isn’t the type to have sex in squalid back rooms (that diva spends a 1000 quid on a silken bed sheets, for god’s sake). He likes to watch and sometimes he takes people back to his hotel, but he wouldn’t follow some bloke into a pitch black closet containing nothing but a bench and a can of lube.
Would he?

Fuck. If he makes an exception here, Roger does not want to find out. The idea twists something deep inside him and he snuffs it, quick and brutal. Freddie's probably back at the bar, wondering where Roger ended up.

In contrast to the sex fantasy land next door, the bar area is positively cheerful. Dancers in jockstraps have taken up station on the bar counter. So for a couple of minutes, he unsuccessfully tries to order a drink through the moving, muscled calves of someone stomping it to Donna Summer.

“Buy me one?”

Next to him, a rather short man with a barely tamed black curls and an easy smile is leaning against the counter. His outfit is not too far removed from something Freddie might wear on stage these days.

“Not looking, sorry.”

“Ah, thought so.” The guy doesn’t seem fazed. “Then let me get you one. Just as a thank you for a great show, mind.”

“A great show?” Roger’s mind is still preoccupied with faux shoe-shine get-ups and the well-oiled guys writhing on the bar.

“I saw you guys on Thursday. Loved the Kazoo”, he winks.

Roger laughs, surprised. “Never heard that before.” So Dreamer’s Ball has its fans.

The guy must have communicated with the bartender without Roger noticing, because just then two drinks appear in front of them. “I’m Dino.”

And despite the deafening music and the go-go dancers and the fact that Dino looks like he just wandered off the set of an exotic porn movie, Roger finds himself drawn into a serious conversation about the challenges of touring and the difference between East and West Coast audiences. Dino apparently plays rhythm guitar for a Rockabilly band (“Don’t worry, I won’t make you listen to a demo”) and loves to hear all about the details of translating a studio song into a live gig and the technical intricacies of producing their multilayered harmonies.

It’s the last thing he expects in a place like this, but it’s surprisingly fun.

Roger only notices the figure approaching when one hand lands on Dino’s shoulder and interrupts him mid-sentence. “Weren’t you supposed to get us drinks, you little... oh, hello there!” An angular, heavily made-up face under a stern black haircut gives him an appraising smile.

Dino grimaces. “Shit, sorry, Mel, I got...”

“Distracted, yes I see. Always the blondes with you, eh?” Roger takes in the heavy duty boots and leather get-up and he realises that this is the performer who’s been up on stage earlier, the dominant part of the SM act.

“Sorry for keeping him”, Roger says. Is Dino like this guy’s slave or something? Has he been encroaching on someone’s territory, broken some sort of code?

Mel rolls his eyes. “Oh, don’t worry. He can’t help it. Send him out for Vodka Tonics, and he’ll
return two hours later with the most beautiful guy on his arm and swears it happened all by accident.”

“Oh, shut up”, Dino mumbles, but can’t hide a grin.

“He’s like one of those guys who can’t put on their own shoes but can tell you what day of the week it was on, like, the Fourth of September ‘75. Like that, but for getting laid.”

Dino frowns. “September 4th ’75”, he mutters to himself. “Jerry”, he exclaims triumphantly. “That was definitely a Jerry.” Then he signals the bartender for another round of drinks. “This is Roger, by the way, and he’s proving strangely irresistible to my charms. Roger, this is Melissa, and she doesn’t know the least thing about music.”

Okay. He can do this. This is either a gay thing where guys call each other girl’s names because they think it’s cute or something (Freddie was unstoppable when he first got wind of that), or it’s actually a girl in drag. Or a guy pretending to be a girl in drag. Or just a butch Lesbian.

Shit.

He quickly checks the size of Mel’s hands and feet as inconspicuously as he can. Could very well be a girl. God, this stuff is confusing. He takes a sip of his drink to buy himself a minute. “I saw a bit of your performance earlier”, he says, once he gets his wits together. “Pretty intense.”

She grins. “Intense? Oh boy, you should see me Fridays at the Anvil.”

Roger immediately concedes defeat. “Okay, I admit it, I have no idea what was going on up there.”

“Not your scene then, that’s okay.” She shrugs.

“Not sure I even have a scene”, he grumbles. Freddie and Paul fucked off to god knows where and basically abandoned him in a gay disco dungeon. Where he only is because his own bloody girlfriend has more important things to do than see him rocking Madison Square Garden.

Melissa and Dino exchange glances. “Listen, we’ve got a table back there”, Dino points at a corner a little removed from the dance floor. “If you get bored, you’re welcome to join us. It’s a mixed crowd, so no worries about scenes and all that.” He picks up the armload of drinks that has accumulated on the bar.

Roger looks around for Freddie and Paul, but can’t see them in the darkness and the throng of the crowd. Oh for fuck’s sake, he not a fucking school girl. “Yeah, why not”, he says and hops off the bar stool. “Should I bring some more Vodka Tonics?”

The ‘mixed group’ is the perfect crowd to get sloshed with. Melissa is the only girl (apparently this a strictly male club, but her performances are famous enough to merit an exception), but there’s a middle-aged biker dude (Marco), a ripped black guy who wears only blue jeans and a pair of cowboy boots (Ed) and the guy that had been on stage with Melissa earlier who up close looks like a fucking swimsuit model (Arturo). He doesn’t know any of the people or places they gossip about, but they easily include him in their banter. Roger isn’t sure if anyone besides Dino knows who he is, but it doesn’t seem to matter.

“So”, Arturo says finally, angling his slim body towards Roger. “What brings you to a place like this, all alone on a Saturday night?”

Dino shakes his head. “Forget it. He’s straight.”
Arturo grins, eyeing Roger's crotch. “Oh, I like ‘straight’.”

“No”, Roger says. “Really straight. Embarrassingly so.”

Arturo looks from Roger to Dino and back. “So”, he says, finally, intrigued rather than flirtatious. “What brings you to a place like this on a Saturday night?”

“Reconnaissance.” Roger grins and shrugs. “I mean, you guys have the wildest clubs in the fucking world. Why don’t we get clubs like that? Like, I’ve been to some pretty out there places, but something like that over there?” He waves vaguely in the direction of the other room. “Holy Shit!”

“Take 500 desperately horny men, force them to bottle up their sexuality for most of their lives, and then bring them all together in the same time and place and turn off the lights.” Ed shrugs. “Doesn’t take a genius to figure out what’s going to happen.”

“It’s just really unfair. I mean, if you tried to put a sex dungeon in a straight club, all you’d get are horny men, sitting around waiting desperately for some girls to show up. But they’d never set a foot in there, except if you pay them of course and then it’s just not the same, is it?”

“Yeah, I wonder why.” Melissa rolls her eyes. “Sorry?”

“Look up ‘Madonna-Whore-complex’, alright?”

“Madonna what?”

“She’s trying to say politely it’s because you guys are arseholes”, Marco translates. Melissa nods. “Well... Not all of us. Not all the time, anyway”

“Take Arturo here”, Ed says. “He’s a total slut.” Arturo waves at him and smiles sweetly. “A regular occupant of The Sling. You’ve seen it right?” Roger nods, trying not too picture it in too much detail. “He gets a volume discount at the Crisco Disco and we’ve all seen him with various phallic objects in his ass.”

“Whether we wanted to or not”, Marco grumbles. “Oh, you wanted to. Don’t pretend.” Arturo glares at him.

“Now imagine a girl like that. Would you invite her to a nice day out at the beach with your friends? Introduce her to your parents? Offer her a job? Marry her?” Arturo frowns. “None of you jerks ever offered me a job.”

“That’s because we’re poor, sweety”, Dino says and helps himself to another drink.

“If she said ‘stop’”, Melissa says in a more somber tone, “Could she be sure the guys in the dungeon would respect that? And if they didn’t, would you call it rape?”

“Er.” It’s hard to wrap his head around. “I mean.”

“Besides, there are places like that. Maybe you’ve just been looking in the wrong spots?” She gets up. “And speaking of places, I need to find one where I can take a piss.”

“What places”, Roger calls after her.
She turns back around, seizing him up from head to toe. Then she shakes her head. “You are not ready”, she says like she’s some ancient Karate master and disappears in to the crowd.

Marco chuckles. “She’s just messing with you.”

“Oh. I’m not so sure”, Dino says. “I mean there is that kind of artsy underground bisexual orgy thing where everyone wears masks and...” He trails off, his eyes growing wide.

Because of all the times, this is the one Freddie Mercury decides to materialize next to Roger.

“Yes, go on”, Roger says to Dino, trying to get him back on track. “Artsy bisexual orgy, you were saying?”

“I just hate to interrupt”, Freddie announces, the fucking liar, “but we’re leaving. Oh, hello.” He gives a quick wave at Dino and the others, as if he’s only just noticed them.

“Yes, well, I’m in the middle of something here, so do you mind fucking off and...” A prickle down his spine stops him. Something’s not right.

Roger looks around. His eyes land on a guy a few feet away, leaning against a table, watching them. He’s on the heavy side, but his sleeveless shirt reveals that a lot of that bulk is muscle. When he notices Roger, the guy gives a brief smile and wave. It looks pleasant enough.

Freddie has followed his line of sight. “That’s Richie”, he says and leans in a little closer. “Paul found him. He’s been featured in *Muscle Boy.*”

Roger eyes Richie’s gut. “When, in 1951?”

Freddie whacks him playfully in the shoulder. “Don’t be nasty.”

“Where’s Paul?”

“Getting the car.”

Richie raises his eyebrows and taps his wrist. Freddie mouths “Coming”, at him, the turns to Roger. “So, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

“No, I’m coming with you. Give me a minute, I’ll meet you outside.” For the life of him he can’t say why, but he doesn’t want Freddie alone with this Richie-bloke one second more than necessary. Something about the guy gives him the creeps.

Freddie stalks off and Dino takes his fist out of his mouth. “Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God,” he whispers.

Arturo puts a hand on his back and rubs soothing circles. “You alright?”

“Do you have any idea who that was, you fucking imbeciles”, Dino hisses.


Dino looks like he’s about to have a stroke. “You... you...”

“He’s winding you up, Dino”, Marco says. “Ed’s been spending the whole night moaning over that doctor that stood him up like two weeks ago.”
Ed gives him the finger.

Roger gets up. Then he hesitates. Normally when he meets people on a night out on tour, he invites them to come see a show. But he can hardly have a bunch of guys looking like they’re straight from the pages of the Spartacus guide ask for him back stage, can he? There’s no worse bunch of gossip than a road crew and they’re already giving him funny looks whenever he’s been out with Freddie.

On the other hand, fuck them. He’s not going to let a bunch of spotty half-wits dictate who he’s friends with. “Listen guys, we’re playing in Uniondale tomorrow. It’s not quite the Garden, but if any you want to come, be at the back door an hour early and ask for Paul, Paul Prenter. He’ll let you in.”

Roger spends the ride home trying to pick a fight with Richie. Richie responds by being charming at him and talking about football (and even calling it football, which is normally a guaranteed way for an American to get on Roger’s ‘okay to talk to’-list), giving him absolutely no pretext to kick him out of the car. He doesn’t even know why he wants to murder the guy, but there’s something about him that sets his teeth on edge. Meanwhile, Freddie acts like a teenage girl and Prenter looks way too pleased with himself as a matchmaker. God, hopefully Richie’s a really lousy lay.

Back in his bedroom, it’s very dark and quiet. Prenter’s been making noises about all of them having a few drinks together, but Freddie put his hand on Richie’s back and led him off to his suite like he’s his prized trophy.

So Roger’s alone. And not thinking about whatever’s going on next door. A whisky seems in order.

Half a bottle later, he jumps up from his armchair and scrambles for his notebook.

*Ask Dino sex orgy (hot girls?) where also Richie total cunt*

Five minutes later, he picks it up again and adds a couple of exclamation marks for good measure.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, there was a gay club called Crisco Disco. Of course there was.
Chicago, 7 December 1978

Chapter Summary

Now’s the time to time have a good long look at the tags. If there’s anything in there worrying you, look at the end notes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It turns out that Dino doesn’t know any more details about the masked orgy thing. Melissa just pretends she doesn’t know what he’s talking about when they meet up after the Uniondale gig.

“Wow”, she announces instead as she takes in the backstage crowd, “you guys are huge!” She frowns. “I think I’ve even heard a couple of your songs on the radio.”

This mortally embarrasses Dino, who hides his face behind his hands. “Oh god, I can’t take you anywhere.”

After they leave New York, the Richie situation deteriorates quickly. The night after Freddie picked him up, he arranges for two dozen red roses awaiting Freddie in the dressing room. Freddie fucking swoons. Despite Roger’s best efforts, they don’t spontaneously crumble to ashes no matter how hard he glares at them.

Two days later, Richie is on the plane to Nashville with them.

In Richfield, he and Freddie have their first big public fight, but if Roger thinks that this is the end of it, he’s badly mistaken. It’s only the beginning.

Sometimes, Roger hates it when he’s right. Because Richie is no sweet-natured Joe Fanelli. While Freddie always squabbled with his lovers, his fights with Richie take on epic proportions. And they don’t just happen after a bad gig when tempers run high, but after good gigs too. And before gigs. And sometimes even during.

In Buffalo, Freddie spends the whole day sipping honeyed lemon tea just to get his voice back into shape after an all night screaming match.

In Montreal, Richie breaks a table.

Freddie’s energy on stage changes. He's always thrived on drama, of course, drawing energy for his performances from smashed glasses and pre-show tantrums. It’s like he needs that aggression to feed on, transforming it into pure fiery light. But now he looks edgier, angrier and at times even unprofessional, cursing the crew on stage when there’s a glitch with the lighting or sound system.

He’d be on edge, snappy and surly, until Richie shows up again with a huge bunch of flowers, and then it’s all sunshine and rainbows for a couple of days. Or hours. Before it all starts again.

It makes Roger sick to his stomach. It reminds of him things he’d rather forget, things he thought he left past him. But whenever he tries to say something, Freddie just brushes him off. Roger even tries to set up Freddie with other guys (even in Madison, Wisconsin, the bars are brimming with
guys taller, darker and more moustachioed than Richie), but to no avail.

All he can do is hang in and hope that Freddie will eventually grow bored of his new boyfriend, like he always does eventually.

Tonight though, they are heading out together again. Him, Freddie and Paul, meeting up with some arsehole friends of Richie's (they probably aren’t all arseholes but irredeemably tainted by association). The last cycle of screaming match – sullen silence – dramatic apology ended two nights ago, so it’s likely to start up again tonight.

Roger does not want to go. But not going means leaving Freddie alone with Richie and Prenter and he just cannot do that. It’s not like he can actually do much – once the fighting starts, the two of them are like rabid dogs. But there’s something inside him that makes him go anyway. It’s weird. He’s really not the type for the silent martyrdom.

There’s a brief knock and Freddie appears in the doorway. “Coming, my dear?”

“Five minutes”, he says, putting the finishing touches to his hair. “Just let me get my things.”

Freddie holds up a hand to someone outside, (Paul, presumably) wagging his fingers. As he turns his head, Roger’s blood turns to ice. There’s a line of finger shaped bruised on the back of his neck, as if someone had grabbed him and squeezed as hard as he could. It’s slightly off to the side, but so far back that Freddie probably hasn’t even noticed.

Roger quickly turns his back to school his expression back into neutral. Jesus Christ. Richie. That fucking arsehole needs his nose flattened ASAP. And yet Freddie is going to meet up with him again tonight. And then take him back to the hotel. And then spend the next day trying to nurse his voice back into shape. And Roger is going to sit there, watching it all play out and doing nothing. Fuck!

“Roger? Time’s a-wasting, darling.” Freddie taps his fingers against the door frame.

“Yeah.” Roger turns around. “Listen. I don’t feel it tonight. Maybe you guys just go ahead and...” You bloody coward, his inner voice taunts him. “…and go without me”, he finishes.

Maybe this not as bad as it looks. Maybe this is just a rough sex thing. (How hard do you have to squeeze to make five individual bruises appear?).

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m good, just not... you know.” He shrugs. Freddie’s been getting into the leather look. Maybe that’s just how he likes it now. Maybe he asked Richie to do it. To hold him down. To push until the capillaries burst.

“If you say so.” Freddie stands back, lips pressed tightly together. He turns and takes a step out into the hallway.

“I’m gonna break up with Dominique”, Roger blurts out.

Wait, what?

Freddie stops dead in his tracks.

Roger shrugs and turns away. He didn't mean to say that. Didn't even mean to think it.
The door falls shut. Roger lets his head hang down, all tension gone from his body.

Seconds later, he blinks in confusion when he finds Freddie crouching in front of the mini bar, eyeing its contents critically. “Not much in here worth drinking. But the champagne’s enough to get us started I guess.” He brandishes the bottle and plops down on the sofa next to Roger.

“You think this is a time for champagne?”

“Darling, is there ever not a time for champagne?” The cork plops.

There’s a rap on the door. “Freddie?”

“Piss off!” His voice is cheerful as he fills two glasses.

The door opens and Paul peers in. “We’re all set to go. You wanted to...”

“Well, I don’t. Roger is having a crisis. I must stay by his side.”

Freddie you fucking histrionic arsehole, don’t do this in front of fucking Prenter. “I don’t have a crisis, I just...”

But Prenter just goes on as if Roger isn’t even there. “But Laura and Teddy and Carmen will be there. And Richie, of course.” His voice takes on a wheedling tone. Roger wants to throw a brick at him. “I’ve told everyone you’d come.”

Freddie’s eyes narrow and he sets the bottle down.”Well, you shouldn’t have done that, now, should you.” Roger can feel the tension building inside Freddie and prepares to wrestle the bottle from him before he can throw it. Or maybe not.

“But you told me...”

“Piss off!” No trace of playfulness there.

Prenter is a pig-headed bastard, but he’s been around long enough to know a lost cause. He quickly shuts the door behind him.

“Why do you put up with this guy,” Roger asks as a glass of champagne is pressed into his hand.

Freddie shrugs. ”He’s useful. Cheers. And now...” He throws himself on the sofa with a dramatic flourish, “tell me all about your failing relationship.”

“Jesus, Freddie, you have all the subtlety of a wrecking ball.”

“I know darling, it’s one of my best attributes.”

“Is there anything you wouldn’t describe as one of your best attributes?”

Freddie shakes his head. “Don’t try to distract me. Give me the juicy bits. Is she getting tired of all your whoring?”

Roger flips him off. “It’s not like I’m even doing much whoring at the moment.”

“Hmm. Yes, I’ve noticed.” Freddie gives him a sly look.

“Did you?” Now that’s rich. Roger’s been heroically abstaining for a whole year, and now Freddie thinks he’s bloody Sherlock Holmes for finally having noticed. And they call Roger self-absorbed.
“It’s funny how when I go to the Anvil it’s the height of depravity, but when you do it, it somehow qualifies you for the sainthood.”

“Yeah, but you’re allowed into the girls’ dressing rooms in strip clubs, so it all evens out doesn’t it?”

Freddie rolls his eyes. “That was one time. It’s not like I make it a habit. Now.” He sits up a little more and turns to Roger, like an interviewer about to ask the deep questions. “Dominique?”

Roger leans back and rubs a hand over his face. “Yeah, Dominique. Shit, I... I don’t even know.” It’s true. He has no idea what the fuck he’s actually thinking.

Freddie sits and waits.

“It’s just the usual I guess. She wants to do the whole grown-up relationship with babies thing and I...” Well, what does he want? Kids are awesome, but touring and partying is also awesome and he doesn’t want to be some arsehole father who’s never around and leaves mum for a barely legal stripper four years later.

“You want the sex, the drugs, the Rock ‘n’ Roll. Which I wholeheartedly approve of.”

“I do want a family. At some point. I guess. But look at what it does to Brian. He loves Jimmy and Chrissie, but he just doesn’t feel he can do right by them. If he can’t do it, how much worse is it going to be for me?” He takes a sip of his drink, grimaces and puts the glass away. This is not a champagne night. “We got any Scotch?”

“Only Bourbon”, Freddie snarls with a look of disgust on his face.

Roger shrugs and gets the bottle from the bar. He isn’t that particular. But Freddie’s always been a snob. Even back in the day when they were constantly broke and selling rags like orphans in a Dickens novel, Freddie never took the tube. He’d rather spend a week’s worth of groceries on a cab or walk ten miles in his velvet boots.

“I’m not even thirty, you know. There’s plenty of time for that later.” He takes a drink of his bourbon. Strong and harsh, just what he needs. "Maybe it's different for women."

“Mary asked about children, once.”

Roger’s head snaps up. “What?” He knows their relationship had been serious, but not that they’d been discussing family. “Really? What did you say to her?”

“I said I’d rather have another cat.”

Roger snorts with laughter. “And she didn’t strangle you with one of your silk scarves? That woman is a fucking saint.”

Freddie grins. “She likes cats too.”

“Well then.”

After a few minutes Freddie said: “I like Dom.”

“Yeah, I know you do.” Once the two of them had gotten so shitfaced together that Roger had trouble getting them both home that night. And they kept whispering to each other in French and giggling. Roger is 99% sure Freddie doesn’t even speak French. “I like her too, of course. I mean,
she’s funny and beautiful and... and we’ve been together for more than two years, and the sex is still pretty good, so…” He gropes around of his pack of cigarettes. “When we have sex that is.”

"Oh?"

“It’s fine when we’re together, I mean, she’s really high energy and always has a new trick up her sleeve, so I can’t complain there. It’s just that…” He lights a Marlboro and sucks the smoke deep into his lungs. “She’s never here. She’s always working, always jetting around the world with bloody Branson. Look, here I am, playing the biggest tour of my career, and she’s in Rio or wherever, getting perved on by her twat of a boss. I haven’t seen her in over a month!”

Freddie considers his champagne. “Her job is important to her.”

“Yeah, well I wish…” He cuts himself off before the words ‘I wish I was important to her, too’ can tumble out. It’s way too early in the evening for something that soppy. “But it’s not like it’s her fucking company, she’s just a bloody PA. Which is fine, but, come on. And I’m telling her all the time she doesn’t have to work. I’d support her.”

“Why haven’t you married her then?”

Roger groans. “Jesus Christ, you too? Have you all been conspiring with my mum?”

Freddie shakes his head. “Your mother is a very decent, upstanding woman who wants to see an honest man made of her son.” He pauses for effect. “I, on the hand, am a greedy old tart who just jumps at the chance of seeing you in a morning suit.”

“You get married then”, Roger says. “Make me best man and I swear I’ll wear that bloody suit.”

“Hmm, tempting, let me get see if I can get Mary on the phone…” Freddie does no such thing of course. Instead, he just pours himself some more champagne. “Cheers.”

Roger raises his Scotch. “Cheers.”

Freddie takes a sip and peers athim over the rim of his glass. “I would, you know. Make you best man.”

“Oh. Thanks mate, that’s... you too.”

“Hm.” Freddie sucks in his lips to hide his grin. It’s a weird moment. Mostly good, but also... way too much like proposing to each other.

“Of course it’s not very likely that I ever...”

“I mean, I’m not really the marrying type, so...”

They both started at the same time and crack up at that. Then they drink to their bachelorhood.

“When are you going to see her again”, Freddie asks.

“Oakland. She’s going to fly over, stay for the shows and then we head home together.” He thinks for a moment. “Do you think I should do it then?”

Freddie looks at him aghast. “And they say I’m a cad.”

“What?”
“So she suffers through a 10-hour plane flight to see you, only for you to dump her? And what then? ‘Thanks for your understanding, dear, have good flight home?’” His expression takes on an air of respectful awe. “That’s inspired, Roger. If one of my boyfriends ever truly fucks me over, that’s how I’m going to do it.”

Do it with Richie, then, he wants to scream. He’s fucking you over big time, you idiot! “I thought she might still want to stay for the shows and the parties”, Roger says instead. To be honest, he hasn’t thought about this at all. He doesn’t actually want to break up with her, does he? He’s just a bit frustrated. Isn’t he? “So what’s your plan, then? Wait until Christmas Eve?”

“Oh, my sweet summer child. I’ll be including your ex-girlfriends in my nightly prayers, poor things.”

“You will not include my ex-girlfriends in your nightly anythings, is that clear?”

Freddie leans back against the armrest, pulling his feet up on the sofa. “I’ve never understood you hetero’s preoccupation with exes. If she’s an ex, what do you care who she fucks?”

“Not friends, not colleagues, certainly not gay band mates.”

“Most of my exes are each other’s exes, even”, Freddie muses, basking in how forward thinking he is.

“Right, so if I were to make a move on Mary...”

“You shut your filthy mouth!”

Roger grins. “There. That was easy.” He decides to prod him a little more. "You know, Brian used to date her..."

"They went out to dinner a few times, nothing happened."

Now, Roger knows for a fact that they did more than just go out to dinner but a) Brian has sworn him to eternal secrecy and b) he has no interest in breaking up the band right now. So he keeps mum.

Freddie crosses his arms. “Let’s get back to the question of you being an idiot who wants to throw away the best thing that’s ever happened to him, shall we?”

The force in Freddie’s voice takes Roger aback. “You don’t think I should do it then?”

Freddie glares at him, then looks away. It takes him a while until he starts speaking. “I’d give my right arm for a chance at what you could have”, he says quietly, quickly, eyes fixed on the coffee table in front of them.

Roger feels a wave of shame wash through him. It’s so easy to talk about what a nuisance a wife and children and family life would be if you know it’s always going to be available to you. Freddie actually stepped away from all that because he felt he had no other choice. And here he is, joking about not being the marrying type with a man who couldn’t marry his lover even if he wanted to. (Although, given who his lover is at the moment is, that’s a fucking blessing. But still.)

“Freddie...”

Freddie takes a deep harsh breath. “This is probably a very stupid thing for me to do, since you usually do the exact opposite of what everyone is telling you, but here we go. No. I don’t think you should do it.”
“I... thank you.”

Freddie nods stiffly. “Good. Now. Tell me a funny story about Brian before I knew him. This evening needs cheering up. Have we got any more champagne?”

+++ 

It’s nice, just sitting there, drinking and talking like in the olden days.

“God, remember that shithole in Kensington? Where we moved in with Chris in... what was it... ‘69?”

“Hmmm.” Freddie’s grinning. “I particularly remember when Chris came home from a trip to France just when there’d been this mass invasion of your friends for some reason?”

“Our friends.”

“Your friends. Anyway, he just stood there in the doorway, gaping at the carnage, and Brian, nice guy that that he is, was like, ‘Oh hey, who are you?’ and Chris just went ‘I live here!’”

“And that deaf landlady, Mrs... what was she called?”

“Livingston. Mrs. Moira Livingston.”

“Right, how she’d had us over for tea one evening and went on about how pleased she was to have such nice young men to rent the flat?”

Freddie’s body is shaking with laughter now. “Oh yes. And meanwhile downstairs this stoner guy... er... Raz or Jaz or something? He’s pissing in her beloved Yucca in the hallway cause Lu and Deke are blocking the loo, screwing like rabbits.”

“You were very complimentary on her china, I remember.” Roger giggles and imitates Freddie: “‘Lovely cups, Mrs. Livingston, my mother’s have a very similar design, although not quite as delicate. She would love them!’ Cool as a cucumber while I’m sweating blood ‘cause she’s the only one in a ten-mile radius whose rent we could afford.”

“And because you were off your tits on that weird stuff Raz brought along.”

Roger grimaces. “God yeah.” Then he remembers something else. “You know how they used to smuggle pot in between our tea leaves? And how we spent whole afternoons sorting it out?”

Freddie sinks back into the cushions, hides his face in his hands and groans. “Don’t, Roger. Please, have mercy.”

“And you just wanted to fix yourself a nice cuppa one evening but we hadn’t sorted the leaves yet. And then I found you hours later, on the kitchen floor, pale like ghost, completely freaking out over some Buddy Holly song...”

“Little Richard, it was Little Richard!”

“...because you were tripping so hard.”

“Ghastly!” Freddie shivers as if he wants to throw off the memory.

“You never touched the stuff again. We used to lie all over the living room, stoned as fuck, while you traipsed around like a wandering minstrel, playing little tunes on your lute or whatever the fuck
“Still wish I could have had a lyre.” He strums the invisible strings with a wistful look on his face.

Roger watches him for a moment. “Freddie. Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Do you like women at all? Sexually, I mean?”

Freddie stays silent at first. This isn’t something they’ve ever talked about. Roger has no idea if Freddie considers himself gay or bisexual or something else entirely. Maybe it’s too personal and important for him to talk about, or maybe he just doesn’t care at all.

“I... do”, he says, finally.

“But you like men more?”

Freddie bites his lip. “They like me more, I think.”

Roger snorts. “Freddie, you could have any girl you wanted.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Right.” Roger thinks about it. “No. Sorry, I don’t get it.”

“It’s...” Freddie shakes his head. “I’m not sure if I get it, too be perfectly honest. But...”

They’re rudely interrupted by a loud bang on the door. “Freddie? Freddie, are you in there?”

Richie. Fuck. How does that fucker even know where Freddie is? But the answer is obvious. Fucking Prenter must have told him.

Roger gets up from the sofa, but Freddie holds him back with a strong grip on his wrist.

“Yes, dear”, he calls out. “What’s the matter?”

“Let me in!” The banging starts up again. “Come on. Who do you think you are? Standing me up like a cheap trick, huh?”

“I didn’t... I...” Freddie looks both angry and flustered.

“The fuck are you even doing in there? Getting screwed by one of your boy toys?”

“Shut up, you fucking cunt!”

Oh god, it’s starting. It’s already started. Every fibre of Roger’s being wants to run up the door and head butt the stupid bastard into the dust.

“How dare you talk to me like that? Huh? You little bitch, if you’re not out there in three seconds, I’m gonna break the fucking door down, do you hear me? You hear me?”

“Fine!” Freddie lets go of Roger, slams down his champagne glass down on the table and jumps up. “Fine.”

He looks mad as hell, but his hands are shaking.
“Freddie”, Roger says under his breath. “You don’t have to go. Just stay. You can stay here however long you like.”

Freddie shakes his head. “It’s fine. He’s just...” He runs his hand through his hair.

“Please!” Now it’s Roger’s turn to hold on tight to Freddie’s arm. “I’ll call security and they’ll have him out of here in no time.”

But Freddie is stubborn. “I don’t need fucking security, Rog.”

The banging on the door starts up again. “Freddie, I’m serious, if you’re not out here presto, I’m gonna...”

“I’m coming”, Freddie yells. “Just give me a bloody second.”

Roger just stands there and watches Freddie put on his shoes and jacket. “Why the fuck do you put up with this arsehole?” He doesn’t even particularly aim the question at Freddie, not expecting an answer anyway.

“He wants me”, Freddie says, already on his way to the door. “And he’s not afraid to show it.”

Roger collapses back onto the sofa, surrounded by the debris of their perfect evening. He can’t think, can’t move. He wants to run after Freddie like a fucking knight in shining armour, tuck him in and keep him safe. Or take him out to a fucking SM club if that’s what it takes. Anything to get him away from that undeserving prick.

But if there’s one thing that would drive Freddie away, it's to tell him what he's supposed to do.

So all he can do is wait.

Chapter End Notes

TW: Physically and emotionally abusive relationship. Email me if you need details or a summary of the chapter.
When it happens, it all seems so easy that Roger wants to sock himself for not having acted weeks ago.

It’s 25 minutes to the start of the show and Freddie and Richie are still going at it.

Roger, Brian and John are in the dressing room with Paul, pretending not to hear the shouting match in full force next door. Until there’s a smash, cracking glass and a shout of pain.

“Screw this”, Brian says and gets up.

Paul immediately stands in the way. “He doesn’t want you in there.”

“Tough”, John says and stands next to Brian.

Roger joins them, blood rushing in his ears. He has no idea what they’re going to do, but they’ll do something, at least. Because it can’t go on like this.

“Come on guys”, Paul says. “You know how he gets before shows.”

Something heavy crashes into the wall to the dressing room, so hard the ground shakes.

As one, the band is past Paul and at the locked door. Brian raises his hand to knock, but John isn’t having any of it. He takes a step back and crashes into the door with this whole body weight. The flimsy construction doesn’t stand a chance. It’s quite impressive, but the sight in the storage room quickly distracts Roger from John’s heroism.

It’s mayhem. There’s splintered glass, clothes strewn about and soaked in spilled beer. And Freddie, sitting in a lopsided chair, blinking up at them, slightly dazed. And Richie towering over him.

“Out”, Brian says to Richie, very calmly.

“The fuck do you want here”, Richie growls. “This is between me and...”

Roger and John move in unison. They don’t have to discuss it, one glance is all they need. They grab the thrashing and screaming Richie by his shoulders and steer him out of the room, handing him over to Paul Prenter and the security man who’s come inside, alarmed by the noise. “He doesn’t come back in”, Roger orders. “And now, everybody out.” This is only for the four of them.

Meanwhile, Brian has brought Freddie back into the dressing room, sitting him down in front of the mirror. A bit of fight comes back into him.

“You shouldn’t have done that”, he says. “Who the fuck do you think you are?”
And that’s exactly what Roger has been dreading. Freddie doesn’t like it when people mess in his private affairs. He likes it even less when they try to take control of him. And least of all when he has to admit to a weakness.

These kinds of problems are not solved by plucky friends taking action. They drag on, for years, until they’ve worn down everyone and it seems like it’s never going to end.

“Just your band mates”, Brian says. “Who the fuck do you think you are? We’ve got to be on stage in 15 minutes and you’ve not even got your make-up on.”

Oh Brian, clever Brian. Making it all about the show, grabbing Freddie where it hurts him the most – his professionalism.

“I...” Freddie’s eyes go to the clock on the wall. For the first time, he seems to truly take in where he is, the costume, the pattering of feet running to and fro outside, the muffled noise of the crowd cheering for them. He sits up straight “My hair”, he says, checking himself critically in the mirror. “Where’s Dane? Get him now. And have you talked to Joe yet? The spotlight was off a whole two yards during Dreamer’s Ball last night.”

Freddie is all business, but Roger can see how his hands are shaking when he reaches for the concealer.

+++ 

They don’t discuss it afterwards. Richie doesn’t return and Freddie doesn’t speak of him. Instead, they turn their energy and focus on the last leg of the tour, down the West Coast.

Dom flies in the night before the first show at L.A. When Roger drives to the airport to meet her, he has no idea what he’s going to say. It doesn’t matter much, because although she’s tired from the long flight, she’s also wound up and excited about being back. She throws her arms around him and chatters away on the ride home from the airport.

She looks absolutely stunning with her deep tan and her black hair swept up into a messy ponytail.

After a few minutes, she sighs and takes his hand. “God, I’m so happy to see you again!” Then she cocks her head. “Is everything alright? You just let me talk for ten minutes straight without butting in even once.”

He shakes his head. “Just... glad to see you again too.” It’s true. Now that she’s here, the last thing he wants to do is break up with her. If anything, he wants more of her. He wants it to be like that always: care-free and excited and together, in L.A or London or New York, a great show or party or sex just around the corner.

“Good. By the way.” She heaves her giant bag (she insists it’s just a handbag, but it looks as big as the duffel Roger uses for overnight travel) onto her lap and starts rummaging around until she finds a black carton box and holds it up triumphantly. “I went shopping.”

He raises his eyebrows expectantly. “Another early Christmas present?”

“Hm, I think you’ll like it better than last year’s.”

“Hey, I liked it”, he protests. “I’m writing in it, even.” He feels a bit guilty when he thinks about some of the entries.

“Well”, she says and puts the box back into the bag. “I think you’ll like this one even better.”
“What is it?” He doesn’t want to be intrigued, but dammit, her mysterious act gets him every time.

“It’s a surprise.”

“So, surprise me then.”

“Oh, I am going to.” She leans forward and puts a hand on his thigh. “Later.”

Maybe it’s not that bad, not seeing each other for stretches of time. Absence makes the heart grow fonder and all that. Given the fact that Roger can’t even stand the sight of his own drum kit (or his band mates, blessed though they may all be) after a long tour, maybe those forced breaks are good for them.

The year’s almost over. He’s going to turn fucking thirty years old. Wasn’t he twenty-two only a few weeks ago? What if he wakes up tomorrow and he's suddenly forty and he's thrown away the best relationship he's ever had?

He puts his hand on hers, kisses her soft lips.

Maybe it's time for the next step.

Chapter End Notes

And that’s another year gone by. Big developments await in 1979.

Okay, I’ve decided that I want this entire fic posted by the end of the year (because I’ll be on vacation after that). That means I have to get out 2-3 chapters a day. I’ll do my best!

Let me just say, it’s a pleasure to have such clever, insightful and enthusiastic readers. I treasure every single one of you!
Just as Roger is making his peace with Jazz, it turns out the collective music press hates it.

"'Queen may be the first truly fascist rock band'", he reads out from the newest edition of Rolling Stone.

"Fascist! Who does that Marsh guy think he is?" Brian is not taking it well. He admits it's not their best album, but he can't understand the personal attacks on the band. Roger thinks it might be cathartic for them to deal with it all together. Brian has a tendency to take such attacks to heart if left alone with it. So he collected all the worst offenders and invited his band mates for a joint breakfast of unfettered ranting. Just to get morale up.

"'The whole thing makes me wonder why anyone would indulge these creeps and their polluting ideas.'"

"Ha! ‘Polluting ideas’, now that is how fascists speak."

"Oh well, it’s only Rolling Stone, who gives a damn what they write?" John’s way of dealing with it is sarcasm instead of anger.

"And the Village Voice", Freddie says. "And Creem. And..."

"Yes, alright, we get the point."

"And apparently, ‘Fat-bottomed girls’ was really sexist”, Roger adds, scanning the article. “Naughty Brian.”

Brian scowls. “Maybe I should write a song titled ‘Enormous Cocks’ to balance things out.”

Freddie looks up from his magazine and quirks one eyebrow but doesn't comment.

Roger starts singing. “Enormous cocks you make the rocking world go round!” He shakes his head. “Sorry, not even Freddie would get away with that one.”

“Four enormous cocks would be an apt description of the band, in any case”, John grumbles.

“Have or are?” Brian, ever the philosopher.

Freddie puts the magazine away and points at them one after the other, ending with himself. “Have, are, neither, both.”

John calmly flips Freddie off while Brian gives a low wolf whistle in Roger’s direction. Roger raises his hands innocently. “What? Some of us are born lucky.”

Audiences don't read music reviews, however, so the European tour is sold out. The album
frustratingly stalls at #2 in the UK charts, outsold by bloody Grease. They're recording the current shows for their first live album, which is really exciting. One of the highlights of the tour are the shows in Munich, where the actual government of the state stepped in after the first gig and demanded the strippers they got on stage during Bicycle wear more clothes. It was hilarious (and the best publicity they could have wished for).

And now Spain. The mild temperatures are a blessing after the freezing cold of Germany and Austria. Tapas, wine, gorgeous senoritas… It could be perfect.

"So how's Dom?"

Roger is startled from his thoughts. "Good. Yeah. We've... yeah." She spent the first two weeks on tour with them, before returning to London.

"No more of that nonsense about..."

"Oh, no. No."

"So?"

"So what?"

Freddie rolls his eyes. "Will I get to see you in that morning suit soon?"

"Ahh, maybe." He has looked at some rings out of the corner of his eye when he happened to pass by a jewellery store. A couple more weeks and he might actually stop to have a proper look. Baby steps.

"Shopping for rompers, then?"

Roger shrugs. "Christ, I don't know." Why does everyone keep pestering him about this? Dom's dropping hints as well. He's getting there, alright?

Freddie raises his eyebrows expectantly. "You've talked to her, then?"

"What? God no." The last thing he needs is to get dragged into endless discussions about feelings and stuff. "I thought maybe after the tour, or after my birthday..."

"One last summer of freedom?"

"Something like that, yeah. Who knows? Maybe I'll get some sort of nesting impulse once I turn thirty."

"Yes, that's exactly how it worked out for me."

"Well, you just went in the other direction." Roger looks around. It's a nice club. Good music, good drinks, not too seedy but with an understated background hum of sex. Barcelona lacks the sheer intensity and variety of the New York scene, but it makes up for it in style. It's more a bar than a club: although there's a small dance floor, most of the space is covered by tables and lounge chairs, artfully separated by plants and curtains to give it a sense of seclusion and intimacy.

They had initially planned to go to a big gay disco, but on the way there Freddie decided he's not in the mood for pounding beats.

The relaxed atmosphere in the bar seems to have rubbed off Freddie. Although the gig has been somewhat sub-par, he didn't work himself into a rut after the show, but shrugged off the audience
as lazy cunts and rushed off. As far as tantrums go it barely registered on the scale.

"So, here you are, in the last year of your fragrant youth, the last year of bachelor life, and yet you're here, drinking beer with a couple of genteel queens?"

"Are you trying to tell me to go out and get laid?"

"I wouldn't ever want to be a bad influence," Freddie says primly.

"Of course not. I mean, you took me to a club that had bathtub installed in the basement with the sole purpose of pissing on people, but apart from that..."

"All I'm saying is that if you have things to get out of your system, now's the time to do it. You don't want to end up like Brian, do you?"

Right. It's not that Brian is unhappy, per se, just that... honestly, a couple more bouts with Peaches before he tied the knot would have done him good.

And it's not like Roger doesn't feel the pull. In Hamburg he got a lap dance that only didn't count as cheating because he applies a very strict definition to that term. And honestly, if this is going to be the last time he gets to see Paris as a free man, he at least wants to have a look at the places the crew are raving about. And once he's inside, there's a snowflake's chance in hell he won't sample a taste.

And why shouldn't he? He's basically on his stag night. Alright, a very drawn out, month-long stag night, but then, he's a rock star, isn't he?

In a way, now that he's made the decision to stay with Dom, he feels he can cut himself some slack. He can stay faithful, he's proven that much over the last year, so it's not like a small dabble here and there is going to throw him off course.

So then what's he doing in a gay bar in Barcelona, making conversation with Freddie instead of finding himself a fiery Spanish girl to take home?

Richie, that's the main reason. The problem seemed solved after Portland, but then that fucker suddenly stepped out of a car with Freddie in Frankfurt, like a zombie rising from the dead in a bad movie, and acted like nothing ever happened. Freddie ignored the stink eye he got from his band mates, and also acted like nothing ever happened. And so Roger, who had been on his way to a private party in a famous night club on Kaiserstraße, turned on his heel and spent his night in a dingy leather bar, glaring daggers at fucking Richie. And then he did the same thing in Zurich, Munich and Lyon and yes, it does get boring after a while. Especially since the clubs over here are nothing compared to New York and LA and San Francisco.

Richie’s been clever enough to stay away from the band as far as possible and hadn’t even tried to get into the backstage area again. All the more reason for Roger to keep a close eye on him.

Not that he's inclined to tell any of this to Freddie. "I'm fine", he grumbles instead. And then, because he just cannot give it a rest, he asks: "Where's lover boy, by the way?"

"Headache", Freddie pouts.

"Seriously?"

"Apparently."
"Like a fifties housewife?" This is delightful. Maybe the stupid prick got himself a brain tumour or something.

"Watch it."

Instead of Richie, Paul and Joe are with them at the bar. Joe's relationship with Freddie is fascinating to Roger. He isn't sure if it's a gay thing or a Freddie thing (or a bit of both), but the last thing Roger would want to do would be to take an ex on tour. Or partying. Yet Freddie just draws them all in, like a collector. Mary, Joe... Even David, who as far as Roger knows has been his very first boyfriend back in '75, still drops by from time to time.

Of course, Joe is a special case. Freddie has been so taken with him that last year, he asked him to uproot his whole life and move to London with him. Which Joe promptly did. Of course, Freddie grew bored of him only months later. But while Freddie can be an egocentric prick, he isn't an arsehole: He got Joe a job as chef in an upscale London restaurant (better than anything he’d done in New York) and pays him a nice sum to accompany him on tour (under the heading of personal caterer, which is a job about as necessary on a Queen tour as a master of the brassieres).

Anyway, Paul is busy befriending a group of Spanish muscle men, Richie is back at the hotel writhing in agony (as Roger likes to picture it), and Freddie apparently wants to help him plan his, er, stag months. So it could have been a nice, relaxing evening, one of those where he gets a few drinks in, but still gets to the hotel early enough for a good night’s sleep (which in middle of a four-month tour can be a life saver). If it hadn’t been for the Japanese.

Roger has no idea what they want at this place, if they even understand where they are or just stumbled their way into the nearest drinking establishment. But it takes them no more than two minutes to recognize Freddie and him and soon they forget all about being from a country famed for its reserved politeness.

Freddie has signed two autographs out of sheer perplexity before he catches himself and Joe and the others step in. Then a camera light flashes.

“Shit.” Fans could be worse than paparazzi, and although they aren't exactly being secretive about the kind of clubs they frequent, neither wants to be photographed at a gay bar.

He and Freddie exchange one glance and they are off, leaving Paul and Joe to handle the tourists.

“Fucking pricks.” It's just what Freddie hates, getting ambushed with his guard down.

“Joe and Paul will handle it. That guy can kiss his film goodbye.” He steers Freddie towards the other side of the bar, past the dance floor. A waiter notices them and after a brief explanation of the situation, leads them to an empty table in the farthest corner of the room. “No one will trouble you here,” he promises.

Freddie crosses his arms and scowls into his freshly served drink. The night is basically over. They are going to wait for the photo-situation to be sorted and then leave for the hotel.

The music's not as loud here, which is why he can hear the voice.

“...just a bit of fun, really.”

Freddie looks up. He’s recognized it too.

“Everyone needs a bit of fun, don’t you think?”
Freddie picks up his drink and gets up.

Well, shit. Just when he thought his night has reached its low point. The last thing he needs right now is to make happy faces at Richie fuckhead McCullen.

Who's supposed to be back at the hotel with a headache, isn't he?

What Roger hears next makes his blood freeze.

“But he’s not even that good of a fuck. Not as good as he thinks he is, anyway.”

Freddie stops in his tracks.

Okay. This guy is either talking about Freddie in which case he needs his fucking teeth rearranged, or he's talking about someone other than Freddie in which case: see above.

“He’s a bit pathetic, to be honest. Tell him he’s pretty, he’ll do anything. Anything.”

Freddie is deadly pale, his hands helplessly balled into fists, frozen in place. Roger looks away, desperately wishing to be anywhere but here, forced to listen to this fuckhead slagging off his friend. Maybe he can just pretend he hasn't heard anything, if they both pretend then...

“And he always comes crawling back for more. Needy little...”

The glass shatters on the ground, cutting off the slimy piece of shit mid-sentence. “How clumsy of me”, Roger calls out as he gets up.

“Roger, don’t...” He shakes off Freddie's arm and marches around the partition.

There is Richie, blanching as he takes Roger in. He sits with a very young, very pretty man, a date obviously, who is blinking up at him in confusion.

"Oh", Roger says, feigning surprise. "Didn't expect to see you here."

+++Back at the hotel, Roger paces back and forth. He’s lost control. He stopped thinking and just went with what felt right. And God, it had felt so right, smashing his fist into Richie's nose. Roger doesn’t have any technique to speak of, but he’d been driven by the wrath of god.

Months and weeks and nights of pent-up rage and frustration and bitter helplessness, that's what Roger packed into his punch. A red spurt of blood, cartilage crushing under the impact, a scream of pain and rage - he soaked it all up, bathing in it, basking in the triumph of finally, finally having his vengeance.

There was Richie, bent over double, hands clutching his head. "If I ever see your face again", Roger hissed, voice carefully controlled, "I'll make you carry it home in a bucket." But when he turned back around to present Freddie with his kill, he was gone.

Roger had been bundled into a car by Joe while Paul dealt with Richie, the bar owner and – if necessary – the press. Those were the times when he really earned his money.

Roger massages his knuckles. It hurts like hell, but it doesn't feel like anything's broken, as far as he can tell. The next gig is in two days, hopefully it'll better by then. Or he'll just tape his fist shut around his drumsticks if need be.
He looks at the clock. Five in the morning and no word yet of Freddie. Joe promised to tell him immediately once they found him.

Shit.

He should have just got Freddie out of there. Should have turned him around, marched him out of that fucking bar and out of Richie’s life forever. But he allowed himself to get swallowed up by his rage. It’s scary how good he felt in that moment. How easy it was to turn into someone he never wanted to be.

A knock on the door. Roger is there is seconds. “Joe?”

As soon as it’s opened, a shadow flits past him into the room. “You bloody idiot!”

“Freddie!”

“What the fuck did you...”

He looks alright. He's alright. Oh thank God.

Freddie marches up to him and grabs him by the collar. “What the fuck were you thinking?”

“I’m sorry”, Roger forces himself to say. He is not sorry. He should be, but he isn’t.

Freddie lets go and pushes him away, propelling himself through the room towards the window. “I can’t believe you...” He rubs a hand over his face, head hanging dejectedly.

Roger doesn't know what to say. Freddie has his back turned so he can't see his expression. He takes a step towards his friend. “I...”

“No one's ever done anything like this for me”, Freddie says quietly.

“Anytime”, Roger says. Minutes ago he’s sworn to himself that he’ll never lose control like that again. For Freddie, he’d do it again in a heartbeat.

A heavy silence hangs in the room.

Then Freddie sighs and turns around, facing Roger. “That won’t be necessary”, he says. “He’s gone. For good.”

Roger doesn't honestly believe that Richie has died, but the finality in Freddie’s voice suggests he might as well have. “Good.”

Freddie nods grimly. “Yeah.” Then he clears his throat. “May I plead asylum on your sofa tonight?”

Roger looks at him expectantly, eyebrows raised.

Freddie rolls his eyes. “I set fire to all his stuff. My suite smells like London 1666.”

A grin slowly spreads over Roger’s face.

“It was necessary.”

“Oh, yes”, Roger agrees. It’s perfect. Impractical, dramatic and with expensive consequences. The only critique he has is that Freddie didn't tell him beforehand. He could have helped. “Come on”,
he says and makes a shooing motion. “You can have the bed, I’ll take the sofa.” You just don’t make Freddie Mercury sleep on the sofa. It's not right.

“We can share”, Freddie says magnanimously.

“Sure.” They didn’t have to do that in a long time, but the bed is gigantic and there are enough blankets and pillows for two. Roger borrows Freddie a pyjama and they settle in for the night. Well, morning.

“Roger”, Freddie says after they've both settled down in the darkness.

“Yes?”

He hesitates. “What he said. It’s not. I mean you won’t tell…” It sounds as if every word pains him.

“Never.”

Chapter End Notes


Sorry for bringing Richie back. He’s gone for good now, promise!

Here are the reviews in question: The Rolling Stone one is infamous for its viciousness. Creem (actually that one would only come out a month later. I cheated a little). And a very short one from the Village Voice.
Paris, 26 February 1979

Chapter Notes

A bit of shippy fluff after the dramatics of the last chapter.

Gerry Stickells is a bloody genius. Ending the tour with three shows in Paris means they've got almost a whole week in the city to sample its earthly delights.

Originally, he and Dom had planned for some romantic one-on-one time together, but then Richard fucking Branson decided to take over some Finnish company, so she's spending the week in three feet of snow, meeting a ton of business men who are all called Mika, as she tells him on the phone.

The silver-lining is that he's free to explore the crème de la crème of French night-life, the highlight of which is due tonight: a 20s-style brothel where all the girls wear silk stockings and use ivory cigarette holders and serve coke from 18th century serving trays. Crystal has been raving about it for weeks after the last tour. Back then, Roger missed out on most of the fun because of his vow of faithfulness. Now, on his farewell-tour from bachelorhood he's going to make the most of it. The thing sounds so spectacular, Freddie had immediately thrown aside his Spartacus guide, and even Brian and John decided to tag along (just to have a look, of course).

There’s still some time to kill, so he decides to head over to Freddie’s suite, maybe have a drink or two before they head out. When he arrives, though, Freddie’s prone on the sofa, and decidedly not wearing his going-out outfit.

“Hey, are you alright?”

The answer is a resounding sneeze and a mumbled “absolutely disgusting” as Freddie blows his nose. A half empty tumbler of brandy sits on the side table.

Roger takes a few steps closer to the sofa. “Looks like a night in for you?”

Freddie heaves himself into a sitting position with heroic effort. “No, no, no”, he says, a little nasally. “Don’t you worry, darling, we’re going to have our fun tonight. Joe’s just getting me a little pick-me-up and I’ll be right as rain.”

“Freddie, if you do a line now, all good it’ll do is make a very expensive snotty tissue.” Freddie’s nose looks a bit red from blowing it and his voice is hoarse. There’s a light sheen of sweat on his forehead. “You look a bit feverish.”

“Look there, if it isn’t Sister Nightingale.”

“You sure it’s a good idea to go out tonight?”

Instantly, Freddie’s mood changes. “It’s Paris”, he exclaims. He reaches for his brandy, but another enormous sneeze has him almost knock over the glass.

Roger jumps out of the way of destruction. “Jesus, Freddie, what is that?”

“That’s fucking Dane Clark”, he croaks in between sniffles. “Spread his germs all over me.”
Their master of the wardrobe has come down with a nasty cold. Everyone kept their distance, but apparently Freddie has caught the bug.

“Okay, that’s it. You’re not going anywhere tonight. I’ll order you some tea and...”

“I’ll go wherever the fuck I like, Florence.”

“It’s an executive decision.”

“An execu...” Freddie looks like he’s about to clock him.

Roger holds up his hands. “I can make it official and get John and Brian here, but you know they’ll agree with me. I don’t want to cancel the next gigs because you couldn’t keep your arse on the sofa for one fucking night.”

Freddie looks mutinous. The band members don’t technically have the right to dictate each other’s movements, of course, and they never tried to keep Freddie (or anyone else) from going out, so Roger has no idea whether this is going to work. If Freddie decides to go, no one can keep him. But if they have to cancel the gig because of him, at least Roger can say he tried.

“It’s just a ...” He breaks down in a coughing fit that couldn’t have been more perfectly timed. Roger gets him a glass of water, which Freddie takes with a look of pure hatred in his eyes at having been so betrayed by his body.


"You're staying in too", Freddie asks.

"Apparently." Roger hadn't really thought about it. He turns to look at Freddie, who studies him with a bemused look on his face. “Bed or sofa?”

Freddie’s grin grows wide and he clutches his invisible pearls with one hand. “My, so forward. But I prefer the desk actually. Perfect height, you know.”

Roger’s eyes swivel to the mahogany Louis Seize desk in the corner and needs a second or two to get the images out of his head. “Why do I even put up with this”, he grumbles as he throws pillows and blankets at Freddie.

He orders herbal tea, hot lemon, milk with honey and cocoa. He searches the place for tissues and stacks them next to sofa. He works through the film catalogue (French, of course) to find something Freddie might like. He gets Aspirin and Paracetamol from the pharmacy cabinet. As he lays out silky pyjamas and a fluffy bathrobe, he has to grin at himself: He doesn’t usually get to fuss over people, not since Clare was a child, anyway. Dom hates being fussied over almost as much as being sick, so she just toughens out the occasional cold and throws things at him if he tries to offer her so much as a hot water bottle.

He finds he’s quite enjoying himself.

Freddie watches him carefully, presiding over the preparations from the sofa like a precious exotic bird peeking out of a nest of blankets. "What are you doing?"
“Saving our next show.”

Freddie looks at the battery of remedies lined up on the table. He takes it all in for a moment, then seems to accept that Roger has gone temporarily mad and decides to go with it. “I think I’d like a bath”, he says in his plummidiest tone.

“Of course, milady.” Roger gives a sarcastic little bow. “Oh, bad news,” he calls out from the bathroom. “I’m afraid we don’t have a rubber ducky.”

“Sacrilege”, Freddie whispers dramatically. “That won’t do. That won’t do at all. Send Paul to fetch me one.”

Roger is tempted to get on the phone and send Paul out for the sheer idiocy of it. It would be a nice change from his usual late night shopping runs. But for some reason, he doesn’t want Paul to come here tonight. It’s nice, just him and Freddie, goofing around.

He draws the bath, adds a generous amount of the bath oils provided by the hotel (piney, balsamic scents that he always likes best when he has a cold), and lays out an exaggerated amount of fluffy towels.

When he returns to the suite, he’s glad to see that Freddie had actually drunk some of the herbal tea. He’s also topped off his brandy. “Water’s ready.”

Freddie holds out a hand. Roger pulls him up, then Freddie draws up the blankets around him and shuffles into the bathroom. Leave it to Freddie to make a big production out of having a cold.

“Smells like a forest in here”, he calls out.

“Sorry, they didn’t have anything that smells of poppers and sweaty balls. Hope you’ll still be comfortable.”

“What if the Big Bad Wolf comes and gets me?” Oh Christ, he’s in full camp mode. Freddie drops the blankets and pulls off his shirt, then holds it out as if he expects Roger to act as his personal fucking butler.

Roger marches over and whisks the shirt away, then dumps unceremoniously in a corner of the nearby the door.

Freddie yelps. He hates it when his clothes get rumpled.

“Shut up and get in the bath. You’ll get cold.”

“Impertinent sod. I... well, someone... spent hours ironing that”, Freddie grumbles as he quickly sheds the rest of his clothes. It’s a bit weird doing it in the tiled bathroom of the Hôtel Ritz, but they’ve shared enough flats and hotel rooms back in the days when cash was spare that he’s not fazed by a little nudity. Plus, a ballet unitard really doesn’t leave anything to the imagination.

Still, he keeps his eyes firmly on the pile of clothes piled up in his arms. “It’s going in the wash anyway, don’t be such fucking princess.”

“Hmmm.” Freddie sighs, sinking deep into the water. Then he holds out one hand. “Champagne”, he says imperiously, his tone spoiled a bit by his clogged sinuses.

“Nope”, Roger says.
“I always have champagne when I’m having a bath.”

Thing is, with Freddie, that could be a bold exaggeration or God’s honest truth. “This is medicinal bathing.” Roger turns to head back into the living room.

“Medicinal champagne then”, Freddie calls after him. And then, when Roger doesn’t stop: “Wanker!”

What Roger does, is get himself a whiskey, a large one, and select a movie. Freddie likes old movies with the grand divas of old, Garbo, Monroe and so on. A few of them are even in the original English version.

“Bath robe”, it rings out from the bath 10 minutes later.

Finally, Freddie is dry and warm and tucked in on the sofa. He agrees with the movie selection (“Morocco”, starring Gary Cooper alongside Marlene Dietrich) and gracefully accepts a (now lukewarm) cup of cocoa. Roger starts the film and bids Freddie good night.

Freddie looks surprised. “Aren’t you going to stay and watch the movie?” There’s no affectation in his voice now. It’s an honest question. And the way he’s sitting there in his pyjamas, hair fluffy and curly from the moisture, clutching a cup of cocoa, he looks like he’s all of 19.

“Yes”, Roger says and sits down on the other side of the sofa. He could try to catch up with the others, but finds that he simply doesn’t want to. A night in sounds quite nice. It’s not like the night clubs are going to close tomorrow. “Yes, why not.”

“Good.” Freddie looks away, twiddling the fringe of his blanket. Then, after a pause, he grins at Roger. “I might need a manicure.”

Only the fact that he has a drink in his hand saves him from a pillow to the face.

The movie is... quite something. Roger doesn’t care much for dramatic love stories with Big Misunderstandings and Great Romantic Gestures, but the night club scenes are fascinating. No wonder Freddie loves Marlene – she looks just as home on a stage as he does.

Freddie watches with rapt attention. After he has emptied his cup, he curls up his side, head propped up on a pillow, eyes glued to the screen. His feet are dangling over the edge of the sofa.

Roger on the other hand, finds himself zoning out during the middle part (which involves a complicated love triangle and way too much hand-wringing). Granted, there is a Lesbian kiss early on, something he does not expect in a thirties black-and-white movie, but it isn’t followed up by anything more explicit. It’s not that he's a complete culture knob, he does read proper books occasionally and owns a number of classical and rare blues recordings and Kubrick is one of his favourite directors. But watching old timey people pine for each other for two hours...

“Don’t mess up my hair,” Freddie mumbles.

Roger’s mind snaps back to the present. He whips his hand away like Freddie’s head is on fire. “Sorry!” Muscle memory be damned. That is exactly how he and Dom often relax on the sofa together, so his hand must have automatically drifted to Freddie’s hair. Thank God it was only his hair. Roger isn’t exactly known for his subtle approach when he’s horny.

Freddie turns his head fractionally so he can look up at him. “I said ‘don’t mess it up’, not ‘stop’.”
Roger looks down, nonplussed.

Freddie shrugs and looks back at the screen, seemingly engrossed in the movie. He hasn’t moved away. Would it be really that weird if he petted Freddie’s hair? Yeah, no shit Sherlock, that would be really fucking weird. They aren't a couple of 12 year-old girls or, or...

He cuts his thoughts off and rolls his eyes at himself. Sure, he has no problem going to the sleaziest gay bars the world has to offer. They went to fucking sex clubs together. But an accidental touch during a movie night sends him into a panic?

Carefully he lowers his hand onto the crown of Freddie’s head again. There is no sign that it is unwelcome, so he lets his fingers spread out, following the individual strands. Freddie’s hair is thick and soft with a slightly coarse curl to it. Freddie spends what feels like hours before (and during and after) each gig with a hair dryer, ironing out the waves until his hair lies flat and tidy. He's started cutting it shorter and shorter over the years (as they all did, excepting Brian of course).

Freddie sighs and presses his head into Roger’s hand, like he’s one of his own beloved cats. Roger smiles and keeps on petting him with long, slow strokes, careful not to disturb the strands too much. Careful not to think about what exactly he’s doing there.

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Roger awakens to a dry mouth and a pain shooting through his neck. Sitting upright on a sofa is the worst way to sleep.

The telly is still on, but showing static screen. Looks like he’ll never know whether Marlene ever got off with Gary Cooper.

Freddie is still lying next to him, mouth open, snoring quietly. Although he’s a couple of years older than Roger, he looks so incredibly young like that.

Roger shuts down the telly and makes sure Freddie is snugly covered with blankets. Then he puts a bottle of water next to him and resists the urge to smooth his hair back from his forehead. Enough of that.

As he leaves the room, he’s already making plans for a night out with the guys tomorrow. Strippers and poker are urgently needed. For balance.
Munich, 3 July 1979

Chapter Notes

Roger's kind of a dick in that one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They spend most of March in Montreux mixing their Live Killers. It was supposed to be a matter of a week or two, tops, but the whole thing turns into a bloody nightmare. The plan was to simply take the best recording, patch up the dodgy bits with parts of other shows and be done with it. Just select the best performance and sound quality for each song, run it through an equalizer – how hard can it be? Thin Lizzy managed it, for fucks sake.

Really, really hard it turns out. Although they have help from an experienced sound engineer, they spend weeks in the studio, wrestling with the material. The best performances have inexplicable glitches in sound quality. Those tapes with superior sound are invariably from nights in which Freddie barely made it through the set. And those few times where everything actually fit, it would be the one time Brian screwed up his solo or Roger launched them into the wrong song at the wrong time.

Oh, and EMI thinks there’s too much swearing so they make them bleep out Freddie’s intro to “Death on two legs”. Dom refuses to believe they actually agreed to something that stupid until he plays the record to her.

In the end, pressed for time and frustrated by the whole endeavour, they patch up the tracks with studio recordings, then pass the whole thing on to the sound engineer for polishing. In the end of all the meddling Roger likes to joke that the only thing live about Live Killers is the bass drum.

So there’s barely enough time to nip back home to England, say hi to his mum and admire the redecoration work Dom has organised for the rather dilapidated top floor of his town house before they head off to Japan to finish the tour.

Despite the unfortunate run-in with the Japanese tourists in Barcelona, Japan still has a special place in Roger’s heart. Back in ’75, when they were still chronically broke and begging radio stations for air time, they’d been treated like the fucking Beatles here. Of course, these days they have made it in Europe and the US as well, but Japanese fans always go the extra mile. It doesn’t matter that Freddie’s voice is shot almost from day one, they celebrate him like an angel has descended from the heavens. And Freddie – craving adoration like it’s air – gives back with all he’s got, refusing to cancel a single show. But it isn’t just Freddie, all of them are recognized everywhere they go, even John who usually manages to keep a low profile. It’s surreal. One day, Roger goes into a small shop, looking for a nice bottle of Sake as a souvenir. Then the shop keeper recognizes him and without pausing for breath proceeds to take an entire film worth of photos of him standing befuddled in front of a rack of liquor bottles.

No wonder Freddie has fallen entirely in love with the country. It’s the only place where he does any touristy stuff – sightseeing, restaurant sampling... And shopping. Oh my god, the shopping.

Roger accompanies him one day. They close down an entire luxury department store in the middle of Tokyo so that Sir Frederick can peruse the merchandise at his leisure. At the end of the day,
he’s bought enough antique paintings, delicate lacquer boxes and silk kimonos that he’ll probably have to order a whole ship to get it to England. And that’s just one day!

Night life in Japan is... different, to say the least. There aren’t the classical raunchy gay clubs that Roger has got used to in the US and Europe, instead their gay culture is nestled up in the geisha and tea-house culture. Freddie is right at home among the drag queens and cabaret artists, although the beautiful geisha boys don’t seem to interest him much. He does enjoy being pampered by them, though, and having fantastic tea served. Roger tramps along initially, but after the first curiosity is satisfied, he quickly loses interest. Way too theatrical for his tastes. And who needs a geisha in a land where grown women wearing school girl uniforms is a thing?

May at least gives them some time off. Freddie heads straight for Bali, while Roger takes Dom to get some much needed sun-soaking in Montpellier.

But the botched live album bothers Roger. He’s itching to get back into the studio, get their creative juices flowing. They get together in Munich this time, to try something new. But as much as he tries, all he comes up with is a song he’s been toying around with since the Jazz sessions – a song he discarded in favour of Fun It, for fuck’s sake. The new producer seems to like it, however, and Freddie agrees to share lead vocals. But still – this is not single material and he knows it.

The others don’t seem to have the same problem. Granted, John is not writing anything at all, but he just doesn’t seem bothered by it. At far as he sees it, it’s Freddie’s and Brian’s job to do the bulk of the song writing, and when he happens to come up with something he likes, it’s a nice bonus. And also his wife is about to give birth so it’s understandable his mind is elsewhere. Brian on the other hand is in full sentimental ballad mode, having already produced two of the damn things and both are strong enough for the album.

The most infuriating, though, is Freddie. He’s been on an extended break, only joining the three of them a week late, and then spends most of his time exploring the Munich night life in depth. It’s a good thing they’ve got the Live album slated for release, because they’re not getting very far like this. Then one day, out of the blue, he saunters into the studio, waving a crumpled sheet with notes about and announces that he’s got their next single.

And the thing is that the bloody thing is good. A simple three-chord rockabilly number with silly lyrics, handclaps and Freddie doing his best Elvis impression (hip-thrusting very much included). The fun thing is that Mack bludgeons Brian into playing Roger’s old telecaster. He’s fuming with held back rage, but has to agree that it really does fit the song.

Still, it’s a frustrating time. Everyone else seems to be getting something worthwhile done, while he’s wasting his time trying to write songs that just don’t work, then giving up in a rage and chugging vodka at three in the afternoon. Which means breakfast.

And to top it all off, Dom isn’t helpful at all. She drops by on the weekends, but has zero tolerance for what she calls useless moping. Instead, she gets all smart and businesslike and tries to set up schedules and targets for him, like he’s a working in a bloody brick factory. They usually end up snapping at each other, and then it’s Sunday night and she has to leave and he feels bad and lonely and ends up going out, looking for something to cheer him up. Something that doesn’t involve him checking off a fucking to-do list.

Which is how that whole clusterfuck got started in the first place.

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His phone is ringing. Again. He doesn’t pick up. Again.
There’s a knock on his door. Crystal pokes his head in. “Er. Dom called. She said, er. She’s asked me to tell you to pick up the phone.”

“Did she?”

“Actually she asked me to tell ‘that bloody coward’ to pick up the phone but I inferred that she meant you and...”

“Piss off.”

“Right.”

The phone starts ringing again. He gets up, takes a few steps towards the door. Then he stops, takes a deep breath. He turns around and picks up the phone.

“Dom, hey...”

It’s probably a good thing his French never progressed beyond basic small talk. He can just let the entire tirade wash over him.

“Look”, he says when she has to pause for air, “I’m really, really sorry.”

So, he had been at a party of some friend of a friend of Crystal’s girlfriend. The place was a dump, but there was booze and high-grade vitamin C and a girl in a black mini dress that – no matter how she tugged at it – always left some part of her pleasantly uncovered.

“I live right next door”, she whispered in his ear when their make-out session had gone as far as it can go on a sofa in the middle of a roomful of people.

“Right”, he said and pulled her to her feet.

He remembers her staggering over the cobbled streets in her high heels. How he felt her up while she dug her keys from her pockets, her breathless giggling promising things to come. How he came back out an hour later, bone tired, trying to flag down a cab to get him back to his hotel.

All that, however, is not the problem. The problem is that – as she told him the next day in a panicked phone call – a jealous ex had spotted them at the party, followed them and taken pictures. And then sold the pictures to some German rag, which refused to be paid off and ran the story on the front page.

And it turns out, the British tabloids have at least one person in their filthy offices that knows German.

“You’re sorry? Wow, that’s... I feel so much better now, Rog.”

“Well, what do you want me to say?”

“Say? I don’t give a fuck what you’ve got to say, Rog, you humiliated me. You...” She breaks off. He can hear her take a few harsh breaths. “All of my friends have seen this. My colleagues. My parents. I don’t care about the girls and the parties and whatever, but this, it’s just...”

“Wait, how do you mean you don’t care about the girls and the parties.”

She huffs. “Oh, come on. Do you really think I’m that naïve?”

“There were no...” Now Roger has to calm himself down. For over a year, he’s been depriving
himself, trying to be good for her, and she didn’t even care? Okay, so there were some slip ups towards the end, but he’s been trying, for fuck’s sake. And she hasn’t even noticed?

“No, shut up, I can’t... I don’t care, Rog, okay? I don’t. But what I expect is for you to treat me with respect and not drag me into this... this... There were reporters ambushing me on my way to work, waving those photos in my face.”

“But I...”

“And you didn’t even call to give me a warning! You must have known beforehand, but not a single word from you, you fucking wanker!”

“What should I have said? ‘Oh hey, Dom, lovely to hear your voice, and by the way, there’s going to be pictures of me and some girl I was shagging the other night all over the papers tomorrow, but no biggie, eh?’” And besides, he did honestly believe that Jim and his barrage of lawyers would find a way to sort it all out before it came to that.

“Yes! At least that would have taken some balls instead of you hiding behind Jim and Crystal and the rest of your fucking entourage.”

“Look, I’m really sorry for how this has played out, but I tried everything I could to keep them from publishing that story.”

“Right. Everything except not making out with some girl directly under a street-lamp.”

“Oh, forget the girl. I don’t even remember what she’s called, she was just...”

“Don’t you? I can help you out. Wait a second...” There’s a rustle of paper. “Her name is Monika (25), she’s a part-time model – hah! – and...”

Okay, that had been a stupid thing to say. “Yes, alright. I fucked up. There. I... what can I do? Tell me. Do you want me to do penance? Flagellate myself? Fashion a voodoo doll after the girl and burn it? Sue Fleet Street? Tell me. Tell me and I’ll...”

“Oh, just... just shut up. Just for once... I...” She sounds tired, raw. “You’re always talking. You’re so good at it, and you say nothing the whole time, and I just can’t... And I feel like we never actually talk about anything. Anything important.”

Now that is just unfair. “I’ve been talking to you plenty. I’ve been trying to tell you how I want to spend more time with you, how frustrated I am with the band and the sessions, but all you do is give me pep talks and shit.”

“I was trying to help you!”

“Maybe I didn’t want help, maybe I just want...” God, he needs a smoke.

“What about what I want then”, she says softly. “You never talk about that.”

Oh god, is this about babies again? Is she seriously using this situation to guilt-trip him into this? “Well, maybe if you’d stop nagging me about it, I’d be more willing to talk.”

“Nagging you. Seriously. Nagging. I...” The click of a lighter tells him she needs a smoke as much as he does. “I dared to bring up the topic of maybe at some point in the future having a family, and you call that nagging?”
“You’ve been going on and on and on about how cute little Jimmy is and how much fun you’ve had shopping for baby clothes with Veronica and how fantastic she looks in her bloody Versace maternity fashion and…”

“Oh no, so I’ve dared to comment on my friends and their families! The Spanish inquisition has nothing on me.”

“Oh, come off it!”

“All I’m asking for is a little bit of respect. To be taken serious. Is that really too much?”

“You’re one to talk. I barely get to see you these days. What do you think it feels like if all of the guys have their wives and girlfriends around, and I’m sitting there like a…” Like a complete loser.

“Okay, is this the point where you’re going to tell me again how you make so much more money than me? How much more important your job is?”

“That’s not what I…”

“Look, Rog, let’s not…” She pauses for a moment. “I get it, right. We both get lonely, we both get frustrated, so things happen sometimes, but we’ve really got to find a way to deal with that. Because family or no, this problem isn’t going to just go away and…”

“Hang on, hang on, wait a second. How do you mean, ‘we both’ get frustrated?”

“Sorry?”

“We both get lonely and frustrated and things happen sometimes’, what’s that supposed to mean? What things?”

There’s a brief silence on the other end. “Roger. If you dare to go jealous on me now…”

“Is it Branson? Are you fucking your boss?”

“Stop it.”

“I knew it. I fucking knew it. So that’s what all these work trips were all about? So you and he could…” There’s a boiling cloud of red rage bubbling up his gut, his chest, his throat, displacing the cloying guilt and frustration. It feels good, and he’s gladly letting it take over.

“Roger, if you don’t shut up right this second I am going to hang up. And I’m not going to call again.”

“What, so you crawl back into his arms? Is he there right now? Is he touching you? I…”

The line goes dead. Roger thrashes the phone.

The next day, he is not waiting for her to call him. Or the day after that. He wouldn’t pick up the phone anyway.

He stews for a week. Then, when he’s just about to give in (or, as he likes to put it, give her another chance), a package arrives. There are three sets of keys in it: one for his mansion in Surrey, one for the townhouse and one – to be used in emergencies only – for his Aston Martin. Also, a note:

I’m sorry it ended like this.
Dominique.

PS: Please don’t wreck your car.

PPS: My father may or may not have hired a hitman. I made him promise me not to, but you know how he is. So better stay away for a while.

He has been dumped. His soon-to-be fiancé dumped him just like that without even…

“You’re an idiot,” Freddie says when he hears about it, more like he’s delivering a diagnosis rather than an insult. “Come on. Let’s get shitfaced.”

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So Roger’s single again. The downside of that whole episode is that he has to endure several very disappointed phone calls from his mother (bemoaning the end of his relationship while staying delicately away from the sordid details of the whole Monika thing) and his grandmother (who somehow missed the memo that your grown-up grandson really does not want to discuss his love life with you, ever, even if you think you’ve got some really helpful advice).

The band is doing better. Brian is the one to offer sympathetic looks and an open ear (not that Roger needs an open ear, he’s fine), John takes him down to the Isar one afternoon, where they sit in silence, slowly getting stoned out of their minds (which Roger also doesn’t need – he’s fine – but the weed is excellent and the sun is shining, so why the fuck not). Freddie basically ignores the topic after the first night, which is a relief. Roger’s fine, he doesn’t need to sit down with his gay best friend for commiseration and cheering up. However, it seems to Roger that he’s inviting him along a bit more than usual, demonstrating that if Roger wants to talk, he’s there. Which he doesn’t. He’s fine.

It’s not that bad, actually. He should be glad it ended how it did, without lengthy back and forth, arguing and compromises and broken promises. The summer’s in full swing, they’ve got a tour planned later in the year, and maybe this is exactly what he needs to get his creative juices flowing again.

And it’s not like she’s the only woman on earth. Being able to throw himself back into the fray without his conscience nagging at him is so freeing. Although now he makes sure to take his distractions home by car and keep his hands off them, until they’re safely inside. He’ll be damned if those filthy German rags earn another bloody penny off him.

Chapter End Notes

Music (Dominique POV): Garfunkel & Oates – Ex-Boyfriend Song

If you want to know what “Freddie’s voice being shot from day one” refers to, please watch this video from the show in Tokyo. It’s adorable for a number of reasons: 1. Freddie’s voice is almost completely gone but he’s still giving it his all from beginning to end (and he looks just beautiful in this); 2. Roger helping him out from behind his drums (with additional help from Brian). 3. Lots of Deacy being Deacy in the background.

So, this is our first major history change. The Quantum Butterfly is flapping its wings.
Sorry Dom, you got to keep him a bit longer in our universe. Let's see where things lead from here.
For his 30th birthday, Seb and Carl organise a helicopter ride where Roger gets to be co-pilot and then a night out at a horrible tacky night club (which is perfect) where he gets so wasted on neon-coloured cocktails he can’t remember anything past midnight and spends the entire next day in bed wishing he’d just die already.

The actual party takes place the day after, once he's suitably recovered, on a picture-pretty Saturday afternoon. Old friends, new friends, the less irritating parts of his family, the band and their families plus some of the crew lounge around his garden or float on lilos in his pool. Later, one of the hottest London DJs is going to turn the area in front of the catering tent into a dance floor.

There’s definitely a lot more children around than at his last birthday. John’s eldest has become something of a ring leader, happily taking his younger brother and little Jimmy under his wing to show them just how much of a nuisance you can be without getting into real trouble. Veronica looks remarkably relaxed given that she has two of those plus a newborn to look after. Laura is handed around to be cooed over and Roger walks away to get another beer before it’s his turn, settling down in a lounge chair a little way off.

It’s not that she isn’t cute, he thinks as John carries Laura over to Freddie, who’s lying on a picnic blanket in the shade of an apple tree to protect his precious skin. It’s just... He doesn’t know what it is. He wasn’t exactly pining to have kids with Dom, so... so it shouldn't matter, should it? He’ll find someone else. He’s got time.

Laura has fallen asleep on Freddie’s chest to the delight of everyone around them, while Freddie shushes them angrily lest they disturb her precious sleep.

Roger feels something delicate and fragile breaking like a spider's web in the frost. The last taut thread of rope he’s dangling from finally snapping. And suddenly, without much warning, he is so angry he wants to smash the orderly rows of champagne glasses and just scream at all those people who invaded his house until his words run out and chop down that bloody tree Dom loved so fucking much and tell everyone to go fuck themselves. It’s a blinding, furious rage that courses through his every cell, the kind of rage that makes him want to lash out and hurt and...

No. Stop. Stop right there. He's not like that.

He gets up and flees inside the house before he does something stupid.

Whiskey. Whiskey and cigarettes and music so loud he can’t hear his own thoughts. That's the thing.

Happy fucking Birthday.

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A beam of light falls through the crack of the opening door.

“Fuck off”, Roger mumbles.
Brian doesn't fuck off. “Found him”, he calls out instead, then plants his arse on the sofa like he hasn’t just been fucking disinvited. “You alright there?”

And sure enough, the other two stooges follow, as if a man locking himself up in the smallest most remote room of his house with a bottle of whiskey on his 30th birthday isn’t sending a clear message that he wants to be left alone.


“Do I look like I’m in the mood for fucking fireworks?”

“Also, there’s a very pissed-off stripper in a cake who refuses to stay in there a minute longer.”

Roger just rolls his eyes. If he ignores them, maybe they’ll go away and leave him to his misery.

“Oh boy”, Brian says. “You said the S-word and still there’s no reaction. Should we call an ambulance? This looks serious.”

“Just leave me alone. All of you.”

"Roger, darling, come on, this is no way to behave on your own birthday party." Freddie crosses his arms and perches on the edge of the designer chair opposite Roger.

"It's *my* party so I can do whatever I want.” He thinks for a moment, then narrows his eyes. "In fact, this is *my* house, so if I tell you to fuck off, you fuck the fuck off.” He angrily shakes the last pathetic drops of whiskey into his glass, stares at it, then flings the empty bottle against the wall. "Fuck!"

"Oookay. How about we *all* have a drink, then, eh?"

Brian being all chipper. God, he wants to throw up.

He might *have* to throw up.

John presses a glass into his hands. Roger sniffs it suspiciously. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

At least John has the decency to look ashamed. Wordlessly, he takes the water back and pours it into a house plant. "Right then. Vodka Tonics for all?"

But before John can do anything about it, Roger puts up a last show of resistance."This is my house and want you out of it. Go be with your perfect wives and your perfect kids or whatever.”

“And where am I supposed to go?” Freddie lounges in a Diamond chair like it’s the softest of sofas instead of a welded mesh of steel rods. Wanker.

“I dunno. One of your hundreds of boyfriends?”

Freddie grimaces. “Seem to be all out of them. Some rogue bashed the last one’s nose in. Seems to have scared him off.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. It’s fine though. He was a cunt.”

Roger can’t help but smile at that. “Alright”, he grumbles. “You may stay.”
“My house has been invaded by my mother-in-law, who flat-out refuses to leave. It also smells of diapers.”

“Fine, John too.”

All eyes go to Brian.

He sighs. “The last time I had sex, dinosaurs roamed the earth. Does that make the cut?”

“Dear god”, Freddie mumbles.

“Right”, Roger says. “Drinks.” He reaches for the whiskey bottle, but it’s not there. Oh right. He shrugs apologetically and drains the last dregs from his glass. Every man for himself.

The others share a look. Then John walks over to the small sideboard bar. “Vodka Tonics”, he says grimly.

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“Right. I’m gonna call her.”

Just as he tries to get up, two sets of arms wrap around his waist and pull him back down.

“Oh no, you won’t”, Brian says.

“It’s been a mistake, I’ve been such an idiot. God... I’m sorry. I’m so...”

“You’ll thank us in the morning”, John says while Freddie pats his shoulder making vague ‘there, there’ noises. Something about the situation seems familiar. Didn’t John say the same thing an hour ago?

“But she’s... She’s been the one. The one to... She’s the best thing that ever happened to me!” He sobers up momentarily. “Apart from you guys, of course, I fucking love you.”

“Yeah, we love you too, Rog”, Brian says.

“Let’s drink to that”, Freddie says and fills up their glasses.

Roger hasn’t quite let go of the idea that drunk-calling his ex at fuck-a-clock in the morning is a brilliant idea. “But if I explain... if I apologize even...”

“Look mate”, John says, “Wait until the morning, okay? If you still think it’s a good idea, by all means call her.”

Roger looks out the window. “It is morning!”

The first of dawns rosy fingers light up the night.

Brian groans. “Oh god. I’ve promised Chrissie to join her and her parents for brunch.”

“See”, Freddie says, pointing at Brian as Exhibit A, “see what hell you’ve narrowly escaped?”

Roger buries his head in his hands. “But I love her. Like... she was so sexy with that bloody French accent and smart as hell and... and the sex, it was just... she had this thing where she...”

“Alright Rog, we, er, we get the picture.” Brian holds up his hands like he’s wading off an evil
spell.

“But what... what am I gonna do, huh? I’m thirty years old and I’ve got nothing.” He stares desolately into his empty glass.

“You do what we all do”, Brian says. “You suffer and you wallow and you lean on your friends to make it through.”

Roger looks dubiously at the three men, all decidedly worse for the wear. “What, you?”

To his amazement, they all nod. “Us”, Freddie says.

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Roger considers writing thank you cards for the first time in his life the next morning. God, it’s so embarrassing, thinking back to some of the things he said, but how much worse would it have been if he’d actually called Dom? Just thinking about it is enough to make him want to tape his mouth shut.

To his surprise, John and Veronica and the kids show up on his door step two days later with tickets to an amusement park. They make up some half-arsed story about how the nanny got sick and they can’t handle all three children on their own (which is obviously bullshit) and would Roger help them out? But when Veronica badgers Roger to climb into the monster roller coaster with her while John feeds his children candy floss until their hair turns pink, he feels like he can breathe for the first time in days.

While the Deacons like to take him out on wholesome family outings, Brian just starts hanging out at his house with little plan or explanation. At first he offers up some half-arsed excuse about needing help with some lyrics going around in his head, but soon he just drops by and spends hours playing pong on Roger’s new Atari. Usually, they don’t talk much, but he’s there and that’s what matters. And when Roger does open up, he sits quietly and nods at all the right times and then shares something of himself so Roger doesn’t have to feel alone.

Freddie’s take on the whole thing is more My Fair Lady: he keeps taking Roger to the ballet and theatre and stuff, like the tragic love stories acted out there (usually ending in gruesome death) might put his own troubles into perspective.

And it works, in a way. Roger even starts writing songs again. He’s not sure if they’re the right for a Queen album, but maybe at some point he might do a solo thing and then...

In August, they head back to Germany to play at Saarbrücken Open Air, one of the most embarrassing gigs of his life. First he has the extremely stupid idea of dying his hair lighter, ending up with a vivid shade of green and having no time for emergency correction measures. Then his monitor keeps malfunctioning so he can barely synch up with the rest of the band and has no idea whether he’s even on the correct song. Freddie thinks the whole thing is hilarious. The night ends in a sea of Vodka a trashed drumkit.

At least September brings about Freddie’s birthday, which makes Roger feel a little less old and gives them all an opportunity to go on a good-old fashioned bender. A few days later, Freddie presents him with an envelope. Inside are two return tickets to JFK later that month.

“Happy Birthday.”

“My birthday was over a month ago.”
“Happy belated birthday.”

“You already gave me a present.”

“Oh, that was just some rubbish I sent Joe out to buy because I didn’t know what to get to you.”

The ‘rubbish’ is a platinum plated monogrammed Montblanc roller pen.

Freddie rubs his hands excitedly. “This”, he says and taps the tickets, “is going to be good.”

At any other time, he’d jump that the opportunity to spend a weekend in NY with his best friend. But right now he’s just not feeling it. Clubs, shows, shopping... what’s it all worth in the end? “So you’ve got something specific planned for us”, he asks, failing to put much enthusiasm into his voice.

“Oh yes. A proper bachelor weekend. Brian and John helped with the planning. Don’t worry,” he adds quickly, “it’s not going to be all golfing and photograph exhibitions.”

“I hate golf.”

Freddie rolls his eyes. “Alright, so no golf. Are you going to be a prick about this all day? You know, the traditional reply to a thoughtful and expensive birthday gift is usually ‘thank you, my good friend. How lucky I am to have you in my life.’”

“Yes, alright, alright. Although somehow I suspect you planned to go there anyway and I’m just a convenient companion.” As Freddie is completely useless at organising trips and also a nervous flyer, travelling with him – especially when it’s just going to be the two of them – means work.

“Oh, no, no, no. It’s not convenient at all. It’s right during my rehearsals.”

Right. Freddie’s secret charity ballet thing he just can’t shut up about. Roger isn’t sure whose idea it was, but someone apparently decided that it would be a great idea for Freddie to sing live on stage while dancing along-side trained Royal Ballet dancers. For weeks Freddie has been moaning about the unspeakable things they make him do during rehearsals.

“If I come along to New York with you – you know, hold your hand during take-off and landing, take care of the luggage etc. – does that mean I don’t have to go see your ballet?”

Freddie turns up his nose. "You don't deserve to see my ballet, you artless little twit."

Chapter End Notes

Music: Electric Light Orchestra – It’s All Over

Of course, if you're mean (like me) you can listen to Matt Mulholland's rendition of My Heart Will Go On during Roger's meltdown.

Things are going to get even more Roger & Freddie centric for a while. I haven't forgotten about the other two boys, promise. They'll be back!
New York, 21-23 September 1979, Pt. I

Chapter Notes

Two boys' nights out, rated M

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Of course they go to New York.

The day before, they shoot a promo video for “Crazy Little Thing”, which gives them all an opportunity to dress up as 50’s style Rock ’n’ Rollers and Freddie an excuse to do unspeakable things to a motorcycle. On camera. He pulls of off the greaser look surprisingly well. Also, Roger hits it off with one of the dancers, so that’s alright.

They leave early the next morning and Freddie talks in an American accent the whole time until Roger threatens to throw him out of the plane.

The first thing Freddie does is take him shopping.

“I’m not a girl”, Roger protests.

“Well, I’m not going out with you dressed like a pimp.”

If that is a reference the awesome leopard print lapels on his jacket, he’s not taking the bait. “No one’s forcing you to wear those glasses”, he shoots back.

“Impertinent sod.”

But Roger can't deny that mindlessly spending money on sneakers and designer jeans is good for the soul. And Freddie knows all the best places. He finds the most amazing green blazer in a small back-alley shop that – according to Freddie – belongs to a friend of Yoko Ono.

Then they have dinner, and then, when Roger starts fearing they might be headed for the Met for some grand production, Freddie simply takes him to the cinema. The movie's already run a couple of weeks, so they have it almost to themselves. Watching Freddie's reaction to Alien it's almost as entertaining as the movie itself. During the tense scene with Kane in the egg chamber, Roger runs his fingers very suddenly along the back of Freddie's neck. Popcorn is sent flying.

"I hate you", Freddie whispers.

And then the club. Not the Anvil or the Mineshaft or any of the other gay clubs Roger has become familiar with. Instead it's a good old-fashioned, high class strip club. Looks like Freddie's taking his duties as a bachelor weekend organiser very seriously.

When Roger comes back from trip to the loo, Freddie's talking to one of the dancers - the tall one with the black ponytail whose legs go on for miles. She'd drawn Roger's eye from the start. When Freddie sees him, he pretends like he didn't do anything, but sure enough, after a couple of minutes she starts honing in on Roger.

"I'm Amber", she whispers with her perfectly round breasts inches from his face, "You're welcome
to join me in the VIP room over there, honey." She leans back a little and cocks her head at him. "If you like?"

She spins and writhes up and down the pole in the small red-and-black room, gripping it between her strong thighs, bending around it like her spine is made of rubber. Then comes the lap dance and it's exactly the kind of exquisite torture that has men coming back for more. She takes his hands and puts them on her hips, and he uses that license to explore, running his fingers down her thighs, up her waist, along the underside of her tits. Her crotch is rubbing over his straining cock just enough to keep him hoping for more. God, she's gorgeous.

"Any chance I can take you home?" It doesn't always work, but it never hurts to ask. Some girls keep it strictly at dancing, and that's fine, but many are up for more if you ask nicely. And being Roger Taylor probably helps too. From the way the lap dance has been going he's relatively sure he's going to get a hand job at least, but maybe she's even up for a proper shag. Not knowing exactly how far she'll go is part of the fun.

She sits back, hands slung loosely around his shoulders. "Where are you staying", she asks.

"The Plaza."
"Hmm. Big suite?"
"Penthouse."
"Stretch limo?"
"Of course."

"And a ten-inch cock as well?" She grinds down and he bites his lips. Damn, she knows what she's doing.

"Oh yes." So he's rounding up. So what.

Amber pretends to think for a moment. Then she stands up on her long, slim legs. "Let's go."

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"I'm never going to move again."

Roger's mouth is fuzzy and his head feels like it's about to explode.

"Come on. Ron will drive us to the beach and you can lounge around in the sun all day. Beer, ice cream, chilled champagne..."

Roger groans. There had been champagne last night. Way too much champagne.

"Girls in tiny bikinis..."

He got a blowjob in the car. And then Amber had kept him up until the early morning hours. Either Freddie had paid her a fortune, or she'd really been into him. He should be satiated for the rest of the week. But in his experience, girls are like chocolates. Once you start... And besides, he's got a lot to make up for.

"...all fit and tanned and glistening as they emerge from the waves..." Freddie's still extolling the virtues of the Fire Island beaches.
“Fine”, Roger says and slowly starts his long climb out of bed.

They pass four swim suit models in five minutes. Four male swimsuit models.

“Those guys are really fit”, Roger notes.

“Oh really?” Freddie has the gall to pretend like he hasn’t even noticed.

“They're also wearing really tiny trunks.”

“Interesting.”

“Freddie, is this a gay beach?”

A grin breaks out on his face. “Yes!”

“You tricked me!”

“Not my fault if you’re so easily tricked. Look!” He points in the direction of the water front.

“There’s a girl in a bikini.”

Yeah, there she is, and looking good. But still. “That’s a ration of 4 to 1, that is not even remotely acceptable.”

“Oh, don’t be dramatic. Besides. You abandoned me in a strip club.” He glares at Roger. "I had to take a cab!"

"I feel for you."

Instead of complaining about it some more (as he's done all morning), Freddie looks up and waves at someone behind Roger. “Ah, look who’s here!”

Roger turns around, and it takes him a second to recognize the group in their cheerful summer outfits. “Welcome to the old people club”, Dino says and puts an old-fashioned boater on his head.

Then Roger is engulfed in hugs by Melissa, Dino, Arturo, Ed and Marco. There’s also a very pretty Japanese woman called Suki. Roger hits on her more or less automatically until she cuts him off with a blunt “I’m a dyke, knock it off”. “She’s also Melissa’s partner”, Marco whispers to him a little later. “So don’t push it.”

They’ve brought along cake and sandwiches and ice-cold lager stored in giant cooling bags. In the late summer heat wave, even American beer tastes like a treat.

And although Roger has spent only a couple of nights with them when they were in New York last year, he feels immediately at home, getting updated on the comings and goings of all the people he might have met last year (and who he barely remembers more than a face or a name about). Every once in a while he catches Freddie’s eye. He looks so smug when he realizes his surprise has worked.

“So”, Dino says after a while, “how's it going then?”

“Ah, you know. Busy making music, planning the next tour...” Getting dumped in the most stupid way possible...
“Are you going to come back to America soon?”

“Going to be a while, sorry. We’re going on a smaller tour of England in the fall and winter and then it’s back to the studio to complete the album. But we’re thinking about a big tour of the US some time next summer.”

“Three times Madison Square Garden”, Freddie says.

“And don’t forget Omaha, Nebraska. Oh the glamour...” Gerry insists they can’t just play the big cities, but also have to tour the circle of hell that is otherwise known as the Midwest. It probably makes sense from a marketing and PR standpoint, but it’s not really what Roger pictured when he imagined himself as a rock star.

“Hey, I’m from Omaha,” Ed says.

“Oh.”

“He’s a rude little number, isn’t he”, Freddie says, frowning at Roger's faux pas. “Don’t be offended.” He leans in and stage whispers: “He’s actually from Truro, Cornwall, which...”

“...is a lovely little town with some of the finest examples of Georgian architecture west of Bath.” And which he fled for London at the earliest opportunity.

“So, do you have any sight-seeing tips for Omaha, Nebraska”, Melissa asks.

“Hmm.” Ed thinks for a moment, then he shrugs and grins. “Nah. It’s a shithole.”

He and Roger clink glasses.

“It’s not like we get to see much anyway”, Roger explains. “Usually it’s just airport, hotel, stage, and back to the airport. Maybe a club or a restaurant when we have a day off.”

“The crowds are different”, Freddie says. “Big city guys are some tough bitches. Hard to please. Whereas out in the prairie, they lap it all up.”

“So you actually like the smaller cities?” Marco looks a bit sceptical.

“For shows anytime. But the accommodation...” He grimaces. “I don’t think they’ve ever even seen a proper tea leaf in Iowa.”

“Once he even had to make do with American vodka for a whole night”, Roger says. “Can you imagine the horror?”

Freddie gave a full body shudder. “Don’t remind me, the nightmares still haunt me.”

“Poor thing”, Suki says, pointedly pouring herself a Jim Beam.

“But one thing you guys have absolutely figured out is clubbing”, Freddie says. Everyone grins. No one has to tell them that. “I could barely believe my eyes when I got here the first time. You are some crazy motherfuckers.”

Ed, who looks like golf caddy in his slacks and polo shirt and not at all like someone who poses in a jockstrap at night, grins. “I remember the first time I came to New York in ’73. I had no idea what I was doing. I just knew the names Christopher Street and Greenwich Village. So I roamed the streets until I found some guys who looked gay to me and followed them. Right into a place called The Toilet. Yeah, really. It’s now a pretty normal bar, but back then, it’s where the top of the freak
“parade congregated. Makes The Anvil look like a tea shop.”

“So was it even wilder at that time,” Roger asks. “The scene, I mean.”

“Not really”, Ed says. “I just got lucky. If you want to call it that.”

“Back then, places like The Toilet were tiny backroom operations”, Melissa explains. “You only went there if you were like hardcore into piss and knew the right people.”

“Or you were new and just didn’t know what you were doing”, Ed protests.

“But these days? Every club has a dark room. Glory holes are seen as quaint. There’s six bathhouses to choose from in the Village alone. Rimming is the new oral.”

“Butthole licking”, Dino prompts at Roger confused expression.

“Right.” Roger quickly opens another beer.

“Back then it was a lot more cruising in parks and men’s rooms and stuff. Very hush-hush,” Marco says. “I mean, Ed is basically a spring chicken. I actually remember the 60’s scene.”

“Oh, here come the ‘Nam-stories.”

“It wasn’t all bad”, Marco goes on. “I kinda miss it sometimes. You know, when you went out and you didn’t know if you’d even find another guy. And then if you did, a 2-minute hand job in the bushes of Central Park seemed like the most exciting thing you’ve ever done in your life.”

“I sure don’t miss getting arrested”, Dino says. “But there was a little bit more... romance to it, yes.”

“Come on, that’s bullshit”, Arturo says. “What’s so romantic about a blowjob in a public toilet?”

“Not the blowjob, but getting there, you know? These days with the hanky code and the earrings it’s like you’re being offered stock options. It’s so... convenient.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“I don’t get that obsession with anonymous sex anyway”, Suki said.

“Yeah, no offence, Suki, but maybe that’s because you’re... you know...” Marco falters.

Suki glares at him. “What?”

No one speaks up. Melissa looks like she’s about to break out the popcorn.


“Better shut up now”, Ed whispers to him. “For god’s sake, don’t start a gender discussion, please? It’s been such a nice afternoon.”

“I think she’s right”, Arturo says. Roger raises his eyebrows. The first time he’s seen Arturo he’d been part of a stage performance that featured the biggest dildo Roger had ever seen. “It’s only so much you can do with a stranger.”

“I think there’s quite a lot you can do with a stranger”, Freddie says delicately.
“Yeah, but it gets kind of repetitive, doesn’t it? I mean, yes, sucking a guy through a hole is exciting the first three or four times you do it, but then you go like ‘Yeah, been there, done that. What’s new?’”

The other guys nod in agreement. Just another reminder in what a different world Roger lives in.

“Anyway, the stuff I do with Mel, or Mel with me, should I say, it’s so much more... intense. Because she knows me so well, she can get me places no anonymous fuck ever will.”

"Thank you", Melissa says and gives a little bow.

Roger’s trying to gauge what Suki thinks of that exchange, but she seems entirely unruffled by Arturo praising her girlfriend’s prowess. “Can I ask a question”, he says and he sees how everyone braces themselves.

“Are you going to horribly embarrass me in front of my friends”, Freddie asks.

“First, they're my friends, and second, I thought you didn’t give a fuck what other people think.”

“Go on”, Melissa says. “We can take it.”

“Do any of you guys have, like normal relationships? Like just two guys – or girls – and no one else?” Everyone looks around to see how the others react.

“I’m afraid you’ve come to the wrong crowd”, Marco says. “I mean you picked us up in the Mineshaft.”

“But there’s tons of guys who don’t sleep around”, Melissa said.

“Yeah, two of my best friends are practically married”’, Ed offered. “But you won’t find them in the clubs.”

“Well... it also depends on what you mean by ‘no one else’”, Dino says. “Like, never doing anything ever? Or is it okay to bring in a third for Christmas? Or one venturing out alone every now and then?”

“Or sleeping around on the sly, straight people style”, Suki says. She raises his eyebrows at Roger.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Melissa elbows Suki in the ribs. Suki crosses her arms. “What, so we’re all supposed to pretend we don’t have newspapers in America?”

“Hey”, Dino says when the awkward silence gets to much and points to a brightly coloured booth to their right. “Who wants some ice cream?”

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Alcohol, sugar and the late afternoon sun quickly work to restore the good mood. In the evening, they all go out for pizza, then to a bar, then to another bar, and finally a very fashionable disco in the East Village that according to Dino only opened a few weeks ago and is the place to be. At least for a few weeks until the next one would pop up.

It might not be the best place for a straight guy looking for single girls up for a night of debauchery, but it does have a great DJ, a packed, energetic dance floor, and a tolerant drug policy. And if he really gets in the mood, he can still head out for another strip club later. If he ever
decides to leave this comfy, warm leather sofa.

But first, there’s something he needs to get off his chest.

“Dino.”

“Yeah.”

“Can I ask you something.”

“Sure.” Dino hands him the joint back and relaxes back into the couch. It’s a really nice, leather couch. Faux leather, but still.

"It’s about sex."

“Oh, and there I go thinking you want to pick my brains on the Red Wings season…”

“Getting screwed, right. What, er, what about that?”

Dino quirks one eye brow. “That an invitation, Mr. Straight Guy?”

“No, just like the last three times you asked.” Roger inhales deeply. It’s good, mellow stuff, the kind that makes the world a warmer, slower, slightly more confusing place. Like syrup. “Do you like it?”

“Ye-es?” Dino looks at him like he’s not quite got a full set of marbles. Then he giggles.

Roger sighs, takes a swig of his beer, and sits forward, forearms resting on his knees. His vision swims from the sudden movement and he scrambles to pick up the thread. What are they talking about? Oh yes. “I mean. Arse-fucking, right.”

“Yeah, I kinda thought you did.”

“So?”

Dino stares at him, like he’s a rather dim-witted puppy. “Look.” He leans forward as well so he can speak in a conspiratorial whisper. “You realize 95% of the guys in this room are gay, right? So if you’re having, like, a moral crisis over the concept of ass-fucking, you’re in the wrong place, my friend.”

Roger has started waving his forefinger in Dino’s face about two-thirds into his speech. “No, no, no, not a crisis. Different strokes and all. It’s good. Just. Look.” He puts his beer down. He couldn’t have started this conversation with any less alcohol in him, but any more and he won’t be able to finish it. “We’ve all got the same equipment, right? Gay or straight, doesn’t matter. Anatomically speaking,”

“I guess.”

“I’ve been to the doctor for, you know, check-ups and such. And I never thought, ‘oh yeah, feels great, I should try that at home.’” He leans back, having expertly delivered his thesis. “So.”

A smug grin tugs at the edge of Dino’s mouth. “So I bet your girlfriends get off every time they go to the gyn, eh?”

“What?” There must be some kind of connection between what he’s talking about and…
“I’ve heard the girls even get two fingers instead of the measly one we get.”

Rogers hand has balled into a fist although his brain is still on the uptake. Some bloke is talking about fingerling his girlfriend. So not on. Not that he has a girlfriend, but in principle...

“Whoa, man, relax.” Dino raises one hand placatingly and tries to hand him back the joint.

“Shut the fuck up about my girlfriend.”

“It’s not about your girlfriend. It’s about doctor’s appointments not being the most erotic experiences, you know. Except for Dave, maybe, he’s into that sort of thing.”

“Yeah but…”

“Look. I like police men. Boots, handcuffs, uniform. Has me on my knees in no time.” He winks and Roger decides he does need more beer after all. “When I actually got arrested in a raid? Worst thing that’s ever happened to me. And that includes the time when I was 8 and got salmonella from my Grandma’s famed potato salad and spent the whole of Thanksgiving on the toilet shitting my guts out.”

Okay. Maybe he does have a point. Sort of. “Right, it’s just that... I just don’t get it. How anyone could want... that.” A cock up the arse. A whole arm. Or that rimming stuff. It’s just so weird. Not to mention unsanitary. He used to think, before he started hanging out with gay guys all the time, that getting fucked was like taking one for the team, a necessity guys put up with because they knew it would be their turn next. But then he heard the endless complaints about everyone being a bottom these days and it turns out, some guys, a lot of guys apparently, actually prefer it.

“Well. It is sort of an acquired taste, I guess. And not even all gay guys want to acquire it.”

“You mean tops”, Roger throws in, proud to display his knowledge of terminology.

Dino nods graciously. “Sure. But some guys just aren’t into ass at all. It’s not like a box you have to tick in order to get your Gay Card. However!” Dino taps Roger’s chest with two fingers. “I think a lot of you guys are missing out on… well, on a lot of things, really, but you deserve that for being mean to us. But never even sticking a finger up your butt while you jerk off? Just ‘cause you’re afraid it makes you gay or something?” He shakes his head. “Sounds like a horrible lack of imagination to me.” Dino settles back, lighting a cigarette. “You ever done it with a girl? Fucked her that way?”

“Errrr... I don’t think so.”

“You mean you’re not sure?”

Thing is, Roger’s not entirely sure about a lot of things he might or might not have done under the influence of... stuff at six in the morning. But he doesn’t have any concrete recollection, so... “No. Pretty sure I haven’t.”

“Why not?”

“Well, I mean... it’s not, you know, necessary, is it?” Also, he watched that horrible Brando movie in his early twenties. The pain and revulsion on the actresses face is enough to put anyone off that kind of thing for life.

Dino stares at him for a few seconds, then burst out in laughter. “Necessary”, he wheezes in between fits, “are you fucking kidding me?” He seems to have caught himself, then snorts again.
“What? I just meant that...”

“Oh, I know what you meant.” He shakes his head. “Not necessary, Jeez.” He claps a heavy hand on Rog’s shoulder and looks at him, all solemn and sober. “Thanks for reminding me why I should thank God he made me gay despite all the shit we get.”

“Oh, come off it.”

“I thought it was just the superior blowjobs, but...”

“What do you mean, superior...”

“Did I just hear the word ‘blowjob’?” Freddie appears from out of the darkness, like Batman without a cape.

“Oh, now look what you’ve done, Dino, you’ve summoned him.”

“Does that sort of summoning also work when I’m all alone in bed at night...” Dino asks speculatively.

“Darling, if it were that easy, I’d never get a proper night’s sleep.”

Dino accepts the turn-down gracefully. It’s not personal. Boyish 5’5” Italian guys are just not Freddie’s thing.

“Anyway, I don’t believe it”, Roger says.

“What?”

“This idea that men give better blowjobs. It must be a myth.” He thinks back to the girl from last night. There is nothing he can think of to improve her performance. “I mean, they probably have bigger mouths. But I don’t see how...”

“They just know what feels good”, Dino says. “Women are always afraid to grip you too hard or...”

“Wait. Stop.” Roger holds up a hand and takes a few seconds to think through the implications. “You... you had sex with women?” Dino is as flamboyantly and openly gay as anyone he knows. And Roger’s in showbiz.

Dino rolls his eyes. “I grew up in a Catholic family in the 50’s. Believe me, I tried very hard not to be gay.”

“But you are. So you’re biased against women.”

“Hm, and you are a perfectly objective observer, are you, straightie?”

Roger can’t keep his eyes from travelling to Freddie. He has sampled both sides of the pond extensively, but he doesn’t say anything. Best not draw his sexual history into this. “It doesn’t make sense anyway. It’s like saying only a woman can truly satisfy another woman.”

Dino grins. “You should talk to Suki about that.”

Roger grimaces. They managed to stay civilized on the beach, but he really doesn’t want to discuss sex with a radical lesbian feminist type. “Let’s not. But I can tell you this.” He sits up and pauses a bit for effect. “One of my lesbian ex-girlfriends actually told me I was the best she’s ever had.”
Two pairs of disbelieving eyes stare at him.

“Hang on,” Dino says, a slow smile spreading over his face. He turns to Freddie. “Did he just say he eats pussy better than a lesbian?”

Freddie just shrugs and sighs, like there’s nothing he can do.

“It’s true! She told me!”

“You must talk to Suki about this. And Melissa. Oh my god.” Dino starts looking around for them, like he can’t wait to tell them.

Freddie pats his forearm to calm him down. “Let him live, please. We need our drummer.” Then he leans back in his chair. “And anyway, you missed the best part.”

“What part?”

“The part where he admitted that more than one of his exes is now a lesbian.” Freddie looks so unbearably smug Roger wants to wipe that right off his face. “Quite suggestive isn’t it?” He raises his eyebrows and sips daintily from his Manhattan.

“They’ve always been Lesbians, you wanker! It’s not like I turned them into ones.”

“Yes”, Freddie says drily to Dino. “He really does think of himself as the protagonist of one of those porn movies. You know, the ones where there’s a planet full of women, or some remote mythic tribe who have never seen a man, and then they worship him and his mighty penis.”

“Oh, shut up.” It’s hardly his fault if art sometimes imitates life.

“Look.” Dino says when he has finally come down from all the lesbian hilarity. “Thing is, men are sluts, right?”

“…right?”

“And they don’t care if you think they are. Whereas women do. Most at least.”

Roger waits, but there is nothing else forthcoming. “So?”

“So men will either suck your cock like it’s the best thing on earth, or they just won’t do it at all.”

Freddie nods. “No, ‘well, he helped with the dishes so I guess I owe him one’-kind of thing.”

“But that sounds more like the difference between having a long-term-partner vs. a one night stand.”

“It isn’t”, Dino says.

Freddie just shrugs. “I wouldn’t know”, he says raising his eyebrows. “I never do the dishes.”

+++ When Roger got up that morning, he thought he’d never want to see the inside of a club (or the business end of a whiskey bottle) ever again. When they head out of the club by 3 am, he just never wants to stop.

“Where now”, he asks Freddie. They’ve lost the others to the dance floor, and while Roger’s up for
a lot, grinding with hundreds of half-naked guys to disco music is one step too far. He does a few boxing steps and punches while they wait for their car to pull up. He feels like he’s on coke, except he hasn’t had any.

“We can have Ron drive us to Times Square, see if we can score another lap dance for you.”

That is tempting. All that talk about sex and blowjobs has certainly got him riled up. But... “Nah, come on. This is Manhattan! There’s gotta be something more exciting than titty bars.”

“I’m afraid I exhausted my knowledge of New York's heterosexual special offerings last night.” He gives Roger a look that’s half disdainful, half impressed. “I had forgotten just how voracious you can be.

“Like that place Ed mentioned. The Loo? What about that?”

Freddie’s eyebrows creep up under his hairline. “Roger Meddows Taylor, are you discovering your kinky side?”

Roger waves that aside. He’s not into having aliens burst out of his chest either, but he can still have fun watching it happen to other people on screen. “Come on”, he says, drumming on his thighs nervously, “I want an adventure!”

Freddie purses his lips, considers him for a long moment. His eyes flicker to the black limousine that has pulled up beside them. “You want an adventure?”

“Hell yeah!”

Freddie nods slowly. “Alright, then. As you wish.” He opens the car door and ushers Roger inside. “6 St. Marks Place.”

Chapter End Notes

Actually, the video for Crazy Little Thing was filmed on the 22nd, but obviously Freddie insisted to shoot it two days earlier so he could have his weekend with Roger ;)

The movie mentioned is Last Tango in Paris. The rape scene is horrific, and as the actress later revealed she wasn’t fully briefed about what was going to happen in advance. So yeah. Bertolucci was a dick.

So, Roger gets kind of confused by the whole concept of lesbianism. But then, I assume quite a few lesbians (not to mention straight men) also get confused by the concept of Roger Taylor, so it all evens out.

Apologies to the inhabitants of Omaha, Nebraska. I'm sure it's a lovely city.
The address is a nondescript brick building squeezed in between other houses just like it. The thing that sets it apart is the giant neon sign stretching across three floors: a stylized, comic-strip like depiction of a man in an old-fashioned bathing suit diving from a board into a splash of water at the bottom, framing the giant letters: St Marks Baths.

A bathhouse. Holy shit.

After a brief look at Freddie, an attendant opens the metal entrance doors and waves them inside. Freddie turns on the doorstep, waiting for Roger to follow him. Roger hesitates just a second, then he sets his face in an expression that he hopes looks unfazed and walks through the door. He’s been to the back rooms of the wildest leather clubs New York has to offer. How much worse can it be?

Whatever he expected, it’s not a roomy and practical lounge area, much like that of a middle class hotel, complete with armchairs, newspapers and a reception desk. A little less well lit, maybe. They are handed a set of keys and towels and directed down a hallway into a dressing room with rows of lockers to each side.

There are showers at the far end, and under the showers a Fire Island-style hunk lazily and thoroughly soaping up his cock.

Okay.

Freddie opens a locker and reaches for the hem of his shirt. Then he stops and half turns towards Roger. “Ron’s still waiting outside”, he says. He does that thing where he seems to be looking down on Roger, although he’s almost two inches smaller. “If you’d rather call it a night.”

No way in hell is going to back down now.

“Hm”, Roger says and toes off his sneakers, tossing them into the locker. “Good to know we won’t have to look for a cab when we get out of here.” He schools his features into a cool, non-committal expression. If this is some sort of game of chicken, he's going to win.

One of Freddie’s eyebrows rises a millimetre and he gives a tiny nod.

They take a brief, perfunctory shower (doing their best to ignore Schwarzenegger’s little brother wanking right next to them) and then, clad in nothing more than plain white towels around their hips, head out into the main area. There are staircases leading to the upper and lower levels and – incongruously – a diner style bar. There’s lively chatter and laughter as people chat casually with one another. When Roger thought of the tubs before – not that he spent a lot of time dwelling on the subject – he always imagined something dank and dark and completely anonymous. But this is people being social. Probably right before or after participating in an orgy.

“Okay, not what I expected”, Roger says.
Freddie shrugs and grins. “Gotta keep your strength up. Hungry?”

Fortifying himself before going venturing into the dark unknown sounds like a good idea. Besides, the after effects of the pot make themselves known. He wolfs down a sandwich and most of Freddie’s as well. Freddie has taken one poke at the soggy bread and greyish meat and ate the pickles and nothing more.

“So”, Roger says. “Upstairs or downstairs?”

Freddie considers it for a moment. “Downstairs first.”

The light gets dimmer and dimmer as they head down, the air warmer and more humid. At the bottom of the stairs, a tall young man with piercings all over his left ear comes up, his eyes lingering on Roger as he slowly walks past them. His hair is wet and drops of water slide down his neck and shoulders.

When Roger turns back, Freddie’s dark eyes are watching him, an amused smile playing around his lips. Yeah, he must love that.

Roger brushes past him into the dark corridor. “Where now?”

Freddie points at a frosted glass door just a few steps ahead. Dim shapes are moving behind it. Before he can think about it, Roger has opened the door and stepped inside.

The wet heat slaps him in the face like a hot towel. It’s difficult to breathe for a few seconds and disorienting because he can barely see through the fog. But when his system gets over the first shock, he can make out two tiers of benches along the sides of the room, not crowded, but filled with a number of men, all clad in the same white towels. The dim light and the steam blur their features, masking differences in age, race and handsomeness. Roger follows Freddie to an empty spot on the second tier and leans back against the wall. This is really not too different from the normal saunas and spas he’s been to before. He’s been expecting a full blown orgy, but most guys genuinely just seem to enjoy the humid warmth seeping into their muscles.

He’s almost relaxed by the time he sees a hand slide up Freddie’s leg and under his towel. No hesitation, no probing, just straight up going for the crown jewels. And in the same second, with equal matter-of-factness, Freddie swats the arm of the guy like an irritating fly and the hand is withdrawn.

Wow. If he thought the pick-up game in the clubs is no-frills efficient, this is that principle dialled up to ten. The idea that anyone might feel him up anytime makes Roger a little uneasy, but it’s good to know he can avert any unwelcome advances with a slap on the wrist. And of course all advances are unwelcome.

Freddie looks content to just let himself soak in the warm, moist heat of the room. He’d leans back on the bench, head fallen back against the wall, eyes closed. Droplets of sweat and steam collect on his forehead and above his collar bone, running down the lines of his face, neck and chest. Roger has rarely ever seen him be so still. Normally he’s all frantic, fidgeting energy.

They stay in the steam room long enough for Roger to notice that while it might not be the sex party he expected, there are some things going on in the more remote corners of the room. But the rule seems to be that towels stay on. It feels like there’s a real sense of etiquette, thoroughly different from anything found in Emily Post, but there nevertheless.

“Ready to move on?” Freddie stretches like cat and gets up.
Next in line is a surprisingly large pool, which is surrounded by a number of smaller whirlpools. The whirlpools are crowded with guys doing god knows what, but the pool is almost empty. Without another thought, Roger whips off his towel and jumps inside. The cool water is a shock after the heat of the steam room, and it drives up his heartbeat to a frenzy before it slowly calms down again. He swims a few laps, then comes up to wipe the water from his eyes.

Freddie is chilling at the edge of the pool, watching him. Roger swims over. “What next”, he asks.

Freddie stares for a moment, then bursts out laughing. “The unflappable Mr Taylor”, he says, shaking his head.

Roger feels like he’s passed a test. “Quite”, he grins. Then he decides to take a risk. “Do you come here often? To places like this?”

Freddie shrugs. “Sometimes.” He looks away, then thinks better of it and shakes his head. “Not as much as I used to.”

Okay, Roger thinks he can decode that. When Freddie first entered this world, it would have been immensely exciting and he’d have thrown himself into it. But public sex, dark rooms, all those things, aren’t really his thing, at least as far as Roger knows. On the other hand, bath houses are as sleazy as it gets, and Freddie really likes to play up his sleazy side. So the answer is probably closer to ‘not really, no’.

Proud at his deduction skills, Roger grins and flicks some water at Freddie’s face, which leads to Freddie shovelling the stuff at him by the handful, so he grabs Freddie by the shoulders and ducks him underwater and Freddie of course pulls him down with him and they’re both very naked and at a bloody gay sauna and Roger almost drowns as he tries to disentangle himself from all those limbs and skin and...

He coughs so hard when he comes up that a worried attendant in white shorts jogs over to him to make sure he’s alright. “Fine”, he wheezes, waving the man away. Ugh, chlorine water tastes revolting. And he doesn’t want to know what else might be in there.

Roger pulls himself out of the water and wraps the towel around himself. He wants to get out of here, but he can’t run away now, not when he’s already challenged Freddie to go on. “Any chance to get a Vodka Tonic in here?”

There are Vodka Tonics at the bar. They don’t talk, but the alcohol loosens Roger up a bit. He orders another one, downs it as fast as he can manage and waits for the familiar warmth to spread through him. He’ll explore the last, dark corner of this bloody place, get the full picture of it, and then he’ll regale his friends with tales of his outrageous exploits until they clamp down their hands over their ears.

He takes a deep breath and leans back in his chair. “Upstairs”, he says.

Freddie holds out an arm in the direction of the staircase. “After you.”

The staircase leads to a long corridor, from which doors lead off on both sides every few yards. It’s not as hot in here as downstairs, but still warm enough to be comfortable in a towel. The lights are an orangey glint, the floor and walls painted dark. The first few doors are shut, but the next one is open. Two guys standing arm in arm block the door, but over their shoulders Roger can see another two men inside, fucking on a narrow cot.

“Everyone can just watch?”
Freddie shrugs. “If they leave the door open, sure.”

The next open door they pass, a naked man is lying face down on the cot, an array of sex toys arranged on the table next to him. But wait. Those are not your garden variety sex toys. Or rather, they are.

“Are those... vegetables?”

Freddie bites his lips to suppress his laughter. He tugs Roger aside a bit. “You’re a lucky one, Rog.” He peeks into the room again. “That’s the Vegetable Man. He’s legendary, but I never got to see him in the flesh.”

“So he... he has a thing for aubergines and stuff?”

“Hmm. Look, see that note on the table? Joe told me it says ‘Do what you want.’ So...”

“So I could just walk in there and, and what? Shove a carrot up his arse?” He’s still trying to wrap his head around it.

“Oh, he’d love that.” Freddie looks at him expectantly and just for a second Roger has the impulse to do it, just to see if he really can, if the guy actually means it. The idea of sodomizing a chubby naked man with a phallic piece of produce does absolutely nothing for him. But there is that thrill at the sheer wrongness of the situation. Someone offering himself up like that. Getting handed a free card to pleasure or hurt or violate someone to his heart’s content, no small-talk, no excuses. Just pure fucking, stripped of all pretensions.

Roger unglues his eyes from the bizarre sight and moves further along the corridor. “Come on.”

“You know, the only thing unusual about him is his choice of, er, tools. If they lie face down, it means they want to get fucked, face up, they’re looking for someone to fuck. If you see someone you like, you go in, and if they don’t protest... off you go.”

The next open door is a bit different, as it leads into a larger, darker room with armchairs and mattresses on the floor and porn playing on a screen. Some country farm boy scene with two impossibly sculpted cowboys 69-ing like it’s their last day on earth. The vodka tonics and the steam room and the pot and the night before are all catching up on him and Roger leans against the door frame to clear his dizzy head. He closes his eyes and for the first time he truly takes in the sounds and the smell of the place. Doors being closed and locked, poppers, chairs creaking, the moaning and grunting of the actors on screen and the patrons on the floor, musky sweat, a low, rhythmic pounding from somewhere next door, his own harsh breaths, a slap of a hand against naked flesh...

...and he’s only wearing a tiny towel and he now has an erection. In a gay bath house where something like that is like an open invitation, like laying yourself down on a bunk with a ten-inch courgette next to you and leaving the door open.

He turns his head to suggest they call it a night, and Freddie’s eyes snap back up at his face and then away at the wall. Oh fuck.

He turns his body, hunching over a little to make things a bit less obvious (although it’s all fucking useless because he’s standing there in a fucking towel and while he might have been exaggerating with the stripper, it’s still really fucking obvious) and crosses his arms. If he’s lucky, they’ll show something really disgusting next, so the problem will just wilt away.

Freddie clears his throat. “I’ll head back down”, he says tactfully, keeping his eyes fixed to the wall.
“No it’s... fine.” Roger clenches teeth. This is fucking embarrassing, but if Freddie thinks he can fuck off and leave him along with a horde of carrot-fucking sex maniacs, he’s badly mistaken. “Let’s just... let’s just finish the tour and then we can get out of here.” Maybe in the next room there’ll be someone sodomizing a goat, or something equally boner killing.

But no. In the next room, there’s just a really fit guy, kneeling next to an armchair, looking up them from under his dark fringe.

Despite himself, Roger looks at Freddie questioningly.

“Blowjob”, he says, and Roger knows, he just knows that they are both thinking the exact same thing. If you ever want that blowjob question answered once and for all...

He’s not considering it.

Roger is up for a lot, but getting a blowjob from some stranger in a bath house... of course, he has got his fair share of blowjobs from strangers in all sorts of places, in fact he’s done a hell of a lot more than just getting blowjobs, but... what was his point again? Right, it’s a guy stranger, that’s the point. He’s come here as a tourist, to do a bit of sightseeing before heading home and getting off to some run-of-the-mill porn in his hotel room.

Besides if he does go in there and lets this guy go to town on him – which he’s not going to do – his cock is going to lose all interest once it realizes it’s a bloke and that would be really embarrassing. Of course that would also solve the problem of him running around with a hard-on. And it’s not like he’s ever going to see the guy again, so what does he care what he thinks. He could always blame the booze.

Theoretically. If he were actually considering it, which he’s not.

“Does he expect a quid-pro-quo”, he whispers to Freddie.

“No. He might ask, but it’s not obligatory.”

Okay, so he can check that point off the contra list. Which isn’t so much a list but a warning light flashing the words ‘It’s a bloke for fuck’s sake’ at him. Also, it’s batteries seem to run out.

Oh god, he’s going to do it, isn’t he?

He’s hard and he’s horny and that guy is just there and it’s something he’s never done before and... it’s one of those things where he knows it’s a very, very, bad idea, but it’s also very, very exciting. Like speedball. Or fucking that mob boss’s wife. Or betting that he can drive faster in reverse than Brian the right way round. Or...

“Coming in or what?” Looks like guy’s got enough of being stared at.

He does it. He actually takes step inside that bloody mood-lit sex-cabin and sits down in that arm chair and its washable vinyl cover.

He doesn’t dare look up at Freddie, who's still standing frozen in the doorway. It’s now that he realizes he hasn’t closed the bloody door behind him. But before he can do anything about it, a pair of big green eyes come into view, looking up at him from under long lashes.

He puts one hand on Roger’s thigh, just at the edge of the towels and quirks one eyebrow. Alright?

And despite the absurdity of the situation and the booze and the vegetable man and the fucking
open door, his erection is still there, mistaking his pumping heart and the sweat pooling on his forehead for arousal. He nods.

Two things happen at the same time. The towel is flicked aside and the door softly starts closing.

“No.”

The guy freezes in his tracks, but Roger hardly notices him. His heart is in his throat as he looks up to Freddie in the doorway. Roger bites down on his tongue, because he is not going to say the words ‘don’t leave me alone’ out loud, he isn’t even going to think them.

Very slowly, carefully like he’s treading on ice, Freddie takes a step inside and closes the door behind him.

Instantly, the room is 20 degrees warmer and only half as big and Roger is sitting there on display with a fucking boner, waiting to be blown by a bloke in front of his best friend. All because the wanted an adventure.

He flinches as a warm hand lands on his. “You okay?” The guy is still looking up at him, a worried crease on his forehead. He’s young, early twenties, a college student maybe.

“Yeah. Fine.”

The shadows on his face deepen and for one surreal moment, Roger thinks he’s about to pass out. But then he sees Freddie, leaning against the door and dimming the light down to a low glow. Apart from that, he doesn’t move.

The hand on his thigh starts stroking him with long, soothing movements, forcing Roger’s gaze back down. “I’m Mikey”, the guy says, smiling encouragingly.

“Roger”, he says automatically, before he can even think of using an alias. Mikey is still stroking him like he’s calming spooked horse. Roger is not going be patronized by a bloody college student. “Get on with it, will you”, he grumbles.

“Yes, sir”, Mikey replies with a cheeky grin that really should have earned him a slap. Who knows, he might even like it. Oh Jesus Christ, where the fuck is that coming from?

Mikey wraps one firm hand around his cock and Roger lets himself sink back into the chair, squeezing his eyes shut, trying not to think about just what the fuck he’s doing here.

Just feel it. Imagine it’s that girl from last night, just the two of you, in the back of the car.

The lips aren’t sticky with lipstick, his brain just has time to note before it sputters to a halt. It’s like he’s held his breath for a year and he’s dizzy with the first gasp of oxygen, filling him, flooding him. When he finally comes back to his senses, he finds his hands digging into the man’s scalp, his shoulder, and forces himself to relax them.

It’s good. It’s so bloody good that this will be over faster than it started if he doesn’t watch out.

Mikey doesn’t seem to possess a gag reflex or a need for oxygen, but he has an almost limitless supply of little flicks and twists and flutters of his tongue that have Roger gasping. But it’s more than just that. Roger has received some expertly executed, technically superior blowjobs before. But he’s never had someone with that kind of technical skill going at it with so much raw enthusiasm. It’s like he’s actually enjoying himself, like there’s nothing else he’s rather be doing than kneel in this room, sucking off a total stranger. He doesn’t use his skills to get Roger off as
quickly as possible, but actively draws it out, keeps him from coming just in time, only to start up again after a brief cooling-off period.

Roger keeps his eyes screwed firmly shut, the better to allow his fantasy girl to take shape, but also so he won’t accidentally look up. Is Freddie watching him? Is he watching Mikey? Is he averting his eyes, to give them privacy, or is he...

When Mikey pulls him back from the brink yet again, Roger opens his eyes and stares down at him, swearing at him under his breath. (Don’t look up, don’t look up, don’t even think about looking up). Mikey puts his forehead against his thigh, grinning, and holy shit, he’s actually stroking himself under his towel. Roger screws his eyes shut and lets his head fall back, panting.

Why, oh why, has he looked. There is absolutely no way he’ll be able to conjure up the image of some girl now. Time to put an end to this. He puts one hand back to the Mikey’s head. “Come on, now”, he said.

“Sure? Because I could go keep this up for hours”, Mikey whispers right against his balls, almost sending Roger flying out of his skin.

Roger twists his fingers into his hair and pulls, just a little. “Do it.”

He does. Roger holds on to whatever he can grasp as his orgasm sweeps through him, sinks back into his seat.

He puts his hands over his face and just sits there until he gets his breath back. He does not want to get up. He does not want to open eyes. “Fuck”, he whispers.

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Freddie doesn’t say anything during the ride back to the hotel. Or at breakfast. Or on the way to the airport.

Roger makes sure that he is busy reading a newspaper, a book or writing into his notebook at all times. And when Freddie sends as much as an inquisitive look in his direction, he meets him with a glare of death. He’s wearing sun glasses so Freddie’s not likely to see it, but he’ll feel it.

It works until they’re on the plane and Freddie had his first drink. He waits until the stewardess has gone away, then leans over to Roger, who pretends to have fallen asleep.

“You don’t have to say anything. Just a quick thumbs up or down.”

“Fuck off”, he grumbles.

“Come on.”

Roger clenches his jaw and wills Freddie to just fuck off.

“I mean it was obvious you liked it on some level, but...”

Roger whirls around. “Shut up!” The heads of other passengers turn, so he tamps his voice down to a hiss “Just shut up about it.”

“Touchy.”

God, the guy can be such a total prat. “It was a mistake, okay? A slip-up. Too much stuff, not enough sleep. Leave. It. The fuck. Alone.”
Freddie stares at him defiantly, like he’s never going to shut up about it, in fact he’s going to tell the whole bloody first class section about it right now. But then he clenches his jaw and his eyes harden. He nods slowly. “I see”, he says.

Then he settles back in his seat and doesn’t say another word to him.

Which is just what Roger wants.

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They don’t see each other for two weeks, but Roger does receive a ticket for the Royal Ballet in early October. And although Freddie can be a prat, Roger is not going to miss his big day. When they meet up back stage, all hard feelings seem forgotten. Roger is greeted with a hug and a glass of champagne and a gushing Freddie who is completely in his element: surrounded by beautiful ballet dancers and wardrobe people fussing over his costume and a dressing room filled with chintz and flowers.

The choreographers solved the problem of having to integrate someone whose main exercise regime is of the horizontal variety among 20-year old, professional dancers all in their smooth-skinned muscular, sinewy glory by having them carry Freddie around most of the time. It’s a bit obvious, but it works none-the-less, because Freddie sings and poses his little heart out and what he lacks in athleticism, he makes up for with sheer balls. Because walking up on that stage in a glittery leotard to perform for a crowd that might not even know who he is, is something Roger wouldn't have done in a million years.

The night breaks every precious fund-raising record the Royal Ballet has ever seen. It also brings a notable addition to Queen’s ever growing entourage.

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“Not available? What do you mean, not available?”

“I mean he can’t go on tour with us this time”, Paul explains patiently for the fourth time.

The Crazy tour is just about to start – a kind of back to the roots approach: Britain only, smaller venues – a breath of fresh air before its back to the studio for them.

“Unacceptable.”

“Freddie, his wife has just had a baby!”

“That was weeks ago!”

“Yeah, believe it or not, babies stick around longer that just a few weeks.”

Roger, John and Brian have given up all pretense of working on the setlist and watch the spectacle with open amusement. Dane Clark, their master of the wardrobe, has resigned and taken up a position at the Royal Opera to be with his family.

Freddie kicks a chair. "He's the only one who does my hair properly.”

“I'm sure we've found a suitable replacement.”

A tall, broad man with a moustache waves shyly from the doorway. It’s obvious he’d rather be anywhere else right now.
“That’s Peter, Peter Freestone, he’s done your wardrobe at the Ballet. Remember him?”

“No.” Freddie’s attention is fixed on Paul, as if he might make Dane reappear if Freddie just acts petulantly enough.

The rest of the band wave at the poor bloke. Dane’s replacement is of course going to be responsible for all their costumes, but in practice that means ninety percent of his time will be dedicated catering to Freddie whims.

“You quite liked him. We all went out together that night, remember?”

“Maybe, maybe.”

That is as much consent as Paul is likely to get from Freddie, and he wisely leaves it at that.

The tour gets off on bumpy start in Ireland (first gig cancelled, then delays because of technical problems). They decide not to play God Save the Queen as their outro, a decision none of them are particularly happy with (especially Freddie who bristles at such “political bullshit”), but at least this saves their security guys from having to break up any fist fights. That’s how their thinking goes, but then some in the audience decides to sing the anthem anyway, so there are fist fights all the same.

Their new wardrobe man must have done an acceptable job by Freddie’s hair, as their lead singer quickly claims him as his personal lackey. The fact that Peter (Phoebe, as Freddie for no discernible reason takes to calling him) is not just openly gay but also well-mannered and all-suffering must have endeared him. Reportedly, he spends a whole week tracking down the perfect kind of shiny red PVC pants for Freddie without so much as a single complaint. Luckily for all involved, the rest of the band’s wardrobe requests consist mostly of t-shirts, generic sweat bands and other, easily procured items. Apart from Freddie, none of them require a mid-show hair fix either.

It shapes up to be a really good tour. Freddie’s voice is in phenomenal shape. They should have recorded Live Killers here, Roger thinks more than once. Crazy Little Thing goes to #2 within the first week of shows, beaten to the top spot only by those wankers Dr. Hook, whoever they are.

So it's all fine. Just four chaps having fun, making music and drinking too much Vodka. They don’t mention New York, and all is well.

Until Glasgow.

Chapter End Notes

Here’s a topical quote from “The Joy of Gay Sex”: “It’s difficult to say how it happened, exactly, but the United States has become the blow-job capital of the world: Men from all over the world vacation here, often travelling across the country to experience the superb technical prowess of American cocksuckers.”

And here’s a pic of the Baths:
Also: Hello Phoebe!
Glasgow, 1 December 1979

Roger misses the out cue. Again. He curses at himself.

He’s playing on autopilot. Problem is, autopilot doesn’t work for live shows when they’re all playing off each other. It requires focus, presence, flow. But tonight, his mind just won’t concentrate on the here and now. It always turns back to last night.

They’d been out together, just him, Freddie, Peter and Paul at a back-alley bar. It’s the first time they’ve done this on this tour – for the first time in two years, Roger has no reason to stay away from the usual distractions on the road, and he takes full advantage of that. But he doesn’t want it to look like he’s having a problem with dropping by a gay bar occasionally. First of all because he doesn’t, but also because it would somehow make that thing that happened in New York seem more important than it is.

Luckily, Paul sets his eyes on one of the barkeepers and spends most of the night at the bar trying to chat him up. Peter – Phoebe, as Freddie always corrects him – has been up since dawn the last couple of days and can barely keep his eyes open, so they send him home after one beer.

The bar is really low-key, especially compared to the US. The only real difference to a normal pub is that it’s not mostly men, but only men. And the tiny dance-floor at the back, where the occasional slow dancing takes place.

With Paul set on his own game, there is no one to recruit new people (and possible dates for Freddie), so they keep to themselves. But after a few drinks, any residual awkwardness between them melts away. It feels good, hanging out with Freddie again. It’s the first time in two months they’ve done this. It’s amazing how much you can miss something without realizing it.

Freddie is chatty and relaxed after a good show, so much so that he doesn’t even throw a fit over the sub-par wine. The fact that Roger steers the conversation towards the Royal Ballet fund raiser must have helped: For a normal bloke like Roger, playing Hyde Park in front of hundreds of thousands of people or Madison Square Garden in New York are boyhood dreams come true. For Freddie, it’s prancing around with a real life ballet troupe – to the tune of his own #1 hit, of course.

They just ordered a second bottle when the music dies down and the lights flash twice before they go out. Roger thinks it’s a power outage, but when everyone jumps up and the yelling starts, he knows something’s wrong.

A strong hand grabs him by the wrist and pulls him out of his seat. Roger rears back. “What the hell...?”

“Shut up and follow me. Both of you.” It’s Paul.

They stumble through the darkened room, the mass of people. Roger cracks his shin against a chair so hard he sees stars.

“Got anything on you?”

“No.” Is this a drugs bust? In a pub where he hasn’t seen so much as a joint being passed around? “What’s going on?”
They’re going to raid this thing. Come on!

They stumble through the darkness, through one door and then the second one, up a flight of stairs and then out into the cool night air. A couple of other patrons are spilling out of the door behind them.

“How do you know how to get out so quickly?” For all that he annoys the crap out of Roger sometimes, that was impressive.

Paul rolls his eyes. “That’s my job.”
He points left. “The car is just around the corner. We’ll...”

Just then, the silhouettes of six uniformed police men walking side by side appear from that side of the street. Freddie’s face does a perfect “Oh shit”-expression.

Paul shoves them in the direction of a narrow alley across the street. “I’ll keep them. Go!”

They take off running amid a flurry of people doing the same thing, the whistles of the police men calling out behind them. Freddie’s still fit from his ballet training, so he’s soon gained a few meters on Roger. When Roger turns the next corner, Freddie’s gone. Roger slows down and looks around, trying to guess in which direction Freddie might have gone.

And then he sees the police man barrelling around the corner.

Okay. It’s not like he’s never been arrested before. In fact, getting arrested as such doesn’t worry him so much, but the thought of what the papers might make out of the fact that he was arrested in a raid on a bar for gay men... He’s about to turn on his heel and make a run for it (or punch the policeman squarely in the face, counting on the element of surprise, and then make a run for it. He’ll decide that spontaneously) when the guy slows down to a jog and calls out: “Seen any queers?”

“Er.” Roger tries to pretend like he wasn’t just about to bolt like a frightened deer and goes into his best ‘just a straight bloke home from his very straight pub’-mode. “Can’t say I did”, he says, but then he thinks of something even cleverer. “Or wait. I think saw two guys running and shouting over there just a minute ago”, he says, pointing in the opposite direction of where he wants to go. “Looked a bit...” He keeps his wrists dangling and immediately feels awful for it.

The police man nods and takes off in the direction Roger’s shown.

Roger leans against a wall and takes off in the direction Roger’s shown.

Roger’s head whips around. Freddie is coming out of the very street he sent the police man into. And Freddie looks about as straight as a circle.

“Fuck, are you okay?” He looks okay.
Freddie waves him off. “I was hiding in a doorway, waiting for you to hurry up. He ran right past me.”

“What the fuck was that?” Roger lights a cigarette as they amble back in the direction of the hotel. Wordlessly, Freddie holds out his hand and Roger hands the cigarette to him. “A drug’s bust?”
Freddie looks at him like he’s just asked the stupidest question. “It was a raid.”

“Why would they raid a pub? Wasn’t it licensed or something?”

“Roger, my dear.” Freddie stops so he can look at him. “Gay sex is illegal in Scotland. So they still raid the bars if they suspect mischief in the men’s rooms.”

“I thought that crap was all done away with in the 60s or something.”

Freddie gives him his haughtiest look. “It might behoove you to pick up a newspaper every now and then, Roger Taylor.”

“Would it now.” As if Freddie reads the papers. If anything, he gets Paul to read them and then tell him the interesting bits.

“Oh yes. Very important to keep up with the world.” Freddie keeps up the serious face for a minute longer, then the giggles bubble out of him like champagne out of a shaken bottle. It’s intoxicating, infectious, and soon Roger is doubling over as well.

The rest of the way back to the hotel is a bit of a blur. It consists mainly of Freddie randomly stopping people and asking them if they’ve seen any queers and Roger pulling him along, wheezing with laughter and feeling very, very drunk. They march into lobby of the hotel like conquering heroes, and Freddie – for some reason – launches into a full throated rendition of Loch Lomond. Roger hushes him out of a vague sense of guilt for anyone trying to catch a wink of sleep.

“Ohhhh, scared the police will find us”, Freddie asks.

“No”, Roger whispers and leans closer and waves in the direction of the front desk. “But I think there are some queers over there.”

“No!” Freddie looks scandalized.

“Yes!”

“In my hotel?!”

The trapse around the lobby like Laurel and Hardy pretending to be secret service agents, while the bewildered receptionist pretends not to notice anything odd. Roger pretends to clear the air with a drawn gun held out before he waves at Freddie to follow him out of the elevator.

The sound of a door opening behind them has Roger act on instinct. He pulls the both of them into a shadowed recess. “Shhh”, he whispers, hoping desperately to quell Freddie’s hysterical giggling but only winding himself up.

It’s not like there’s any actual reason to hide. No one gives a damn when they come home from a night out. But he’s so caught up in this little game, feeling like he is 15 again and secretly smoking behind the school gym, always prepared to duck and run when the teacher alarm is sounded.

Footsteps come closer and Freddie claps a hand over his own mouth to keep himself quiet. It’s such a precious sight that Roger has to turn away, pressing his forehead against the blessedly cool wall, just trying to breathe.

The key turns in a door a few meters down the hall, which is a blessing since they are both making such a spectacle of themselves that a deaf man couldn’t have passed them by without noticing.
Slowly, very slowly the giggle fit subsides. Roger turns and with his back to the wall slides down until he’s sitting on the floor. His whole body is weak and hot and shivery, as if a fever has broken. Adrenaline, endorphin, lack of oxygen, it rattles off in the back of his brain, half remembered bits from his biology degree rising to the surface.

A hand on his shoulder. “You all right, darling?”

Freddie is crouching next to him. He’s flushed and out of breath and looks like he’s twenty again, a skinny, perpetually broke nutter who tells everyone he’s going to be a star some day. Roger is so bloody fond of him his heart is going to burst.

And then... Roger isn’t sure what exactly happens then. But Freddie’s deep dark eyes dip down to Roger’s lips, just for a second, and a surge goes through his body and his own gaze also drops, but it doesn’t come up again. It’s like he’s being run by an automatic programme, autonomous of higher thought, something that urges him forward until their lips are pressed together. Freddie makes a low, soft noise and then there are hands in Roger’s hair and a hot slick tongue in his mouth and he falls forward into that warmth, that heat.

Stop.

Stop!

He rears back, panting. Freddie is half sitting, half leaning against the wall, wide eyed, hands held up next to him. Did Roger say that out loud?

Roger stumbles to his feet. “I...” He has to say something just for the sake of saying something but nothing else is forthcoming. Freddie is getting up on his knees, and the look on his face isn’t shock or anger or desire, but concern. Roger can’t handle concern, can’t handle it right now.

“All Night”, he blurs out and turns in the direction of what he hopes will be his room, but he’d have walked anywhere as long as it gets him away.

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John’s bass line is teetering. Brian throws him confused looks. Fuck. Fuckity fuck. Roger throws in a cymbal roll to mask the confusion. It’s “I’m in love with my car”, the one live song where he’s singing the lead and he has no idea which verse they’re on. He’s about to just launch into the chorus to get them all back on the same page when Freddie swoops in.

“All I hear is your gear...”, he sings, trying to make his voice sound a little bit like Roger’s husky tenor. “...my hand’s on your...”

“...grease gun”, Roger falls in, “oh, it’s like a disease son.”

And they are back. The audience doesn’t take it hard on them. They sing their hearts out, even singing along to Brian’s guitar solo during Spread Your Wings. Roger manages to keep it together well enough to get through their set, but not much more.

This can’t go on, he decides. This has got to stop.
Please listen to Roger’s complete blank on I’m In Love With My Car. It’s hilarious (and very cute when Freddie comes in to save him).

Okay, that raid. I haven’t been able to find out if and to what degree gay bars in Scotland/Glasgow were being raided at the time. Wikipedia tells me that bathhouses were regularly raided well into the 80s in Britain, when gay sex (in private) had already been legalised, so I didn’t find the idea too outlandish.

Gay sex had been legalized in Wales and England in 1967 (consensual, private acts between men older than 21), but Scotland only followed in 1981 and Northern Ireland in 1982)
Liverpool, 7 December 1979

“Get me some porn.”

Crystal isn’t taken aback by the request. He’s had worse. “Anything in particular?”

“I really don’t care.” Roger throws himself onto the bed and presses his hands into his eyes.

“Righto.”

“Something with girls”, Roger shouts after him, belatedly. The last thing he needs is Crystal trying be funny.

“You know, Rog, I can get you an actual girl, too.”

God no. The last thing he wants to deal with right now is a real, living, breathing person. “I just wanna look at some tits, okay?” When Crystal doesn’t immediately move, Roger punches his pillow. “What are you fucking waiting for? Want me to draw you a bloody picture?”

Recognizing an emergency when he sees one, it takes him only half an hour to return with a couple of mags. Lurid, straight to the point, no false pretences, top notch spank bank material. The guy deserves a fucking pay raise.

It’s time Roger stops acting like a love sick school girl. He isn't going to go out with Freddie anymore, obviously, but it isn’t like he can just avoid him the whole time either, they’re on a fucking tour. So he has to find a way to watch him prance around on stage half naked without losing the rest of his fucking sanity.

He flips through the mag until he finds a nice upskirt shot of a pouty redhead with a very convincing come-hither look and shoves a hand down his pants. It will be a much needed cleanse. So much pent up energy and frustration and nowhere to go because all his stupid brain can focus on is one ill-conceived, drunk, late night whatever with his best friend.

Tits. Just focus on her fucking tits and... Yes, that’s better. He gets into it, his derailed thoughts sliding back into the old familiar groove. This. This is what he likes. This is what works for him.

He makes a complete mess of the mag, but it’s done its job. His mind is empty. His body is satisfied.

Hopefully, he can go on with his life now.

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Two hours later

“I’m not gay”, Roger proclaims.

“That’s very good, dear.” Freddie peers left and right down the – mercifully empty – hallway, then pulls Roger inside and closes the door. “But maybe not something half of Liverpool needs to know?”

Freddie is still in his clubbing clothes: leather pants and a white t-shirt. He must have just come in, as the sweat on his neck hasn’t dried yet. His hair is curling up at the ends, escaping the confines of gel and spray as it always does towards the end of a night.
Roger’s eyes keep sliding down to the notch over Freddie’s collar bone that just shows over the neckline of his shirt. It makes him want to kick something.

He can’t go on like this. It’s like a dam has broken and he’s reliving puberty, except this time with an added sexual identity crisis delivered free of charge. “Well I’m not.” He says it again, because really, what else can he say?

“Alright. I know.”

“Yeah so. Just so you don’t think...” Roger grinds his teeth and starts pacing. “Just so you don’t... you know.”

Freddie looks like he hasn’t the faintest what Roger is going on about, but he nods gamely.

Roger stops and drops his face into his hands. He shouldn’t have done this sober. God, what is he even doing here? He had to come over and say something, because the alternative is exploding with frustration, but there really isn’t anything Freddie of all people can do about it, is there?

“Would it help you if you punched me?”

“What?”

“Isn't that the traditional thing to do? After an unwelcome..." 

“No, you fucking moron, I do not want to fucking punch you.” Roger has no idea if Freddie is serious or not, but that much has to be made clear. “And besides, you didn’t...” He shakes his head. “No, let’s not go back there, let’s just... look. Your my...” Out with it. “Your my best friend, okay? And I want us to hang out and go out and talk and do shit together and everything not be fucking weird. So.” He takes a deep breath. “Can we, can we just do that, yes?”

“I’d very much like to do that, yes”, Freddie says, voice quiet.

“Good. Okay.” Roger is breathing hard, like he’s just run a marathon. God, this is difficult. He has the weird impulse to shake Freddie’s hand or something. Instead, he turns towards the door.

“Am I?”

“Huh?” He turns his head to look at Freddie.

“Am I your. Best friend?”

Roger frowns. He might not have said it before, but clearly Freddie must know? “Of course you are.”

A brief, brilliant smile flashes over Freddie’s face. Then he bites his lips and nods. “Good night, Rog.”

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Things get easier after that. Not quite back to normal, but almost. Sometimes Freddie hesitates minutely before slinging an arm over his shoulder or giving a mock-flirty reply, but they are pulling through. They’ve known each other for ten years. Another ten years and neither of them would even remember that little blip.

Of course, just as they are about to hit their stride again, Freddie decides to pick up one absolute toser of a boyfriend. A grinning, bragging motorcycle courier who is so full of himself he can
barely hold up a conversation that doesn’t revolve around him, his friends, his bizep or his newly acquired famous boyfriend.

Roger develops the habit of going off for a smoke whenever Tony appears. The guy is murder on his health.

However, there’s this nagging suspicion in the back of Roger’s mind, that maybe, maybe, he’s not being completely objective about this.

“John, I need a reality check.”

It’s after one of their smallest shows in London, a tiny pub with the bar just feet from the stage. The crowd had been completely nuts.

John grins into his beer. “No, they won’t develop light sabres in your life time.”

“Of course they will”, Roger says matter of factly. Brian said so and Brian is certified smart, not just clever with gear and stuff. “But that’s not what I wanted to ask you about.”

“Shoot.”

“Tony. Freddie’s... you know.”

“Boy toy?”

“Ugh, I hate you.” Roger grimaces. “But he’s an arsehole, right?”

John shrugs. “Better than that last one anyway.”

Yes, the one thing he had to grant Tony was that he doesn’t seem violent.

“But Tony’s a bit of tosser”, John adds. “The guys say he’s very generous... with Freddie’s powder.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Always as a gaggle of his ‘friends’ tagging along with rolled up bills at the ready, and not for paying. Wonder how long Freddie will tolerate that.”

“He likes to be generous.”

“I think he has his limits.” John leans back in his chair and taxes Roger. “Why are you asking me about Tony?”

“Guy’s a fucking drag”, Roger says, non-chalantly. ‘Because I’m worried I might just be jealous’ is not going to cross his lips. “Freddie used to be fun to go out it, but with this guy along? It’s the fucking Tony-show all night long. I just don’t get how Freddie stands it.”

“Maybe he likes not being in the spotlight for once”, John says. “Or maybe the guy's just hung like a horse.”

Roger throws a coaster at him. A beer soaked coaster.
The end of tour party takes place in Freddie’s apartment in Stafford Terrace. Tony is there, of course, having been unceremoniously moved into his flat by Freddie like another piece of furniture. But there are enough genuinely nice people around to make it bearable.

Roger’s wandering along the buffet, wondering if it’s time to start on the cheese yet, when Freddie appears next to him. “Got a Christmas present for you.” Freddie leads him into what he calls his drawing room (of fucking course he does), a smaller room facing the stairwell on the first floor.

Roger shoots him a look before going in. “You got a stripper in there?”

“I wouldn’t want to become predictable. Go on in, don’t worry, it’s perfectly safe.”

There is a small, wrapped box on the antique dresser to the right.

“Merry Christmas.”

It’s a 1:18 die-cast fire-engine red 1962 Ferrari 250 GTO, maybe the most beautiful car in the world.

“Jesus, Freddie.” He takes it out of its box and traces the elegant lines with his fingertips. The wheels are tiny, but perfectly weighted, and the bonnet opens to a meticulous replica of the original 12-cylinder V-type engine. “There’s only about 50 of the things around. How on earth did you…”

“Sotheby’s.”

Oh god. He must have paid a fortune. Not that he couldn’t afford it, but it still makes Roger feel a bit rotten about the crystal decanter he got Freddie. Not that is was cheap, but... “You have to stop doing that, you know.” God knows how much the New York trip cost him.

Freddie waves him off. “Don’t be silly, darling. I love making presents.”

“How did you even know which model to choose?”

Freddie rolls his eyes. “I do occasionally listen to you when you’re talking. Not too often, of course, I do value my sanity, but from time to time...” He grins.

Roger punches him playfully in the arm. Freddie does look happy. Like he’s been looking forward to this surprise all day and couldn’t ask for anything else in the world but for Roger to tell him he likes it.

Roger carefully puts the car back into the box and they decide to join the rest of the party again. But just as they flicked off the lights and are about to head out of the room, there is a crash coming from the landing of the stairs. Freddie pokes his head out and quickly rears back inside.

“What? What’s happening?”

“Shhhh.” Freddie hushes him. He’s pushed the door almost close so only a thin sliver of light illuminates his features. “It’s Phoebe”, he whispers. “He’s pulled fucking Jack Mahelona.”
Roger elbows him aside and takes up the space by the door himself. Jack is a friend of Joe Fanelli’s and often serves as a waiter at Freddie’s parties – and by popular gay opinion he is just about the hottest guy in town. And there he is, making out with their sweet-natured master of the wardrobe on a conveniently placed divan.

“That’s an antique”, Freddie whispers, straining to get a good look over the top of Roger’s head. The genuine outrage in his voice makes Roger shake with held back laughter.

Phoebe, conscientious as ever, must have thought along the same lines, because soon he pushes himself up and whispers something to Jack. Hand in hand, they make for a door to the left.

“Storage closet”, Freddie says and Roger cracks up again.

“Shocking, I must say. The things that go on in this house.”

“Hmmm”, Freddie hums approvingly, as if a little secretive shagging belongs in any proper household. The sound rumbles along Roger's back. He is suddenly very aware of just how close they are standing together.

He doesn’t move a muscle. He could have stepped aside, or out into the hall or just pushed Freddie off a little. But a part of him wants to see what happens if he doesn’t. Part of him craves the exhilaration of not knowing, this moment right on the edge. And so he waits for Freddie to step away, heart hammering in his chest.

Freddie takes a deep breath. The exhale brushes along Roger’s neck, making every hair stand on end. Roger screws his eyes shut, bites down hard on his lips. Why doesn’t he just go? It’s not too late. Nothing has happened. Maybe Freddie hasn’t even noticed what’s going on. Maybe nothing is going on and it’s all just in Roger’s head.

A hand on his waist, very light, just resting there. But no, never, not in a million years an accident. Another breath blows along the back of his neck and this time there is a light touch behind it.

It’s not too late. He can still pretend nothing has happened. This is nothing. This is...

Freddie reaches around him and pushes the door closed with a click that sounds way too loud in the silence around him. Soft, dry lips on his neck, mouthing along the side. Both hands on his waist now, their grip tightening, slowly turning him around. He is letting himself be turned around, lets his head fall back against the door.

He just wants to see what happens. He’ll stop it any minute now. He’s not gay, this isn’t going work for him. He’ll stop it.

Eventually.

Any minute now.

It’s that little edge of teeth just below his ear that breaks the spell. But he doesn’t rear back, doesn’t bristle and flee. Instead his arms go around Freddie, one hand gripping the back of his shirt, the other buried in his hair, pulling, tugging.

It’s as if Freddie has just been waiting for that signal. He presses forward until their bodies are flush, until the very air he breathe is Freddie.

Roger dips his head, searches for Freddie’s lips, finds them, loses them again as Freddie nips at his
ear. “Oh god”, he breathes. “Oh christ.”

“Are you panicking on me, dear?” Roger feels the deep rumble of those word reverberating through his chest.

“No”, Roger says, panicking.

“Good because, quite frankly, I’ve been dying to do this for ages.”

“You can’t fuck me”, he blurts out, and immediately wishes the floor would open up and swallow him whole.

Freddie descends on him in a searing kiss, then presses his lips to Roger’s ear. “Can’t I.”

It’s so much, the heat and the pressure and the energy, and Roger has to move, has to do something, before... He twists, pushes, and with one almighty shove it’s Freddie who’s pinned to the wall. Somewhere a picture frame crashes to the floor.

Roger is panting. He could leave. He could back off and leave and pretend the whole thing’s never happened, just like they always pretend these things don’t happen. He looks at his hands clawing at Freddie’s shirt, twisted and cramped like they’re trying to take root there. Freddie’s chest his rising and falling to the beat of his harsh breath in Roger’s ear.

“No,” he says, because he barely keeps a grip on what is happening, but that is the one thing he knows.

“Good.” Freddie’s hands are on his, tugging them open gently and pushing him back just a little. And there’s a pang in Roger’s chest, a pang of something just like relief. It must be relief. Freddie’s doing the sensible thing, and they can go back down, laugh it off, chalk it up to an end of tour tizzy... “Because I’ve had something else in mind.” His thumbs are rubbing circles into Roger’s hands. “Alright?”

“Like. Like what.” He’s still staring at their hands, trying to hold on to the line of this conversation. If his life depended on it he couldn’t have looked up at Freddie’s eyes. “This.” And with one fluid, heart-stopping motion goes to his knees.

“Oh fuck, fuck!” Now he wishes he had the wall behind him. Freddie’s hands are on his hips, steadying him.

“Shh, it’s alright.” Roger watches as elegant, practiced fingers reach for his fly and pop the button open. There’s a look of utter concentration on Freddie’s face, not unlike when he’s at the mixing board. Then he raises his gaze and again it’s all Roger can do to stay on his feet as those familiar, dark eyes look up at him. There’s a question in them and Roger nods in response, instinctively, before he even knows he’s going to do it.

This is it. This is what they’ve been building up to, for weeks, months, maybe years, and he can’t stop it anymore than he can stop the waves building and crashing onto the shore. There are a thousand reasons not to do this, but they get drowned out by the sound of his own harsh breath and the heat that engulfs him.

Oh, and Freddie’s good, of course he is. He never does anything by half and certainly not something as important to him as sex. His hands are hard on Roger’s hips, holding him steady, maybe even holding him up, while he sucks just the head of his cock into his mouth.

Roger grips Freddie’s shoulder solely to keep himself standing up and claps the other over his
mouth. There are people downstairs and next door, there are Brian and John and Tony and... Oh sweet Lord, Freddie’s fucking boyfriend is right downstairs, and oh, only a right fucking bastard would get off on that.

The grip on Roger’s hips tightens and Freddie pulls off with a cough. “Easy”, he mutters and gets to his feet.

No. No, the time for easy is over. Roger crashes into him, driving him into the door, sliding one leg between Freddie for some friction.

“Yeah, alright, alright, just let me...” Freddie fumbles with his trousers. “Christ, Rog, just fuck off for one minute and let me... ah.”

Something hot and hard presses against Roger’s cock and he knows, somewhere deep inside, that this is the moment where he should panic for real, but it just doesn’t come. All he wants is to get closer to that heat.

Freddie spits into his hand and then engulfs both their cocks.

“Oh god”, Roger chants. “Oh god.”

“Yeah, come on”, Freddie whispers as he wanks them both.

Their combined movements are an uncoordinated mess, but it works just well enough to get Roger right to the edge. He takes hold of Freddie’s hips and thrusts against him, desperately searching that spark of release. Freddie lets himself be driven into the wall, letting his head fall back against it with a thump. “Yeah, give it to me. Come on.”

His long, sinewy neck is right there. Roger leans forward and brings his mouth to the smooth sweaty skin, tasting salt and bitter cologne. He nips at the place where neck meets shoulder and Freddie yelps so he does it again, a bit harder, driving into him the whole time. The Freddie's hands speed up and then something pulses hot and wet against Roger’s dick and he just can’t hold on anymore. With a strangled groan he comes all over their cocks and hands and clothes. And then he just stands there, a hand on the door jamb, trying to get his breath back.

Freddie takes what looks like a small table cloth from a drawer and tosses it to Roger. The only light in the room comes from the street lights outside and apart from the voices and the music drifting up from the party downstairs, it’s eerily silent.

Roger carefully keeps his attention on himself, wiping away the stains on his clothes as best as he can.

“Throw some champagne on yourself”, Freddie says and places the half empty bottle they’d brought with them of the table next to him.

“Huh?” Roger scrubs hard at a small spot on his shirt.

“The stains won’t stand out as much.”

“Oh. Yeah. Good idea.”

“I’ll get changed”, he says. “I’d borrow you something but...”

...but Roger showing up in Freddie’s clothes is way more suspicious than a couple of odd stains.
Freddie stands there a few seconds longer while Roger keeps his eyes firmly on his cleaning efforts. Then he turns and leaves the room.

With a shaking hand, Roger reaches for the champagne.

Chapter End Notes

Did I mention Roger has issues? He has issues. In case anyone hasn't noticed.

That night's show at the Hammersmith Odeon has been filmed and it's just fantastically energetic. Do yourself a favour and watch it if you have the time. (Also: Freddie's wearing kneepads, which I take to interpret as a sign of where exactly his mind has been those last days and weeks :D).

Thanks again to all the old and new people commenting! It's an absolute pleasure to open my e-mail inbox at the moment. You're all so kind and clever and funny! I hope I can keep you interested in this (awfully long) story!
Munich, 21 February 1980

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Roger spends New Year’s in a rented house on Ibiza with Carl and Seb, a couple of other friends and every party girl they can scrounge up in the clubs of Vila. At the end of the holiday, he buys the house. It feels like the right thing to do.

Of course they are still due an album, so February finds them all back in the studio. It’s... not going so well. Brian hates the synth playthings that Roger brings into the studio, Roger hates Deacy’s newfound love of funk and Freddie hates Brian's habit of upping the volume of the guitar tracks every time he's at the mixing desk.

Roger spends a lot of time on the Alpine ski slopes just an hour from the city.

The others find their own distractions. Munich is a lot more exciting than Montreux, so it offers a lot of opportunities for the band to avoid each other, so less and less time is being spent in the studio. Back in June, their days used to start around 11 or 12 with a leisurely breakfast and a first jam session. Now, that that has shifted to 3 or 4 pm and some days only half of the band bothers to show up at all.

It's not ideal.

The one thing that isn’t much of a problem for Roger is the thing that happened at Christmas. He figures it’s just been a weird end-of-year, end-of-tour, pent-up-frustrations kind of thing. Lots of weird things happen on tour, it’s not like they mean anything. If they all meant something, Roger would be on his tenth wife by now. And Freddie and him... maybe it’s just something that Roger had to get out of his system. He’s always been one who’ll rather go one step too far rather than miss out on something. And with all that time spent in gay sex clubs together, his body (and his brain) might have become a little confused. Wires crossed, that kind of thing.

So now, he just doesn’t spend any time in gay sex clubs, so it’s not a problem anymore. He heads off to the Sugar Shack with Brian and John and Crystal and the other crew guys, while Freddie goes out with his entourage. A bit of distance is exactly what they need. And the Shack doesn’t just have great cocktails and music, but also enough fresh-faced German mädels to keep him entertained.

So it’s all fine.

Or it would have been fine, if John hadn’t decided to be an arsehole one day.


Brian takes a step back and raises his hands in innocence.

“It’s gotta have the right sound, Rog”, John says.

“The right...” Roger picks up his sticks and makes a quick drum roll. “Great. Like a dead fart. What’s next for me? Your son’s fucking plastic toy drum?”

“Darlings, please...” Freddie the peacemaker tries to cut in but John ignores him.
“No, don’t worry. I don’t want you to overextend yourself, do I?”

“Oh, fuck off.”

John crosses his arms in front of his chest. “Look, just sit down and play the fucking beat, okay? It’s really not that difficult.”

“If you want me to play drums, you shouldn’t have covered them in fucking tape, should you?”

“Maybe I wouldn’t have had to, if you’d bothered to show up on time and actually worked with us.”

“Oh, so this is my fault, is it?”

“Yes, you moron, of course it’s your...”

“John, please?” Brian looks exhausted. “Roger, come on. We’re all here for once, so I’d like to actually get something done today.”

Roger bites the inside of his cheek and breathes deeply to calm himself down. It might even have worked, if John would have kept his sanctimonious mouth shut.

“Look Rog, it’s my song. I know you don’t like it, but we’ve agreed it’ll go on the album so would you please just shut up and play the fucking beat.”

Roger throws the sticks at John stupid bloody face and storms out of the room. That stupid funk shit has been an idiotic idea from the start. That’s what you get for leaving Deacy and Freddie alone in the studio for even five minutes.

Then he stops dead in his tracks, turns and pops his head into the studio again. “And no one touches my kit!”

He marches in the general direction of the exit, a great, self-righteous march that has people scramble out of his way.

He needs air, but when he steps outside, ice cold, snow-tinged wind drives him right back inside. He thunders through the maze of corridors until he arrives at a dead end that’s blessedly free of people where he can just pace back and forth until some of that urge to just go and beat someone up isn't quite so pressing anymore. Why, oh why hadn't he joined Genesis when he had the chance? At least they seem to have some respect for their drummer.

He's on his fourth Marlboro when Freddie appears around the corner. Roger would have expected them to send Brian, but maybe he's busy helping John put sheets in his bass drum or something. The thought alone sends the rage bubbling up in him again. Who do they even think they are?

"Calmed down?"

"Piss off." Not by a long shot.

"It's only that it's a bit difficult to put down a backing track without the drums."

"Let Mack program you something. It can't sound worse than this shit."

Freddie leans against the wall. "Aren't you taking this a tiny bit personally?"

"What, me?" Roger takes one last drag and crushes the butt under his foot. "Is that Mr. Throws a
fit if he doesn't get his coffee served first' lecturing me about taking things personally?"

"I…"

"I'm not some drum machine that you can just switch on and off whenever you feel like it."

"John's been working on this for weeks", Freddie says. "Can't you at least try and…"

"No, I cannot! How d'you think he'd react if I switched all the strings on his bass without asking him first."

"Alright, maybe that was a bit intrusive, but…"

"Just because you worked out a new song doesn't mean I don't get a say!"

"Roger, you've barely been here", Freddie thunders, clearly at the end of his tether. "You spend more time hurling yourself down ski slopes than working with us."

Roger can't help but laugh. "Are you lecturing me on work ethic?"

"I've been working on this bloody song until my voice gave out. I won't have it all go to shit just because you can't get over yourself and your precious big drum sound!" Freddie's standing right in front of him now, hands on his hips, chest heaving with barely suppressed anger.

"You don't get to dictate my playing, you prick! None of you do!"

"What else are we supposed to do if you only drop in once a week or so to…"

"So you admit it!" Roger pokes his finger into Freddie's chest. "It wasn't just John!"

Freddie bats his hand away. "Get a grip, Roger! This is ridiculous."

"You've been in on it." They're so close now that Roger can see the pulse hammering his Freddie's neck. He quashes the urge to sink his teeth in it. Instead he pokes him again, just to get his point across.

Freddie's eyes flash like storm clouds lit from within. He clenches his teeth, swallows hard. "You're such a bloody…"

But Roger doesn't let him finish. "You all think you can just push me around however you like and…" He wants to put a hand on Freddie's chest, just to push him away a bit, to get some distance between them but then…

Then Freddie's fingers close around his wrist and he is pulled sideways through a doorway he didn't even know was there. He stumbles, turns, and can just hear Freddie grumbling "…bloody irritating twat" before the door falls closed.

"What the…" He doesn’t get further than that as two hands grip his shirt hard and then his mouth is getting bruised in a crushing, messy kiss. There are teeth and tongue and the copper taste of blood and he hears rather than feels his back hitting a wall as he’s pushed backwards.

Freddie’s hips grind against his and, fuck, the guy is hard already, and that is enough to have Roger’s blood rushing south as well.

He twists his head away and draws a ragged breath. “What are you doing?”
"You've been driving me up the bloody wall, you know that?" He drops one hand to Roger's crotch and palms him through his jeans.

"Stop it!" Roger makes a half-hearted move to pull Freddie's hand away.

Freddie stills and lets his hand be pushed aside, but he doesn't move away. "You really want me to stop?" He leans forward until his lips are flush at Roger's ear. "I don't think you do. You want this."

"Fuck!" Roger's head falls back against the wall.

Freddie laughs in short panting breaths against his ear, a soundless 'told you so'.

It's enough to get Roger's anger override his horniness. He grabs Freddie shoulder with both hands and in one swift movement half turns them until they crash into a shelf.

"Fuck", Freddie groans and Roger honestly has no idea whether it's pleasure or pain and he doesn't care.

"You have no idea what I want", Roger whispers.

"Show me", Freddie whispers and bites him, he honest to god bites his fucking collar bone and it fucking hurts. Just why Roger's reaction to that is to yank Freddie's fly open and pull out his dick he doesn't know, but there he is, with a cock in his hand that isn't his own for the first time in his life, and all he can think about is make Freddie come so hard it'll wipe that smug grin off his face.

The angle isn't that different from wanking. He holds Freddie pinned to the bookshelf with his left arm over his chest and works his dick with his right. It's getting slippery, Freddie's breath coming in short, gasping breaths and Roger grins ferally, teeth bared.

"Yeah, come on, you bloody tosser", he whispers as Freddie comes all over his hand.

Freddie's barely recovered when he undoes Roger's fly at lightning speed and pushes a hand inside to return the favour. It takes him all of two minutes before he comes, propped up half against wall, half against Freddie and it's like all the angry energy that's kept him going flows out of his body.

They're all business afterwards. Tucking themselves back in, checking each other for telltale stains, righting the supply shelves. As far as they can be righted, that is.

Roger unlocks the door. Only the key won't turn. He turns around to look at Freddie. "Has this been open the whole time?"

Freddie shrugs. "Like there was time to lock it", he scoffs, smoothing down his hair.

"Are you out of your mind? Anyone could have wandered in here!"

"Exciting, isn't it?"

Fuck, it is. "No, it's not the least exciting, you twat!"

"Would you keep your voice down", Freddie hisses. "No one's found us, it's all fine. Don't be such a drama queen."

Roger pinches the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. He breathes deeply and tries to put his mind back to business, back to anything that isn't what happened five minutes ago. "Come on", he says. "Let's get it over with and play that stupid song."
So, Freddie hasn't exactly had an easy time either.

Song for this chapter: **Die Toten Hosen – Niemals einer Meinung.**
It’s like my secret theme song for Queen recording sessions. It's about people who are constantly at each other's throat but can't do without each other. Sample lyrics (in my bad translation):

“I'm pointing at the stars, but you're only seeing the moon, I'm yelling 'halt' but you're already running off. If there's something I want to tell you, I can be sure you already know – and know better on top of that. [...] We'll never agree on anything, even if it's just about the weather; don't ask me why but I need you. Every day the smallest argument is enough to set us off; don't ask me why but I love you. [...] If there's something you really like I already know I can't stand it because it's so boring. [...] This is how it's always been with us, this is how it'll always be. If you want to give it another shot, count me in at once!”
The jangle of keys wakes him up. He blinks in the grey early morning light streaming in through gaps in the curtain. Rain patters against the windows. It’s the girl from last night, already dressed, checking her purse before she heads out. Margit? Mathilde? No, that was the stupid one with the poodle.

“Where you goin’ so soon”, he mumbles. Marlene, that’s it.

She startles. “I’ve got to work.”

“What, on a Saturday?” It is, Saturday, right? He’s not good with days of the week.

"I woke you up. Sorry." Marlene looks a little lost, as she stands there in her heels, clutching her purse and tugging the hem of her short black dress down. She’s done that last night, too. It had looked both shy and sexy then, like she didn’t even know how it was drawing even more attention to her killer legs.

“’s fine.” He props himself up on one elbow and reaches into the bedside drawer. There should be... ah, yes. He picks out a couple of bank notes somewhat haphazardly and holds them out to her.

Marlene makes no move to take them. She just stands there, frozen and stares at him like she just can’t believe it. “I really don’t...” She makes a vague shooing gesture and sets her jaw. She looks like’s close to tears. Why would she...

Oh shit.

Roger sits up, a bit more awake now. “For or a cab”, he explains, feeling immensely stupid. “Just so you get home alright.”

“Oh.”

“I’d get Helmut to drive you, but he won’t be here before noon, so...”

“No, I’ll take the bus. It’s fine.”

“Come on. It’s freezing out there.” He raises one eyebrow. “And you are not dressed for Munich in February. Not that I’m complaining...”

Marlene blushes, but a small smile appears on her face as well. She’s not really his type with her freckles and her curly brown hair, but she’s quite cute. And turns out she can be a real firecracker once he managed to coax her out of his shell.

“Or you might want to stay a little longer?” He puts on the best version of his seduction face he can manage at whatever time it is in the morning.

She bites her lip and wags her finger at him. “Don’t temp me, Roger.”

He takes her finger and bites it lightly. “Why not?”

For a minute he thinks he might win her over, but then she snatches her hand away. “I’ve got to
He presses the money into her hand. She takes it, but still looks worried.

“Come on, don’t be stubborn. I dragged you here after all.” After the Monika-debacle, he’d never gone to a girl’s place again. A discrete driver and vigilant hotel staff mean fewer chances of paparazzi.

“It’s really not necessary.”

Good lord, independent women are so annoying. Why does he always end being attracted to them? “Look, how about you buy me a drink tonight in return?”

She does a double take. “Tonight?”

Roger does an internal double take. Did he just invite her on a date? It certainly sounds like it. He glances back at her endless long legs. Yeah, why not. “Tonight”, he says.

Marlene looks non-plussed, then she blushes and breaks into a bright smile that she immediately fights back. She fiddles with the top button on her thin denim jacket as she desperately tries to keep her cool. “Not sure if I’m free tonight.”

“Well, I will be at the Shack tonight. All by myself, in my VIP lounge, with no one to keep me company. Very lonely.”

“Poor little rich boy.”

“Oh yes.”

“Hmm...” She slings the purse over her shoulder. “I’ll see what I can do.”

When the door falls shut behind her, he rolls on to his back and stretches languidly. Maybe something steady is exactly what he needs right now. Maybe that will help with the... the situation. Because it has happened again. That's three times now it total, and while he can explain every incident individually (end-of-tour-craziness, pent-up frustration, and... pent up frustration again), it's starting to look worryingly like a series. Something that's got be stopped in its tracks.

It doesn’t have to be forever, just while they’re in Munich.

And it works. After a few nights out, she becomes a lot more relaxed around them. She just got her university degree and plans to start post-grad work in the fall, so her “work” is mostly reading books and writing papers, which — as Roger persuasively explains — she can also do at his place. Or in the studio.

And so — after the first few days of wide-eyed wonder — she spends most of her afternoons planted on the sofa in the studio, surrounded by books and scribbling down notes. It’s a wonder to Roger how she can concentrate among all this racket, but she says the endless squabbling makes for a really calming background noise. “And if all else fails, I can always decide to write my thesis on the interpersonal dynamics of you guys. It’s quite fascinating.”

Yeah, let’s not. God knows what she’s going to see.

Anyway, now when Freddie gets Rogers hackles raised, Marlene looks up from her textbook, holds up his packet of cigarettes, and accompanies him for a few laps around the building until he’s wound down. He feels a bit like a dog being taken out for a walk, but it helps. Also, occasionally
they have sex in a conveniently empty office, which also helps.

The only downside is that Freddie has taken to bring Tony along to the studio as well. Roger doesn’t know if its one-upmanship or whatever, but it’s incredibly annoying. Where Marlene is maybe slightly too quiet and bookish for his tastes, Tony is just a fucking nuisance. It’s bad enough when Prenter butts in when they’re discussing music, but at least he has some expertise in the music business. Tony just doesn’t have a clue, and yet Freddie insists on listening to his input and calls the others close-minded when they object. Luckily, Freddie has got enough sense to discard most of his ideas eventually, but only after they’ve all wasted a few hour of their time on it.

And it’s not like they have a lot of time to waste. There’s a huge tour of the US planned for the summer, to capitalize on the huge surprise hit of Crazy Little Thing and they’ll need at least two or three weeks to rehearse all the new material. On top of that, they agreed to do the soundtrack for an upcoming fantasy flick, which is something they have no experience with at all. The main work has been scheduled for the fall, but then they’ll have barely two months until the beginning of the next leg of tour.

But it keeps Roger on his toes, which is good. He thrives when he’s on the move, downtime just makes him restless and lazy.

So he spends his days at the studio with Marlene, his nights at one of the trendy clubs with Marlene and the morning hours in bed with Marlene. It should be stifling, but it works. Of course it helps that underneath her quiet demeanor, she has a wild streak. When Roger chats up a stunning Dutch girl during an impromptu party at his hotel suite, it takes her a couple of minutes to understand what is going on, but then throws herself into the threesome with a vengeance.

Having a girlfriend around is one thing to keep his head straight. The other reveals itself when they all meet up to shoot the promo for Play the Game a couple of weeks later. Freddie has had a change of style. It doesn’t sound dramatic (hair cut short and a mustache instead of clean-shaven skin), but the effect is drastic.

So drastic in fact that when the video first runs, the Queen offices are flooded with mail pleading (demanding) he shave it off. It's worse than when they put 100 naked ladies on bikes.

It's a look that had become increasingly common at the clubs. He probably fits in a lot better now. It also conceals his teeth a bit and, Roger thinks to himself, it makes him look a bit more, well, like a London boy born and bred.

Whatever Freddie's reasons might be, one thing is for sure: whatever physical attraction he might have felt for his band mate at some point has now been buried firmly under a few square inches of hair. No way could he ever kiss someone with actual hair on his face.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, before the tour starts properly, I feel I have to talk a bit about when Freddie was infected with HIV. It's a bit tasteless to speculate about, but it's kind of the point of the story, so... But feel free to skip this if it makes you uncomfortable.

Theoretically, it could have happened at any point between the first America tour in 1974 (HIV was already spreading in the US around that time) and, say, 1985 (which would mean a super short latency phase). But the most likely time period, as identified
by Richards & Langthorne (Somebody to Love, 2016), is between 1980 and 1982 when he was spending a lot of time in NY, having sex with lots people at a time when infection rates were already staggeringly high. But of course who and when exactly is impossible to know. What Roger's actions do, is to stack the odds a bit more in Freddie's favour. It's a question of numbers, luck and probability. But this won't be a story of "prevent that one specific guy from sleeping with Freddie and everything's well".
Los Angeles, 23 June 1980

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Game Tour Rehearsals

“Oh, fuck yes!”

“Shhh!” Roger tries to clamp a hand over Freddie’s mouth. He’s doing it on purpose: the more Roger tries to shush him, the louder he gets.

“Hmph, sho good…” Freddie has sucked his forefinger into his mouth and swirls his tongue around it in a graphically suggestive manner.

The reason they have to be quiet is because right next door, Tony Bastard (as Roger is very creatively calling him) is sleeping off his hangover in Freddie’s bed. Roger had dropped by to ask if Freddie wants to join him and Brian on a trip to the Getty Centre later on. He’s not quite clear how that lead to them dry humping on the shaggy carpet of the living room, but here they are.

“Freddie, seriously shut up or I swear I’ll... ah.” Freddie has wrapped his long legs around him and gives a sort of wriggle that has Roger seeing stars.

“Oh what?” Freddie asks and his looks is so triumphant that Roger just can’t help it.

“Or I’ll shut you up”, he hisses and Freddie promptly bursts out laughing.

“I’d like to see you try.”

“Shut up, shut up you... hush!” Roger presses their lips together, peppering Freddie’s mouth with kisses.

“I mean it. Make me”, Freddie says and his eyes have gone dark.

“Fuck.” Roger grinds down against him hard.

“Yeah. Come on, choir boy, come o- Hmph.”

Roger clamps his hand down over Freddie’s mouth, hard this time. He buries his head in the crook of Freddie’s neck and drives his hips down hard. He hasn’t even taken off his trousers but he is that close to the edge already. Freddie’s moans are somehow even more obscene than anything he could say. The door could have flown open and the collected world press stormed into the room, Roger wouldn’t have cared. He thrusts and rubs himself against Freddie in single-minded determination, until he comes raw and hard in his pants.

Before he can think about it, he’s fumbled open Freddie’s trousers and shoved a hand inside his pants, finding him hard and leaking. He rolls a little onto his side so he can move better and starts wanking Freddie, never taking his hand from his mouth. Then he drops his head down to Freddie’s ear. “Do you like that? Do you like what happens when you can’t keep your mouth shut?”

Freddie screws his eyes shut. He looks almost in pain, but then he nods, a tiny jerking movement that Roger feels more than sees. “Fuck, yeah, you fucking do.” He tightens his grip on Freddie’s dick, just a little too tight, and bites down on his earlobe, just a little too hard, and Freddie fucking
keens when he comes.

Tony must have drunk enough Tequila to kill a Moose to sleep through that.

+++ This has got to stop. It’s got to stop right now, or else he’s going to go crazy. It has happened two more times already, and then today... He takes a deep shaky breath and punches in the number.

“Marlene, sweetie, hey!”

“Rog! How are you?” She sounds surprised. Which is to be expected, gives that they haven’t spoken in weeks. He meant to call her, but...

“Great, I’m great!”

“It’s gotta be the middle of the night in... where exactly are you?”

“LA. Yeah, er, rehearsals are crazy, we’ve got so much new stuff to go through...” And afterwards he’s got to toss off Freddie in a defunct ladies’ room, it seems, but that is not what matters right now. He puts on his most charming face and hopes in carries over into his voice. “Wanna come over?”

“Yeah, Sure. Just let me put on my shoes and I’ll pop round for a bit. LA is right around the corner from Blumenau, isn’t it?”

“And take your bikini as well. There might be a bit of a swim involved.”

“Oh, I was in the swimming team at school, so that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Were you? I didn’t know that.”

“You don’t know a lot of things.”

“Are you an undercover journalist for News of the World as well?”

“Shit, my cover is blown.”

There’s a bit of an awkward silence.

“Listen, actually, I wasn’t joking just then. How about you fly over for the tour?”

“Come on, Rog, that’s...”

“What, it's going to be fun!”

“Rog, I've got the selection interview for the scholarship in July. I can’t just leave.”

Come to think of it she had mentioned something about an interview. “So you hop home for that. It cannot take more than a few days.”

“Yeah, but can't just show up there unprepared, jetlagged and still hungover from the last after show party.”

“When's the next round of admissions then?”

“January, but...”
“Right, so you just wait a few months and apply for the next one!”

“It’s unlikely I get in on the first go, I’ll probably have to apply a couple of times anyway and…”

“Hey, you're the smartest girl I know. Of course you'll get in! And in the meantime you get to travel across America with me and the boys, all expenses taken care of by the company…”

“Oh yes? Will the company also pay my rent when my savings are used up in November?”

“Sure.”

“Right so... what?”

Roger shrugs. “We'll sign you up as my PA or make up some job for you in the studio in or something. Assistant production manager, how about that?”

She laughs. “Yeah, right.”

“What? Freddie always takes along a cook and master of the revels or some shit. And it's not like Joe does much cooking. Anyway we can write it all off as expenses which will make John very happy, so…”

“Shit, Rog, you do live in a different world from the rest of us.”

“So you'll come over? No more excuses?”

“It's not that easy.”

“Of course it is! Look. You said you wanted to live a little, right?”

“Yes, but.”

“What good is it having a PhD at 25? You've got plenty of time for that later.”

“26. If I manage to do it in three years, which is…”

“Oh, well.” Roger sighs loudly. “Guess your parents would be very proud.” That's a bit of a dirty move. Her parent's constant demands are her favourite subject to rant about when she's had too much to drink.

“Fuck, they would be, wouldn’t they.”

“Listen. I miss you. And with the tour and the recording sessions in London afterwards it'll be months until I'm back in Munich.”

There’s a bit of a pause on the other end.

“Do you? Miss me?”

“Of course I do! I'm stuck here all day with a bunch of nerds, talking about delayed reverb and switch-mode amplifiers and stuff.”

“I'm sure you're not doing that all day. Or night.”

Yeah let's not get into that. “Not as fun without you.”

She sighs. “Jesus, Rog, you sure know how to tempt a girl.”
“We’re going to play Vancouver, Seattle, San Francisco, LA all within the first few weeks - travel by private jet of course - and then we're going to be in NY for my birthday. You won't believe the clubs they've got there and...”

“Stop, Roger. I’m...” She laughs, a little nervous. “So... so are you going to send over your private jet to whisk me away or what?”

“That can't do cross Atlantic flights, sorry. But I'll have Dana arrange tickets for you.”

There’s some more back and forth, but when he hangs up, Roger takes a deep breath. It's going to take a few days to arrange for a visa, but if Paul works his magic, she should be here by Friday or Saturday, tops.

And then things can finally go back to normal.

Chapter End Notes

The actual touring schedule had a weird three week gap from mid-July to early August. Now, according to this website (www.diary.queensongs.info) Roger’s first son was born two months prematurely on May 22nd. If that’s true, the gap would be exactly around the time of the estimated birth date, so maybe that’s the reason for it. In the story timeline, Dominique and Roger have already broken up, so there’s no reason for such a long break in the touring. Roger’s also way too busy sorting out his love life to work on his solo album during those three weeks. Therefore I rearranged the tour itinerary for my own purposes.
It’s not working.

Marlene is here and it’s great but the magic bullet has run all out of magic.

It’s like once his libido realized that all the rage and frustration that builds up so easily during a tour (an equipment malfunction here, a botched cue there) can be channelled into a very willing target, it just runs wild with it. It's not just Freddie initiating things any more. Last time it was Roger who pushed him into the next storage closet and humped him until another pair of pants were ruined.

It’s not only baffling and exasperating, it's also getting dangerous. Which makes it even harder to stop. After the first show in Oakland, he gets into a shouting match with Freddie and before he realises it, he's grabbed him by the lapels of his dressing gown and pushed him against the wall right in front of Brian and John. And the anger and the excitement coursing through him, their proximity, it’s so familiar that his gaze drops automatically to Freddie's red lips and suddenly his trousers seem too tight and...

“Are you two going to make out or what?”

Roger lets go and stumbles back like he's received an electric shock. When he turns around, John is giggling and Brian smirks at him.

A joke then. Just a joke, but if even Brian noticed it...

On top of all that, Marlene is in some kind of strop and leaves the after show party early.

“What's the matter”, he asks when he gets to the hotel.

She puts down her book and looks at him for a long moment. “What exactly am I doing here”, she asks.

He sits down next to her on the bed, takes her hand. “Skiving?”

“I bet you managed to have fun without me.”

Rogers blood runs cold. Does she know something? “How do you mean?”

She just shakes her head.

Great. Now he gets the silent treatment. “Is this about the groupies? They're always hanging around, I swear I don’t...”

She shakes her head. “No, just...”

“What?”

“Rog, this is the first real conversation we've had since I've come here. The first time we've talked to each other without Gerry or Jim or someone from the crew or the band or, or fucking Michael Jackson hanging around.”
“Come on, that was one time, it's not like he's always...”

“You know what I mean.”

“... and I thought it was exciting for you, meeting him.”

“That's not the point, Rog!”

“Then what is the point? Tell me, please, because I'm not getting it!” If there's one thing he can't deal with its vague accusations of wrongdoing.

“You're never here!”

Which is bullshit. He's there right now!

Marlene gets up. She's been in bed but she's still fully dressed. “I came here all the way from Germany to be with you, but you're always rehearsing or meeting important people or partying with more interesting people... and when you're with me, you're so tired you just crash and sleep all day!”

“You can come along to the parties and the sound checks and...”

“... and then I sit around while you're being busy and hardly say a word to me.”

“I don't get it. You were fine back in Munich, hanging around the studio, going out with me and the guys... I thought you liked all that.”

“I did. I do, but...” She breaks off and rubs a hand over her face. “That was different. I had my research. I had my own friends. I had this spot by the lake in the Westpark where I've been sitting every Sunday since I was 16. And in Munich when we were together, we were actually together. Here...” She takes a deep breath. “I'm... I'm lonely, alright?”

“But I thought you got along well with Chrissie and Veronica? And Sylvia?”

“Yes, they've all been lovely, but they've known each other for years, and they have their children to take care of and...” She bites her lips. “I'm sorry, but I'm not made for all this.”

She cannot leave. She must not leave. As fucks up as the situation with Freddie is, it's only going to get worse when she's not here. Roger is not going to give up belief in his talisman so quickly.

He walks over to her, puts his arm around her. “Okay, look, it's been a bit crazy, I know. Touring can be like that.”

“I can't be like that.”

“I'm sorry. I should have taken better care of you. Look.” He picks up the itinerary. “We've got the next three nights off. And then we'll head over to New England and New York and after my birthday we have a whole week off. We can do anything you like then.”

“I want to have dinner with you. Just you.”

He smiles. “Yeah, alright. We can do that.”

“And breakfast in bed.”

“That too.”
“And I want to drive your car.”

“Absolutely not!”

She shoves him back onto the bed. “You don’t even have a car here!” She crawls on top of him. “That was a trick question. And you failed.”

She playfully bites the side of his neck. God, he’s absolutely knackered, but he’s just averted a major crisis and has a definite feeling that this is not the right time for a ‘not now.’ He rolls them around in one practised move. “Let me make it up to you.”

+++ 

They spend three days in LA and Roger makes sure to include some proper sightseeing and a romantic dinner with Marlene.

It’s hard though. Even on nights off, being on tour can be all consuming, making it hard to think about anything but the next gig, problems with the gear, travel schedules, things to improve on, the thousands of people vying for his attention...

They celebrate Brian’s birthday in Boston and he ends up tossing Freddie off in the men’s room. Paul sees them coming out together, but it’s easy enough to pretend they merely indulged in some chemical (rather than manual) stimulation. Freddie quickly makes a quip about shared lines being the best lines, but Roger can feel Paul’s eyes on him the rest of the night. He doesn't like it one bit.

In Hartford, they get this close to actually cancelling a show, because Freddie finds out Tony cheated on him and throws an epic tantrum (which is a bit rich, considering), which ends with Freddie sending him back to England (instructions: move out of my flat immediately, leave the cat). The show, once they get on stage, is stellar. The blowjob Roger receives afterwards almost blinds him.

In Newhaven, they end up in the wardrobe, making out like deranged teenagers when Phoebe walks in with a stack of freshly laundered shirts. The door opens to the outside, so they have a second’s warning and spring apart just in time and pretend they were just discussing outfits, but it’s a close call. Somehow that only makes it better.

+++ 

“Where the hell were you?”

Roger has never been this hungover in his life.

Alright, maybe he has been, but he’s worked hard to forget.

He toes off his shoes and falls into bed, winces as a ray of bright sunlight falling in through a gap in the curtains pierces his eyes. “Not now, baby.”

“It’s ten in the morning. You just vanished from the party and no one would tell me where you were.”

Right, the party. Melissa had been there, and Dino and some others. And Rick Parfitt, for some reason. “Out with an old friend. Marlene please...” He doesn’t even remember what Rick is doing in New York, but he wanted to show Roger this bar he knew and...

“And old friend? What’s his name then? Cherry? Ginger?”
Roger buries his head in the pillow. God, woman, please stop talking. “Jus’ Rick an’ me. Come on, let me get some sleep. We’ll talk later but...”

“You promised to show me Manhattan today. Lunch at Delmonico’s, then a matinee on Broadway... We’ve already got the tickets.”

Yeah, no way. “Tomorrow, okay?”

“You promised”, she says quietly.

“Look. I’m sorry, but...” With an inhuman effort, he pulls himself up and fishes his wallet from his jacket. “Take my card, alright? Buy yourself something nice. Anything you like.”

There’s a long silence, then the card is taken from his hands and he can sink into deep, blessed sleep.

+++  

When he finally finds the strength to get up (and order a very, very late breakfast), Marlene is in the living room, looking chipper.

“Hey there”, Roger says and yawns.

“Oh, hey.”

He sits down at the table. “Did you get yourself something nice?”

“I did.”

“Can I see?”

“Of course.” She takes up her handbag.

Probably jewellery if it fits in there. Hm. He was hoping for a nice slinky dress maybe, or a set of lingerie or...

She puts an envelope down in front of him. Tickets for something? Please, please don’t let it be opera.

It’s a plane ticket from JFK to Munich. Leaving today. “What’s that?”

“Something I should have done two weeks ago.”

“Oh, come on. I said I’m sorry and...”

A knock on the door cuts him off.

“Ah, that’ll be the cab.” She stands up and smiles ruefully. “Don’t worry. You paid for that, too.”

“You’re not serious.”

“Very serious.” She slings her bag over her shoulder and walks towards the door. It's only now that Roger realises there are suitcases stacked against the wall.

“Because I stayed out late one fucking night?”

She whirls around. “No. Because you keep blowing me off. Because you treat me like a bloody
piece of luggage. Because you lie to me. I might be naive, but I’m not stupid.”

“There was no girl!” Strictly speaking, there were girls around, but he’s 99% sure he didn’t do anything with them. And as for people who aren’t girls...

“And anyway. I’ve got an interview coming up. I’ll probably blow it, but it’s better than sitting around waiting for you to make up your goddamn mind.”

Again, the knocking. “Miss Hoffmann?”

“Goodbye, Rog.”

He doesn’t argue. He is not going to beg her to stay. If that’s how she’s going to repay him, he’s not going to stop her. He’s in New York. His birthday is coming up. He’s going to have a good time and he’s not going to let some, some floozy ruin it for him.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry everyone who’s been waiting for the big Tony drama. That was a bit of an anticlimax I guess...

Remember back in 78 when Roger was thinking about breaking up with Dom after having her fly in to see him? And Freddie said: “That’s inspired, Roger. If one of my boyfriends ever truly fucks me over, that’s how I’m going to do it”? According to Phoebe's book, that's exactly how Freddie broke up with Tony Bastin after finding out how he was using him (he also kept Tony's cat Oscar). Alas, in this timeline, he's already in LA, so it doesn't quite work like that. But he still kept the cat ;)

And yes, very surprisingly Roger's relationship didn't really go anywhere. I feel I have to quote Granny Weatherwax here: "Sin, young man, is when you treat people like things."

A song for Marlene: **Lea - Leiser**.

Hands up everyone who thinks Roger will deal with this in a reasonable, grown-up mature manner?
New York, 26 July 1980

Chapter Notes

Another "Roger's being a dick" warning seems appropriate.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next day, a handful of old friends fly in from England. Seb and Carl are there, Clare and Philippe, and Rick of course. They’re playing Madison Square Garden both Friday and Saturday night, and the second show is on the night of his birthday. So they see in his birthday on Friday night, and then the real party starts after the Saturday show in a VIP lounge at the Palladium (which Dino and Melissa denounce as a club for boorish snobbish arseholes, but Roger can see how much they enjoy themselves as they bypass the long lines stretching out from the front door).

Brian and John tag along with Chrissie and Veronica, and Freddie shows up fashionably late, with a complete entourage and – apparently – the new Mr. Lover: a muscle-bound Nordic god in his twenties introducing himself – no shit – as Thor. Roger hates him on sight.

The mood is good, but Roger finds it hard to let go. He misses Marlene. If he’s honest, he misses Dom, too. He’s mostly over her, but from time to time he’s still hit by what could have been. Back in May, he spent a whole week completely depressed and pining for her, lost in soppy images of them as a happy family, however unrealistic that was. He got over it eventually, but he can’t help but think how right at home she would have been here, dancing and laughing and celebrating. He could try and find himself someone for the night, of course – but somehow that seems like too much effort.

His birthday gift from the band is a cake in the shape of a giant tit (although Brian tries to sell it as a volcano). The moment this thing is brought in is like someone has given the starting signal for everyone to let loose. Melissa and Clare – his baby sister who’s now working as a fucking legal advisor bucolic Truro – get up on the bar counter and give a performance that involves a sort of tango punctuated by smashed shot glasses. Melissa gives the group an impromptu live demonstration on bondage technique. And the snow keeps falling in July.

Out of the corner of his eye he can’t help observing Freddie, who looks like he’s having a ball. He is in an excessively good mood, fawned over by his new boytoy. At one point, Thor gets up and heads to the dance floor, only to take off his shirt and basically hump the air for 15 minutes while Freddie sits there eating him up with his eyes. Roger doesn’t even want to imagine what they would have been like in a gay club.

Thank god for vodka.

Eventually, Freddie says his goodbyes and – pulling a smug looking Thunder God after him – makes for the hotel.

Good. At least Roger doesn’t have to watch them eye fuck all night. He holds his empty glass out over his head and just drinks whatever is put in it.

"You alright?" Brian has plopped down on a chair next to him.
"Course I'm alright. It's my birthday, my friends are here, the bar is well stocked and I got lots of presents. It's great. Why wouldn't I be alright?" Roger's dimly aware that that answer might be a tad too long to be convincing.

Brian's watchful eyes search his face. Damn, Roger should have brought his sunglasses. "It's just that..." He sighs. "I've heard about Marlene."

Oh great. Well, of course he would. It's not like he can keep it a secret that his girlfriend has suddenly disappeared overnight.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Roger crosses his arms. "Do I look like I fucking want to talk about it?" About how his girlfriends keep dumping him? About how he's just turned 31 and his love life is deeper in the shitter than ever before? Just so he can gossip about it with Deacy and pity him from the high seat of their perfect family lives?

"Easy, Rog, I just..."

"Well, I just don't, alright?"

Brian raises his hands. "Okay, fine." He picks up his beer and gets up. "I can see everything's just peachy for you. Understood."

Roger stares morosely into his glass. They used to talk be able to about these things. Not often, and usually it was Brian who talked and Roger who listened, but when things got really bad, he knew he could sit down and pour out his heart. More often than not, Brian even had something clever to say about it. Not a solution to the problem, but a perspective Roger didn't even consider before. And it just feels good to know there's someone willing to listen.

But how could he possibly talk about what's going on with Brian of all people? Who's married and a dad and just about the straightest person he knows? Brian's never been the biggest fan of Roger's 'gambolling', but he's accepted it as par for the course. But taking home a different girl (or two) every night is so very different from what he's been up to lately. It's not that Brian is bigoted, but how could he possibly understand that? Roger himself doesn't understand it.

Around four in the morning, decides he's had enough though. It just isn't his night. The party is still in full swing though, so he slips out quietly. On the way to the back door, he passes Dino, who is leaning against a wall, arms crossed and eyes closed.

"Hey, you alright?"

"Hm?" Dino jerks awake and blinks quickly a few times. "Yeah just..." He yawns and shakes his head. "Just need a minute. Don't wanna poop your party."

"I'm calling it a night anyway."

"Ah." Dino seems relieved. It's the first time Roger sees him quit a party before the clubs closed.

"You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, just... bit exhausted at the moment. Nothing bad, just too much work and play, too little sleep..." He smiles a lopsided grin. "Nothing I need telling you about I guess."

"Come on, I can drive you home."

"Oh great. Well, of course he would. It's not like he can keep it a secret that his girlfriend has suddenly disappeared overnight."

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“Yeah, just... bit exhausted at the moment. Nothing bad, just too much work and play, too little sleep...” He smiles a lopsided grin. “Nothing I need telling you about I guess.”

“Come on, I can drive you home.”
That has Dino fully awake. “Don’t tell me you’re getting behind a wheel. I’ve seen you chug enough Stoly to drown a goldfish.”

“What? No.” He sometimes forgets that not everyone lives in his world. “My driver’s waiting outside.”

“Of course he fucking is.” Dino shakes his head and pushes himself off the wall. “Always wanted to go into one of these”, he says as he slides onto the cream coloured leather of the back seat.

“Where do you live?”

Dino throws out his arm. “Among the stars”, he declares and sighs contentedly as he settles back. His dream of spending an evening talking shop with Deacey has finally been fulfilled, looks like.

Roger chuckles. “Can’t drive you there, I’m afraid.”

“The Village.” As the driver speeds off into the night, Dino investigates all the little nooks and crannies of the car. “Oh my god, you’ve got an actual drinks cabinet in here! Complete with a set of champagne glasses. And...” He holds up the small silver box and rattles it, raising his eyebrows at Roger.

“Breath mints”, he says, keeping his face straight. “Help yourself?”

Dino considers it for a moment. “Actually, I’d rather have one of these...” He holds up a bottle of Moët.

“Thought the party’s over”, Roger says, but motions at him to open the bottle anyway.

“Roger my friend.” Dino leans forward, elbows on his knees and looks at him very seriously. “I’m in the back of a fucking Rolls Royce...”

“It’s a Mercedes...”

“...limousine, being chauffeured around New York with an actual rock star keeping me company.” He pops the cork and fills two glasses. “The only thing missing in this fantasy is a blowjob.” He winks as he hands Roger his glass.

“There should be spare hooker under the right seat if you’re interested.” Dino bursts out laughing. Roger takes a sip of champagne and looks up at Dino, just as his friend is wiping a drop of champagne off his chin. Dino is always one for flirty banter. He’s come on to him more times that Roger can count. It doesn’t mean anything. “But I don’t recommend it. It’s hell on the upholstery, you know.”

“You bastard know all about that, don’t you?”

Or rather, Dino doesn’t expect him to take him up on it. He did actually try to chat Roger up when they first met, that’s for sure. “Actually, there was that one time... well, one or two times... it might have happened occasionally.”

“Hm. Why don’t these things ever just happen to me?”

It’s not like Roger wants him to mean it. He’s not into guys. Anyone can get a blowjob from another guy. And dry humping hardly counts as sex at all. “Dunno. Pissed off an ancient deity lately?”
Dino pretends to think really hard. “I screwed a guy called Apollo last week. No wait, that was *at* the Apollo. You think that was it?”

But then he’d know. Then he’d know for sure, in practice, that this doesn’t do it for him. Might just settle the whole thing once and for all. “I think he must have rather liked that”, Roger says, slowly shifting gears. “Don’t you?”

‘Don’t’, some rational, non-inebriated part of his brain supplies. He chugs some more champagne to quieten it.

“Guess so”, Dino says.

Roger stretches his neck, trying to work up the nerve. “Yeah, because. Because there might be something in store for you."

Dino smiles, confused. “You don’t *actually* have a hooker locked away under your seat, right?”

Roger looks at him for a moment, letting the place go quiet. “No”, he says and leans forward.

Dino’s glass crashes to the floor. The taste of champagne on someone else’s tongue. Hands on his back, in his hair. Hands on his chest. Hands pushing him away. “...going on? Roger? The fuck!”

He opens his eyes. Dino stares at him. “Come on”, he says. “This is what you’ve always wanted, isn’t it?” He dives right back in. This time Dino lets him and Roger reaches for his fly. Until...

“Stop. Stop this right now.”

“Why?” Roger tries to get his mouth on Dino’s neck, but he twists away and Roger slides off.

“Because I’m fucking telling you to!”

The anger in Dino's voice makes Roger recoil like he’s been slapped.

“What’s wrong with you?” Dino keeps a hand to his mouth as if he can’t quite grasp what has just happened. He looks like a blushing maiden and it pisses Roger off.

“Oh come off it.”

Dino presses the call button. “Stop here, please.”

“The fuck are you doing?”

“Getting a cab.”

“Oh, come on, don’t act all prissy.”

The car slows to a halt. Dino opens the door.

“The fuck’s the matter with you”, Roger yells. He’s letting anger take over. It’s better than all the other things might be feeling right now. “You’re always coming on to me. Is that just for show? Can’t handle the real thing?”

“No”, Dino says quietly as he gets out. “But I’m not your fucking toy.” He looks back at Roger, an expression of cold fury on his face. “And I don’t fuck closet cases.”

The door slams shut.
Roger’s and Dom’s first child was born in May 1980. In this timeline, Roger only feels the echoes of that.

I have no idea what kind of job Roger’s sister actually holds. Researching family members makes me feel creepy, so I decided to just make things up.
If Roger believed in god, he’d be on his knees right now, promising to donate everything he owns if he makes it so last night didn’t happen. Or just to send down a lightning bolt and melt him off the face of the earth, that would work nicely too.

But he doesn't so he's going to have to live with this. His instinct is to slink away with his tail between his legs (so to speak) and just never contact anyone who knows Dino ever again. He's got other friends. There are other cities.

He's already got the phone in his hand to order a ticket down to LA.

He slams it back down. This bullshit. This is such bullshit. He’s not that much of a coward. An arsehole, maybe, and an idiot, at times, but not a bloody coward.

But calling him up is too much. He writes a note instead, inviting Dino out to dinner, and has the hotel arrange for a bicycle courier. He feels a bit like fucking Elizabeth Bennett as he waits for a reply.

When he bell boy finally returns with an answer, Roger takes a few deep, fortifying breaths before he opens it. Victorian heroine indeed.

How about dinner at my place, at 8.

PS: What is this, 1823?

+++  
The address leads him to a fairly dilapidated brown stone at the Northern border of Greenwich Village. Roger has picked up two bottles of wine on the way (red and white to make sure it goes with whatever is for dinner), belatedly realizing that this gives it a vaguely date-y feel. Which is exactly not the vibe he wants to go for.

While he’s still thinking about hiding the bottles in the scraggly hedgerow in front of the building, the door is opened by a tall blond man in a woollen jumper. “Hello, you must be Roger”, he says, shaking his hand. “I’m James. Come on in.”

A dinner party isn’t quite what Roger expected.

The small apartment is stuffed with all sorts of odds and ends. Guitar music and a fantastic garlicky smell is wafting into the hallway. Roger follows the smell into the sort of kitchen that immediately makes one feel at home: worn chairs, dried chilis and herbs hanging on the walls, photos and notes taped to the gigantic, very American fridge. In the middle of it, Dino, humming along to the music and chopping away at some greenery with a knife almost as long as he is tall.

“Hey”, Roger says and Dino turns around, a smile on his face.

“Hey yourself”, Dino says. “Dinner’s almost ready. Sit, please.” He takes both bottles from Roger and immediately selects the white. “Glad to see the pony express found its way back to you. I must say, I’ve never had a note hand delivered to me before.”
“Feels a bit black-and-white times, doesn't it? Er, listen, Dino, about last night...”

Just then, James steps into the kitchen, carrying a small wrapped parcel. “Before I forget”, he says. “Happy belated birthday from me too.”

Roger takes it from that near stranger, somewhat dumbstruck. “Er, thanks. That really isn’t...”

James waves him off. “It’s really just a little something.”

“I told him it wasn’t necessary, but he’s like that”, Dino said, a smile playing around his lips. A loving smile.

Oh.

Roger focuses hard on carefully unwrapping the box. Dino has a boyfriend. Roger jumped him, and he has a boyfriend. He’s never seen him with anyone, but they haven’t seen each other in almost a year. And he’s just assumed. Like an idiot.

The box reveals a small selection of delicious looking handmade truffles. “Wow. These look fantastic. Did you make them yourself?” Maybe, if he behaves really well, he’ll get out of here without having his nose broken by a jealous lover.

James shakes his head. “I try sometimes, but mine never look as good as these. I rang up my mum, she has a shop just a few blocks from here.”

Roger pops one into his mouth. He’s barely eaten a thing today, and the creamy-rich filling explodes into taste. “Wow”, he mumbles.

“Hey, hey, hey, don’t go spoiling your appetite.” Dino whacks him with a (not terrible clean) spatula. “I’ve been slaving away in here for hours!”

James crosses his arms and regards his boyfriend with a sly look. “Didn’t your friend offer to take you out?”

Dino shakes his head and puts a heavy iron cast pan down on the table. “Sunday night is pasta night”, he says.

James leans over at Roger and stage whispers, “Help, he’s turning into my mother before my very eyes”, which gets him whacked as well.

So Dino has a not just a boyfriend, but the boyfriend is actually a really nice guy and the two as a couple sweeter than a Belgian Truffle. If Dino’s plan is to drive him to self-flagellation, he’s on the right track.

Dinner is delicious and despite Roger’s guilty conscience nagging at him, quite enjoyable. James works for an insurance company in Brooklyn and has been with Dino for four years now.

“We met the ‘76 Liberation March”, Dino says proudly.

Roger wonders why he’s never seen him before, but doesn’t have the nerve to ask. “You go to the marches”, he asks instead. Dino doesn’t strike Roger as the political type at all. Melissa, Ed and Marco seem to be involved on some level, but every time conversation turns to politics, Dino likes to strip off his shirt and head for the dance floor.

James chuckled. “Oh yes. I was marching with the Gay Activist Alliance, very earnest and proper,
while this guy was dancing in a cage on the float behind me while people threw glitter at him.”

“Those were the days”, Dino says, a dreamy look in his eyes.

James rolls his eyes. “We got into a fight, then a discussion and then we went out for drinks.”

“Tried me six months to get into his pants”, Dino says. “It was like dating Queen Victoria.” He looks up at James, who is blushing madly. “Worth the wait though.”

“Yes, thank you.” James clears his throat and gets up. “Right. I gotta finish up on some work.”

“Always working”, Dino says, rolling his eyes.

They clear the table together, but then Dino shoos him away from the sink and back to the table. “I’ll do that later. We’ve got to talk.” It isn’t said menacingly or angry, but as matter of fact.

“Yes, we do.” Roger pours himself another glass of wine. He’ll need it. “Okay. So I’m an idiot. I shouldn’t have... I shouldn’t have jumped you like this and I shouldn’t have said... what I’ve said. And believe me, if I had known about James, I’d...”

“Leave James out of it”, Dino says. “He’s got nothing to do with it.”

“But he’s your... partner isn’t he?”

“Yes. But this has got nothing to do with him.”

“Okay, so anyway. I want to apologize for acting like a complete twat.”

“Apolgy accepted”, Dino says and sighs. “Thank god that’s over with. I hate holding grudges.”

Okay, that was too easy. “You didn’t seem terribly grudgy.”

“Oh, that was plenty grudgy, believe me”, he says. “James thought I was cross with him all day.”

“So you and James...”

Dino rolled his eyes. “You just can’t leave that alone, can you?”

“Sorry.”

“Short version: I’m a slutty party animal, he’s a boring accountant. He doesn’t mind me going out, as long as I don’t pester him to come with me.”

Roger ponders that for a while. “And the long version?”

“Tell you what”, Dino says and gets up for another bottle of wine, “I’ll tell you the long version once you’ve explained to me what the hell is going on with you.”

There it is. Roger couldn’t really have hoped to escape that.

“Touring is always crazy”, he says after a while. “Going from one place to the next, always surrounded by a huge crowd of people, the press, fans, crew, groupies... messes with your head.”

Dino took a sip of wine. “But you’re used to that.”

“Yes, I’m used to that. But...” Oh god, he can’t under any circumstances tell him, can he? Roger takes another sip of his wine. Sometimes it’s best to just open your mouth and see what comes out.
“My girlfriend dumped me”, he says. “Well, she wasn’t really my girlfriend, but...”

“You mean that German girl? Marlene?”

“Yes.”

“Right. Melissa told me she was so pissed at you the other night.”

Roger winces. “I know.”

“Didn’t you get dumped last year as well?”

“I thought gay guys were supposed to be tactful.”

“And another one gone, and another one gone”, Dino hums. “Anyway. That’s very sad and all, but it doesn’t explain anything, does it? I mean, jumping your gay friend after you’ve been dumped isn’t a standard response. Although I kind of wish it was.”

“Actually...” Roger takes a deep breath. He shouldn’t tell a soul, but... Fuck it, if Dino wants to rat him out to press, he’s got more than enough material already. “Fine. Okay. Listen. You can’t talk about this with anyone, okay?”

Dino’s eyes grow wide and he nods.

“I mean it. Not James, not Mel.”

“I promise.”

“Remember that conversation we had last year about whether men give better head than women?”

“Yes.”

Roger got out his cigarettes. “You mind?”

Dino shakes his head. “James’ll kill me tomorrow, but go ahead.”

“Okay, so.” Roger lights a smoke and inhales deeply. “So I did go on to test that theory.”

“Oh my god.”

“We, er, we went to the baths that night and...” He trails off, not sure how to put this.

Dino’s eyes are like saucers when he leans in. “Are you trying to tell me”, he whispers, “that you fucked Freddie Mercury at the tubs?!”

“What? No! Absolutely not, that’s not what...” Roger drains his wine glass. “For fuck’s sake, are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

“Sorry. So. So what happened then?”

Roger clears his throat. “I’m not sure how it happened, but there was all that porn and I was really horny, and, and so I got sucked off. By a guy. Not Freddie. Just some bloke.”

“How was it?”

“How do you think it was? Bloody brilliant is how it was.”
“Told you.” Dino crosses his arms and leans back with a smug grin. “So you made it a habit?”

“Kind of, I mean...” God, he can’t possibly tell him about Freddie. It’s just too big. “I don’t do much, but yes, sometimes I get off with a guy. And I don’t know why. I mean, I like girls. A lot. But sometimes it just gets to me and before I know what I’m doing I’m being tossed off by another guy and I have no idea why.”

“Wow.”

“And I’m not gay. Seriously, I’m just not. I’ve spent enough time with you guys to know that I’m not.” He stubs out his cigarette. “So last night... I dunno. I guess it was like a bet with myself. That I’d do it, suck off a guy, and I’d hate it and then the other stuff would stop too.”

“You wanted to suck my cock to prove to yourself you’re not gay.”

Roger crosses his arms and glares at him. “Yes”, he says, daring him to challenge his flawless logic.

“Hm.” Dino mulls this over for a few minutes. “You’re pretty messed up”, he says finally.

“Oh thanks. Yes, that’s really helpful.”

“Right, so what do you want me to say?”

“Oh, I don't know. Do you think I’m gay?”

“No, I don’t think you’re gay.”

“Thank you.” Roger expects relief. It doesn’t come. “Could you say that one more time, with more conviction?”

“I could have it printed on a t-shirt for you if you like.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

“Look, straight guys having their dicks sucked by sissies is a long and proud tradition. Maybe you have a touch of the bi, maybe not, and honestly I don’t give a damn. As long as you’re not an asshole about it (and for the record, you were a total asshole last night), who cares?” Dino lights another smoke. “Is it one specific guy you’re doing all this messing around with?”

Dangerous territory. “Yes”, Roger mumbles.

“And you only do it when he initiates.”

“Yes.” Oh damn it. “No. It used to be like that, but these days, sometimes it’s me. I don’t want to, but then I get into this weird sort of space where... where I just can’t stop myself and all the reasons why this is a really stupid idea just go flying out the window.”

“You know, usually I’d call that ‘being in love’...” Dino takes in Roger’s glare of death and quickly changes track, “but maybe ‘bullshit’ is the better word.”

“Bullshit? I’m baring the depths of my soul to you here!”

“You said you just can’t stop yourself, and sorry, but that’s bullshit. Maybe if we’re talking extreme circumstances like heroin addiction, or... or maybe Erik Estrada...” Dino trails off, temporarily distracted. Then he clears his throat. “Barring those two cases it’s not a matter of can’t.”
You just don’t want to stop.” A few seconds later, Dino’s eyes grow wide as if he’s just thought of something. “It’s not Erik Estrada, is it? I’m going to murder you with those limp-wristed sissie hands if...”

Roger buries his face in his hands laughing. “Jesus Christ, Dino, no, it’s not Erik... whoever, I don’t even know who that is!”

“He’s in CHiPs and he’s the hottest motorcycle-riding highway police man ever to grace the screen of my television. I’d show you a picture, but that might be dangerous, given the fragile state of your heterosexuality at the moment, so...”

“One more word, and you won’t get a VIP pass to our shows ever again.”

“As I was saying”, Dino smoothly changes track, “a manly, butch, gold-star straight guy like you can stop the whole thing. If you really want to.”

Roger sighs. “Yeah, right.”

“I mean, I don’t necessarily think you should. If it gets you off and makes you happy and the other guy too, why not go for it?”

“Because I don’t like men.”

“And I don’t like crime shows, and still I watch CHiPs.”

“Because it’s not...” He has to grin before he even says it, “...necessary. There are more than enough girls around.”

“Most good things aren’t necessary.”

“The press would be all over u- me if this gets out.”

“Hmm. You know, I got beaten up by what I thought was my best friend when he found out I was gay.”

“Shit. That's..." But Dino waves him off. "Go on. Your next excuse?"

My mom...” Dino’s withering look makes him shut up. “If this gets out, it might break up the band”, he says finally, expecting Dino to reply with a variant of “Gay people have been losing their jobs over this forever.” But instead Dino grows dead serious.

“Alright. Stop fucking this guy immediately.”

Roger throws up his hands. “I’m trying!”

“Do you really think it would affect the band that much”, he asks after a while. “I mean, they must know you’re going to the gay clubs. And they definitely know about Freddie and they don’t care.”

“Oh, I don’t think Brian and John would be repelled or anything. Bewildered, more like,” He takes a moment to think about it. “The thing is, we’re toeing the line as it is. With the name “Queen” and Freddie’s stage antics and his costumes and his lyrics and his... his everything, really. And he gets away with it, partly, I think because the rest of us are so normal. If it turns out I’m a ‘queer’, too” – if it turns out me and the lead singer nip off for a shared wank during breaks, he adds mentally – “that’s just one step too far. I mean the music press already hate us, but EMI don’t give a fuck.
because we earn them a shit ton of money. But if that stops, if our records don’t sell, if our tours don’t sell out…” He shakes his head. “Freddie would never go back to playing 2000-seaters. I wouldn’t either.”

Roger is taken aback at his own words. He hasn’t actually considered the consequences this thing might have, beyond his own mortification.

It doesn’t stop swirling around in his mind all the way back to the hotel late that night after they finished off the wine. This thing they’re doing, it’s not like the drugs or the parties or the girls, something that’s lurid and scandalous but glamorous and part of what makes rock stars interesting. If this got out, it might end his career.

Worse, it might end the band. Splinter apart those friendships that mean more than anything to him in the world.

Band members fucking each other never ends well. That’s why it’s never a good idea to have girls in bands.

He can see that future vividly, like he’s watching a movie: The four of them struggling in solo projects or forming new bands that can never step out of the shadow of their former success. Half-hearted reunions, bitter accusations, all their dirty laundry being aired in public, John gone, Freddie gone...

No.

He cannot let that happen.

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At the hotel, he steers his feet firmly to the door of Freddie’s suite.

A very sleepy looking Phoebe opens the door.

“Is Freddie there?”

“He’s still out with Paul and the others.” He looks at Roger questioningly. “Anything the matter?”

“Nah, just... just thought you guys might be having a party or something.” He tries to act chipper, like he’s really in the mood for a late night bash.

“You might still catch them at the Flamingo”, Phoebe suggests.

“Yeah, right. Thanks, anyway.” He saunters off like’s actually considering it, but once he’s around the corner, he heads straight for his own suite.

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Roger presses his pillow over his head, but the knocking doesn’t go away. He jumps out of bed and marches towards the door with the wrath of god coursing through him. If that is Crystal’s idea of a prank, Roger is going to end him.

He flings open the door.

Freddie, in full clubbing gear, a white shirt translucent with sweat peaking out under a short leather jacket. His hair is mussed and his cheeks flushed, dark eyes rimmed with a trace of kohl. “You called upon me”, he asks in his most snobbish tone.
Roger’s too busy reigning in his Pavlovian reflexes, demanding he grab and pull and own to answer, so Freddie brushes past him, a smirk on his a face.

“I...” Roger turns around, but Freddie is on him, slamming the door shut with the weight of Roger’s body. Roger is bucking into him automatically and before he knows when and how, Freddie’s kissing him deep and urgent and he’s making those tiny, breathless noises in the back of his throat that have Roger aching for it.

It might break up the band. It might break up the band.

Roger ducks away, holding Freddie off with an outstretched arm to his chest. "Listen, er.” God he sounds ragged. “Maybe this isn't such a good idea."

Freddie just looks at him.

“Look, I mean. What, what are we even doing here, hm? I don’t like men, you don’t like”, he gestures at himself, “the pretty blonde type, so this... what is this even, huh?”

“It’s... fun?” Freddie over-articulates the word, like he’s talking to a three year-old.

“Yeah, but it could ruin us. I mean seriously. No one gives a fuck what you do out in the clubs, and the strippers and the groupies and the backstage carnage actually help us get press, but the two of us, doing it? That would actually make us officially the gay band. It would be too much. People would crucify us. Not to mention Brian and John. And what for? I mean, there are a thousand ways to get our rocks off. We can basically walk into a bar and point our fingers. So.” The words just tumble out of his mouth, the reader’s digest version of everything that’s been going around in his head. It’s the first time they ever actually talk about this and it’s like a dam burst.

“I see.”

“It’s probably just something we had to get out of our system and... and I think we did. Right?”

“Right”, Freddie says. “Yes, we... yes.”

“Yeah”, Roger says, slapping Freddie’s shoulder in a very manly way. “So we can go back to... to how things were.”

“Very well.” Freddie nods to himself. Then he reaches for the door handle.

“Where are you going”, Roger asks, stupidly.

“Gonna find myself someone else to fuck”, Freddie says and pulls the door open.

He might have meant it as a joke but to Roger it feels like a slap to the face.

“Hey. Are we... are we okay?”

“Of course we are, dear.” Freddie doesn’t even look back as he walks out the door.

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He doesn’t see much of Freddie after that, which is probably for the best. It’s not that Roger is afraid he’s not going to able to resist the pull or anything, but it would feel weird to hang out in a sex club together after all that’s happened. And besides, Freddie is completely in the thrall of the nordic man mountain he pulled on Roger’s birthday.
And anyways, Roger’s got his own friends, after all. He does some sightseeing in New York – he hasn’t actually seen much of the city apart from its nightlife. There’s a short pang as he remembers that this is what he’s planned to do with Marlene. But then, it’s her loss.

He accompanies Dino to a band rehearsal, and they’re not half bad. Roger toys with the idea of inviting them as a surprise special guest for one of the Madison Square Garden shows later in the tour, but the last time they tried something like that, the support act got booed off stage and someone even threw a wine bottle at them. They had to cut their set short and Brian got so pissed off at their own audience he actually went out there and gave them a scolding.

Besides, while they play straightforward rockabilly, the group looks gayer than the Village People.

In early August they go back on the tour trail, this time through the South, up the East Coast and then to Toronto, bypassing New York and New England.

Getting back up on stage with Freddie is hard. They have to play off each other so much that Roger can’t just focus on his drumming and ignore everything else. But while before, Freddie’s antics had been amusing, funny or – at times – plain exasperating, now Roger finds them worryingly distracting. He’s glad he has a drum kit between himself and Freddie – he has no idea how Brian and John managed all those years.

Off stage, they do their best to be normal. Hanging out with the others, bitching at each other, even heading off to the clubs every now and then (though never on their own). But they make very sure they sit apart in the car, on the sofas, that their feet don’t accidentally brush under the breakfast table – all the things that just naturally happened ever since they’d known each other.

It’s a mess. And Roger can only hope that it gets better over time. Luckily, distractions are always just a club away.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, going on stage and scolding the audience for being mean to the support group is such a Brian thing to do <3 As a fan recalls: "There were lots and LOTS of boos and early in The Blasters' set someone threw a wine bottle right past the lead singer and into the drum set. I remember that clearly. Their opening set was cut short, and Brian May came out and scolded us."
Roger pulls up his pants. “The clap?”

“We should have the test results in a few days”, the doctor says, putting away the swab. “But it’s clearly a bacterial infection, so we’ll start you on a course of antibiotics right away.”

“Great.” Roger crosses his arms and scowls. This is so bloody embarrassing.

“Nothing to worry about. A week of antibiotics and you should be right as rain again.”

God, he hopes so. Right now it feels like someone’s pouring acid through his dick every time he has to piss.

“You should also inform your partner. Those kinds of infections can often remain symptomless but have long-term consequences if left untreated, so although it might be an awkward conversation to have...”

“Sure.” He doesn’t even know Sandy’s last name, let alone her phone number.

The doctor gives him a stern look. “Any partners”, he adds.

“Yes, alright.” God, why can’t the old turtle just get on with it and hand him his meds so he can get the fuck out of here.

“In which case it is particularly important that you make the use of condoms a priority, son.” And now he’s going all paternal on him. Great.

Roger clenches his teeth. He bloody well knows that, he’s not stupid. But he’d been horny and lonely and more than just a little drunk and she was soooo eager. Of course, once he realized he didn’t have any rubbers with him, he should have just called it off or done something else. She did say, “Oh it’s alright, I’m on the pill”, but when it comes to that, he doesn’t usually trust the word of a complete stranger. Especially when she’s just as drunk and horny as he is. But then she said, “And you can just pull out in time”, and somehow he’s taken that for solid reasoning and humped away at her like a brainless idiot.

He's not usually like that. As much as the others sometimes paint him as a hormone driven idiot when it comes to women, he has managed not to leave a trail of babies behind him. But that night, he just didn't care, he didn't want to think about all the things that might go wrong... and now he's being presented with the bill.

"Refrain from any sexual activity until you have been free of symptoms for at least five days”, The doctor says as he writes up the prescription. He looks at him over the rim of his glasses as if he's silently adding 'if you can manage to do that'. “Also, no alcohol and a lot of rest while you’re on the medication.”
Sure, it’s not like vodka and three hours of sleep logged on a plane are the staples of touring life or anything. "Alright. Thanks, doc."

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Everyone knows, of course. His grandma’s knitting circle has nothing on a contingent of bored roadies when it comes to their capacity to spread gossip, and rumours about the wild night of debauchery that led to his situation are making the rounds. Apparently, he’d made a bet with Freddie that he’d sample every brothel in Memphis in a single night (which he doesn’t believe is even physically possible for a mere mortal).

He doesn’t bother arguing against it. That would only make it worse.

Anyway, being on tour without the comforts of alcohol and easy sex is kind of a drag. He quickly finds out that the advice against drinking isn’t just trite doctor-speak when a single glass of wine before the next show has him so nauseated that he barely makes it to the acoustic set before staggering off stage and vomiting right on Crystal’s shoes. All to the dulcet tones of Freddie and Brian performing “Love of my Life”. Very atmospheric. After that it’s teetotal for him.

As he doesn’t see the point of going out if he can’t even have a drink, he prefers to stay back at the hotel. He watches telly, orders room service and plays Scrabble with whoever isn’t feeling like going out that night. Most nights that’s Brian, although Deacey and Crystal also make appearances.

Brian and John make careful attempts to get him to talk about whatever is going on, but Roger brushes them off. There is nothing to talk about. Not anymore.

Freddie also offers to stay with him one night, but it’s half-hearted and Roger quickly waves him off. It’s sad that they don’t do this anymore, just spend a quiet night in. Everything that happened since Christmas hovers like a spectre between them. But they’ll get there, in time. He hopes.

The whole episode has its perks though. As he’s now in bed by midnight, he has enough energy for a quick tour of the cities they are playing in, to take in some sights and find little presents that his mom and sister might enjoy. He sees more of America in that week than he has in all the tours before.

Still, it’s a relief when he can finally join the fray again. John has invited them all out for drinks on his birthday. Roger ends up at the bar, celebrating the end of his involuntary bout of sobriety with a double whiskey sour. At some point, Joe Fanelli sits down next to him.

“So”, Roger says. “What did I miss?”


“Didn’t know you were that fond of me.” It’s not that he and Joe hate each other or anything, but if it weren’t for Freddie, they probably wouldn’t end up in the same bar very often.

“I’m not, but His Nibs was getting insufferable.”

He nods at Freddie, who is back in a corner of the bar, talking a thousand miles per minute at some poor, star-struck waiter.

“Thought he was all distracted by his Viking.” He’d seen Thor Arnold around a lot.

Joe grins. “You know what the Viking did?”

“What?”
“First, he refused Freddie’s offer to accompany him, all expenses taken care off.”

“Blasphemy!”

“I know.” Joe takes a sip of his drink. “Next, he shows up in Charlotte, unannounced, a huge bunch of flowers in hand.”

Oh. That guy is clever. “How did Freddie take it?”

“He was livid, of course. He hates surprises. And people acting all, you know, independent and stuff.” Joe grins again. “But he also loves flowers. And being wooed. And giant, soft-hearted, muscle-bound gods.”

Roger can just about keep himself from rolling his eyes. Why does everyone have to keep repeating that? The guy isn’t \textit{that} good looking.

“So it’s all very romantic high-drama for a few days, and then Thor decides he has to fly home again. For work.”

Roger can’t help grinning. “How dare he?”

“Important work, even. Guy’s a doctor or a nurse or something. And then it was all pouting, tantrums and smashed mirrors a few days. Until today.” Joe raises his glass. “So cheers!”

Roger highly doubts it has anything to do with him. Most likely, Freddie’s natural cycle of infatuation and boredom has just run its course. For now. If Thor plays his hand clever enough, he might keep it going quite a while.

Which is a good thing. Thor sounds like a decent guy, at least. Freddie sure could use someone in his life who keeps his own schedule and doesn’t let himself be swallowed up by Freddie’s crazy life style. And who doesn’t try to mooch off him. A doctor even. Jer Bulsara would be so proud.

Roger knocks back his whisky before he says something stupid.
Toronto, 30 August 1980

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Toronto is the final gig before another ten-day break around Freddie’s birthday, which will of course be celebrated in New York. Freddie’s birthday parties are always something to behold, but this time Roger will head back to England instead, to visit his family. He doesn't want a repeat of the last birthday party in New York.

And anyways, he needs a break away from Freddie. It's not that he's pining (of course not, there's nothing to pine about, for fuck's sake!), but constantly having to watch his every move and word is getting on his nerves. He's never been good at holding his tongue, but now he keeps second guessing himself, always making sure he doesn't accidentally sound flirtatious or anything like that. So their interactions are staid and boring, and the more Roger tries to be cool and relaxed, the less he feels like it. He ignores his band mates' worried looks as best as he can and just tries to get on with on with it.

Today's show is in an open-air stadium that is just about the most ugly building Roger has ever seen in his life. When he complains about it, one of the Canadian stage hands just nods with a chagrined look and tells him it's called 'the mistake by the lake'. It's a very fitting name.

The audience, however, is amazing. Playing open air is always daunting, because so much of the sound and the energy circulating between band and audience can get lost. But tonight, it works. Maybe it's the added nervousness of playing a stadium, or the knowledge that it's the last gig before the break, but when Roger goes on stage, everything that's on his mind is wiped out and replaced by the roar of the crowd and the wind in his hair and the pumping of his heart. For the first time in weeks he feels truly in flow with the band, the audience, the rhythm, the music. And when Freddie poses on the drum riser with his guitar during Crazy Little Thing, Roger doesn't try to control that surge of excitement going through him, but uses it to play harder and faster and better than ever before.

After, he feels high and hot and pumped up. Backstage, he and John keep whooping and shouting at each other nonsensically in between shots of Stolichnaya.

“Come on, guys, let’s head over to the Grey Goose”, Brian says, a huge smile on his face. “My treat.”

Hooting and jeering they trump after him. The Grey Goose has become almost something like a local for them when they're in town. It has a gallery that offers both privacy and an amazing view of the dance floor, a brilliant selection of Belgian beer and a fantastic DJ.

Roger doesn’t even wait to get a drink. He rarely dances, but this time he just heads straight for the dance floor, floating on leftover adrenaline from the show. Brian’s curly mane comes into view, and then Freddie's there as well, and of course there’s Deacy with his strange, bouncy moves.

"We don't dance", Brian shouts at Roger over the music. "What's happening?"

Roger just laughs and shakes his head and then it's all four of them, just rocking and rolling their hearts out.

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Roger takes a deep, deep drag of his cigarette, holds it, then watches the white smoke disappear into the night. The sky is crystal clear and the stars are blinking overhead. He thinks back to their wild night in New Orleans two years ago, how they’d all lain in the park and had Brian explain the stars to them. They should do that again, all of them together. Maybe without the wild goose chase beforehand.

“Got one for me?”

Roger turns his head. His hair rasps against the rough brick of the wall he's leaning against. “You don’t smoke.”

“Oh, but I do.” The cigarette is plucked from him by elegant fingers. “Haven’t you read the papers?”

Freddie leans against the wall next to him, eyes closed. His skin is shiny with sweat and he shivers lightly in the cool night air. Roger wants to see it again. He watches hypnotized as Freddie’s plush lips wrap around the cigarette and his cheeks hollow.

Freddie lets out a stream of smoke. “See something you like”, he asks without even opening his eyes.

“Fuck you.” Roger says lightly, not looking away.

Freddie ducks his head and bites his lips to hide his smile. Then he turns his head and looks up at Roger from under his lashes. Speculating. Waiting. Inviting.

That unbelievable, exasperating, smug bastard.

This is a bad idea on so many levels. It's already fucking up their dynamic. It's already hard enough to keep it together on stage. It might break up their friendship. It might break up the...

“Oh fuck it.” Roger takes hold of Freddie’s damp shirt, presses him into the wall and crushes their mouths together. Not just their mouths, their bodies, head to toe and everything in between.

It’s been so long. Roger’s getting hard just from this and he wants to devour Freddie then and there.

Freddie twists his head away. “Car.”

“Huh?” Roger is too busy licking his way down Freddie’s exquisite neck to listen.

“I appreciate your enthusiasm, oh”, Freddie gasps as Roger sucks a bit of skin into his mouth, "but we really can’t do this here.” He jerks his head in the direction of the door and then Roger hears it too. Steps, voices.

He jumps away. “Shit!”

“Come on.”

They practically run around the building to the waiting car, slowing down at the last moment to compose themselves.

“To the Ritz”, Freddie shouts, throwing himself into his seat and it’s all Roger can do not to leap onto him. But as much as the darkened back of the limousine feels private, and as discreet as the driver may be, this is still a public place.

So he settles on the other side of the car, fingers drumming a nervous beat on his thighs. They
Roger’s mind is racing. This isn't a spontaneous fumble in a darkened corner, so easily chalked up to the heat of the moment. This is premeditated. They are in a car, speeding towards the hotel, towards the privacy of a luxury suite, and they're going to... Roger claws his hands into the leather upholstery. Five minutes. Just five more minutes, and then just the lobby and the elevator and the hallway, and then... And then.

Then Freddie takes a bloody eternity (or at least the length of one of Brian’s guitar solos) to open the bloody door while it's all Roger can do to keep his hands away from him while they're still in the hallway.

The door falls shut with a bang: Roger blindly reaches for Freddie and when he loses his footing in the dark, he doesn't even try to remain standing, he just goes down and takes the whole world with him.

“Fuck!”

Roger claws at Freddie's shirt, hitching it up and out of the way, then goes straight for Freddie’s belt. But just as he's getting somewhere, Freddie takes his face in his hands and pulls him down into a searing, blinding kiss. He moans as Freddie's clever tongue slides along his own, teasing and demanding at once. By the time Roger has got his breath back, his trousers and pants are down to his knees and his cock is firmly in Freddie’s hand.

“How did you do that?”

“Magic”, Freddie says and flips them with one bump of his hips. The fact that Roger’s legs are tangled in his jeans gives him an unfair advantage there.

“Hey!”

“Don’t bitch, you’ll like it”, Freddie says and slithers down Roger’s body.

“Yeah, okay. That’s okay, I... oh, oh, yeah, I like it.” The slick heat of Freddie's mouth engulfs him and why, why has he ever given this up? But it's over way too soon, because just as Roger really gets going, Freddie takes him in hand and crawls back up the length of his body. Roger raises his head and blinks down at him. “I didn’t say you could stop, did I?”

Freddie chuckles. “You liked that, didn’t you”, he asks, his breath hot on Roger’s cheek, his hand moving hard and tight on his cock. Roger doesn’t dignify that with an answer. He can only lose.

“But I don’t want this over fast. Not this time.”

Roger reaches up, slides his hands into Freddie’s short hair and pulls him down, sliding his lips against Freddie in an open mouthed caress. God, he tastes good. He sneaks up his other hand from Freddie’s slim hips over his slimmer waist until he can drag his finger one by one over a nipple that hardens instantly. Freddie sucks in a sharp breath.

Oh. That's interesting. “Liked that, didn’t you?”

“Yes, do it again.”

Roger strokes over it with his thumb in a short, breathless rhythm and Freddie sinks his teeth into his lower lip to keep in his groan. Roger, delighted in having the upper hand for once, pinches and rolls and strokes and presses down mercilessly, until Freddie lets go of his cock, slaps his hands away with a breathless laugh and presses his wrist into the carpet.
“I want you to fuck me tonight”, he whispers against Roger’s lips, swallowing his breaths. “I want you to. Will you do that?”

“Oh Jesus Christ.” The world grows fuzzy round the edges as every remaining drop of blood in his body rushes south. That's... that's so far beyond...

Freddie grinds his erection into Roger's. He's still in his jeans and the rough denim chafes but it only makes Roger want more. “Will you? You’ll like it, I promise.”

“I don’t... I don’t know what to...” It's been a long, long time since Roger last had to admit to a knowledge gap in the sex department. He knows in theory of course and it's not like it's bloody rocket science, but he also knows how easy it is to hurt someone with that, and he can't risk that.

The kiss is grounding, slowing, taking his frantic thoughts and focussing them on that soft press of lips and tongue. He ignores the tickling of that infernal moustache as good as he can. “I’ll take care of you”, Freddie whispers, “I’ll make you feel so good.”

“Oh bloody hell.” He reaches for Freddie’s trousers again. He might not know much, but these have to come off, that's for sure.

“Will you?”

“Yes, fuck, of course I’ll fucking do it.” And if Freddie would just hold still for a moment they might actually get somewhere.

In one swift movement, Freddie pushes himself up onto his hands and knees. “Bed”, he says and stands up, pulling at Roger’s hand. Christ, they haven’t made it more than two yards from the door.

Roger has no clear recollection how they make it onto the bed without serious injury. He loses his trousers and pants somewhere on the way, and Freddie makes quick work of his shirt. Then Freddie sits back on his knees and efficiently strips out of his remaining clothes, never taking his eyes off Roger.

They’ve never been like that. They’ve been naked together, and they’ve had sex (or at least something close to it, Roger's always been undecided whether handjobs count or not), but never like this, in this plush bed, with all the time in the world and bathed in the soft light of the bedside lamp.

It's real. It's so very real. This isn’t a heat-of the moment fumble where he can pretend it's just another warm body in lieu of what he really wants. This is the real thing. And Freddie, with his skinny legs and his moustache and his chest hair and his long, hard erection is very, very male.

Roger closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. He reaches out and pulls Freddie to him. Warm arms around him, warm lips on his.

He leans forward, deepens the kiss, snakes his arms around Freddie. Then Freddie pulls them both down, Roger on top of him and wraps his legs around his hips so their cocks rub against each other. Before he can even think about it, Roger thrusts his hips against Freddie and there's heat and friction, way too much friction on their damp skin, but stopping isn’t an option so he does it again. And again.

“Wait just...” Freddie strains and reaches for something, but Roger doesn't want him to get up and interrupt them again, he just wants to hold him and rut against him forever. “…just wait for one second, you bloody horndog.” Freddie laughs breathlessly and it's the most beautiful sound in the
Freddie fumbles with a small tube and then their cocks are coated in slick and the next time Roger
thrusts it feels so good his toes curl up. “Oh holy fuck, this is good.”

“You get all religious when you get worked up”, Freddie whispers. “I like tha... oh.”

“And you go all speechless when you have your tits played with”, Roger says, using Freddie’s
momentary distraction to increase his speed. He twists Freddie's nipple between his fingers until he
arches his back underneath him, head thrown back against the bed sheet. Hell, whatever anyone
else might think about it, this is sex. It’s two bodies writhing together in pleasure, chasing that
moment when all the tension, the strain, the energy collapses in one...

...oh, yes, fuck one blinding sensation of sweet, sweet release, oh god.

“No! No, no, no, no, stop this, stop this right now – dammit.”

“Hmmm?” Roger raises his head and blinks beatifically at Freddie’s glare.

“You bastard”, Freddie says. “You promised”

Roger nuzzles his nose into Freddie’s cheek. “You felt sooo good.”

“How quickly can you go again?”

Roger’s body feels like it weighs a ton and every thought is slow, like its winding its way through
molasses. “Tuesday?”

Freddie groans. “I hate you.” He pushes Roger off him and rolls out of bed.

“Hey, hey, where you goin’?” Roger makes a half-hearted attempt to reach for him, but misses. It's
not like he wants to leave him hanging. He'll take care of him. He just needs a blessed second.

“Having a wank”, Freddie snaps. “Under the shower with these up my arse.” He gives Roger a
two-fingered salute, but he doesn't look truly angry. A bit vexed, more like.

Roger giggles and rolls onto his back. He can’t help it, even when Freddie slams the bathroom door
behind himself, it’s so... It’s like he’s high on something. He didn’t do it on purpose, it had just felt
really, really good (although he can't deny a bit of relief). And it’s not like they can’t try against
next time, so...

Slowly, he comes out of the fog.

Next time.

It’s not even a question for him now. He just assumes a next time, and apparently he’s just
accepted that he’s actually going fuck Freddie, which is... which is a whole nother kettle of... thing.
Worse, he’s promised to do it. And while they were having sex, it didn’t even seem all that scary.
But now? Pretty scary. And more than a little exciting too, because that's just how he is.

And what if Freddie expects him to return the favour?

No. He’s told Freddie the very first time that isn’t going to happen. If Freddie just assumes a tit for
tat, that’s his problem, not Roger’s.

Somewhat sobered, he gets up and gets dressed. He debates for a moment whether he should stay
and wait for Freddie or just get the hell out of here. He doesn’t want the night to end on a sour note, but would just leaving make things better or worse? He could leave a note maybe. But what on earth should he write? “Hey, thanks for the shag, next time let’s do it proper?” “Freddie, I don’t know what this is but please let’s not let it go weird again?” Why isn’t there an etiquette book for these kinds of situations?

While he’s still debating with himself, the bathroom door opens and Freddie comes out, wrapped in one of his favourite silk kimonos.

“I was just...” Roger jerks his thumb at the door.

Freddie gives him a look that isn’t free of reproach, but whatever he’s done under the shower must have tempered his mood. “Sure”, he says and turns to get something from the dresser.

"That was..." That was what. Nice? Fun? The best sex in years? "Er, thanks anyway." Smooth, Taylor, very smooth.

Freddie looks up, an amused smile on his face. "You're welcome", says with a small formal bow.

“Good night, then.” Roger has just reached for the door handle when a hand on his shoulder makes him turn.

Freddie presses a short, chaste kiss on his lips. “Good night”, he mumbles.

"Night", Roger repeats, a little stunned, then gets the hell out of there.

His lips are still tingling when he falls asleep that night.

Chapter End Notes

The Grey Goose is made up. I don't know where the band actually went for drinks in Toronto.

Yay, finally a sex scene in which Roger is present enough to actually take in a bit of what's going on. And he doesn't bolt immediately after! \o/
New York, 5 September 1980

So Roger stays in New York for Freddie’s birthday party after all. Although speaking of a birthday party isn’t technically correct, it’s more like one long series of parties and at one point everyone gives Freddie presents. Roger has been in a bit of pickle, because he hadn’t planned to be there and therefore needs a birthday present on the quick. It’s Phoebe who nudges him in the right direction: tickets for Turandot with Pavarotti in the Met Sunday night. Gerry somehow makes it happen that they got box seats even. Freddie loves Turandot, and he’ll love it even more that Roger is willing to suffer through it for him.

(Roger doesn't truly hate opera. He even likes some of the music a lot, and sometimes listens to recordings at home. It's just all that sitting around in a darkened auditorium, not being allowed to move muscle lest some stuffy 90-year old socialite hushes you with all the indignity a stuck-up toff with nothing better to do that annoys him. And then you're not even allowed to argue back. Also, the so-called plots are bloody ridiculous. He tried reading up on the story of Il Trovatore before he went to see it, but stopped after two sentences because it was so utterly bewildering.)

Brian and Deacy are there for the birthday after a brief trip back to LA with the wives and children, as well as most of the crew, Mary, Peter Straker and a couple of other old friends of Freddie’s. Freddie invites Roger to bring along anyone he likes, so Melissa, Arturo and the others make frequent appearances as well – all except Dino, who’s in bed with the flu, probably cursing the gods. As a consolation, Roger gets the whole band to sign a Get-Well-Card.

Also there in all his shiny glory is Thor the Bore along with a couple of his friends who Freddie takes to calling his New York daughters. Every single one of them has the exact same moustache. Add in Phoebe, Paul and Freddie himself and you’d think this is a motto party. Roger notes with some satisfaction that while Freddie is perfectly polite and jokey with Thor, when he leans in to kiss him, Freddie turns his head at the last moment so his lips land on his cheek. Also Freddie spends more time talking to Roger than Thor. Not that Roger has timed it or anything.

Freddie has stamina, there’s no doubt about that. Over the course of the weekend, the make-up of the crowd changes as people drop out to get a good night’s sleep while others come in to take their place. The only one who is always there in the middle of the action is Freddie. And even when he’s very obviously running on fumes, he refuses to be outpartied by anyone.

Saturday night finds them all at The Spike, another dark and sleazy club where the music is too loud for conversation – but conversation isn’t what you’re there for anyway.

Roger finds himself pounding bourbon with Marco the biker – who’s going through a messy breakup and needs someone to pour his heart out to. The details are beyond Roger’s comprehension at that point, but he can nod grimly and order another round of shots when Marco’s lips start trembling and that seems all that’s required of him.

At 4, the club closes, so he invites everyone back to his suite to keep the party going.

At 5, he’s completely fucked. Not just drunk as a skunk but also bone-deep exhausted. He just isn’t 20 anymore. The natural high that sustained him all night falters. He leaves the others to it and heads into the bedroom just next door. The last thing sees is one of Paul’s friends trying to do Russian squat dancing and crashing right into a coffee table. Despite the racket Roger drifts off in
seconds.

The bed dips beside him. Bright light is falling through the windows and it’s gone quiet next door. Roger blinks his eyes open. “What...?”

“Shh, go back to sleep, darling.”

“Freddie?” Roger tries to sit up, but a gentle, persistent hand on his shoulder presses him back down. “I can’t”, Roger mumbles. “Seriously, I’m knackered, Freddie, we can’t...”

“I know, dear, it’s okay.”

Roger hears the soft rustle of bedding as Freddie settles into bed next to him, far to the other side, very prim and proper.

“Is that alright”, Freddie asks, his voice soft and small.

“Yeah”, Roger says and relaxes back into the mattress. “Yeah, course it’s alright, Freddie.”

He’s almost drifted back into sleep when Freddie said very quietly: “I don’t like sleeping alone.”

Roger shifts his hand just far enough that it touches Freddie’s.

+++  Something stirs next to him.

Roger startles awake.

“Don't wake up”, Freddie whispers. “It’s only half ten.”

Roger groans.

Freddie pats his hand. “Get some more sleep. I gotta head back.”

Right. At some point people will wonder where Freddie is. It's not that unusual for members of the band ending up staying in each others suites when the night got too long (or at least it didn't use to be, back before families were a thing), but too often and it will starting to look weird. And while there were a number of people at the party he might have spent the night with, if he wants a decent chance at sneaking back into his suite, he better leave early.

Freddie slips on his shoes and tiptoes to the door. When he opens it, the smell of stale cigarettes and spilt beer wafts into the bedroom. Roger grimaces and buries his face in the pillow. He hears Freddie chuckle softly, and then the door closes.

Roger tries to go back to sleep for a couple of minutes, but it’s a lost cause. He might as well get up now. There’s not much to do today, except for the opera tonight, so he can always grab some sleep later on. He calls the reception to get the cleaning brigade in and heads for the shower.

So he’d slept with Freddie Mercury.

He’d noticed that Freddie was barely spending a moment unaccompanied. Roger would go spare if he’d have someone around him 24/7 (one of the reasons touring fucks with his mind), but Freddie actually encourages it. When they’d recorded the last album, Freddie had joined them a few days later in Munich because he had agreed to give an interview back in London. The problem was, he absolutely refused to take the plane on his own. So Ratty, who was actually very busy organizing
the transport of their gear back home from the last Japan trip, had to fly with him to Germany and then back to London the next day.

Roger charted it up to Freddie being a diva, but maybe there’s more to it.

*I hate sleeping alone.*

Of course, they can’t keep doing that. Not regularly anyway. Best friends with eccentric sleeping habits will only get them so far.

Although it had been nice, waking up next to someone warm and familiar.

Roger switches the shower to cold.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the ridiculously short chapter. But I couldn't really integrate it into the next one, so here we go. Anyway, at least it's a sweet one, right?

I also merged two later chapters and adjusted the chapter count accordingly. Don't worry, you won't miss out on anything!

If you want to read some hilarious summaries of ridiculous opera plots, please look [here](#).
Kansas City, 12 September 1980

Chapter Notes

Things get a bit cringey and sad.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The drink is snatched out of Roger’s hand.

“Hey!”

“I want you sober.”

“Well, I want me drunk.” Roger stretches to get his glass back, but as he is seated, it’s no problem for Freddie to hold it out of reach.

“We are in Kansas City, so I understand your thinking, but this is non-negotiable, my dear.”

“Have all the drivers gone on strike or what?”

Freddie bends down so he can whisper in Roger’s ear. “I’m gonna get fucked tonight.” Roger’s pulse speeds up. “And it’s either you, or that guy with the sideburns over there.”

He follows Freddie’s glance. The guy with the sideburns looks like he butchers roadkill for a hobby.

Roger stares at Freddie open-mouthed.

“My room, then, half an hour.” Freddie knocks back the shot – Roger’s shot – and slams it back on the table. “Don’t bother with flowers.”

+++ The hallway is deserted. Still, Roger looks nervously left and right as he’s rapping on Freddie’s door.

It springs open. “You’re late.” Freddie, in his Kimono. Freshly showered, his hair still damp. There’s a jittery, slightly distracted air about him. That rule about being sober only applied to Roger then.

Roger quickly steps inside and pushes the door closed. Only then does he take his hand from behind his back and holds it out.

Freddie’s mouth pops open. He looks from the single, lopsided freesia to Roger, then huffs out a laugh as he takes the rather pathetic looking flower from him. “Where the hell did you even get that at this hour?”

“Nicked it from someone’s front garden.” Sitting at the bar, waiting for the 30 minutes to pass (and with no drinks to keep him company) had been intolerable, so he decided to walk back to the hotel and came past the flower bed on the way.
“I like freesias”, Freddie says as he carefully lays it down on a dresser.

“Good to know”, Roger says. This is getting really uncomfortable. The flower was supposed to be a bloody joke. Having Freddie go all mushy wasn’t the plan.

“Come on in then. Drink?”

Roger follows Freddie into the living room. This is weird. It’s the first time they’d planned something like that. All the other times they’d been propelled along, too far gone too fast for serious thinking. But now, what they are about to do hangs like a spectre between them.

Of course, Freddie knows just the thing for that: Cristal.

“Thought you wanted me sober.”

“Not that sober”, Freddie declares as they clinks glasses. “You’re a rock star, darling, your base line is different from normal people’s.”

The champagne tingles in his mouth and before the alcohol even has a chance to hit his bloodstream, he already feels himself relaxing. Lots of muscle memory tied to that taste. He chugs the first glass so fast his eyes prickle. He lets himself sink into the sofa and sighs deeply.

Freddie sits beside him. “It’s not supposed to be a trial by fire, you know?” He puts one hand on Roger’s shoulder, right where it meets his neck and squeezes lightly.

Roger bites back a groan.

“So tense.”

“It’s always like that when we’re on tour”, Roger says while Freddie kneads the muscle. “Thrashing away at a drum kit two hours a night does that to you.”

“Hmmm. Turn a bit, darling, will you? That’s it.”

It obvious that Freddie has no idea how to give a massage, but the squeezing and stroking feels good nonetheless and he lets his head hang forward. He enjoys it while it lasts, because Freddie’s attention span quickly reaches its natural limit and his hands begin to roam.

“Gives you a bit of muscle too, this drumming thing”, he says as his hands slide down Roger’s upper arms.

“You like it?”

“You know I do.”

Roger flexes a little, feeling equal parts self-conscious and turned on.

“You know, I didn’t bring you here so you could sit on your bum and get pampered”, Freddie says, lips and that infernal moustache brushing against the back of Roger’s back.

"Right.” He feels equal parts intimidation and arousal. "Bedroom, then?"

When he tries to get up, Freddie pulls him back. "No. Here."

"Alright." Roger chugs the rest of the champagne and throws the glass away. He needs every bit of bravado he can muster.
He pulls Freddie's shirt off, then pushes at his chest until he lies back along the length of the sofa. He kneels over him and lies down until their bodies are flush. Their kisses start out testing, searching, but quickly turn hot and heavy. Roger doesn't know exactly how this is going to work, but it's just sex after all, so that's how he's going to go about it.

Freddie opens Roger's trousers and pushes them down far enough that he can reach for his cock, which is definitely taking an interest in the proceedings. Then Freddie bites at his neck, a little too hard with those sharp teeth. "Hey", Roger complains and Freddie does it again. Roger puts a hand on his cheek to push him away and Freddie's struggles a bit against him.

Roger raises himself up so he can look at Freddie. "Hey, what's..."

Freddie's hands go to the back of his neck, fingers digging in painfully, pulling him back down. "Come on", he says, breathing hard and rolling his head back so his long neck is exposed. "Come on."

Roger leans down and nips at the edge of Freddie's jaw. "You could have just said", he grumbles.

"Where's the fun in tha- oh fuck!"

Roger's bitten down hard, harder than he would with anyone else, and Freddie's hips snap up against him. It's a heady, powerful feeling and he answers it with a hard push down and Freddie groans.

This goes on for a few minutes, but then, just when Roger thinks they're really getting started, Freddie pushes at his chest. Roger sits up, not quite getting what Freddie's trying to do, and then Freddie shoves and twists and they both land hard on the floor.

"What the fuck?" He rubs his bruised hip. Did he miss some sort of stop signal?

But Freddie's shoving down his own trousers and pants, not even bothering to take them off. He kneels up, puts his hands on the seat of the sofa. "Like that", he says.

It slowly dawns on Roger that Freddie is approximately four light years ahead of him in the proceedings. "What, now?"

Freddie drops his head between his outstretched arms. "Yes, of course now. When did you think, Boxing Day?"

Roger can barely look at the sight in front of him. He looks around the room. "Where's... I need..."

"You don't. Do it, come on."

Roger's head is spinning. This is going way too fast. He's more or less hard already, but that will only get him so far. You can't just shove it in, he knows that. He's been embroiled in the gay scene long enough to pick some things up, and he knows the casual references to Crisco and KY and the 'one-finger, two-finger'-routine. He isn't blind and he isn't a complete idiot. "Lube", he says.

Freddie turns to look back at him. His expression is one of utter exasperation. "Spit, for fuck's sake", he hisses.

By now Roger's mouth is so dry he probably couldn't produce enough even for a wank, let alone a fuck. "Are you out of your mind? I'm not going to... What about, you know, preparation."

"Did a bit myself before you came. Also..." Freddie reaches into the folds of the sofa and holds up
a small glass bottle. "Don't need prep when you have this", he says.

"Holy fuck", Roger breathes, watching slack jawed as Freddie pops the cap, holds the bottle to his nose and inhales deeply. He takes a second whiff, then he looks back at him over his shoulder and grins, a bit frenzied. A flush is creeping all over his upper body and his eyes are wild. A faintly sweet, chemical smell hangs in the air. "This doesn't last long", he says. "Come on. Fuck me. Fuck me right now."

Freddie is right there. He is presenting himself to Roger, inviting him, begging him to do it and... Okay, Roger has had some pretty sleazy sex in his day and it isn't like him to question his sex partners much, but this doesn't feel right. Doesn't feel right at all. But Freddie wants this, right? And Roger's promised and... and he can't just leave him hanging now, can he? Roger puts a tentative hand on Freddie's back. It's wet with sweat.

Freddie has laid his head onto one outstretched arm and is looking back at Roger with heavy eyes. "You can close your eyes and imagine I'm one of those girls you like if it helps", and he looks so serious as he says this that it might just break Roger's heart. "Clap a hand over my mouth and you won't hear a peep from me."

Oh god. No. No way is he going to do this. And judging from the state of his wilting erection, he might not be able to if he tried.

Roger wraps one arm around Freddie’s waist and pulls at him until his back is against Roger’s chest. His skin is hot to the touch. Freddie breathes deeply, obviously expecting things to get started. He startles when he is pulled around into a sitting position in front of the sofa, Roger hovering over him.

"What..."

"You offered to shut up so shut up", Roger whispers and Freddie's wide eyes stare up at him in confusion. He reaches between Freddie's legs and closes his hand his cock.

"I don't want...

Roger kisses him, partly to shut him up, partly to have him stop looking at him like this. He thinks Freddie might try to push him off (and of course he'll stop if he does), but the opposite happens. He opens up and sucks at his tongue and lips like he's starving for it. Roger wanks him none too gently and Freddie clings to his shoulders, making soft, high pitched noises in his throat. If this were anyone else and if he didn't know about the poppers, he'd call it overacting. He wraps his free arm around Freddie's shoulder, holding onto him as tightly as he can.

Freddie's mouth goes slack when he comes not a minute later, his whole body boneless and relaxed.

Roger puts him to bed afterwards. Freddie is sleepy and pliant as he comes down. He reaches for Roger's hand when he tucks him in, and without another word, Roger gets into the bed beside him.

He'll have to leave early. But for an hour or so at least he can stay.

Chapter End Notes
So, someone commented how patient Freddie's being. Looks like his patience has run out.

Poppers (mostly Amyl nitrite at the time) were (are) widely used as a stimulant for sex. They give a brief rush, a sense of euphoria and warmth, and they relax the smooth muscles in the body, which is why they are popular for bottoming.
Detroit, 20 September 1980

This last leg of the tour consists of an eastwards crawl through the Midwest, playing venues like Omaha Nebraska, St. Paul Minnesota and Syracuse New York. Lovely, enthusiastic crowds, but not the most exciting places. Most days, they drive to airport directly after the gig to fly into the next city. The occasional day off is spent lolling around hotel rooms, catching their breaths. It's been a long tour and they're all feeling the effects.

Still, no touring without boozing, and of course any city has at least one decent bar if you know where to look. Luckily, in Paul, Gerry and Jobby the band has three men with sixth senses for finding those places at their disposal.

Gay clubs are a different matter - this isn’t San Francisco or New York where the homosexual brigade has overtaken whole quarters. It’s all a lot more hush-hush and understated, with an implicit understanding that non-harassment is conditioned on invisibility. So the drinking mostly takes place in whatever bars and clubs seem most tolerant of a noisy rock’n’roll-entourage on a weekday night, often reverting to one of their hotel suites around midnight.

Things with Freddie are... Roger still doesn't know what they are. Freddie has never mentioned the night in Kansas and he hasn't asked Roger for another try, which is a relief, to be honest. Roger sometimes feels unsaid words hovering over them like a rain cloud threatening to pour, but there’s nothing explicitly different between them.

He’s making his peace with the fact that he (his body at least and his mind is slowly catching up) is apparently fine having sex with a bloke (one specific bloke) on a (semi-)regular basis. He’s also still fine getting a blow-job from some girl in a dingy back room. He's conducting, as Brian might put it, a small-scale longitudinal study into the state of his heterosexuality and so far the results are robust, positive and conclusive.

What he’s not okay with is when Freddie first invites him to go out and, then just ignores him all night. In Ames, Iowa, instead of staying at a small pub with John and Brian and a couple of local girls for whom this is clearly the most exciting thing to happen since Led Zeppelin stopped over in the late 60s, he’s gone and joined Freddie, Paul and couple of Paul’s friends (which exist in copious amounts in just about every city they play in) for a private party in Freddie’s suite. Only to spend the rest of the night watching Freddie eye-fucking some biker dude. It's not that he’s jealous, it's not even that he's expected sex, but Freddie is his only friend in this group. And then, after ignoring him the whole night, Freddie jumps him like he’s the last raft on the Titanic after the next gig.

On their next night off, in Chicago, he's therefore not at all in the mood to join Freddie and his entourage on their exploration of the latest leather clubs. He goes out with the Ratty and Crystal instead and collects some more data for his study.

He really should have done the same thing tonight, because he finds himself sitting alone in a desolate backroom gay bar in Detroit, fuming into his watered-down Vodka Tonic. Freddie has been making eyes at some muscle boy the whole night, but at least he hasn’t been an arsehole about it and actually talked to Roger once in a while, so it had been an okay evening. Until Roger went for a piss, then came back to find him gone, along with muscle boy. Paul just shrugged when Roger asked where Freddie was and grinned insouciantly, the prick.
Roger empties his drink. Then orders another.

He takes a cab back to the hotel. He really doesn't want to share a car with bloody Paul Prenter.

It's not that he expects Freddie to be like a, like a boyfriend or something, they're not a bloody couple, after all. But he thought they're friends, whatever else they might be, and friends don't sneak around behind the other's back. Friends don't complete ignore each other just because a piece of eye candy happens to be nearby. He's really got better things to do on his nights off than being lead around on a leash by bloody Freddie Mercury! By the time he slams the car door behind him, he’s so angry he feels like he’s about to burst a blood vessel. He marches straight to Freddie’s suite, banging on the door. For once, he doesn’t care who notices. His mission is good and true and he will not be ignored.

The door flies open, a livid Freddie in an open Kimono over tiny pants standing in the door way. For once, the sight is not distracting, but infuriating. Freddie crosses his arms over his chest and glares at him. “What?”

"What the fuck was that?"

Freddie raises one eyebrow. "What?"

"Don't play dumb, you prick, that thing where you first dragged me to the most depressing bar at the arse-end of bloody Detroit and then fucked off at the first opportunity when I wasn't looking."

"Oh that?" Freddie looks down his nose on him. "That was me, 'pulling'. I'm sure I don't have to explain the process to you, do I?"

"Oh, shut up!" Roger pushes past him. "You can't just fuck off like that!"

Freddie's voice falls to a rumble. "I can do whatever I like. Whoever I like."

"I'm not talking about... He still in there?" Roger jerks his thumb towards the bedroom door. He doesn’t want Freddie’s piece of rough listening in on this. Also, he is dying to kick someone’s arse and this might be a splendid opportunity.

“Don’t you dare, don’t you fucking dare!” Freddie comes running after him, but Roger is already pushing the door open.

“Alright, out.”

There’s no answer, so he peers into the dimly lit room. It’s empty.

Roger turns to Freddie, who’s gone white. "Wow, that was quick. Even for your standards. Didn't even want to stay the night?’ He just about manages not to throw an 'I know how much you hate sleeping alone' in his face.

“How dare you”, Freddie says quietly through clenched teeth.

“How dare I? You left me in the middle of nowhere, you fucking prick!"

“I wasn’t aware you needed my chaperoning.”

"With bloody Prenter!"

"So? Did he make a move on you or why exactly are you acting like a hysteric damsel?"
“Not the fucking point, Freddie. You can’t just piss off whenever you feel like it. Who do you think I am, one of your bloody stooges?”

Two steps brings Freddie close. “And you can’t storm into my bedroom whenever you feel like it just because you’re jealous.”

“I am not...” Roger has to laugh, it’s so ridiculous. “What, of your latest shag? Do you even know his name?”

“Hmm, I don’t know Reg, let me think a minute.”

“Oh, aren’t you clever. But you know what?” Roger steps even closer, lowering his voice to a hiss. “I didn’t ask for this. I didn’t ask for any of this.” He’s now so close he can see his own reflection in Freddie’s eyes. “You came to me.”

"Oh yes, here we go.” Freddie puts his hands on his hips and looks at him with utter disdain. "Tell me all about how the big bad queer corrupted you."

"Fuck off, Freddie."

Freddie shakes his head. "I'm so sick of this. Of you and your..."

"My what?"

"Whatever's making you act like a complete arsehole."

"What, I'm the... Oh, that's rich, that's just..."

Freddie's leaning in close now. "You've been bored stiff by the hookers and the strippers and the groupies, so I took you along. But god forbid I go my own way for once and..."

"Your own way? For once? What the fuck are you talking about?" Roger doesn't know whether to laugh or punch the wall. "You always do whatever the fuck you want." The whole world bends over backwards to cater to every single one of Freddie's whims.

"Yes, and it'll always, always, be like that. Because the last thing I need is some controlling little nanny that tells me how long I can stay out and who I can play with and..."

Roger turns on his heel and marches towards the door. It's either leaving now or doing something he'll bitterly regret. "Fuck you, Freddie. Have fun with Paul and Joe and the rest of your little circus troupe, I'm out."

He slams the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

I realise that without Freddie's POV, his behaviour might appear a little erratic right now. I hope that in later chapters, when patterns start to appear and sometimes they even talk about some things (no, really!), it will become a bit more clear what's the deal with him. Until then, remember the following: he has his own issues to work through, this whole thing is as confusing to him as it is to Roger (albeit in a different way) and the signals Roger is sending out are as mixed as a bowl of Bertie Bott's
Beans. Also try to imagine how he must have felt the morning after their disastrous 'date' in Kansas City.

(Good writers don't have to explain character motivation in the author's notes, right? Eh, I'm still learning ¯\_(ツ)_/¯)

Also: OMG, this weird little (okay, not so little) time-travel soap-opera thing has got over a hundred kudos! I am incandescently happy (and baffled) so many people enjoy it! Thanks everyone reading and commenting!!!  мир ^_^
“Because he’s been a massive arsehole. End of story.”

“He’s always been... difficult. What’s he done this time that’s so much worse?” Brian just doesn’t get it. Well, how could he? Roger has been stonewalling for the last 30 minutes.

“Maybe I’m just sick of being jerked around by him. Of everyone catering to his massive ego.”

Brian rolls his eyes. “Yes, God forbid there be any egos involved in this”, he mumbles.

“Shut it.”

“Come on, we’ve all made our peace with that. The first time he had a meltdown because John’s got a nicer room than him, that would have been the time to take a stand, but we all accepted it as part of the package.”

“Look Bri, I’m just tired of him, okay? Three more gigs, then we can all go our separate ways and...”

“Woah, whoa, whoa!” Brian looks shocked. “What are you talking about?”

Roger reviews the conversation in his head. “I didn’t mean forever, Jesus, Brian, calm down. Just some cooling off, being around normal people again.”

“What about the album?”

“The soundtrack thing? We’ve already got the demos, so I’ll just come in for the backing track and then you and Mack can do the fiddly bit.”

“I see, it’s going to be a masterpiece”, Brian grumbled.

Normally, Roger hates doing things half-arsed just as much as Brian, but in this case, he isn’t too bothered. It’s just a side-project for a campy movie, not a proper album, and most of it revolves around the same two or three themes. And he really doesn't look forward to being locked up in a studio with Freddie any longer than he has to.

Brian thumps him in the shoulder none to gently. “Well, you know what? We’ve still got three more gigs to play. In Madison Square Garden, in front of a lot of famous people and my family. And I refuse to accept a substandard performance just because you two don’t have your collective shit together.”

“It wasn’t that ba...”

“His voice kept cracking and you refused to up your backing vocals.”
“I had a cold!”

“And so he starts doing these weird little piano improvs every time you try to lead us into a new song, which fucked up the whole flow.”

“Told you he was an arsehole.”

Brian sighs. “A pox upon both your houses.” He taps his finger tips against his lips like he's pondering some complex math problem. "Okay, listen. Clearly, something is going on. Has been going on for a while. And... no, listen." He holds up one hand to keep Roger from butting in. "Whatever it is, I'm not going to pry. But if you ever want to talk about it - and believe me, it can't be any weirder than what I've come up with on my own - I'm here, okay?"

Oh god, Brian knows. That alone is almost enough to make him spill the beans, to explain that it's not how he thinks, that it's all over and done with and will not happen again.

But when the first panic subsides, he realises something else: What Brian also just did, is offer him an olive branch. He didn't demand he tell the truth or asked him point blank. He offered him his ear, if he wants to talk. So if he doesn't - and he really, really doesn't, he just wants to put this whole miserable affair behind him - he's giving Roger an out. The opportunity to walk out of this with his dignity intact. Then they can both pretend they don't know what's going on and maybe one day, when they're old and this whole weird time is long behind them, maybe then Roger will decide to tell him. Or not. Probably not.

Roger keeps his eyes firmly on the table in front of him. "Okay."

Brian waits a few more second to see if that is the kickoff to some sort of confession, but when that is not coming, he just nods. "Alright. So, whatever it is, we have to find a way to keep working together. Because..."

There's a knock on the door. Deacy pops his head in. “He wants to talk to you”, he says to Roger.

Roger’s eyebrows rise. “He wants to talk to me?”

Freddie hasn't told Deacy, has he? But if Brian knows, surely Deacy's worked it out as well? Hell, Deacy had asked him about this point blank years ago. Maybe he made Freddie the same offer Brian made Roger. Maybe they can all just agree to pretend it never happened. Just like real family then.

“Took me an hour to get him there and don't even for one moment expect him to apologise - if he even is the one to apologise, I have no idea - but yeah, he does.”

“Alright, then...” It’s hard to believe that Freddie would ever make the first step, but a bad concert performance might just do the trick. Freddie hates it when the press writes about his voice failing, and he knows that between them, Roger and Brian can cover up a lot.

They all head over to Deacy’s suite and when Roger opens the door, Freddie’s sitting on the sofa, hands folded in his lap.

“So”, Freddie asks archly.

“So what?”

“You asked to meet me, so I assumed you had something to say.”
The door falls shut behind Roger. The lock clicks. It’s only then that he notices that Brian and Deacy didn’t follow him inside.

He turns on the spot and slams into the door, which – solid timber as it is – refuses to budge. “You fucking wankers”, he shouts, rubbing his shoulder. Damn, that hurts!

“It’s for your own good”, John says through the door.

“What’s happening?” Freddie gets up.

“Locked us in here.” Roger tries the handle a few more times. “Guess you didn’t ask John to bring me here?”

“Certainly not! He told me you wanted to meet me on ‘neutral ground’. Should have known it was a trap. You’re way too stubborn.”

“Listen, Deacy, they’re talking to each other already”, a muffled Brian is heard outside.

“We’re not!” Freddie and Roger shout in unison. Cackling laughter wafts in through the door.

Freddie stands right in front of it. “Alright, this isn’t funny. Let us out this instant.”

“Nope”, Deacy says. “We’re going to wait right next door until you’re ready to tell us you’ve made up.”

“Unlock the door. Now!” Roger kicks at it and the pain shoots through his foot. “Dammit!”

“I’ve got a date at the Spike tonight, I am not going to miss that.” Freddie mutters, then yells: “This is a crime you’re committing! I’m calling the police!”

“Yeah, good luck with that”, John replies. “Electrical engineer, remember? If you clowns manage to get the phone back in working order I’ll eat my bass.”

“I’m trashing the room”, Freddie threatens and picks up the nearest item, which happens to be an umbrella. “I’m gonna...”

Roger grips his arm with both hands before Freddie can smash the umbrella into a mirror. “For fuck’s sake”, he hisses. “Can you not act like a three-year old, just this once?”

“Roger, we are essentially being grounded, if ever there was a time for tantrums, now’s it.” He tries to wriggle free, but Roger wrests the umbrella from him and tosses it safely into a corner at the far end of the room.

A horrible crash follows. The antique crystal vase, piece of pride on a mahagoni side table right next to the window, has toppled and fallen to the floor and splintered into a thousand pieces.

“What was that?” John shouts.

“Whatever it was, The Game’s just gone to gold in the US, so I guess we can afford it”, Brian comments, while Freddie dissolves into helpless, snorting laughter. “We’ll be right next door.”

“Fuck off”, Roger yells. “All of you!”
A glass is plunked down on the coffee table. Roger looks up from where he’s lying sullenly on the sofa. Freddie’s standing there, vodka bottle in hand.

“Stolichnaya”, he says in the same tone of voice prison inmates reserve for cleverly disguised jail-breaking tools. “John’s a cunt, but he’s not a monster.”

Roger nods and sits up. With a grim expression, he reaches for his glass, knocks it back and immediately holds it out for more.

Drinking doesn’t require talking, only determination and basic hand-eye coordination. They sit in silence as the sky darkens outside and the city lights go up.

Suddenly, Freddie gets up and staggers towards John’s bedroom. “Where you going?” Roger bites his tongue. They are not talking.

“Loo.” Freddie says, then pauses in the open doorway.

“What is it?”

He turns to Roger, an unholy grin on his face. “I’m gonna piss on all his stuff!”

Roger jumps up. He’s still furious at Freddie, but that is genius. “Fuck yeah.”

But when they are in the bedroom, they find the wardrobe and dresser empty. Clever fucker cleared out his stuff beforehand. Probably got himself another room already.

“Just the bed then”, Freddie says and - with the expression of a samurai going into battle - reaches for his fly.

“No!” Roger holds out a hand. “The only one’s who’re gonna notice are the maids. Wrong target.”

“He’s not getting away that easily.”

“No”, Roger says. “No, he isn’t. They both aren’t.” He walks back into the main living area. “But this takes some planning.”

“We’ll get them drunk and paint them with sharpies.”

“Or get them tattooed? Doesn’t Jobby know just the guy for that... Deppie or Leppie or something?
"Get some little girl to run up to Brian and yell ‘Papa!’”

They settled back on the sofa, giggling as one half-baked idea of revenge after the other is let loose.

“Hide all John’s clothes before the next gig so he’ll have to borrow one of your old unitards.”

“Burn all of Brian’s clogs.”

“Put laxatives in their pre-gig beers.”

“Get Crystal to pretend he’s from NASA, telling Brian they want to name a star after him.”

“Or put him on the first Space Shuttle flight.”
“Evil”, Freddie says, a manic glint in his eyes and cracks open the next bottle. “I’m mean, but you...” He nods approvingly.

“Na zdorov’ye!”

They clink glasses.

Roger leans back on the sofa and sighs. He’s held on to his grudge as long as he can but the combination of booze and a shared enemy makes it impossible for him to keep that burning resentment alive any longer. “Can you tell me just one thing.”

“Hm?”

“Why me?”

Silence.

“Come on. I know I’m not your type.”

“You know my type?”


“What about your type, my dear? I possess neither big tits nor a pussy and my experience with stripping poles is very one sided.”

Roger shrugs. “I never went to boarding school”, he says, a lot more nonchalantly than he feels. “Had to get it out of my system at some time.”

“Have you? Got it out of your system?” Freddie balances the cap of the bottle on the tip of his finger, watching it intently.

“Oh yeah. I’m good now.” God, he really hopes so. This whole confusing experience has been going on for almost a year now. He’s not sure how much more either of them can take. Everytime they’ve gone to bed with each other, they only ended up worse than before.

"How good for you." Freddie toasts him.

“So, what about you? Still haven’t answered the question.”

“Yes, I do imagine you must feel very special.”

Roger rolls his eyes and knocks back another vodka. Dammit, Stoly is smooth.

Freddie shrugs and grins, showing a lot of teeth. “But don’t. I’ll fuck anything that moves.”

“See”, Roger says, sitting up and pointing at Freddie. “I know you always say that, but it just isn’t true, is it?”

"Isn't it?" Freddie's stalling, so Roger keeps prodding.

"You're picky. Any I've never seen you set a foot into a darkroom.

Freddie rolls his eyes. "Alright. So 'everything that moves' might be a tad exaggerated." He holds
out his hands. "Got me."
"So why did you..."

Freddie cuts him off with a raised finger and takes another sip of vodka. “Don’t be tedious, darling, I feel like I’m being interviewed by the bloody BBC.”

Roger sighs. “How about a game then? Twenty questions.”

“Oh, just shoot me please.”

“And every time I guess wrong, I have to drink.”

“Darling, I might be cross with you but I don’t actually want you dead.”

Roger leans back against the armrest. “Why don’t you just talk to me”, he says quietly. “I feel like I haven’t talked to you properly in ages.”

“Talk about what, hm? We shagged a few times, so what? It doesn’t mean we have to give a fucking press conference.”

Roger spends a few horrifying and entertaining seconds with that fantasy.

“So do you want to talk? Or do you just want to poke and prod at me until I tell you how irresistible you are? Is that what you want to hear? That I bare my devious, lecherous soul to you? Satisfy your curiosity about what kind of perversions I get up with all the other guys?”

Nope, he certainly does not want to know that. Okay, maybe he does a bit. “No, just...” He sighs in frustration. More vodka. “I want to know that we’re alright, okay? That you’re alright.”

“‘Course I’m alright.”

“But aren’t you ever scared?”

“Of what?”

The inevitability of death, nuclear war, that weird twinge in your hip that wasn’t there yesterday. “Guys”, he says simply. “I mean, we are arseholes. And I’ve seen some of the guys you’ve taken home. They looked like they could snap your spine with their bare hands. With girls, that sort of thing just isn’t a problem. Well, most girls.”

“Girls can be devious little monsters”, Freddie says with the conviction of a wizened old witch hunter. “Might murder you in your sleep.”

“Come on, like that ever happens.” Whereas he has seen the bruises, heard the shouts – and god knows what he’s missed. “It must be different, dating men.”

“I never go to the clubs alone. Paul, Joe, Phoebe... they watch out.”

“But they’re not with you all the time, are they?” The thought gives him pause. Certainly Freddie doesn’t have one of his cronies chaperone him during sex. “Are they?”

Freddie grimaces. “Ugh, god no. What a dirty little mind you have.”

Roger nips on his vodka. It’s nerve-wrecking, trying to have this conversation with Freddie. He’s constantly deflecting so it always takes three or four attempts until he gets something close to an
answer. But Roger has something of a dogged streak in him. And he can’t shake the feeling that somewhere deep inside, Freddie wants to talk.

“So. Have you ever been scared of a guy you were dating or, or getting off with?”

Silence. Keep digging. There is something there, Roger knows it.

“You can tell me to shut up, but... I'm worried about you, at times.”

He's been thinking back to that night in Kansas City. If that's how Freddie's dates usually go...

Freddie looks into his glass and sucks his lower lip between his teeth. Roger can see it churning within him. “Sometimes...” Freddie breaks off. He downs the rest of his vodka, the he starts again. “There have been times when I didn’t know what’s going to happen next. When I couldn’t tell what would happen if I said ‘no’ or ‘stop’ or ‘slow down’. If they’d listen. Sometimes...”

“What?”

“Sometimes I don’t know if maybe I don’t want them to listen.”

“Jesus.”

Freddie shakes his head. “Not really, I don’t think, but... but the idea that they might... that I can’t always tell if...” When he speaks again, he looks up from his glass, straight into Roger’s eyes. His words are careful and deliberate. “I am not bored then.”

Roger fishes for a cigarette. There are guys out there like that and one day Freddie will meet one and it won't be just an exciting little fantasy all in his head. Perhaps Freddie’s status and money (and the spectre of a small army of well-trained security guys and lawyers waiting in the wings) protected him until now. But his fame also makes him vulnerable. What if someone takes pictures? What if someone threatens to publish them? “Did that... did that ever happen?”

“I don’t know.”

“The fuck does that mean?”

Freddie doesn’t answer.

Roger very carefully calms his voice back down. “Tell me? Please?”

“Look, it’s hard to tell sometimes when you’re fucked up on vodka and cocaine. Or when you’re not sure if you’re still fighting or already making up.”

Oh shit. They’ve been doing things like that, first shouting at each other, then tearing their clothes off. “Did I ever...?”

Freddie snorts, honest surprise on his face. “You, my tender little lamb?”

“Watch it”, Roger grumbles to hide his relief.

“There was that one time”, Freddie says, keeping voice light. “I thought Richie was going to kill me, actually.”

Roger hardly dares to breathe. That fucker. He’s going to find him, he swears it to all the gods, he’ll hunt him down with knives and...
“It was shortly after we got together that second time. He used to...” Freddie pours himself another shot, but doesn’t drink. “He used to choke me sometimes.”

Roger remembers the bruises on his neck. How he tried not to think too hard about where they came from. “Jesus, Freddie.”

“Only during sex, at first.”

“Only?!”

“It’s not that unusual. When you do it right, your orgasm feels like it goes on forever.” Freddie draws out the word in a way that makes Roger's cheeks feel warm. "A lot of guys are into it.”

“Are you... into it?”

Freddie looks into his glass, shrugs.

Oh god, how can Roger ever let Freddie go out with anyone ever again? That’s not just a bit of rough sex, that sounds fucking dangerous.

“Anyway, that one time we were fighting about”, Freddie shoots him a nervous look, “about you actually. About how you've always been coming along with us to bars. Things like that.”

“Shit.” He had actually been making it worse. He had been trying to help, but it had only made Richie more angry at Freddie. "I'm so..."

But Freddie isn't having any of this. “It could have been about anything really, he didn’t need much to set him off. And then he had his hands around my neck again, pressing me into the wall.”

Roger digs his nails into his hands.

“I thought he was just trying to... to shut me up, or to scare me, but this time he wouldn’t let go.”

Roger clenches his teeth when he realises that ‘this time’ means it hadn’t been the first time. God, how could he have been so blind?

"Sometimes he’d let up a bit, just enough to let in that bit of air I needed so I wouldn’t faint, and he...”

“What?”

“He asked me if I liked it.”

Roger’s pretty sure that Gerry knows a hitman. Or knows someone who knows someone who knows a hitman. Anyway, Richie is fucking dead and Roger is going to play footie with his head.

Freddie’s hand on his arm brings him back to the here and now. To his surprise, Freddie’s smiling at him. “Please don’t get yourself arrested”, he says. “He’s not worth it.”

“You’re worth it”, Roger growls before he can help it.

Freddie ducks his head, and Roger can see how pleased he is. It makes him feel all warm inside. “I’m really not”, Freddie says. “Anyway, he’s gone now. And Paul’s looking out for me a lot more these days. He’s good at that.”

Yes, but Paul was the one who introduced him to Richie in the first place. And who tried to keep
John, Brian and him away when they first intervened. “Not infallible, though.”

Freddie regards him for a moment. “What are you saying?”

What is he saying? He shrugs. “I don’t know.”

Freddie rolls his eyes. “Right.”

“I mean, I...” He doesn’t have anything resembling a plan, just vague fears and half-baked hopes and a lot of muddled feelings. He has to protect Freddie, that is clearer now than ever. “I just don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Why?”

What a stupid question! “Do you honestly not know?”

Only their breathing is audible in the silence. Heat creeps up Roger’s face as something unsayable wavers between them.

“You’re my friend”, Roger says quickly. “I mean, my best friend, and... shit, this is turning into a bloody soap opera.”

“Try more vodka.” Freddie waves lazily towards the bottle.

Roger knocks back another shot. “Look, this is going to sound stupid, but when I met Richie... even at the beginning when he was all sunshine out of his arse, I knew he wasn’t good news.”

Freddie tenses up.

“I also knew that Tony was using you right from the start and that this skinny guy who tried to pick you up in San Diego was a wife-beater.”

Freddie blinks at him. “Roger, Are you trying to tell me you're psychic?”

“No, I just... I recognize a complete tosser when I see one.” Not that he doesn’t have blind spots, but for a millionaire rock star, he managed to keep a good crowd of friends around him. Not a lot of people in his position can say that about them.

”Prove it. Richie and Tony... anyone can say that with hindsight. And the wife-beater? How can I know you’re not making that up.”

How is Roger supposed to prove something like that? Pick out a guy he has a bad feeling about, let Freddie go home with him – the thought alone makes him feel sick to the stomach – then say “I told you so” the next morning?

But then he has an idea.

“You said there have been situations that felt scary, a bit out of control maybe. Confusing.”

“Yes.”

“One of those nights was in Boston last year, wasn’t it? With that preppy guy, Tommy or something?”

A sharp intake of breath tells him he’s been right. “How do you know that? How can you possibly know that?”
Roger shrugs. “Dunno,” he mumbles. But that’s not true, is it? He does know, it’s just the last thing he wants to talk about with anyone ever. He stumps out the cigarette and takes a deep breath. Freddie has been honest with him. He owes him this. “My mum walked away from my dad with Clare and me when I was 13.”

“Sorry about that”, Freddie says, clearly a little confused about the turn of the conversation.

Roger shakes his head. “It was the best day of my life.”

“Oh.”

The only sounds in the room are Freddie fiddling with a cigarette and lighter.

“You don’t smoke”, Roger says.

“Oh, but I do”, Freddie says and inhales deeply. He observes Roger through the thick smoke curling up between them. “What about Thor”, he asks.

Marvellous change of topic. Doesn’t Roger just love to talk about Thor. “What about him?”

“It’s obvious you dislike him. Should I stay away from him?”

‘Yes!’ Roger’s nasty side wants to scream. “No”, he says, like a grown-up. “He’s perfectly nice. You should fuck his brains out.”

“I’d rather have it the other way round”, Freddie says coquettishly.

The image of lithe, slender Freddie and that hunk is...not something Roger wants to dwell on. For a whole host of reasons. This whole thing between them is fucked up enough as it is.

“Want to go out with me tonight”, Freddie asks.

“Out? Where?”

“Dinner first, I’m starving. And then... how about the Anvil? I think I’m in the mood for a little fun...”

“What about your date at the Spike?”

“Ah, just someone Paul scrounged up. I’m sure we can come up with something better.”

Is this a test? “Er. Sure... if we ever manage to escape our prison.”

Freddie gets up and walks over the right-hand wall, pounding against it with his fist.

“Alright, you devious little cunts”, he yells. Roger hopes he's chosen the correct side. “You’ve won!”

It takes a while, but eventually John’s voice can be heard from the other side of the door again. “All friends now?”

“Any friendlier and I’ll have Roger over the back of the sofa.”

“Freddie!” Roger hisses.

Freddie beams at him, delighted as ever at his own outrageousness.
The lock clicks and the door opens a crack. Brian’s curly head appears inside. “Don’t try to trick us. We’re prepared to take desperate measures.”

“Like what”, Roger asks

“Call your mums.”

He ducks just in time as two pillows hit the door.

+++ 

The Anvil on a saturday night is pandemonium. It's quite early, so the real party hasn’t even started yet, but already the place is packed. Roger and Freddie head straight for the bar.

"Right then", Freddie says after a respectable amount of time has passed and he's surveyed the crowd. "You pick someone for me."

Surprisingly, it's a lot of fun: Roger points out various guys, while Freddie vetoes them, explaining to him at length why this or that guy doesn't fulfil his standards.

Roger suspects he's just playing hard to please, but if it means they get to stay in the club a bit longer, drinking fantastic drinks and squabbling over who has the better eye for dick sizes, it's fine with Roger. It’s just nice to be out with him again. And now that they’ve sorted things between them, they are a lot more relaxed around each other.

In the end they have just about settled on Tim, a bloke who looks like an ancient Greek statue of a discus thrower (minus the discus but plus an absolutely atrocious New Jersey accent), when the stately form of Thor Arnold floats into view. Poor Tim is dropped like a hot potato. Roger almost feels bad for him.

"Thought you had to work", Freddie says by way of greeting, pouting just a little.

"Had a hunch you might be here, so I came straight from my shift."

That's a transparent lie - Thor might have hoped to meet him, but there's no way he could have known Freddie would be at the Anvil - but so charmingly delivered that Freddie's defences are melting like snow in the spring.

Though he's not quite done yet. "Thought you had all your other friends to go out with."

"As do you?" Thor raises one eyebrow. "Hi Roger."

Roger gives a little wave, but it's clear he's just a side character in this conversation.

Freddie just scowls.

"I'm sorry I neglected you", Thor says and steps a little closer. "Let me make it up to you?"

Freddie doesn't give up the display of immensely hurt feelings, but relents a little. "Want to buy me a drink then?"

Thor steps even closer so he's right up in Freddie's space and takes one his hands in both of his. "I want to take you home", he says, eyes boring into Freddie's. "If you let me?"

It's a revolting display and Roger seriously has to fight the impulse to bat his hands away. But Freddie looks like he's about to swoon, and dammit, he deserves to be taken care of by somebody.
And if it can't be Roger, then at least it's not some pick-up he's known for all of five minutes.

"Yes", Freddie says simply and pushes himself off the bar. But then he hesitates and his eyes flicker minutely to Roger.

Wait. Is he asking for permission?

There's a worryingly loud voice inside of him that demands he doesn't give it. He wonders what would happen if he said no and just took Freddie by the hand and walked him out of here. (And then?) It's a heady, dangerous feeling he doesn't want to explore too deeply, so he just nods quickly.

Thor Arnold is by all accounts and in his own estimation a good man. Completely infuriating, for some reason, but kind and sincere. He's what Freddie deserves and Roger is not going to stand in the way.

Later, lying in his gigantic, empty bed, he tries not to think about what is going on upstairs. He isn't worried, as such. But somehow, he feels a bit like... a bit like a pimp. It's also, strangely, not entirely a bad feeling. He's not sure what that says about him. Anyway, of course friends look out for each other, friends play wingman for each other, but has he actually agreed to vet Freddie’s hook-ups? And did he just give his blessing to Freddie going home with Thor? That's fucked up, right?

He rolls onto his other side, batting the pillow into shape with a little too much enthusiasm. He's overthinking this. Clearly, he’s overthinking this. He can’t shadow Freddie 24/7 anyway. This is just a tour thing, or maybe a tour-and-recording thing. Freddie’s a grown man able to make his own choices, he doesn’t need a chaperone.

But what he does need is a friend. And with that whole sex thing finally out of the way, Roger can be that.

Chapter End Notes

So, some sort of communication at last. What do you think of the results?

And yay, Brian and John are back! I neglected them a bit, poor guys, didn't I? I promise you’ll see a bit more of them from now on.

Depressing fact of the day: Non-consensual choking is a huge risk factor that an abuser is going to escalate to homicide. So be careful out there!

And just to make that clear: Roger's parents got divorced when he was 15, but the details about Roger’s childhood and his dad are completely the creation of my imagination (or so I thought). Although, as I learned through this fantastic commentariat, there are some hints that it might not be too far from the truth.

ETA: Here's an interview where Roger talks about it (starting at 2:50). Thanks to everyone who's brought it to my attention!

ETA2: And the amazing trixie_b has taken the line "We shagged a few times, so what? It doesn’t mean we have to give a fucking press conference" and run wild with
it in the comments. Go read it, it's great!
London, 15 November 1980

Of course, Freddie's choices – if left alone for just a few weeks – turn out to be terrible.

“The guy's a self-satisfied, smug gold-digger.”

“Rubbish. He adores me.”

“Adores you? He adores himself for snagging a star. He’s Tony reloaded, I’m telling you.”

Soon after their return from New York, Freddie picked up a new guy, Peter Morgan, ex-Mr-Britain, bouncer at Heaven, and all around pillock. It’s not that Roger wants to hate all of Freddie’s boyfriends (in fact, he’s glad that there is a boyfriend, as that means fewer anonymous pick-ups to worry about), but it seems that Freddie’s talent on the stage is bought by a total lack of common sense when it comes to choosing boyfriends.

Freddie considers his statement for a moment. Then he sighs. “Maybe. But have you seen his bicep?”

“Christ, you’re even shallower than me.”

“He is not... he’s not like Richie, though”, Freddie says quietly.

“No”, Roger agrees. Peter and Freddie argue all the time, of course, but there’s no violence involved. “But he’s not Thor, either.”

Freddie throws him a disbelieving look. “First you almost get an aneurysm when you so much as see the guy, now you’re trying to set me up with him?”

“He’s a good guy”, Roger says. “And he likes you.”

“Not enough to come to Europe with me”, Freddie grumbles.

Yes, that’s the rub, isn’t it? Thor has deep roots in the US and he’s not going to upend his whole life to follow Freddie around. And Freddie doesn’t abide his boyfriends having their own lives. He likes to be the sun around which they revolve.

The danger here is, of course, that eventually Freddie will decide to move to New York permanently. He feels drawn there, and Roger knows that he’s been stretching out his feelers for an apartment. And that would just be wrong. Freddie belongs in London. It's probably silly to feel so strongly about this, but...

“Sorry, are we late?”

The door swings open and Brian and John stroll in.

“Yes”, Freddie crows triumphantly. “Yes, you are, very late. How are we supposed to work like this?”

“Keep your hat on”, John says, sitting down. “We’ve got exciting news.”

They’ve agreed to meet up to discuss plans for the next year. They managed to get the Flash Gordon soundtrack done just in time and they’d start on a sold-out European Tour later that month. Before that, it’s time to decide what 1981 will bring.
“I’ve just talked to Jim this morning”, John continues. “Rio is on.”

“The Maracanã?” Freddie leans forward, eyes sparkling.

“Just that.” John is grinning broadly.

“The logistics are going to be a nightmare”, Brian says. “Gerry's already got his hands full.”

“170,000 people, can you imagine?” Freddie had been fascinated by the idea from the start.

“Is there a date yet”, Roger asks.

“Late February, right after the Japan trip.”

“I’ll need some time off after that”, Freddie says.

“Got plans?” Freddie is usually the definition of work hard, play hard. Asking for time off is not something he does very often.

“I’ll show you. Later.” He then proceeds to act very mysterious and refuses to answer any of their questions.

“Actually”, Brian says, “I’ll be needing some time off too.”

Roger and Freddie exchange glances.

“Gonna be all mysterious about it too”, John asks.

“I’m... that is, we, Chrissie and I, are going to have another baby. In May.” He’s a bit abashed as he accepts their congratulations, but doesn’t look as shell-shocked as last time.

“So, how about July for the new album EMI is bugging us about? That gonna be manageable?”

Brian nods. “Think so. Although depending on how South America goes, Jim is also looking into the possibility of going to Central America in the fall. Mexico and such.”

“Before the Montreal thing?”, Roger asks.

“Yeah. By the way, that TV-guy called again about putting out a live video of the Montreal Show.”

Roger remembers the last time they released a live recording. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“We can prepare better than last time”, Brian said. “The idea of taping a couple of shows in the middle of a tour and then cutting it all together into one album was a bit hare-brained, wasn’t it? I mean, the acoustics, the audience, it’s always different. Plus it was the middle of a long tour and none of us were firing on all cylinders.”

“We’re going to make sure there’s at least two weeks off before Rock Montreal”, John says. “So we can take some time resting and rehearsing.”

After that, they talk finances and PR appearances, which is always along the least favourite aspects of Roger’s job. But he got used to it. It’s better than handing over control to some shady manager who serves his own interests first and foremost.

“Right”, he says when even John is satisfied with the numbers. “Drinks? There’s a fantastic pub
just round the...”

“Yes, drinks”, Freddie butts in. “But I’ll take you.”

“Take us where?”

Freddie grins. “You’ll see!”

So the all cram in the back of Freddie’s Rolls Royce and head towards Kensington. First Roger thinks they’re headed for a party at Stafford Terrace, but soon the car takes an unfamiliar right turn.

“Just so you know, I promised Veronica I’d take her out to dinner”, John says.

“Yes, yes, darling, don’t you worry.” Freddie waves him off.

The car stops in a small, quiet street in front of a walled off property. Freddie leads them through an inconspicuous wooden door into a huge garden run to seed. And in the middle of that garden, a gigantic mansion.

“Wow.”

“What is that?”

“That, my darlings, is the Hoare House.”

“The what?”

Freddie is obviously delighted by the effect of his little pun. He’s beaming in a way that makes Roger want to freeze the moment and keep it somewhere safe. “So fitting, isn’t it? Mary found it for me!”

He leads them inside. The house has fallen into disrepair and has obviously not been lived in for a while, but still exudes a faded Georgian charm.

“It’s enormous!”

“I know! Finally I have somewhere to put all my treasures.”

Roger has wondered at times where exactly all that stuff Freddie buys on his trips goes. His favourites are in Stafford Terrace, of course, but there have to be an awful lot in storage as well.

“Many of the walls will have to be knocked in, of course. I want great, airy rooms.” He leads them to a table where he’s spread out some architectural drawings. In one of them, part of the roof has been replaced by a giant glass dome. “What do you think?”

John sums it up. “The queen has found her palace, it seems.”

“Are you going to move in next year then”, Roger asks. Is that what he needs the time off for?

Freddie snorts. “Darling, it’s going to be years before anyone can live in here. I must consult an architect and a landscaper first, that’s what I want to do next year after the South America tour. And then I’ll have to draw up the final plans, and then somebody will actually have to convert the bloody thing.” He shakes his head. “No, I’m going to stay in Stafford Terrace for the moment. Mary’s going to oversee the day-to-day arrangements.”
Roger wipes some dust off a table and rubs it between his fingers. A palatial residence in the middle of London. Looks like even the magic of the mighty Thor has its limits. "Nice house", he says. Bit understated, if you ask me, but...

Freddie reaches out and pinches him in the side. The bastard is fast. Must be the remnants of his childhood boxing practice.

"Oi!" He tries to grab Freddie's wrist, but he's already pulled it out of reach.

"No fighting." Brian claps a hand on one of their shoulders each. "Right then. Didn't someone say something about drinks?"
South America is madness. Pure madness. Even Japan can’t hold a candle to it.

They are escorted from the plane by uniformed security guards. At the airport, all flight announcements have been cancelled in favour of Queen songs. Radio and TV stations interrupt their regularly scheduled program with special Queen news bulletins.

Argentina is a police state, and true to its name, there is police everywhere. They are escorted from the airport to the hotel by a fucking motorcade. Free movement is impossible.

It doesn’t help that Freddie keeps intoning “Don’t Cry for me Argentina” at every opportunity, which has their Argentinean promoter close to tears. “If he does that on stage, or around the press, they will shoot me”, he pleads with Jim. “Make him shut up, please.” Of course, Freddie knows very well that there is a line, but he just can’t resist a little hum every now and then.

The sound check is intimidating as hell. They are playing in a gigantic football stadium and without a roof over them, their music just echoes through the vast space, sadly fading away into nothingness. Add to that the armed soldiers flanking the stage as the audience finally pours in, all their nerves are on edge.

The shows are worth it, though. Huge crowds of people who’ve never been to a rock concert of this size, cheering and clapping and singing along. Diego Maradona joins them on stage, only to be introduced by Freddie as “quite cute”. Brian almost falls off the stage laughing.

Next comes Brazil and it’s the same nerve-wrecking a mix of triumph and sheer what-the-fuckery. In Buenos Aires, the security guy assigned to John introduces himself with the fact that he has killed 200 people. His idea of a joke is to stuff a loaded gun down his trousers. Gigs are cancelled and unc cancelled several times a day, which drives Gerry Stickells to ripping a phone off the wall in frustration and throwing it out the window. For one surreal moment it looks as if they are all going to be arrested hours before a show, though no one quite knows why.

Despite last minute donations to the charity of the mayor of Rio’s wife (or something), they don’t play the Maracanã. They spend a week whiling the time away in Rio, waiting to see what sort of background maneuvering is necessary to get them there. But for once, neither Jim’s machinations nor Gerry’s calling in favours nor Freddie’s well-timed tantrums get them anywhere.

Another thing that makes Rio so frustrating is that all its temptations – the clubs, the beaches, and the Brazilians populating them – are more or less off guard to the band. Or rather, they can go there, but it’s difficult to blend in when you’re surrounded by a ten man security death squad.

So they spend their time in their (very nice) hotel, giving interviews to the huge press entourage by day and downing shitloads of Cachaça by night.

It’s all a bit vexing, but there’s one development, though, that Roger can’t help but enjoy with all his petty heart.

Peter Morgan, Freddie’s model boyfriend has been accompanying them during the whole tour. Where Tony was greedy but modestly clever, Peter is as stupid as a half-brained mollusc. Not only does he find himself a local piece on the side and not only is that piece both a lot younger and
hotter than Freddie (both deadly sins on their own), but Peter also decides to amble hand in hand with him right down the promenade in front of their hotel.

Roger isn’t there to witness it, but according to Phoebe, Freddie’s tantrum was epic. And that’s the last they see of Peter.

It’s quite a downer for Freddie though. Although he tries to pretend he isn’t hurt, the betrayal gets to him. Even the pretty boys an increasingly desperate Paul Prenter parades in front of him go ignored.

“They’re all odious blood-sucking traitors”, Freddie complains to Roger one night on the balcony of his suite, so drunk he can barely sit up straight in his chair. “All just in it for the money.”

“Peter was a cunt”, Roger agrees.

“You’re on the right track, Rog”, Freddie slurs. “Keeping to your own, not letting anyone too close... ‘s clever. You’re a clever one.” He tries to fish a cigarette from its pack.

Roger takes it away. “You don’t smoke.”

“Oh, but I do.” Freddie grins at the familiar exchange.

“Why’ve you started?”

Freddie shrugs. “Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“It’s a bloody stupid idea”, Roger says. “Gonna ruin your voice.”

“My voice’s fine.”

"For now, maybe, but..."

The door opens and Paul sticks out his head. “Freddie? There’s some lovely guys in here that want to meet you.”

“Tell them to go get fucked.”

Paul grins. “I did. That’s why they’re here.”

For the first time in forever, Freddie looks actively put off by the idea of no strings attached sex. “You’ll do the honours then”, he says. “Now fuck off.”

Paul shoots Roger a pleading look, but Roger just shrugs and gives him a ‘sorry, you’re on your own there’-look. (He’s not sorry.)

“You know, there are guys who aren’t just with you because of the money and the fame”, he says, once they’re alone. "Guys who like you.”

“If this is about Thor again...”

“Not just Thor, Joe too.”

“Yeees”, Freddie says. “Joe’s nice.”

Not exciting enough then. “Phoebe would walk through fire for you. Not that I’m suggesting you date him”, he adds at Freddie’s incredulous look. “Just. There are decent guys out there. You’ll find
someone.”
Roger lights up a smoke.

“Gimme one.”

“No.”

They sit quietly for so long, that Roger thinks Freddie might have fallen asleep. He gets up and puts a hand on Freddie’s arm. “Hey. You okay there?”

Freddie blinks up at him. “You gonna stay with me tonight?”

Roger’s breath catches. He tries to step back, but Freddie puts his hand over Roger’s, holding him there. “Freddie, I…”

“Not for... you know. Just sleeping.”

Roger looks back the suite crammed with people. “You know I can’t.”

“You mean you don’t want to.” Freddie turns away as far as he can in his chair, drawing up his knees against his chest.

“Hey, that’s not... There’s about a thousand people in there. We can’t just go into your bedroom together.”

“Take my key and leave”, Freddie says, fumbling it out of the pockets of his tight jeans. It takes him a while. “I’m gonna throw everyone out, and then call you.”

Roger is impressed. That is some higher-order planning for someone who chugged down a whole bowl of Caipirinha. It's also the first time in years he's seen Freddie carry a room key. These days, he's largely outsourced things like these to Paul and Phoebe, to a worrying degree sometimes. Maybe it's a good sign. “Yes. Okay. We can do that.”

Just sleeping though, he reminds himself. This is not a prelude to anything else. Just comfort to a friend.

The call comes an hour later. Roger slips back out of his room and makes his way up to Freddie’s suite.

He opens the door and finds himself face to face with Paul Prenter.

“Oh”, he says.

“Hello”, Paul says, his eyes darting from the key in Roger’s hand to his face.

Roger holds up the key. “Just wanted to bring this back”, he says. “Must have pocketed it by accident.”

“Thanks.” Paul holds out his hand for the key, a sceptical look on his face. Roger can’t very well deny it to him, so he hands it over.

“Night then”, Roger says and marches back to his room, back held as straight as possible.

That had been... not good. Not good at all. Why would he bring back the key after an hour when he knows that Paul always has a spare one and he could well enough wait until the next day? Paul is
never going to fall for that.

His phone rings.

“Where the fuck are you?”

“Freddie, keep your voice down.”

“Don’t tell me what to…”

“Prenter’s still next door, so shut up.”


Roger tells Freddie what happened. "I told him I wanted everyone to leave”, Freddie hisses. “I’m gonna…”

“No! Freddie, come on, think. If you go out and rip him a new one, it’s going to be even more suspicious.”

There is silence on the other side. “Sorry”, Freddie says finally. “He sleeps on the couch sometimes. I... I forgot.”

“'S okay.” Roger really, really hopes it’s only the couch. He can’t very well come out and ask Freddie if there’s anything between him and Prenter, but god, that thought alone is enough to fuel his nightmares.

“Can you... can you stay on the phone?”

“On the phone?”

“Yes. Tonight.”

“Sure, Freddie, just a sec.” He puts the receiver away, chucks his jeans and shirt and climbs into bed. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Nothing”, Freddie says. “Just keep it there. Will you... can you do that for me?”

"Of course, Freddie. Shhh. Go to sleep. It's okay." He runs his fingers lightly over his pillow in the same way he'd done with Freddie's hair all those years ago in Paris. God, how he wishes he could be with him now. "I'm here."

Chapter End Notes

In honor of Marie Fredriksson, the song for this chapter is "Listen To Your Heart" by Roxette.
So they don’t play the Maracanã, but they do play to a crowd of 131,000 in São Paulo. Roger can’t imagine that the Maracanã (or anything else for that matter) can be much better than than this crowd of people, many of whom don't even speak English, singing "Love Of My Life" at Freddie and Brian with everything they've got.

The tour almost ends in disaster though, as there is there's a threat of their millions of pounds worth of equipment being confiscated. Roger has no idea whether that’s just paranoia or a real danger, but it leads to some cloak-and-dagger action, with Ratty spending 18 hours at the airport, heroically guarding their precious cargo until the plane gets permission to take-off. He does get a raise after that.

Roger has plans to get back to London, but that morning, Freddie presents him with a ticket to New York. “Got to show you something”, he says. “You'll like it.”

'It' turns out to be a gigantic, hideous skyscraper on the Upper East Side. Roger throws Freddie a disdainful look. “Another house?”

“Just a flat dear.” Freddie lets them into the apartment and throws himself onto the sofa in front of the panoramic windows. “I’m going to have a fabulous birthday bash in the fall and I’m sick of staying in hotels every time I come here.”

“Oh yes, presidential suites and 24-hour room service can be so tedious”, Roger says. They each have a suite at the Berkshire Place Hotel for now, which Roger thinks is perfectly adequate. He steps closer to the windows to take in the view, which is pretty spectacular, he has to admit. But it's not like Freddie comes to New York for the view.

“You can see seven bridges from the apartment”, Freddie supplies eagerly. He sounds like a fucking sales brochure. “Of course, first I’ll somehow have to convince the greedy bastard who owns it to agree to my terms.”

“You haven’t bought it yet?” The way he lounges on the sofa looks very much like he owns the place.

“No. Sylvia Stickells got the key from the agent. We’re really not supposed to be in here, very naughty.” He twirls the key around his fingers. “Anyway, the moment the owner heard Freddie Mercury is interested in buying it, the sum mysteriously doubled, the bastard.”

"Bit of a tactical mistake on Sylvia's part there."

"Before she told him, he didn't want to sell at all.” He looks up at Roger. “Do you like it?”

Roger looks at the high ceilings, the grey pinstriped wall-paper. Personally, he’d rather live in an unheated cabin in the woods than in a high-rise complex. He just doesn’t get the appeal. “It’s all
very... grey, isn’t it?”

Freddie rolls his eyes. “It’s not like I’m going to nest here. You all have second – or third – homes abroad. Why can’t I?” He sounds peeved.

“What about Garden Lodge?” Roger assumed that buying the property meant Freddie would stay in England for good. He belongs in England!

Freddie shrugs. “Garden Lodge is going to be my home. This...” He indicates the flat with a swirl of his hand, “this is just for convenience. And a good investment.”

“That it certainly is.” Roger’s no expert on the housing market, but an apartment in the middle of New York City sounds foolproof.

“It’s got four bedrooms”, Freddie says. “You’d be welcome to stay in any of them any time.” There’s a heady half second in which the world tilts a little. "Except when I need them of course", Freddie adds quickly.

“Alright then”, Roger says, mainly to stop thinking about bedrooms with Freddie in them already. He doesn't like the grey apartment or the complex it is in. But what can he say? It's not like he's got any proper arguments against it.

Thankfully, there is more to do in New York than house hunting, though.

Friday night they go out to a disco called the 12 West where they meet up with Freddie's New York Daughters and a couple of Roger’s friends. Melissa and Dino are there along with Ed and Marco. Over the next two hours, Roger is brought duly up to date on all the important developments he’s missed. Largely concerning people he doesn’t even know.

“Of course you know Andrew. He’s that gorgeous surfer guy who never goes anywhere without a bullet of poppers round his neck.”

“Dino, you call everyone ‘gorgeous’ and poppers aren’t a distinguishing feature in here.”

“But he’s...”

“Look, I’m not good with faces and names, okay?” Roger looks around. “By the way, where’s Arturo?”

The four exchange knowing looks and grin a little sheepishly.

"What, has he found a special someone?"

"A special something, more like", Marco says.

“Picked up some, er, really embarrassing medical problem”, Ed says.

“Rectal gonorrhoea”, Dino whispers gleefully, throwing all remaining tact out of the window.

“Ew.” The only thing to make a term like gonorrhoea sound even worse is to add ‘rectal’ to it. The pictures this calls to mind are not pretty.

“And making a huge drama out of it, too”, Marco says, rolling his eyes. “Been bitching about it for an hour over the phone.”

Roger remembers his own recent run-in with the clap and is a bit more sympathetic. “Come on,
that sounds absolutely horrible.”

Marco shrugs. “Yeah, but he’s making it out like it’s this singular calamity that’s hit him. In fact, he’s just been lucky all this time. Screwin’ around in here you get bugs from time to time.”

“Don’t start”, Melissa says and leans over to Roger in a conspiratorial whisper. “It can be like an old ladies’ club in here: who’s got which ailments, what drugs work best...”

“... which doctor’s got the best waiting room for picking people up in”, Dino butts in.

”And you’d know all about that, wouldn't you", Melissa sighs, looking a bit concerned.

Dino shrugs. "Might as well make the best of it, right?"

“William”, Ed decides. “No contest.”

“Sonnabend”, Marco contends.

“Sonnabend’s place is a dump.”

“But all the prettiest boys of the West Village congregate there. And half the time he forgets to send you a bill.”

“Bingo night is nothing compared to those guys”, Melissa moans.

The whole discussion is a bit distasteful, but also fascinating. In Roger’s world, VDs are something to hush up. If word gets out, there’s some teasing and knowing looks, but you certainly don’t compare notes or brag about picking someone up in the doctor’s waiting room. “But isn't that, you know.” Worrying? Embarrassing? Painful?

Ed shrugs. “The first time’s a bit embarrassing, but it happens to everyone.”

“It’s not the Middle Ages anymore”, Dino adds. “You get a shot or some pills...”

“...maybe a phone number from the hot guy waiting next in line...”

“...and a lecture from the nice doctor and then you’re off again. It’s not that big a deal.”

“Yeah, but it still sucks to piss blood”, Roger says.

“But it’s sooo much fun screwing around. Cheers!” Ed raises his Pina Colada.

Out of the corner of his eye, Roger sees Freddie getting up from where he’s been sitting with a couple of his Daughters. He is waving his goodbyes, tagging along a guy he must have picked up. Their body language makes it clear where they were headed. Thor has - unforgivably - failed to foresee Freddie's last minute decision to head to New Yorkand embarked on a long-planned vacation to San Francisco, so Freddie is on the prowl.

Roger feels his stomach flip, a clear “no, not him” flashing in front of his eyes. He gets to his feet. “Back in a moment”, he mumbles and makes his way over to Freddie. “A word?”

Freddie raises his eyebrows, but lets himself be tugged aside.

“Not him”, Roger says. It’s the first time he flat out vetoes someone Freddie has already decided to take home, and he has no idea how he’s going to react to that.
“What? Why?”

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

Freddie looks back to the slim, dark-haired man waiting for him. "What’s wrong with him?"

Roger has no idea. He can’t explain it. The guy looks jittery and there’s a glazed look in his eyes. Maybe he’s on something? Or worse, really needs to be on something? Anyway, he has that very definite image of the guy pulling out a switchblade, which is... which is not something you can actually predict, is it? He is not actually psychic after all.

Roger feels faintly ridiculous and also like a major cock-block. “I don’t know”, he says, shrugging helplessly. “Just please don’t.”

Freddie frowns at him and for a moment Roger thinks he’s going to have a major blowup. “My lord you look like you’re going to faint, darling. And you said ‘please’.” His eyes swivel back and forth between the guy and Roger. “That bad?”

Roger nods. “That bad.”

Freddie gives a deep, melodramatic sigh. “You owe me one”, he says. "I promise."

He has no idea what Freddie says to the guy, but soon he takes off while Freddie soaks back to the bar.

“What was that”, Melissa asks immediately and Roger groans inwardly. Of course she would have observed all that.

“It’s a long, complicated and most of all boring story”, he says, frantically searching for a topic that will direct attention away from him. “So, uh, any thoughts on that Reagan guy?”

A heated discussion wells up around him, but he’s not listening. He’s scanning the crowd. He’s glad that Freddie listened to him but Freddie is only going to voluntary refrain from sex so often. If Roger wants him to keep listening to him, he has to make sure he enjoys himself.

Fuck. He’s way too involved in his friend’s sex life, isn’t he?

When he looks up, it’s not just Melissa, but also Dino watching him intently. Not tonight, he decides. It would be impossible to help find another guy for Freddie without them noticing, no matter how subtle he tries to be.

Tomorrow then.

Chapter End Notes

There's footage of the São Paulo show (bad quality, unfortunately). You can just see, how incredibly thrilled Freddie is at the reaction to Love of My Life. It also features Brian May speaking Portuguese and shushing the audience when they keep chanting his name during the solo guitar part 😊
The discussion of STIs in the gay community at the time is not meant as some sort of moralistic finger-wagging. But if you read accounts of that time, that's pretty much the attitude the pro-party-crowd took. Neither HIV/AIDS nor antibiotics resistance were on anyone's radar yet, so the risk/reward-calculations looked a lot different than in the mid-80s and 90s.

Dr. Joseph Sonnabend and Dr. Dan William were two prominent gay physicians in NYC at the time.
New York, 28 March 1981

While it’s usually Freddie who organizes their outings, this time Roger takes over. He’s promised Freddie amends for last night and that's what he's going to get.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

“I don’t like surprises.”

“You’ll like that one.”

They get out of the car a few blocks away from the club. As they turn the corner, Freddie gives a low whistle. “The Saint?”

Roger grins and dangles the locker key from his forefinger. ”You’re not the only one who knows people.” It’s one the hippest clubs, opened only last year, one that – as Dino had put it – is frequented by "all the beautiful people”. Hopefully, one of them will be exciting enough for Freddie and sane enough for Roger.

He allows himself a moment to reflect on the way his priorities shifted over the last years. Those are just not the kinds of problems he used to have.

“That one.” Roger points at a slender, trim red-head in nothing but a pair of tight jeans that are ripped in strategic places. His legs are about a mile long. If he were gay, that’s who he would have gone for.

“Too pretty.”

Roger shakes his head. Ever since Peter Morgan fucked him over, Freddie has this weird obsession with always being the prettiest one in the bedroom. For Roger, ‘too pretty to fuck’ is just a completely insane policy.

“What about him, then?” This guy leaning against the bar is not extraordinarily good-looking, but he looks strong and confident, just as Freddie likes it.

Freddie looks at him aghast.

“What?”

“Wait until he turns round.” Freddie says and lights a cigarette.

Roger takes it away from him in a practised gesture. “You don’t smoke.”

“Oh, but I... look!”

The guy has turned around to order something from the bartender. That’s when Roger sees the hankies in his back pocket. Yellow and red in his right trouser pocket, that means... oh dear. “Yeah, good point.” And good to know Freddie isn’t interested in pissing on or fisting someone.
“Oh yes. If it had been the other pocket though...” Freddie waggles his eyebrows at him and Roger’s mouth falls open. “Just a joke, relax dear. I’m not all that hardcore, you know.”

“Good. That’s er, good to know.” He downs his Scotch. Fact is, he doesn’t know what exactly Freddie likes. Or rather, he knows some of the basics, of course, but how he feels about the more out there stuff... “What, er, what about the other colours?”

“Nosy.”

“Just so I know who to screen out”, Roger protests.

“Screen out anyone with hankies”, Freddie says. “It’s completely lacking in charm and dignity and the element of surprise.”

“Okay then”, Roger says lightly. That’s something, at least. An element of surprise...

“Him”, Freddie says.

Roger follows his gaze. A guy in his late thirties with a full, trimmed beared and dark, piercing eyes. His surly expression and leather look make him an intimidating figure, but from the distance least, Roger doesn’t have a bad feeling about him. “Alright then”, he says. “Wanna ask him for a drink?”

“No”, Freddie says, settling onto his barstool. “You will.”

O-kay. “Uhm...”

“You owe me one”, Freddie says. “Now go on, off you pop. I’ll be waiting right here.”

“Are you seriously going to make me do this?”

Freddie gives him his toothiest smile (and that is saying something). “Yes. Or are you scared?”

It’s a cheap shot, but it gets Roger moving. It’s a long way to the other side of the bar. Enough for Roger to reflect on the fact, that here he is, trying to chat up a guy who looks like a semi-professional arm-wrestler for his best friend.

The way is not long enough for Roger to come up with something clever to say.

“Hi!” He stands as tall as possible and presents his most charming smile.

Dark-eyes’ eyebrows rise as he checks Roger out from head to toe and back up. “Hello there”, the guy says in a voice like dark porter and honey. Immediately he half-turns to the barkeeper. “Two Scotch.” Then an apologetic half-smile. “Or did I get that wrong?”

“No, but...”

A true smile comes upon his face and it’s like the stormy sky lights up. “It’s my one true talent.”

"Buying the right drinks for strangers?” Roger looks at him, a bit puzzled.

The guy shrugs. “Not up there with curing cancer or playing Jazz piano, but it has its uses.” The scotch arrives and they clink glasses. “Besides, I was hoping we might not stay strangers for long.”

Oh dear. „Listen, er...“
“Robert.”

“Roger, hi. Er, thing is... that is, actually I’m...”

Roberts eyes grow wide. “Oh my god, are you English?”

Okay, Robert is not exactly quick on the uptake. “Er, yes.”

“Right, forget the drinks, gorgeous, I’m sold, let’s get out of here.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” He takes Robert’s wrist to make sure he doesn’t fall off his chair in his excitement. “So, you like British guys, then?”

“Oh god, yes. Had an English maths instructor in college. Everyone thought I had the hots for mean value theorems.”

“Yeah, I had a similar thing in Geography class”, Roger says, mind temporarily drifting off to Miss Bhavsar and her clingy knitted sweaters. “But anyway. I gotta be honest with you here. I’m not actually available.”

Robert’s face falls.

“But there’s this friend of mine... as English as scones with clotted cream.”

“See, it’s not just the accent, you know, I mean you’re gorgeous even when you’re not talking, I mean your eyes are just...”

Roger’s face is burning. He’s not used to being fawned over by men who could mop the floor with him. God, he has to get out of here. “You know what, forget it. It was a stupid idea and...”

“No, no, no, wait!” This time it’s on Robert to hold on to him. “Tell me about your friend.”

“Well, he’s funny and handsome and lonely and rather shy. And he thinks you are gorgeous.”

“Tell me more.”

“He’s got the poshest accent you’ll ever hear outside of a BBC drama.” Which isn’t quite true, but Roger doubts an American can tell the difference.

“When you say handsome...”

“Dark, slender, with the biggest brown eyes, endless legs...” He feels a bit like an auctioneer appraising cattle, so he stops. “He’s over there, at the bar, brushing off that twink.”

Roberts eyes narrow. “Don’t I know him from somewhere?”

“Probably. But I’m not telling. And you won’t either.” He lets a bit of steel creep into his voice.

“He doesn’t look very shy.”

“He only is when he really likes someone.”

Robert comes to a decision. “Vodka & Tonic”, he tells the barman, and then at Roger, “Did I get that right?”

It takes Freddie all of five minutes to make Robert forget all about his initial infatuation with
Roger. In fact, the two of them quickly forget all about Roger, period.

It’s all good though. Roger has mastered the challenge and Robert seems like a decent guy. It doesn’t help that his expression can convey both adoration and seriousness at the same time, which appeals to Freddie like cream does to a cat. Two drinks later, the two are ready to head back to the hotel.

“I’m leaving too”, Roger says. “Gonna take a cab back though, wouldn’t want to intrude.”

Robert splutters to assure him that isn’t necessary while Freddie simply says. “Yes, good.”

As they are weaving through the throng of patrons, Roger makes sure he stays close to Robert. “Listen”, he says under his breath. “I know you’ll treat well him, right?”

Robert stares at him. “Of course. What do you take me for?”

“Just want to make sure. Because if you don’t…” He leaves the ‘I’ll make you regret the day were born’ implied. Then an idea pops into his mind. “Also, use this.” He gets out his wallet and slips a condom into Robert’s hand.

Robert looks confused. “Does he have something or...?”

“No, and I want it to stay that way, okay?” The words ‘rectal gonorrhoea’ echo unappealingly in his mind.

“Okay. Sure.” Robert leans a little closer. “Listen, are you two... I mean, am I intruding on something? You could, you know, join in, I wouldn't mind if that's...”

“What are you whispering about, my darlings, hm?” Freddie turns around towards them.

“You, of course”, Roger says brightly. “What else is there to talk about?”

He sees the two off and gets himself another drink.

Oh boy, this whole thing is certainly getting weirder and weirder. He's in New York, and instead of finding himself a fling for the night or the week, he's spending all his time and energy making sure his friend can get his rocks off without accidentally picking up another Richie. And he doesn't even mind.

Somehow over the last two or three years his life must have gone completely off the rails. Subtly at first, but by now he's so off track his younger self would have laughed himself silly. In a gay disco, on a Saturday night, happily waving off Freddie and his play date that he helped set up. No, happily is the wrong word. There's a part of him that hated watching Freddie walk off arm in arm with Robert. He hesitates to call it jealousy but... Maybe contentedly is better. He knows that he did all he could to make sure Freddie doesn't get hurt and that's more important than anything else.

Of course, it's also - again - really fucking weird to focus so much energy on just one person. A grown man who managed to survive without him hovering over his shoulder for 34 years now.

Maybe he needs a hobby. Or a girlfriend. It's been almost a year since the attempt with Marlene failed so spectacularly. The idea completely fails to excite him right now, but maybe he just needs to get back into the groove. Fake it 'til you make it.

After all, Freddie's not the only one who gets lonely.
So, the famous hanky code: Hankies in the right pocket mean you’re looking to be the sub/bottom for a given sex act, hankies in the left means Dom/top. Common ones are light blue (blowjobs) and dark blue (anal sex). There are some charts out there that list like 30 different colours – which seems a bit over the top? I mean, can anyone really tell apart purple and magenta, or grey and charcoal? In the flickering light of a disco?? (They were apparently quite en vogue in the 70s and early 80s, but I'm not sure if anyone still uses them unironically today).

Exciting News: In a parallel universe, Roger has just written to Dear Prudence with his conundrum. He got some decent advice, so hopefully it won't take that Roger 80+ chapters to get there.
Robert keeps Freddie entertained while they are in New York, but soon Europe is calling them back. Freddie spends most of the rest of the spring with some long-suffering architect, buried in his grand plans for Garden Lodge. The plans change weekly and sometimes it seems to Roger that Freddie derives more pleasure from the planning process than from actually seeing the changes carried out.

Roger uses the time off to spend some time in Truro with his family (where - to his great annoyance - everyone tells him he's not spending enough time with his family. He's there now, isn't he?). Clare is going to have her first baby in August, so everyone is really excited about that. Their mum is completely over the moon at the prospect of having a grandchild, especially since Roger disappointed her so severely after the split with Dom.

He also keeps himself busy with an old-timer Mercedes he bought two years ago. He isn’t great with motors and stuff, preferring to drive cars rather than fix them. But this is fun, finding out what’s wrong and then making it right again. Seb, one of his friends back from Truro who is great with cars and stuff, spends a couple of weekends with him, and John and Brian drop by as well. Beers and cars, evenings at the pub, the occasional one- or two-night stand... It’s a good counter-measure to the nights out with Freddie, although there are much less of these in England. More people know them here and the press cares a lot less about discretion than in the US. Roger really doesn’t a want a picture of him coming out of Heaven or Xenon with Freddie all over the papers. It might give the wrong impression.

It’s all rather tranquil, really, until one day in May that he spends in the small but fully equipped sound studio built into the basement of his mansion. Brian is there with him, testing a new guitar Roger bought at an auction, which quickly leads them into a pretty good jam session. Roger’s just doing a quick kitchen run to get them some sandwiches when the phone rings.

“Where on earth are you? I’ve been trying to reach you for hours!” It’s Genie, Chrissie's best friend. And if she’s calling him here, that can mean only one thing.

“Don’t have a phone down in the studio yet”, he says. “I...”

“Tell Brian to get his arse over to the hospital, now.”

Roger sprints down the stairs and yells at Brian to get moving.

Brian blanches.”What, now? But she still has more than two weeks to go and...”

“Don’t think they’re always right on schedule”, Roger says, steering Brian out of the house and towards his car.

“James was.”

“You good to drive?”

“Sure”, Brian says and proceeds to drop the keys three times in a row as he tries to unlock the car.

“Right, I’m driving.”
“I want to live”, Brian protests even as he gets into the passenger’s seat. He laughs shakily. “My wife’s having a baby you know.”

“Don’t worry. This thing barely goes above 150 anyway, does it? Just joking.” Yeah, maybe not a good time for jokes. Brian looks like you could knock him over with a feather.

At the hospital, they are assured by a nurse that everything is going well so far and are brought into a small waiting room. Then she motions for Brian to follow her inside the delivery room.

“Didn’t know you were allowed inside”, Roger says. His experience with childbirth is mainly from 1950’s movies and involve chain-smoking fathers pacing outside while doctors yell for hot water.

“They might kick me out again if I get in the way but...” There is a moaning scream heard from inside and Brian goes white.

“Go”, Roger says, shooing him inside.

“You don’t have to wait here, I’ll...”

“Brian, shut the fuck up and go! I’ll be fine.”

Brian disappears into the delivery room and Roger settles in for the indeterminable wait.

It’s not all bad though. Every hour or so Genie pops out of the delivery room for an update. He doesn’t understand the details (and doesn’t want to think about them too hard either), but the gist of it seems to be that things are progressing. The nurses bring him coffee and sandwiches and one of the attending doctors asks him for an autograph for his daughter.

“How old is she”, Roger asks before he can stop himself.

“11”, doctor says with a disapproving look.

Roger takes extra care and draws a kitten next to the autograph to make up for his bad behaviour.

As evening closes in, his back is hurting and Roger really starts to wonder how long this is going to take. He’d offered to stay in the vague sense that he could support Brian (and the understanding that he could go home after two or three hours tops) but it’s not like he can do anything, anyway. But then a pretty young nurse, Alice it says on her name tag, offers him to wait in one of the adjoining private rooms. “It’s usually reserved for family members or doctors on call”, she explains. “But we can make an exception in your case, Mr Taylor.”

“Is that so?”

She nods. “You’ll be more comfortable there”, she says. “It’s got a bed.” A flush creeps into her cheeks.

“Interesting”, Roger says. She really is a looker. And in actual uniform. “Would you mind showing me the...”

The door of the delivery room bursts open and Brian stumbles out. “It’s happening”, he mumbles, white as a sheet. “There’s a lot of blood and...” Then he swoons right into Alice’s practiced arms in what has to be the most epic cockblock Roger has ever witnessed.

After that there is a whirlwind of activity. Doctors and nurses run in and out of the room while Brian is brought back to his feet, apologizing incessantly. Alice barely notices Roger anymore, so
smitten is she with that sensitive and concerned young father under her care. Eventually, Chrissie is wheeled out on her bed, a wrapped up newborn in her arms. Considering that she’s done all of the work, she looks a lot more put together than Brian.

“Isn’t she beautiful?”

A crumpled, violet potato is shoved under Roger’s nose. “Yes, er. Looks just like you Bri”, he says, which is evidently the right thing to say, because Brian starts bawling like a... well, like newborn.

“Is it supposed to be that colour”, he whispers to Alice when the proud parents are out of earshot.

She giggles. “Yes, it’s all fine.”

“About that room you mentioned”, Roger says. “And that bed...”

The door opens and a wheezing, heavily pregnant woman is shuffled in, surrounded by what seems to be her entire extended family.

“...is probably going to be taken”, Alice says with a grin.

Babies ruin everything, Roger decides. Why do they have to do this here? Are there no other hospitals in London?

She makes her way towards the expecting mother and Roger sighs, resigned to his fate. Then she half turns and looks at him over her shoulder. "My shift ends in 20 minutes though."

A healthy mother and child, a happy Brian, and a date for the trusty friend. No matter how weird his life might be sometimes, today he's just going to sit back and enjoy.

Chapter End Notes

In the actual timeline, it’s around this time that Roger releases his first solo album. In this story, he’s been so caught up in his complex love life during ’79 and ’80 that he didn't really get around to recording it ;) Sorry, Fun In Space fans, sacrifices had to be made.
New York, 29 July 1981

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The band reassembles first in Munich and then Montreux in June to get started on the new album, with Brian joining in a bit later so he has a bit more time with his family.

Freddie and John use Brian’s absence to team up and write something that sounds more Jackson 5 than Rock ‘n’ Roll. Roger is glad when Brian comes back and brings his guitar along, although it feels like he’s spending more time on the phone with Chrissie than in the recording studio.

It’s slow going until that fateful day when an awestruck techie announces that David Bowie has bought studio time. First they just listen in to each others’ recording sessions, but before long, that turns into a vodka (and blow) fuelled jam session. They play around with the basics of a song they’d been bandying around and the John comes up with that bass line and it all goes crazy from there. David goes from weird and mellow to crazy intense and takes over lyrically, which in turn has Freddie bent on beating him in the vocal booth.

They aren’t sure what to do with the results, but when the record company hears that they have a Queen/Bowie-collaboration on their hands, they go nuts, so a few weeks later Mack and Freddie join David in New York to mix their improvised jamming into an actual song.

Which leads to a desperate phone call from Mack about 32 hours in. “They’re going to shoot each other. Or I’m going to shoot them. Or myself. They’re like toddlers. Drunk toddlers with a God complex and access to cocaine.”

So Roger, who’d got along reasonably well with David and had a reputation for being able to handle Freddie, flies in to play peace maker.

Freddie isn’t in the studio when he arrives late at night, though. Instead, he is in his hotel suite, completely off his tits, watching the Royal Wedding with Phoebe, Peter Straker and the New York Daughters. It’s way too gay even for Roger’s hardened senses. He lasts all of five minutes before fleeing back to the studio, where he and Mac spend the morning sorting through mixes and demos. David floats in an out and Freddie only joins them late at night when they are about to call it quits for the day.

It takes about a thousand quid worth of Stoly, as many screaming matches as are typical for a whole Queen album, two all-nighters and uncounted packs of cigarettes to get this nightmare of a collaboration to a finish. It isn’t exactly a masterpiece, but it’s done, paid for in blood, sweat and tears. (When the always hard-to please Brian hears the final mix, he stares at Roger like he’s out of his mind. “One word”, Roger says, and means it from the bottom of his heart, “just one word and I’ll clock you.”)

Thank god there are normal people he can meet up with in this town as well. People who flog other people on stage, granted, but terribly nice in all other respects. The day after the final mixing session, Melissa takes him out for lunch.

“You look like shit”, she says, charming as ever.

“Don’t ask”, he replies. “It’s been a nightmare.”

“Need a drink?”
He grimaces. Even he has limits. "Ugh, I’ll stick to water, thanks.” He massages the bridge of his
nose, trying to get rid of that pounding headache. “Dino couldn’t make it?”

“No, er...” Melissa’s expression grows serious. “Actually, Rog, Dino’s in hospital.”

“Oh no, what? What happened? Is he going to be okay?”

She shrugs. “Probably, yes.”

That doesn’t sound too good. People don’t say ‘probably’ when you’ve got a broken leg or
something. ‘Probably’ is a cancer caught early on, or diabetes or something. “Look, I don’t want to
pry or anything but...”

“No, it’s fine, it’s just... Dino hates it when people worry about him.” She crosses her arms. “So he
tells us he’s fine, not to worry, it was just some bad chilli, just too much stress, just a bout of flu,
and then one day James calls to tell me he’s been hospitalized with pneumonia so bad he had to be
put on a fucking respirator.” She looks exasperated. “The doctors had to order in special medication
from the CDC to get it under control.”

“Shit.”

“You’ve got it.” She takes a sip of her wine. “He’s off the respirator now but they want to keep him
in for another week.”

“Let’s visit him.” Roger gets up immediately, then hesitated. “I mean. If it’s alright. I’d really like
to see him.”

She sighs. “I gotta warn you. He’s a very bad, very cranky patient.”

‘Cranky’ is the last word Roger would associate with Dino. “That I want to see.”

+++ Melissa warned him that Dino looks “even worse than you”, but seeing him still comes as a shock.
He must have lost two stone since Roger last saw him March and his skin looks grey under the
fluorescent light. Something about the sight triggers some half-forgotten memory. Something he’s
seen on the telly somewhere? Or when he’s been at the hospital when Louisa was born? He pushes
it aside, because whatever it was, it hadn't been very nice and he doesn't want to think about it.

James is at Dino's side, exhaustion and concern etched into his face. Dino scolds Melissa for
bringing Roger in, but is happy enough to chat with him, although he often has to pause because his
breathing is still laboured.

“When it rains, it pours”, he says. Apparently he’s been diagnosed with food poisoning, shingles
and mononucleosis all within the last twelve months. “I used to be the guy wearing a t-shirt in
February, never catching so much as a cold. Now I just need to hear someone coughing and voila,
next day I’ve got fucking pneumonia.”

“Special pneumonia, of course”, James says smiling, stroking his hair.

“Oh yes, I feel really special.”

Dino quickly changes the topic to Queen and Roger’s reason for being in New York. It takes all
three of them to keep him in bed when he gets the news.
“David Bowie? David Bowie is here? In New York, in a studio with Freddie Mercury? And they’re producing a song together?” His voice takes on a reedy tone.

“Dino, please calm down.”

‘Calm down, calm down’, it’s David Bowie! David and Freddie together, it’s as close to actual magic as humanity will ever get!”

Roger thinks back to the petty squabbling, the tantrums and the hissy fits he’s been happy enough to escape. “Yeah, quite.”

“And I am stuck in here. Oh, the gods are punishing me.” He ends the sentence in a wheezing cough.

“Dino, darling, I love you, but you’ve got to calm down or I’ll have to have you sedated”, James says.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Don’t try me.”

“I think it’s time you’ve had some coffee. When’s the last time you’ve eaten? You’re spending way too much time in here.” Dino looks pointedly at James. “Why don’t you and Mel go get some donuts or something?”

Melissa looks pointedly at James. “Sure”, she says, slowly. “I sure could use something sweet and deep fried right about now.”

James has a worried expression on his face. “Of course”, he says, then looks between Roger and Dino. “Are you going to be alright? There’s a call button right there if something’s wrong and the nurse’s station is...”

Dino groans. “I am surrounded by doctors. I think I’ll survive the next fifteen minutes without you.”

“Subtle”, Roger says when the door closed behind James and Melissa.

“Come on, it’s not like I want to have a go with you. Also, it’s true. James is spending too much time in here.”

“Hard to get rid off. Good for you.”

“Yeah, I’m a lucky bastard. Soo...” Dino grins. “You’ve been evading me.”

“I wouldn’t say ‘evade’...” They’d seen each at the club back in March, but there had been people around so they couldn’t really talk about the development of Roger’s little conundrum.

“Anything in particular you wouldn’t want to talk about? Not to pressure you or anything but I’ve been in here for a week, terribly sick, and almost dying of boredom and...”

“Alright, alright. You’re a bloody pest, you know that?”

Dino ignores the name-calling. “So? You and mystery guy...?”

“Not much to tell.” Roger fiddles with the hem of his shirt. “We’ve stopped.”

“Because it wasn’t what either of us wanted. It was stupid and dangerous and really not worth the risk. So. All settled now.”

“Hm.”

“Not very interesting, I know. Sorry.”

Dino sighs. “It’s very sensible, I’m sure. But it’s a bit like the opening act of the movie, when the hero is called out to be heroic, and after a lot of back and forth, he decides to stay home after all.”

“Are you calling me boring?”

“I am, yes. Congratulations on being so normal”, Dino huffs and sinks back into the mattress. “I’m just going to go on languishing then.”

“Come on, just another couple of days and you’ll be out of here, right?”

“You know how often I’ve heard that this year?” Dino looks truly despondent.

“Well, it’s gotta be true some time.” Roger lightly punches him in the arm. “Come on, everyone’s got a bad year. You know about how Brian almost single-handedly fucked up the band when we’d just hit it big because he just kept getting sick?”

Dino shakes his head, reluctant but already intrigued.

“The year was 1974 and it was supposed to be our big year. No more touring the UK as supporting acts, this was Queen going big in Australia and the US. Terribly exciting as you can imagine.” The whole truth is that they’d still been a supporting act in the US, but still, playing overseas at all had been huge. “So before we went to Australia we had to get all these vaccinations and Brian just couldn’t handle it. He was constantly on the verge of fainting and looked like death on legs.”

There’d been lots of other problems on that particular tour, but a lead guitarist not on top of his game hadn’t helped. “And when we went to America, his arm, where he’d got the injection just would stop hurting, but of course he doesn’t say a word, stubborn bastard that he is. So by the time we’re in New York, not even half-way through, he suddenly turns bright yellow and collapses after a show. So somehow we manage to get him onto a plane – he could barely stand on his feet – and back to London and it turns out he got hepatitis from the vaccinations and the whole injection site has become inflamed and gangrenous. He was terrified they’d take off his arm.”

Dino’s eyes grow wide as he tries to imagine a world without Brian May’s guitar playing.

“So, not only did we have to cut the tour short just as our album was getting traction in the US, he also had to stay in hospital for another two months, so he couldn’t work on the new album with us. When he finally did return to the studio, he kept throwing up all the time and collapsed again in August, this time because of some kind of stomach ulcer. He kept writing songs in the hospital as well as he could because he was terrified we might throw the leper out of the band.”

“Wow.”

“Yup. Anyway, he’s had that one shit year but been fit as a fiddle ever since. It’s like once something gets hold of you, it’s easier for all sorts of other crap to pile on.”

“Yeah, that’s what the doctor’s say too.” Dino sighs. “I just want to feel normal again.”
“Take your meds, do what the doctors say, don’t go on a world tour and drown yourself in Vodka every other night. At least not until next year.”

Dino’s smile is weak, but he does look a bit cheered up.

After that, they chat about the new album and the Middle America tour they have planned. At some point, Melissa and James come back, carrying a huge box of sticky, glittery donuts. Dino is putting on a brave face, but Roger can feel him getting exhausted and keeps the visit short. After he’s said goodbye, Melissa offers to see him out.

“Is he going to be alright?”

“Yeah, he should be.” But Melissa looks worried. “It’s weird though. The nurse told me there are three more guys with the same kind of super rare pneumonia in this hospital alone. Two of them are also gay.”

A cold shiver runs down Roger’s spine. That rings a bell somehow, a gloomy bell, like something half-remembered from a bad dream. He hates it and ignores the feeling as best he can. “Maybe they’ve all picked it up in the same night club? Faulty ventilation system or something?” That’s how Legionnaire's Disease happened, right?

“Yeah maybe.” She shakes her head. “It’s just been a rough year for him, but maybe if they stamp out the bug for good now...”

“Good. If there’s anything I can do to...”

“Oh, I’ve just been waiting for this”, she says.

“What is it?”

“Okay, now, this has got nothing to do with you being rich and famous, alright?” She gets out a bright red cardboard box with a slit at the top, holds it aloft and shakes it. The tinkling and rustling inside sounds like it's already half-way filled with notes and coins. “I’m pestering all of my friends with this.”

"Sure." Roger gets out his wallet and adds a couple of notes. “What’s it for? You guys gonna throw him a party when he gets out or something?"

"Er, no. I mean, yes, we probably will, but..." She looks at him like he’s just asked if the moon was made of cheese. “It's for all this”, she says, indicating their surroundings. “No NHS round here, remember?”

Oh shit. “He hasn’t got insurance?”

"He did, until he lost his job because he ran out of sick days.”

"He ran out of... He lost his job? Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't he tell me?” God, he had no idea. Not about the state of Dino’s health, his job trouble... He calls him his friend - hell, they all are friends - but it seems he really doesn't have any idea what's on in his everyday life.

She shrugs. "Not his style."

"What was his job, anyway?” As a friend should know this, shouldn't he? But somehow it just never came up.
"He used to work at a bookstore. A proper bookstore, as he likes to remind everyone, not a porn shop."

"And they fired him just because he got sick? Are they allowed to do that?"

"Welcome to America!"

"So now he has to pay for all of this? Shit." Roger only has a vague idea how much hospital stays cost, but it can't come cheap. "But... what do you guys do if you get, I don’t know, cancer or something?"

"We... die? After bankrupting our families of course."

"Holy shit." He is aware in a abstract way that the American health insurance system is shit, but he never actually thought about what that means in practice. "And James?"

"He earns enough to keep them both afloat day to day, but with the hospital bills and medication on top..." She shrugs.

Roger nods. "Right. So I assume all this adds up to a bit more than fits in your little red box."

She clutches it protectively. "It's better than nothing."

"Sure, but come on. Give me a real number. How much do you need?"

"Roger, I can’t..." She turns the box over in her hands, then buts it back into her bag. "Thanks for this. But I shouldn't have told you."

"Rubbish. Course you should have."

"Rog, James will murder me if he knows I even asked..."

"So don’t tell him."

She doesn’t look convinced.

"Look, in two days, I’ll head off back to Europe, while you guys sit by his bedside and make sure he’s okay. If my money can help, I want to give it to you, alright?" It's true that money doesn't buy happiness, but it can make all sorts of annoying problems go away.

"Alright, then."

"So, how much for the hospital bills?"

Chapter End Notes

The song referenced at the beginning is "Cool Cat" and the only good thing about it - IMHO - is that Freddie sings falsetto, which he doesn't do often enough.

It is virtually impossible to find out when exactly the mixing session for Under Pressure took place and who took part in it. There are so many different accounts floating around. The recording in Montreux was in early July and the mixing some time later in the summer or fall of 1981 – in the end I just ran with the one that best
fitted the story.

Also, we have now entered the era of the earliest stirrings of the AIDS crisis. Expect things to become really depressing from time to time. The information given about HIV/AIDS in this story reflects – to the best of my abilities – what was known at the time, not what we know today.

The first official report about a cluster of cases of what would later be called AIDS had been published just the previous month and concerned five men from Los Angeles, all suffering from *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia, a very rare type of pneumonia only seen in immunosuppressed people. It's a chilling read when you know everything that is going to happen later.
Puebla, 17 October 1981

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The rest of the recording sessions back in Montreux aren’t terribly productive. They manage to record a b-side for Under Pressure, but somehow the creative juices aren’t flowing as they used to. John is happy exploring Switzerland with his family, Brian is distracted by his baby daughter and Freddie is busy choosing window sills and floor-coverings for his new palace at Garden Lodge. Which leaves Roger free to roam the Alpine Streets in his shiny silver Mercedes Roadster.

In September they head back to New York for Freddie’s 35th birthday. Despite his efforts, the deal for his new apartment has still not come through, so they celebrate at the Berkshire Place Hotel instead. And instead of three days of revelry like last time, it’s now five. The bill for the champagne alone runs up to 30,000$. Freddie loves it. He flies all his friends from London there in a chartered Concorde and basically has them take over the entire top floors of the hotel. It’s a miracle the hotel doesn’t throw them out.

Afterwards the band meets up again in LA to prepare for a second tour of South and Middle America. The crew are frantic with the logistics of the operation, but the band is looking forward to it. Last time has been crazy, but the huge stadiums and massive crowds are something special and they’re all looking forward to a repeat performance.

+++

“Get us the hell out of here!”

“Gerry’s negotiating with the...”

Roger slams his fist onto the table. “I don’t give a fuck about Gerry's negotiations, I’m not going to stay another minute in this god-forsaken dump!”

The first few shows in Venezuela had been okay, but after that things quickly deteriorated. The crew had been fed something the local promoter said was KFC but everyone was really sure was not chicken. Brian, Roger and John had been guests at some live TV show (which Freddie had categorically refused) when an announcer had run into the studio and excitedly shouted something into the cameras in Spanish. “I think the president’s dead? Or something?” Brian, who had a basic grasp of Spanish, had translated for them. Only minutes later, the same episode repeated itself. “False alarm, apparently”, Brian said, struggling to keep his face straight.

The president did die shortly afterwards and a period of national mourning was declared, which meant all remaining shows were cancelled.

They’d then flown to Mexico but things only got worse. The crew escorting their equipment was stopped every few kilometres on flimsy excuses for bribes to change hands. After the first gig, a bridge outside the stadium collapsed. Luckily, no one was killed, but the police closed down the stadium and wouldn’t let the band or crew leave ‘for their own protection’ until another wad of cash changed hands.

And then Puebla. Shorty before they arrived, the local promoter got kidnapped or thrown in jail (no one seemed quite sure which it was and if it made much of a difference) and they had to pay 25,000$ in ransom/bail. The crew is housed in the worst hotel in town and half of them come down
with food-poisoning. When Crystal shows him a picture of his toilet, Roger offers his roadie humanitarian asylum in his own (perfectly fine) suite. And speaking of toilets, in the entire backstage area of the stadium, there is exactly one that is working properly. And it doesn’t have a lock.

The show itself is completely unhinged in a not so good way. The stadium is filled to twice the maximum capacity and the audience seems to be off their tits on mescaline and tequila (which is also an apt description of the band on more nights than one, but they are just four blokes, not 50,000). Apparently, for them a rock gig is mainly an excuse to go apeshit. They hurl all kinds of shit onto the stage – not flowers and cards, but batteries, shoes and plain dirt. Freddie barely makes it through the set and ends it on an incensed “Adios, amigos, you motherfuckers!”, before storming off the stage and swearing never to set another foot on it again.

“Guys, please.” Paul is pleading with them to stay calm.

“No, Paul.” Brian’s voice is calm, but steely. “Roger’s right. I want you to get us back to the hotel, right now. Order in a bloody helicopter if you have to, I don’t care.”

Paul takes a deep breath. “I can’t”, he says finally.

“What do you mean you can’t?” Slowly, the words sink in. “You mean we can’t leave?”

They’d been ushered into some sort of cellar underneath the backstage area. John has been looking uncomfortable, from the beginning, but at those news he pales visibly.

“Brian, please. Gerry will work it all out. Until then, we’ve just got to stay calm and...”

“Paul, you fucking wanker, I’m not staying in here another minute!” Freddie slams a stone the size of his fist down on the table. “They tried to murder me!”

The door opens and a serious looking Gerry Stickells rushes in. Paul looks visibly relieved as the attention shifts to Gerry. “There’s riot police out there. They’ve locked the whole thing down and...”

Roger groans. “Is this Monterrey all over again? You know what? I don’t care, just hand over the cash to whatever bloodsucker’s in charge and get us straight back to the US.”

“Yeah, fuck the contract”, John says. “I don’t care how much it costs, we’re out.”

“It’s not about the contract,” Gerry says.

“Gerry, this is fucking insane”, Roger says. “John’s been hit in the head!” Thank god it was just an old boot, not a rock.

“Yes. Yes, it is fucking insane.” Gerry rubs his forehead with his hand. Then he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a crumpled sheet of paper. “They want you to sign this.”

“They... what?” Brian looks incredulous. “What the hell is that?”

“It’s a sworn statement that you will be back tomorrow night.”

“Are you joking?” Roger snatches up the paper, but quickly gives up on trying to read it as it’s all in Spanish. He shoves it at Brian, maybe he can make something out of it.

“The police chief and his two underlings and their machine guns certainly aren’t.”
Roger can’t believe it. “Are you saying they’ll lock us up in here? At gun point? Are you seriously saying that?”

Gerry sinks down on a chair. “I don’t know, guys. Probably not. But who the fuck knows? If they say there’s rioting in the streets and they can’t guarantee for our safety…”

“Fuck!” Freddie kicks a chair half-way through the room.

“I’m not signing this”, Brian says. “This is blackmail. We’ve already signed a contract, they can’t force us to…”

“Guys.” John speaks quietly, but his voice is serious enough to make them all fall silent. He is breathing slow and deliberate. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to spend a minute longer in here than I have to.”

John hates being in small, cramped spaces, and this space is not just small and cramped but also dark and most of all locked. He looks pale and drawn. Freddie's face softens at the sight and he heads over to stand next to him, a steadying hand on his upper back. John gives him a small, grateful nod.

“Yeah, well, me neither, but…”

“So I suggest we sign the bloody thing, get back to the hotel and regroup there.”

“You want us to sign this?” Roger can’t believe it. John never signs anything without having at least two lawyers and his wife read through it.

“Yeah.” John shrugs. “Just a piece of paper. If we decide to breach the contract, we’re going to be raked over the coals anyway. But that’s what we’re paying Jim for. Right now, our problem is not contract penalties, but getting the fuck out of here.”

They argue back and forth a few more minutes, but eventually even Brain relents and they all sign (although Freddie has to be physically impeded from adding ‘you stupid motherfuckers’ to his signature).

A visibly relieved Gerry hurries off with the form, and half an hour later they are escorted out of the building by a very important looking escort of police officials.

It takes half the night, but eventually, they come up with a plan. It’s clear that if they simply refuse to play the next two planned shows, they’ll probably never see any of their gear again. Also, there’s a non-zero chance of the local promoter disappearing into some black hole. So they agree to play the second show while the crew pull a night shift to pack up any gear that isn’t urgently need and get it out of the country as quickly as possible. Gerry is going to set up a transport to get the band, rest of the crew and the gear out immediately after the show. He’s already arranged for the stacks of cash necessary to make the whole escape go smoothly.

Luckily, the gig is going a lot smoother than last time. John dons a Texas Cowboys helmet before the show to protect himself from projectiles, but this time it’s not necessary. The crowd is much better behaved and the police actually confiscates the more obvious projectiles before anyone is left into the stadium.

During Brian’s rambling guitar solo, which Roger waits out backstage in the Doll’s house with Freddie and John, they are so giddy with relief that they goof around with a sombrero and Ratty’s camera. Some of Roger’s absolute favourite tour pics are created that night: him and Freddie and John, giggly and relaxed, with those gigantic silly hats on their heads.
In the end, Freddie even condescends to a conciliatory goodbye: “Thank you for being a totally different audience tonight. We all thank you. Muchos gracias.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry to any Mexicans and Venezuelans reading this! The guys got a very skewed impression of your lovely countries.

If you'd like to read another take on that infamous show in Puebla, Toinette93 has written a lovely one-shot about it.

The backstage pics are among my favourite things in the world:

And for good measure, here's John in his protective gear:
Once they are safely back in Texas, Deacy and Brian make their way to LA where their families are waiting. Freddie marches straight to the airport ticket counter and buys three tickets to New York – one for himself, one for his friend-slash-manservant Phoebe and the third he holds out to Roger. “Let’s get laid”, he says.

With the apartment deal finally under wraps, Freddie insists on moving all of them into the flat. “Don’t be silly, dear”, he says when Roger suggests booking himself into a hotel, “we’ve got four bedrooms to share between the three us. Or was it five? I forget.”

The first thing Roger does in New York is check in with James and Dino. They’d been out of town for Freddie’s birthday so this is the first time Roger sees them outside the hospital again.

Dino is up and about and breathing normally again, but he hasn’t gained back any of the weight he’d lost. He as as excitable as ever when Roger tells him stories of their crazy Mexican adventures, but tires quickly. When Roger asks him if he wants to join him on a night out some time, he rolls his eyes.

“Sorry. I’m basically 80 years old now. I watch jeopardy reruns on Saturday night, can you imagine?”

When Dino heads into the kitchen to fix them all dinner, Roger has an opportunity to talk to James alone. “He going to be okay?”

James sighs. “God, I hope so. I just feel like he needs a break one of these days. Just a month or so where he can rest without the next infection wearing him down again.” He settles back on the sofa with his wine. “I’d really like to take him out of the city for a while, somewhere warm and quiet.”

“That sounds good.” Winter is drawing near and in New York that is no picnic.

“Yeah, no shit that sounds good.” James laughs. “Thing is, he’s been fired because his sick days have run out and someone has to pay the rent.”

Roger cringes inwardly. Money just isn’t something he’s used to worrying about a lot, so he tends to take it for granted. “Let me take care of that”, he says.

James blanches. “Jesus, Roger, no.” He shakes his head. “I didn’t mean to come off like...” He clenches his teeth and sits up a little straighter. “I wasn’t asking for your money.”

“Oh, understood. I’m still offering it though.”

“And I’m telling you not to.”

Roger leans forward, elbows on his knees. “Come on. You guys are my friends. Let me help you.”

“You already did. You sent Dino that tape from the recording session. It made his fucking year!”

“Come on, that was...”

“And don’t believe for one I second I don’t know why Melissa’s fund suddenly had enough money
“Melissa’s got a fund? What fund?” Roger makes his eyes as big and innocent as they can go. Which is quite big and innocent, as a number of ex-girlfriends have informed him (usually before yelling that it’s not going to work on them anymore).

“I’m not asking for handouts.”

“It’s not a fucking...” Time to bring in the big guns. “Are you seriously going to turn down an offer that could really help him simply because you’re too proud to accept help?”

“How dare you say that”, James hisses. “I’d give my right arm to have him be alright, you...” He cuts himself off with obvious effort. “He wouldn’t want it.”

“No, because he’s just as much of a bull-headed idiot as you are.”

James looks down at his feet, refusing the smile on his face to be seen. “He’s a piece of work, I give you that.”

They sit in silence for a moment, the tension slowly ebbing away between them.

“I just don’t want you to think... you must have people asking you for money all the time.”

“Not really, if I’m honest. The only ones who do are people even richer than me inviting me to their fund raisers.” He scrubs a hand through his hair. “Look, I’ve got a finca on Ibiza – warm, sunny Ibiza. Perfect for someone recovering from a lung infection.”


“The house is quiet enough. Couple of miles outside Vila, private beach, secluded orchards...”

It takes a lot more wheedling and cajoling, but in the end, James agrees to take the house and a cheque just high enough to cover his leave of absence.

“Thank you”, Roger says.

“Dino’s going to kill me if he finds out.”

“Nah. He’ll just bitch and moan and make a fuss and refuse to go – so I suggest you just lie about it.”

“Easy for you to say”, James mumbles. “Hey. Thank you.”

“It’s no big...”

“Shut up. It is a big deal, and I’ll say thank you as much and as often and in whichever manner I see fit.” He spreads his hands. “I’m afraid you’ll just have to put up with it.”

In the end, Roger decides to do them one better. On further thought, Tenerife is much better suited for a convalescent – warmer climate, much quieter. How lucky that Brian happens to have a house there! Of course, while he enjoys the beaches and the waves as much as the next guy, the main reason is that Tenerife has two important observatories where Brian has done some actual research, the fucking smartarse. And as they’ll all be in Munich recording the new album, the house will be empty anyway.

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The second important thing Roger does in New York is get himself laid. Freddie is quite intent on it. Roger thinks it’s a bit counterproductive that he drags them to another gay club – not much game for him there – but Freddie is so excited about diving back into the fray that Roger doesn’t complain. When they arrive, the Daughters are already there – and they have their girlfriends in tow. Or whatever you call the lady friends of a bunch of gay dudes. And one of those girlfriends is just what Roger needs to rewind after a long, stressful tour of the bottom half of the continent. He waves Freddie and Thor – who seems to be back in Freddie’s good graces – off early on, then has a whole night to focus on a lovely lady called Tanya who’s on vacation from Montana and clearly determined to make the most of it.

The next afternoon, Freddie and Thor look very smug when Roger shuffles into the kitchen for his coffee. He feels like... well, like a guy in his thirties feels after pounding shots with a horde of drag queens, then getting ridden into the sunrise by a girl 10 years younger who rides rodeos for a living.

“Someone had a good time last night”, Freddie comments. He actually has the gall of looking at Roger over the top of a newspaper. As if Freddie reads the fucking newspaper. “Didn’t know you could yodel.”

Thor elbows him in the ribs.

“That wasn’t me, you wanker.” He might have to rethink their living situation. Although if he’s honest, he doesn’t even care all that much. Tour buses and crappy hotels with paper thin walls during their early years means that everyone – band and crew – knows what everyone else sounds like in bed. It’s part of touring life.

Freddie gives Thor a look. “You never yodel for me”, he says reproachfully.

“Oh, I do. You just don’t hear it because your screeches drown out every other sound.” Thor holds up a carton and smiles sweetly at Roger. “Orange juice?”

Roger doesn’t quite get why Thor and Freddie aren’t proper boyfriends, at least for the times Freddie is in New York. They are perfect for each other. And Thor is a tall, blond Viking minus the axe murder. But apart from the occasional night together, they don’t seem all that romantically involved. Which of course means that Freddie is on the prowl. Which means work for Roger. Which somehow, inexplicably, he finds pleasing rather than horribly annoying.

Freddie had liked Robert, so he’s now taken to regularly sending Roger out to pull guys for him. Usually he preselects them, but one night, he surprises Roger by simply asking him to bring him someone.

“Anyone?”

“Of course not, stupid. Someone hot.”

Roger has taken two steps before he turns back around. “And you’re not going to argue with my choice?”

Freddie looks taken aback, like he hasn’t thought that far. He settles back into his chair. “No”, Freddie says slowly, as if warming to the idea. “No. Surprise me.”

Oh god, why has he asked that? It makes everything 1000% more difficult and serious. And also exciting. He drifts along the bar, the dance floor. He knows Freddie’s type, but he also knows that
sometimes he goes for the complete opposite. He also wonders what would happen if he brought over someone he’d be sure Freddie wouldn’t like. Would Freddie accept the challenge? Or laugh him off and tell him to go fuck himself? Which would be very unfair to the poor bloke he’d select as guinea pig.

It takes some time. His first candidate is there with his boyfriend, and number two is looking for someone heavy into leather. In the end, Roger settles on Joaquin, who’s a little too young and too pretty for Freddie’s taste, but at least he’s eager. According to his hankies, he’s very much a top, but not into any stuff that’s too out there. Freddie might find the hankies tasteless and lacking in style but they make Roger’s job so much easier (good lord, when has he started thinking about it as a job?). Still, he makes him take them off before Freddie can see. He also hands him a condom, which Joaquin accepts with a knowing smile.

“You the squeamish one or him?”

“As far as Freddie’s concerned, you’re the squeamish one, alright?”

Joaquin shrugs. He reaches into his pocket, and, with a gotcha grin, pulls out another condom. "Good thing I am."

“Oh.”

Freddie whispers “Really, Rog? Haven’t you had enough of Latin America for a while”, but Joaquin’s easy smile (and toned abs) quickly win him over.

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And so Roger’s and Freddie’s relationship takes on a new, fucked up dynamic. And it evolves: Sometimes Roger sends the man for the night directly to the car to wait for Freddie there. Sometimes Freddie gives him more particular instructions (a topless dancer, someone wearing Levi’s or at least 6 feet tall). Sometimes they head home alone because Freddie isn’t in the mood or there’s no one he likes.

They only do it abroad, though. Back in England, the press and the paparazzi are too much of a threat. Photos of the two of them regularly hanging out at gay clubs together is not something they need. So during those times, Freddie heads out with Phoebe, Paul and some of his ever increasing circle of friends from London.

But on tour or when recording in Munich, often enough it’s just the two of them. When Freddie wants to send Roger out to find him someone, he sometimes takes Phoebe along, because he doesn’t like waiting around on his own. What exactly Phoebe makes of the whole thing Roger has no idea. He’s a model of discretion, but Roger really hopes he never decides to write a book. But there’s something about him that makes Roger trust him.

Unlike a certain other member of Freddie’s entourage.

Chapter End Notes

Phoebe’s book is called “Freddie Mercury – An Intimate Memoir by the Man Who Knew Him Best”. He doesn’t give anything away about Roger though ;)

So, I know everyone is waiting for Freddie and Roger to get their shit together, but I plead for a bit more patience. I have a plan for this story, so when things happen it will be worth the wait (or so I think).
Munich, 5 December 1981

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Back in Munich they cram in some more recording hours for the new album before the year is over. One night when they’re all at the Shack together, Paul Prenter sidles up to Roger at the bar.

He’s wearing his widest, most winning smile as he orders a beer. Then he turns to Roger.

“You trying to boot me out?”

“How do you mean?”

Paul rolls his eyes. “You know how I mean, mate.”

Roger takes a deep breath. “Listen, mate. I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Of course he does. Paul used to be the big organizer of Freddie’s private life. He had introduced him to the New York club scene, had procured potential lovers and made sure he got home alright after a long night out. Now, to a large degree, Roger has taken over and Paul is finding himself more and more in a role that fits his actual job description: day-to-day band manager: Fielding interview requests, organizing cars and hotels and flights, arguing with local promoters and overseeing the backstage area.

Roger has already suspected that he doesn’t care much for him and resents being booted out of Freddie’s innermost circle. But it surprises him that Paul would be that blunt about it. Roger is his boss, after all.

“Do you think I don’t know what’s going on?”

“I don’t know, Paul, do you know what’s going on?”

“Don’t play dumb.”

“Hm. The way I see it it’s really fucking simple. Freddie’s my friend. We go out together. If you find yourself not invited as often, I suggest you find yourself some other friends. You’re good at that, aren’t you?” Roger stubs out his cigarette. “Or better yet, concern yourself more with your actual job, you know, the one we’re paying you for?”

Paul’s eyes narrow. “What are you trying to say?”

“Look, that TV guy you got for the Montreal video. Has he ever filmed a rock concert? Because Brian’s seen the footage and he’s pissed. And don’t think you can blame the Mexico disaster entirely on Gerry. You know, just as a friendly heads up.”

Paul comes very close. “You better not try to screw me over, Taylor. Everyone’s got their dirty little secrets.”

“Oh, fuck off!” Roger slams his glass down.

Paul raises his hands, all smiles again. “Just a friendly heads-up”, he says as he backs away.

Roger is fuming. He isn’t going to be intimidated by that sneaky little weasel. Especially not since he’s got nothing to hide. Not anymore, anyway. So this thing he and Freddie are doing is a little
weird, so what? It’s certainly none of Prenter’s fucking business.

He needs some air. He grabs his drink and turns around. Which brings him face to face with someone very familiar. His stomach lurches. He thinks about pretending not to have seen her (it works, if both do it), but Marlene’s already speaking.

“I... I didn’t know you were back”, she says, staring at him and taking a step back. “I wouldn’t have come if... I was just going actually.” She shakes her head, sets her jaw.

“Hey, er. How... how are you?” Five minutes of awkward small talk, and then they go their separate ways and can ignore each other for the rest of their lives. He can do that.

“Fine”, she says. She certainly looks fine. Rail thin as ever, her messy hair now cut short and curling around her ears. He’s thinking about complimenting her new haircut, but she crosses her arms and looks a bit upset. He really doesn’t want to end up with a drink in his face.

“Great, that’s great.” He gestures in the direction of the exit. “I was just about to...”

“Sure”, she nods and steps aside.

“Well, it’s been...” He clears his throat. “See you around, then.” Please let's not. He turns to go. A hand on his arm stops him.

“Rog, can we...” She swallows and takes a deep breath. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Alright.” It's been one and a half years since they last saw each other, well out of the time frame for a ‘missed period’ kind of talk, so Roger is relatively relaxed.

“Somewhere where we don’t have to yell at each other over the music?”

He probably owes her that. “How about I drive you home?”

When they get to his car (a sparkly new BMW coupe Queen productions has leased for him), he accidentally walks up to the passenger’s side. It happens sometimes when he’s distracted, still being more used to English models.

“Sorry”, he mumbles.

Marlene just grins, walks over to the driver’s side and holds out her hand.

She can’t be serious. “No way”, he says.

Marlene just quirks one eyebrow and waits, arm still outstretched.

“Do you even know how to drive?”

She just rolls her eyes, still waiting.

He tosses her the keys. Sometimes he thinks this whole women’s lib thing has gone too far. Voting rights and equal pay and sexual liberation is all good and well, but do they have to usurp every domain?

They creep at a snail’s pace through the outskirts of the city. She doesn’t put any bumps into his car, but that’s the only positive thing he can say about her driving. It’s maddening.
“Where are we going”, he asks.

“You’ll see.”

“Is it far?”

“Not very.”

He drums his fingers against his thigh. Driving usually relaxes him but this is like Chinese water torture. The next time she slows down before a green light, he can’t hold back any longer.

“This isn’t a state funeral, you know.”

She ignores him.

He pats the dashboard. “This baby isn’t made for sustaining speeds below 50”, he says.

“Rog, shut up and let me concentrate.”

“Concentrate? It’s about the only car in the streets and we’re not even inside city limits anymore. It’s not rocket science.”

“No, but I’ve popped some Quaaludes earlier and I don’t have a licence, so I really don’t want to be stopped by the police right now.”

“You what?! Pull over right this minute!”

She laughs. “Just pulling your leg, I’m fine.”

Roger’s heart starts slowing down again. “Not funny.”

“I’m going at the legal speed limit, alright? Besides, we’re almost there.”

A few minutes later she pulls into a bumpy country lane and then stops by the side of a river, shimmering in the clear winter night.

“If it were summer we could sit out there on the boulders. They keep the warmth of the sun well into the night.”

“It’s a lovely spot”, Roger says.

“I grew up here. There’s a tiny village, just a five minute’s walk away.” He says the name, something so long and so insanely Bavarian he couldn’t repeat it if he practiced for a week.

“Ah.” He pushes the button to roll back the cover of the sun-roof. It’s too cold to open the roof itself, but they have a clear look of the starry sky like that. “I’ve been meaning to ask. Did you get your scholarship?”

“They accepted me, against all odds.”

“Clever girl.”

“I declined though.” She puts the back of the car seat as far back as it will go and puts her feet on the dashboard. “I went to Australia instead. Sheep-shearing.”

“Seriously?” It sounds like she’s having him on again, but her English does sound different from
the last time he’s seen her. The harsh, rolling r’s that sometimes crept in have gone completely.

“Bloody oath, mate.” She grins. "My dad had a fit."

"Good." He has exactly zero tolerance for overbearing fathers.

“But you’ve come back.”

“Yup. No future in sheep-shearing for me. But I’ve decided I don’t want to spend my life writing up research papers. So I’m training to become a therapist instead.”

Oh god. Does she want to turn this into a counselling session? Work on his childhood trauma?

She looks amused. “Am I scaring you?"

“Don’t be silly. I’m just not... not one for talking everything to death, you know.”

“No, you’re not.” She plays with the ring on her little finger. “Actually, I just want to ask you one question. That’s it, that’s all I want.” Before he can answer, she laughs a little to herself. “Well no, actually I want to slap you, but I’m a pacifist, so it’s going to be the question instead.”

“What if I prefer the slap?” That’ll be over in a second at least.

She shakes her head. “Rog, why did you want me to come to America with you?”

Roger shrugs. “I liked you. Like you still, of course.”

“You ignored me. The whole time I was there.”

“I... I wasn't at my best.”

“Was it like a guy thing? That you had to have a girl at your side to keep up with the others or something?”

She cannot possibly know, can she? “Er. A bit maybe. But... I don’t know, I don't think much about things like that. We had a good time in Munich and I thought we'd have a good time in the States as well.” He thinks for a moment. “Why did you come with me, then?”

She shakes her head. “You have no idea, do you?”

“How do you mean?”

She takes a deep breath. “When I met you at that party it was maybe the second time I stepped into a club like that, ever. And I was only there because Brigitte dragged me along. And suddenly there were you. Roger fucking Taylor, talking to me, flirting with me and... and I never wanted to be cool so badly in my life.”

“Wait. I thought you didn’t even know who I was?”

“I had a picture of you in my fucking bedside drawer ever since I was 17.”

“Blimey.”

“Yeah, so. Of course I came to fucking America with you. I thought it meant.” She takes a deep breath. "I thought it meant I was your girlfriend, alright?"
“You were”, he says. In a way.

She chews on her bottom lip. “Just so I know: Was there someone else? I'm not going to yell at you, just for my own peace of mind.”

“You said there was just one question.”

“Yes. I guess you don’t have to answer that one.”

That's fair. He likes people playing fair. “Yes. Kind of. It's...” He pushes his own seat down and settles back, looking the stars glinting above him. “It's over and done with.”

She nods to herself. “Do you have any idea how crappy that feels?”

So this is what he gets for being honest. God, he hates it when women do that. “Look, you asked me...”

“I don't mean now. But then.”

“So what do you want me to do, huh? I already apologised.”

She thinks about that for a moment. “No, you haven't.”

He sighs. “Fine. I'm sorry. There.”

She shakes her head and chuckles. “Christ, Rog, you’re such a wanker.”

He throws up his hands. However fucked up that thing with Freddie might be, at least he's never subjected to talks like this.

“Lucky for you I'm all grown up now otherwise I'd have kicked you out of the car already.”

“It’s my car.”

“Or worse, started crying.”

Okay, time for a change of subject. “You look more grown up.”

“Oh yes. Got a proper job now at the clinic. And I've also started meditating”, she counts it off on her fingers, “I read Simone de Bouvoir, had sex with women, raised my consciousness, stopped wearing padded bras and moved into my own flat. And there's this really nice boy I met in...”

“You had sex with women? That's...”

“...not something I'm ever going to discuss with an immature twat like you.”

Dammit. “But you could help me settle a really important argument!”

“What.” She looks like she knows exactly she's going to regret asking, but cannot help her curiosity.

“Who's better at, you know, going down on you? Me or them.”

She stares at him for a second, then breaks down in helpless giggles.

“Come on, it's a simple question.”
She puts her palms together in front her mouth like she's pondering the secrets of the universe, then frowns at him. “You went down on me?”

“Hey!”

“I don’t seem to recall, really…”

He turns onto his side as far as he can, facing her. “If you think this is funny…”

“My memory seems a liiiiiittle hazy…”

“Need a bloody reminder then?”

She stares at him, wide-eyed. “Are you hitting on me?”

He checks in with himself. “Yeah.”

“You’ve got some nerve.”

He ducks his head, bites his lip and looks up at her. “Is it working, though?”

For a second, he thinks it might. Then she rubs her hands over her face and laughs. “Oh god, you’re a piece of work.”

Dammit.

Marlene pulls the seat back up, as if she’s just realized the horizontal position is a bit suggestive. She clears her throat. “Certainly not in the front seat of your car”, she says slowly. “Buy me dinner?”

Roger grins. “Alright.”

He’s going to blow her fucking mind.

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20 hours and a dinner date later.

Roger stomps through the room, pulling up his trousers as he goes. “I put my heart and soul into it and this is the thanks I get?”

“I didn't say you were bad…”

“I put a bloody crick in my neck, you ungrateful little…”

“See, a lesbian would know to vary the position during a long session. Like, if I lie like this and you kneel on the floor…” She scoots along the bed until she lies right at the edge, feet dangling to the ground. “…or I could have sat on your face for a bit and…”

“Why didn't you say so earlier if you're so bloody clever, huh?” He's hopping on one foot, trying to put his socks on without crashing into a table.

“What, me, a mere woman, correcting the vagina whisperer?”

“I never called myself... You are enjoying this!”

“Of course I am!” She sits up on the bed, looking entirely too smug. “You know, I think you're
quite talented, actually. All you need is a little more practise.”

“I've had plenty practice”, he growls.

“But you want to compete with champion athletes. And if I remember correctly you can be a little lazy.

“Lazy? I've just put in hours of...”

“Fine.” She throws up her hands and reaches for her panties. “I was offering you no strings attached sex and a chance to inflate your already massive ego even further, but if you're not interested...”

Roger turns to her, arms crossed in front of his chest. “I thought you didn't want to fuck an immature twat like me now you've got your pick of the meditating lesbians.”


"Why did you?"

She cocks her head. "However fucked up that thing between us was, that part was always good." She reaches out and hooks a finger into the waistband of his trousers. “Don't you think so?”

She looks up at him with her deep green eyes and if he hadn't got off just a few minutes ago he'd already be hardening again. "You have grown up.", he grumbles.

She nods, like it's been decided, then flips onto her back. “I thought I was in love with you, you know.”

Oh Christ. He rubs a hand over his face. How can she lie there and be all flirty and giggly and then suddenly say something like this?

“Don't worry, won't be making that mistake again.” Then, with barely a pause, she adds. “Is that other girl still around?”

“What other... oh. Er, no, that ended shortly after you left actually.” Somehow, telling sort of the truth feels a lot worse than lying.

“Anyone else, then?”

“What happened to ‘no strings attached’?”

“I just don't want to be the other woman.”

“No, there’s no one else.” He shrugs. “Just a bit of fun, every now and then.”

“Alright.” She gets up and starts getting dressed in earnest. “Well, I've got an actual job now so call ahead if you want to go out.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“And no perving on my lesbian friends.”

Roger does some very quick thinking. “What if some of them are up for…”

She finds his second sock and throws it into his face. “And learn the difference between ‘lesbian’
and ‘bisexual’ for Christ's sake, it's really not that difficult.”

Chapter End Notes

*dodges rotten eggs and cabbage* Wait, wait, how do you mean you don't want her back? Ouch!

*waves crumpled sheets of paper like a peace flag* Look, I wrote a bonus chapter last night! 4000 words of kinky Froger sex, ain't that nice? Yeah? Great. Now you in the back, put that axe down, that's it. Nice and slow.

*tiptoes off*

Yes, there is a bonus chapter (look, the chapter count is up again!) buuuuut it's going at very end. Patience, my friends.

Apparently the whole band was pissed at the lack of professionalism of the crew filming Rock Montreal. It's a shame, because the picture quality is sooooo good. But if you listen to Roger and Brian's audio commentary, every second sentence is a bitchy "Oh look, a guitar solo without a guitarist!" or something like that.
Munich, 18 December 1981

Chapter Notes

While Munich's night life is as fun as ever, in the studio things are not going well. The only one who has produced something close to a finished song is John, a funk number called Back Chat that is even more minimal that Dust. Recording and mixing that thing has been like shitting bricks, though – while Freddie has fun playing around with the song, Brian spends the better part of a week pleading with John to let him add just one tiny guitar track at least. He’s won John over in the end, but the war of attrition leaves them all tired out. In consequence, they are exasperated and irritated with each other and tiny squabbles turn into big fights, which then have to be smoothed over with drinks in the Shack. Which leads to all sorts of trouble.

“We spend more time in the Shack than in the studio. And when I’m here, it’s usually just me and Crystal and Mack, because you guys are still asleep or already drinking or…”

“Woah, Roger, like you keep a 9 to 5 schedule.” John crosses his arms. “I haven’t seen a trace of you the last few times I’ve been in with Freddie and…”

“Oh, is that so Mr ‘Run off to Bali’?”

“Roger, please, not again”, Brian groans.

Roger takes a deep breath. “But actually that’s exactly my point”, he says. “We all do it. We all just keep getting distracted. And I don’t want to end up with a second rate album because we don’t get off our arses.”

“We’ve had this discussion a million times”, Brian says. “It just never changes anything.”

“So let’s change something.” Freddie sits on a table and swings his feet back and forth, like a four-year old.

Brian rolls his eyes and waves his arm about as if he’s holding a magic wand. “Abracadabra”, he proclaims. “There. All changed.”

“Don’t be a silly old cow”, Freddie chides. “We have to shake things up again. Coming to Munich was good for us last time. Maybe it’s not so good now.”

“Change the studio again?” Roger is sceptical. “I don’t know if Mack would leave Munich for long.” His wife Ingrid is pregnant with their first child and due in March.

“Change the producer?” Brian and Mack worked well together during the Flash Gordon soundtrack but maybe he feels it’s time for a new approach.

John immediately puts an end to that. “No. He’s the right one for this album.”

“I don’t think it would matter much”, Freddie says. “Munich or Montreux, we’ll always find places to drink and fuck away the time.”

“Except if there aren’t any”, Brian says. "Places, I mean."

“There are always some”, Roger says. “Every recording studio in the world is surrounded by at
least three pubs, a brothel and a seedy alley to buy drugs. It’s like a law of nature. You could build a studio in Antarctica and within a few days, there’d be a club next door.”

“So let’s get away from the studio”, Brian says. "I mean, we’ll have to come back for recording at some point. But how about we all go away for a while, for writing and arranging and trying things out. Together, I mean.”

“Like a retreat?” They haven’t really done anything like that since preparing A Night at the Opera.

“Yeah. Look”, Brian leans forward, elbows on his knees. “These days, we have so much money that we can spend as much time in the studio as we want. So it doesn’t matter if we lose a day or two or twenty. We get lazy. We come and go on our own schedules. We lose focus.”

“I like the word ‘retreat’”, Roger says, letting his imagination run free. “Beaches, palm trees, pretty Thai girls giving out massages...”

“Do you?” Brian grins with barely contained glee. “Actually I was talking about the 'hermits in unheated cells'-variety.”

A storm of protests erupts. Brian points out that going to a luxury resort would utterly defeat the purpose while Freddie categorically refuses to go to a place where they’d have to cook their own dinner every night (which isn’t completely unreasonable in light of their combined cooking skills). Roger’s idea for a chalet in the French Alps is quickly unmasked as a cheap trick to go skiing.

"Why don't we just go to Roger's house?" John cuts through the squabbling.

"It's in the middle of London."

John rolled his eyes. "The other one, fat cat. In Surrey."

"Not England", Brian says. As they are only allowed a number of days in the country if they want to avoid the tax man, Brian and John reserve those for being with their families. "But the idea is good. A mansion, somewhere remote..."

"I’ll be needing a piano”, Freddie says. "And I'm not sharing a bathroom. And I need to bring Phoebe. And Paul. And Joe, so we don't all die of food poisoning."

"Freddie, if we all bring our entourages along the whole thing will descend into a bender within the first few days."

Freddie shrugs. "You don't have to bring anyone."

"The idea is that we all get together and focus on the music, not that you shore yourself up in your room with your pals."

"He does have a point, though", Roger says. "We'll need some staff, for cooking, errant running and so on." Let’s face it, they have all become pretty spoiled.

"Maybe we can find something that's big enough?" John has started taking notes. "I don't mind if Joe and Phoebe come along, as long as they're not there as Freddie's personal slaves."

"Not Paul, though", Brian says, with John and Roger nodding in agreement. Luckily, Freddie is only too prepared to sacrifice him as a pawn if it means the other two can come along, and so they decide that John is going to organise a house big enough for all of their egos and equipments to start off the new year.
"Not him."
"Fuck off."
"Freddie."

"No, Roger. You've been cockblocking me since forever, and I'm tired of it. You're turning into my mother." He turns around and waves at the piece of rough impatiently waiting for him by the door. And a rough one it is indeed.

"Freddie, the last one was fresh out of prison." Freddie's choice in men is getting worse and worse. It's almost like he's baiting Roger.

"I believe in second chances."

"For aggravated assault! As he's been proudly telling everyone!"

"Don't you think if he planned on aggravatedly assaulting someone he'd have kept mum on that?"

"No, because that would have required a modicum of empathy and sense of guilt. Guy was a psycho."

"And the one before that?"

"You mean that charming guy with the Blood and Honour tattoo? The one who Mack had a fit about when he saw him?"

"I wasn't taking him home to discuss apartheid, Roger, I just want a fucking shag." He nods at his date for the evening. "So what's wrong with him? Doesn't call his granny for her birthday?"

"There are track marks – fresh track marks – all over his arms."

"Are you sure you want to get all high and mighty about using drugs?"

"There are different kinds of drugs! He'll be asking you for money before the night is over."

"At this point, I don't mind paying someone if that's what it takes to get a fucking blowjob 'round here!"

"Oh, he'll give you more than a blowjob, have you seen that rash on his neck?" It's remarkable. There are plenty of healthy, good-looking, perfectly nice young men in here. And Freddie chooses the one guy who looks like something out of a documentary.

Roger sighs and looks back at Marlene, who's sitting at a table on the other end of the room with Mack and John. Actually, Roger is out with her tonight. He shouldn't be running interference for Freddie at all. The good thing about the scene in Munich is that it's much more integrated than in London or New York. There are designated gay clubs, but also a lot of spaces that are frequented by all sorts of people, gay and straight.

Since they're are all going out together so often, it's become difficult to keep his arrangement with Freddie going. Which sounds a lot more sordid than it is. Really, he is just looking out for a friend, but he's not keen on explaining the situation to his band mates. Or his not-quite-girlfriend-for-the-time-being. So he's gone from picking people out for Freddie to just checking in whenever he's leaving with someone. And vetoing them at the last minute.
So Freddie, increasingly annoyed at his interference, has taken to going out alone. A few days ago, Phoebe had shown up in the studio, sporting a black eye. Both he and Freddie categorically refused to tell Roger what had happened, and that fact alone tells Roger all he needs to know.

"Look, I'll... I'll find you someone, okay? Give me ten minutes, alright?"

Freddie grudgingly relents. Of course, it takes a lot longer than ten minutes because Freddie is determined to be a fucking diva, rejecting half the candidates out of hand and the others after they barely introduced themselves. He’s doing it on purpose, the fucking prat, and it’s two in the morning before he finally condescends to accept a quiet giant named Klaus who doesn't speak a word of English but is so charmingly and openly star struck that Freddie can’t resist.

"What the fuck was that", Marlene asks when Roger finally makes his way back to her, with the biggest, most elaborate cocktail in the barkeeper's repertoire.

"Look, it's got three umbrellas", Roger says as he puts it down in front of her. "And every type of vodka they have in stock."

She gives him a odd look, but gamely tries the drink. "Holy cow. Does it contain anything but Vodka?"

"Something to make it purple."

"Right. So to get back on topic: What the fuck was that?"

"It's called the Rambazamba Riesenspritzer Spezial."

She rests her chin on her folded hands and regards him for a moment. "Must be something really interesting if you go to such lengths not to talk about it."

"I think there's a dash of Tabasco as a special ingredient", he says, not giving up on what might not be a winning, but for the time being his only strategy.

"I'll tell you what it looked like to me, okay?" She takes another sip of the drink. "It looked like you were finding men for him. And he kept rejecting them. Until that big dude at the end."

So much for trying to be subtle.

"Is that some kind of a male bonding thing or something? Does he get you girls from time to time? Is the whole band involved in it?" She looks like she’s about to break out her note book.

"Jesus no." He tries to imagine John, who hasn't chatted up a girl since 1972, trying to pull someone for him. He takes the straw from her and tries the cocktail himself. What can he say? It certainly lives up to its name.

"So?"

"Look, he's a spoiled brat whose got terrible taste in men. So whenever he picks up someone particularly odious, I intervene. He appreciates that on some level, but mainly acts like a twat about it and makes me get him a..." 'replacement' sounds horrible.

"Replacement?"

"Your word, not mine. But yes."

"So you do have a kinky side!" She looks delighted.
"It's not... I mean of course I do, but that's not..." He took another mouthful of the Rambaramba or whatever it's called. "It's not kinky!"

"Of course it is!" She holds up one finger. "I'm not saying... you know. But you are kind of involved in your friend's sex life."

"Yeah, but more in an organisational capacity, I mean..." He groans. "Fuck, that is kinda kinky."

"So?" She looks expectantly.

"There is no 'so'. Nothing else to say. Listen, how about you and I get the hell out of here and I'll show some more of my kinky side."

"Okay..." She leans back in her chair and lets her eyes wander over the crowd. "What about that one?" She points at a guy in cut-off jeans (in Germany in December!), gyrating on the dance floor.

"You're not serious, are you?"

She shrugs. "I don't see why I, as your official piece-on-the-side, should be excluded from the interesting sex games you play with your friends."

"It's not a 'sex game'! And I'm not 'playing' it with my 'friends', just..."

She elbows him in the ribs. "Why do you try to take all the fun out of it?"

"There is no fun in it in the first place. It's about trust and friendship and having each other's back and..."

"You mean, like, doggy style?"

"Alright, this conversation is officially over." He gets up.

"Woah, Rog, calm down. I was just ribbing you."

"It's not funny." He should never, ever have talked to her about it. Stonewall and say nothing, that's what he should have done.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were so... I didn't realize it was a difficult topic for you."

Reluctantly he sits back down. "Are you psychologising me?"

"I don't know, Rog. How do you feel about your mother?"

He can't help but grin at her. "I hate you."

"Look, it's just that you seem like this pretty straightforward guy. And suddenly there's this interesting sort of... wrinkle in the fabric."

Roger feels vaguely insulted. "Are you saying I'm boring?"

"More 'a man of simple tastes'", she says, quoting him. "Booze, money, fast cars, naked ladies. And vetting lovers for your gay friends, apparently."

"Friend."

"Friend", she repeats. "So, you don't have to talk me about it, but it seems like you're getting a bit
worked up about it and maybe you do want to talk."

He weighs his options. If he were a dentist in Kensington, he could just talk this sort of thing over with a friend over drinks, but he isn't and if she decides to sell the story to the papers...

...but she's never leaked anything before. Not when they had a threesome, not when he'd taken that bad pill and tried to swim through the Isar, not when that party went out of hand and they trashed his suite so completely the hotel refused to host them from then on.

And it's a weird story. Not "Roger and Freddie are secret lovers", but "Roger gives Freddie tips on which men to take home." Not quite the same punch.

And he knows his friends. He's taken a gamble with Dino and he's been true to his word. Hell, this whole arrangement with Freddie rests on the idea that he knows whether people can be trusted.

"There's not much more to tell", he says. "You know the gist of it."

"How did you get started?"

That's a tough one. It involves two years of dancing around each other with occasional (at times semi-regular) bump-ins and he's not delving into that. Roger shrugs. "He's picked up some pretty bad boyfriends. Abuser types, angry types, exploitative types... the whole gamut. And they were worse enough in public, I have no idea what went on behind closed doors. And Freddie, he seems like this super-commanding, knows-what-he-wants guy, but when it comes to relationships, I don't know, he's just a completely sucker."

Marlene sighs. "Yeah, I know the type. Go on."

"So I have a bit of a knack for sniffing out the worst types, so whenever he's about to do something really stupid, I point it out."

"And he goes along with it?"

"For the most part. No idea what he's doing when he's off on his own, though. We don't see as much of each other outside of touring and recording. And sometimes I almost feel like he's testing me. Those last days, he's really been scrapping the bottom of the barrel. I mean, like Nazis and addicts type of barrel."

She grins. "Making it interesting or you."

Roger grimaces. "Right. It's not like I don't have anything else to do on nights like these." He gives her a suggestive look, but she ignores it.

"So what's in it for you?"

"For me? I don't have to worry that my best friend picks up the next John Wayne Gacy."

Marlene leans forward. "An act of selfless altruism?"

“Well, I also get to go to the hottest clubs, the best parties... I met some of the funniest, craziest people I know through him. Excepting presenting company.”

“It’s just that most friends don’t take quite as much interest in each other’s sex lives.”

He sits back and crosses his arms. “What are you implying?”
Marlene looks at him for a moment and her self-satisfied expression makes him a little uncomfortable. Then she smiles. "Nothing", she says and swats his arm. "Don't be so thin-skinned. It's quite cute, you looking out for him like that. Wish I had had someone like that when I first started going out."

Oh. "Did you... was there..."

"I live", she says lightly and noisily slurps at the dregs of the cocktail. "Want to get us another one of these?"

Chapter End Notes

There is no universe in which John doesn't run off to Bali at some point.
Chapter Notes

In the second week of January, they move into a manor house in Brittany, set in grey stone in the middle of a park like garden that is regularly invaded by an unruly herd of neighbouring goats. Phoebe and Joe move into an outbuilding and a housekeeper comes in daily from the village. Eight bedrooms, two studies, a huge living room with a grand piano and a light-flooded conservatory is shared between the four of them. Each has brought along whatever they deem necessary for song-writing – a variety of instruments, heaps of notebooks, tape and record players, but also anti-stress balls (Brian), a caseload of bath salts (Freddie), a golf bag (John) and a stack of lad mags (Roger).

Roger quickly remembers why they never repeated the *A Night At The Opera*-style of album preparation: His band mates fucking suck. The walls of the chateau are thick, but they’re no match for Brian's red special when he plugs it in at 7 in the morning. Or John blasting Cameo through his 2000 watt amps.

The first days are hard on all of them, especially Roger and Freddie who aren't used to all this tranquillity. The house is equipped with books and a telly, but there’s only so much time you can spend lounging around on the sofa before it gets mind-numbingly boring. Day 6 brings a snowstorm and then a chilling cold, quickly putting an end to Roger's daily walks. It also leads to a small crisis for Freddie, because Brian strictly prohibits smoking in the house, and Freddie refuses to put as much as a foot outside. In the end, he takes to wrapping himself in a duvet from head to toe and poor Phoebe has to stand next to him to hold his cigarette for him.

Apart from that, Phoebe and Joe largely keep to themselves. They aren't subject to the self-imposed conclave and – although they keep mum about it to keep the band's jealous wrath at bay – likely spend some of their nights out in the next town. They all have to admit that having Joe along is a huge boon though. Every plight is easier to bear when there's an endless supply of tiramisu in the fridge.

Roger definitely has to take up running or something once this is over.

So it’s all horribly boring, which is exactly why it works – out of sheer desperation, they all begin to work. And they don’t just jot down the first idea they have, then call it a day and head out to the clubs. They keep going back to it, rewriting, reworking, bouncing ideas off each other.

Every now and then, Freddie would wander in, looking for a distraction, and five minutes later they are already trying harmonics. Or John would play around with a bass line and suddenly Brian comes running in, announcing he has just the lyrics for that. Writing songs is a lonely business, but in here, where they are constantly in each other's orbit, collaboration is inevitable, something that just happens, whether it’s just two of them refining lyrics over coffee or the whole band crowding around Freddie at the Steinway Grand.

It takes them about a week to settle in, but eventually even Freddie, who'll always go for more and faster, always on the edge of spinning out of control, relaxes a little, as the natural pace of the centuries-old building takes over. Still a racing car, but on idle for the time being.

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"Pandering to the South American market?"
"Don't be cynical." Brian puts down the guitar.

"I'm not, I like pandering", Freddie says.

"You're a money-grabbing old tart, Fred."

"Yeah", Roger agrees. "Just no romance in your soul."

Freddie rolls his eyes, sits up, and then – both hands crossed over his heart – sings the song in the most heart-rendering, schmaltzy tone. It’s quite a show, until he gets the highest part and breaks off, coughing. "Are you trying to kill me?"

"If you didn't constantly fill your lungs with toxic fumes, you wouldn't have such problems with the high notes", Brian says primly.

Freddie flips him off, but John comes to Brian’s support. "Yeah, I mean, who the fuck starts smoking in his thirties?"

"Why am I being crucified while he", Freddie points at Roger, "has been smoking forever and never gets any shit for it?"

"He's a lost soul", Brian says. "And he isn't our lead singer..."

"...and he still thinks it makes him look cool and we don't want to break his heart...", John adds.

"...whereas you won't even get your nodules fixed because you're scared it might affect your voice."

"Maybe I want to look cool too", Freddie says. "Like Roger. I might start wearing tiger prints, too. And that haircut..."

Roger throws a handful of popcorn at him. "Freddie, you smoke like a fucking schoolgirl."

"I do not!"

"Oh yes you do!" Roger sees a perfect opportunity to get around Brian's smoking ban and lights up. He sits up very straight, crosses his legs and holds the cigarette in Freddie's fussy way, fingers outstretched. "Look, darling", he says in his best Freddie voice and takes some quick, short puffs, "I'm just in it for the money and the drugs, you know?"

"I don't smoke like that", Freddie protests. "I don't talk like that!"

"Yes, you do", John and Brian say, cracking up.

In the ensuing mayhem, Freddie sees his chance and angles for a cigarette himself.

"Absolutely not", Roger says and snatches the packet away.

"Just to demonstrate how absolutely wrong Roger is."

"Nope." Brian takes the half-smoked cigarette from Roger and stubs it out. "Enough of this."

"Why did you start, though", John asks.

Freddie shrugs. "Gives you something to do with your hands."
"Take up knitting, for Christ's sake."

"Or wanking", Roger adds helpfully.

Brian cocks his head thoughtfully. "I'm not sure which the British public would find more shocking at this point."

They sit talking for a while longer until first Brian and then John bid goodnight and head upstairs.

"Do I really look like a schoolgirl when I smoke", Freddie asks.

"Yeah. Sorry."

"Can you show me how to do it properly? Now Brian's not here?"

"Nope." Roger takes his cigarette packet and throws it to the far side of the room, just to make sure.

"Why not? I thought you were my friend."

"One, because I don't approve and won't abet your smoking. Brian's right, it's a stupid thing to do for a singer. And also, I wouldn't want to deprive the world of something so beautiful and precious."

"Beautiful?"

Freddie is suddenly very close, his dark eyes shining.

Shit.

Roger looks down at his hands. "You know what I mean."

When he looks up, Freddie is so close they share the same breath.

He looks away, heart pounding. God he's missed this. The thrill, the intimacy, not knowing what's going to happen next. And Freddie's smell - of stolen cigarettes, expensive cologne, of warmth and energy. "I don't..."

But Freddie's lips are on him, tentative and asking. Is this alright? It feels alright, more than alright. Roger sighs and traces one hand lightly around the edge of Freddie's jaw. It's all back: the frantic first time, the aggressive encounter in the studio, the warmth of a shared bed. Fuck, he's missed this.

He clutches at the back of Freddie's head pulling him close and there's not a moment of hesitation in Freddie's reaction. He slides off his armchair onto the couch and kneels over Roger, deepening the kiss.

A door bangs above them and they break apart with a start. A muffled curse follows, but no footsteps down the stairs. Roger stares at Freddie panting.

Freddie jerks his chin and raises one eyebrow. Want to go upstairs?

Roger sighs and rubs one hand over his face. "I don't..." Fuck, why does he have to be the reasonable one? He sucks at that.

Freddie sits back, his face blank. "You don't like men, I know." He gives a shaky, breathy laugh
and waves one hand through the air. “How am I supposed to get laid in here then, huh?”

Roger scoots to the side putting a bit more space between them. God, they barely kissed for a minute and already he’s so hard it hurts. “Yeah”, he says, trying to get some of his cool back. “Bet you that door was Brian sneaking into John's room.”

Freddie wrinkles his nose. “Please don't put such horrible images in my brain”

“Who knows. Maybe after an intense discussion about the merits of steel vs plastic strings, when emotions are running wild, blood all pumped up...”

Freddie holds up both hands. “Okay, now you've done it I'm going to have no problem with celibacy from now on...”

Good. This is good. Laughing it off instead of talking about... about whatever the fuck this is.

Freddie puts his glass aside. “Think I'll head up too”, he said.

“Good night”, Roger says. And then when Freddie is at the foot of the stairs. “Don't take the wrong door. Not sure they’re up for a threesome.”

Freddie gives him the finger without even looking back.

When he’s out of sight, Roger lets his head fall back against the sofa. It doesn't matter how often he tells himself that he should have got it out of his system by now. Fact is, he hasn't. He obviously hasn't. There is this simmering tension that he just can't get rid of. It’s a weak comfort to know that it’s apparently the same for Freddie. Actually that makes it worse, because that means he could actually have it. So two people have to keep themselves in check instead of one. And one of those people is notoriously bad at saying no to sex. The other is Freddie Mercury. Haha.

Maybe he'll just have to learn how to live with it. He never really got over his adolescent obsession with Shirley Eaton either and it isn't causing much trouble in his life. But then Shirley isn't currently sharing a house with him. Or having sex with his mic stand a few yards away from him on a regular basis. Or asking him for his opinion on her sex partners.

He gropes around for his pack of cigarettes before remembering he's thrown it into a corner. It's infuriating. When he's had girl trouble before, he's always been able to talk about it with someone. Carl or Brian or Crystal or one of his mates. But this isn't something he can really discuss with anyone. Except...

He looks at his watch. It’s still early in New York. The last thing he’s heard from Dino has been a Christmas letter with some chocolates from James's mum and photos of him from their Ibiza trip, looking much recovered though still a bit on the thin side.

He'd probably be thrilled to get that phone call. And he proved himself trustworthy.

Roger gets up and walks over to the telephone. Then he thinks better of it and heads up to his room. He'll have to look up the number and this is not the kind of conversation wants to have in a hallway.

He weighs the receiver in his hand. What is he even going to say? Me and the mystery man who is definitely not Freddie Mercury kissed and I'm having a crisis? I'm wondering if my temporary bout of gayness might be chronic?

Also, he hates talking on the phone. It’s something that mystifies him about women. How they can
have emotionally fraught conversations without a beer between them. On the phone you aren't even able to replace words with eyerolls, handwaves or punches.

And in the very back of his mind there is also a healthy dose of paranoia about the security of the phone line. They aren't secret agents or anything so they don't bother with tap proof wires or anything like that. No journalists even know they are here so this is really not something he should realistically have to worry about. .. and yet.

He puts the receiver back down.

He's been living with this thing between them for two years now (god, has it really been over two years since Glasgow?). He’s managed on his own so far. Freddie certainly doesn’t discuss this. (Does he? With who?) But then, it must be easier for Freddie. For him, Roger is probably just one more guy he might spend the night with when the mood is right. A friend, sure, but Freddie has many friends he occasionally sleeps with. It’s normal for him.

They'd be back in the US for a tour in the summer. He'd see Dino then at the latest. And depending on how things go, they can discuss the whole situation then. In person. If there still is a situation.

Maybe he should just get himself a proper, serious girlfriend again. Maybe that's what he is craving. Not sex but sex with someone who knows you better than you knew yourself.

He wonders what Marlene is doing.

Chapter End Notes

So I couldn’t help tinkering with Hot Space. The result of the retreat is that the songs are the same but the mixing and arrangements differ (heavier, closer to the live versions). Sorry to all those who actually like the album as it is, but this is my story of crazy wish fulfilment.

Song for this chapter: Las Palabras de Amor

Don't touch me now
Don't hold me now
Don't break the spell, darling
Now you are near
Look in my eyes and speak to me
The special promises I long to hear

And here's a collection of Freddie being precious while smoking 😊
“I’ve met someone.” Marlene is beaming with barely suppressed excitement.

“You… what?” This ‘how about we take things to the next level’-conversation is not going as planned.

“Yeah.” She nods. “It’s getting a bit more serious, so I thought you should know.”

“Serious”, he repeats. Jesus Christ, he’s only been gone for six weeks!

“Well, I’ve known him for a while, but we spent New Years’ together, and… actually we spent a lot of time together since then and…” She smiles in the most revoltingly dreamy manner. “He’s in my meditation class.”

Roger hates him already.

She turns a little and points at a tanned guy in his twenties sitting a few tables away. “He’s called Bernd. He’s from Switzerland. He used to be a pro skier, but then he had this knee injury and… Rog, are you okay?” She frowns at him.

“Yeah. Fine. He looks… nice”, he says without much enthusiasm. Like a toothpaste model, more like.

She cocks her head. “Rog, have I said something wrong?” She puts a hand on his arm and leans in, a frown of concern between her eyes. “I assumed that you'd... that we were…”

“We are”, Roger quickly assures her. Pull yourself together man, don't let this get any more humiliating. He’s still devoting most of his brain resources to accommodating to the turn the conversation had taken.

“I just assumed that you were seeing other people too.”

“I am”, he says, which isn't technically true but soon would be. He'd make sure of that.

“Good.” Of all the conversations he never thought he'd have, reassuring a girl that of course he’s sleeping with other women is definitely one of them. “I just wouldn’t want things to be weird between us.”

“Sure. No reason to be weird.”

Marlene studies him for a moment. “Are you sure it’s okay? You seem…” Then her face falls. “Are you having a bad feeling about him? Is he someone you’d warn me away from?”

Roger is not a very good man. She’s looking at him like she actually trusts his word on this, so it would be so easy to just make up some story about having a really bad feeling about this and then offering her a shoulder to cry on and… “I don’t know”, he says evasively.

“And your famous gut feeling?”

He sighs. Does he really want to be that guy? The guy who has to badmouth a girl’s boyfriend to
get her back into his bed? “I guess he’s fine”, he says. “But I don’t know him, so…”

“Oh, we can change that. He's so excited to meet you.” She turns and waves at bloody Björn or whatever he’s called to come over.

Oh great. Just what he needs. Is she trying to get back at him for the way he treated her back then? Is this some sort of payback? She looks just genuinely happy about all this.

But Roger’s a pro, so he puts on his shades and his fakest smile as they shake hands. "Hey, how nice to meet you."

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After that little episode, Roger still goes out with Marlene from time to time, but watching her and her boyfriend acting all in love is not his favourite pastime. Not that he is jealous (okay, maybe a bit jealous).

But maybe there’s an upside, too. The more involved Roger has become with Marlene, the more Freddie took to hitting the clubs with Prenter again like in the olden days. This made Prenter glow with newfound importance which is not good for Roger’s blood pressure.

But now Roger has time for nights out with Freddie again, and it’s a good thing too because Freddie still attracts the weirdest weirdoes he can find. Roger has his hands full keeping him from taking home hardened criminals and drug addicts.

Tonight they’re at the New York. Anton is loud, built like a tank and speaks about five words of English. And when he smiles he looks like a shark tasting the water for blood. Roger doesn't like it one bit.

Anton also gropes a boy who can’t be a day above eighteen and looks like he's scared out of his wits even being in a gay bar.

Roger likes that even less.

"Anyone else", he says when Anton is on a loo break. He waves around. "Anyone."

But Freddie just grins and shakes his head.

"I'm serious."

"Must we really do this again?"

"Come on. There are so many guys in here. You could have any of them."

"Could I really?" Freddie raises one eyebrow, a curious expression on his face. But it's gone before Roger can decipher it. "I don't want anyone else. I want him. And I'm going to take him home."

"What do you even find in him? He's so..."

"Gehen wir?" Anton is back. He puts a possessive hand on Freddie's back. Roger wants to sink his teeth in it until he can feel the tendons snap.

"Yes", Freddie says pointedly. "Let's go."

"Right", Roger says. And gets up. Freddie hesitates. "Don't mind if I hitch a ride, do you", Roger asks, all charm and smiles.
"A ride?" Freddie cocks his head at him, a puzzled frown on his face. They each came in their own car, there's no need to share.

"Come on then", Roger says, and leads the way.

The atmosphere in the car is tense. Freddie's expression is inscrutable but Anton keeps shooting Roger dirty looks. Seems like the sucker would have liked to start the proceedings right in the car. Roger answers with his sweetest, most oblivious smile. It's very gratifying.

Once they’re in the elevator, Freddie punches in his floor. Roger doesn't. Let him stew a little.

They all get off and make their way to Freddie's suite. By now Anton's glare is positively toxic. Roger revels in it. Of course, it's a losing game. Not much longer and he'll have to beg off and hand Anton his triumph but until then Roger savours every second. Let’s see how far he can take this.

Freddie unlocks the door. He takes a step inside pulling Anton along. Then turns to Roger, eyebrows raised challengingly. Roger blinks. Freddie shrugs and starts to close the door.

Roger takes a step inside, heart pounding under Freddie's intense gaze.

How far can he push this? When is his bluff going to be called? It has to happen at some point. Are they going to laugh about it? Fight? Will this be end of their ‘arrangement’?

Then with just the hint of a smile on his lips, Freddie turns to Anton. "Drink?"

Anton’s eyes wander between Roger and Freddie. "Not here for drinks", he says. He takes a step towards Freddie and grabs his arse, eyes on Roger. Like a dog marking his territory.

"Vodka tonic", Roger says casually and saunters in the direction of the bar. “But don't mind me.”

He can feel their combined stares on his back, one hateful, the other burning with... something. He isn't quite sure. He keeps his hands extra steady as he pours his drink.

When he turns back around and they are kissing. If this were a movie the glass in his hand would shattered. But this is solid German engineering, probably bullet proof.

He hasn't seen Freddie kissing very often. For all his posing he really isn't one for public make out sessions. Sometimes at parties when things get muddled and heated towards the end. But never like this. In private. And with intent.

Anton draws back and whispers something in Freddie's ear. Freddie nods and again his eyes turn to Roger as he walks backwards towards the bedroom, Anton in tow. There is a challenge in his gaze, a dare.

An invitation?

Before he can think too much about it, Roger takes a step after them. Something flashes in Freddie's eyes. Roger follows them until he is standing in the door to the bedroom.

"Ernsthaft?" Anton asks. He looks exasperated.

Maybe he'll just leave. Maybe, if Roger just keeps pushing, this will be too weird for him and he'll call it a night. That would be the best outcome. Roger steps inside the bedroom.

Anton takes a second, but then he makes up his mind. "Na dann. Bed", he says to Freddie and makes a shooing motion.
Roger closes the door behind him.

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Roger braces himself with one hand on the sink as he tears at his fly.

He's been playing it so cool for so long, all this time while his own personal porn performance played out in front of him, trying to looked unimpressed and calmly nodding at Anton as he got dressed and left. So cool as he ambled out of the room slightly angled away so Freddie wouldn't see his raging erection.

He gasps as his cock springs free. He grasps his rock hard dick so hard it borders on pain.

He doesn't even try to banish the images from his brain. Right now he doesn't care, can’t pretend that he's thinking about anything but Freddie's face scrunched up, his arms shiny with sweat and straining to keep him up, his harsh breathing over the rhythmic sounds of fucking.

Roger bites his lips to keep the groans inside as he comes.

He holds himself up with both hands on the sink and hangs his head, taking deep breaths. Then he washes up and splashes some water on his face, hoping its coolness might take some of the heat out of his cheeks.

When he comes back into the living room, Freddie is lounging on the sofa in his silk kimono. He sends Roger a knowing look. Roger refuses to be embarrassed. Freddie just had sex in front of him. (Jesus Christ Freddie just had sex in front of him what the fuck is he even doing?). So he isn't going to be embarrassed for having a wank behind closed doors. (A wank involving graphic images of said sex- oh shut up!)

"Everything alright?" His Majesty looks amused.

Roger nods coolly. “Sure”, he says. “You too?”

Freddie nods languidly and yawns. "See", he says. "There was no need to worry."

"There was plenty need", Roger says. Anton had been reasonably well behaved but who knows how he would have acted of Roger hadn't been there. He certainly wasn't thrilled about the condom.

Freddie rolls his eyes.

"You could have chosen someone a bit easier on the eye", Roger says, only half joking. Anton had the hairiest arse he's ever seen in his life (although his experience is admittedly limited) and looked like he was having a stroke when he came. Although that might have been a blessing in disguise. If Anton had been super hot (not that Roger thinks about men in those terms, but comparatively), Roger’s balls might have suffocated in his jeans.

"Next time", Freddie says matter-of-factly.

Oh crap.

"Sure", Roger says with what he hopes looks like an unruffled expression. "I'll, er... I'll be off then."

'Next time', it echoes through his mind as he makes his way back to his room. He really set himself
up for that one, didn't he? What the fuck is he getting himself into? Freddie didn’t seem turned off by his presence - but had he actually liked it? Had he enjoyed taking their game of chicken as far as it would go? Or does he enjoy giving a good show even in the bedroom?

Of course there would be a next time. This is a new and exciting thing and Freddie likes new and exciting things. Just as Roger does. But where is all this going to end? Is Roger going to become the master of ceremonies for Freddie's private orgies? Is Freddie just going to keep on pulling weirder and weirder guys until finds one who'll escalate things despite Roger's presence?

Would he want Roger to join in at some point?

Roger lets himself fall onto his bed. All he wants in life is money, fame and a girl by his side (alright, maybe two or three girls). How the fuck did he end up running an escort service for his best friend?

Chapter End Notes

The bits of German translate to "Are we going?", “Seriously?” and “Well then.”

If you want Anton’s POV for this chapter: Listen to “You, Me and Steve” by Garfunkel and Oates. It's hilarious.
While Roger's private life is a total mess, at least in the studio things are looking up. Mack put Ingrid's due date on a huge wall calendar and keeps tapping it when they start lagging. "I won’t be setting a foot in here once the baby's born", he says. "So you guys better get moving."

Not that things are easy, far from it. But now, when there’s a difference of opinion, they work on it. They still fight and storm out, but then they come back and fight some more and then do another take. And then they fight about that and bit by bit an album emerges. Late night bar sessions become late night studio sessions.

It’s playful. It’s even fun sometimes. They spend one afternoon recording the weirdest versions of Body Language just for shits and giggles.

“We should release a sessions tape at some point”, Roger muses. “All those early versions and secret favourites…”

“Remember early on, before we knew it was hopeless, when we let John sing?” Freddie grins.

Brian groans. “Roger said favourites not horror show.”

“Hey, I have feelings you know”, John complains.

“I was thinking more along the lines of Ogre Battle with the original intro or maybe Don't Stop Me Now with all the guitars.”

“That was the best version”, Brian adds wistfully.

“You always think the guitar versions are the best versions”, Freddie taunts.

“Or how about Heart Attack with Roger on lead vocals,” Brian says pointedly.

“We all agreed my version was better”, Freddie protests. “It was a band decision that…”

“Alright, alright don't get all worked up about it.”

“...that I should sing it and…”

“Ladies.” Mack's voice booms over the tannoy. “Do you really think now’s the time to argue over albums you've already released?”

“I'm just saying that...”

John pats his arm. “Yes, keep your hat on, Tinkerbell, you're still the prettiest in the land, alright?”

Freddie glares at him.

“That's Snow White.” Mack’s voice booms out of the tannoy like it’s the word of god.

Freddie bursts out laughing. “Alright, alright. Ready for a proper take on Body Language?”
“I need to get laid.” Brian has his elbows on the table, face buried in his hands. He says it like it’s a bad thing.

“Oh.” Roger gets out his cigarettes, pours himself a drink and settles in. He doesn’t know where this is going, but at least it’s going somewhere. Apparently Roger’s not the only one struggling with his love life.

It’s been obvious for a while that something’s wrong with Brian. He pines for his family but when they come to visit it doesn’t really improve his mood either. He struggles with something but of course he doesn’t talk about it because that would be all grown up and sensible. So he turns to vodka instead. Lots of vodka. So much vodka that Freddie comments on it. Which is a bit rich.

Even a straight British guy can’t completely shore up the dam forever though, and that night at the Shack he cracks.

“I mean, she’s just had a baby and...” Brian’s face crumples. “God, I’m such an arsehole. Forget it. Forget I said anything.”

“No, no, no, hey. Look at me.” Roger pours a drink and presses it into Brian’s hands. “This is a drunk talk between blokes, alright? Just between the two of us. Everyone’s got to vent now and then. Even you.”

Brian clenches his teeth, but chugs the drink. “Alright. So. I get that she needs time. I do, I totally do. But.” He fills the glass again. “But it’s been 9 months. Thing is, I’ve got a working right hand all that, so it’s not...”

Roger nods bravely. He can do this.

“...so it’s not like it’s a physical. Thing. Problem. It’s just...” Brian looks like he’s in actual pain as he speaks.

“What is it?”

“I just want someone to say ‘Yes’ to me. Not ‘Don’t’ or ‘I’m tired’ or ‘Not yet’, but just ‘Yes’. I guess it's not even about sex at all, really. Just... being held, being wanted.”

“That’s not an arsehole thing to want.” Roger lets another mouthful of smoke seep into his lungs. “Was it the same, last time?” That would have been around the time of Brian’s New Orleans breakdown.

“That’s not an arsehole thing to want.” Roger lets another mouthful of smoke seep into his lungs. “Was it the same, last time?” That would have been around the time of Brian’s New Orleans breakdown.

“Kind of. I mean, she only had eyes for James then, it was like I didn’t even count anymore. But it got better after five or six months, after the tour. And so I thought this time might be different. And it was good, you know, while she was pregnant, she was very, erm... affectionate.” Brian clears his throat, ducks his head and grins. “It was like the good old days, you know. But now it’s the same all over again and I... I just don’t know anymore.”

As much as Roger sometimes mourns what could have been between him and Dom, right now he couldn’t be happier not having to deal with all that. “Must be hard”, he says, a little helplessly.

“Thing is, I should be able to pull myself together and give her time, as long as she needs. Instead I... I think about...” He runs a hand through his unruly hair. “For god’s sake, do you think it’s easy watching you and Freddie and Crystal and all the others run off to get laid every night? Or John playing happy family with Ronnie?”
Roger takes a drag of his cigarette. He needs to think well and good about what he is going to say next. Because while Brian has largely been faithful to Chrissie, he hasn’t been without the occasional lapse. Roger thinks he’s still basically a saint, considering the circumstances, but Brian has been so torn up about it every time.

So Roger could try to get him to a club where he knows the girls would be all over him and not-so-subtly encourage him to take one home. It might give him some of that yes-feeling he is craving and he could blame Roger for being a bad influence and bringing him there. On the other hand, that might just make things worse.

Brian downs another drink, then immediately fills the glass up again.

“Woah, there”, Roger says. That speed is both impressive and worrying.

“Ah, fuck it.” Brian slams down the empty glass on the table and gets up. Looks like he’s made the decision for Roger. “Let’s make some music.”

“Er. What?”

Roger is still trying to understand what is going on as he is gripped by the hand and pulled along.

“Now’s the time, baby”, Brian says and crashes into a chair. “Whoopsie.”

Brian collects an equally befuddled Mack on the way out and herds them all to the studio.

It’s 3 in the morning.

Roger is sat on the sofa, drink in hand, while Mack takes up position behind the desk.

Then Brian picks up his guitar.

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“You're taking the piss!”

“I swear on my grandma’s grave! He could barely walk, but he fucking killed that solo. One take, that was it.”

Freddie plays the tape again. Brian has been dithering with his guitar solo for Put Out The Fire for ages. Apparently, all he needed was a heart to heart and the best part of a bottle of Stoly.

“He just kept yelling at Mack to put more echo on it and called it ‘awesome’. And then he fell asleep on the mixing desk.”

"Oh my." Freddie shakes his head. "What's going on with him, you think?"

Roger shrugs. He can't really discuss what Brian told him that night. "Oh, you know Brian. Walking around with a brain a few sizes to big if you ask me."

Freddie fiddles with the tape for a minute, then he looks up at him. "Wanna go out?"

"Got something in particular in mind?"

"There's a tropical beach party at the Frisco."

Well, It's either that or Marlene's boyfriend's birthday party. "Is Paul going to be along?"
"Nope"

"Do I get to wear an aloha shirt?"

"Over my dead body, darling."

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His shirt is orange. It's got pink blossoms on it. And palm trees of course. Freddie considers it below his dignity to comment on it. His sole concession to the beach party theme is a straw hat. Apart from that he is his usual jeans and skin tight t-shirt self. Roger's just on his way to the bar to get them drinks when a voice speaks to him over his shoulder.

"Hello there."

Roger whirls around. He has to look up a bit until his eyes reach a handsome face surrounded by wavy auburn hair. He knows that face.

The man smiles. "We met at..."

"...Mack’s birthday. Michael, right? Or no." Roger clears his throat and concentrates. "Mi-cha-el." That tricky German sound in the middle doesn’t sound quite right, but Michael nods encouragingly.

"Have you been practicing," he asks with a wink.

When they met, Michael had been low key flirting with him the whole evening, which had been quite flattering considering he looks like one of those guys who get free access to all the hottest clubs because his presence means everyone else wants to get in too. But he never really made a pass (and of course Roger isn't available anyway). Still it had been nice to know he’s in demand.

"Oh yes, I spent hours."

"Introduce me to your friend." Freddie descends on them. In full pulling mode.

"Freddie", Roger says, "this is Michael. Michael - brace yourself."

"I like it when guys say that", Michael says slowly. "Good times ahead."

"You into threesomes", Freddie asks.

Roger gapes at him. What the fuck?

Michael takes it in his stride. "Depends on the threesome."

"I fuck you. He watches."

"Freddie..."

"I'm not saying no but for the record, I don't think that counts as a threesome."

Freddie shrugs. "Close enough."

"Give us a second, would you?" Roger pulls Freddie aside. "What are you doing?"

"Providing the evening entertainment." His smile is manic, eyes burning. In other words, he’s high as fuck.
Roger puts his head closer so he doesn't have to shout over the music. "Are you mad", he hisses. "You can't go around announcing us having threesomes."

"Why not?"

"We're surrounded by people. And what if he blabs? And also, we don't have threesomes", he adds belatedly.

"What if Anton blabs", Freddie responds, and yeah, that has been on Roger's mind as well, thanks for the reminder.

"Anton is just one guy. We can't make it a fucking habit."

"What about your fabulous instincts then?"

Roger wants to strangle him. "I don't have fabulous instincts, I just have common sense and I dare to use it." He certainly can't predict which 5-minute acquaintance could be bought by a paper. Hell, for all he knows, Michael might work for a paper.

"Fine." Freddie crosses his arms and – for lack of a better word – pouts. "Fine, have it your way then." He whirls around and marches off.

Roger pinches the bridge of his nose. This can't go on. Whatever they do, Freddie would always up the ante, always drag them in deeper. Until it all goes up in flames.

He turns back to Michael. "Sorry", he says. "We don't actually... you know. He gets like that sometimes."

"And he gets away with it, doesn't he?"

"Yeah. Maybe that's the problem."

"Need a beer?"

They spend the night at the bar, very not pointedly not talking about either Freddie or threesomes. They talk football and local bands and whether peach schnapps has any place in a proper Sex On The Beach. Michael has an easy laugh and a quick humour that make him ideal to take Roger's mind off things.

"So", Michael says, after a brief lull in the conversation. He plays with his coaster. He has very long, elegant fingers. Sort of like Freddie's.

"So." Roger looks up at his face. His very handsome face. Oh no. No, no, no.

Michael laughs sheepishly and scrubs a hand through his hair. "Listen, if you want me to fuck off..." He raises his eyebrows and bites his lips. His lush, perfectly pink lips. "It's just that I'd kind of like to take you home." He shrugs, like he can't help himself.

"I'm..." 'Not Gay!', his brain stem screams while his higher functions scramble for a response. He shifts on his bar stool and rubs a hand over his chest. Michael's eyes follow the movement. God, he is actually being wooed by the hottest guy in town. It feels good. And wrong. But mostly good. Fuck.

His eyes drift through the bar as he's stalling for an answer. There is Freddie. There is bloody Anton, practically in his lap. Two times in a row means they are nearing the boyfriend zone and
Roger would rather fuck the guy himself than have him be with Freddie.

Michael has followed his glance. "I'm sorry", he says, sitting back a little, giving him space. "I should have realized."

Roger's eyes snap back. The pieces fall into place and the words tumble out of his mouth. "Still up for that threesome?"

"Um." Michael's face goes through a serious of expressions. "You mean the technically-it-might-just-count-threesome?"

"That's the one."

"And you'll watch?"

God help him. "Yes. Only watch."

Michael considers him. Then a smile appears on his face. "Yes", he says.

"Let's go then." Now he has a plan, there’s no time to lose.

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Again, Roger finds himself in Freddie's bedroom, about to bear witness to some very gay sex. Except that this time, he doesn't want to break the other guy's arm every time he touches Freddie (okay, he wants to break it a little). As last time, Roger sits in an armchair next to bed, which makes it feel like he's about to judge a boxing match.

Without his shirt, Michael looks like a fucking Greek sculpture. He and Freddie spend quite a while just rolling around on the bed making out, finding their flow. It looks a lot more playful than the other night: whispered words, grins, glances and nods. Is that okay? And that? Right, won't do that again. And Michael is good. Whereas it had taken Roger three or four attempts to accidentally stumble over the fact that Freddie has sensitive nipples, it takes Michael all of two minutes. And then another before he has Freddie gasping for air.

"Got any clamps?"

Freddie's head falls back onto the pillow. "No", he pants. "You'd fucking kill me with them."

"I would."

That devilish smile on that angelic face. The image of Freddie's nipples squashed by silver metal while he is writhing on the bed in beautiful agony. Oh fucking hell.

Roger opens his eyes again to find two pairs of eyes staring at him. No way. No way is he going to be able to hide his arousal this time.

"Can I kiss him", Michael asks without taking his eyes of Roger's face.

"Yes", Freddie says and it's only then that Roger realizes who they mean.

Michael pushes himself up on his hands and knees. The muscles in his shoulders ripple. He arches forward until he's just inches away from Roger. His lips are so very red. "Yes?"

Roger's eyes drift, automatically, to Freddie who is staring at him with wide eyes. He looks like a bomb could go off in the next room and yet he wouldn't look away.
Roger must have nodded because hot, wet lips are on his, pressing, retreating, pressing in again. Michael is clean shaven and doesn't taste of cigarettes and his lips are thinner and his teeth less menacing.

He pulls back and Roger opens his eyes again. Michael stares at him, eyes dark. "Are you..." He breaks off, lost for words. Roger doesn't know what he's asking. Is he going to join in? He isn't, is he? No, he's already smack dab in the fucking middle of it, Mr Roger Taylor, 100% pouf-free, how very fucking funny, and he isn't sure whether he's going to laugh or implode or...

A movement in the corner of his eye saves him. Freddie has hooked a finger into Michaels belt loop and is pulling him back. "Back to me, beautiful." He waits until he has Michael's full attention. "Suck me. And get these off first."

"Bossy", Michael says, but he strips out of his jeans as ordered before he peels Freddie out of his and crawls down the length of his body.

Last time, Roger did his best to look at anything but the scene before him. He'd been there solely to annoy Anton and to keep him in check. This time, he's transfixed. Michael licks and sucks and bobs his head like there's nothing in the world he'd rather do and for the first time in his life Roger has an inkling of why someone might enjoy doing this.

Freddie is writhing on the bed, one hand in his hair, the other gripping the sheet. He is murmuring instructions and praise and incoherent nonsense. His cock is dark and glistening with spit as it goes in and out of Michaels mouth.

Roger crosses his legs and bites back a moan as the pressure shifts on his cock.

"Stop. Stop." Freddie has one hand on Michael's cheek and is pushing him back.

Michael quirks one eyebrow. A reddish golden lock of hair falls into his eyes. He looks like a depraved cherub. Botticelli meets Oscar Wilde. "Not yet?"

"No, not yet. You", Freddie points one lazy finger at him, "are going to get fucked tonight, my dear."

"Fuck, yes." Michael gets up his knees and shimmies out of his briefs. His dick is a little thinner than Freddie's and about as long, with a slight upwards curve. "Lube?"

Freddie waves a hand in the direction of the bedside drawer. "Roger, if you'd be so kind."

That startles Roger out of his daze. He opens the drawer with some trepidation (never, ever, open another guys bedside drawer is one of the earliest lessons he's learned while flat sharing), but all that is in there is a half-empty bottle of lubricant. He hands it to Freddie, who passes it on to Michael.

"You gonna let us do all the work", Michael asks.

"Yeah", Freddie says, crossing his arms behind his head. "I'm well-known for being a lazy motherfucker."

The sight that is spread out in front of Roger is one he never in his life would have thought he'd have reason to describe. There is his best friend, cock so hard it is leaking, idly watching a male model reaching behind himself with a big glob of lube on his fingers. And although Michael is hands down the better looking of the two, Roger's eyes keep wandering back to Freddie's skinny frame. His cock. His hairy chest. His heavy, hooded eyes. The way his teeth dig into his lips.
"Are you very tight", Freddie whispers. Roger bites down on the insides of his cheeks.

"God yes." Michael moans slightly as he adjusts his position.

"Don't stretch yourself too much." Freddie's eyes are glued to Michael and the electricity is palpable between them.

"Fuck", Michael lets his head roll back, and okay. He has to be doing this intentionally. No one looks that much like a centrefold by accident. After a few more minutes, he withdraws his hand and wipes it on the sheets. "You ready for me?"

Freddie beckons him forward. It should look cheesy, but so many things that Freddie do should and yet he gets away with it.

Michael shakes his head and laughs softly. "All the work", he says as he scoots forward on his knees. He takes Freddie's cock in hand and...

"One second!"

Both startle visibly at the interruption.

Roger shimmies around on the chair, trying to get one hand in the pocket of his (way, way too tight) jeans. He fishes out a condom and holds it up triumphantly.

"Oh, must we", Freddie grumbles.

"Yes, we must", Roger says and tears open the packet. Only then does he realize that Freddie doesn't make the least effort to take it from him. Michael is still holding on to Freddie's penis and it looks like he's expecting Roger to...

It's not like Roger hasn't touched Freddie's cock before, but Jesus Christ on a bike, he is just about to fuck some dude with it! How the hell is Roger supposed to deal with that?

He takes the condom out of the packet and awkwardly holds it out to Michael like he's handing him a fucking salt shaker at dinner, biting back a dapper 'there you go' at the last second. Michael rolls the condom on and then squirts some more lube over it. He looks pointedly at Roger. "Are we go, then?"

Again, a number of unsuitable responses pop up in Roger's brain. "Be my guest", or "Off you go then", or (the absolute worst) "You are go for launch". Sometimes he just wants to debrain himself with an icepick. In the end, he just nods.

And then it is happening. Michael is sinking down on Freddie's cock, taking him in inch by inch. When he is all the way down, Roger is drenched in sweat.

And then Michael starts moving.

His hips are twisting in sinuous small movements, grinding his arse against Freddie's pelvis. Michael's got one hand on his own cock, giving it a brief stroke every now and then, but clearly he's not in a hurry.

And just when Roger thinks he's finally got a grip on himself, that he's going to get out of this with a little bit of his dignity intact, Michael leans forward. Freddie bites his lips at the shift of angle and when Roger looks down he can actually see just the end of Freddie's cock going inside Michael's body. Whatever air he draws into his lungs feels hot and humid and like he can't possible
keep on sitting there, watching.

This is so different from last night. This is so different from the way Roger imagined it could be. Michael reaches for Freddie's hands, entwining them with his own and pressing them into the mattress. Freddie bends his knees, feet flat on the bed, and he starts pushing up with his hips and the groan that is forced from Michael's throat goes straight to Roger's core. He brings his hand up to his mouth and bites down his knuckles just to have something to ground him.

Coming here has been by far the stupidest idea he's ever had in his life. His dick and balls feel like they've tripled in size and his Levi's aren't giving a millimetre.

The muscles in Michael's back are rippling with every movement and Freddie's hips are snapping up into him in earnest now. Michael's head is just inches from Freddie's and occasionally he drops down low enough that their lips touch in a sliding, not-quite kiss that has Roger's lips tingle just from watching it. Michael is the one getting fucked, but somehow he's also the one completely in control.

There must have been some sort of signal because suddenly things are happening very fast. Michael releases Freddie's hands and grips his cock, wanking himself hard and fast and with intent. Freddie's hands go to Michaels's hips, holding him in place as he fucks up into him. Their rhythm speeds up and falters in a way that – please, please – spells the end being near. Michael comes first, splattering come all over Freddie's stomach and chest, and then Freddie throws his head back and his fingers dig hard into Michael’s hips, before falling away bonelessly.

Roger doesn't wait for them to get their bearings. He stumbles out of the bedroom and into the en suite, just about managing to slam the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

I WANT THAT SESSIONS TAPE! I WANT ALL THE TAPES!!!

The Brian May drunk solo story is more or less true (the conversation with Roger beforehand is of course made up), you can read it here (note how his description goes from ‘we were all plucked out and slightly inebriated’ to ‘I was so drunk’)

I WANT THAT SESSIONS TAPE! I WANT ALL THE TAPES!!!
Roger spends a lot of time wanking in bathrooms. Like, a lot. If this goes on for much longer he'll develop an instinctual boner every time he sees ceramic tile. It has occurred to him at some point that there is really no need for him to sit in on Freddie's 'sessions' with perfectly nice guys, but somehow it keeps happening. And it's not like Freddie has to force him to come along.

He is so fucked. He is royally fucked, even as he – technically speaking – isn't getting any.

On the bright side: It's finished. Another album in the box and they've all come out of the process alive, friendships intact. The fact that Freddie has at some point sent Paul Prenter back to London to oversee some refurbishing work at Garden Lodge really helped. As did a series of mysterious guys' nights out between John and Brian. What exactly happened on these nights is subject to a lot of speculation among the crew (ranging from exotic mind altering drugs to hard-fought scrabble competitions). Whatever they did, it shows results. Brian has scaled down on the vodka and John has allowed some guitars and proper drums on his tracks. Only one pure disco track remains, and after long battles (that culminate in John's beloved bass being taken hostage), even the tricky question of the singles is resolved.

They celebrate the last day of recordings with a party in the Shack. Everyone's there - Band, crew, production team, friends they made in Munich. Basically, they own the club. So spirits are high and eventually Roger, Freddie and John end up on the dance floor. Brian's not quite there yet, but he's sitting at the bar with Mack and Jobby, tapping his foot in time with the beat. Another 10 minutes, another drink maybe, and he'll be ready to join them.

It’s so packed that they all keep brushing against each other as they dance. So it doesn’t attract attention when Freddie leans in a bit, moustache tickling Rogers ear.

"Find me someone."

"Somebody to love?" Roger waggles his eyebrows and stamps his feet in time with the beat.

"Someone who'll fuck me until I can't see straight."

That has Roger sobering up in no time.

And Freddie isn't done. "Someone who'll sweep me off my feet and make me scream myself hoarse, who'll make me forget my own name, someone..."

If Roger doesn't stop this right now he'll have a boner right in the middle of the fucking dance floor. He takes a step back and holds up a hand.

Freddie grins. The disco lights flicker over his face. The bastard knows exactly what he's doing.

"Alright", Roger says. Time to up the ante. "Give me your keys."

Freddie hesitates.

Roger raises his eyebrows. "Scared?"
Slowly Freddie reaches into the pocket of his trousers and digs out the key to his suite. They dangle off his long fingers for a second.

Roger snatches them up. "Give me half an hour. Then come to the hotel."

Freddie's eyes are gleaming. "Alright", he says.

"I want you sober", Roger says sternly. Well, at least no less sober than he’s now. "And on time." No way he does he plan to sit around making chitchat with Freddie's soon to be lover for hours.

He circles the room. Lets his eyes roam the bar, the tables, the dance floor. Michael is there with some friends but he is not what Freddie wants tonight. It would have to be someone with an edge to him. 'Someone who'll sweep me off my feet.'

His gaze meets dozens of men. By now he's practiced in sorting them. Too pretty, too much of a bear, that one is here with a boyfriend, that one's straight, too old, too much of a gossip. There are one or two likely candidates but something holds him back. Is it something about them? Or is he just getting tired of picking up tricks for his friend?

He circles again, getting more and more frustrated by the minute. Half an hour is not a lot of time.

Then he spots a tall muscular guy leaning against a corner of the bar. His expression is cool and aloof, but his eyes are kind. He’s also big and butch, just how Freddie likes them. Roger forces himself to walk over to him. He doesn't want to invite this guy over, but he’s running out of options and just wants to get it over with.

He stops in front of the guy and reaches for one of his practised openings.

And finds he doesn't have it in him.

"Alles in Ordnung mit dir?" The man looks genuinely concerned and puts a steadying hand on Roger’s shoulder.

Yeah, he would have been the right one for tonight.

But Roger simply doesn't want to ask him. It's like a big, unmoveable roadblock has set up station in his brain.

"Ja", he says and turns away.

His heart is pounding. His palms are sweaty. He heads for the exit and calls a cab.

The idea didn't pop into his mind. No, it has been sitting there all the time, patiently waiting for him to discover it. It has his blood singing and his mind racing. It's like cocaine but way scarier.

It’s like he watches himself on the way to the hotel, through the lobby, up to Freddie's suite, sitting down on the plush sofa. Like he's watching a movie, wondering if the protagonist will really go through with it. Or if he’s going to balk at the last minute.

He doesn't. But half an hour is a long time, even when it's really just 10 minutes by now. He switches on the lamp on the coffee table. Every opening of the elevator doors, every step in the carpeted hallway has his heart pick up a beat or two.

Is that Freddie's footsteps? No, those are heels. No, too heavy. Too slow. No, a group of women, drunk and giggling.
Steps stop in front of the door. Roger gets up from the sofa. He wishes he'd thought more about this part, but if he'd done that, he wouldn't be here anymore, he'd be at the hotel bar drinking himself into oblivion.

Freddie steps inside. He blinks as his eyes get used to the dim light. He raises his eyebrows questioningly. "He in there", he asks and nods towards the bedroom.

"No." Roger says. His intention is to wait, to just stand there and wait until the penny drops, until Freddie's bemused expression turns into understanding (and then? Shock? Disappointment? Anger? Delight?). But he just can't do it. His eyes drop to the safe level of Freddie's collar bone, away from those questioning eyes.

He walks through the room, slow but steady. It’s like when he was 10 and jumped of the high diving tower for the first time. His brain was screaming at him not to do it, but he just made his feet keep walking forward, one step at a time, until the ground fell away beneath him. And so he keeps walking until he's right in front of Freddie, until he can put two hands on his waist, until Freddie's forced to walk backwards or keel over. Until Freddie's back hits the wall and they breathe the same air.

Freddie sucks in a breath, but he doesn't pull away.

Roger's gaze is on the hollow of Freddie's throat, deepening with every drawn breath. "Say yes", he says, and then, in what may be the bravest moment of his life he raises his eyes.

Freddie's huge, dark eyes are staring at him and Roger is so hyped he can't read them. His heart is pulsing in his throat, his fingers tingle and for one hysteric moment he's sure that time has frozen and they're just going to stay like this forever.

"God, Roger." Freddie's breath comes fast and harsh.

"Say it." Fuck, he has no idea what he's going to do if Freddie says no. He honestly doesn’t. Crumble into a heap of shame-flavoured dust, probably.

Freddie licks his lips and nods.

“Say it”, Roger hisses through clenched teeth, pushing back hard.

"Yes", Freddie whispers.

Roger drives into him with everything he's got, pressing forward to feel the solid heat of Freddie's body. He reaches up to pull Freddie's head down, sucks his lower lip between his own, licks him open until he moans and relents to the onslaught. God, it's been way too long. He drops his hands to Freddie's trousers and unceremoniously tears open his fly. It's not easy to pop the buttons on Levi’s jeans but tonight Roger does it without thinking twice.

"Oh yes", Freddie says and lets his head fall back against the wall. His long smooth neck is night there and Roger scrapes his teeth down the length of it and that's when Freddie starts sliding down the wall and Roger quickly wedges a thigh between his legs to keep him propped up.

Freddie’s fucking knees buckled. Roger put his mouth on him and it made Freddie go weak in the knees and if that isn’t the hottest thing that ever happened in his life... Roger bites down at the point where neck meets shoulder and this time he's ready for it, taking a bit more of Freddie's weight, propping him up with his body. "Fuck, you really want to go down on your knees for me, don't you?"
"Fuck you", Freddie whispers, but for once that great voice barely has enough breath in it to get the words out.

Roger nibbles his way down the side of Freddie's neck, over his collar bone, his chest until he feels the hard nub of a nipple through the thin material of Freddie's shirt. He sucks it into his mouth, fabric and all. The angle is awkward, Freddie being a bit shorter than him, so Roger has to twist his neck and widen his stance, but Freddie's groans are absolutely filthy and it's so worth it. There's a hard, denim-clad bulge pressing into his belly, and for a second Roger thinks about going down even further, pressing his mouth over it and...

He pushes himself back up, letting his upper body rub against Freddie's all the way until he can descend on Freddie's mouth again. And Freddie lets him, surrenders to him, but there's this current that's always asking 'what's next? what else you got in store for me?'

What Roger wants is to hold Freddie, wrap himself around him, make it last forever because who knows what's going to come after. But that is not what Freddie wants. 'Someone who'll fuck me until I can't see straight. Someone to swipe me off my feet.' Roger will be damned if he can't give him that.

He might not know what he's doing, but he'll do that with everything he's got.

Roger pulls back slightly, just enough so he can rest his forehead against Freddie's.

Freddie pushes forward, trying to recapture his lips, but Roger slides a hand into his hair and pulls him back. "You want me to fuck you?"

Saying those words lets a dark heat pool deep in his balls, coiling and twisted. He's doing it for Freddie's sake, wouldn't do this for anyone else in the fucking world, but right now he wants it so fucking much.

Freddie huffs out a desperate, soundless laugh, shaking his head.

At first Roger thinks that's a no, but then Freddie hisses "The fuck you're waiting for", and then Roger is marching them both in the direction of the bedroom, one hand high on Freddie's back, the other keeping to the wall so he doesn't crash into the floor or random pieces of furniture on the way.

The heavy curtains are drawn so it's pitch black, and before Roger can make a grab for the lights, Freddie is on him and they're crashing onto the bed.

"Come on", Freddie whispers and yanks ineffectively at the waistband of his trousers. "Come on."

Right. Freddie’s not one for slow and careful, and to be honest if Roger tries to be that, he’ll probably just stutter and falter before this gets anywhere. So. Get a move on.

He reaches out blindly, grabbing a piece of fabric (a shirt, probably a sleeve). "Off. All of it." And to his amazement, what he can make out in the near darkness, Freddie complies. Doesn't argue, doesn’t talk back, doesn’t turn it into a catty reply. Just efficiently sheds his shirt, his jeans and pants as efficiently.

Roger watches as his eyes grow accustomed to the darkness, catching his breath, then he shucks his own shirt and opens his trousers. Before he can really get anywhere, Freddie’s grabbed him round the neck and pulled him down into a searing kiss, impatient as always. Roger takes a hold of his hips and pulls away softly, resting his cheek against Freddie’s. "Show me how."
“It’s not rocket science.”

“Show me”, Roger says, gripping him harder. “I’ll fuck you through the mattress, I swear, but you’ve got to show me.” He will not hurt Freddie.

Freddie nods, and they share a moment of stillness. Then he moves and Roger hears the slide of the bedside drawer. “Give me your hand.”

Something cold and slick is smeared onto his fingers. It doesn’t feel very sexy. He rubs his fingers together and feels the lube warm up. Then Freddie takes his hand and pulls it behind himself.

Okay, alright, he can do this. He lets his hand trail down Freddie’s spine, losing about half the slick on the way, along the groove above his tailbone. Down between his buttocks. It’s hot there, and damp and a bit hairy, and when Roger presses lightly with his middle finger, there’s hardly any yield. He circles a bit, and Freddie gives a contented hum. After a few minutes, he tries pressing in again and this time just the tip of his finger slides in.

It’s impossibly tight. The idea that he his cock will ever fit in there seems ludicrous.

“Don’t tease”, Freddie whispers and grinds down, as if trying to force Roger’s finger in deeper.

“I’m not.” Roger doesn’t have the mental capacity for anything as complex as teasing right now.

“Roger.” Freddie’s tone is serious now. “Darling, listen to me for a minute, alright?”

Roger nods.

“If this is going to work, you’ll have to trust me.”

“I do.”

“Then go for it!”

‘Someone to sweep me off my feet’ bounces round and round in Roger’s head. He’s not being very sweepy right now, is he? "Don't let me hurt you. Promise."

“I promise. Now would you please...”

But Roger’s already moving. He’s pulling Freddie’s head down of a kiss with his free hand and wriggles his finger in just a bit deeper at the same time. Freddie’s nails dig into his shoulders, but not to push him away.

Roger pulls his finger out, circles once more, then pushes back in. He repeats that a couple of times until his finger catches a bit. He reaches for the lube at the same time as Freddie and they both have to grin. Like hands meeting in the popcorn bag on a first date.

He empties half the bottle over his fingers and then works two in at the same time.

“Yes, like that”, Freddie hisses. His forehead is wet with sweat where it’s pressed to Roger’s cheek.

He moves the fingers against each other, twisting and turning, even stretching them apart a bit. The more he does it, the easier the movements become as Freddie’s body responds and relaxes. He pressed in a little deeper and Freddie lets his head fall back, breathing hard. Roger repeats the movement and Freddie swears under his breath. Roger still finds it hard to believe that this could actually be pleasurable, but it must be or else Freddie’s putting on the performance of a life time. Roger plays around a bit with the angle and the pressure until he’s found the combination that has
Freddie strain against him so hard he’s shaking.

This is fun. The movement is not so different from something he’d try with a woman (although it doesn’t work for all of them), so he feels a bit on safer ground. He reaches for Freddie’s cock with his free hand and is a little alarmed to find him barely half-hard, but when he slides his hand along the length he can feel him leaking.

“You like that”, he asks.

“You’re killing me”, Freddie whispers. Roger crooks his fingers. “Oh fuck.”

Oh yes. Roger’s wrist is starting to hurt from the strain and the angle, but if he can make Freddie sound like that, he’s prepared to do this until the sun comes up. Maybe make him come from that. Is that even possible? He’ll find out. And then...

“I’m ready”, Freddie pants. “Do it.”

“No way.” Roger scissors his fingers. It’s become a lot looser, but still. It’s only two fingers, that’s nothing compared to...

“You said you trust me.”

Roger swallows hard. Freddie can be an irresponsible tit, but he also has a lot more experience with this than Roger. And he’s promised. And Roger’s promised as well. He takes a deep breath, tastes Freddie’s sweat on his tongue, his burning heat gripping Roger’s fingers.

Roger leans forward, pushing Freddie down until he’s on his back. Roger’s hand gets trapped and he has to pull out, which has Freddie cursing him.

“Shh.” Roger trails kisses up his neck, his chin, to his mouth. Freddie surges up towards him, wrapping his long legs around his body. Roger’s cock slides along the groove of his hip, slippery with spilled lube and sweat. It feels really nice.

“If you come right know”, Freddie growls, “I’m going to kill you.”

Roger grins and slides his fingers back to Freddie’s hole, circling it. This time, he’s teasing on purpose. “So eager”, he says and thrusts his cock forward again. Then he pushes in again with his fingers, just to make sure he’s still open.

“Such a fucking tease”, Freddie moans and arches his back.

“Think you can take me then?” He makes it sound like a challenge, like a bit of sex talk, but he has to hear it one more time.

“God yes, come on”, Freddie whispers.

Roger pulls his fingers out and sits up on his heels, coating his cock liberally with the remaining lube. Before, he wasn’t sure if he’d be able to do it, if he’d even manage to keep up an erection. Now, the mere thought of that tight, slick heat has his cock straining. Freddie’s body is a dark shape before him, on his back, feet flat on the bed. Roger leans back down, settling in between his legs. Freddie’s thighs grip his waist and pull him in. His cock brushes against Freddie’s arse and his breath catches.

On impulse, he leans to the side and flicks on the bedside lamp. Freddie blinks his eyes shut. “Sorry”, Roger whispers. He’s got to see what’s going on. “I want to see you.” He kisses him and...
Freddie slides a hand into his hair, running his fingers over his scalp.

Roger reaches down to take himself in hand and gets into position. He pushes forward carefully until the tip of his cock catches on the rim. It’s feels amazing. He loves that part. That moment right before pushing inside the first time, drawing out the anticipation, the light contact, like a wet kiss at the most sensitive part of him.

Then he pushes forward, carefully, and bit by bit he feels Freddie’s body opening to him. The pressure is intense, like fucking into a tightly balled fist. He pauses to get his breath back and immediately Freddie’s heels dig into his side. Roger looks up at his face and there’s a deep crease between his eyes, his teeth dug into his lower lip. A flood of arousal washes through him and he yields to the press of Freddie’s feet and sinks forward into that sweet, tight heat and...

“Oh fuck!” Freddie’s fingers clench in his hair and Roger instinctively draws back so he can have more of that slide, that tightness and... “Don’t move.”

Roger forces his muscles to stay still, halfway buried in Freddie’s body. He wants, he needs to move, just a tiny little bit, to relieve some of that pressure that’s building inside him, but he holds himself motionless on trembling arms. Freddie’s jaw is clenched and he’s breathing deep and harsh through his nose. Then his hands relax fractionally and he gives a tiny nod.

Slowly Roger slides back in until his body is flush with Freddie, until every inch of him is gripped tightly. There’s so much friction that he can’t imagine moving back and forth as much as he would with a woman, but he can make those tiny, deep rocking motions that feel like his cock is being wrung out in the best possible way.

Freddie is making tiny urgent noises in the back of his throat, which Roger takes to mean he likes it. Bit by bit, Roger increases his range of motion, until there’s a bit of a slide again and he has to distract himself from just how good that feels or else he won’t be able to go at it for very much longer.

“More”, Freddie whispers and shifts a little, hitching one leg higher.

Roger pushes in with a bit more force and Freddie groans and digs his nails into Roger’s back.

“Yes. More. Come on, I won’t break.”

Roger does it again a bit quicker and he bites his own tongue to keep himself under control. Freddie’s panting now, his pulse hammering away in his neck so hard Roger can see it. He comes up onto his knees a bit more, bending Freddie’s legs back to have a better angle. One of Freddie’s calves slides up his arm and on instinct, Roger pushes it up even higher until it rests on his shoulder.

“Fuck yes”, Freddie hisses and pulls himself closer against Roger with his legs, fucking himself on Roger’s cock from that impossible angle and Roger just can’t anymore. He pushes down in a fast rhythm, small, harsh movements that rattle the bed frame and send a shock though him every time. He should go slower, he should focus on getting Freddie off, but not now, he can’t right now, it feels too good and he... He’s coming with his mouth latched onto Freddie’s shoulder, almost bending him in half, panting like there’s not enough air in the world.

“Stay there”, Freddie whispers when he tries to lower them back down. “Stay just like that.” His hand his moving fast on his cock and Roger can feel him drawing together tightly around his cock when he comes.
The next thing he’s aware of is Freddie wriggling out underneath him. Roger rolls sluggishly aside, then startles upright when he lands in a lake of congealed lube and semen. "Eugh!"

Freddie just chuckles, but Roger suddenly realizes that he didn’t use a condom. Hadn’t even thought about it, not for a second. For someone who refuses to let anyone go near Freddie without one, it’s a bit rich. And it’s not like he knows what Freddie gets up to when he’s not around. Of course, it’s not like Freddie’s just another shag, but they’re not... not boyfriends either.

Freddie stretches languidly, then sits up and swings his legs over the side of the bed. “I need a shower”, he says, inspecting the cum splattered on his own belly. Then he looks at Roger over his shoulder, one eyebrow raised in question.

Roger pretends he doesn’t see it and wipes away at his own stomach with a corner of the bed sheet. It’s ruined anyway.

It’s not that Roger wants a boyfriend. Sex is one thing, but candlelight and roses and arguing over dishes quite another. There’s obviously a side of him that can have, that craves full-on sex with another man (one particular man), but it’s not a relationship. It’s not serious like it was with Dom, like it might, in another life, have become with Marlene, with marriage and kids in the cards.

And he has no idea how long this might last. When Freddie will get bored of it. When he’ll rile Roger up so much that they’ll scream at each other. When Roger will say something unforgiveable.

But let’s face it. Roger liked it. Liked it more than he ever imagined he could. And if he’s not completely mistaken, Freddie liked it too. And that glance just now... yeah, they’re probably going to do it again.

In the bathroom, the shower starts running.

The next tour starts in April, and that means drunk nights together, and lonely nights, and pent up aggression and feelings that are so easily channelled into a quick shag... Yes, they’re definitely going to do that again. And maybe that’s not the worst thing in the world.

Freddie has left the bathroom door open. It’s an invitation if there ever was once. Not for sex (even Freddie’s stamina has limits), but for sharing the aftermath. For more than just a great a shag. But how much more can they take before it all falls to pieces?

Fuck it, he thinks as he follows Freddie inside. Might as well enjoy it while it lasts.

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, I’m not getting paid by Levi’s for any of this.

The German bit is “Are you alright?” – “Yes.”

Aaalso, word-count wise we’re pretty much exactly at the half-way mark. The trials and tribulations are far from over (in fact, get ready for some angsty shit), but the focus will be a little different now that Roger has grudgingly accepted some things about himself.

Thanks again to everyone reading, commenting and kudo’ing - it means the world to me!
New York, 20 March 1982

Chapter Notes

Now's the time to take another close look at the tags and/or look at the end notes for warnings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A couple of days later, they all head back to England for a breather before the next tour. Roger drives to Truro for a brief, long promised visit with his family. Then he spends the whole ride back wondering whether he should call Freddie. And what the fuck he’s supposed to say. They've repeated their tryst, twice, but there's no clear understanding what happens now. Luckily, tour rehearsals aren't far off and then things should resolve itself.

But back in London, he gets a call from the head office. “Two calls for you from New York. A Melissa something? She had your number and it sounded urgent, so I assumed...”

“Yeah, that’s alright, thanks Sam.” An ominous, brooding feeling settles in his gut. He doesn’t like urgent calls. They rarely mean good news. He looks at his watch. 10am on the east coast. He has no idea what kind of schedule Melissa has on weekdays so he decides to give it a try.

She picks up after the second ring. "Yes?"

"Melissa, hey, it’s Roger. You tried to call?"

"Yeah, thank fuck you're calling back."

"Is everything okay", he asked although he knows deep down it isn't.

"No, Rog. No, it's... it's...", She took a deep breath. "Dino's back in the hospital." She pauses. "And this time he might not come out again."

"What? Why? What are you saying?"

"Listen it's... have you heard anything of what's going on over here?"

"Er..." If he's honest, a nuclear war could have broken out over the last weeks and he wouldn't have noticed. Finishing the album and dealing with red alert levels of sexual frustration kind of took up his attention.

"People are dying, Rog. And no one knows what the fuck is going on. Arturo says it’s the government or the FBI coming for us. You know, it’s sounds crazy but with Reagan in the White house and that asshole Fallwell everywhere... And they won’t even let me to him. His parents are here and they’re not letting me or James or any of his friends in. Good Catholics, you know. We can't even...” Her voice cracks.

"Mel, please slow down. What's happening?"

"Gimme a sec." He hears her take a deep breath. And another. "Dino's collapsed at the shops yesterday morning. He's in hospital and it's not looking good. Collapsed lung, all sorts of
infections..."
"Fuck."

"He's unconscious, so some arsehole secretary looked up his next of kin, which are his parents who he hasn't spoken to in 15 years. So they swoop in and throw James out and actually call the cops on him when he refuses to leave."

Roger sits down on the sofa. This can't be real. This can't be happening in this day and age.

"Anyway, James is... he's beside himself because we don't know what's going on and..."

"Is he with you?"

"Yes. He's staying with us for now."

"Good."

"Roger, there is something seriously fucked up going on here. They call it gay cancer, but..."

"Wait. Dino doesn't have cancer, does he?"

"It's not just cancer. People are dying of all sorts of shit. Like pneumonia. Have you ever heard of someone dying of pneumonia, a young healthy person anyway? And it's not just that. Herpes, dementia, untreatable diarrhea. All of them men, all of them gay. And no one gives a shit about it."

He can't believe it. Things like that don't happen, not in the civilized world anyway. And yet, it resonates with something deep inside of him, like a string picking up vibrations through the air. "So Dino, is he... does he..."

"He almost died before they got him to the hospital. The doctors stabilized him, but they told us to prepare for the worst. You could tell they're freaked out. Thei have no idea what's happening."

"Alright", Roger says. "I'm coming over."

"What?"

"I'm catching the next flight to New York." He gets up, phone in hand and empties his duffle onto the bed so he can put fresh clothes in.

"Roger, there's nothing you can do."

He's surprised at himself. There's Carl's 30th birthday party and he thought about dropping in with Freddie, see how things are going in Garden Lodge and maybe something more... thing is, he's got fun things planned. Sitting at a hospital bed is not really his style. "I can be with you."

Besides, in a week they’re going to start rehearsals for the tour in LA where Brian and Deacy have bought their second homes, so he has to get to the US anyway.

He calls Sam to organize tickets, then the office so everyone knows where he is in case anyone needs to contact him. And then, before he can think too much about it, he calls Freddie.

"I'm going to New York", he says. "A couple of days. Just so you know."

"New York? Without me? How very rude." His voice is playful and camp, but Roger thinks there's a question lurking there. Or is that just wishful thinking? "And I just promised Mary to host her
parents for the weekend, and then there's that matinee thing at the...

"Not going to be pleasure cruise." He throws clothes into his overnight bag haphazardly. "Dino is very sick. He... he might not... it's not looking good."

"Oh." Freddie needs a few seconds to switch gears. "Do you want to take the flat?"

Roger hadn't even though of that. "No, it's okay, I'm just going to...

"I'll call Sylvia. She'll have it prepared."

"Freddie, that's really not..."

"I've just had the blue room refurbished. I haven't seen it yet but Sylvia says it's spectacular."

Roger massages the bridge of his nose. He could waste a lot more time arguing with Freddie about this. "Alright", he says. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it."

"Right. Well then..."

"Send my regards to Dino and Melissa and..." Freddie breaks off, "...and the others", he adds, a bit sheepish.

"James", Roger says. Freddie’s never been good with names. "He's Dino's... partner."

"Right."

"I will."

"Have a good flight."

+++ Melissa's flat is a beehive. There are all sorts of people, some of who Roger already knows, like Arturo and Ed, but also many new or only vaguely familiar faces, people he might have met at a club or a party. Somewhere in an armchair in a corner is James, trying very hard to put on a brave face.

Roger isn't sure if he should go over to him (he must be sick of people asking him how he's doing by now), but James sees him and immediately waves him over.

"Well. Shit." Roger says.

"Yeah."

"How are you holding up?"

"Honestly? Not so good." James rubs a hand over his face. "Thanks for coming."

"Wish I could do something. Do you need a lawyer perhaps? I know a good one."

James shakes his head. "Thanks, but see those ladies over there?" He pointed at a group of rather fearsome looking women gathered around the living room table, which is covered in paper. "Some of Ed's lawyer friends. They're getting the ACLU involved, I believe."
"That's good."

James nods. He presses his lips tightly together. "I'm just worried sick", he says. "And I miss him so much."

Oh God, Roger does not know how to handle that. He's a lucky bastard, mostly inexperienced with major tragedy. He puts a tentative hand on James' arm. "How was Tenerife", he asks. "Thanks for the photos, by the way."

"Oh, it was great. I really thought it was doing him good. Not much to tell though." James smiles a little sheepishly. "We basically just lounged around in the sun all day."

"Yeah, Dino looked brown as a nut in those pics."

"Thanks for not mentioning my own colour. I never go beyond hot pink."

Melissa winds her way through the packed living room. "James. Good news." She crouches next to the chair, taking his hand. "He's woken up."

James is instantly alert. "How is he? How do you..."

"The hospital just called. He woke up and the first thing he did after they removed the tube was ask for you."

"Oh God." James looks close to tears. "When can I see him?"

"Now", Melissa says. "The head nurse is furious about the way this case was handled. Visiting hours are over, but he's got an individual room, so they'll let you in anyway."

James wants to get up, but Melissa holds on to his hand. "One more thing. Take one of the lawyers. We don't know what's going happen next and if he loses consciousness again..."

Roger can see that there are more 'ifs' she leaves unsaid.

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Two nights later, Melissa calls to let him know James is waiting for him at the hospital. There's been a bit of queue as everyone is waiting to see Dino at last.

The figure in the hospital bed is almost unrecognizable: hollow cheeks where there used to be fleshy dimples, whispy, greyish tufts of hair instead of dark curls, rattling, laboured breathing instead of constant chatter. Melissa tried to prepare him for the sight, but it's still hard to square with the fun-loving, bubbly person he knows.

And it recalls something dark and scary, something from a dream he's been pushing away as far as it will go. This is a new thing, Melissa had said, stumping doctors and researchers. Then why does it feel so painfully familiar?

He just stands there for a while, taking it all in, while James holds Dino's hand and talks to him in a low voice.

"Sometimes it's hard to say whether he's awake or not", James says. "He's lost most of his eyesight, too, so..." He bends down to Dino, lifting his oxygen mask a little. "Did you say something, sweetheart?"

"I said... 'he' can hear... you talking... about him." A trace of a smile is on Dino's face, even as he
has to pause three times for breath to complete the sentence.

"Still a cheeky bugger I see." Roger stands next to him. He isn't sure what to do with his hands. Taking one of Dino's seems way too intimate, but not touching him at all would be worse. He settles on patting his forearm a few times. The bones are sharp enough to cut.

Dino pushes his head back into the pillow and croaks. At first Roger thinks he's choking, but then he sees James' smile. Dino is laughing. Jesus Christ.

Dino brings a hand to his mask and lifts it a bit. "Brought me... some scones?"

"Better." Roger pulls the cassette player out of his rucksack and holds it up. "The latest tracks, fresh from of the studio."

Dino nods and Roger plugs it in. Soon "Staying Power" fills the room.

"You gone... disco?"

"A bit, maybe", Roger says.

"Got some... Rock'n'Roll... too?"

Roger puts on "Put out the Fire".

"Love the solo", Dino comments, and is delighted to hear the (edited) version of how that had come about.

"James, could you... leave us... a moment?" Dino takes a few deep breaths through his mask.

"Sure", James says, and he looks so torn as he gets up that Roger feels horrible for chasing him away from his partner's bedside. "I need to stretch my legs anyway." He leans closer to Dino and kisses his forehead.

"Thanks for... coming", Dino says when they are alone.

"Sure."

"It means a lot... to him too."

"James?"

Dino nods. "He's going to... take it hard."

"What do you mean", Roger says, although he knows perfectly well what Dino means. And Dino knows he knows, given the withering look he sends Roger's way.

"Tell me... about you."

"Anything in particular you'd like to hear?"

"Something... interesting." Dino presses his mask tightly to his face and takes a few deep laboured breaths. The few sentences have exhausted him.

And so Roger tells him. About this thing that's happening between him and Freddie. About how he doesn't have a clue what he's doing. About how he's sure to fuck it up some way.
When he finishes, Dino smiles weakly. "Proud of you, straight boy."

Roger flips him off, but then relents. "It's really fucking gay, isn't it."

Dino nods. "Wish I could see... the wedding", he says and although it is such a ridiculous, silly thing to say, Roger is suddenly close to tears. Yeah, that's not going to happen in a million years, but he'd still like to have Dino there.

They sit in silence for a while. Roger thinks Dino's gone back to sleep, but then he turns his head and opens his eyes again. Their a bit unfocused, not quite settling on Roger's face. "Did you... offer me... a blowjob once?"

Roger buries his face in his hands. "Oh god."

"Thought I might... have dreamed it up. I get... confused." Dino frowns. "Why did I... say no?"

"Because I was a complete arsehole about it."

"Ah", he says, as if that explains everything. There's the slightest smile on Dino's face now. "Pity though."

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"Get me out of here." Melissa stands in the cramped kitchen of James and Dino's flat. They spent the last day preparing the flat to bring Dino home. It's filled with people who want to help. It's quite touching, but everyone is also on edge, nervous and anxious. Melissa just had a low-key hissing match with Suki about... he isn't entirely sure what it was about but at the end Suki looked like she was about to stab Melissa with a butter knife.

Yeah, getting out sounds good. Dinner? At Lorenzo's?"

"Dinner's good, but Lorenzo's is packed. I can't deal with people right now."

"How about you come back to Freddie's place then? We'll order pizza and get grease all over his upholstery."

"You're staying at Freddie's place?"

"Yeah. He offered. It's about as grandiose as you'd think. It feels like sleeping in a cathedral."

She looks a little miffed. "You know there's scores of people who can't pay their rent because rich fuckers like you buy up all the spaces in Manhattan."

Not a discussion he can win. "All the more reason not to let it stand empty all the time. Come on."

She orders pineapple on her pizza, which Roger loves because Freddie would blow a gasket if he knew a sacrilege like that is being committed in his flat.

He considers taking a picture but getting off the sofa to get the camera seems like too much effort.

They watch mindless American television (which surpasses even British telly in its utter shiteness) and stuff themselves with pizza and talk about anything but Dino.

But then Melissa starts crying and Roger sits on the sofa, staring at his hands, not knowing what to do. He reaches out gingerly to squeeze her shoulder, but she bats his hand away and hides her face in her hands. "Ignore me the next five minutes", she says, voice raw. "Please."
So he pretends to be thoroughly engrossed in the love affairs of some grotesquely made up Texan housewives until Melissa's got herself back under control. She blows her nose noisily and takes some deep breaths. "You may now look at me again", she says with a weak smile.

He mutes the telly and they sit in silence for a moment. Melissa gets up and stands in front of the giant windows, regarding the glittering skyline. "One of Ed's best friends is in the hospital as well", she says. "And they say there's this whole house on Fire Island, that everyone who rented a share has got it as well." She turns around and looks at him. "This feels bad, Roger. This feels really bad."

He knows he should probably tell her it's not going to be that bad, that everything looks darkest before dawn, but he can't shake the feeling that she's right. He knows she's right, somehow he just knows. And she's been living in the middle of all this while he's merely dropped in as a tourist, so what on earth can he possibly say to her?

"The doctors, do they have any idea what this is?"

"It's something about their immune systems", she says. "It just breaks down. James told me that Dino's basically got no white blood cells left."

Roger remembers enough from his biology degree to connect the dots. "So they can't fight off any infections." It makes sense. Dino's mononucleosis, the recurring bouts of flu, the pneumonia... But something doesn't fit. "You told me it's called gay cancer. But cancer's not infectious, is it?" Or do white blood cells have anything to do with cancer as well? He isn't sure.

Melissa shrugs. "Suki says they found out some kinds are, but I don't know. I'm not a fucking cancer scientist, Rog. All I know is that all around me people are getting sick. People who are young and healthy and brilliant and it's fucking terrifying."

Fear, held by bay so far by sheer business creeps up his spine. "Do they know what brings this on? The immune system break down, I mean? Is it... is it a virus or something?" Dear God, please don't let it be a virus.

"There's all sorts of crazy theories. Too much poppers or just the combined effect of too many STDs... one doctor's convinced it's some kind of allergic reaction to semen." She rolled her eyes. "As if gay guys haven't been bathing in the stuff since semen existed."

Or women, Roger thinks.

"The CDC lady who was here to interview Dino seems to think it might be a virus or something. They're conducting a study to find out."

Alarm bells go off in Roger's head. If this can spread like the flu, even just taking Dino's hand might have been enough to transmit it. Melissa doesn't seem to be fazed though. Does she just refuse thinking about it? "Aren't you worried, he asks. "About getting it?"

"What can I do? Flee the city and lock myself up in a mountain hut, Boccaccio style?" Melissa shrugs. "Also, the only ones who get it are guys who have lots of sex with other guys."

The alarm whips itself up into a storm. He knows someone who fits that description only too well. "You have sex with guys", he says weakly.

"It's not lots of guys, it's Arturo and sometimes one other and that's it. And they're both fine. And it's a rather special kind of sex." She gives him a knowing look. Yeah, he remembers the one show he saw his first time at the Anvil. It's the kind of sex that involves lots of props.
It occurs to Roger that he probably should have paid better attention in his introductory virology class. "So what are people doing to protect themselves?"

"Oh god, all sorts of things. Some spend hundreds of dollars on vitamin pills, some have stopped going to the bathhouses, some wipe themselves with alcohol after sex..."

Roger grimaces. That must sting.

"Yeah, I know. But it's all feeling around in the dark. No one really knows anything, so the advice is all over the place. The public health department sure doesn't say anything. The only thing that we're all sure might work is just stop having sex altogether, but come on, we're not going to do that."

Yeah, Roger understands only too well. He knows that cigarettes, alcohol, drugs and lack of sleep might kill him one day, but that's one day in the far off of future and now is now.

"You worry about him, don't you?" Melissa is looking at him with the softest expression.

His instinctive reaction is to deny it, but then he nods. Freddie is his friend. And whatever else he may be, it's perfectly normal to worry about one's friend.

"Me too. Freddie, Ed, Arturo, all of them."

"Is there anything we can do, you think?"

She regards him a moment. "This thing isn't exactly top priority with the politicians right now. If someone really well known raised a stink about this, getting the press and the public to care..."

He starts shaking his head even while she's still speaking. "No. No, sorry. We're one step from being That Gay Band as it is, we can't be That Gay Cancer Band." He feels horrible for making that calculation, for thinking like this. They might get away with Freddie being out to everyone who wants to see as long as he keeps up some plausible deniability, but they can't take up a gay cause on top of that. And if something about him and Freddie ever leaks to the press... well, being the spokesman for a gay disease is not going to help.

Melissa nods as if she didn't expect him to say anything else. "Money, then. Next best thing."

"Right."

"I'll put you in touch with some people."

"Alright, but this has got to be completely under the radar. I'm sorry."

"Roger, even half the people organizing the community response are closeted. They know how to be discreet."

"I'm not closeted", he says, just to make that clear, then feels ashamed because that's really not the point right now.

She walks over to the telly and goes through the tapes stacked there. She holds one up. Mad Max. "You in the mood for some escapist post-apocalyptic hellscape?"

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When Roger gets the message that Dino is back home, he somehow, against his better knowledge, assumes that means he's better. But when he steps into the bedroom, there's no banter, not even a
shared smile. Dino is unconscious. A drip runs to his arm, the hospital equipment incongruous with the comfortable bedroom. Dino is drawing breaths that sound like he is sucking pond water through a straw. And the pauses between them are way too long.

Roger stares at James and Melissa, who are sitting quietly next to the bed.

"What's going on", he asks Suki, whose standing next to him. "Where's his respirator?"

She grips his arm and leads him outside.

"He sounds like he's drowning on dry land", he hisses when the door has closed behind them.

Suki looks up at him with tired eyes. "Do you really think we don't know that?"

"No but... why isn't anyone doing anything? Why isn't he back in the hospital? Where's his fucking doctor?"

"Roger, shut up."

"But..."

"Shut up." She doesn't raise her voice but it packs so much cold steel that even Roger is taken aback. "He's dying, okay? He's got hours, not days. And with pneumonia, this is how you go."

Roger shakes his head, confused. "But...” Another thought interrupts. “How do you know all this?”

“I'm a doctor. Well, a neurologist but I've seen this often enough.” She pauses and then adds: “Usually in people 50 years older than him.”

“But you could put a tube down his throat, right? So he doesn't have to gasp for air?"

"He's DNR." Suki's lips quiver and she takes two deep breaths before she can speak. "He's decided he wants no more interventions."

"So you... so you let him suffocate?"

"He's unconscious. And so chock-full of morphine an elephant could sit on his chest and he wouldn't feel it."

"Jesus." He rubs the back of his neck with his hand. Then he realizes that James must have been witnessing this for hours, days on end. "How long?"

Suki shrugs. "Not much longer. Another night, perhaps. Maybe a day."

Roger takes a deep breath. He finds it hard to accept that there is nothing that can be done for a 34-year-old man with nothing more than some fucking pneumonia. "What can I do?"

"Sit with him", she says, her voice as soft as he'd ever heard it. "We've, uh." She wipes her eyes surreptitiously and Roger clenches his teeth to keep his own emotions in check. "We want to make sure James isn't alone. Me, Melissa, a couple of Dino's friends. We'll go on a sort of roster. You up for it?"

"Sure."

Well, actually there's little that he feels less up for than this. And actually he's also supposed to be in LA for rehearsals tomorrow. But that doesn't seem to matter much now.
As he has the luxury of not having to go to work the next day, he agrees to take the late night/early morning shift, spending the night on the sofa until it's time for his turn. The mood in the apartment is special. People are coming and going, dropping off food and best wishes. It isn't the bustling beehive atmosphere, like the first day at Melissa's place; it's quieter, more subdued than that. James' mum keeps them well stocked with chocolates and tea. Ed and Arturo cook dinner for everyone. One of Dino's band mates, a huge pierced lesbian called Tina who looks like she can crush beer cans in her fists brings along her guitar and plays the softest, sweetest lullabies. Roger spends most of the night discussing the finer points of the Star Wars saga and all the possible ways the next movie could fuck everything up with a bespectacled young woman who turns out to be James’ sister.

It's by all means a nice evening – until he remembers that his friend lies dying not 10 yards away.

When he takes up his shift, Dino's rattling breath is the only sound in the bedroom. James is lying silently beside him on the bed, asleep or awake, Roger can't say. He settles in an armchair by the bed and a dreadful sense of deja vu settles over him. He's never done this before, he knows he hasn't - his family members either live long or die quickly or are too far removed from him to visit on their deathbeds. And yet he's almost nauseous with remembered grief. It's the grief he felt that night in Philadelphia, years ago, when he'd been so convinced that Freddie was dead.

It's ridiculous. It was ridiculous then, it is ridiculous now. Freddie's back in London, safe and sound. But again, his fingers are itching to pick up the phone, hear his voice, make sure he's okay. Because if he isn't... The thought alone is almost more than he can bear.

Roger clenches his teeth and takes a long, slow, deep breath. His friend is struggling for every minute and here he is, indulging in fantasy catastrophes because he can't deal with the here and now. He's not going to run off to London or LA. He's going to stay right here and he's going to bear it.

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When his phone rings in the afternoon, he knows it has happened. He left in the early morning when Tina took over for him.

He goes out and buys himself a black suit because he refused to bring one along from England. He heads over to James' place and stands around uselessly, stammering his condolences and trying not to look too much at James, because every time he does it's like an icy knife is being twisted in his gut. A house on Tenerife and all the money in the world can’t help with this.

There is a traditional Catholic funeral a few days later, Dino's last minute concession to his family. His parents, a diminutive Italian couple bent with grief sits in the first row to the right. They barely nod at James as he takes his place on the left but Roger doesn't have it in him to hate them. Later maybe. Not now.

He lets the liturgy wash over him, trying hard not to listen to what the priest is saying. He finds being grateful to a merciful god kind of difficult when he just let a friend of him choke to death for no good reason at all.

The wake is a different matter. It's just Dino's friends and band mates, no family except two of his cousins who don't seem to be raving bigots. There's food and – importantly – booze and people feel free to laugh and cry however they see fit. It gets a bit rowdy towards the end, but as Roger crams himself onto the tiny balcony jutting out from the kitchen with five more people to share a blunt, he figures it's probably just how Dino would have wanted it.
It's funny how he's met Dino maybe a dozen times, but still feels like he's known him much better. It often happens like this in his line of work. You meet people for a few days, doing crazy stuff together and feeling like you've known them forever. And then you fly out and don't see each other again for two years, but when you do it's like you're meeting a long-lost brother.

And now he's gone and coming back to New York will never be the same.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: Minor Character Death

Further Reading:

Randy Shilts: “And the band played on”. It’s a gripping and very well written account of the earliest years of the AIDS epidemic (1980-86). Highly recommended with two caveats: 1. It was published in 1987 so some of the medical facts are outdated. 2. Gaetan Dugas (one of the first known victims in the US/Canada) is vilified to a degree he doesn’t deserve.

David France: “How to Survive a Plague”. Moving account of what it was like to live through this and of the AIDS/LGBT activism that emerged from this crisis.

Sean Strub: “Body Counts”. An autobiography of a politician/businessman/activist. Lots of info on gay life in America from the 60s to the 90s. He was infected with HIV in the early 80s and survived.

Flying to LA the next day means completely shifting gears. They've only got a week until the next tour kicks off in Gothenburg and the rest of the band is already deep in rehearsals. And there's a lot of new material to cover, so Roger doesn't have much time to wallow in his misery.

Brian and John take him out for beers in the best tradition of male British emotion processing. They don't talk all that much, but when Brian heads for the loo, John speaks up.

"I don't want to worry Brian, but how serious is this?"

Roger sighs. "Fucked if I know, Deacy. The best case scenario is that it's just some unlucky guys and a batch of bad poppers and the same time next year this has all blown over." Deep in his bones, he knows it won't have.

"And if we're not?"

"Then it's going to be a fucking shit show."

Deacy looks troubled. "Are you taking care of him?"

"Who", Roger asks before he can truly think about it.

"Freddie." John's look is unreadable. Does he know? Did he guess?

"Who", Roger asks before he can truly think about it.

"Freddie." John's look is unreadable. Does he know? Did he guess?

Careful now. "You know Freddie. He has the self-preservation instincts of a herd of lemmings."

"Blind lemmings. And stubborn ones."

"That too." Tell Freddie to look left and right before crossing a street and he'll blindfold himself just because next time.

And yet, although he knows it's useless, Roger does try to talk to Freddie. He tries it conversationally when the topic of the US tour comes up, he leaves newspapers lying around when there's a rare article about the mysterious disease, he even asks Freddie directly if he's worried.

He's brushed off every single time with a shrug, a bland non-answer, an annoyed eye-roll, a warning side-ways glance. Eventually, Roger gives up. He's tired of worrying, tired of being a gloom-bear and tired of being ignored. So he stuffs all the many feelings he's got about this into a big suitcase, stows it in the most easy-to-ignore basement corner of his mind and goes about his business.

Because there's a lot of it.

Touring is always intense and this time they have got a lot of new material to learn. Things don't go off smoothly this time: Two weeks before Hot Space supposed to be released, David fucking Bowie calls and lets them know that he doesn't like the backing vocals he did for them on one of the tracks and wants them taken off. So they scramble to find someone else to record new backing vocals and all this delays the release by almost a month. So all they can put out is the new single and tour in support of that.
He and Freddie are... it's different from before, but Roger is stumped to say what exactly it is. The first night after he's back from New York, Freddie cancels all commitments and just holds him through the night. It feels good, it feels close, it feels like... But then Roger asks him to leave a bar early the next night, and he does, but he can feel the irritation radiating off Freddie all night. Two days later, he finds Freddie at a party at Gerry's, his arm around a Castro Clone.

"This is Andy", he says, head tilted back a little, jaw jutting out. Daring Roger to say something.

"Hey Andy", Roger says and nods at him.

The message is clear: Don't presume.

So they pretty much pick up where they left off: They still go out together and they still pick up guys for Freddie (and the occasional girl for Roger). In addition, whenever they can get away with it (and on tour it's not easy to get away with it), they'll head home together, sneaking back to one of their rooms, always leaving before sunrise.

Things are in a fragile equilibrium for the first month of the European tour. And then it all goes to hell.

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They're in Frankfurt when Roger gets the call from Melissa, updating him on how things are going for her (okay) and James (about as well as expected). He feels a bit like a cad. He'd thinks about them a lot, of course, but he never actually picks up the phone to get in touch. And it isn't just because of the stress of touring life.

"Anyway, just thought you might want the update."

"Yeah, of course I do. Thanks for calling. I'm not great at keeping in touch and stuff, you know. Especially on tour..."

"Me neither. But Suki kicks me in the shins when I slack off too much. So..." Melissa hesitates. The call must already be costing her a pretty dollar, but something keeps her from hanging up. "Listen, I..."

"What is it?"

"It's getting a bit scary over her. Suki sees a lot of what's going on at the hospitals. I mean, she's a neurologist, and not an expert in infectious disease, but some of the guys get neurological symptoms as well so..."

"It's not getting better?"

"It's getting worse."

That old familiar leaden emptiness in his stomach. "Shit."

"She's talked to some of the CDC people. Nothing's official yet, but they're convinced it's a virus. A new one, transmitted similarly to Hepatitis."

Okay, that's bad news, but also kind of good news, isn't it? If they know how it's transmitted, that means they can tell people how to protect themselves. "So how is that?"

"Needles and sex, mainly. It's in semen and blood, so anytime the two mix it's dangerous. A lot of
guys who got this new thing are into fisting and rough sex, apparently. But all it takes is too little lube or not enough prep or a broken fingernail, really."

Roger winces. "Okay, I get the picture."

"And Rog?"

"Hm?"

"It looks like it can take up to a year until symptoms show. So Mary - she's Suki's contact at the CDC - she thinks that you can get it from people who have no idea they've got it. People who look fine."

Icy cold fear trickles down his spine. Why does this all sound so fucking familiar? It's like he's stuck in some kind of never-ending horrible déjà-vous.

"So that makes everyone really nervous. Ed has called Suki up twice in the middle of the night because he's had a bit of a cough."

"So is he..."

"He's fine, but... we're all getting a bit jumpy. I've started using latex gloves for some of the, er, messier stuff."

"Right."

"Shiny black latex of course", she says and for once he can hear the smile in her voice. "Anyway, I just thought I'd keep you up to date. I'm pestering all my friends about keeping safe so maybe you want to do the same."

Yeah, it's not like he hasn't tried. "Sure, er, thanks."

"I've been called a prude, can you imagine?"

"For the life of me I cannot. Have you..."

"Sorry Rog, gotta hang up soon. Phone bill, you know."

"Right, er, listen we'll be back in New York in June, how about we meet up then?"

"Sure. Take care!"

When she hangs up, Roger takes a couple of deep breaths. "All it takes is too little lube", it echoes through his mind, mixing up with Freddie's "Don't need prep if you've got this" and brandishing a bullet of poppers. That was two years ago, and it clearly hadn't been the first time he'd done that.

But he's fine, he's alright. The last time he'd caught so much as a cold had been... probably Paris '79. And that's although he treats vodka as a staple food and barely hits the pillow before sunrise.

Thoughts like these help Roger keep the panic at bay. Because of course, Freddie wants to go out that night. And he wants to take someone home, someone who is not Roger.

"You're such a sour puss tonight", Freddie chides him.

"Tired", he says.
"Let's get you home then", Freddie says, and for a second Roger thinks he's been spared (for tonight at least) and he'll get Freddie all to himself. But then he follows his eyes to a slim and sinewy leather man, a little shorter than what he usually goes for. He projects a certain aggression, but doesn't seem violent, so Roger - who mainly just wants this over with – nods his consent.

This time, Roger doesn't feel a trace of arousal as he presides over the sex. It all goes a little faster than he's comfortable with, but the guy makes no fuss about the condom or about Roger being there as a spectator. It's all over in less than thirty minutes. Maybe Roger's mood put a damper on everything.

Freddie certainly bitches about it afterwards when they're alone. "Always nice to see the audience enjoying itself", he says and rolls off the bed. "Thanks for that."

But Roger doesn't respond because there's blood on the bed sheet. Not a lot, no more than a stain, but it's there and it's fresh.

"Freddie, are you hurt?"

"Huh? No, I'm fine", Freddie says distractedly as he puts on a new pair of briefs.

"There's blood. On the sheets."

"Ah."

Freddie seems supremely unconcerned but Roger can't look away. He can't tell from the look of it whose it is of course. And would it matter? If it's Jürgen's (or whatever the fuck his name was) it might be infectious. And if it's Freddie's, he might have a cut somewhere which would make him vulnerable ("any time blood and semen mix"). There's a swooshing noise in his ears and for a second he thinks he might actually faint. He jumps up and grabs Freddie by the arm, pulls him around, starts scanning him for scratches, bites ("all it takes is a broken fingernail").

"Roger, what on earth..."

"Shut up." Roger crouches in front of him, inspecting his legs.

Freddie tries to step back and stumbles because Roger is holding on to his ankle, and the he falls backwards onto the bed.

"Get away from there!" Roger is on him, pulling him off. He knows he's panicking but he has to get Freddie away from there, away from the blood, keep him safe.

"Fuck off!" Freddie's landed hard with his arse on the floor.

"We've got to get you under the shower", he says while Freddie is batting his hands away. "Or we can use some Stoly as a disinfectant if you're..."

But Freddie's pushed himself to his feet. "I don't know what the fuck all the fuss is about but... Stop pawing at me!" He pushes Roger away and takes a few steps towards the door.

"We've got to stop this", Roger says.

"What? Stop what?" Freddie glares at him, hands on his hips.

"This", Roger says, waving at the bed. "It's way too fucking dangerous and..."

"Oh hello, mother hen, how nice to see you again."
"You are playing with your life!"

Freddie rolls his eyes. "And say they I'm dramatic."

"Don't you dare make a joke of this!" This is important. He doesn't completely understand it, but he's right about this, he knows he is. He has to get through to Freddie. It might be his only chance.

"I've been playing with my life for 10 years now, I'm still kicking."

"Are you even trying to understand what I'm saying? Have you been listening to what I’ve been telling you? This is Russian Roulette and I'm not going to stand by and..."

Freddie's face contorts and with two long steps he is right in Roger's space. "Do you think I'm stupid? Do you think I don't know what this is about?"

"Dunno, do you?"

"You're jealous. You think because you've had me you can dictate what I do."

"I'm not..."

"Sure, you've indulged me a while but now you're showing your true face and I don't like it. One. Bit." Freddie's face is very close to his and its expression is thunderous.

"It's not about jealousy, you tosser! If you decide to fuck off and marry fucking Jürgen and have 16 kids with him, fine, go for it." Actually no, that is not be fine. Under no circumstances will that ever be fine. "It's about you. I... We cannot lose you."

"I don't believe it. Not for a second. You're the one throwing yourself down vertical ski slopes and tearing up mountain passes at 100 miles!"

"That's completely different!"

"No, it isn't and you know it!"

"One of my best friends has died and I will not stand by and watch as you..."

"So go!" Freddie grabs his arm and pushes him towards the door. "I'm not forcing you to be here!"

"So you can throw yourself under the next bus? Forget it!"

Freddie's eyes narrow. "Is that why you're doing this", he asks slowly, as if he's just working it all out in his head. "Is that why you're fucking me? Because you think, what, it'll save my life?"

The hurt and the shame on Freddie's face is almost more than Roger can bear. Whatever Freddie thinks it can't be this. "No, Freddie..."

"Is that what it is? Is that what I am? You're noble fucking sacrifice?"

"No, Christ, you..."

"Is it so you can justify the whores and the drugs to yourself, so you can pat yourself on the back for being such a good boy?"

"Christ, do you seriously..."
"Yes, I do, and tell you what, I will not be..."

"...seriously think that?"

"...not be some charity case that you can use to prove how bloody open minded you are when really..."

"The fuck are you talking about?"

"...really you're just waiting for the next girl to come around and..."

"You mean the world to me!"

All that's audible in the room is the harsh rasping of their breaths. Oh God, what had he just said? He wants to downplay it, clarify it with a tagged on "as a friend, you know" (which has saved him often enough), but with every second that passes that would only make it worse. And the way Freddie is looking at him: wide-eyed and slack-jawed, an expression of such open longing it makes Roger's chest hurt with treacherous hope, makes him want to say it again until they can't pretend it means anything else than what it does.

Then Freddie's mouth twists into something ugly. "You", he hisses. "You are such a deceiving, manipulative fucking cunt!" The last word is screamed into his face. Freddie whirls around and starts putting on the rest of his clothes at high speed. His worn clothes, which Freddie abhors.

"I didn't mean it", Roger says. "Jesus, I didn't mean it like that, Freddie..."

"Shut up!" Freddie slips into his sneakers, not bothering to tie up the laces.

"Freddie, for fuck's sake, just calm down and..."

Freddie shakes off the hand Roger put on his arm like it's a poisonous snake. "Don't you dare", he hisses as he heads for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"Out." Freddie's face is white with rage and his voice barely controlled. He pauses in the doorway. "I'm going out. And I'm going to do everything. With everyone."

Roger starts after him but the door is slammed in his face. He fumbles it open, watches as Freddie storms down the hallway.

"Fr..." He cuts himself off and slams his hand into the wall. He wants to run after him, tackle him to the ground and drag him screaming and fighting back inside the room and lock him up forever. He wants to kiss him until he can't even think of anyone else. He wants to scream and rage and fucking smack some sense into that stupid bastard, make him understand that...

And he's not going to do to that. Never.

He doesn't sleep that night. Can't quiet his mind which swings between horror scenarios of what's happening to Freddie and tearing himself to shreds for being the biggest idiot on the planet. He's going to lose him. He's fucked up and now he's going to lose him forever. And he's got no one but himself to blame.

And every time he gets closer to sleep, the most disturbing question of all creeps up on him. Why did he say what he said? Of course Freddie means a lot to him, he'd take a fucking bullet for him.
But he cares just as much about Brian or John or Clare, doesn't he? Only Brian and John and Clare aren't so bent on self-destruction.

And he doesn't want to fuck any of them so that might have something to do with it, too.

What do you call it when you want to fuck someone and also have them wake up in your bed every day of your life and care more for their happiness than for your own, a treacherous voice in his head asks as dawn is breaking.

He rummages in his bedside drawer for sleeping pills or downers or even bloody Quaaludes but there is nothing. He'll have to have a word with management.

He thinks about the fully stocked bar in the living room, but the thought of vodka or whiskey makes him sick to the stomach.

He gives up around 9 and heads down for breakfast. Well, some coffee at least. He just can't stay ensconced in his room any longer, he'll go crazy. In the hall, he runs into Phoebe, loaded with dry cleaning bags.

"Roger!" He looks surprised. Seeing a band member up before noon is not a common sight.

"Oh, hey." He tries to play it cool, to not let his pounding heart be betrayed by his voice. "You seen Freddie yet?"

"I thought he was out with you?"

"Yeah, we... he went off on his own later." Play it cool.

Phoebe's eyes search his face. He must look like shit. His trusty sun glasses can only cover up so much. "I'll have a look", he says, a sliver of reproach in his voice. Phoebe would never not know if Freddie made it home alright.

"That would be great. I'm downstairs."

He basically chugs his first cup of coffee and immediately refills. There are freshly baked buns and jam and scrambled eggs on offer but right now the idea of food makes him nauseous.

Please let him be okay.

When Phoebe returns it's in a jog. Roger's stomach drops.

"He's not there."

Oh shit oh shit oh shit shit! Roger gets up although he doesn't know where to go or what to do.

"I've checked with Paul. He isn't there either, so I guess they're still out together."

Roger's overwhelmed by contradictory feelings. Freddie's not alone. Paul won't let him come to immediate harm. But Paul's also a non-questioning henchman who'll encourage his worst impulses. And he'll be triumphant. Roger wants to punch something.

Phoebe looks like he wants to say something, but then turns away. He never gives his opinion without having been asked. That's probably why Freddie likes to have him around.

Roger can't sit still a minute longer. It's hours until sound check and only then will he know if Freddie's truly gone AWOL. Roger will go to pieces if he's left to stew any longer, but he's got just
enough self-preservation instinct to know really can’t get into a car right now.

So he heads down to the gym. He tears into the punching back until his knuckles swell up and he can barely lift his arms anymore. He'll pay for that tonight, but when he heads back up to his room, sheer exhaustion means he gets at least a few hours dreamless sleep.

When he gets to the concert hall for the sound check (late, because he can't stand waiting around for Freddie any longer than he has to), his knees almost give out. Freddie's there, casually chatting with Ratty, looking unharmed (if a bit tired) and not sparing a second glance for him. But he's there. He's alright. At least for now and Roger's going to be grateful for that.

"You okay, Rog?" John looks worried.

"Sure."

"Because you look like shit."

"Yeah, thanks arsehole."

His shoulder muscles are on fire when he picks up his drum sticks. He immediately requests Sheer Heart Attack be dropped as an encore. It's hard enough on him on a normal night; today he knows he won't get through it. He claims to have trapped a nerve in his sleep and Paul, smug bastard that he is, helpfully gets a physiotherapist to come in and have a look at him.

"That's not a trapped nerve", he says with German directness.

"No, I've spent three hours this morning thrashing a punching bag", Roger replies, equally blunt.

"Yup, that's more like it."

The massage and a warming cream help a bit, but it still takes all his grit and determination to get him through the show. Thank god the next two nights are off.

After the show Freddie is perfectly polite to him. He also deflects any attempt at a proper conversation with steely coolness. And when he heads out for the night, he demonstratively puts his arms around Paul and Phoebe, walking past Roger as if he isn't even there.

Chapter End Notes

So, Roger is not the only one who has issues. And he's been pushing some major buttons there.

"I'm doing everything with everyone" was allegedly what Freddie said to Paul Gambaccini in '83 or '84 when asked whether he'd changed his behaviour.

'Mary at the CDC' is a shoutout to Mary Guinan, one of the researchers who tirelessly interviewed hundreds of early victims to find out what's going on. You can read about that (and the other work she did for the CDC) in her book Adventures of a Female Medical Detective.
"What's it this time?"

Brian has watched Roger and Freddie ignore each for a week before cornering Roger at the bar of a very hip, very straight pub.

"Nothing."

"Well it's clearly something."

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Well, you'll have to, because you've been walking around like a kicked puppy and you know I have a soft spot for those."

Oh great. He's expected John and Brian to notice something's wrong (they aren't complete idiots), but he put a lot of effort into looking cool and put together. Kicked puppy isn't really his style. "Fuck off", he says and orders another Kölsch. Beer designed to be chugged in one go. Brilliant.

"Nope."

"What do you want from me, huh? We don't fight, we play together well on stage, what more do you want?"

"I want to know what's going on."

Roger scoffs. "Well, tough."

"And I want to help. If there's anything I can do to help. Because that's what friends do, don't they?"

And Brian is looking at him with his earnest expression and his innocent wide eyes that make him look like a particularly concerned poodle and Roger knows he's lost. "I hate you."

Brian, knowing when he's on to a winning strategy, just sits there and waits. And so Roger spills. Not about the sex or the watching Freddie have sex or the vetting Freddie's partners for sex, but the rest. How it felt watching Dino die. How he knows in his gut that something horrible is slowly unfolding. How Freddie just refuses to slow down and listen. How he lost his chill and fucked it up (omitting certain incriminating details, which is all the details) and how Freddie's gone ballistic and decided to throw all caution into the wind.

How scared he is of losing him.

Brian just takes it all in this patient, calm manner that he's got. He's good at this, listening quietly. Almost good enough to make Roger want to reveal just how deep the emotional waters he got himself into really are.

Almost.

They sit in silence after he's finished, only the sleek synth pop filling the air between them

"Is it really that bad", Brian asks finally, not challenging Roger but with deep concern. "I've read something about it in the papers, but it didn't sound all that scary."
Roger shakes his head. "Maybe I've just panicked, I don't know", he says. "But over there, in the US, it is really scary. You... you haven't seen him", he says quietly. "Dino, I mean."

"Okay, but are we talking about a dozen cases or hundreds or thousands?"

Roger shrugged. Of course Brian in his methodical, analytical way would want to know that. "A few hundred, I think."

"It's not that many", Brian says carefully.

"But it's getting more. And it's all people in the same circles. It's all people who... it's all people like Freddie."

"I get it, Rog, I do, but... Look, when Chrissie was pregnant the first time, I'd read a book about all the things that can go wrong. And guess what, I was convinced that she'd die, that the baby would die or that it would have horrific deformities... I saw all the signs. It was terrifying."

"He's not sick, I know that. But if he goes on like that..."

"Well, at the very least it seems to be a US problem, right? So he should be fine as long as he's here?"

"Only we've got a US tour planned in the summer. And he's got an apartment in New York."

"It's still two months away. Maybe by then it will all have turned out to be nothing but a trumped up health scare. Remember swine flu? They were telling us we were all going to die, too. And then nothing happened."

It's weird, being the worrywart for once. Usually their roles are reversed. "But it's not just that. I mean... have you seen some of the guys he takes home?"

"Rog, I worry about him too, always have. But he's been doing that for years now. And he's always come out alright. And Paul's looking after him. I know", he added when he saw Roger's grimace. "I don't like him either, but he would never let him come to harm. And when things get really bad, like with Richie, remember, he's still got us."

"If things get 'really bad' there's fuck all we can do, don't you get that?" Why is no one taking this seriously?

"Alright. I'm sorry. You know more about this than I do. Do you think it would help if Deacy or me talked to him?"

Roger shakes his head. "He'll assume it's coming from me. He's just paranoid people are trying to control him." He shrugs. "No wonder if you look at the people around him."

"Have you tried apologising to him then?"

"Kind of. In the moment."

"I imagine he was not very susceptible then, was he? Maybe give it another try?"

Roger shakes his head. "He won't even talk to me."

"Try?"

Damn him. "It's useless right now. But... I guess I'll have to. At some point."
He means it when he says that there wouldn’t be much use in apologising right now. Freddie will set that as just another attempt to manipulate him. But if Roger's being honest, he also doesn't see that this whole quagmire is solely his fault. He might have overreacted, but Freddie just flew completely off the handle. Why does he have to grovel just to get back into Freddie's good graces, while Freddie snubs him at every opportunity and parades his conquests around in front of him?

So instead of apologising, Roger does what he always does when he's facing a problem he doesn't know how to resolve: he throws himself into action. Beating up punching bags becomes something of a hobby, although he learns how to pace himself so it won't interfere with his drumming. He rediscovers the joys of mindless binge drinking with the crew and cocaine-fuelled one-night stands.

And if Freddie happens to see him heading out into the night with a girl on each arm, well then maybe a little taste of his own medicine does him good.

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Roger's in high spirits when he comes off stage after the first Vienna gig. Good crowd, good show and he's worked himself into a state where all he feels is adrenaline. And when that wears off, Crystal would provide him with more of it – in chemical form.

He waves away the robe Crystal is offering him and dances through the dressing room, cigarette in one hand, bottle of champagne in the other. Freddie's at the other end of the room, yellow bath robe half-slipped off his shoulder. Roger quickly turns his head away.

Then, slowly, because he just can't help himself, his eyes wander back. He thought it was a hickey just above his shoulder blade, but hickeys don't turn black around the edges like that.

He wants to throw up. He wants to shake Freddie until he comes to his senses. He wants to tear Paul and Phoebe to shreds for letting this happen.

Freddie turns around and their eyes lock. Roger should look away. He should just go, pop some pills, chase the image out of his mind. He should not stand there and let his face confess every single fucked-up thought he's feeling, god he's an idiot.

Freddie blinks, drops his gaze, and Roger uses the reprieve to get the hell out.

His first instinct is the underground car park. Get behind the wheel, put the pedal to the metal until the gas runs out and he’s as far away from all this shit as he can get. But after a few steps he realises that he doesn’t have a car here, only a rented limousine with a rented driver, who’ll be under very strict instructions not to surrender his keys to drunk band members (it's not like Roger hasn't tried before).

He marches through the labyrinthine halls of the Stadthalle, waving off the bloody minders and hangers-on who always, always want something from him, until he crosses through a heavy door and finds himself outside, on a little niche in the roof. A ladder leads down to the floor, so it must be some sort of fire escape. The fine drizzle that's been in the air all day stings against his heated skin and the city lights glitter beneath him. He sits down on the wet floor, back against the wall.

He's got a bottle of Moët and a half full pack of Marlboros. Whiskey would be better than champagne, but it’ll do.

Every time a proper thought threatens to form in his head he remedies that with a mouthful of Champagne. Every time the images threaten to overwhelm him, he lights another Marlboro, holding each lungful until the pressure in his chest blocks out everything else.
It's quite a good system he's got going there. Should have thought of it sooner.

The light steady rain washes away the cold sweat from his skin, soaking his jeans, his hair. It’s bloody cold and he has to cup his smoke in his hands so it doesn’t get wet, but he welcomes it. The wind licking an icy trail along his exposed arms, the hard concrete digging into his back, the acrid smoke stinging in his already sore throat – it all helps chase away the images lurking just around the corner of his mind. And after a while, it doesn’t even feel that cold anymore.

Two feet appear in front of him. White trainers, dark trousers, ridiculously long skinny legs.

He lights another cigarette. Only two left. He wonders what he’ll do when he runs out and chases the thought away with the last drops of the champagne.

Freddie crouches down across from him, leaning his back against the balustrade of the fire escape. His right foot is right in a puddle and his pristine white trainers get soaked with grimy water. Roger wants to point it out, but when he looks up and opens his mouth to speak, he’s already forgot what he wanted to say.

Freddie holds out his hand for a cigarette.

His last one. Roger gives it to him.

Freddie stares at him for a long moment, twiddling the Marlboro between his fingers, then throws it away. He looks down at his hands, picking at the hem of his shirt. His black hair is glistening with rain.

Freddie licks his lips a few times. Roger can see that he wants to say something. Usually he’d be brimming with impatience for him to just get it out with, but he feels weirdly detached, prepared to just watch him however long it might take.

"You... You drive me up the fucking wall!", he says finally, a shaky laugh in his voice. Then he clears his throat, draws in a deep breath. "What you said that night..." His voice trails off.

Roger doesn’t have the strength to pretend he doesn’t know what Freddie means. It’s what got him into this mess. “I shouldn’t have said that”, the mumbles. It feels like he’s talking through a lidocaine injection, lips stiff and lifeless.

Freddie's eyes flash. "Are you taking it back?"

"Never." The word is out before Roger's properly understood the question. It might the wrong answer but he’s not going to lie.

Freddie looks away for a moment. Then he says quietly: "It's boring without you. Come back in?"

Oh god, he wants to. But he can’t. He can’t stand by and watch Freddie destroy himself and... He takes a deep breath, but before he can say anything, his breath catches in his sore throat and he’s coughing so hard it feels like he’s turning blue. When he can finally wheeze in a short breath, Freddie’s next to him, a hand on his shoulder.

"You're shivering." A crease has formed between his dark eyes.

Roger shrugs.

"And you're lecturing me about health." Freddie takes Roger’s cigarette from his limp fingers and crushes it under his foot.
“Hey”, Roger protests weakly.

Freddie ignores him. Instead he puts his searing hot hands all over Roger’s face. "Oh my", he says. "You're freezing, darling."

And just like that Roger has to fight back tears. He clenches his teeth. He won't be sobbing in Freddie's arms. He has some dignity left in him.

"Come on", Freddie says. "Let's get you home."
Roger lets himself be pulled up and lead inside. His legs feel weak and he’s leaning heavily on Freddie, soaking up his warmth, his strength, his smell oh god how he’s missed that smell. Sweat and artificial fog and champagne and the starry night sky. He should stay away, he really shouldn’t allow himself to be drawn back in, but maybe just for now, just for this one minute, he’ll let himself pretend.

They run into John and he stops in his tracks when he sees Roger. "You alright?"

"Roger is feeling poorly. I'm taking him back to the hotel."

John nods. "Yeah. Probably a good idea. You need help?"

"Can you get him some towels and a coat, too?"

"Sure." John jogs off to the dressing room and returns a minute later, with Brian in tow and his arms loaded with clothes.

"You going to be alright, Rog?" Brian’s concerned face looms into view.

No, nothing is going to be alright ever again. But Roger nods, putting on a brave face. "Yeah, just a bit exhausted."

His friends bundle him up so much it’s ridiculous. They even wrap a towel around his head.

"I'm just a bit tired", he protests but their obvious concern puts a treacherous, warm glow in his belly.

John and Brian exchange glances.

"Are you two going to be alright," John asks.

Freddie nods. "I've got this. A decent night's sleep and he'll be right as rain."

"Just don't get lost on the way and end up in some back alley bar", Brian jokes but with a stern look at Freddie.

They head down to the underground car park. "What about Paul and... and the others", Roger asks, trying to keep his voice level.

"Fuck them."

It's all they say on the way to the hotel. The car is warm but his clothes are still wet and clammy under the coat. Freddie leads them up into Rogers’s room, never taking his arm off his shoulders. It feels good.

Freddie leaves him standing in the living room. Roger immediately misses his solid warmth.

"Back in a minute, dear", he says and it's an endearment Freddie always uses, with tons of people, but still it tugs at Roger's heart.
Christ. When has he become such a girl?

Freddie returns with pyjamas and a bath robe. He looks unsure for a moment, but then comes over and stands very close. The stage make-up makes his eyes look even darker and his cheekbones more dramatic than usual.

"Let's get you under the shower", he says and tugs the coat off Roger’s shoulders then reaches for the hem of his shirt. Up close, Roger notices that inch or so he has on Freddie. Funny how much taller he always seems from afar.

"Come on", he says when Roger makes no indication to help. He looks up at Roger with a half amused, half exasperated expression. His parted lips are very, very red.

'Don't do this', the clever part of Roger’s brain advises as he leans down. 'You'll break your heart.' But oh, he tastes so good.

Freddie hesitates all of two seconds before he abandons his plan and pulls Roger close. His lips part willingly and he sighs when Roger slides his tongue inside. It’s slow and deep and intoxicating and it might tear him apart but he can’t stop.

He slides his hands under Freddie's shirt causing him to shiver.

"Christ, you're cold", Freddie murmurs against his lips.

"Warm me up then", Roger says all filters broken down. He'll be mortally embarrassed by that tomorrow but he just can't be arsed to care right now. Not when Freddie shakes his head and laughs and looks at him like he's the most adorable thing in the world.

"I'm trying", he grumbles. Then he puts an arm around his waist and leads him into the bedroom, where he quickly peels off all of Roger's clothes. It's weird, getting undressed without making out, when Freddie is so close. Roger tries to get even closer, but Freddie ducks away from his searching lips, bats away his fumbling hands. "You're like a swarm of moths, darling", he says.

"That doesn't make any sense", Roger mumbles. He's not a moth. A firefly, if anything. Or a wasp. The words come a little easier now, lips warmed up by the kissing.

Freddie just folds back the duvet and shoos him onto bed, piling blankets on top of him. He doesn't follow.

Roger peers over the edge of the duvet. He's cold and tired and Freddie's warmer than all the blankets in the world together and he's prepared to sacrifice the remainder of his dignity if only he can Freddie with him, just for tonight. Please, just for tonight.

But when he looks up, Freddie is already stripping out of his clothes, quick and businesslike, shirt and socks and pants joining Roger's on the floor.

And then he's there, solid and warm and a little grubby from a night on stage and Roger tries to burrow himself in him. Inside this solid cocoon of warmth, the sluggish fog that has filled his brain melts away. He's vaguely aware that he's in the undignified position of little spoon (he is the taller one, after all), but too tired and comfortable to care.

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He is burning up. His fingers feel like glowing coals and his hair is wet with sweat. There's a
furnace at his back and he's trapped inside a gigantic viscous heating pad by a heavy rope of embers around his middle.

Roger swims upwards towards the air, twisting and kicking, until he finally emerges, revelling in the cool air on his wrists, his face. He takes a deep breath that has him fully awake.

No morning light comes through the curtains so he can't have slept more than a few hours. He's in his room, Freddie still asleep next to him, and he's both parched and in desperate need of a piss. He crawls out of the bed, almost falls over a pair of jeans that entrap his feet and stumbles into the bathroom where he gulps down a pint of water straight from the tap.

Back in the bedroom, he looks down at Freddie's sleeping form. He'd kissed him. Roger had offered himself up to him on a silver platter and they slept curled up into one another, buck naked. But Freddie had only kissed back for a minute, had batted his hands away and rolled his eyes at him.

Of course Freddie, who has sex with a mic stand in front of thousands of people every night, would think nothing of sharing a bed with his former... whatever to warm him up with his body heat. He's probably seen something like that in one of those old movies of his. Mountaineers or brothers in arms fighting for survival.

He should go. He should put on some clothes and head over to the living room and sleep on the sofa and start working on setting up his life without all this. Maybe he should approach this like an addict. Is there a twelve-step programme to help you get over shagging your friend?

Tomorrow. He's going to start on that tomorrow, first thing in the morning.

As softly as he can he crawls back under the covers. Freddie stirs, rolling onto his back, and Roger quickly lies down, pretending he was just moving in his sleep. He's on his side, nose so close to Freddie's hair he can smell the last traces of the spray that - ages ago - must have kept it in check. Freddie sighs and turns around completely so his back is pressed to Roger's front.

Roger freezes. He's shocked with how much he wants to just wrap himself around Freddie, how much he's missed this. But that is really out of bounds now. Right?

Freddie puts him out of his misery. Or pulls him in deeper, it's hard to say right now. He reaches behind himself until he gets hold of Roger's left hand and pulls it around him with such determination that the gap between their bodies is closed and they're skin to skin.

Roger buries his face in the crook of Freddie's neck, into the stubble and the trace of cologne and the heady scent of naked skin. A tingling current runs through his body, waking up every last part of him. It's not a good idea, in fact it's a horrible idea that he's going to pay for, but when Freddie squeezes his hand and squirms so that his arse brushes against Roger's hardening cock, his already weak defences crumble. He runs his hands along the long lines of Freddie's body, his hips, his flanks, his chest. There's the sensation of chest hair under his fingertips. He tended to avoid it, but now takes his time, trails his fingers through it. Somehow, even that is something he missed.

It's slow and unhurried, like they never got around to doing it before, and Roger knows, he knows, he's fucking drowning, but it feels so right. Freddie's writhing against him until he is fucking aching and thrusting back in a tiny urgent rhythm. When Roger trails his hand down to Freddie's cock, he's rock-hard.

"Fuck", he breathes into Freddie's neck, chasing the word with his teeth along the skin.
Freddie hisses and wiggles, moving up on the bed. At first Roger thinks he's moving away, out of his reach, but then his thighs close around Roger's cock, heavy and tight. His face is about the height of Freddie's shoulder blades now and not for the first time he wishes he were a couple of inches taller. He tries to move up as well, but with his cock trapped he doesn't really have anywhere to go.

"Uhm", he says and pats Freddie's hips. No way is he going to be able to fuck him like this.

Then Freddie reaches down and his thumb and forefinger close in a circle around the very tip of his cock. "Move", he says.

Roger gives an experimental thrust. There's not much movement, but his foreskin provides some slide. It's like a very tight, dry handjob. Not unpleasant, but he has no idea what Freddie is getting out of it.

"Again", he says, and Roger complies, with a little more force this time, establishing a small, rhythmic back and forth. "Hmm yes", Freddie moans, and now Roger understands why. And the end of each thrust, the tip of his cock brushes against Freddie's balls in a fleeting, maddeningly slight contact that has him scrambling for more.

Alright, this might just work.

He sneaks his right arm under Freddie's waist until he can take Freddie's cock in hand. He strokes down in time with his next thrust. "Oh fuck", Freddie whispers.

Good, but it can be better. Roger trails his free hand up again, circling it around one of his nipples. Freddie squeezes his thighs so hard it borders on painful, but when he relaxes again, the next tiny slide is all the sweeter for it.

They go on like that for what feels like ages. Freddie arches and twists, half trying to get away from Roger's pinching, pressing fingers, half searching for them. Sweat and precome provide a bit of slick, but the tempo is slow enough that Roger feels like he can go for hours.

And then Freddie takes his hand, tugs it away from his chest and takes two of his fingers in his mouth. Sucks them down into wet slippery heat.

Combined with the unholy friction on his dick it's a bit like he’s getting a whole-body blowjob, and it’s devastating. Roger pushes forward until they’re both half on their stomachs. His arm is trapped under Freddie’s body, but it doesn’t matter now. He fucks into the tight heat, driving Freddie forward into his hand, again and again, until Freddie moans around his fingers and comes in a drawn-out, full-body shudder that takes Roger right over the edge with him.

“Fuck”, he says when he’s got his breath back.

"It's even better with lube”, Freddie yawns.

“Impossible.”

Freddie huffs out a laugh and snuggles back against him. Roger shuffles until they’re both out of the wet spot. They’re both a bit disgusting really, but bone-deep exhaustion is pulling him under quickly. Weeks of not-enough-sleep and constant worry are taking their toll.

Freddie stirs. "Sorry I've been such an arsehole", he mumbles, very quietly, but Roger presses his still wet fingers against his lips. He doesn't want to hear it. Not now.
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Rain dredges against the bedroom windows when Roger wakes up. Freddie's still sound asleep next to him. Roger's heart is heavy with feeling as he regards the long lines of his back.

What on earth has he got himself into?

When did his life veer so steeply off course that - despite his better judgement - he got completely tangled up in the most impossible man on earth?

He rubs a hand through his hair and it gets stuck. It's still caked with product from the night before. He rolls out of bed and goes to have a badly needed shower.

Time for some honesty. Last night was incredibly good. It was also incomprehensibly stupid. Looks like that is going to be his default setting where Freddie's concerned. He's missed his exit and now all he can do is hold on to that runaway train for however long he can. Because he cannot stand by and watch him run off a cliff. Not when there's even a slim chance that he might reach the brakes in time.

He has no idea where this comes from, this certainty that there's calamity lurking just behind the corner. He is not like that. He usually gets very annoyed with people who are like that.

And worse, if something does happen - if Freddie gets beaten up or worse, if he comes down with this thing that killed Dino - there's fuck all that Roger can do and he's not mentally equipped to deal with shit like that.

But the thing is, he doesn't really have a choice, does he? Because if he decides he just can't hack it, Freddie's not going to stop screwing around. And worse, he'll be aided and abetted by Paul fucking Prenter, who doesn't question him at all, whether its drugs or sex or friends or facial hair choices.

So Roger can either be his... wingman with benefits or whatever the fuck he's supposed to call this, which at least gives him a chance to intervene, but still means he might have to sit by and watch everything go up in flames. The alternative is to go back to being band mates and occasional drinking buddies, to keep his distance and live with the knowledge that if something happens he hasn’t even tried to stop it.

Right. Like it's even a contest.

The sight of his pruny fingers reminds him that he's been in here way too long. He shuts the water off and towels off, then wraps himself up in a bathrobe and walks into the bedroom.

Freddie's gone. Roger's heart sinks. Whatever last night might have felt like, Freddie is not his boyfriend.

Not that he wants a bloody boyfriend, get a fucking grip, Taylor. Scary places his brain is wandering today.

He shuffles into the living room. He is not prepared for the sight that greets him. Freddie, in briefs (Roger's briefs if he isn’t mistaken) and an untied bath robe (Roger's bath robe he's very sure) picking at an omelette. A whole breakfast buffet is laid out on the table in front of him.

"Did you answer the door like that", Roger asks.

Freddie shrugs and grins.
"My door."

Freddie rolls his eyes. "As if the waiter cares one whit."

"What if someone else had..." But he cuts himself off. He's not going to turn into his mum, for fuck's sake. Roger sits down and picks at some fruit salad instead. He knows that he and Freddie have to talk about it all at some point, that their cycle of fucking and arguing and then going back to normal can't just go on.

But what on earth can he possibly say?

"I won't stop fucking other men." Freddie says it conversationally, like he is informing Roger about his shopping plans for the day.

"Ah", Roger says.

Freddie gives him a "so there"-look and pops a cherry tomato into his mouth.

"But?" There's got to be more.

"In the butt, yes. Or mouth. Or..."

It's funny how easy it is to go from wanting to protect someone with your life to fantasising about strangling him.

"Thanks for the clarification, wanker. But was there anything specifically you wanted to tell me with that statement? Because you've already said that. Repeatedly. In about 20 different versions."

'Everything with everyone' is still playing on a loop in his head. Instead of a snarky comeback there is silence. Freddie looks down at his plate, pursing his lips like he's trying to come up with an answer. "Thousands of people die in car crashes every year", he says finally. "Yet here you are speeding down the serpentes at 100 miles an hour."

It's not that he doesn't have a point. Roger has just about scraped by on two occasions. If the street had been an inch narrower or not miraculously empty... "But I wear a seat-belt." Well, most of the time anyway. "And I only do that sober", (alright, sober-ish), "and on dry streets."

A slight frown appears on Freddie's face. "Is that metaphor again or..."

"Oh, fuck metaphors." Roger pushes his plate away and turns to face Freddie head on.

"So, what do you want me to do", Freddie asked. "Find myself a new hobby? Join a bridge club? Take up golf?"

"Lord knows I wouldn't inflict that on the world."

A slight grin appeared on Freddie's face and he ducks his head to hide it. It's awfully cute.

Roger mentally kicks himself. "Look, no one really knows what's going on. But people are dying."

Freddie's expression grows serious. "I know", he says quietly. "An ex of Tony's, he's... he's got this cancer thing. Peter Straker told me." He twiddles with his fork. "He's from New York, too."

Alright. Calm. Tony and Freddie last saw each other, what, two years ago? As far as he knows anyway...
"And Tony?"

"Ah, he's alright. The wanker." Freddies mouth curls up in a half-smile.

“Bloody wanker.” Cursing his name is something of a tradition between them. But still. Tony might be a bastard, but it’s not like Roger wants him to die. But if this means that Freddie’s going to listen to him for once, he’s going to take his chance. "Thing is, there's all these different theories of what it might be, but everyone pretty much agrees that getting fucked by lots of strangers has something to do with it."

Freddies scowls. "I've already told you..."

Roger holds up his hands. "Yeah, alright, keep your hat on, I’m just...” He sighs. “Work with me here, alright?”

“You’re one to talk”, Freddie huffs. “You’re the one who got the clap, remember? I never got anything.”

Of course Freddie would rub that under his nose. Still, it's an opening. “And I’ve learned my lesson. Got a bulk deal with Durex.”

Freddies grimaces. "They're fiddly and uncomfortable and they smell bad and kill the mood and..."

“It’s all just a question of preparation, see. Gotta put it on early enough so it isn’t this huge stumbling block when you really get going.”

Freddie gawps at him. “Are you giving me sex tips?”

What the fuck is that supposed to mean? Honestly, a) speaking in raw numbers, Roger is at least equally experienced (Freddie might have gained a bit of ground during the late seventies, but Roger’s had one hell of a head start), and b) they’ve been fucking on and off for over two years now. Is Freddie trying to insult him? He’s still trying to come up with an answer when Freddie goes on.

“And half the time they break anyway.”

“So use proper lube, not fucking Crisco, then they don't break.” Freddie doesn’t look convinced. “Look, I know my way around rubbers, alright? Sitting up with a girl for three nights straight because her period won’t come when you’re seventeen is one hell of a lesson.” Except for the occasional slip-up. “Also”, he pours himself a cuppa and makes sure to sound very casual as he speaks, “I want to keep fucking you.” The sentence hangs in the air between. They never actually discussed anything like that aloud. He goes on quickly. "And I don't want to pick up god knows what from your tricks.”

He stirs two lumps of sugar into his tea, pretending that this takes up his complete attention, that he’s not frantically looking for Freddie’s reaction.

Freddie leans back in his chair. “Oh, so this is all about you then”, he says and tosses his napkin at Roger’s head. He pretends to glare, but his eyes twinkle.

Roger shrugs and takes a sip of his tea, then spits it out coughing. “Who the fuck serves herbal tea for breakfast”, he wheezes.

“Fucking barbarians”, Freddie grins. Then he pushes his coffee cup towards Roger. “Here, darling.”
Roger’s not one for coffee in the morning, but right now he’ll drink bloody Drano to get the acrid taste out of his mouth.

“And they call me a drama queen”, Freddie mutters.

Roger flips him off and finishes his coffee for revenge. He’s not sure their discussion actually got anywhere, but he feels better than he has in days. As good as the sex has been, it’s nothing compared to how much he’s missed this. Just sitting together, chatting and teasing.

Freddie picks up a slice of orange. “Condoms and lube then”, he says, absent-mindedly. “I’ll put it on Phoebe’s shopping list.”

No matter how much the poor man is paid, it can’t possibly be enough.

“Anything else?”

“Nothing that draws blood.”

“Mine or theirs?”

“Either.”

Freddie nods slowly. “What about yours?

“Mine?”

“Sometimes I just want to sink my teeth into your neck and suck you dry.”

O-kay. “I’m okay with the sucking me dry part but...”

Freddie’s eyes slowly travel down his body until they land on his crotch. Fuck. Roger crosses his legs.

“Don’t distract me.”

“Your nails digging so hard into my skin while you fuck me that I’ll feel it for a week.”

Roger’s mind goes kind of blank. “Er.”

A smug grin spreads on Freddie’s face. “You like that.”

“Shut up.”

Freddie’s eyebrows rise. “Smacking me into the mouth, hard, when I just won’t shut up. Making me shut up.”

“No. I... no.” The image of Freddie on his knees, looking up at him, a drop of blood welling up from that sultry upper lip. Freddie’s tongue sneaking out, tasting it... What the fuck is happening here? He pushes the image away resolutely. “No.”

“What if I asked you to?”

“Stop it!”

“What if...”

Freddie is mercifully cut off by a knock on the door. Roger looks at the clock. It’s just past noon.
“You up, Rog?”

Brian. Right, he’s agreed to go to the Natural History Museum with him, back when he was scrambling to fill every minute of his day with some kind of activity that has him not thinking about Freddie. It feels like ages ago, but it was only yesterday.


Freddie looks down at himself. “Oh, so I am.”

Thing is, Freddie’s clearly just messing with him. He’s bluffing. He knows Roger isn’t going to open the door to Brian with him sitting there looking like a high-class hooker waiting for customers.

“Is everything alright?” Brian sounds a bit worried. Of course he would be. The last time he’s seen Roger, he’d been a complete mess that had to be half-carried into the car.

“Yes”, Freddie calls out. “He’s just looking for an excuse to cancel the Grand Tour.”

“The fuck are you doing”, Roger whispers.

Freddie shrugs. “He knows I brought you home. Paul knows I never returned to my suite.”

And if Paul knows, everyone knows, and trying to pretend otherwise is just going to look suspicious.

It’s okay. No one is suspecting them. Just act normal, Taylor, for heaven’s sake. Brian won’t even know the pair of pants is Roger’s. He gets up and opens the door for Brian. He coughs a little. “I have a cold”, he says in a feeble, over-the-top pretend-sick voice.

“Seeing the wonders of the natural world will take your mind off it”, Brian says. He sees Freddie and waves at him. “Hi there, Fred.”

Freddie waves back and puts up his feet on a chair so the bath robe falls open over his long legs. Just in case Brian hasn’t noticed he is basically naked. Wanker.

Brian looks pleased. He steps a little closer to Roger and drops his voice. “You two are alright then?”

Roger nods.

“Good. That’s good. And you feel better as well?”

“Yeah, I’m alright”, Roger says. Then he has a clever idea. He stretches his back and winces a little. “Just a bit of a crick in my neck from having to sleep on the sofa.” He rolls his eyes at Freddie.

Brian purses his lips. “Some caretaker he is.”

Now Roger feels bad for throwing Freddie under the bus like that. “It’s alright. He left me all the warmest blankets. And he made me a hot-water bottle with his own two hands.”
“You could have just shared the bed”, Brian says, still looking a little miffed. The crazy thing is, under normal circumstances they might have done just that and seen no reason to lie about it.

“Come on, let it go. I just needed some quiet, a good night’s sleep and decent breakfast. And he gave me all that.”

“So what was the matter?”

Roger shrugs. “Just got a bit worked up about...” He shakes his head. “Silly things, really. Brain just not shutting up you know. Bit of touring craziness.” He gives Brian a pat on the shoulder. “It’s alright though. Let’s go have a look at all those fascinating rocks and ferns or whatever it is they show in that museum of yours.”

Chapter End Notes

Communication has been achieved \o/
Roger stumbles off the stage while the first slow rumblings of Brian’s guitar solo echo through Madison Square Garden. God, he needs a nap, but if he closes his eyes now, if he so much as sits down, he’ll never make it back on stage again.

The night before the first of the two shows in New York fell on Roger's birthday. So they did what any respectable rock band would do: Get horribly wasted and postpone less important things like sleep until later. Roger doesn’t remember too much. He might have done some horribly clichéd things. Like snorting powder off a hooker’s bum. Something Freddie, who’s been in a nasty mood all day, can't resist alluding to on stage. Luckily, Brian cuts him off with some unscheduled guitar wailing before it gets too explicit.

The party itself wouldn’t have been that much of a problem, but for some reason none of them can figure out, they’d agreed ages ago to do a meet-and-greet at some record store in the afternoon, which means none of them got more than two or three hours of sleep.

It's a good thing they have ten years experience playing together, otherwise the whole gig would have fallen apart. But as it is, they're perfectly adequate. Not the best they've ever been, but the fans certainly get their money's worth.

But now, Roger is in dire need of a pick-me-up. He’s looking out for Crystal, and he’s right there, but something’s off. He takes Roger’s arm and then Ratty’s on the other side of him and he’s being lead away.

“What...” Roger looks around sees Freddie standing close to the stage entrance, arms crossed, glaring as he's being led off. Deacy's next to him, a smirk on his face.

“Special birthday surprise”, Ratty says. “You’ll like it.”

He’s being led through the doll's house and into a dark corridor. "Happy birthday", Crystal says and opens the door to a side room. Without much further ceremony, Roger is shoved inside.

He blinks a few times in the – comparatively – bright light. Christ, his head is pounding.

"Happy birthday, Roger." Marlene grins at him. She sits in a chair to his left and looks breathtaking in her tiny black dress, hair even shorter than the last time he's seen her. “Sorry I couldn’t make it to the big party yesterday.

"Hey", he says. Then he walks over and hugs her. "How lovely to..."

She holds up a hand and gets up. "We don't have much time", she says.

"Time for what?" He has some idea where this is going, but in his state of mind...

"Your belated backstage birthday bonk, of course." She cocks her head. "If you like?"

“Here? Now?” He stares at her.

“Come on, you must have had backstage quickies before”, she says, “or you’re one pathetic rock
"There may have been one or... or twenty..." He trails off as she stands close enough that a strand of her perfume wafts into his nose. Hmm, good memories. Another thought occurs to him. "What about Bernd?"

"Fucked off to some Ashram in India. Tosser."

Oh God, is she doing this to spite her ex? That only makes it better. "Never trust a guy who meditates."

She moves to stand right in front of him and puts her hand on his chest, her index finger hooking into the neckline of his shirt. "Come on, then. Brian's gonna make his solo extra long today, but we don't have forever."

Jesus Christ, Brian's in on it as well? And John probably, and... Freddie's face as he stood there, watching him being taken away, drifts to the foreground. Yes, he would have known, too. And he didn't look too happy. Although Freddie's really in no place to get jealous over Roger getting something on the side. The thought that Freddie might be jealous sends of a cascade of emotions too complex for him to entangle right now. Annoyance, certainly. A kind of sadness. Dark satisfaction.

He rubs his hands over his face and tugs her hand away. "Seriously, Marlene, you have no idea how much I appreciate this, but I’m running on two hours of sleep and if I come right now I’m never going to make it back on stage."

She laughs a bit ruefully, shaking her head. "Christ. I’ve been waiting back here for hours, getting all worked up about it. I’m horny as fuck." She leans against the wall and crosses her shapely legs, one foot over the other. She looks positively lecherous, and it’s almost enough to make Roger go for it. To know she’s been thinking about this, planning this, getting turned on by the very idea... Oh god, did she masturbate in that chair? This is all so up his alley it isn’t even funny.

But he’s also getting paid thousands of pounds to go back on that stage and he prides himself on always giving the fans what they deserve. It’s a dilemma of mythical proportions. What would Plato do? Unfortunately, the only person who knows is out there torturing his guitar.

She looks up and frowns at him. "Roger, are you okay?" She stands up straight and puts a hand his arm, concerned this time rather than seductive.

"I feel like my head's going to explode." He squeezes his eyes shut against the light for a moment. "Sorry, gonna use the oldest excuse in the book."

"It's okay. Come here, sit down."

He sits down in the chair, a bit reluctantly because he doesn't know if he'll manage to get up again. She turns the lights down and stands behind him. "I can't fall asleep", he protests.

"Don't worry, I won't let you." She raises her cool fingers to his temples, pressing in lightly. "How long have we got?"

He listens to the sounds wafting in from the stage. "Five minutes", he says. "Six, tops." Ratty or Crystal would knock on the door in time to get him though.

"Alright then, just relax", she says as she starts to massage his head. "My best friend gets migraines. She says it helps."
It does feel good. She massages the muscles in his jaw and his neck, presses into points around his eyes and nose that - for whatever reason - make the pain recede. She pulls lightly on his hair and it's as if some of the heaviness that's been there all day is lifted off. "'S good", he mumbles.

"Good. Now talk me through the rest of the set so you don't nod off, alright?"

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“Did she give you some uppers along with a blowjob?” Roger pushes away the mic that Freddie is still holding. Its muted, thank god, but what a time for a tech malfunction. They all stand together at the front of the stage, waving goodbye to the audience. "Usually you can barely move after you got off."

"Would you shut up?" There's dozens of people within earshot.

Freddie ignores him of course. "What the fuck happened back there?"

"How exactly is that any of your business?” For some reason, he doesn't want to tell Freddie the truth. Let him be a bit peeved for a while.

They walk off stage to the sounds of "God Save the Queen." The crew awaits them with robes at the ready. Roger is subjected to a lot of wink-wink nudge-nudges because of course everyone thinks they know what happened during the solo (or any of the four versions of the story currently in circulation). He's shuffling around a little disoriented, the effects of a too little sleep and too much alcohol mixing with the rush of another gig and the next round of drinks. He is getting too old for this.

The door to the loo opens as he passes it and before he understands what’s going on, he's dragged inside. Freddie's there, looking furious.

"What..."

"A massage", he fumes, an unholy gleam in his eyes.

He must have talked to Marlene, then. But why is he angry? If he is angry, that is. Because he also looks like he does when someone tells him he's selling more records than Elton John. "Freddie what...?"

"Shut up", he hisses and drops to his knees.

Roger collapses against the wall when he realizes what's going on. "Oh my god."

"Quiet", Freddie commands, and then Roger's fly is opened and Freddie just swallows him down and it's all he can do to keep himself upright. This isn’t something that Freddie does very often, so Roger strains his last remaining conscious brain cells to pay attention to what is happening: the slide of wet heat on his cock, the feel of Freddie’s gelled hair under his fingers, the look of his sensuous red lips stretched around him...

Afterwards, Freddie has to all but carry him to the car.

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Of course, these days New York is not the place of unbridled joy it used to be. As soon as he's out of the haze of drugs and adrenaline he's been under those first two days, he comes head to head with the shadow of Dino's death. Life at the clubs is as high-flying as ever, but it feels like there's
an edge of hysteria to the celebrations. Marco and Ed still hope the whole thing will blow over (although both admit that they’ve become more careful with who they take home), while Arturo and Melissa have thrown themselves into activism to help victims of the disease through an organisation called the Gay Men’s Health Crisis.

On their last day before they leave New York, Roger meets up for lunch with James. He looks a lot better than the last time he saw him (which was right after the funeral, so that isn’t saying much), but it’s still a somewhat quiet occasion. Before they say goodbye, James tells him he’s got something for him and gets a book from his backpack.

Roger turns it around so he can see the cover. The Joy of Gay Sex, it says in silver writing on a crème background. He stares at James for a minute. Oh god, has Dino told him? What exactly has he told him? And did James tell anyone else?

“What the hell”, he says finally, but James waves him off.

“It’s Dino’s copy. He wanted you to have it. Don’t ask me why.”

“He... did he...” Roger turns the book over in his hands.

“It was... towards the end. He said all sorts of things. Melissa got a couple of his cook books. She’s never cooked so much as a pot of spaghetti. He got quite confused at times.” James gets that sad smile on his face that Roger never knows how to respond to. “But it’s what he said, so here we are. Maybe he mixed you up with someone else or just wanted to yank your chain one last time.”

Or he tried to be helpful. Cheeky bugger indeed. He flicks through the pages. Jesus Christ, it’s got illustrations. And handwritten annotations. He slams it shut again and places it face down on the table. “Thanks”, he says to James. “It’ll have a place of pride in my bookshelf.”

“Quite a conversation starter, I imagine.”

Another thought occurs to Roger. “Does it mean a lot to you? Because I’ll gladly give it back if...”

“Oh no, keep it, please. I’ve got so many mementoes... too many maybe.”

Roger wraps the book in packing paper and stows it away at the very bottom of his largest suitcase, the one that carries mostly redundant spare clothes and never gets completely unpacked.

Chapter End Notes

During this concert Freddie introduced Roger as “Roger Chizzler”, which Bob at queenlive.com calls “a pretty direct reference to the off-stage excess of this tour.” I haven’t really been able to work out whether “chizzle” refers to ejaculating or doing cocaine though. Anyone experts on early 80’s slang care to enlighten me?
The Midwest doesn't have a lot going for it. It's swelteringly hot, the food is crap and the people here wouldn't know a decent beer if you trapped them in a barrel of one. One thing you can't complain about however, is the hospitality. Whereas on the East Coast they often run into problems with the hotels (because the best suites are already booked, or because of noise complaints, or because of a certain type of girl hanging about), in the Midwest they basically just hand you the keys to the place, bow down and say, 'please, trash it to your heart's content, it's my pleasure.' They still make you pay for it but it's the thought that counts.

Roger ponders this as he wades his way through the throng of people hitting it up in the middle of Freddie's suite. Well, it's called a suite, but really it's more like the entire top floor of the building, complete with a rooftop terrace and more bedrooms than Roger's London townhouse. Naturally, the party congregated here.

He makes his way out and jogs down a flight of stairs to his own suite, trying to keep from rubbing his burning eyes. He's been wearing his contact lenses all day, and although he'll be half blind without them, he has to get them out right this minute or he'll go spare.

He unlocks the door and dashes through the suite to the ensuite bathroom. He slips the lenses out of his eyes and puts in his eye drops. He leans back against the tile of the bathroom wall as he waits for the soothing effect of the drops to take effect.

His ophthalmologist is always nagging him for leaving them in too long again and again. But what's he supposed to do? Wear glasses in public? Don't be silly.

Slowly, the itching recedes and he blinks his eyes open. The world is slightly blurry, his near-sightedness expounded by the slight film of the eye drops, but it's not like he wants to spend the rest of the night reading poetry. And the lovely ladies he's been chatting with before this unscheduled break won't ever know the difference, so...

There's some sort of commotion out in the hall, but before Roger can identify what it is, a door slams. His door, it sounds like.

"Hello", he calls and walks out of the bathroom. Has he forgotten to close the door behind him? Maybe it's just fallen shut. He crosses through the bedroom into the main living area.

His heart does a double beat when he sees the figure lined out against the door. Long hair and a short dress, that much he can see. He calms down a bit. Just a fan probably. He can deal with that. "Hey, you really can't be in here", he says and walks slowly towards her. An autograph and she'll be on her way.

"Shhh", she hisses. She has her back pressed to the door, like she's trying to hold it shut.
He walks closer. "What..."

An almighty bang makes the door rattle in its hinges. "Are you in there", he voice booms in from the other side. The door knob rattles.

"What's going on", he asks the girl. He's close enough that he can see her properly now. Damp dark hair, one strap of her dress torn and… shit, it's that blood on her face? She's breathing fast and shallow, her lips pressed tightly together.

"You get out here right this minute, you little bitch or..." Two scenes fuse in Roger's mind. Clare, eight years old, cowering in fear while their father rages above her. Freddie, bruises on his neck, leaving with Richie.

"Don't open the door", she whispers. "Please don't..."

He opens the door so she's hidden by the wing, just wide enough that he can stand in the opening. The guy on the other side holds back the kick he's been aiming at the last moment. He's wearing a black shirt with the word "Security" embroidered onto the collar and looks vaguely familiar.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing", Roger asks.

"Uhm." The guy's expression falls as he realizes whose door he's been banging onto. "Sorry, sir, didn't mean to..." He's holding on to his left wrist, thick drops of blood welling up between his fingers.

Roger crosses his arms. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Jeff", he says distractedly as he inspects his injured wrist. He looks at Roger for a moment, then leans in a bit closer. "Look, sorry for disturbing you, but there's this girl, right. Bitch fucking bit me."

"And how is that my problem?"

"I thought she..." Jeff tries to sneak a look inside the suite, but Roger blocks him his body. The girl has gone completely still next to him. Jeff looks down and his face darkens. Roger follows his gaze. There's a small, dark trail of blood leading inside his suite.

Roger pretends he hasn't noticed anything and keeps his face completely neutral. This guy is trained, and probably armed, but Roger is technically his boss.

"So you haven't seen her then?"

"No", Roger says.

Jeff looks at him for a minute, then he nods to himself. "Alright then." He turns to leave, but then he leans back in and whispers conspiratorially. "Have fun then. But careful, she's a wild one." And then he marches off.

The only thing keeping Roger from running after him and tackling him to the fucking floor is the outline of the holster at his hip. He's fuming, clinging to the door handle, with barely suppressed rage. Give him to me unarmed in a dark alley, he thinks, give him to me and I'll break his fucking spine, the fucking...

"If you touch me I'm gonna knee you in the nuts."
He turns around. The girl has armed herself with an umbrella stand and wields it like she means it. Roger softly closes the door and takes a step away from her, hands raised at his sides.

"That what you did to him?"

"Among other things." With her wild expression and bloodied face she looks like an avenging angel.

"Well done", he says.

She doesn't reply, just keeps him in her sight, wary of any movement. Now that Jeff's no longer threatening outside he seems to have progressed to enemy number one.

"Look, er. How about I sit over here", he sits down on the sofa so he no longer blocks the door, "so maybe you can put that thing down and tell me what happened?"

She doesn't say anything, but sets the umbrella stand aside for now, though she still keeps it close. She could just leave of course, but he doubts she'll be willing to risk running into Jeff again.

"I'm Roger", he says after a few minutes.

She looks at him like, seriously? "Trish", she says finally. "Trisha Mae Brown."

"Are you hurt?"

"No."

"Not your blood then?" He points at his face.

"My..." she touches her face with her hand. "Oh. No it's his." She sounds a bit smug.

"Good." Pause. "What happened?"

"What do you think."

"Did he..." She's still dressed so he doesn't think it went too far. But who knows? "I mean are you..." Good he's so out of his depth here.

She takes pity on him. "I was an idiot okay? He said he'd get me backstage passes for a hand job. Just a handjob right?"

Right. A number of guys have access to backstage passes and they're traded for all sorts of favours, but a temp like Jeff certainly wouldn't get her very far.

"...and then we got started he got handsy and I didn't say anything and then he put his hand up my skirt and I tried to push it away and and then he put his hands further back and said he wants a backstage pass too and then I kneed him in the nuts but he blocked the door and then I bit him and..."

She breaks off.

Jesus Christ what can he say to something like this? "What a wanker."

She stares at him for a moment then breaks in to a smile. "He is."

"Listen, do you want to have a sit?" He gestures towards the sofa. "If you like. You don't have to, I mean..."
"Yes, I... I'd like that, I..." She takes a step towards the sofa and it's only then that he sees her knees are trembling. It takes an effort to stay exactly where he is and not rush over to help her.

She sits down on the sofa and he gets her a wet towel from the bathroom so she can wipe her face. "You want some water?"

She does. When he puts the glass down in front of her the towel is stained crimson and he can see her face properly for the first time.

He sits down gingerly at the other end of the sofa. "Trish", he says, trying to keep his voice light, "how old are you?"

"Eighteen", she says and she sounds exactly like he had sounded when was trying to lie his way into a club.

She must have seen his disbelief because her face falls and she looks away.

"Seventeen", he asks tentatively. Please, don't let be less than that.

She sighs. "Sixteen last week."

God, he needs a drink.

She looks at him with wide eyes. "Are you going to call my mum?"

"Sure, if you want me to." It's what he should have done 10 minutes ago.

"God no! She thinks I'm having a sleepover at Annie's. She'll kill me!"

"I really don't think she'll do that."

"She'll ground me forever and I can't go to the show tomorrow", she says, as if that's at least as bad.

Right the show. Not easily deterred that one. "You got tickets?"

"Yeah. I've been looking forward to it all year." She pauses briefly. "I've fucked it all up."

No some fucking wanker called Jeff fucked it all up. "Are you alone here? Or is someone with you?"

She shakes her head. "I came with Annie and her boyfriend but they went off to smoke weed with a couple of guys." She looks apologetic. "They're not much into you guys."

Trish looks like she could need a friend right now. She stares sullenly at the untouched glass of water in front of her. Roger needs reinforcements pronto. He probably also needs to talk to Jim who is back in London and hopefully still awake. Should he call the police as well? But police means press and this really isn't the kind of news they need. But that shouldn't matter, should it?

God, he needs to find Gerry.

He gets up.

"Don't leave!"

"I'm just going to get help."
"I don't want to..." Her eyes are wide and frightened, the toughness crumbling away from her. She draws her knees up to her chest, drops her head onto them and starts to shake.

Roger stands in the middle of the room paralysed. He's as out of his depth as a stranded whale. Don't just stare at her, he thinks. Say something. Do something!

"Do you, like, need a hug or something?"

She shakes her head. Yeah, of course not, stupid. He's just about to take desperate measures and offer her a nice cuppa when he sees her nod.

"Yes", she croaks.

He takes a careful step towards her. "Yes, to the hug?"

Again she nods, never lifting her head up from her knees.

"Alright." He sits down next to her and carefully puts an arm around her. She curls up into him, mashing her face into his chest and shaking like a leave.

He pats her hair and bites his tongue to keep from saying 'There there'.

God, this is awkward. Teenaged girls are something to keep away from (or so he's been told repeatedly) not snuggle up with. This could be so much trouble. But he just doesn't have it in him to get up and leave her like this.

"I'm sorry", she sobs. "I'm so sorry."

"Shh, is alright. It's alright."

"I'm such an idiot."

'Yes, you are', he thinks. And at sixteen you've got every right to be. "It's not your fault" is what he says instead.

"I just thought it would be OK. I thought... and when he started I... I didn't run immediately. I thought he'd just stop. Maybe he thought I was up for it. I mean...

"You almost bit his fucking hand off", Roger says more calmly than he feels. "Bit hard to misunderstand that."

He feels her smile against his chest. She pushes herself up and rummages for a tissue in her tiny handbag, then blows her nose noisily. "S-sorry about your shirt", she stammers.

Yeah, it's for the bin. Not just snot and tears but also smears of blood and make-up. "It's alright. Never liked it anyway." Which is a lie. He loves that shirt.

"You smell nice", she says.

Oh dear lord. "Listen, is it alright if I get on the phone for a second? It's right over there." He indicates an office space separated from the living room by a sliding glass door. She'll still be able to see him.

"Please don't call my mum."

"Believe me, I'm not keen on meeting your mum either." That gets him a weak smile. He pushes
the door almost close behind him and calls Freddie's suite. It's the main hub of activities and someone would be there who could find Gerry for him.

"Poofter's parlour, how may I help you."

"Jobby?"

"Shh, I'm incognito."

Roger rolls his eyes. "Listen, is Gerry around?"

"Nah, haven't seen him in ages. Why, what's up?"

"Anyone else? John or Brian perhaps, or..."

"Oi, Brian!" Roger holds the phone away from his ear. "Got the pretty half of the rhythm section on the line for you."

There's a bit of jostling on the other end and then Brian's clear voice. "John?"

"Yes, very funny. Listen, I need your help."

"Alright."

Roger looks at Trish who has curled up on her side, still looking at him. "Okay. So. I've got this girl here and I don't know what to do."

There is a long silence on the other end. "Is that supposed to be a joke?"

Yeah, he could have phrased that better. "No, listen. She's... something really not good happened and... shit!"

"Roger, are you..." Brian pauses and when he speaks again his voice has dropped to a whisper. "Are you asking me to help you hide a body or something? Because..."

"For fuck's sake, Bri, some arsehole's tried to... and she's crying and she's sixteen fucking years old and she thinks I smell nice."

"Jesus, Rog."

"Yeah, bloody Jesus alright. Now would you get over here and..." He isn't quite sure what exactly he wants Brian to do, but Brian is calm and clever and at least he'll have someone at his side. "And see if you can bring Gerry along, or..."

"Alright Rog, I've got this. Be right there."

He tries to reach Jim after that but he doesn't pick up. Not exactly within his office hours.

He walks back into the living room. "You want something else to drink?"

"Beer", she says.

His first reflex is a hearty 'no way', but she looks like she could really use one. And she doesn't seem drunk. "Did he give you anything", he asks, just to make sure. "Drugs, I mean?"

She shakes her head. "He offered me Vodka, but I hate it. I like Budweiser though."
He gives her a disapproving look. "Here, have a proper one." He hands her a stout and opens one for himself as well. Ever since their first tour they made a point of putting it into their contracts: hotel rooms must be stocked with proper beer at all times. "Cheers."

A few minutes later there's a rap on the door and Roger goes to open it. It's Brian in full concerned problem solving mood - and with Freddie in tow.

"How are you holding up mate?"

"Er. Good. Hi, Freddie." Roger shoots Brian a questioning look.

Brian shrugs. "He wanted to help, too."

"What happened to your shirt", Freddie asks.

"Oh. She just had a bit of a cry. It's okay."

Freddie and Brian exchange glances. "On your shirt?"

"Yes on my..." He glares at them. "Look, I don't know what I'm doing, okay? That's why you guys are here."

When they come into the living room, Trish looks up and freezes on the sofa. Perhaps it hadn't been the brightest idea to just barge in with two more blokes in tow. They stand there a bit helpless and Brian just keeps looking at Roger for pointers but Roger hasn't really formulated a plan beyond "go get Brian".

Trish's huge eyes never leave Brian as he carefully edges over to the kitchen counter, not coming closer but circling a bit to her left. He smiles at her. "Hi", he says. "I'm Brian."

"You're Brian May", she whispers.

That startles a real smile out of him. "Right", he says and gives a little wave."I am, I guess. Hello!"

Alright, Roger might smell nice, but clearly Brian is the one who's got the biggest poster on her wall. It's quite amusing to see how Freddie, who is arguably the biggest star of them all, is just going completely ignored.

"I've listened to your solo on Keep Yourself Alive a million times", she said. "I gave myself tendinitis trying to play that."

"You play the guitar?"

"Yeah. I'm pants at it though."

"Hmm, maybe you should try your hand drumming then."

"Oi!"

She grins. "Actually, I've been..." Her eyes go wide as if she just remembered something horrible and her hands fly to her face. She turns away from him and starts rummaging in her handbag.

"Are you alright?"

"I look like a troll", she moans and uncaps her lipstick. "Don't look at me!"
"You don't look at all like a troll!" - "You look fantastic!" - "Not even remotely troll-like!" Roger and Brian protest in unison, but now's Freddie's hour. He walks over to her, very determined, and sits next to her on the sofa. "May I?" He reaches one finger out to lift her chin. "Oh my, aren't you lovely."

Roger hasn't seen Freddie that camp since the mid-70s. He looks at Brian. 'The fuck is he doing?' Brian just shrugs.

"Just a touch of powder on your nose and then we wipe away that... oh my, is that blood? Nevermind, darling." He potters about with various vials and boxes for a while and then pronounces her "Perfect, isn't she?"

Trish grins at Freddie with her freshly shiny lips. "Thank you!"

Roger is frozen in horrified fascination. Freddie glares at him and he clears his throat. "Yes. Er. Lovely."

"Absolutely", Brian chimes in.

Freddie sits back and crosses his legs, oozing smug superiority. "Now who's up for some Scrabble."

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No one wants to play scrabble but rummy is acceptable to all. It's not a long term solution but Trish looks happy and relaxed for now and that's something.

20 minutes later there's another knock on the door and Gerry finally arrives. Their tour manager looks a little worse for wear but when Roger takes him aside and tells him what happened he quickly sobers up.

"You have the guy's name?"

"Jeff. One of the American security guys."

Gerry nods. "Consider him fired."

"Can you get the shit kicked out of him too?" Roger's is itching to do it himself to be honest but is realistic enough to know he doesn't stand a chance in a fair fight, frequent punching bag sessions or no. Gerry knows all sorts people and while rumours of mob contacts are probably exaggerated he still knows some pretty shady creatures.

He makes a thoughtful face. "No. But I'll ask Sherri to come in and teach him some manners. She likes that sort of thing."

That is brilliant. Sherri is one of the tour drivers who's been with them ever they since they first came to America. She's about 20 stone, tough as nails and all the roadies are afraid of her.

"Yes. And make sure the others take note." Trading favours (of the chemical, sexual or entertainment variety) for tickets and access to the band is part of the game and the game isn't always played fair. But assaulting teenage girls is about three steps too far. "Should we call the police?" He knows what the answer is but feels he's got to ask.

"Do you really want the police in here? This place is teeming with drugs and sex and people who sell both. And police means press and the press would just love a sex scandal involving a minor."
He pauses for a second. "And did you give her alcohol?"

"I gave her a fucking beer Gerry, she's not a child. What where you drinking at that age, huh? Ginger ale?"

"Not the point." Gerry sighs. "Does she want to go to the police?"

"Don't think so. Her main concern seems to be that her mum finds out and grounds her." He chews on his lip. "Just seems like the right thing to do."

He looks over at Trish sitting on the sofa with Brian and Freddie. Brian is giving her an impromptu guitar lesson (on Roger's guitar which Brian isn't actually allowed to touch but he lets it slide for now).

"Roger." Gerry puts a hand on his arm. "You like this girl right? You don't want to see her come to harm?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Then have mercy on her and don't call the cops. She went to a room with a stranger promising her tickets for sex."

"But..."

"She'll be humiliated."

"He chased her down", Roger protests. "And when he found out she was in here he... he handed her off to me like a bloody sex doll."

"Do you really think that's something you of all people should get high and mighty about?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Come on I've been out with you. You talk like that sometimes."

"But not seriously!"

"You once had a dozen groupies do a topless limbo dance competition, and the winner got to give you a blowjob."

Okay, not his greatest moment. But there's a hell of a difference between sleazy sex and forcing yourself on someone. "They volunteered! It was all in good fun!"

"And you cheated and declared the girl in fourth place winner because you liked her best."

"She had a handicap."

"Two massive handicaps, if I remember correctly."

Roger smiles at the memory. "Yeah."

Gerry rolls his eyes. "You realise that's exactly what I'm talking about, right?"

Roger puts his hands on his hips. "That's not remotely the same!" She'd been thrilled to go with him. And it's not like she didn't have her fun, he made sure she enjoyed herself. "What exactly are you trying to imply, huh? I'd never..."
Gerry raises his hands placatingly. "Hey calm down okay? I'm trying to help here. All I'm saying is that not everyone is going to take her side."

Roger takes a deep breath and rubs a hand over his face. "Alright then. No police. So what's the plan?"

"Why don't we ask her?"

The plan they hash out involves a lot less shady machinations than Roger has imagined. It's so simple he could have come up with it on his own.

Trish decidedly does not want the police. What she wants is to go to the show tomorrow with her friend, so two VIP passes (without any favours asked) are arranged for her. Gerry works some special magic and - at three in the morning - locates a counsellor for her to visit if she needs it (which she says she doesn't but right now she's so high on a powerful drug called Sitting Near Brian May that she'd probably feel no pain if a bullet ant bit her).

What she doesn't want is to go home, although they arrange for her to be driven in their biggest stretch limousine. At first Roger thinks it's because she doesn't want her night with the stars to end, but she looks genuinely anxious.

"Come on", he says. "You can't stay here all night. And we've got a show tomorrow so we all need some sleep too."

All of them quickly school their faces into something serious at that line of argument. Like usually they're all in bed by midnight when there's a show the next day.

"I know it's just..." She looks at Roger. "Can you drive me? I'm sorry, I don't want to be a drag on you when you've all been so nice to me, but..."

But she doesn't want to sit alone in a huge car with a strange man driving her. Right.

"Sure", he says.

"Roger." Brian gives him a warning look.

"What?"

Brian rolls his eyes and pulls him aside. "I've seen you chugging Vodka Martinis with Joe and Charlie not two hours ago."

"Yeah, but I'm good now." He feels stone cold sober.

"Alcohol doesn't just vanish from the blood because you've had a scare. If you get in an accident the police to going to pick you up intoxicated with her in the front seat. Its going to be a nightmare."

"And here I was thinking you were worried about my welfare."

"I am, but I've largely given up trying to get you to care about it too. So this is more effective."

"Right. But look, she seems okay but what she went through must have been really fucking scary. Her friends have already gone home and I think she trusts me."

"Oh, the irony."
"Shut it."

He offers to accompany her on her ride home instead which seems acceptable to all involved.

It's a quiet ride. Trish mainly tries not to fall asleep and she looks relieved when they arrive in front of a rather dilapidated looking apartment building.

"You gonna be alright?"

"Sure. And thanks. You've been great."

He just about stops himself from saying something really inappropriate. "See you tomorrow at the show."

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Back at the hotel the party is still in full swing but Roger's done for the night and goes straight back to his suite. Brian and Gerry have left but Freddie's still on the couch playing scrabble with himself.

"Who's winning?"

Freddie flicks a Q at him.

"Hey careful, you can take an eye out with these."

"Now that would be a shame."

Roger sits down on the sofa. He picks up the guitar and strums it a bit. "Thanks for being here tonight. You were great."

"Ah, she barely knew I was here. Blinded by His Hairness. She going to be okay?"

"I guess. She seems tough. I still really feel like beating someone up though."

"Should we go looking for him?"

"You hold his arms, I break his nose?"

"Whatever makes you happy, dear."

Roger shakes his head. "Nah. Gerry's gonna set Sherri on him. Much more effective than us two old queens. I'll just have an extra go at the punching bag tomorrow."

"You've been doing that a lot lately haven't you?"

"Yeah." And he's not going to delve too far into the reasons for that.

Freddie reaches of and trails one finger over the line of Roger's shoulder and arm. "I've noticed."

Roger lifts one eyebrow. "Have you?"

"Hmm." Freddie's huge eyes are practically eating him up. This would never not turn him on.

Roger lets his head fall back onto the backrest and gives Freddie his best sleepy eyed come hither look. "Tell me about it."
Freddie scoots closer. "Have I told you lately you're a vain old tart?" He traces a finger over the shell of Roger's ear sending a shiver down his spine.

"Tell me more about that." He grins at Freddie, showing some teeth.

"I've seen you give the interview to that American radio station the other day. That girl was practically crawling into your lap. And you knew exactly what you were doing. That cocky grin and that thing with your tongue you're always doing?"

Yeah. That had been a good interview. One fluffball question after the next. "You calling me a slag?" He does the cocky grin with the tongue thing just because he can.

Freddie's finger trails down his neck along his collar bone into the open V of his shirt. "There's got to be a reason we get along so well." He tugs at the collar of his shirt. "Take that off, handsome."

This is Freddie shamelessly playing to his ego. It works. He sits up and unbuttons then slides the shirt off and throws it aside.

"Very nice." Freddie palms himself through his trousers and to his horror Roger feels himself blush to the roots of his hair. He's not used to being someone's a pinup. Not while he's in the room anyway.

He's not sure he likes it. Compared to the guys in the clubs he's still a runt, punching bag or no. But Freddie drinks him in like he's the first rain after a draught. His cock certainly likes it.

Roger settles back again. He's not sure what to do with his hands, so he folds them behind his head.

"I should draw you some day." He reaches for Roger's chin and turns his head slightly to the side and down, then tugs his arms down, arranging him just so. "Now look at me. Yes. Just like that."

He's still wearing most of his clothes but he's naked in front of those eyes. He huffs a breath and ducks his head. "Jesus, Freddie", he murmurs. When he looks up again Freddie's smile has become positively lewd.

"Oh, to have those eyes look up at me."

A surge of heat washes through him. Is that something he wants to do with Freddie? Is that something he could do?

He sits up and laughs a bit embarrassed, shoving at Freddie's shoulder lightly. "Stop flattering", he says. "My ego's big enough as it is."

"Not just your ego." And Freddie looks so proud at this little innuendo, so silly as he waggles his eyebrows that Roger leaps forward and tackles him until he's flat on his back, which has Freddie giggling with delight.

"You impossible..." He kisses his neck "...daft..." His cheeks. "...shameless..." His forehead. "...tease." He's got Freddie locked down good with his body and goes straight for his ribs until Freddie is breathless with laughter, at the same time pushing him away and rubbing his half hard cock up against his thigh. "I should have you over my knee for that."

And where the fuck did that come from.

He tries covering it up by kissing Freddie but Freddie twists his head away so they're cheek to cheek instead. "You should", he says, breath coming in short gasps.
And just like that his cock goes from interested to rock hard. "Oh Christ."

"Hmm, I have been a very naughty boy ind-hmpf."

Roger claps a hand over Freddie's mouth. He's way too sober for this. Instead, he slides down Freddie's body a bit and pushes up his shirt until his chest is exposed. Roger slots himself between Freddie's legs until he's at just the right height, then descends on Freddie's nipples. It took Roger a while to get used to the lack of squishiness and the copious amount of hair, but it never fails to make Freddie squirm and if there's one thing that is guaranteed to get Roger going, it's an enthusiastic response.

Freddie wriggles back and forth until his head is on the armrest and he can look down at Roger. He opens his mouth a bit so one of Roger's fingers slips inside the wet heat and he bites down on it, hard.

Roger props himself up with his free hand and raises his eyes until they meet Freddie's. Freddie holds his gaze for a moment, than moans around his fingers and lets his head fall back against the armrest.

'To have those eyes look up at me.' Right. He can do that. He can absolutely do that. Freddie seems to be in visual mode tonight, and that's something Roger can work with. He attacks Freddie's right nipple with renewed vigour, biting down on it lightly at first, then a bit harder, and when the response is an enthusiastic buck of his hips that almost throws Roger to the floor, he scrapes his teeth over it none to gently.

"Oh fuck." Freddie twists his head aside so Roger's fingers slip free.

He trails them down Freddie's cheek, his neck, over his rucked up shirt, until he can reach for the other nipple, strumming his thumb over it back and forth. Freddie's groan reverberates through his body.

"God, you're a menace."

Roger pushes himself a little higher on his free arm so he's halfway in a pushup. He's not sure how long he's going to be able to hold that position, but it will make the newly developed muscles in his arms and shoulders stand out nicely. He flicks Freddie's nipple with his tongue a few times, then looks up again. Freddie's head is thrown back, eyes clenched shut. "Look at me", he says. When their eyes connect Freddie's mouth falls open.

Roger grins and closes his teeth around the nipple, pulling just a bit.

Freddie's eyes flutter close. Roger immediately lets go but pinches the other one between his thumb and forefinger. "Eyes on me."

Freddie stares down at him, eyes wide, breath coming in short gasps.

"Think you can come from that", Roger asks idly between laps of his tongue.

"No."

He sucks the nipple into his mouth hard, before releasing and blowing on it. "Well you better."

Freddie throws an arm over his eyes and laughs breathlessly. "I've created a monster."

Roger flicks Freddie's nipple with his fingers, none too gently. The gasp from Freddie has
something dark and wild inside him purring. "I said eyes on me."

Freddie takes his arm away. There are red patches high on his cheekbones that give him a feverish, heated look. He gives a tiny nod and whatever blood is still left above the waist quickly flows to Roger's cock. He switches sides (partly to mix things up, partly because his right triceps is screaming for a break) and dives right into it, sucking and licking and biting on one side, flicking and twisting on the other. Freddie's hips are in constant motion, riding upwards, seeking friction, but Roger turns himself away, allowing only the slightest contact.

"You bastard", Freddie breathes.

"Come on", Roger whispers into his chest. "You can do it."

"I can't, I really...

Roger cuts him off with a hard suck, then slowly releases him. He looks up at Freddie and with his softest smile and says: "Can't you? Well, that's just too bad isn't it?"

Freddie's hand comes down to clutch at his shoulder, trying to keep him in place, give himself more leverage, but Roger carefully angles himself away while keeping the pressure on Freddie's nipples. They look a bit puffy now and Roger's not sure how long he should keep this up.

A little longer, he decides. Just a little.

He circles Freddie's nipple with his tongue, only touching it very lightly every now and then. "Ask me nicely."

"Fuck you."

That gets him a hard bite (although Roger's not quite sure if that's really a punishment) and a complete withdrawal of pressure over his cock (which definitely is). "Nice-ly." Roger lets his tongue flick out on each of the syllables.

"I'm not... oh fuck."

Roger's turned his head and drags his light evening stubble over the swollen nipple experimentally. He calls it a success and does it again.

"Please", Freddie whimpers, then ruins the effect by adding "I hate you" with his next breath.

It's definitely progress though and Roger lowers himself again, giving his arm a much needed break. He smiles up beatifically as Freddie surges up against him, drinking in the hard line between his eyes, the bitten lips, the sweat rolling down his temples. Roger keeps torturing Freddie's nipple with the fingers of one hand, but scoots up a little, giving Freddie his thigh to hump. He grasps his face gently with the other hand, angling it so he keeps looking at him.

He feels Freddie's rhythm faltering and watches as his mouth twists, eyes screwed involuntarily shut. It's a heady moment of triumph, his own erection forgotten for the moment as he watches Freddie come, body taut like a string, and knows that he's done that without even really touching his cock.

He doesn't have much time to revel in his own greatness, though, as Freddie pushes Roger to sit up, then swings himself up and around until he's half sitting in Roger's lap, half kneeling above him, and tearing at his fly.
"Careful", Roger gasps as his painfully erect cock gets trapped in the waistband of his briefs.

"Shut up."

There's pressure all around him: from Freddie's hands on his cock, his mouth on his lips, his chest pressing him back against the armrest. It's like a benevolent force of nature having decided to get him off, right now, and he better strap himself in and go along for the ride.

It's going to be a matter of minutes because Freddie knows exactly what he's doing and how Roger likes it. His tongue is pushing into Roger's mouth, hot and slick, and Roger surrenders to it. He clutches at Freddie's back, his arse, pulling him ever closer.

"God", he gasps as Freddie licks a wet stripe along his neck to his ear.

"You're gonna pay for that", Freddie says.

"Fuck, yes, please." He doesn't know whether he's responding to Freddie's hand on his dick or the words out of his mouth, but it doesn't matter because boiling heat is bubbling up low in his balls and Freddie's on him and around him and he lets himself fall into that.

"You wanna stay over", Roger asks casually as he lounges on the sofa in blissful afterglow.

Freddie grimaces as he stalks to the bathroom in his soiled pants. "My rooms have been invaded by a barbarian horde. I plead for asylum."

"Sure", he says non-chalantly.

At the next show, Freddie adlibs "My titties are hurting" during Dust, which has Roger almost (almost!) drop a beat.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: Off-screen sexual assault of a minor.

Sherri is real. She's mentioned in Peter Hince's Queen Unseen. Apparently, she used to drive with a police issue nightstick under her seat.

We all know the tongue thing, right? If not, it can be witnessed in this completely obscene YouTube video (around 2:42).
Sapporo, 28 October 1982

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Roger stares at the documents spread out in front of him. Rows of numbers, invoices, memos... his head is hurting already. It's not that he's bad with numbers, on the contrary, but they've been on tour for what feels like forever and he's way too tired for this shit. Also, being confronted with any form of accounting makes him feel like the life is being sucked out of him. "Alright, explain it to me. Short version."

"Paul has been channelling money out of Queen Productions", Brian says. "And he's been doing it for years."

John takes over. "And it's not just some trumped up expenses. It's massive amounts of cash. Look." Here taps a couple of numbers on a balance sheet and pulls up a couple of invoices and receipts. "45,000 pounds for a promotion campaign that never happened."

Roger doesn't have an eye for that kind of thing, but if John says it's real, then he trusts him implicitly. "That's massive."

"It all goes to a number of small companies with surprisingly complex ownership structures. Jim's still trying to figure out out, but at least three of them can be connected to his brother."

"How did he get away with that? And for years, you said?"

John shrugs. "Our finances aren't exactly a picture of transparency. There's lots of dark money floating around... there has to be, otherwise things like the South American tour wouldn't have been possible. Some things have to be done on a basis of trust. Gerry, Mary, Jim and until now, Paul, they could have done all sorts of things."

"Also he started small", Brian says. "Just a few thousand here and there, and when he realised no one noticed, he escalated."

"And then he got greedy," John looks grimly satisfied.

"Right." Roger thinks for a moment. "Have you told Freddie yet?"

"No we... we wanted to clear this with you first.

"We want him gone", Brian says just in case Roger is unclear on that fact. "But if Freddie refuses..."

Roger nods. Yeah, Freddie and Paul go back a long way. Paul has been the one to take him under his wing, introduce him to this new world that was out of his reach for so long. And Freddie is loyal. Once he trusts someone, he'll give them second and third chances. Unless they truly screw him over, that is.

"You're closest to him", John says. "We thought if you talked to him first..."

Roger shakes his head. He and Freddie have found a kind of equilibrium, but Frankfurt still casts a long shadow. If Freddie thinks even for a moment that Roger is acting out of jealousy or a desire to control him, this whole thing is going to backfire spectacularly. Of course, he can't really explain
that to John and Brian. "No. You do it. Explain it to him just as you did to me."

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"…and that's just the amount we've been able to track down so far, there might be a lot more hidden in there." John pauses briefly in his lecture to have a sip of water. He's presenting his evidence for Paul's betrayal like a crown prosecutor.

"Are you telling me Paul fucked us over?" Freddie's sitting there with his arms crossed.

"Yes."

"That he stole my money and lied to me. For years. And that I didn't even notice."

Roger feels his shoulders go tense. He hasn't said anything so far, but this isn't going well. "Freddie…"

Freddie holds up his hand to shush him. "And you want to fire him."

"Yes", Brian says. "You see, if you want to take him on as a personal assistant or…"

"Why would I want to do that?" Freddie looks aghast.

"Well, he's certainly not going to manage me anymore", Brian says, crossing his arms as well, gearing up for a fight.

"Of course not."

"So I…" Brian stops. "Are you alright with letting him go?"

Freddie stares at him. "Alright with it? He betrayed me!"

"Oh. We… we thought… I mean you and Paul are close, so…"

"You think that makes it better?"

"No but…"

"Okay, so we all agree, right?" Roger steps in before Brian starts talking Freddie round in the wrong direction. Discussions with Brian can be maddeningly circular at times.

Everyone nods and relief spreads through Roger. Loyal, up to point. And once that point is reached...

"So how do we get our money back", Freddie asks.

"We don't", John growls, clearly unhappy with his own answer.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Brian sighs. "That money he took, it's not all... well, we don't want too much outside scrutiny paid to those accounts, you know?"

"So he gets away with it?"

"Yes."
"No." Freddie looks incredulous.

"Sorry, but…"

"No! Tell Jim to do something clever and sort it out."

"Jim's already been through this, he says…"

Roger wanders over to the windows overlooking the city, tuning out the squabbling. Prenter gone will be a relief. He's got eyes everywhere and a mean streak to boot. And although Roger would never admit it out loud, of course they'd competed for Freddie's attention.

It takes almost half an hour, but eventually Freddie accepts that they can't take Prenter to court. They decide that they'll finish the tour and then have Jim meeting with him once they're all back in London. Probably best for all involved if the band keep out of it as much as possible to keep emotions from running high.

When the meeting is officially over and Jim gone back to his office, Brian asks them to stay a minute longer.

"Sure." Roger sits back down. Another pregnancy announcement?

"I've been thinking about this for a while and now's a good time as any."

Roger bites his lips. This doesn't sound good.

"What is it", John asks.

"I need a break. From touring, from recording, I'm..." He raises a hand to keep Roger from butting in. "Just let me finish this, please, okay? I'm tired and I feel like I haven't been able to give it my all these last weeks... months, really. I need some time off. And I don't just mean over Christmas, but a couple of months at least."

"Is everything alright?" John looks concerned.

"Yeah, sure." It doesn't sound completely convincing. "I just... I need to recharge my batteries and I really need to spend some time with Chrissie and the kids. Not just a few days to say hello, but..." He shrugs. "I think we all could all do with a break, to be honest. Get some new ideas before we start on a new album instead of charging head-on back into the studio... A breath of fresh air."

"How long did you have in mind", Freddie asks.

Brian shrugs. "Half a year, or a bit longer? After the birthday season, maybe?"

Their birthdays all fall into the late summer within eight weeks of each other, ending with Freddie's on September 5.

John shrugs. "Fine with me. Good time span for working on my handicap."

Freddie rolls his eyes. He has zero appreciation for John's golf hobby. Roger just finds it annoying (and a bit insulting) that it's so easy for John to give all this up for a while and focus on something completely different.

"So what about you then", John asks, a little peeved.

"Oh, Garden Lodge will keep me occupied. We've just got to put the finishing touches on the
building plans and then..." He unfolds his hands like a magician "...the transformation can begin."

"And you, Rog?"

"Huh? Oh." He feels a bit caught out. His great plans for '83 had been another album, another tour, shagging Freddie and maybe buying a new car. Now two of those are on hold and even cars and sex aren't enough to fill an entire summer. And how much will he see of Freddie when they're not recording or touring? But if Brian wants a break, there's not much he can do about it. "Er, I don't know, this and that. Been thinking of doing a solo album, actually." He's been thinking about for three years, but nothing ever came of it.

But now that he's said it, why not? He's got enough material that never made it onto their albums. And he's itching to get out from behind the drum kit and put in some guitar work, some proper singing.

Freddie smirks at him. "At last the world will know the masterpiece that is 'Let's get Crazy'."

Roger raises his eyebrows. "Jealous?"

"Hah!" Freddie laughs it off, but his eyes are glinting in a way that means he doesn't find it very funny at all. Freddie's got a frighteningly competitive side and if properly piqued, he might hammer out his own solo project just to spite him. Hopefully building his Disney castle is enough of a distraction for now. Roger has no interest whatsoever into entering into a competition.

Especially considering the fact that his grand solo project is all of two minutes old.

Chapter End Notes

As far as I know, Paul Prenter hasn’t actually embezzled any money, but he was let go as band manager in the early 80s to become Freddie's personal manager. In this timeline, the idea is that he felt his standing become more precarious and his connection with Freddie weaken the more Roger bonded with Freddie. Therefore he decided to get himself a little nest egg, just in case.

*Let’s Get Crazy* was actually released in April ’81 as part of Roger’s first solo album “Fun in Space”. Go listen to it, it's very, er... very Roger.
London, 6 November 1982

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Things seem to be going well. The fact that a decision about Paul has been made gives them a boost for the last two concerts and they return to London in high spirits.

But then a few days before the scheduled meeting with Paul, Roger gets a phone call from Jim. "How quickly can you be at the office?"

Roger throws another pair of trousers into his duffel. "20 minutes in theory, but actually I'm on my way to Cornwall." He promised him mum he'd visit as soon as possible after their return. Three days are really as long as he can push it.

"Holidays are cancelled. You've got to come in now."

"Jim?"

"I really don't want to do this on the phone."

Cold dread spreads through his body. That's the kind of thing you say when someone's died. "Jim, for fuck's sake, tell me."

Jim sighs. "You're the boss... I've just had a call from Dana."

Roger frowns. Dana mainly deals with the press and public, she isn't the one Freddie's parents would call if... He lights a Marlboro.

"News of the World is going to bring a story tomorrow and they've asked for our comment."

"What story... no, wait. So no one's died?" He wants that settled first.

"What? No!"

Roger can just about see Jim frowning at the phone in confusion. "For fuck's sake, Jim, I thought it was something serious. You almost gave me a heart attack."

"Roger, the story's going to be about Freddie and you."

Prenter. Fucking vicious shitbag Paul Prenter, fuck him with a rusty spoon, the bastard son of a...

"Yes, it's very likely fed to them by Paul", Jim goes on calmly. "We've got to..."

Roger puts the phone aside so he can kick the shit out of his bed for a few minutes and swear without being interrupted all the time. He knew it, he fucking knew it.

He breathes deeply a few times, then picks up the receiver again.

"Are you quite alright?"

"Peachy", Roger fumes.

"So the paper faxed us their draft and we've got an hour or two to decide what we're going to do..."
about it. I guess they consider this fair play."

"They just want to see if they can squeeze out any juicy reactions from us, the fucking leeches."

"Yes, so I need you to come in."

"Right."

"Roger?"

"Yes."

"Don't drive, please."

"Be there in ten."

"Roger, I mean it, get a cab, for heaven's... Roger? Damn it!"

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When he walks into the office, Freddie is sitting in Jim's chair, feet on his desk.

"Finally", he says and jumps up, nervous energy radiating off him.

"Where's Jim?"

"In the conference room, getting the others up to speed."

Oh. So Jim wants to give him and Freddie a few minutes to get their stories straight if they have to.

"Okay. So what do we say? What's our line?" The drive here as taken the edge off a little (off his temper and also off an inconveniently placed bollard, but that's neither here nor there) and he feels calm enough to assemble a plan.

"Prenter's a filthy little traitor."

"You sure it's him?"

"Of course it's him!" With one sweep of his arm Freddie empties the neat desk of its contents, including the phone.

Roger walks over, keeping himself at the last moment from hugging Freddie tight. The office gives them a degree of privacy but it's not completely secluded. He puts both hands on his shoulders instead. "Hey, cool it. That's just what the fucker wants. Us losing our nerve."

"I'll rip him to fucking shreds!" Freddie's eyes are flashing as he yells the words with utter conviction.

"And I'll cheer you on. But for now we have to come up with a story for Jim and the guys. What do we tell them?"

"The truth."

Roger drops his head and closes his eyes. "Right, Freddie, er..." Oh god, he's not ready for this. Not yet.

"That Prenter is a filthy little liar", Freddie continues. "That this is his revenge on me. On us."
Roger looks up. Freddie's face is unreadable.

"They know we spend a lot of time at the clubs together, that you have gay friends. The press might make something out of it, but we all know it doesn't mean anything, right?"

"No, of course it doesn't." Roger hesitates. He wants to take Freddie's hand, but with the situation being as it is, quells the impulse. "Is that alright for you?"

Freddie shrugs. "Of course it's alright." He turns to the door. "Come on. The others will think we're making out if we wait any longer."

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It isn't just a newspaper article. It's a huge, first page smear campaign. Even on the grainy fax it looks garish.

"Jesus, those fucking pigs." Roger throws the paper back onto the table.

"Coward will not even come right out and put his name to it", Freddie spat. "'Anonymous sources close to the band', fuck him."

Brian shifts in his seat. "Are they seriously going to print that? I mean, it's pretty weak. All they have are this 'anonymous source' and some pictures showing you guys being... being you."

There are three pics going with the article, one from backstage showing Roger and Freddie standing quite close in various states of undress (nothing out of the ordinary in a dressing room after a concert, there have to be similar pics of Brian and John), one from a party, arm in arm, Freddie giving him a big smooch on the cheek, and...

"I will murder him with my bare hands."

"Easy, Rog." Brian pats his back.

It's that pic from the night in Barcelona when Roger bashed Richie's face in. The one the Japanese tourists managed to snap. It had been Paul's job to get rid of it. "This was four years ago", Roger shouts. "He's been planning this for four years!"

John cranes his neck to see a bit better. Not that there's much to see. It's just Freddie and Roger next to each other, squinting in the flash light. In the background though, there's a male couple, slow dancing on the dance floor, putting the pic in context. "I agree with Brian. If that's the worst he has..."

"It says here that more details are forthcoming." Brian taps the page. "Looks like they want to make a series out of it. Milk it for all it's worth."

"Yeah, but I mean, is this even worth responding to? Won't that just give it more publicity?"

Jim agrees. "That's what PR says."

"What I don't get", Brian says, "is why Paul would make up something like that?"

"Because he's a filthy little traitor out for money." Freddie looks as livid as Roger has ever seen him.

"Have you heard something from him then?"
"No. But I bet you our next single he's driving up his price. That's why they promise the really juicy bits in the next instalment. This", Freddie slapped the page with his open hand, "is a warning shot."

Jim speaks up. "Just so we're all on the same page: There is nothing to what Prenter's saying, right?"

Freddie rolls his eyes. "No. Well, the cocaine, maybe. And there may have been hookers. And the occasional orgy. But nothing out of the ordinary."

"Yes, shocking", Jim says in his most bored voice. "But between you two..." He looks back and forth between Roger and Freddie.

Freddie sighs. "How many times do I have to..."

Roger tries to cut in. "Freddie."

"I've really got quite enough of this."

"A word?" He tugs Freddie aside. "Actually..." He takes a deep breath. He's not ready for this, but he'll never be ready for it, and the others will find out at some point anyway. Hell, they probably already do. "Actually I think they should know the truth."

Freddie's momentarily speechless.

"If that's alright with you."

"Yes, yes that's... fuck, yes of course it's alright with me. I don't care what they think."

The 'but you do' hangs heavily in the air between them.

Roger's heart is pounding in his chest. This is it. "Alright. Come on then."

They sit back down at the table. Brian's eyebrows have vanished under his fringe, Jim wears his best poker face, and John has leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. The tension is palpable.

Roger takes a deep breath. "There might be something to it."

"What?" Brian looks between the two of them like he is desperately waiting for one of them to start laughing and say it's all a joke.

John just sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose with his fingers. His look says 'I fucking knew it.'

"You... Wait, are you serious?"

Jesus Christ, Brian even has the gall to pretend to be shocked. As if he hadn't known forever, as if he hadn't basically offered him a pact of silence back in New York, the fucking hypocrite. Roger grits his teeth and nods.

"So, you two, you're. Are you like. Like a couple? Or something?" Brian keeps looking mainly at Roger as if to say 'We all know about Freddie, but you too, Taylor? A shitlifter?' Never ever in his life did Roger expect to have his friend look at him like that.

Roger crosses his arms in front of his chest. Something dark and ugly is churning in the pit of his stomach. "Well, at least I'm getting some", he shoots back.
"The fuck is that supposed to mean?" Brian stares at him like he's one ounce of restraint away from clocking him.

"Come on, boys, cool down." Jim looks between then two of them like a disapproving parent.

"I think you know exactly what I mean."

"Christ, you are such a..."

"For fuck's sake, Brian", Freddie hissed. "No, we're not a fucking couple and we're not going marry and pop out a couple of babies and take fucking high tea together every afternoon."

"I didn't..." Brian looks honestly baffled and on some level, the level that doesn't want to fucking strangle him, Roger feels for him. It it's not like they are used to discussing these things. Girlfriends came and went, some became wives, some were replaced by pretty boys, but they never ever talked about any of it. Not like this anyway, sober and serious and with their bloody lawyer at the table.

Roger leans back in his chair and sighs. "It's just this occasional..." He whirls his hand about, waiting for the right inspiration. "...thing", he ends, somewhat uninspired. God, he doesn't want to talk about this. He feels he owes it to Freddie to come clean, but he doesn't have even the slightest inclination to discuss this thing with his band mates. He hasn't even properly discussed this with Freddie.

"What does he have on you", John asks, matter of factly.

"Nothing", Freddie grumbled.

"Not much", Roger clarifies.

"Photos?"

"Don't think so, we've been careful."

"And the evil traitor would have rubbed that right under our noses if he had."

Jim and John visibly relax at that.

"He saw us come out of a... a bathroom once. Together." Roger's face is burning and he hates it.

"Alright", Jim mutters and makes a note. Brian looks at him slightly nauseated.

"It wasn't that bad", Roger protests. "Not like we were... we were just..." The words I've been making out with Freddie Mercury like a horny school boy' are never going to cross his lips. Ever, as long as he lives. He looks at Freddie for help.

Freddie on the other hand has gone from morose to amused at his plight. "Staring lovingly into each other's eyes, of course, before making sweet, sweet love on the..."

A cacophony of various cries of disgust and pleads to stop talking now blessedly drowns out the end of that sentence.

"Jesus fuck, you guys." Brian shakes his head, but he's also smiling for the first time since the meeting began.

"So, Prenter." Jim gets them all back on topic. "It's just his word against yours?"
"Basically", Roger says.

"I guess if he really scrapes the bottom of the barrel he can get some guys to talk about how Roger and I go to the clubs together."

"And how I hang out at your place. A lot of the guys know I've spent night there."

Brian shrugged. "We all used to hang out in each other's rooms. Day, night, who cares."

"If he talks to some of the ex-drivers he might know about the bathhouse."

"The bathhouse?" John asks increduously. "You two go to bathhouses together?"

"It was just once on a lark, alright, nothing happened." An image of Mikey with his cock in his mouth hovers in front of him. "Well, it's none of your fucking business what happened."

Three pairs of eyes as large as saucers are turned on him.

Roger crosses his arms in front of his chest. "Fuck off!"

Brian clears his throat. "You guys have been having fun, I must say."

"Speaking of fun", Freddie says and gives Roger a meaningful look. "What about Anton and Michael or... any of the others."

Oh shit. Yes, of course. Way too many people know. Why did they ever get so careless?

John looks back and forth between them. "What about Anton and Michael and the others?"

"That's really none of your business", Roger hisses.

"Sorry Rog, but right now, it is our business."

Roger bites down on his lips and closes his eyes. This is so humiliating. "Fine. You tell them, Freddie."

And so Freddie gives his band mates the most bare-bones version of the not-quite threesomes they've been having. To their credit, Brian and John almost manage to keep their faces impassive. But Roger can feel their judgement like knives driving into the pit of his stomach.

"It's not a smoking gun", Jim says finally. "But the press is not a court of law. He doesn't have to bring evidence as long as the story's good."

"You're right." John looks very serious. "And he's had access to all our rooms. Who knows, he might have installed a camera."

"Oh Jesus Christ." The thought alone has Roger feeling sick.

Freddie puts a calming hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry, darling. If he had video, he wouldn't have bothered with this article. He'd have just straight up blackmailed us." He looks up at the others, who are staring at his hand. "What? Am I not allowed to touch him anymore?"

Freddie looks peeved enough that Roger briefly worries he might kiss him just for shock value, but thank god the others quickly look away and mutter apologies under their breath.

"Just going to take a while to get used to, is all", Brian mumbles.
"So what are we going to offer him?" Roger is desperate to get the focus of this discussion somewhere - anywhere - else.

"Nothing", Freddie hisses. "A year's worth of used toilet paper, if you want to be generous."

"Well, I don't know about you two, but I don't want to read anymore articles like that", Brian says. "And if it's only a question of money..."

"It's a question of rewarding a filthy little traitor instead of putting his head on a spike where it belongs!"

"Yes, well, unfortunately you're not a 16th century monarch, so we don't have that option."

In a teeth-grinding, two hour discussion they finally decide to offer Paul a very generous severance package and support if he decides to set up his own management firm, which he'd been making some noise about. Coming to terms with it involves a lot of shouting and kicking things.

Their official comment to the press is that this is whole story ridiculous and that they won't seriously respond to made up charges.

"Not to offend you guys or anything, but..." John clears his throat. "It's probably a good idea to keep a low profile for the time being. The Paparazzi will really be on the prowl now."

Freddie rolls his eyes. "Yes, thanks for the warning, John, wouldn't have thought of it otherwise."

"I'm going to get PR's to put together a list of appearances for you and Mary", Jim says. "And Roger if you want to publicly cavort with some models, now might be a good time."

"Yeah, I'm on it", Roger says, although when it's put to him like a piece of homework to finish, the idea loses a whole lot of glamour.

Roger and Brian are the last to leave and before they part ways Brian stops him. "You going to be okay?"

"Sure. Yeah. I'm alright."

"Good." He thinks for a moment. "Listen, if you... if you ever want to talk about... well, if you want to have a pint or something... call me, alright?"

"Thanks, sure." Roger just wants to get the hell out of here.

"I mean it", Brian says, with his earnest, concerned expression. "Anytime."

Chapter End Notes

So, here we are with the least surprising development ever, heh.

Thanks to ActualBlanketGoblin, who gave me the idea to use the Barcelona pic. I hadn't even thought of that!
Paul never admits to being the anonymous source. But after things with him are settled, no new articles appear.

Still, the story generates enough interest that other papers pick it up and enrich it with their own speculations. Roger gets asked about it in interviews (questions which he deflects with a mixture of exasperation and good humour). It gets bad enough that Clare asks him about it over Christmas (apparently his mum got into a fight with the neighbours over them believing the lies the papers are spreading).

It's not the huge scandal New of the World might have hoped it would be, but it's still serious enough that they have to lie low for a while. As always when they're not touring or recording, Roger's relationship with Freddie is caught in suspension. There's no pretext for hanging out all the time - and with the papers and the paparazzi lying in wait for any whiff of scandal, none of them wants to risk the future success the band, the success they've all been working so hard for those last ten years.

It's still weird. Usually, those lulls where they don't see much of each other only last a couple of weeks and have predetermined end points. This time, they're free-floating, and although there are plans for a new album later in the year, it's all very vague. And so their 'thing' just sizzles out. Is not like when they've been fighting, there's nothing keeping them from seeing each other, as long as they're discreet. But every time Roger thinks about calling, he doesn't. As Freddie said, it's not like they're a couple. So Freddie doesn't call either. And after a while, the thought of picking up the receiver begins to feel like an admission of defeat.

Instead, Roger does what he always does: He keeps himself busy. He gets Marlene to be his arm-piece for a couple of red-carpet events ("This wouldn't have anything to do with that News of the World article, would it?" "Oh, look there, it's Al Pacino!"). He also discovers the joys of speed-boat racing (which combines the speed of car racing with the amenities of beach resorts and bikini-clad beauties) and sets plans for his solo album in motion.

There's no reason to mope, after all. It's not like they're a couple.

He's busy and when he's not busy there's people around to keep him entertained and when there's no people around he's usually off his face on something.

Sheer momentum keeps him going until early June, which is quite an accomplishment. Then he finds himself at a bar at 2 in the morning, having fled from the party that's going on in his rented apartment, and even the exquisite whiskey cannot hold it together any longer.

He stumbles to the next phone and punches in the number.

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"Look, I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have..."

"Yeah, well, I'm here now, so that really doesn't matter, does it." Brian slams down two glasses of whiskey on the table between them. "You almost gave me a heart attack when you rang me up last night and I flew all the way over here - away from the family time I've promised Chrissie - to be
"Cry."
"Christ, if you ever get tired of playing guitar you should start a support hotline. So sweet and caring."
"Roger, I'm a peaceful man, but if you're going to tell me everything's fine, not to worry and try to send me on my way, I am going to punch you. I'm not kidding."
"Alright, alright." Roger takes up one glass and chugs it. He's still got one bitch of a hangover from last night but he's not going to do this sober. "Let me have a drink or two and we'll... we'll talk." He grimaces. Good lord he must have been fucked up last night up to think this was a good idea.

They drink in silence for half an hour, the alcohol being a grim necessity rather than an indulgence.


Brian is still coughing from the mouthful of whiskey he inhaled.

"I meant. I hate him, right?"

Brian nods, his face slowly taking on a normal colour.

"He's a completely self-centered, egotistical maniac who drives me up the fucking wall."

Brian fortifies himself with another drink, then bravely nods at Roger to go on.

Roger picks at the label on the whiskey bottle. "And he's rude and hairy and petulant and not even remotely my type."

"Hm, I don't know, you've always like brunettes", Brian says.

"Yeah, but come on... I mean he's got the skinniest, hairiest legs I've ever seen in my life. And that bloody moustache..."

"Alright, so... so what is your type?"

"Cheryl Tiegs?"

Brian laughs, a bit of tension draining from him. "I meant, with men, you know."

"I don't have one", Roger yells, then hushes himself down. "That's the thing. I don't like men. At all. I don't walk through the streets thinking, 'oh, he's hot, wish I could have a piece of that.'" He firmly pushes all thoughts of Michael aside. That had been a confusing time. Besides, one can easily be rounded down to zero.

"So..." Brian looks frustrated. "So how does that work with you and..."

Roger raises his eyebrows. "You want the gory details?"

"God no!" Brian almost knocks over his glass in distress. "Just. Just so I know what you're talking about. Uhm. You guys are having sex. In some manner. Right?"

"Yes, we..."

"Just yes or no, thanks." Brian gets up for a new bottle of whiskey. Whatever they need to get through this. "But how did it all get started? Did Freddie... did he..." Brian looks a bit worried.
"Did he what?" It takes him a moment to get what Brian is getting at. "God, no. No it was all... a bit confused, but he didn't, like, prey on me or anything."

"Good."

"It just... built up, I guess. A sort of tension and then at some point we snapped and..."

"Was it Glasgow?" Brian asks quietly.

"Yes. Er, sort of. How did you..."

"You were so fucked up after that. We'd all thought some girl had gotten to you, but you didn't parade anyone around as you usually do, so it was a bit of a mystery."

"Yeah, so..." Roger laughs. "Yeah, some girl had gotten to me. Exactly. Er, by the way, there's been something I've been meaning to ask."

"Yes, alright."

"At the end of the 80s-tour, when we were... when Freddie and I had been fighting and you and John committed false imprisonment."

Brian chuckles. "For a good cause. But yes?"

You said something that made me think you knew what was going on. But then when we told you last year, you seemed completely baffled."

"Ah. Well I was."

"So, what did you think was going on all that time?"

"Hm." He spins his empty glass in his hands. "I don't know, it was all so weird. And I had my own worries with, you know, Chrissy and Jimmy and everything... Anyway, I had the weirdest theories. Blackmail, maybe, because of the gay clubs, or... mainly I worried it might be about drugs. That you two were doing weird shit together and then got into arguments about that. That or that it was about a girl."

"A girl?"

Brian shrugs, a bit sheepishly. "It's not like Freddie doesn't like girls. And with you involved, it seems like a likely kind of trouble, doesn't it?"

Roger shakes his head. "Did you talk to John about it?"

"Once or twice, but... He probably had a much better idea of what was going on than me, but he never said it outright. And then we mainly just talked about how to get things sorted between you again. You seemed to be doing better after New York, so we left it alone. Well, apart from..."

"Yeah, let's not talk about that." Roger's stomach still twists into knots whenever he thinks about Frankfurt '82.

"So mainly I was just happy that whatever it was between seemed to be working again. I..." He takes a deep breath. "I'm not one to pry into private affairs", he says. "Maybe I should at times, but it's not something that comes easy to me."

"But you never thought we were..."
"It did cross my mind, of course. But Rog, I've known you for 15 years. You used to live with Freddie. And you've never shown the slightest, you know, inclination. Honestly, I think your reputation is the main reason you two got away with it for so long at all. Also..."

"What?"

Brian shrugs, a little embarrassed. "It seemed a little... pedestrian, doesn't it? I mean, not everything has to be about sex, right?"

"No, you'd rather make up a story about us tripping on acid in between shows. Jesus, Bri."

Brian shrugs. "So", he says, getting the conversation back on track. "Glasgow?"

"Yeah, Glasgow. Thing is, I think he was just as confused as I was. I mean, I'm not his type either. He likes them tall, dark and butch." He downs his beer. "So what the fuck are we even doing?"

"Roger, honestly, none of us have the faintest idea what the two of you are doing."

Roger scowls. Not helpful.

"But whatever you were doing last year... it was obviously working better for you than what you are doing now."

"It was a fucking mess."

"At least it was something."

Roger groans. "Don't go philosophical on me Bri."

"Rog, no offence, but gay relationship drama is really not my forte."

"It's not a..." Roger cuts himself off. Because it is, isn't it? A fucking gay relationship, that's what he got himself into. He sighs. "I've written a song about him", he says after a silence. "Can you fucking believe it?"

"A song?"

"Pa-the-tic", Roger says.

"Yeah well, your songs usually are."

Roger narrowly misses Brian's shin. "Like, what am I even doing? I'm not a bloody teenager and he isn't sodding Rosie Weatherby."

"Was that her name? Good name for a song."

"Would you stay on bloody topic here?"

"Roger." Brian sits up and presses his hands together in front of his lips. "I really don't know what to say to you. Except... Have you talked to him about it? About any of this?"

Roger glares at him. "Hello, earth to Brian, what planet are you currently on? Of course I haven't fucking talked to him about it, how could I possibly..."

"Alright, yeah, didn't know what I was thinking..."
"...it's not something you can just talk about, you know, it's just not..."

"...suggesting any kind of grown-up behaviour or showing some sort of vulnerability..."

Roger throws himself back onto the sofa. "Oh yes, sarcasm, thanks, that's so helpful."

"Look, what are you expecting me to do?"

Roger scowls at him. To be honest, he didn't even expect Brian to come here at all. And now that he's here... "I don't know, whip out your Tardis, transport me back in time before everything got fucked up?"

"Sorry, not my specialization, time travel. If you ever need to know something about interplanetary dust, however..." There's a shared smile and they sit in silence for a while. "What does he think about all this?"

"No idea. Ask his cats, they probably know." Roger puts his glass away. Suddenly he's not in the mood. "I think he likes having me as a fall-back option. I'm fun, I'm easy, I won't steal his blow or rat him out to the papers. And on tour we're always together anyway." And Roger's a bloody good lay, but he doesn't want to burden Brian with unwelcome images.

"I don't know", Brian says with a thoughtful expression. "I've seen him during your 'breaks' - and that all makes so much more sense in hindsight - and he was a right mess. Even more so than you."

Now that is interesting. Roger has always kept away from Freddie as much as possible after their fights. "You think so?"

"Yeah. I mean, he was still Freddie, still partying and insisting on having a good time, but it felt like he wanted to have a good time rather than actually having one. Does that make sense? Protesting too much."

Roger ducks his head. "He was probably just annoyed he couldn't boss me around", he mumbles, but his heart latches onto the idea of Freddie missing him like a starved baby goat to a bottle of warm milk.

"Oh, I'm sure he was. But he never moped around like that for anyone else."

Roger can't help a small smile appearing on his face.

"So, hey, obviously I'm an idiot and everything, but maybe next time you see him, you might want to open up about how you feel just a tiny little bit?"

Roger buries his face in his hands. The last time he's done that it ended with Freddie running out and fucking half of Germany. "It's going to be a blood sport."

Brian shrugs. The bastard has no pity. "Better risk him tearing you to pieces than doing it yourself." He claps his hand on Roger's shoulder in a very masculine and supportive kind of way. The unmistakeable signal that that part of the conversation is now over. Then he leans back on the sofa, eyeing Roger with a grin that doesn't bode well. "You wrote a song for him?"

So Brian obviously thinks this is where the teasing part starts but Roger is going to nip that right in the bud. "You will take that your grave."

"Just you and a gently weeping guitar? Or do you go for the full orchestral strings and..."
"One more word and I'll drown you in the fucking toilet, Brian."

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Talking to Brian is no magic bullet, but some of the inner tension he's worked so hard to repress has gone at last. He's almost confessed to it anyway, but now he's to some degree prepared to face it. He's fallen for Freddie. Hard. And ignoring it won't make it go away.

Of course, simply admitting it is not really a solution. He's not going to hand his heart to Freddie on a silver platter. He'd come close to in Frankfurt last year and it had almost destroyed everything. The one thing that is sure to drive Freddie away is to smother him.

And is there even anything more in the cards for them, realistically, besides what they're already doing? Freddie isn't interested in a boyfriend - at least not in the traditional sense. He likes to have someone at his beck and call, he likes not having to wake up alone, he obviously likes the sex - but all the rest of it? Putting another person's needs first? Monogamy? Domesticity?

Not that those are among Roger's core competencies either. Later that night, Brian talked a little about the effort he's putting into making his marriage work and Roger got exhausted just from listening.

But it's probably better than being so fucking lonely all the time. God, he's tired of it.

He still hasn't decided what to actually do about it, though, when one day Anna's blonde head pops round the doorway. "Joe Fanelli's on the phone for you. You wanna call him back later or..."

Roger sits back from the mixing desk and stretches his back. He has no recollection of what he actually did this last half hour. "No, let's take ten."

He quickly walks over to the office. It's not like he and Joe are pals. If Joe's calling it must be something about Freddie. Dread mixes with anticipation, quickening his steps.

"Joe?"

"Hey, how's Switzerland?"

"Rich and boring, as always."

"Ha, how fitting."

Roger rolls his eyes.

"Listen, why I'm calling you..." He clears his throat and seems not to know how to go on.

Oh god. "Is he screwing a mob boss? Cheating on a mob boss? With his brother? Is he about to be shot in the head?"

Joe laughs. "No, but at this point it wouldn't surprise me."

Roger groans.

"Yeah. Listen, we're a bit worried about him, to be honest. Phoebe and Mary as well, but they don't think I should call you... well, you know how Freddie hates talking behind his back."

Yes, for someone who brags about his sexual prowess in the press, Freddie is extremely protective of his privacy.
"But he's driving me crazy - he's driving us all crazy - and I think I have an idea why."

"What's going on?"

"He's turned into an absolute terror at Garden Lodge. Three interior designers have quit in tears and he's smashed a custom built mahogany dresser to pieces because the wood wasn't the exact shade of, well, wood he wanted. He orders me to cook him dinner, then refuses to eat it because it's too hot or too cold or too spicy or too bland or whatever. He accused Phoebe of planning to sell him out."

"Phoebe?"

"I'm not even kidding. Then he goes all weepy and contrite after a tantrum and buys us jewellery and shit to make up for it. I don't mind much, but I think Phoebe takes it hard, having his loyalty questioned like that. The whole Prenter thing must be messing with his head. Anyway, that's not even what I wanted to tell you."

Roger feels around for cigarettes. "What did you want to tell me."

"He barely went out those last few months. Every now and then we'd all to Heaven, but he'd mainly just stand around glumly and leave early."

Good, Roger thinks.

"Well, and consume a massive amount of blow and vodka."

Not so good. But then, who's he to judge?

"Anyway, last night, he suddenly gets all antsy and invites all sorts of people and parties with them at his place. And then, at fuck a clock in the morning, he decides to go to the Copacabana, only to get into a bar fight. Freddie. In a bar fight."

"What?" Freddie's tantrums can turn violent, but he usually chooses the site of his outbursts (and his opponents) well.

"Yeah, seriously. Got his sights on some Burt Reynolds lookalike - big, dark, moustachioed, you know the type - but the guy doesn't want anything to do with him. I'm like 80% sure he doesn't even know who Freddie is. Anyway, Freddie can't leave him well enough alone, and then the guy's boyfriend turns up."

"Shit." That is very, very unlike Freddie. He doesn't like to make a first move on anyone he doesn't already know is into him, and he certainly doesn't pester unwilling people with boyfriends.

"We almost had the police called on us. Phoebe went into hysterics and flushed a few thousand quid worth of coke down the toilet - which did not improve Freddie's mood one bit, let me tell you."

"A few thousand?"

"He'd just topped up the supply", Joe says, and then adds hesitantly. "Freddie's burning through it at the moment."

"That bad, huh?"

"Listen, I wouldn't have called you if..." Joe breaks off. "He'd never say anything of course. But
he's driving himself spare. And I thought...

"What?"

"You're working on an album, right?"

"Yeah. Gonna be pretty good."

"Isn't there some song you might be stuck with? Where you really need some input getting the lyrics right? Or the instrumentation? Or whatever the hell else it is you music people do?"

Roger grits his teeth. That would be typical. Everyone bending over backwards so Freddie doesn't have to admit he's bored (or, dare he think it, pining) and can instead sweep in like a rescuing angel. That's how it is with Freddie. You always have to take the fucking high road for him.

But at least it would be a way.

"Interesting you mention that", Roger says slowly, resigned to his fate. "In fact, there's this one song I'm really struggling with..."

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36 hours later, Freddie steps into the mixing room at Super Bear Studios.

Roger's heart is thumping. He's seen him come in out of the corner of his eye, but pretends to be deeply engrossed in his work. He hates how very school girl this is, but he's made so many first steps. Let Freddie take this one.

He expects a smug "how may I help you then" or a snappy tirade about unreliable airport service or a demand for vodka and coke. Instead he gets a perfunctory "Hello Roger, so good to see you" and then Freddie makes small talk with his sound engineer for 10 minutes.

Roger's heart sinks. He's here to do business, to help out a friend, it's not... of course it isn't, stupid. Freddie's probably put the whole thing behind him already. Roger likes to think of himself as the clever one, but clearly Freddie's a few steps ahead of him. Because what kind of idiot falls for his (unsuitable, unavailable) best friend?

"...get the kettle boiling then", David says. "Jeannie makes the best tea this side of the channel. You want some too, Rog?"

"Nah, I'm good", he mumbles, head bent low over a sheet of technical notes, the very picture of busy concentration.

It's quiet after the door falls short shut. Roger breathes as slowly, quietly, as he can, trying to put himself together. He'll be fine. He'll get through this mess, somehow. He will certainly not pine for Freddie like a fucking loser. Cool, relaxed, professional, that's it.

He will deny to his dying day that the shriek that fills the room is his. Freddie has gone straight for his ribs, and for a second it's so unexpected, so removed from everything on his mind, that all he can do is yelp and bat at the swift fingers pinching him all over.

"Stop it... gah, stop, you..." He manages to turn around in his chair and struggles to get to his feet. "Oh, you're going to regret this."

"Hm, I hope so."
And then he has his hands on Freddie's slim, strong body, feels his breathy giggles, breathes his warm-familiar scent, tastes his cheeks, his lips, his tongue...

When he finally has his breath back, Freddie's beaming face is just inches from his own. The corners of his eyes have crinkled up and his lips are flushed dark red. He looks good enough to eat and that is exactly what Roger's going to do.

"Come on", he says and pushes Freddie roughly through the door, barely managing to keep his hands to himself as they stumble down the hallway towards the exit.

Out of the corner of his eye, Roger sees David and Jeannie coming out of the small kitchen. "Er. Your tea?"

Freddie keeps a firm hand on Roger's back to keep him from slowing down. "Later", he calls out. "Things to do, people to see!"

Roger can't keep the giggles down as they hurry along. It's all he can do to keep his hands off the more innapropriate places. They're the opposite of inconspicuous, but right now he doesn't give a damn.

In the parking lot, he makes straight for his midnight black BMW.

"Phoebe can take us." Freddie nods toward the smoked-glass limousine a bit further away.

"That'll take twice as long." Also, it's going to be torture, sitting in the back of a car with Freddie and not being able to touch him. Because he is not going to make out in a car with Phoebe in front, smoked-glass partition or no. "Get in."

Thank god he's a fucking excellent driver, otherwise he might have crashed the car on three separate occasions. It's not even that Freddie's doing anything particularly crass, he just stretches himself luxuriously (letting his shirt ride up just high enough to show a sliver of skin) or talks about his dinner plans (voice so low he has to lean in to about an inch of Roger's ear) or plucks (invisible) lint off Roger's trousers.

By the time the car halts with screaming tires in front of the apartment complex, Roger is shaking with rage and excitement and he all but drags Freddie up the stairs by the scruff of his neck.

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They have lots of sex. And some drugs. And in the meantime they record an album. It takes about two days to go from the Roger Taylor solo experience (with Freddie consulting) to Freddie with Roger on back-up vocals. Then Roger remembers that they're supposed to be on a break and that Freddie's here more or less incognito - recording an album together is only going to stir up unwelcome speculation. So he puts his foot down and Freddie is banished to the mixing desk henceforth.

He does help with the lyrics and the production of the thing. Although the whole "trouble with the album"-story started as a front to get Freddie to Switzerland (Roger is perfectly able of recording his own album, thank you very much), he is awfully good at this. He'd make one hell of a producer.

What they don't do is talk about this thing between them. Whatever it is. But it's alright. They'll figure it out. Eventually.
So, Jim Hutton had a cameo, did you spot him? However, that'll be the only run in he has with Freddie in this timeline... sorry, my dear, you had him in the other universe.

Song for this chapter (well, for Roger in the first third of it): Bruce Springsteen – Dancing in the Dark
New York, 25 June 1983

Chapter Notes

Look at the tags or see end notes for warnings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Montreux and the studio and all the things don't talk about get too confining, they head off to New York.

Roger's a bit apprehensive when Freddie first brings it up: "Sounds good. But what if they snap a picture of us going into the Spike or the Mineshaft together?"

"The Mineshaft?" Freddie raises one eyebrow. "I say New York and the first thing you think about is the Mineshaft? You've come a long way, choir boy."

"I'm serious." The whole point of this year off is to let things settle down. The band is going to get together for another album in the fall, and when Roger releases his own solo effort next year, he doesn't want all the talk be about whether or not he's a poof. It's fine being together in Montreux - the studio is used by a ton of artists and both of them can claim they're working on their solo efforts. There's much less reason for them to be in a New York gay club together.

Freddie shrugs. "Wear a wig?"

He doesn't wear a wig, of course. It's a ridiculous idea, impractical and completely beneath him. Instead, on their first night in New York, they lock themselves in the biggest bathroom of Freddie's apartment with a bottle of Stoly and twenty shades of hair colouring.

Freddie picks one up and wrinkles his nose. "Raven black? What was Phoebe thinking when he picked this one up? It doesn't go with your complexion at all."

"I have a complexion? Should I be worried about that?"

"Like a maiden fair", Freddie says and then ducks as Roger sends a box of Chili Chocolate Brown flying his way.

They decide on a reddish brown that makes him worryingly look a bit like an Irish cartoon character but enough unlike himself that it would fool an unsuspecting photographer. Phoebe is then ordered in trim his hair much shorter than his usual shaggy cut. He hasn't worn his hair that short since he was 14 and it's amazing what a difference it makes.

"My, look at those cheek bones", Freddie purrs, running a finger over them.

"So, er, how do we disguise you then?" Roger tries his best not to get distracted by Freddie's smoldering eyes. He pretends to think about his own question for a minute. "Only one option, really."

"Oh no", Freddie says. "No, no, no, darling you banish that thought right now.

Roger reaches for the razor. "For the good of the band", he says.
Freddie puts up some resistance, but then Roger whispers "I'll fuck you over the back of the sofa when we come home" in his ear and that does the trick.

"I will grow it back", Freddie warns him. "It takes all of a week and you'll never now it was gone."

Roger marvels at how different Freddie looks like this. Not younger per se, but so much like it's 1979 and they're about to have their first snog in a deserted hotel hallway. Roger looks away before he does something he's not quite prepared to do in front of Phoebe.

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The three of them head out to the Anvil. Despite the new disease the atmosphere has lost nothing of its celebratory mood. If anything, people seem more determined to party than ever. They drink the first Vodka Tonic on Dino, and the next on Donna Summer and the third to the - according to Freddie's expertise - super hot guy behind the bar.

Roger can't seem to take his eyes off him. Freddie, not the barkeeper. He kind of whishes they hadn't gone out at all - this is his chance at kissing him all night without any hair getting in the way and instead he's sitting here, watching him drool over some Village People-impersonator.

Freddie hops off the bar stool and holds out his hand.

"The sofa", Roger asks hopefully.

Freddie laughs and shakes his head. "Later. Tonight we do things by the book. We had the drinks, now we dance."

"I don't dance." But he lets himself be tugged towards the dance floor by Freddie.

"And maybe later", Freddie goes on, as if Roger hasn't even spoken, "we'll make out in the men's room for a bit and then in the car and then we head for the sofa."

Roger doesn't know the song that's playing, but it's got an easy thumping beat and Freddie looks like he's about to eat him alive and that's enough for him. If this is their one chance to date, Roger will grab as much of it with his greedy grubby hands as he can get.

Freddie hooks his fingers in Roger's belt loops to keep the distance between them just so - close enough their thighs brush with an electric tingle every now and then, far enough away that they can keep eye contact. Roger doesn't do anything fancy, he just sways and stomps along to the beat, lets Freddie pull him and push him this way and that, and then gives himself over to the rhythm and the lights, the acrid smell of poppers and sweat permeating the room and the irresistible pull of those deep brown eyes.

Freddie lets go of his belt, turns on the spot and raises his arms into the air. Roger slides his hands around his trim waist and steps forward just enough to let his dick slide along the back Freddie's denim-clad arse. It's just the slightest contact, but it sends a thrill up his spine that has him gasping for more. He tightens his hands and pulls Freddie back against him and that is obviously the right move because Freddie's head falls back onto his shoulder and he does that absolutely dirty grinding motion that has Roger seeing stars.

They stay like that for another song, then Freddie suddenly steps away. "We're going home. Now," The heat in his eyes has Roger's heart hammering and he takes Freddie's wrist, tugging him towards the back door. No need for a side-trip to the men's room.

They have to wait a couple of minutes for Phoebe to get the car. The street out back is almost
deserted at this time, just two or three weary clubbers milling about, but Roger resists the urge to press Freddie against the brick wall and have his way him then and there. But he can't completely keeps his hands off him either.

"So what exactly are you going to do to me once we get home", Freddie asks.

"Do you really want to spoil the surprise?"

"So it's going to be surprising? I don't like surprises."

"So you keep saying. But remember when..."

He only has a seconds warning. Freddie's eyes shifting to something behind him, widening. His hand on Rogers arm. A high pitched whooping hoot.

Pain explodes at the back of his head. He is staggering forward by the momentum of the impact. He's on his knees only vaguely filtering in the voices around.

... got him, I got the... Searing, blinding pain ...oh my god are you... Grit under his knees ...fucking faggots... are you hurt?... all gonna die anyway... Nausea welling up in his stomach ...look at me come, on please... happened to him?... from a car Brightness piercing through his eyelids ...gonna be alright love... might come back... hurry up will ya? ... make sure he's... Arms around his waist ...let's go!

There are hands all over him, pressing and pulling, and then he is hauled to his feet. The world spins and he feels like he's going to throw up.

"It's okay, we've got you, darling, you can soon lie back down but we've got to get you out of here."

The next thing he knows is cool leather underneath him and a warm hand on his cheek.

"Drive!"

It might have been a second or a minute or an hour later when the car lurches through a bend in the road and that's it, his stomach turns and he vomits all over the floor of the car.

"Slow down you fucking moron! Hey, shhh, is okay." His mouth is wiped with a soft cloth and he moans.

"How far?"

"Jesus, I don't know." Phoebe, that's Phoebe. He sounds panicked. Why is he in Phoebe's car?

"There's got to be a bloody hospital around here."

No hospital. That's important, he can't go to a hospital, because... "No hospital." Roger rolls onto his back and Freddie's face swims into view.

"Of course you need to go to the hospital, darling."

"No, I..." Roger really shouldn't have shaken his head. His stomach twists and he squeezes his eyes shut to keep from retching again. "Just get me home."

"Don't be silly, you need a doctor." Light fingers moving over his face. "You're bleeding, you've been unconscious!"
Bright lights flash through the car and Roger closes his eyes reflexively, trying to turn away. The back of his head explodes in agony and he groans in pain.

"Right, that's it. Phoebe, stop. Call an ambulance."

The car slows down. "No, Freddie, please." He takes two deep breaths to control the nausea, to sound not quite as bad as he feels. "We can't, too risky. The police, press... us, looking like this, it's..."

"Fuck that. I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

"I'm fine", Roger says, attempting a smile that feels like it's going to split his skull in half.

"Darling, please, let me... Please." A note of actual pleading enters into Freddie's voice and for a moment Roger is almost prepared to give in. Then he has an idea.

"Melissa." Why hasn't he thought of it sooner. "Call her. Her girlfriend's a doctor, she can check me."

"That's not..."

"I've got her number at home. Please, just bring me home."

"Roger, my dear, shut your pretty mouth, you're in no state to make decisions."

Roger puts his hand on Freddie's and opens his eyes, trying hard to get his face into focus, but his eyes aren't obeying him. "Please."

Freddie closes his eyes, bites his lips. He takes a deep breath. "Fine. Alright, fine. Damn you."

The ride back to the apartment feels longer than a transatlantic flight, but it can't have been more than 15 minutes. His legs feel like jelly and when Freddie and Phoebe pull him out of the car, a wave of nausea comes over him so bad he just wants to lie down and die. When he's finally put down on the sofa, he's panting like he's run a marathon.

Phoebe gets on the phone, while Freddie flutters around the flat, bringing him water and a cool wet cloth for his head while Roger keeps drifting off.

A light patter on his cheek. Light so bright it hurts. Roger flinches away instinctively, then stills when the pain erupts at the back of his head. "Fuck."

"Ah, there you are." The light disappears and is replaced by Suki's calm face. "How are you feeling."

"Like crap." He sees Freddie hovering close by, pacing and fiddling with his hands.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

Roger frowns. He was in a car and didn't want to go to the hospital. The club, the dancing, taking Freddie home to... he feels himself blush under Suki's attentive gaze. Why is she even here? "I don't..." He shakes his head, wincing at the pain.

"Can you tell me where you are?"

"Freddie's flat. New York."
"Date?"

He hesitates. "June." He thinks for a moment. If it's June, isn't he supposed to be in Montreux? He's recording an album, isn't he?

"Alright. Can you sit up for me? I want to get a closer look at your head."

He pushes himself up and feels the bile rise in his throat. He frantically looks around for a bucket or something, he can't vomit on Freddie's 4000 quid Persian rug.

Suki pushes his head between his knees with steady, gentle hands. "It's alright." She keeps her hand on his shoulder while he breathes through it.

"It's not. It's awful", he groans."

There's some movement around them and he's given a bowl to spit into. Antique crystal, he notices.

"Can you stay like that for a minute?"

"Sure." The problem is going to be ever sitting up again.

Gloves are snapped on and then there's prodding fingers at the base of his skull, his neck. His hands and legs get pinched, and he has to say whether he can move, if there's any numbness.

"I feel like a 500 pounds of Jell-O", he says.

Then she turns her attention back to his head. "You've got quite a laceration, some swelling... The wound needs to be dressed. I'm going to do that now, alright?"

It's unpleasant, but afterwards he's allowed to lie back down and a warm blanket is put over him.

"So?" Freddie stands close to the sofa, one hand on the backrest. Roger wants it to be on him.

"He's got quite a concussion, but there are no indications of a skull fracture or haemorrhaging. I'd really like to bring him in for a scan though, just to make sure."

"Yes, I said so, but...

"No", Roger says. He forces his eyes open to look pleadingly at Suki. God, it's too bright in here. Freddie scoffs and puts his hands on his hips. "See? Stubborn as a constipated mule, that one."

"Well, I can't force him."

Freddie's cool fingers are stroking his hair back from his face and it's the best feeling in the world. "What do we do now?"

"Well, if he absolutely doesn't want to go to the hospital, the next best thing we can do is let him rest. If any of his symptoms are worsening - the headaches, the vomiting, et cetera - or if he gets seizures or loses consciousness, call an ambulance immediately. If you're not sure, call me."

"Yes, yes, I'll..."

"Or if you have somewhere I can bunk I can check on him and...

"You can stay the night of course, there are enough bedrooms for all of us, but I'll do the checking.
It's bad enough we got you out of your bed at three in the morning."

"I don't have a shift tomorrow, so don't worry. But I will expect an absolutely superb breakfast."

"Oysters and champagne?"

"I'm more of an omelettes and pastries person."

There is some more activity and talking but Roger's already drifting off. He vaguely aware of being led to his bedroom - their bedroom - and welcomes the cool sheets and darkness.

Gentle hands on his shoulders shake him awake. "Roger. Wake up, darling."

"No." He does not want to wake up. There's pain waiting for him.

"Look at me, please, just a second."

Roger blinks his eyes open. The only light in the room is a dim bed-side lamp, but even that seems too bright. "Why are you doing this to me."

"Because you refused to go to the hospital and so I have to make sure you don't die on me."

Roger tries to remember. The horrible drive here. Suki. But why?

"What happened?" The last thing Roger remembers is standing outside the club, waiting to get home. Why had they been waiting? Right, Phoebe had to get the car.

"I'll tell you tomorrow. Go back to sleep."

Roger shakes his head. At least it doesn't make him feel like he's going to be sick anymore. "Tell me what happened."

Freddie sighs. "They hit you with a bottle from a car driving by. Jim Beam", he adds with an expression like he's smelling something rotten.

"Why?" Had he got into a fight with someone? He can't remember.

Freddie looks at him for a long moment. "Because you were standing outside the dressed like a faggot. With me. At two in the morning."

"Oh fuck." There's shame, there's anger, there's guilt. Why should he feel bad about this? He's not done anything wrong, has he? "Did they... are you...?" He tries to push himself up on one elbow, to get a good look at Freddie.

But Freddie pushes him back down none too gently. "I'm fine, silly." He rolls his eyes dramatically. "Except you scared the living hell out of me, thanks very much."

"Er, sorry?" He glares at Freddie. Of course he's the one apologising.

Freddie lies down on the bed, so close their foreheads almost touch. Then he reaches out with one hand and strokes along his arm. It feels very good. "You are not allowed to do this to me ever again", he whispers, "do you hear me?"

His eyes are huge and although the room is too bright and his head aches, Roger can't look away. "Alright."
"You just wouldn't answer me, you wouldn't wake up properly. There was blood all over the place and I... I thought you were dying!"

"I'm not dying, you hysterical queen."

"You better not. I'd never forgive you." His expression is so serious and fierce that it takes Roger's breath away. It also makes him want to hold him tight forever. And giggle and kiss him and tell him...

He stops himself just in time. "Well, at least we've established you're the one being wronged here," Roger reaches back with his hand and gingerly feels the bandage. It's right at the base of his skull, a little to the left. A few inches down and to the right and it would have hit his spine. He closes his eyes and reaches for Freddie's hand. "Are you going to stay with me?" He has no idea whether Freddie slept in the same bed before he woke him up, but Roger wants to make sure. He doesn't want to be alone.

"Always."

Roger's eyes fly open. Freddie's jaw is squared and he looks like he's just waiting for Roger to challenge him on that. But he doesn't look away. "Well, good", Roger says, because clearly there's something significant going on here but he's tired and his head hurts and he's down for the count and it's all he can muster at this point.

"Go the fuck back to sleep", Freddie grumbles, but Roger can hear the smile in his voice.

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He wakes up from hushed voices. He blinks his eyes open and instantly regrets it. The dull background throb of his headache blossoms into a bright painful spark. He presses his hands over his eyes and groans. Seconds later, someone kneels at his side, stroking lightly over his hair.

"Are you in pain, darling? Do you need something to drink? Or a bucket perhaps? I'll just..."

"'m fine", Roger mumbles. "Just turn the fucking lights down."

"The lights are down", Suki says from the doorway. "But I'll close the door so the light doesn't come in from outside, okay?"

The darkness is instantly soothing.

"Can I have another look at your head", she asks.

Roger really doesn't want to, all he wants is go back to sleep, or to drowsing at least, with Freddie at his side. And some water. And thinking of that, a trip to the loo. Which means getting up.

Fuck.

"Go ahead", he says, delaying the inevitable for another few minutes.

She examines his head wound and - with sincere apologies - shines a flashlight into his eyes. Then he's asked to answer a battery of questions, to move his arms and legs, fingers and toes.

"Am I gonna live?"

"Yeah. But you've got quite a concussion and you're gonna feel like shit the next days."
"Days plural?"
"Definitely plural. Sorry."

"Poor baby." Freddie rubs a hand over his back in soothing circles.

Roger slowly realizes that they aren't exactly being discreet. Is it obvious that Freddie has slept in here? They details of last night are kind of hazy, so he has no idea what they might have said or done in front of Suki. He looks up and she gives him a slight smile, then looks down at her note pad, scribbling something.

"Plenty of rest, plenty of water and herbal tea. Paracetamol if the headaches get to bad. I hope I don't have to say this, but because it's you: No drugs, no alcohol for at least two weeks. Get as much sleep as you can. Eat well. When you feel up for it, go out for walks, but take it easy as long as you're sensitive to light. I don't recommend flying either, so stay in New York for the time being if you can. If your symptoms worsen or haven't receded after at week, call me immediately." She tears a sheet from the notebook and hands it to Freddie.

"Hey, er, thanks", Roger says. "For everything. If there's anything I can..."

"Freddie's already promised me your car. A Ferrari 308 GOB? Sweet."

Roger tries to keep his face neutral. "Did he?"

Suki laughs. "Yes, but don't worry. What am I going to do with a car in the middle of New York City? Oh and before I forget." She pauses with her hand on the handle of the door. "I'm a keen believer in doctor-patient confidentiality." With that, she disappears outside, making sure to open door only as wide as necessary.

Roger lets himself fall back onto the bed. "We've got to find a way to make it up to her."

"Hmm", Freddie hums in agreement and lies down next to him. "Dildoes?"

"Dildoes?"

"She's a lesbian, isn't she?"

"Well, you're gay, does that mean you want everyone to give you butt plugs?"

"Roger, I think I've just found the motto for my next birthday party."

"I knew even as I was saying it I should just shut up."

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The next days are hell, just as Suki promised. They're also unexpectedly nice. He hasn't been fussed over like this since he caught scarlet fever when he was nine. Usually he gets antsy whenever he's scooped up somewhere, but his pounding headaches, occasional dizzy spells and sensitivity to light quell any impulse to be up and about. So he sleeps a lot. Watches TV with Freddie. Eats Phoebe's delicious meals. Usually he'd go spare with boredom, but his concussion makes him feel a little stupid, slowing down his thinking to a nice, measurable pace. American daily soaps and nature documentaries are the height what he can take in. It's a pleasurably woozy experience. Is this how stupid people feel all the time?

Freddie, for lack of a better word, hovers. It should be annoying, and Roger does his best to act
gruff, to preserve the last vestiges of his autonomy, but if he's honest with himself? He loves it.

In front of Phoebe, all pretense is long gone. Freddie's never been one for PDAs, but he cuddles with Roger on the sofa, places chaste kisses and little touches on him whenever he feels like it and acts very much like the definition of a concerned lover.

Which Roger is not going to question.

Melissa visits him on day four and Freddie perches in an armchair next to them like a disproving chaperone until Roger tells him bluntly to fuck off.

"He's not to strain himself", Freddie warns Melissa sternly before he leaves.

"You've got one protective boyfriend", Melissa comments and Roger groans.

"Suki told you?" So much for doctor-patient confidentiality.

A slow predatory grin spreads on her face. "No. But you just did."

"Hey that's... that's unfair! I'm brain damaged and defenceless."

"Sorry", she says, looking not the least bit sorry. "All Suki told me was that you were attacked outside a night club and had a concussion. That woman can be maddeningly stubborn. But honey", she leans forward, elbows on her knees, "if you two want to keep this under wraps you've got some work ahead."

"We've kept it under wraps for three years, thanks very much", and something is telling him that he's playing right into her hands but he doesn't care.

"But it wasn't always like this, huh?"

What is she, a wizard? Magic lesbo-vision? He gives up. "Guess not. Listen. I feel like I'm on some really strong weed and it's kind of good but also my head hurts a lot. So have mercy on me, okay?"

"God, Roger, do you have any idea how happy I am for you? You two have been making eyes at each other forever. It's been like a fucking soap opera these last years."

Roger pauses a beat. "Did we?"

"Have you even watched the live footage of your shows?"

He hasn't. Well, he has watched it, but with a technical eye, paying attention to camera angles and editing and sound mixing. He has no interest beyond that, especially since the Rock Montreal recording was a disaster: The director Paul and Jim hired clearly had no experience recording live rock concerts, so the camera was always where it wasn't supposed to be. Of course, catching Freddie's erratic movements are hard enough for the best of cameramen, but not being able to keep a straight shot of Brian's solos? Fucking amateurs. It's a shame though, because the picture and sound quality are amazing.

"Girl, I've been to my shows, smack dab in the middle in fact and... hang on, since when do you watch our shows?"

She pouts, looking a little caught out. "Since Dino made me promise him to bear witness."

"Dino?"
"He was quite far gone at the time and he didn't name names, but I'm pretty sure he meant you when he talked about 'those two fuckers who are clearly perfect for each other'."

"Oh." The room suddenly seems a lot brighter. Surely that was why there is this pressure behind his eyes?

"Yeah. I'm sure it was one of the things that bugged him most about bowing out early, not being able to see your full saga play out."

"Shit, Melissa, I'm..." ...not equipped to deal with this right now.

"A pussy, yes, I know. I'm too, so no need to pretend. I've spent last night holed up in my bedroom listening to one of his tapes, bawling my eyes out. So." She gives a deep, shuddering sigh. "Anyway, Ed bought the Montreal concert and we all watched it and..." She shakes her head and laughs. "It's so funny I've even got to explain this to you."

"What", he asks with a bit of trepidation. Surely she's exaggerating? He has seen the tapes and if Freddie had been making out with him at some point he's sure he'd have noticed. And remembered.

"Well, he's just constantly prancing around your drum kit, trying to get your attention while you're totally focussed on the music, and he's being all flirty and pouty and..."

"Ah, yeah, he's always been like that. Took some getting used to, but after almost fifteen years together... Doesn't mean anything."

"Roger, in the end he basically jerked off his mic stand into your face!"

Wait, what?

"It's not even metaphorical. And okay, he also tried to go down on Brian, but Brian clearly wasn't into it, but you? You just loved it."

Well, Freddie always treats his mic stand like a natural extension of his penis, and they all get treated to some very graphic gestures, but... "I'm sure you're exaggerating."

"I swear to God, I'm not. And we're all sitting there, trying very hard to pretend we're not seeing what we're seeing, because, you know, you're our friend, and you've always been so insistent that you're straight, but come on!"

The words are pouring out of her like a dam has been broken.

"I'm not believing anything you're saying."

"I swear it's true!"

"You're lying!"

"I'm gonna call Ed. I'll have him bring the tape over", she threatens. Offers. Whatever.

The door flies open and Freddie strides in, very purposefully. Without sparing a glance for them he digs through the tapes stacked in a cabinet and holds up a "We Will Rock You"-VHS.

Of course he's got it.

"Excellent", Melissa says and claps her hands.
"How long have you been listening", Roger complains. "There is such as a thing as privacy, you know?"

"Shut up, dear." He smiles at Melissa. "Care for some wine?"

+++ Melissa's right. And wrong.

While she and Freddie slowly get drunk and giggly next to him, Roger - out of necessity - stays stone cold sober, which is quite an experience. The concert video is still maddening to watch - did this guy purposefully turn his camera wherever the least action was? - but he manages to keep his professional hat off enough to get a sense of what's going on between him and Freddie.

And yeah, Freddie is all over his drum kit. Has he always been like that? With the lights and the flow of the music it's not always easy to keep track of what the others are doing during a show. But compared to the other concerts he's seen on film it looks like he's doing more of it, definitely.

And then Sheer Heart Attack. Although Melissa has told him, he's not quite prepared for that. Freddie has always used that song to let loose, kicking monitors and acting for better or worse like a little punk. It would just make his day if one of these nights he could get Brian riled up enough to get into an on-stage fight with him.

But this time Freddie really goes for it. And as Melissa says, it's obvious that Roger loves it. Which he did. He just hadn't quite realized at the time just how gay the whole thing looks. And they weren't even sleeping together at the time.

Melissa and Freddie, fuelled by red wine and champagne, are having a great time. Roger is very happy for them, but his headache is getting worse and their giggling isn't helping, so when the tape has finished, he throws them out.

"Gonna head out later with Ed and some of the others", Melissa says as she gets up. "Dinner and drinks at Ricarda's first and then on to the Spike. Wanna come too?"

Freddie nods enthusiastically, but then hesitates, looks at Roger and sits back down, looking very prim. "No, thank you."

Roger rolls his eyes and nudges him. "You can go out with her, you know. I don't need constant supervision."

The hope in Freddie's eyes is heartbreaking. "You think so?"

"Yes, absolutely. And take Phoebe, too. The poor guy's been scooped in here forever."

"Absolutely not. I'm not leaving you alone!"

"Look, James is coming over for dinner anyway, so I won't even be alone. And you tend to drive him a bit crazy, especially when you're on champagne, so maybe it's better this way."

Freddie puts up some token resistance, but it's clear that he's itching to go.

+++ James looks a lot better than the last time Roger has seen him. It's been over a year since Dino has died and he looks like he's come to terms with it.
"I've really been getting back into activism. It's doing me a lot of good, but it's also tough, really tough. A lot of people need support and the city is just looking the other way."

"Is it... is it getting worse?"

James nods grimly. "The number of cases doubles every few months. A lot of them get cut off by their families. You know, admitting you've got AIDS is like admitting you're gay. The doctors have no idea what to do, the nurses are scared to even touch them and the social workers are just completely overloaded. And the homophobes come crawling out of the woodwork too." He nods at Roger. "This attack on you, for example. Those things have always happened of course, but the Village used to be relatively safe. Our turf, you know. But it has changed. I really don't think you should come over here so much. It's become dangerous."

And Freddie and Melissa and the others are out there right now, putting themselves in the line of fire. He tries to push the thought away. "The other night at the club... It wasn't all that different from before."

James shrugs. "Course not. Do you think people stopped partying during the Cuban missile crisis when we all thought the nuclear apocalypse was nigh? Why would they do so now? Especially since it's not just sleazy bathhouse sluts getting it anymore but normal, everyday gay dudes. Dudes like me."

Roger tenses up. "Are you..."

James' eyes grow wide. "No, god, sorry. Didn't mean to sound like that. I'm fine. But some of the guys getting Kaposi's haven't had risky sex in two years. So if it can take that long to show up, isn't it all too late?"

An icy band of fear tightens around his chest. Two years ago Freddie was still... He shoves that feeling away resolutely. Those are extreme cases James is talking about. They're going to be fine.

James takes a sip of his wine. "I don't think so, obviously. But no one really knows. And if there's one thing the gay community doesn't like to hear its that they should cut back on the four D."

"Four D?"

"Dancing, Disco, Drugs and Dick."

Roger groans. "Oh yeah."

"And as long as no one official comes out and says, hey guys, we're positive that A, B and C are dangerous, but X, Y and Z are safe, so stick to that... well, people are not going to put their entire lives on hold."

"But why aren't there any guidelines? They must know by now how this thing is spread. Melissa said it's a virus a year ago."

"I guess, but... look it's complicated, okay? It's political. If the CDC comes right out and says that gay sex is killing people, the community will be in uproar and the crazies are going to have a field day. And no one wants to dirty their hands by talking about all those nasty sex acts those gays get up to. I mean, come on, can you imagine the health secretary getting up on a stage, and assessing the risks of rimming vs. fisting?"

Roger shrugs. "That might get people to watch the news again."
James grins, but then quickly sobers up. "Anyway, the community itself is split. Some want to the bathhouses closed immediately, some think that's the first step to concentration camps. Some argue for abstinence, some call it heteronormative fear-mongering. And in the middle of all this, people are dying and the news only give a shit when straight drug users or hemophiliacs are hit. Then they might give it a front page."

"So where do you stand on all this?"

James plays with his glass, considering. "I think everyone should help in their own way. I'm not one for manning barricades or storming city hall. But I'm a good organizer. I can get legal and medical advice where it's most needed, I can help people find the social and housing support they need, I can sit with guys who's lovers are just fading away. I need this right now. Knowing I'm doing some good. Not thinking about him all the time. It helps." James leans back and puts his glass down. "Now, I remember being invited for dinner. Got any food in?"

They spend the rest of night eating Phoebe's excellent Irish Stew and watching Baseball, which Roger doesn't understand in the slightest. He has a feeling that that makes it better.

Around eleven, Roger just starts nodding off like a toddler on the sofa, which is more than a little embarrassing. James, however, makes no attempt to leave.

"Hey, it's not like I want to throw you out or anything, but if you don't flee you're at serious risk of having your shoulder drooled on."

"It's fine, you can go to sleep if you like. I'll just move over to the armchair and keep the telly on, if that's alright with you."

A suspicion creeps up on Roger. "Did Freddie make you babysit me?" James ignores that completely, which is all the answer Roger needs. "It's absolutely not necessary. I'm fine, basically."

"Do you want me to bring you a warmer blanket? Or maybe the bedroom's better if you're tired. Freddie said you needed lots of good sleep and..."

Roger flops onto his stomach and buries his face in the upholstery. "This is so embarrassing."

"Yeah, guess you gonna have to deal with that." James leans over and pats his shoulder.

"Sorry, he made you do that. He's a bit..." He really doesn't know how to finish this.

"Don't worry about it. It's nice to watch over someone who'll get better for a change."

"Shit, James, I'm..."

"Forget I said that." He gets up and rubs his hands together. "Let me get you that blanket."

Chapter End Notes

Warning: Homophobic Violence.

According to the books by David France and Randy Shilts, there was an uptick in homophobic violence as HIV/AIDS got more mainstream press.
The Montreal show is a real treasure. Go watch Sheer Herat Attack. It's super shippy as it is, but in the alternate story 'verse, imagine Freddie dialling it up to eleven ;)}
They stay in New York for another week before heading back to London, where they meet up with Jim, John and Brian to plan the rest of the year. Brian presents his mini solo project that had apparently just happened during a jam session with Eddie van Halen (as these things do). No matter how much he protests that he needs family time, the lure of the recording studio is strong in this one.

John meanwhile looks tanned and relaxed, apparently having made good on his promise to work on his golf handicap. And some other things: He and Veronica are going to have their fourth baby in December. He endures the inevitable ribbing with a raised middle finger and a hearty shrug.

They agree to start working on another album in August, in LA this time where Brian and John have bought houses so they can bring along their families. Also, after a rainy English summer, they're set on getting some sunshine.

After the meeting, Roger and Freddie fly back to Montreux to get a couple more weeks of work in on his album. It's good to have Freddie there, although Roger sometimes has to slap his hands away from the mixing desk and remind him whose album it is. Of course, Freddie can't keep away from the microphone and the piano for long and soon he's tinkering with his own songs as well, talking about maybe recording his own solo album.

It's different between them now. Roger can't quite put his finger on it, but something has changed since New York. It isn't that they're holding hands or calling each other cutey names (except in that way that Freddie calls everyone cutey names), but in his head, Roger is definitely thinking of Freddie as his boyfriend, although he still stumbles over the term every time it pops into his mind. And he thinks maybe Freddie does too.

Because while they still go out together - usually with a with a bigger group so it isn't too suspicious - Freddie doesn't take other people home. And to honour the unspoken agreement they now apparently have, neither does Roger.

Which means that for the first time in all the years they've been doing this, Roger gets to experience the full brunt of Freddie's libido unleashed on him.

It's amazing they get any work done at all.

"Puis-je vous aider?"

The smiling elderly florist brings Roger back to the here and now. He looks at the bunch of Freesias in his hand - Freddie's favourite - and feels caught out.

Officially, Roger's staying in a rented apartment while Freddie checked into a hotel. In reality, Freddie stays at the hotel room about once a week to keep up appearances. Essentially, they're living together, which they haven't done in over ten years. Only this time, they have a maid to pick up after them, Phoebe to organize the pesky details of a busy musician life and the money to order in food every time they feel like it instead of living on beans on toast.

But now Freddie's gone to London to meet with his interior designer and discuss... carpets, probably. Our something. Roger tries his best but his brain is just incapable of focussing on fabric
patterns for more than two minutes at a time.

Anyway, Freddie's returning tonight and for some reason Roger has decided he's going to buy him flowers. Which is stupid, but on the other hand, it was his own idea, and his ideas are usually brilliant.

The florist looks at him encouragingly. "Souhaiteriez-vous je vous les enveloppe?"

Roger stuffs the flowers back into their vase. "Non, merci." Then he marches determinedly out of the shop.

This is stupid. He's being stupid. Freddie's not his sodding girlfriend and he doesn't want any sodding flowers. Sod this.

+++ 

"Freesias."

Roger doesn't turn around when he hears Freddie's voice. He's very busy with this... utilities bill or whatever it is he's just found in the desk drawer. He just hums non-commitally.

"Are they... are they for me?"

"Hm?" Roger half turns and tries hard to look as if he's just noticed the giant-ass wall of yellow and lavender flowers in the middle of the dining table. "Saw them at a shop", he says as non-chalantly as possible.

He went into that damn shop four whole times before he finally marched up to the counter and demanded all the Freesias they had. The florist had looked at him like he was a complete nutter and with Roger's French being a little rusty it took him a while to understand that the florist was trying to tell him that he had a whole warehouse full of the things out back. Wouldn't monsieur rather have a bouquet that he could actually carry without a forklift?

"You like them?" Oh God, he should have binned the bloody things on the way home.

Freddie reaches out and fiddles with the arrangement for a minute, something complicated going on with his expression. Then he looks at Roger over his shoulder. "You missed me", he says. 

Roger frowns. "You've been gone?"

Freddie stalks towards him, a cocky grin on his face. "You did", he crows triumphantly and pushes Roger back on his chair so he can straddle him.

Roger looks at the ceiling. Then he looks at Freddie's moustache, all regrown and annoying as if he'd never shaved it off. And then at his own hands twisted in his lap. There must be some glib answer to that. He always has a glib answer.

Freddie lifts up Roger's chin with two fingers. Roger hates it when he does that. He's also instantly turned on. Fuck.

"A bit, maybe", he grumbles.

Freddie's triumphant grin turns soft. "They're lovely", he says and leans forward for a very brief, very chaste kiss. "I love them."

"That's, er... that's good." Alright, time to stop behaving like a 16 year old at his first dance. He
schools his features into something resembling a confident 33 year-old man. "I notice you took the early flight." Freddie must have gone straight from the last meeting to the airport.

Freddie leans forward until his moustache tickles the outline of Roger's ear and they're chest to chest. When he speaks, his voice reverberates through Roger's body. "I notice you've memorized both mine and the flight schedule."

Dammit! Roger's going down, and he's going down fast. "Are you trying to be smart with me?"

Freddie just chuckles and nips at his earlobe. "Did you write a terribly romantic poem about me as well? Or a song? Or were you too busy pining under the shower?"

Roger grabs a fistful of his hair and pulls his head back so the long column of his throat is exposed. "No", he growls and nips at the tendon running down the side of Freddie's neck. He's immediately rewarded with a sharp downward thrust of Freddie's hips. The angle allows only the slightest bit from friction but that's alright for now. "I've been too busy thinking about all the things I'd do to once you came back."

"Wanking quite a lot then?"

Roger sinks his teeth in a little deeper until Freddie sharply sucks in his breath.

"What... ouch! What did you come up with?"

"Oh, I thought I'd lay you out on the bed, play with your tits until you beg me to fuck you and then do it some more and then, if you ask me very, very nicely", he punctuates that with small bites directly over Freddie's collarbone", "I'd fuck you through the fucking mattress. And if you'd been really good, I might have made it last for-e-ver." He lets go of Freddie's neck and looks up at him. Freddie's eyes are huge and not entirely focused and all Roger wants to do is act out the exact scenario he's just described. He lets his eyes rest on Freddie's face for a moment. "Of course that was before you decided to act like a prick."

Immediately Freddie's eyes snap back into focus. He wets his lips and puts both hands on the back rest of the chair, left and right of Roger's head. "So", he says, and his eyes are fucking molten black rock, "what are you going to do to me now?"

Roger can see the pulse jumping at the base of his throat, his chest rising and falling, feels the tiny rocking motions of his hips. He wants all that, but instead he puts his fingers together in front of his chest and shrugs, trying to look completely unconcerned. "I'm not going to do anything", he says, doing his best to ignore the tightness in his trousers.

Freddie nods slowly, a lewd smile spreading over his face. "Oh, you will, darling", he says and slides his hands down Roger's front until they rest lightly on his thighs. "You will."

Chapter End Notes

The French bits: “Can I help you?” - “Would you like me to wrap them up for you?” - "No thanks!"
Roger buys Freddie flowers from time to time. He also has worryingly romantic impulses like taking him out for a dinner and walking hand in hand as the sun sets over Lake Geneva - thank god they have to stay out of the public eye, otherwise he might he turn in a walking, talking Keats poem and would have to beg Crystal to just shoot him already.

Flying back home for his birthday is a good idea. His mum is delighted to have him back in Truro for a big family gathering and Freddie takes over the studio to work on some of his own songs. It gives Roger an opportunity to meet up with old friends and get treated to his Uncle Liam's special backyard barbecue spectacle. Sure, snorting coke with six strippers and Rod Steward in Las Vegas is exciting, but there's something to be said for lying in the shadow of your Auntie Gertie's apple trees, getting pleasantly sloshed on lager, while your cousins have the same argument over the welfare state they've been having for 15 years. Clare's two-year old gets her ketchup-smeared fingers all over his white linen trousers, but she makes up for it by being a delightful little trouble maker who adores him and believes everything he tells her. Including that Auntie Rita absolutely loves snails.

He watches Lily as she crawls through the grass, looking under bushes and branches to find a present for her Auntie. He could have a little one like that by now, if he'd stayed with Dom. Maybe even another one in the way. The thought boggles the mind. Would they have been happy, doting parents, like Clare and Philippe? Or would the relationship have cracked under the strain of touring and sleepless nights and drab routines? Would he feel happy and fulfilled and eager for more like John, or struggling and forever berating himself like Brian? Or would he just have fucking off after a few months, got himself a younger, slimmer girlfriend and seen his kid a couple of times a year to pat him on the head and buy his affection with some expensive toys?

He empties his beer and settles back onto the warm grass. No, it's probably all for the best. But his mind won't let it rest. What about later? He's 34 years old. There's still plenty of time, of course, but he'd still have to find a girl, settle down... And all the settling down he's been doing so far is in a direction that definitely does not lead to babies. Which is a good thing, of course. For now, at least. But in five years? Ten years? Is he still going to be fine then, still carousing with 20 year-olds in public while secretly dating a man he can't even invite out to a Valentines dinner in case someone tips off the press? Children or not, he's not sure how long he can live like that. The pretense, the secrecy, even towards his own family, some his closest friends... It was fine while it was just a bit of fun on the side - but it feels different now. A lot different.

A shriek offers a welcome distraction from his thoughts. Auntie Rita got her present it seems. The garden table, laden with drinks, flips over in a spectacular cascade of crockery as she jumps up to get away from her snail-laden grand-niece. Who'd have thought a 60 year-old lady weighing all of 8 stone can develop such momentum?

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He's back in Montreux three days later, running through the drizzle from his car to the flat. The lights are on, which means Freddie is home, and his treacherous heart thumps brightly at the thought. Like he isn't in deep enough as it is.

He opens the door and is greeted by the rich, delicious smell of a Sunday roast. A few steps inside and the mouth watering promise of dinner is dampened by acrid notes of burnt toast. And are those wisps of smoke dimming the lighting to a yellowish glow?
Sensing doom, Roger steps into the living room.

Freddie is on the sofa, barely looking up when he comes in. "Happy birthday", he yells and throws a package in Roger's general direction like it's a boomerang and he's trying to cull deer. "You're late!"

Roger catches the brightly wrapped box and looks between Freddie, the empty bottle of Stoly and the kitchen door. Several things begin to make sense.

"Got delayed in Amsterdam", Roger says distractedly. He points in the direction of the kitchen. "I'll just..."

Freddie almost trips over his feet as he jumps up from the sofa and none too subtly puts himself between Roger and the doorway. "Open the present", he demands. The vodka on his breath makes Roger's eyes water.

Roger turns the package in his hands. He really is quite hungry, and he'd like to see if he can salvage some of the dinner. Or if he should just call in the fire brigade. "I just want to see if..."

"Stop talking about the damned kitchen", Freddie yells and stomps his foot. In that moment, he looks exactly like Roger's two year-old niece. Down to the deep vertical crease between his eyebrows.

Just in time, a loud clang and a muffled curse is heard from the kitchen. "Is Phoebe in there?" Oh thank god, because that means a) any burning pans are going to be dealt with competently and b) his chances of actually getting something to eat have just increased exponentially.

Freddie throws up his hands, lets out a sort of growl and turns on his heel. He stomps off and lets himself fall back on the sofa. "Yes, he's in the bloody kitchen", he gripes. "Happy now? Why don't you go be with him and swap stories and be pals together, huh?" He makes a shooing motion and reaches for his glass. "Talk about how marvellous you two are at everything and how you never do anything wrong and..."

Roger walks over to the sofa, takes the glass out of his hands and downs it before Freddie has a chance to do more than gape at him. He deserves it. Both his flights have been delayed, he hasn't eaten anything in hours, it's cold and raining and he's nearing middle age with nothing but a massive fortune and a secret boyfriend to show for it.

He sits down next to Freddie, lets the tender burn of expensive vodka warm him from within. He shrugs out of his jacket. Freddie is curled up next to him, silently fuming.

Roger clears his throat. "Did you... Did you cook for me?" The thought doesn't make sense, as he's never seen Freddie so much as boil an egg, but all the facts point to it. If it had been Phoebe all along, there'd be a laid table and a steaming, perfect Sunday roast in the middle of it.

Freddie crosses his arms, presses his lips together and pointedly looks the other way.

That would be a yes. "Roast beef?"

A huff and an eye roll.

Roger sits up, turns towards Freddie and puts a hand on his shoulder. The fact that it's not immediately shrugged off counts as a win. The situation is so totally weird he has no idea what to say. Hm, what would Brian do?
"Thank you", he says.

Freddie looks up at the ceiling and breaths deeply. "Went to the butchers myself."

It takes all Roger's got in him to bite back his smile. He nods grimly, as if he's listening to a grizzled Vietnam vet.

"It was perfect", he says. "And I laid the table and put on the potatoes and... and you just wouldn't come." He curls up on his side, as deeply wounded as only a born drama queen with close to a litre of Vodka in his blood can be. "And now everything is burnt and cold and disgusting."

"There was a thunderstorm in Amsterdam", Roger says.

Freddie just huffs as if clearly that is Roger's fault. "And you don't even want my present."

"What? No! Of course I want your present!" Thank god Roger is officially old now. His younger self never would have been able (or bothered) to keep his cool like this. He'd have been cackling and taking the piss out of Freddie until he'd be thrown out of his own apartment.

He turns his attention back to the box. Out of the corner of his eyes he can feel Freddie watching him closely, but when Roger turns back to him, he quickly pretends to stare at the wall.

Inside the box, wrapped in plain white Washi paper, is an light blue silk scarf with a delicate wave-like pattern. "Wow." He rubs it between his fingers. The material it's so fine he can't even make out the individual threads.

"It's supposed to bring out the colour in your eyes", Freddie whines. "But you clearly hate it so..."

Roger cuts him off with a kiss. "It's beautiful and I love it."

Freddie leans back, snuggling up against him. Roger holds him like this for a while, just enjoying his warmth and smell pressed against him. But then his stomach grumbles audibly.

"Right. I'm starving. Let's see if Phoebe..." But Freddie doesn't move. Roger cranes his head. Freddie is fast asleep, mouth slightly open, lashes fanning out over his cheeks. Roger wriggles himself out from behind him and lies Freddie down on the length of the sofa as carefully as he can.

In the kitchen, Phoebe is kneeling in front of the stove, his whole upper body having disappeared inside.

"Don't do it", Roger says. "You've got so much to live for."

Phoebe bangs his head as he reappears from the oven. He's wielding a flannel and a fearsome looking wire brush. "Yeah, heaven forbid I miss Freddie's scheduled hangover tantrum tomorrow."

The sharp smell of cleansing agents doesn't quite manage to mask the charcoal aroma in the background. The kitchen itself looks rather clean, except for the stack of dirty pots in the corner.

"It's my day off, by the way." Phoebe rolls his eyes, wipes his hands on a dish towel and gets to his feet. "Although when he called me up and asked for a recipe for roast beef, I knew I better stay on standby."

Roger inspects the pots in the corner. They're covered in a thick crust of black soot. "Wow."

"Yup. They're for the bin."
"What did he do, exactly?"

Phoebe shrugged. "He made roast beef. And potatoes. And roasted root vegetables, I believe. It's hard to tell from the remains without forensic analysis." He points at the blackened remnants of what might once have been vegetables on a baking tray. "I believe he was quite successful. But when you weren't here at 7, he just kept everything on, so it wouldn't get cold. And when you weren't here at 8, he broke out the vodka. And when you weren't here at 9..."

"Yes, alright, I don't need a minute-by-minute-breakdown." He hasn't missed the plaintive tone in Phoebe's voice. "There was a thunderstorm in Amsterdam!"

"And all the phone lines were down so you couldn't call?" Phoebe crosses his arms over his chest.

"Hey, how the fuck am I supposed to know Freddie – Freddie! - decides to go full on Bocuse on me, huh? I didn't even know he'd be here!"

The corners of Phoebe's mouth twitch. "Aretha Franklin herself wouldn't have been able to tempt him away from here tonight."

"Oh, that's... shut up." Roger looks around, not quite knowing what to do with his feelings. "We got anything edible in? Not roast beef, if possible?"
They all reconvene in Los Angeles to start work on a new album. New place, new ideas. Freddie flies in early and uses the opportunity to visit Michael Jackson at his Neverland ranch. At first he's very excited and talks about recording some songs together (although he also complains endlessly about Michael's tacky style), but when Roger sees him again two weeks later, that idea has been gently put to rest. Apparently there was some sort of falling out. Freddie doesn't talk about it, but Roger imagines that having two slightly hysterical superstars together for a prolonged period of time with no buffer between them can't go too well.

In the studio, it's more or less like it always is. They don't talk about the Roger-and-Freddie situation and although John and Brian must know they don't actually need two separate hotel rooms, they keep the couply stuff strictly to their private hours.

Despite the lure of LA's beaches and clubs, they manage to keep up the work ethic, which is undoubtedly helped by the fact that John's and Brian's families are there. It means that both of them are mostly sober and eager to get some work done. They're also much less likely to snipe at each other when the wives are present. This in turn means that Freddie and Roger are forced to put in the hours as well if they want keep up with them and have any influence on the album. Which they do.

"Radio Caca?" John wrinkles his nose.

"Yup", Roger days and hums the chorus again. "My niece came up with it. She's half-French. Catchy, isn't it?"

"But what's it supposed to mean?" John looks completely befuddled.

"It's how toddlers talk", Roger replies. "Shouldn't you know all about that? Like poo poo and pee pee and..."

"Yeah, I'm familiar with that, thanks. Why is it in your song?"

Roger rolls his eyes. "I'm not going to explain metaphor to you, I'm really getting too old for..."

"Give me that", Freddie butts in and snatches the lyrics from John's hands. He scans the text. "It's got potential. Needs some work, though."

Roger, out of his line of sight, pretends to strangle him. "What", he asks clicking the t.

"It's too drab and glum. You're not Brian, for heaven's sake." Then he disappears out the door, sheets of notes and lyrics in hand. "I won't be disturbed", he announces on his way out.

"Right", Brian says. "Anyone got something else to work on while the genius is busy with the poo-poo song?"

By the time the genius returns they've put down a decent rhythm track for "Tear it up", called it a good days work and broken out the drinks in honour of Crystal's birthday. They've got quite a buzz going when Freddie strides in triumphant. He plucks Roger's beer from his hands and brandishes the lyrics like a sword. "Art, ladies and gentlemen!"
John takes the sheet. He frowns, then looks up at Freddie, eyebrows raised.

"What's he done", Brian asks.

Roger settles back. It might be genius. It might be a complete clusterfuck.

"You've just spent 6 hours rewriting Roger's lyrics", John says. "And the end result is that you turned Radio Caca into..." He looks at the sheet again, to make sure he's read it right the first time or maybe just for effect. "...into Radio Ga Ga."

"That's not all I did!" Freddie steps close to John and taps his finger at the sheet. "See there, that complete line is different and I've exchanged all the..."

"Yes, I was simplifying a bit." John rolls his eyes.

"And look, the phrasing of the bridge, it's..."

"...looks good, yeah, I see." Seems like John's getting into it.

"Er, guys?" Brian's wearing his exasperated 'I could have got a PhD from Imperial, why am I surrounded by these idiots'-expression. "A baby talk song? Seriously?"

"It's not all baby talk", Roger protests. "If you'd have bothered to read the rest of the text..."

But Freddie cuts him off. "No, it's fun, see? 'Radio Ga Ga, Radio Gu Gu, Radio Blah Blah' - it's good! It's fun!"

Now it's Roger's time to stare. "You put in more baby talk?"

"Once is just bad writing", Freddie explains. "It needs repetition to really..."

"It's not bad writing, it's a restrained used of a rhetoric device, you wanker!"

"That you stole from a two year old."

Roger jumps up from his chair.

"No, no, no." John tugs him back down none to gently with a hand on his arm. "We've officially started the fun part of the night. No more shouting matches until tomorrow noon. It's the law."

"He started it", Roger grumbles, not sure himself if he means Brian or Freddie, but allows John to put another beer into his hand.

When everyone's calmed down and the conversation drifted to less divisive topics, he gets himself the sheets with Freddie's lyrics on them. As John said, he didn't change that much, but with a few twists of the lyrics he's turned it from an angry swan song into a stubbornly optimistic celebration. It now essentially promises the return of radio's full glory at a time of dire need. Like Gandalf riding in at the first light.

Of course, that is going to change the whole dynamic of the song. They'd have to adjust the instrumentation, the whole sound, the tempo... He puts the sheet aside. They'd figure it all out. They'd play all the different version, they'd get annoyed, they'd fight, they'd make up and in the end there would be a group decision. It would be tedious and exhausting, but in the end they'd have a better song for going through all of it.

As always.
Freddie's birthday is a quieter affair than the last years. Mary and Peter Straker come to visit from London and Thor Arnold flies in from New York but apart from that it's mostly just the band, production crew and some friends from the area, like Gerry and Sylvia Stickells. Roger is surprised that Freddie doesn't make a huge production of it or at least takes a few days off to celebrate in New York, but Freddie shrugs it off, saying he doesn't want to break the flow or recording.

And they've got a good flow going. They're never going to win awards for being the fastest in the studio, but compared to the last albums they're making good progress. There's a lot less fighting because whenever the rest of the band reject one of Freddie's or Roger's songs, they can now turn up their noses and say that if Queen doesn't want it, it will go on their solo albums instead. Soon John and Brian take to saying "I'll just put it on my solo album" as well, just be annoying, like when John sings a horribly out of tune demo track for I Want to Break Free. Or when a hamburger falls through the grate. "Oh, that'll be perfect for my solo album", Brian trills as he holds up the charred remains.

They stay in LA for a couple of more weeks, but in September they celebrate their last weekend there. The new school year has started for the older children, so recording in Europe will put John and Brian much closer to their families.

Although no one's keen to trade the California summer for a German fall and winter. And tonight it's like LA puts on a last grand gesture to seduce them into staying with the most beautiful and fragrant of early autumn nights. They have dinner in the large garden of John's house, then simply lounge around the wicker garden chairs feeling quite pleased with themselves.

Freddie has been drinking Champagne all night. When they go out, he usually switches to harder liquor like vodka or peppermint schnapps, which really riles him up. But if it's only champagne he turns giggly and a little mellow, his movements fluid instead of aggressive and excited. He's discussing the lastest fashion blunders with Sylvia Stickells and he almost falls out of his chair laughing when she does an impression of a local glamour girl. He's amazing like this, relaxed and carefree and with an open unguarded laugh that is neither pretty nor dignified but absolutely glorious.

When Roger finally looks away, he notices that Brian is watching him. He also notices that he's grinning like a loon and quickly reaches for a drink to hide behind.

Two hours later, only the four of them are left and the conversation has turned into a reminiscing about the glory days and their plans for the future.

"We should do something like the Crazy-tour again", Brian says. "Smaller cities, smaller venues, more experimental sets..."

John nods. "Maybe invite some local acts to join in for a song or two."

"I don't know." Roger has good memories of the 79' tour (for obvious reasons), but he loves the energy of the big stadiums. "I'm thinking we should explore a bit more. We haven't even played all of Europe, or anywhere in mainland Asia. Or Africa. Or perhaps go behind the iron curtain."

"Be honest, Rog", John says. "You just want to see if you can get away wearing a "Free Afghanistan"-shirt in Russia."

Roger grins. "Bet you I could." He lights a cigarette.
"I am not going to communist prison for you", Freddie says and snatches the cigarette from his fingers, then stubs it out.

"Wha... hey! That was my last one!"

"You shouldn't smoke so much. It's terribly bad for the lungs."

"Are you lecturing me about the health effects of too many drugs? Seriously?"

"I've seen a documentary about it. It's horrible."

"You're still smoking the damn things!" Although Roger had to admit he scaled it down somewhat. At least around him.

"Yes, and you're constantly haranguing me about it."

"It's damaging your voice, you idiot. You had to use an inhaler during the last tour just so you get on stage some nights and... Shut up", Roger hisses at Brian and John who are giggling like deranged hags. Then snaps his fingers at John. "Alright, you give me one."

"Don't you dare!" Freddie immediately turns on John.

"Sorry", John says. "Mummy says you musn't." He looks like he's enjoying himself immensely, the prat.

Roger glares at him a moment. John just shrugs. Brian looks very pleased with the development."I don't believe it", Roger grumbles. "Is this a plot or something?"

Brian leans forward on his chair, focusing on Freddie. "So what would you like to do? With Queen, I mean."

"The Maracanã", Freddie says. "One day'll I'll sing in the Maracanã in front of 300.000 people."

"You'd be brilliant", Roger says.

"Of course I'd be brilliant, darling. We all would be."

They drink to their combined brilliance under the starry night sky.

Chapter End Notes

So, did I give Roger a half-French niece just to make sure Radio Ga Ga happens in this timeline? Yes. Yes, I did. Some things are too important to mess with.
Munich, 11 October 1983

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They return to Germany just in time for the last weekend of the Oktoberfest. They've been to Munich often enough, but never at this time of year. Roger decides that - given enough beer - Germans can be just as batshit as Mexicans. On paper, beer served by the litre and heaving bosoms in traditional dresses sound fantastic. In practice, he barely makes it through the afternoon and has to be carried out of the stuffy tent by a couple of Australian Valkyries (if he remembers correctly). He recoils at the smell of Brathendl for days afterward.

Marlene just shakes her head at him. "Told you so", she says when he tells her of his woes.

It takes him a week to recuperate and then he decides to keep strictly to the kind of partying he's familiar with: The Sugar Shack, the Frisco, Hendeson's, those he can deal with. Swaying in time to traditional brass music, squished between 300 pound Bavarian matrons and drunk American tourists when his stomach is that close to spilling over with beer and roast chicken - not so much.

Freddie loves it of course. And the more Roger rails against it, the more adamant he becomes that it was the best party ever, and hey, maybe that could be the theme for his next birthday party, wouldn't that be just fantastic?

Roger carefully balances the drinks (vodka tonic, he's got enough of beer for the rest of the year) back to the table. It's classic disco night at The New York and it's not easy navigating through the dance floor with two full glasses in his hands. A young man with long hair and no shirt almost slaps him as he windmills about the place and Roger ducks and steps aside just in time. A sharp twinge shoots through his leg at the movement. "Hey", he yells, but the guy has already drifted off, not even turning his head. Probably high on something.

Roger puts his drinks down on a nearby table and shakes his leg out, rubbing his hand over it. Did he overdo it at the gym this morning? He can't remember anything but...

Oh. A grin spreads on his face. Not this morning. But last night, he and Freddie had a very vigorous sort of workout, the kind that lasts hours and leaves you sweat soaked and gasping for breath and like you're just going to melt into the other person. They got into all sorts of weird positions, like when he's been half-kneeling on the bed with one foot still on the floor and... yes, sense memory alone threatens to send another cramp through his thigh.

Worth it, though. Absolutely worth it. Freddie had even stayed his anti-smoking crusade and produced two cigarettes from his bedside drawer afterwards, handing one to Roger without comment. Roger was too shagged out to chide him for keeping cigarettes there.

The weird thing is, whereas usually the sex always tended to get sort of stale the longer he knew someone, with Freddie it just keeps escalating. In a good way. They've always been... he keeps looking for the right word. Fierce? Aggressive? Experimental? All of that, and it still is, but now it gets mixed up with all sorts of intimacy and - dare he say it - romance and it's lifted onto a whole other plane.

He schools his expression into something a little less obvious and makes his way back to Freddie. Thinking about last night has left him not a little horny, and who knows, maybe if he plays his cards right, Freddie's going to let him take him home early.
Five minutes later, that hope has evaporated into thin air.

Freddie is busy. Freddie has found some new friends who are a lot more interesting than Roger. One of them even fulfills the two prime traits for being friends with Freddie: Being built like a tank and having a big moustache. Who cares if he doesn't speak a word of English and only communicates through his loud-mouthed busty friend (who Roger's never heard of but who seems to consider herself some kind of star). And through gropes.

Roger still makes a half-hearted effort to get involved in the conversation, but the anger is simmering inside him. Is this going to be Kansas City all over again? Freddie getting bored with him so he treats him like an annoying hanger-on?

Gloria Gaynor comes on and Freddie jumps from his seat, pulling tank-guy with him. He doesn't spare a single glance for Roger as he heads for the dance floor.

Fuck that. Fuck him.

Roger downs his VT and gets up. If Freddie wants to screw around, fine. It's not like they're really a couple or anything. But he's got better things to do on his Saturday nights than being ignored by Freddie and his crew.

He gets up. Should he pass by the dance floor, wave good-bye? Screw that. Freddie didn't wave good-bye either.

Crystal, Jobby, Mac and Deacy are still at the Sugar Shack. The music is better, there's plenty of girls to ogle and the guys are actually interested in his company. And it's a relief to be able to just light up a cigarette without his infernal majesty tut-tutting over his shoulder. A relief to have him out of his mind for once.

"Where's Freddie", Crystal asks.

Roger rolls his eyes. Of course he wouldn't escape that easily. "Being a dick somewhere else."

"Trouble in paradise?"

"Would you shut the fuck up?" He smiles his toothiest smile.

"Touchy." Crystal, obnoxious fuck that he is, waggles his eyebrows at him, just to rile him up a bit more. But then he organizes Roger a beer and a joint, because he's a decent human being after all, and they talk about anything but Mr Fahrenheit. Who can go fuck himself.

The evening only gets better when Mack introduces him to one of his friends, a dark-eyed Italian called Francesca, who looks a bit like a 1920's flapper with her short black hair and small red mouth, and is obviously interested in him. She's a bit older than him, maybe around 40, but she's got style and confidence and an amazing trim figure. And she doesn't ignore him.

She even gets him dancing. She can do proper steps and everything while he can't and she obviously loves that. She laughs and peers up at him through long, heavy lashes. Oh yes, she'd take him home if he lets her and he has no doubt that she'd show him a good time.

Francesca excuses herself to the loo and Roger sits back at the table. It's been way too long since he's been with a woman. There was that waitress in Montreux back in June, and he can't even remember that properly because he's been pretty fucked up at the time.

"Don't do it."
He looks up to see John. He has his chin resting in one of his hands, holding a cigarette in the other.

"Do what?"

John rolls his eyes and shakes his head. 'You know what', his expression says, and yeah, Roger does know.

"It's okay", he says. "We're not like that."

John raises his eyebrows. He takes a deep drag of his cigarette. "Sure?"

Roger watches Francesca making her way back to the table, hips swinging in time to the music. He looks back at John, who looks like a bloody French philosopher with his mad hair and his cigarette and the half-full glass of wine in front of him.

Roger slams his glass down on the table. "Damn you."

+++ 

"Where the fuck were you?"

Roger almost stumbles backwards out the doorway so furious and sudden is the shout that assaults him. He sets his jaw, slams the door behind him and marches into the living room. Freddie's on the sofa, drumming his fingers on the arm rest and looking pissed.

"Out. With friends", he says, as lightly as he can. He throws the keys on the table and heads straight for the drinks cupboard.

"You can't just leave."

Roger pours himself a whiskey and raises one eyebrow at Freddie. "Can't I?" He didn't expect Freddie to be here, and honestly one part of him is glad he's not out there getting high with a bunch of Germans, but he's not in the mood for games right now. "I'm kinda surprised you noticed."

Freddie jumps up like that's just what he's been waiting for. "Hah! So you were jealous!"

Roger downs the shot. "I'm not fucking jealous." He takes a step towards Freddie. "Or do you want me to be jealous? Is that it? Do you want me to sit around seething and not thinking of anything but you? Do you want me to step in and drag you out of there like a cave man? Is that it?"

Freddie rolls his eyes. "Of course everything I do has to be about you, Mr. Roger Taylor, the pretty one, the fucking rock star."

"What do you want from me Freddie? Huh? You could have just fucked off with Werner or Hans or whatever his name was but here you are, picking a fight with me instead. You know", he leans forward, "maybe this is all about me, huh?"

"Fuck you. You don't control me. No one controls me."

And he's so serious and offended as he says this that the fight drains right out of Roger. He shakes his head and sits down on the sofa, feeling very old and very tired all of a sudden.

"God, Freddie, you're so fucking extra. You're just..." He reaches out and takes Freddie's hand pulling him towards him. Freddie resists for a moment but then sits down next to him. "Of course I don't control you. NASA Mission Control couldn't fucking control you. Christ on a bike. I just... I
don't want the same fight over and over. I don't want me saying stupid things and you storming out and doing stupid things over and over. So. Tell me." He looks straight at Freddie. "What do you want from me? Because good help me I'm probably gonna give it to you."

Freddie gives him a long look. "I want to take you to bed."

"Okay." Roger takes a deep breath and puts on his serious face. "You know I'm easy and all but right now I'm...

"Oh, don't be an idiot." Freddie gets up and holds out his hand. He cocks his head and glares at Roger until he relents. Roger lets himself be pulled to his feet and towards the bedroom.

Roger hesitates briefly before they go inside. "Freddie, if you've got someone in there I..."

"Oh shut up."

Freddie doesn't bother to put on the lights or undress, he just pushes Roger onto the bed and curls up behind him, pulls up the duvet and buries his nose in Roger's hair.

"We've got to do something about your hair."

"Seriously, Freddie? That's what you want to discuss? My hair?" Besides his hair rocking but he's not even going to argue with Freddie about it.

"Makes you look... American."

"You like America. Americans."

"I like you."

O-kay. He knows that. It's not like Freddie's ever said it in as much words, but he knows anyway. So why does he feel so warm all of a sudden? "So, er. Anything else you want to..."

"I want to be with you. I want you to want to be with me. And I want you to show me how much."

"Alright, I..."

"Hush, I'm not done. I want to go out. I want to fuck other guys while you watch and sometimes on my own. I want to tell you about it and see you tremble with rage. I want to have threesomes and foursomes and I want you to pimp me out and then slap me for being a slag. I want to slap you some time just to fuck up your perfect face. I want to be woken up with a bouquet of roses and I want to get you so angry you make me bleed. I want to be the bloody sun you revolve around and I want to make you burn. I want you to drag me to hell and back up." He takes a long deep breath. "Can you do that? All of that, the whole parcel not just the pretty bits, the ones you're comfortable with?"

Bloody hell what has he done to deserve this madman? "Yes". Roger says because he's obviously not in his right mind and his head is spinning, but what else can he say?

"You will?" Freddie sounds like he's expected anything but that.

"Of course I will."

"Oh."

"Can I say what I want too?"
"No."

"Freddie!"

Freddie huffs. "OK fine. But no taking it back."

"No I won't... damn you." Roger sighs. "Alright. I'm not a mind reader. So I want you to tell me what's going on. What you want and when, what you expect me to do."

"I can't do that. It's not how this works."

"But it's not going to work any other way. No wait." He feels Freddie pulling away from him and keeps him close. "I'm not arguing. This is not about wanting out, it's about..." He turns around so he can see the outline of Freddie's silhouette. "Fuck, Freddie, look at me. I'm a fucking idiot. How am I supposed to know when you're making out with a guy at a club if you're in the mood for the jealous cave man thing or genuinely interested in the guy? Whether you want to get off with him alone or with me watching? And even if I do know, maybe sometimes I'm just completely not in the mood - and I have to be able to tell you without you thinking I'm being angry or anything."

"How do you mean 'not in the mood'?" He sounds almost offended.

"Freddie, I'm not a sexual services dispenser."

"I've heard differently."

Roger pinches him in the side. "I'm serious. Some of what you said, it's pretty out there stuff. And I'm game, like I said, but if I come over to your flat expecting dinner and a movie and cuddles on the sofa and instead there's four leather men wielding double ended dildoes..."

"Roger!" Freddie sounds delighted and Roger's got to nip this right in the bud.

"Would you stay on topic just this once? Like tonight. What did you want tonight?"

Freddie gives a long suffering sigh and rolls onto his back. "Not an interrogation, certainly."

Roger's not going to take the bait. "But?"

"I don't know. I usually don't know what I want until I've done it."

"Well then how the fuck am I supposed to know?"

"I thought you were clever."

"Yeah, but not like that. I'm not a... I really don't." Melissa probably knows things like that. He doesn't.

"But you have instincts. You know when someone's up to no good. Can't you tell with me too?"

"I don't..." He thinks again. He does in a way. He knows when Freddie's is trying to rile him up, when he wants it rough, when he needs it slow. The stuff he's talked about though... that's on a whole other level. What if he thinks Freddie wants the four leather men (and Jesus Christ, he has to find a way to get off the table again) when all he wants is a bit of a scolding by his jealous boyfriend? "A bit", he admits grudgingly. "Sometimes."

"See? You're making a big drama out of nothing."
"But say I get it wrong. Like I did tonight, obviously. We can't just fight and sulk and make up and fight and sulk all the time. And what if I really mess up and you get hurt and..."

"I'm not some delicate flower, Roger."

Yes, you are you bloody idiot. "No, but you're not bulletproof either."

"Look you'll do fine. It's worked out pretty well so far didn't it?"

Apart from the time you started a bar fight because you were so frustrated, and the time you ran off and screwed god knows who and didn't talk to me for weeks and... Roger clenches his teeth. And then he says something he'd never admit to outside this bed. "It's scary. This. All of it."

Freddie doesn't say anything for a long time. He just lies there breathing in the darkness. Then: "Tony's got it too."

Roger doesn't have to ask what. "Oh. Oh, I'm so sorry."

There's a long silence. Roger has no idea what to say. Tony's an arsehole, but...

"Sometimes I wonder if... If it's too late for me."

"What? No. You're fine, aren't you?" He pushes up on one arm. "Aren't you?"

"Yes, but - will you lie down? - Tony says he hasn't been sleeping around for two years. And two years ago I've still been... you know."

Yes, that's the nightmare they all have. That it's all too late and the true horror is yet to come. "But Tony's boyfriend had it first. Maybe he's been sleeping around without telling Tony and that's how he got it."

"Yeah. Maybe." He doesn't sound convinced.

Roger rolls onto his side and throws an arm over Freddie's chest. "You're going to be alright", he says to both of them. "We're going to be alright."

Chapter End Notes

And another cameo: Winnie and Barbara. Sorry guys, you're not part of this timeline.

Song for this chapter: Meat Loaf – I’d do Anything For Love.

Freddie’s speech reminds me a bit of that song. At one point I had an editing note in the margins of my draft: “Don’t have him talk like a bloody Meat Loaf song”, but then I decided I kind of liked it and left it as it was ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

Tony Bastin died of AIDS in November 1986.
London, 23 November 1983

"Rog? Got to talk to you about something." Oh dear, it's Brian with his serious face.

"Yeah?"

"Something serious."

"Okay. Sure." Roger shores up his defences.

Brian looks around, then leans in, lowering his voice. "John's hair. Do you think it has... awoken?"

Roger's looks over at John, who is tinkering with a piece of equipment at the end of the sound stage and bursts out laughing. The Perm has certainly got a lot bigger than last time he saw it. "Fuck, I think you're right", he whispers.

"I'm pretty sure the janitor crosses himself every time he sees it."

"Maybe he can bring in a local priest to perform an exorcism."

Brian nods grimly. " Might be safer for us all."

"Although I'm not sure you of all people should get so high and mighty about other people's hair."

"Hey, I was born that way!"

"Yes, so you keep saying, but..."

"What are you whispering about, my darlings?" Freddie puts one arm around each of them, insinuating himself between them.

"You, of course", Roger says, as he always does.

"I knew it!" He looks delighted by that info. "Alright, my little gaggle of tettletales, David's ready for us."

And thus begins another session in the flying car. Roger's driving / flying, of course, and Freddie rides shotgun, which leaves Brian and John in the back. It should be a relatively straightforward shoot, but in every take at least one of them can't resist doing a funny grimace (Brian) or having a smoke when they think the tape's not rolling (John) or messing up the lyrics (Freddie). Things are not made easier by the fact that Freddie keeps a gigantic glass of vodka tonic stashed under the dashboard. Which Roger takes to sipping from as well. So they're both well and truly sloshed by the time they're half-way through with filming.

"Could you two children in the front focus for two bloody minutes", Brian complains the next time Freddie forgets his text and breaks down in giggles. "My legs are getting numb and I'd like to get out of here before Christmas."

"Enjoy it", John says. "How often do get to be in a flying car? And one in which Roger's driving can't actually kill you because it's fixed in place?"

Roger flips him off backwards and steals another mouthful of Freddie's V+T.

"Get your own drink", Freddie snaps and takes it away from Roger.
"How come you two get drinks anyway", Brian pipes up.

"I get drinks", Freddie clarifies. "Because I plan for things and am always prepared for an emergency."

Roger side-eyes him. "What sort of emergency requires a V+T and a packet of silk-cuts?" Roger has only just found those. Freddie must have been smoking them secretly while he was on a loo break.

"Every kind of emergency. And a propos silk cuts, light me one of these, will you darling?"

"Absolutely not."

Freddie rolls his eyes and, seeing this as a challenge instead of an eternal truth, reaches for them himself. Roger smacks his hands away and soon they've got a tussle going on (which is kept from escalating by the fact that they're both stuck in a car prop and can't move their legs).

"Children, please, no fighting!"

"Shut up", they shout in unison and promptly start giggling. When Roger comes up for air, he happens to look up just at the same time as Freddie and their eyes meet and it's been a very, very long time since they're last kissed, like this morning at least, and...

Roger clears his throat and looks away, trying to gather his bearings. They're in the middle of a video shoot, for Christ's sake. He looks around to see if anyone's noticed. David Mallet, the director is deep in discussion with his assistant, and most of the crew have gone out for a break while two electricians try to fix a problem with the electrical wiring. No one's looking at them, it's all fine.

"Oh, just kiss already", John grumbles.

Roger's not sure if he's heard right, if his hyperactive imagination has been making it up. His eyes snap back to Freddie's. There's a flash of dark eyes and then those lush, red lips are pressed against his, a hot wet tongue licking inside his mouth for just a fraction of a second, before it's all gone again and Roger's grasping for his composure.

There's a few seconds of deafening silence.

"Think it's gonna rain tonight?" Brian, being British.

"Hope not. Been planning on taking Joshua for a stroll through the park before dinner." And there's John.

Sometimes he just loves his band mates.

+++ After another couple of weeks in Munich they get the album done in time for Christmas. Or so they think, before they all get together for one last check.

"Still think it would sound better with the guitar arpeggios before the first chorus", Brian says.

Roger rolls his eyes. Brian thinks everything sounds better with guitar arpeggios.

"Well, I still think the whole number is at least 2 or 3 bpm too fast", John says.
"It's fine", Roger says. "We've been over this a million time, it needs a bit of drive."

"No, he's right", Freddie says. "It's too frantic."

"That means doing the whole thing from scratch", Brian says. They can't just slow down the tape, as that would mean all sorts of distortion.

John shakes his head. "My flight is leaving in two hours and I promised Veronica I'd be on that plane."

"So we just leave the whole thing as it is, right?" Roger looks around, knowing within his heart of hearts what's going to come next.

"We're going to have to call Jim", Brian says. "We'll need another week in January."

"Make it two", Freddie says. "My phrasing on Man on the Prowl could use some work too."

"Yes, and while we're at it..."

"For fucks sake!" Roger kicks against the leg of the table so hard the beer bottles rattle. He plans to spend his January finishing his solo album with maybe a bit of leisurely skiing thrown in. He doesn't want to go back to sodding Munich. It's not that he doesn't want the album to be good (he does, and it is good, it's his favourite album since News of the World), but sometimes you just have to draw a line and say, right, that's it, we're done here.

"Come on, Rog", Brian says, patting his shoulder. "Just another week or two."

"One week", he says through gritted teeth. "One week of hard, concentrated studio work. The four of us together. No visiting the family or fucking off to Bali on a whim." He'll never let John live that one down. "No Sugar Shack until the tracks are done."

John looks at Freddie. "What are you doing to him? He's turning into Brian."
This is very much the (porny) Christmas Episode of this fic. I didn't manage to synch up the posting schedule with the holidays properly, so feel free to put off reading this for a couple of days if you want the full Christmas experience.

Four separate cars wait for them at Heathrow.

It's only four weeks until they'd meet again in Munich for the finishing touches of the album, but saying goodbye to Freddie still feels weird. They've always spent the time between albums and tours apart, but with things having changed so much over the summer...

"Where are you going for Christmas", Brian asks.

"My mum's family. Answering lots of questions about non-existent girlfriends and whether it isn't time for me to settle down one of these days."

"Oh." Brian grimaces. "You're always welcome to join Chrissie and me, you know."

"Yeah, thanks mate. I'm fine. They're actually a great bunch. In small doses, that is."

Very small doses, apparently.

It's the 5 o'clock on Christmas Day and Roger's seriously thinking about faking a bout of flu just so he can shore himself up in his room. Christmas Eve had been nice, just his mum, Claire, Philippe and little Lily (who didn't like the demo of Radio Ga Ga he's brought along just for her at all, the snob). Jim and Sally, two friends he's known since grammar school dropped in as well, and they all sat around in the kitchen, drinking beer (ginger ale in Clare's case, as she's pregnant with her second one) and pretending to help his mum and grandma with dinner.

But Christmas day itself... It's not just that the house is two sizes too small for all the aunts and uncles and cousins and in-laws flooding it. It's also that his entire extended family seems to have gone into breeding mode. There's not just Lily and a handful of older kids, but also three infants: his cousin Katie made the start with little Harry in September and Judy (who always, always has to steal the limelight) gave birth to twin girls a month later. And while they're all very cute (although Roger couldn't tell them apart if his life depended on it), at least one of them is always cranky or in need of a nappy change. And every time he turns around, either Katie or Judy has got her tits out to feed one of the babies. He understands it's necessary, but... they're his bloody cousins. And it's the Christmas lunch table, for fucks sake. But apparently these things are considered normal these days and he's not allowed to make jokes about it.

"Clare, can you promise me one thing?"

She laughs and smacks his arm. "Better get used to it", she says. "It's a beautiful and natural bodily function and we're not gonna hide away any longer." She wags her finger at him and smirks.

"How come if I go about my beautiful, natural bodily functions in public I get arrested", he
grumbles, which his Auntie Trudie overhears. She's lived in a commune during the sixties and before he can do anything about it, he's being lectured on the feminine divine and the beauty of life-giving mother Gaia.

So when his cousin Carl asks if he wants to smoke some homegrown weed outside, he happily marches into the icy December sleet like it's the Mediterranean sunshine.

They're halfway through a shared joint and Roger's just settling into that flowing, relaxed state when the window right next to them opens.

"Roger?" Reflexively he throws the blunt into the rose bushes next to him. Carl's grimaces.

His grandma's head appears. "Ah, there you are. What are you doing out there? It's freezing!"

"Just, er, needed some fresh air", he says, waving his hands about. It occurs to him that the air around them is kind of misty and not very fresh. He crosses his arms and goes on the attack. "The whole house smells of diapers."

"It would have helped if you had taken the trash out with you, wouldn't it?"

Carl tries very hard not to giggle. Roger rolls his eyes. He's been back to two days and it's like he's sixteen again. "What is it?"

"Your friend is the phone for you. Freddie Mercury."

His heart rate speeds up and suddenly he's not cold anymore. "Ah", he says, playing it cool and hoping Carl's too stoned to notice his reaction. "Right, I'm coming."

His grandmother disappears back inside and Carl crouches to pick up the blunt, hoping it didn't get too soaked to finish. Then he dives head-first into the bushes when the window flies open again. "And pick up after yourselves. Your mother put a lot of work into these roses."

There's only one phone in the house and it's in the middle of the hallway. Roger takes a deep breath and picks up. "Freddie?"

"Were on earth were you?"

"Er... out?"

"Rome rose and fell in less time than it took to get you to the phone. Did you nip off to Ibiza for a bit?"

"Yeah, just returned to take your call, arsehole. So could you get to the point? The hookers are not gonna screw themselves, you know?" His grin falters when he turns around and looks straight into the pruny face of his great-aunt Ruth.

Ah, fuck it. He never liked her anyway.

"Actually, I just wanted to wish you a blessed and Merry Christmas, but... what is going on over there?"

Screeches of hell are ripping the air asunder. Sounds like someone took away Lily's awful one-eyed stuffed sheep.

"Family", he says as brightly as he can. "Isn't it wonderful? Also, Merry Christmas to you too. How's it going?"
They talk like that for a couple of minutes. Freddie spent Christmas with his family as well, but there's going to be a small party of friends coming over to his place tonight. They quickly run out of things to say. They don't often talk on the phone.

"Well, er... smells like dinner's getting ready and..."

"Yes, of course. I've got to check if Joe got all the mistletoe in place before the guests arrive."

"So thanks. For giving me a call."

"Sure."

Roger plays with the cord. He's going to hang up any second now. "Bye then."

"Good bye, Ro..."

"When will I see you again?" Roger leans against the wall and grimaces at the receiver. They've not even been a week apart. How needy can you be?

"Oh." Freddie sounds surprised. "January, I thought."

Of course. Fuck. "Yeah, right. I was just... anyway, thanks for calling." He slams the phone down, face burning with embarrassment. He needs to get a fucking grip. And a beer. And another joint. Where's Carl?

The phone rings. He lifts the receiver. Anything to keep his mind off the spectacular way he just got humiliated. "Taylor", he growls.

"I meant" - it's Freddie sounding peeved - "I meant you can come over anytime."

"It's fine, you know, I was just..." Just what? He yells angrily at himself. Making conversation? Passing the time?

"It's usually people coming and going all through Boxing Day", Freddie goes on as if he hadn't said anything, "so it's not like you'd stick out. Or maybe the day after that, if you'd rather... not have people around." His voice goes a just a little low and just a little husky and, oh yes, Roger would rather.

"I don't... have a Christmas present", he says, trying to get a little bit of his cool back.

"Better get me one then."

Roger chuckles. "Right. Er, the 27th then? Philippe's got tickets for the match tomorrow and then were going to out to dinner with Clare and some of his family afterwards. But I'm free after that."

"Good."

"Good." After a few seconds Roger becomes aware that he's playing with his fucking hair and grinning like a loon. If Clare saw him like that he'd never hear the end of it. He puts the receiver down more gently this time.

+++ "What did you get me? Oh look!" Freddie points up. "Mistletoe! Lucky me!" And without missing a beat, he's pressed a big fat messy smooch to Roger's lips. "Come in, come in", he urges, tugging Roger towards the living room, while Roger's still gathering his wits about him. They haven't even
made it out of the hallway and already his head is swirling. "You must see the tree! It almost smothered Phoebe when he carried it in but it looks absolutely amazing. I've found those golden baubles at an auction at Christie's - cost a fortune, of course, but they're antique and..."

The mania is explained by the nearly empty glass of champagne in Freddie's hand. The faint smell of roast beef hanging in the air is more worrying.

"Freddie", Roger cuts him off as they stand in front of the (really quite charming if ridiculously oversized) Christmas tree, "are you cooking again?" Because Roger doesn't want to die in a blazing fire.

"What me? God no." Freddie turns and gets the champagne bottle and a glass for Roger. "Joe's prepared some things for us before he left. Lamb, I believe. Or was it veal? Baby animals anyway, Brian would be so sad. We can reheat it when..."

"So Joe's gone out?"

Freddie rolls his eyes. "Yes."

"And Phoebe?"

"At his brother's. Why are you..."

"Good." It's not like Roger's planned this, but suddenly he knows exactly what to do. He takes the bottle and the glasses from Freddie and puts them on a side table. Then he drops his shoulder low until it's level with Freddie's stomach, slings his hands around his legs like it's a slow motion rugby tackle, and lifts him in a fireman's carry.

Then he almost crashes sideways into the pretty tree because, fuck, that bastard's a lot heavier than he looks. He steadies them at the last moment and uses the momentum to stumble towards the door instead. "Where's your bedroom?" Jesus Christ, they've been fucking on and off for four years now and he doesn't even know that.

Freddie just slaps his arse and ignores the question. "What are you doing", he protests. "I've been promised presents!" He doesn't sound too put off though.

"Come on", Roger urges as he stumbles back into the hallway. "Left or right." He really hopes Freddie will answer soon because if he stops moving he'll probably just collapse and that just wouldn't do at all.

"Upstairs", Freddie says and Roger stifles a groan.

Oh well, nothing for it. He gathers some speed and it carries him up the first three steps with remarkable ease.

Problem is, there's 15 more to go.

"Look", Freddie says and twists in a way that almost has them crashing into the wall. "Mistletoe." He rucks up Roger's shirt and bites more than kisses his lower back. That gives Roger another five steps.

His thighs feel like rubber as he clears the top of the stairs. A long hallway stretches in front of him and dear god, please don't let it be at the far end.

"Second on the left", Freddie prompts. "And hurry up." He runs his tongue along Roger's side,
clearly not caring at all that he's in immediate danger of being dropped to the floor.

Roger barges through the second door on the left, takes three steps in the direction of what he really hopes is a bed and drops them both unceremoniously onto it. There's an almighty screech as two cats shoot off in different directions. Freddie's oofs as the air is forced out of his lungs and Roger rolls to his side, panting.

He doesn't get much time to recover though. Freddie leaps onto him like a cougar on a fallen wildebeest. "You missed me."

"I did." Roger slides his hand along Freddie's thigh.

"Did you bring me a present then?"

"I did."

Freddie runs his eyes once up and down the length of his body. "Hm, so you did."

It's all horribly cheesy, but it's also fun and Freddie's looking at him with eyes that are fucking smoldering so Roger refuses to be embarrassed. "Do you like it", he asks and stretches out a bit more.

"I haven't even unwrapped it yet."

"Then what are you wai..."

Here doesn't get further than that, because Freddie's lips are pressed hard onto his and eager hands tear at his clothes. This is not savouring the anticipation and saving the wrapping paper for next year, this is sheer exuberant 'want now'. Roger lets himself be manhandled out of his clothes, stealing a kiss or a grope where he can, but mainly giving himself over to this whirlwind. His shoes go flying and land with a bang at the opposing wall. The seams on his jeans creak as they're shoved out of the way. Freddie's still completely dressed when he takes Roger's cock firmly in hand, lies down half on top of him and whispers an absolutely filthy stream of promises right into his ear.

Roger brings a hand to the back of his neck and draws him into a slow, sloppy kiss. "Seems like I wasn't the only one who missed this, huh", he murmurs against Freddie's lips. Freddie squeezes him just hard enough to make him groan. "You have no idea."

Rogers trails his fingers down the length of Freddie's spine until he can tuck then just inside the waistband of his jeans. Freddie just melts into him and Roger uses that moment to roll them around. Freddie's staring up at him, a bit out of breath, like his drinking him in.

It's too much. Roger dips his hand into the crook of Freddie's neck and sucks a bit of skin into his mouth. Freddie's hand falls away from him, but that's okay for now. He moves slowly lower, mouthing along the line of Freddie's jaw, his neck, along the open v of his shirt collar. He takes his time sliding the buttons or off their holes and pushing the shirt open. He licks along a nipple and Freddie's hands slide into his hair.

The slight pull sends a thrill down his spine, but he twists away after a moment and sits up. Freddie huffs, but Roger hushes him. "Let me."

He works open Freddie's fly. Then he stops in his tracks. Freddie's wearing Christmas themed pants. They're tiny and deep red with white trimming and a fluffy white bobble at the front. Which bobs when Freddie's cock is freed from the confines off his jeans. It has absolutely no right to be
"Merry Christmas", Freddie whispers and cackles like a hyena.

Roger can't help it. His slow languid seduction performance completely derailed, he drops his head to Freddie's belly and blows the loudest raspberry he can manage. This had Freddie thrashing and shrieking, so Roger holds him down and does it again until they're both breathless and high with laughter. He presses a kiss to Freddie's stomach, right above the hip bone. It's supposed to be a throwaway gesture, but Freddie sucks in a sharp breath and suddenly Roger realises that he's just an inch or so from the top of those ridiculous pants.

His heart picks up a beat. He's never attempted to do that. Freddie never asked for it and Roger... well, he used to think the worst case scenario is that he likes it. That he is just a cocksucker after all. Which he knows is hypocritical as fuck, but... But actually, wouldn't it be even worse if he hates it? If he can't stand it and would have to tell Freddie he can never give this to him?

Anyway, he can only lose, so it's probably best to leave this alone. Except Freddie has gone very still, barely breathing above him. And Roger has been down here a long time and... and something in him wants to do it. He prides himself on being a good lover, after all. And the first time he'd gone down on a woman had taken some getting used to as well. So.

He draws one finger along the crease of Freddie's thigh, then drags them over the satiny fabric. The bobble bobs.

Alright, the pants have got to go, otherwise he's never going toget anywhere. He taps Freddie's hip so his lifts up a bit and Roger can tug the pants down. Once they're gone, he cups Freddie's balls in one hand and... and something in his pants wants to do it. He prides himself on being a good lover, after all. And the first time he'd gone down on a woman had taken some getting used to as well. So.

Roger takes his cock into his hand and slides upwards, pulling the foreskin over the head and back down. Freddie gives a hum of approval and Roger does it again. He lies his head down on Freddie's hip, watching the slow slide. Freddie gives a shuddering sigh.

Roger moves even closer and the next time his hand closes around the tip of Freddie's cock he can put a kiss to the silky skin at the base.

"Oh yes", Freddie moans. It can't be the sensation alone, because it was no more than dry lips pressing in briefly.

He puts his mouth there again, letting his tongue flick out briefly. It tastes just like Freddie does, only more and darker and with a faint trace of soap. He kisses his way up to the tip, just brief, open mouthed kisses and... okay, the tip is a different matter, the precome that gathered there bitter on his tongue. He lets his hands take over while he waits for the taste to subside.

So that's it. He had a cock in his mouth (however briefly), and he still lives and (he conducts a quick mental check) he still likes breasts. It's a bit silly really, to make so much ado about this. It's just a body part after all.

Newly fortified, he moves in again and sucks the entire tip of Freddie's cock into mouth.

"Oh fuck, fuck!" One of Freddie's hands buries itself in Roger's hair, and then flies away again. "Sorry, sorry", he pants. "God, you're a menace."
Nothing turns Roger on as much as a lover telling him he can't help himself because Roger is just that good. He nips at Freddie's hip and then takes the head of his cock into his mouth again and when Freddie's hand lands on his head again, he holds onto it with his own before he can take it away again. "Leave it there", he murmurs. "But push me down and you won't come for a week."

Which it's a totally empty threat because Roger doesn't have that kind of patience or self-control, but it does its job, because Freddie gasps and hits cock jumps against his lips.

Roger keeps sucking just at the tip, one hand wrapped around the base. More doesn't seem to be necessary from the way Freddie's thrashing underneath him. It's kind of fun actually.

But then Freddie's moans become more urgent and he starts tapping Roger's shoulder.

"Off", he groans, and part of Roger wants to see it through to the end, but then Freddie shoves him off and rolls onto his side, grimacing.

"Shit, are you hurt." Here strokes Freddie's sides calmingly.

"My nuts are about to explode", Freddie hisses through clenched teeth.

"So let me..." Roger reaches for him, but Freddie bats them away.

He takes a deep breath and rolls onto his back. "I have plans", he says simply. "You won't derail them."

"What sort of plans?" If the Carol's singers are due in five minutes, Roger's gonna sock him.

Freddie hooks one foot around his hip and pulls him between his legs. Roger's badly neglected cock makes contact with Freddie's balls. "Okay", he says.

Freddie pulls him down completely, kissing him deep and heavy. He rolls around until they're on their sides, still locked up in each other.

"I want you to fuck me into the new year." Freddie's breath is hot on his lips.

"Okay."

"Into the next galaxy."

"Okay."

"Right now."

"Okay." Roger moves one hand to his arse. In this context, 'right now' is more like ten minutes because of the prep involved, but that's just a... "The fuck is that?" There's something hard and flat under his fingers and, god, he knows what this is, he just...

Freddie shrugs. "I really missed you."

Roger closes his fingers around the flared base of the butt plug and twists a little.

Freddie breathes out sharply.

"How long?"

"An hour or two? Come on, I'm so ready."
Okay, so Freddie opened himself up, worked that thing inside himself, then sat (or stood?) around for hours, waiting for Roger to arrive, while the plug must have rubbed against him with every move. This is... this is so...

Roger wriggles out from between Freddie's legs.

"Darling, no, what..." Freddie tries to pull him back in.

"Shut up." He grabs a hold of Freddie's hip and shoulder and flips him onto his stomach. Then he pulls his cheeks apart to see the round black base sticking out of Freddie's arse. He tugs at it a little. The base tapers into a sort of stem just a little wider than his thumb. What is he even doing? This should be so not his thing. Except his cock is rock hard and all he wants to do is play with it until Freddie is a puddle of need on the bed.

Freddie wriggles his hips and cranes his neck to look at Roger over his shoulder.

Roger swats him to make him hold still. “Hush.”

“Get to it, will you?”

Unhurriedly, he puts his thumb on the base and pushes a little. Freddie takes a sharp breath and grinds down into the mattress. “No”, he says matter-of-factly. Then he takes hold of the base again and pulls at it, until the stem starts to broaden again. The skin stretches around the smooth toy. Beads of sweat form on Freddie’s back. Roger holds the plug like that for a moment, then pushes it back in, angling down.

“Oh god.” Freddie lets his head fall down. He bends one knee and hitches one leg a little higher, opening himself up.

Roger pushes a little harder, then eases off, pushes again. It’s a small, slow grinding motion and although he doesn’t know what it feels like, he can see it must be intense from the way Freddie’s fingers are digging into the bed sheets.

“Please, darling, it’s been hours, I can’t...”

“Oh, I’m sure a minute longer won’t hurt.” He takes the base between his fingers again and twists it clockwise. “Or two.” He grins to himself as Freddie groans.

“I hate you.”

“You want me to stop?” He suspends the motion.

“If you stop, I might have to kill you.”

Roger pulls at the plug again, a little further this time, so far that Freddie takes a sharp breath and goes still. “You really don’t have a concept of asking nicely, do you”, he asks, ignoring the fact that Freddie had done exactly that a minute earlier.

“Fuck you”, he grunts, and oh, what Roger would give to see his face right now.

There’s an expensive looking porcelain dispenser on the bedside table. Roger leans over and presses down the handle, and yes, that is lube on his fingers. He tries not to think about whose job it is to keep the lube dispenser filled. Because there chance of Freddie doing that himself is zero.

Freddie’s breath picks up in anticipation, but Roger just goes back to the small, rhythmic grinding
motion from before, this time slicking himself up with his free hand. Freddie’s pushing his arse back into him, then pushing back down, like he’s trying to get closer and further away at the same time. His knees wander higher and higher, so at the end he’s half-kneeling. It’s so exposed, so vulnerable. Roger lets go of the plug and runs one hand up and down Freddie’s back. He doesn’t say anything this time, doesn’t complain or swear or beg, just waits for whatever Roger decides to do. The feeling is heady, a powerful current running through him. A thousand ideas run through his mind, some cruel, some tender, some plain impossible.

He leans forward and kisses Freddie’s back, putting his hand on the plug again. “How do I do this”, he murmurs against the skin. He has no idea how big the plug is and what tricks you have to use to get it out.

“Just pull slowly and steadily”, Freddie says.

“And then, can I...”

“Yes. Yes. You... please don’t make me wait any longer?”

He doesn’t. He pulls the butt plug out as gently as he can and then, just as slowly, sinks into Freddie. He rests his head between Freddie’s shoulder blades and breathes. Then Freddie pushes back slightly with his hips and Roger starts moving. He sits back on his heels and pulls Freddie up onto his knees, holding onto his hips. He’s not going to last long, so he reaches for Freddie’s cock and finds it wet with precome. Of course he knew that Freddie was turned on by what he was doing, saw it in the tension in his muscles, heard it in his gasps. But holding the immediate physical proof of it in his hand, is almost too much for him. He picks up his speed, wanking Freddie hard in time with his thrusts. This is going to be over in a minute or two, tops, and he wants...

Freddie drops down on his elbows and buries his face in a pillow. His cock becomes that little bit harder, it always does before he comes. Roger grabs the pillow and yanks it aside. “No”, he grunts, “I want to hear you, I...” His fingers close around the short hair at the back of Freddie’s head and he pulls him up, hard.

“Oh my god”, Freddie gasps and Roger shoves and then his cock is clenched to tightly he can barely move at all and then he just pushes and pushes, fucking into the red hot heat of Freddie’s body until his knees give out and they’re both collapsed flat onto the bed. The rush surges through him, pulling him, driving him, until he comes, long and glorious, and everything else is drowned out.

It takes Roger a while to gather his wits. That was... Holy shit, that was awesome. And super gay. And a bit... worrying towards the end. And Freddie’s not saying anything.

“Was that alright”, he asks tentatively.

“Alright?” Freddie’s voice is hoarse and a bit slurred. “My brain just melted.” He takes Roger’s arm and pulls it around him tightly.

“Need anything?”

“Just this.” He snuggles against Roger and yawns. The bed sheets are completely disgusting – they are completely disgusting – but that doesn’t matter for now.

After a few minutes, Freddie presses a kiss to his hand. “I have a Christmas present for you.”

“I don’t think I can take any more of your Christmas presents.”
He can feel Freddie smile against his hand. “A proper one, promise.”

Chapter End Notes

Here's the inspiration for Freddie's pants:

Also, I found this image from Puebla and thought it was kind of fitting (yes, I know it's not actually a butt plug 😂)
Munich, 10 February 1984

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When they get back to together in Munich in the new year, it's Roger and John who spend most of the time in the studio, doing the final mixing and polishing work. There's even a surprise last minute bonus addition to the album, after Freddie and Brian locked themselves up in Brian's hotel room with an acoustic guitar for two days and watched sad things on the telly. "Is This The World We Created" is the perfect finishing song for the album, an album that Roger's wholeheartedly proud of.

John and Brian soon return to England to be with their families. There are a few festival appearances planned and video shoot in March, but things are only really going to get busy in the summer with a tour of Europe. And after that... well, Jim's got a very (very) lucrative offer to play about a dozen gigs in Sun City, but with the political situation being as it is, apparently they're not allowed to play music there. Which is just silly in Roger's opinion, but it's got Brian hemming and hawing and Jim shuffling his papers nervously, so there jury's still out on that.

So that leaves Freddie and Roger back in Munich with a lot of songs on their hands that didn't make it onto The Works. Days are spent in the studio, alternately working on the rough draft of Freddie's album or the finishing touches of Roger's. At night, they often head out into the club scene. Everyone's used to seeing them around and they're usually part of a larger group of Mack's or Marlene's friends, so there's no need to hide, especially since the hubbub around the News of The World article has completely died down. They also make sure to spend some time apart, one of them travelling to Montreux or London, Roger always arranging to be seen with a girl on his arm on those occasions. The papers have a lot of fun covering the "rich bachelor playboy who cannot be pinned down"-angle, and that's just fine with him.

Behind closed doors, they are for all intents and purposes, a couple. Roger’s come to terms with calling it that, and although they don’t talk about it, he’s pretty sure Freddie thinks about it the same way. They live in Freddie’s rented apartment, although Roger’s still booked into a hotel, just in case someone asks questions. Occasionally, Freddie decides to spend the night with someone else, and Roger can’t deny it stings, but there’s also this warm glow every time Freddie returns to him. If that is the price of admission, he’s willing to pay it. Especially since it goes both ways.

As long as Freddie doesn’t sabotage his game, anyway.

He’s just half-way through chatting up an absolute bombshell at the bar of the Shack when Freddie materializes next to him, tells her to find someone else to fuck (in those exact words) and – when they get to the hotel, which is closer than the flat – quietens Roger’s protests with a sweet, drawn-out blowjob (which is not something he does very often, so Roger forgives his rudeness almost immediately).

As they lie in the afterglow, Roger’s fingers itch for a smoke.

“Do you have any idea what you look like when you’re chatting up those girls”, Freddie asks.

“No?” Pretty good, Roger suspects. It works most of the time, after all. Although he’s never actually been able to watch himself doing it of course.

“You wield those pretty blue eyes like they're a weapon. The girls don’t stand a chance.”
“Alright.” Roger files this away for later. Because they always have to be careful when they go out, he never really gets the chance to chat Freddie up as such. But maybe one day...

“I want to watch you fuck a girl.”

“Oh?” A thrill goes through him, the idea of Freddie watching him intently, both jealous and turned on at the same time.

Freddie grins knowingly and runs a finger down his arm. “You like that.”

Roger clears his throat. “A bit, maybe.”

“So you’ll do it?”

So it's more than just an idle fantasy for Freddie then. Thing is, the idea sounds hot as fuck, but Roger's not that much of an exhibitionist. Sex in semi-public places, where you know you might get caught, can be super exciting, but having someone watch over him while he's doing it? Granted, there had been that time with Mikey in the bathhouse, but Roger had been way too hyped (and too focused on not looking at Freddie) to realise what was going on in the moment. Also, all he had to do then was sit there and let it happen. But having real sex with someone while Freddie watches? Wouldn't he feel really self-conscious as he kisses her, fondles her? He imagines the blonde from the bar writhing underneath him, Freddie’s dark eyes drinking it all in...

It stews in Roger's brain over those next few days. Is he imagining things or does Freddie seem a bit restless these days, a bit bored? Is he getting bored with Roger? Bored with what they have? Roger has basically pledged to keep Freddie entertained sexwise, and that request was as direct as it gets. Also, he's walking around in a state of near permanent arousal, so it's not like his body has got a problem with the idea.

The next day, Roger calls Marlene. She's the logical person to go to. They've already had a threesome together, she knows that he is involved in Freddie's sex life (though not quite to which extent) and she’s not seeing anyone at the moment. It's also been a while since they last hooked up.

She hangs up on him.

When Roger tells Freddie of his defeat, his reaction is not much better than hers. "You called her?" He turns around where he's been sitting on the sofa, a look of indignation on his face.

"Yeah. Why not?" Freddie and Marlene aren't exactly best friends, but they get along just fine and Marlene is objectively pretty.

"She's... she's a friend."

Roger shrugs. "You've had sex with most of your friends."

"But she's..." Freddie breaks off and crosses his arms in front of his chest. “What did she say?”

"She said she wasn't going to be some sort of sex doll for a couple of rich perverts, Christ, you can be such an arsehole, Roger, end quote.”

That startles a laugh out of Freddie. „You must have worded that terribly. What on earth did you say to her?“

Roger shrugs. „What you told me. And that she's the logical person to go to."

„Hm, logical.“ Freddie looks a lot more relaxed now. He smirks at Roger. “So even you don’t get away with everything, it seems.”

“I think she might come around. Give her a day or two.” She had once flown to America for the sole purpose of a backstage-quickie with him to spite her ex, after all. And Roger can be very persuasive. She likes his eyes too.

“Hm.” Freddie doesn’t look very excited about the prospect.

“Are you alright?”

“Sure.” He doesn’t look at Roger.

“Don’t you like her? We could always ask someone else, you know. It’s going to take a while of course to find someone else we can trust. But if there’s one god-given talent I have its picking up complete slags.” His pointed look is completely ignored. Freddie chews on his lips and stares at the blank screen of the telly. “Or we could just...”

“For fuck’s sake, it was just a silly idea”, Freddie growls and throws up his hands. “You don’t have to call-up your entire back-catalogue of girlfriends.”

“Woah, alright.” Just a silly idea? Freddie had sounded serious at the time. But maybe that was just sex talk?

“It’s not like I have to try every single sex act in existence. Just because I like to talk about something doesn’t mean I want to do it, is that so hard to understand?” He gets up from the sofa and paces to the window. He’s ranting now. “Why do you have to take everything so bloody seriously. I...”

“Hey there, keep your hat on. Who’s taking things way too seriously now, huh?” He only tried to help, after all. Freddie asked him for it.

Freddie crosses his arms and turns to look out the window, pointedly not looking at him.

Roger feels the irritation, the anger rise inside him. He's trying to give Freddie what he wants, and instead of a 'thank you' or at least a polite 'no thanks, I didn't mean it that way', all the gets is a bloody tantrum. It makes him want to push back just as hard, ounce for ounce. Instead though, he counts to twenty in his head, breathing slowly. Marlene taught him that.

When he feels like he can talk without expletives tumbling out of his mouth, he takes one last deep breath. “You want some tea”, he asks, in the tone he usually reserves for slow drivers in the fast lane.

“Of course I’d like some tea”, Freddie gripes back.

“Fine”, Roger growls and marches into the kitchen. The switch of the electric kettle is an innocent outlet for his pent up frustration.

“One sugar”, Freddie calls after him as if he doesn’t bloody know that. Then, a minute later, “We got any of those lemon biscuits in as well, darling?”

And so Roger serves Freddie tea and lemon biscuits and when Marlene calls him up a couple of days later to ask how exactly that whole scenario is supposed to play out, he plays it all off as a joke.
It makes his heart bleed a bit. But when Freddie pulls his head into his lap when they watch a movie later that night and pets his hair until Roger starts to melt into him, he doesn't mind so much anymore.

Chapter End Notes

So mayamaja predicted a threesome with Marlene, and honestly, that was exactly what was supposed to happen here (in fact, I've got whole scene two-thirds of the way written). But somehow, Freddie kept getting too upset. And it would have been contrary to Roger's character development if he had just ignored that. In short, the whole scene just felt weird and I couldn't make it work.
London, 23 March 1984

Chapter Notes

Alright chaps, here comes the I Want To Break Free-chapter. If anyone wants to get out their trope bingo cards, now's the time 😊

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The spring of ‘84 sees Radio Ga Ga become a massive hit. It doesn't quite take the top spot in the UK, but it goes to number one in Ireland, the Netherlands and all of Scandinavia (except bloody Norway, for whatever reason), which means Roger's finally caught up with his band mates as a hit single writer. Not that he'd ever have admitted to this bothering him.

The next thing on their agenda is the video for the next single, Break Free. They bounce some ideas back and forth, but nothing really captures their imagination, so for a while it looks like it's going to be a straightforward studio performance.

It's an off-hand comment of Melissa's ("Why don't you guys put on some wigs and play at being women? Isn't that what passes off for comedy in Britain? That or waving your naked butts at the camera?") that finally gives him the right idea.

"Coronation Street."

"Coro... what?"

For a moment Roger isn't sure if that's a rhetorical 'what' or if Brian honestly doesn't know what Coronation Street is. "Four bored middle aged housewives dreaming of, well, breaking free."

"You mean drag", John asks, who a lot quicker on the uptake.

Roger grins widely. "Yeah!"

There's a moment of silence. Roger gears up for a long discussion, but help comes from an unlikely source.

"A very time honoured British tradition", Brian muses. "I can't believe we haven't done that already."

John crosses his arms and regards Brian for a moment. "You'd make a great Hilda Odgen."

"What, with an apron dress and curlers in my hair", Brian asks, a smile breaking out on his face.

Roger raises his eyebrows. He didn't know Brian had such detailed knowledge of the Coronation Street characters.

"My mom watches it religiously", Brian says. "I was but a defenceless child."

Roger raises his hands innocently. "I didn't say anything."

"You better not."
"Who's John going to be?"

"Bet Lynch?"

They all break out in very ladylike giggling.

All but Freddie, that is. "My dears, I hate to pee in your cornflakes, but do you really think this is wise?"

Roger does a double take. "Since when do you care what is wise?"

"Since our resident worrywart gets shiny eyes at the idea of putting curlers in his hair", Freddie responds somewhat sourly. "Someone has to do the job."

Brian rolls his eyes and shrugs. "Everyone does drag. My dad did drag."

"Really?" Brian's dad is just about the most straight-laced person Roger knows.

"Yeah, almost every year, for the Panto."

"Besides, the press hasn't written anything about you two for over a year", John adds. "This story has blown over and I really don't see how us doing drag is going to change any of that. It's going to be funny, not sexy."

"Speak for yourself, will you", Brian grumbles.

"Fine", Freddie says, holding up his hands. "Far be it from me to stand in the way of wigs and silly costumes." He thinks for a minute. "I'll have to shave off my moustache, of course."

"Yes", Roger says, delighted. He hasn't even thought of that, but it's a brilliant side-effect.

"No!" John shouts, and Brian adds: "That's the one thing you mustn't do!"

"It's going to be so much funnier."

"It'll look ridiculous", Roger protests, but it's a losing battle.

A few weeks later, they're in the studio, getting their costumes done. Brian steps into the role of Hilda like he was born for it, but for the rest of the band it takes some fiddling to get it right. They know they have found the right role for John – a frumpy conservative grandma – when he starts running around whacking everyone with a folded up magazine and chiding them on their manners.

Getting Freddie to abandon his idea of wearing six-inch-heels ("It can't be that hard, women do it all the time") is a lot more work, and it's only when he loses his balance and cartwheels down the stairs that he finally relents. He's taken over the role of Bet Lynch from John, but decides that his wig has got to be black instead of blonde (because otherwise he'd just look silly). He keeps pestering the guy in charge of costumes for ever bigger, faker breasts until he looks like it's a miracle he manages to stand upright without keeling over.

Roger had been thinking about going for a rebellious teenager in a punk phase with ripped tights and safety pins through his ears. But that clashes too much with the conservative get ups of the others, so he changes it to wide-eyed, blonde schoolgirl. The make-up artist, a super-focused, no-nonsense woman named Tonya, seizes him up for a few moments, and then – with an oddly decisive gesture – puts away the fake eyelashes she's been wielding and gets to work. Roger's used to getting some basic make up done for shows, but this is on an entirely new level. After what feels
like hours, Tonya takes a step back, arranges his fringe with a few flicks of her fingers and nods. "Yes", she says. "That will do."

Roger follows the giggling and the shrieks to where John and Brian have already got together to take some pictures and do some basic test runs.

"What do you think," he asks and holds out his arms, giving a ridiculously fake smile and blinking his eye lashes, which are heavy and sticky with mascara. He expects them to break down in howling laughter. What he gets, is instant silence and blank stares. His smile falters. "What?"

Brian clears his throat. "Jesus, Rog."

"What?"

One of the photographers, a cute blonde with a pixie cut he's been low-key flirting with most of the morning, lowers her camera and scowls at him. "Fuck, you look better than me."

"Come on!"

John looks between him and her. "No, you definitely do", he says, ever the charmer.

"Fuck off." Roger takes a few steps aside until he can get a glance at himself in the mirror. There is no question that of the three of them he's the best looking by a mile, but he looks like a guy in drag. Not like a girl. It's not like anyone is going to be fooled.

Brian seems to have recovered a bit. "Do you have a painting of yourself in an attic somewhere? Because you look barely legal."

"You know", John says pensively, "if this rock star thing doesn't work out, I've heard that there are these special clubs for Japanese businessmen, where there go and..."

"Oh shut up, the lot of you. You're just jealous because I can pull off pantyhose and you don't."

He quickly wishes he hadn't said that because it prompts both Brian and John to hoist up the skirts and present their stockinged legs in protest. It's not a sight he ever wanted to see.

"So what are we..."

There's a crash behind them and when Roger turns around, he sees Freddie on the floor, cursing the Hoover he must have stumbled over.

Roger quickly walks over to him to help him up. "Have you put on those fuck-me-heels again? We've been over that a million times!" He takes Freddie's hand to pull him up, but Freddie just uses it to pull him down until they're almost face-to-face.

"No, I haven't", he whispers, "but if I pretend to have hurt my ankle, do you think we could slip away long enough for a quick shag?"

Roger groans and pulls an unwilling Freddie back on his feet. "Not you too."

Freddie very openly ogles him from head to toe. "Are you wearing knickers?"

Roger takes two steps back. A few feet away, John and Brian are perched on the sofa, observing the whole scene with keen eyes, just like the gossipy old biddies they're playing. "Knock it off or you'll never find out."
Freddie grins. "Later then?"

Roger rolls his eyes. "Yes. Fine. Come on now."

The rest of the afternoon is hilarious in an unnerving way. He gets cat-called by one of the camera assistants and it doesn't sound like it's done in jest. People are staring at him. An elderly man in charge of the lighting rig tells him, apropos of nothing, that Roger looks a bit like his first wife. "Congratulations", he says because, what the fuck are you supposed to say to something like that. Instead of laughing it off, the guy says "oh yeah" and gets a dreamy look on his face. And when Roger heads out for some fresh air, he overhears a conversation on the lunch room that has him questioning his sanity.

"It’s not gay if he’s dressed like this."

"Like hell it is!"

"No, no, no, all I said is that if that were a chick, I’d do her. But he isn’t, so I wouldn’t."

"But if he – she – offered you a blowie, would you say yes?"

"N-no...” that came a little hesitantly. “Because I know it’s Rog. That’d be fucking weird."

"But if you didn’t know...?"

"Well, yes. But only as long as I don’t know there’s a cock under there."

"A question for the ages, isn’t it?"

"What?"

"If you fuck a guy but don’t know it’s a guy, is it gay?"

"Of course it is! Why the fuck are we even..."

"No, it’s not!"

"You’re awfully touchy about this, is there something you’d like to tell us?"

"Fuck you!"

"Now that would be 100% gay."

+++ 

Luckily, his band mates, once they get over their first shock, stuff their wide eyed staring. And once Roger has body checked the next guy to wolf-whistle him into the wall, the crew drop their antics as well.

The rest of the day is a blast. There is a script of course, but mainly they just prance around the set being silly while the song blares in the background and Freddie lip-synchs into the camera. Thanks to David, the director who manages to put on his professional hat occasionally (in between cracking closet-jokes and staging a impromptu Miss England contest, which Brian wins hands down), they eventually get the Coro segment done.

At the end of the day, Roger is absolutely knackered. They're due back early the next day to film the crowd sequence, but for now, all he wants to do is head home and never wear pantyhose again.
He sits down in the dressing room, stretching his aching feet – he’s been spared heels, but the leather brogues are still a long way from his usual trainers. He reaches up to take his wig off when Freddie marches in, already back in his normal clothes.

“Ah ah ah”, he says, slapping Roger’s hands away. “You promised.”

“You're not serious.”

“Dead serious.”

Roger grins. “You’re not even into drag.” Freddie watches the occasional drag act and he admires the really good ones. But not once has Roger ever seen him attracted to a guy dressed as a woman. It’s the very opposite of his preferred type.

Freddie moves to stand over the chair, one leg on either side of Roger’s. He leans down until he can put his hands on the armrests and his mouth is just inches from Roger’s lips. “There are two options. We can do this here, where anyone might come in – where Brian and John certainly will come in once they’re done giggling over the outtakes – or we can drive home and have our privacy. But I will have my wicked way with you while you’re looking like this, make no mistake.”

Roger stares up at him. “Home”, he says.

Freddie steps back. He rummages in the duffel bag he’s carrying and pulls out track suit bottoms at least two sizes too big and a black hoodie. “Put these on over your costume. The car’s right outside.” It’s not exactly a fool-proof disguise, but it should do for the few minutes it will take to get them out of the building.

It’s really, really bad luck that Brian and John run directly into them as the leave the dressing room. The hoodie is pulled deep over Roger’s face as they rush past with curt goodbyes and see-you-tomorrows. But it doesn’t require Sherlockian levels of deductions to guess what’s going on, and as Roger hurries down the hall, he can hear Brian’s confused “Is Roger still...” and John’s “Don’t say it” and it’s almost enough to make him turn back around and end the bloody charade right then and there.

But Freddie’s not deterred so easily and before Roger can make up his mind, he’s hustled through the back door and into the waiting Rolls Royce.

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Freddie’s hands move over his thighs, cupping his bum briefly, then down again. He groans. “Oh, my god, did you shave your legs too?”

Roger just shrugs and grins. If there’s going to be a close up of his legs in pantyhose on international television, he’s going to make sure he looks good. He grinds into Freddie and bends down to kiss him. When he comes back up, Freddie looks a little dazed. Hm, this is fun.

Roger bites his lower lip a bit coquettishly. He stole the lipstick from the set and touched it up in the car. He can see traces of colour on Freddie’s lips, taste it on his tongue. “Did you have anything particular in mind”, he asks. Freddie’s eyes are huge and dark, going back and forth between Roger’s mouth and his eyes. Oh, to have those eyes look up at me, it echoes through his head.

So that’s what Freddie wants. Alright then. He slides down the length of Freddie’s body until he’s kneeling on the floor in front of the sofa, between his legs. He rubs his hand along the bulge in Freddie’s trousers and smiles a toothy lady-Roger smile at him. Freddie reaches down hand and cups his jaw, running his thumb along the line of Roger’s lips. It’s almost reverential, and it makes
him a bit uncomfortable. He drops a kiss to the hand, then tugs it away. He opens Freddie’s fly and
shoves his pants aside. Maybe they should just get this done with. Roger sucks Freddie off
sometimes, but he’s never done it from this position and certainly never in drag and... It’s all a little
weird, is all.

He pulls Freddie’s cock from his briefs and takes the head into his mouth. He focuses on the
familiar taste and swirls his tongue around it. Again, Freddie’s hand is on his face. He’s not pulling
or pushing him, just cupping his jaw and stroking his thumb over his cheekbone, like he can’t help
it. Roger tries to look up at his face (that’s the whole purpose of the exercise, after all), but
somehow he can’t bring himself to do it. He tries to imagine what Freddie must see: the school-girl
outfit, the blonde wig, cherry-red lips stretched around his cock, dark lashes fanning out over
Roger’s cheeks. This would totally be Roger's thing, for sure, a girl like that, kneeling in front of
him, servicing him and...

He pulls off and turns his head away, breathing harshly. “I can’t...” He grits his teeth and tries to
calm down. It’s just a costume, for heaven’s sake, get a grip.

Freddie leans forward and puts a hand on his arm. There’s a look of concern on his face. “Alright,
come here”, he says.

“No”, Roger says and shuffles back in position, “I’m good, I just have to...” ...stop being such a
fucking pussy, he thinks. And speaking of which, he’s been in this exact position with women and
it's never been a problem, so why should this be so different?

“Please, darling”, Freddie says and tightens his grip on his arm. He leans down until his face is
level with Roger’s. “I really need you to kiss me right now.”

There’s such need in his voice that Roger doesn’t think twice. He just leans in and presses his lips
to Freddie’s, licking his way inside. Freddie’s hands are on his waist and without breaking the kiss
Roger’s being manoeuvred back onto the sofa.

When they part and Roger opens his eyes, Freddie’s looking at him with such concern his heart
twists. “Sorry”, he says. He thought he could do this, but...

Freddie shakes his head. “It was a stupid idea”, he says and runs a hand along the hemline of his
shirt. “I couldn’t even see those legs properly.”

“You like my legs?”

Freddie looks at him like that’s an incredibly daft question to ask. He tugs at the skirt. “Let’s get
rid of that.” The skirt goes and the pantyhose too and then Freddie stares slack jawed at his crotch.

They are knickers, but plain white ones and not all that different from a pair of briefs. Except that
there’s not quite enough fabric to cover everything.

“Have you been running around the set like this all day”, Freddie asks.

Roger shrugs. “It was a bit drafty”, he admits.

Freddie runs his thumbs along the crease of his thighs, brushing his balls on the way down. Now
that gets Roger back in the groove again. The hands slide over his smooth thighs, which are
weirdly sensitive now that he hose is gone. The knickers feel like they’re getting tighter. Freddie
kisses him again and his hands roam over Roger’s hips, his sides, over his...

“Damn it”, Freddie growls and pokes at the false tits. “Get rid of the blasted things, will you?”
Together, they dispose of the blouse and the falsies and then Freddie reaches for the wig as well.

“I thought you liked that”, Roger says.

Freddie throws the wig and cap away. “Yeah, but with it on I cannot do this.” He runs his fingers through Roger’s flattened hair, trailing the nails over his scalp just so. His toes curl up, it feels so good. “God, your face”, Freddie whispers.

“Hmm.” Roger floats in bliss as Freddie’s hands roam through his hair, freeing the strands that had been trapped all day.

“I want to try something”, Freddie murmurs. “Can I?”

The last time Freddie had asked that question, Roger had put his back out so badly he couldn’t walk straight for days. He had also come his fucking brains out. “Sure”, he says.

“Right. Come here.” He lies down on his back, pulling Roger along until he’s being straddled. His hands go back to Roger’s legs, stroking up and down. He really seems to like his legs. Oh well, Roger can certainly throw in a shave every now and then if it makes him happy, he decides magnanimously.

Freddie’s hands pull at the back of his thighs until Roger kneels up. And then he keeps on pulling, urging him on to shuffle forward on his knees. Blood pools in Roger’s groin when he realises where this is going to go. But Freddie stops him when Roger is kneeling over his chest.

“How are you feeling?” he asks Roger, his voice calm.

“I’m good.” Roger is breathless from the effort of trying to move.

“Can I...” Roger’s question is cut off as Freddie’s hands leave his legs and go up to his thighs, stroking up and down. He looks his fill. And then he puts a pillow behind his head and drags his hand up the length of Roger’s cock through the knickers. Roger’s thighs tense as he pushes into the touch. His cock is growing increasingly uncomfortable, but Freddie makes no effort to free him.

After a couple of minutes of teasing, Freddie slides his hands under Roger’s thighs again and nods. Roger puts his hands on the armrest behind Freddie and moves forward until his knees are on either side of his shoulders. Freddie’s hands come up behind him, landing on his lower back. Those damned knickers are still very much in the way and Roger reaches down to pull them aside, but Freddie shakes his head. “Not yet.”

He mouths Roger through the fabric, guiding him into position with his hands. The knickers get wet and translucent with spit. Every now and then, Freddie tugs him back, takes a few breaths and looks up at Roger looming above him. Roger is completely taken up with staying still and following Freddie’s glacial pace.

Then finally, he pushes the sodden knickers out of the way. He licks at Roger’s balls a few times because that’s the only part he can reach now that his cock is straining upwards and away. Eventually, Freddie quirks one eyebrow at him. “Give it to me, then”, he says.

Right, because his arms are trapped under Roger’s legs. He takes his cock in hand and pushes it down until the head is in reach of Freddie’s lips. Heat surges through him at the sight. Why is that so hot? It should be awkward, but it’s... powerful, a voice in his head supplies. But he’s only doing what Freddie tells him to, so who’s really in control here?

Freddie’s mouth feels like a furnace after the coolness of the wet knickers and Roger closes his eyes, leans forward a little more, slides in to get more of that delicious heat. A strong grip on his
thighs stops him. Freddie has wrapped his arms around them and is holding him back. Roger’s eyes fly open and he groans at the sight below him. Freddie’s lips are stretched around his cock. The tendons in his neck stand out as he breathes to accommodate the length. It’s only halfway in, but he’s not exactly small so... Roger pulls back, but the hands around his thighs only clamp down harder. Freddie shakes his head minutely, so Roger holds still. Freddie stares up at him, at his chest rising and falling, his shoulders tense with the strain of holding himself just like this.

Finally, Freddie’s hands relax and his fingers tap against his thighs, twice, urging him to back off. Roger pulls out almost completely. He’s so hard that he has to use his hand again to keep from losing contact with Freddie’s spit-slick lips and he has to close his eyes against that sight. “Oh god”, he moans.

“Again”, Freddie says and this time he doesn’t let him in so deep, just the tip. He swirls his tongue around it and then presses it flat against the underside. He taps Roger again, then pulls him in almost immediately. He repeats it until Roger picks up the rhythm: small, shallow thrusts, into that waiting mouth. It’s maddening, not enough and too much at the same time.

Then Freddie pulls him back a little further again. “Look at me”, he murmurs, and the movement of his lips sends spark along Roger’s dick. Freddie looks like something out of a debauched dream, hair wet with sweat, his lips reddened and full, resting against the head of his cock.

Roger huffs out a laugh and hangs his head. “If I keep looking at you, this whole thing will last no more than a minute.”

“If you keep looking at me, I’ll need a lot less than that”, Freddie says and lets his hands fall away from Roger’s thigh. He can feel the muscles in his upper arm tensing and relaxing as he starts stroking himself.

“Fuck”, he breathes, but he keeps his eyes on Freddie’s face.

“Alright?”

“Alright”, he whispers and picks up the rhythm again.

His whole body shakes with the strain of holding himself back. Now that Freddie’s got his hands on himself, the full responsibility of controlling himself is on Roger. He digs his teeth into his lower lip to keep himself grounded, and just then Freddie’s head rolls back as he groans, and Roger slips out. He puts one hand on Freddie’s jaw to bring his head back down. Their eyes lock just as Roger slides back in and then Freddie frowns and moans around his cock, his whole body tensing underneath him.

His mouth goes slack and there’s not enough friction, but it doesn’t matter, because the most brilliant man in the world is letting Roger do this to him, trusting him so completely, offering himself up like that and he just can’t... he panics a bit then because he’s just about to come and Freddie hates having it in his mouth, and Roger can’t just come all over his face (oh god stop thinking stop thinking about that, it’s not helping!) and so he tries to get off him at the same time that his muscles go tense up and a wave of pleasure momentarily takes his brain off the grid.

When he’s able to process his surroundings again, Freddie’s lying on the sofa, laughing so hard he can barely breathe. Roger’s wrist is aching and there’s carpet under his cheek. He might have to revisit the scene later, but this easily ranks among the five most embarrassing sex moments of his life. Probably even a top three candidate.

The laughing stops and hands are on his back. “Oh my god, are you okay?”

“Don’t be silly, dear.” Freddie heaves him up into a sitting position. “That was very chivalrous of you.”

Roger grimaces. “Not exactly what I was going for.”

Freddie leans down. “Do it properly next time, then.”

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A couple of weeks later, Freddie shoots the Royal Ballet part of the video on his own. When he comes down to Roger's place afterwards, the moustache is gone.

"One suffers for one's art I guess", Freddie muses, looking all tragic standing by the window. It's incredible how much more delicate he looks like that.

"Oh yes?"

Freddie eyes him speculatively. “I know it’s been almost a year. But I think you still owe me a shag over the sofa.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I’m totally hung up on this image of Roger naked except for his Rogerina make-up and tiny white knickers. Any talented fanartists I can bait?

BTW, this is what Freddie looked like without the moustache in 1984 😊:
Munich, 19 May 1984

Chapter Notes

I've added another tag at the end. It's going to be alright though, promise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

All in all, with his single topping the charts and his solo album finished and all the weird, awesome sex he's having, the ’84 is turning into a good year for Roger. He's splitting his time between England and Munich, where Freddie's spending the free time they've got left before the tour by getting to work on his solo album in earnest.

In May, Roger’s back in London for a few days to shoot a promo for his single, Man on Fire, which is going to come out in June. It's a good song and the video is full of burning buildings and oil drums and him as a frustrated guy in a warehouse. Quite intense the whole thing. He can’t wait to show it to Freddie.

When he gets back to Munich, Joe lets him into the apartment. “Gotta warn you. He’s not in a good mood. He’s... ah well, you’ll see.”

Freddie lies on the sofa, his leg in a giant plaster cast, looking morose, but mostly fine. Joe would have said if it was something really bad.

“What did you do?”

“What did I... oh, yes, so this is all my fault, I see.” Freddie’s in full combat mode.

Roger saunters over to the sofa and tickles his hair. “Things usually are”, he teases. “Come on. I leave you alone for a few days and you break your leg?”

"Some cunt kicked me last night."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

It is very, very unlikely that it happened 'just like that', but Roger will get the whole story later on from Joe. He cracks his knuckles. "Name? Address?"

"Thanks, sweetheart, that's very chivalrous of you, but we didn’t trade calling cards.” Freddie’s still scowling but seems mollified by Roger’s offer.

Roger heads over to the other end of the sofa and inspects the cast. “That thing is gigantic.”

Freddie nods. “Got to keep this atrocity on for two weeks, then they’ll switch me to something lighter.”

“Poor thing”, Roger says. “What did the doctor say?”

Freddie waves his hands about vaguely. “Some ligament or other got torn. It’ll heal in time for the
tour, but this thing is absolutely hateful.”

Oh yes, it’ll slow Freddie down, no doubt about that. “Got something here to cheer you up”, Roger says, brandishing the tape.

They watch it together. Roger finds he’s quite nervous about Freddie’s reaction. It's an awesome video, of course, and he knows Freddie likes the song, but still. "What do you think?"

Freddie looks up from the screen and stares at him with an expression Roger cannot read.

"What?"

"It's..."

Freddie lost for words is not something Roger sees very often.

"This", he says finally, gesturing at the screen, "is absolutely amazing, darling."

“You think so?” Roger’s chuffed. He had expected Freddie to scoff at the simplicity of it and suggest about a hundred ways it would have been better if he’d been allowed a hand in it.

“It’s perfect. Do not change a single thing.”

First, Roger is a little suspicious that Freddie’s having him on, but Freddie watches the tape quite often over the next days and weeks and whenever he does, there’s this fond little smile on his face that has Roger thinking of the worst four letter word of them all. The one that starts with ‘l’.

Of course, the fact that Freddie likes his video doesn’t mean that he sees any reason to involve Roger in the next promo shoot, which turns out to be the most stupid music video in the history of everything ever. Freddie – inspired by the artistic bent of the Radio Ga Ga video – has decided that the video for his single, "It's a Hard Life", which is slated for release in the late summer, is going to top everything that’s come before.

Now, Roger gets that an operatic song needs an operatic flair, but jesters and plague masks? Antlers?

After two whole days of being pestered by Freddie, Brian finally cracks and agrees to mime his guitar solo on a skull guitar. He comes dangerously close to acting during it. But at least Brian's got something productive to do, while John and Roger just stand around looking stupid. John's costume looks like a mixture of knight and tin man and Roger's almost suffocating under that damned itchy lace collar. If Freddie just wanted to see his legs in tights again, he could’ve just asked.

However, Freddie doesn't reserve all the ridiculousness for his band mates. In fact, the height of it he's saved for himself with a costume that makes him look – and Roger can't for the life of him imagine what it's actually supposed to symbolize – a hard-boiled amorous lobster who's just strangled a pheasant.

Pity, because it's a really good song.

Anyway, Roger can’t really bring himself to be angry with Freddie, because he’s pouring his heart and soul into it and working his arse off although his knee is still giving him trouble. He’s found a German physiotherapist who he treats simultaneously as a servant to be at his beck and call and a god to be obeyed to the letter. Dieter is tall and thin and plays about every kind of sport Roger’s ever heard of (and some he’s pretty sure Dieter just invented himself). He strictly forbids cigarettes, alcohol and drugs (and it’s there that Freddie’s strict adherence crumbles) and plans to
start him on Yoga sessions once the tendons have healed enough. And that Roger just can’t wait to see.

In July, Roger, John and Brian get together for the Christmas Song Battles. Freddie stays in Munich, having generously given them carte blanche to make the decision without his input. July is a stupid month to write a Christmas song, but necessary because if you wait until the spirit of the season hits you, it’s already too late. Roger’s song wins and they record a demo version to send to EMI, while Roger takes a copy back to Munich to play to Freddie, who reacts with a typical insulting compliment (“This is actually rather good”, like he’s surprised they get anything done without him at all).

So it’s all good really: Roger’s published a solo album he’s really proud of (although it doesn’t exactly sets the charts of fire) and a great Queen album for which he’s written the top-performing single. ‘Break Free’ also becomes a hit (though not quite as big, at not least in the UK where it really matters). However, the Americans are making a huge fuss over the video, which is just silly, and Capitol Records completely drops the ball over promotion, so sales plummet. It’s disappointing, because they used to have America in the palm of their hands.

Anyway, now he’s back in Munich with Freddie, who's buried himself deep in his solo work. He's determined to get most of the songs written before they start touring again, and – with tour rehearsals only two weeks away – the stress is starting to show. He's pulling 10 to 12 hour stints in the studio and there are deep shadows under his eyes. He knows very well that this is his chance to realise his creative vision – an album without three other band members interfering. What this also means is that if things don't work out, there's no one else to blame. Freddie always puts on a big show of never doubting himself, but of course deep inside he does. Everyone does.

The other problem is the weather. It’s been a miserable, rainy summer and it’s really starting to get on Roger’s nerves. Freddie – who's very much a creature of the night anyway – can't have seen more than 10 minutes of actual sunlight over the last weeks. He's starting to look like a moustachioed vampire.

So one afternoon – during which Freddie agonizes over a single line for five hours – Roger decides he needs a break. They both do.

“Come to Ibiza with me.”

"Ibiza?"

"I'm sick of the grey and the rain."

"Me too", Freddie says quietly. "But I've just got to wrestle this damned song into shape first."

"Just a few days in the house. You can work on the lyrics there." He rests his chin on his hands and blinks his eyes at Freddie. "It could be a late birthday present for me."

“You already got a birthday present.” Yes, and Roger still has the hickeys to prove it.

“Another one then. You like giving out presents. And there’s a pool, private beach, drinks in the warm, golden, evening sun..."

Freddie’s expression gets positively longing. "I'd like that", he says. "I really do. But I'm already behind schedule and..."

Roger shrugs. "Since when does Freddie Mercury give a damn about schedules?"
"Since he's being paid six-figure advances to stick to them", Freddie mumbles.

"Wait. Are you trying to tell me you're a... a working man now? Getting up in the morning for a paycheck?"

Freddie wags a finger at him, a smile playing around his mouth. "Watch it."

"One rock star you are."

"I'm warning you."

"Spread your wings and fly away..."

He's tackled to the ground and tickled until they're both gasping. Then Freddie sits up, takes the sheave of paper he's been writing on, crumples it up and tosses it at Roger's head. "Right. Get me on a fucking flight then."

That was easier than expected. "Er, we can't go out much, though." The press attention around their story has died down almost completely, but they shouldn't make it too obvious that their vacationing together. It's fine for them to be seen in Munich, because they're both working there (and Roger makes sure he’s photographed with Marlene on strategic occasions). “I don’t want you to be bored.”

"You mean we'd have lie by the pool all day, drinking Margaritas and being lazy and having nothing better to do with our nights than shagging them away?"

Roger grins. “If you put it like that...”

"One rock star you are..." Freddie looks very smug at that.

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The house sits amid lush green gardens that open to the ocean to reveal a spectacular view of the Mediterranean Sea. Steps lead down craggy rocks to a small, secluded bay-like beach. There’s a grove of pine-trees shielding the house from view and Palm trees around the pool. In the summer, the air is filled with the fragrant scent of rosemary, thyme and juniper.

The main reason Roger bought it is that it’s just a 30 minute drive from Vila (20 if Roger's driving), with its famous club and party scene. But now, for the first time, he really appreciates the privacy and seclusion of the place.

The house is maintained by two sisters in their sixties, both widows, who live in the nearby village. They come in twice a day to cook breakfast and dinner, collect the washing and do the rooms and can be counted on not to pop up for surprise visits, which is good if your main plan for the holiday is to have sex with your boyfriend on every available surface.

"Do you know you turn golden when you're in the sun too much?" Freddie’s blinking down at him from his sun lounger. Freddie doesn't turn much of anything, because he hides himself away under a giant hat and insists on the shadow of a parasol at all times.

Roger rolls onto his back and stretches himself out on his beach towel. It’s late afternoon, but the sand has soaked up the warmth of the sun all day. It’s like being baked in a clay oven. “There is no too much”, he sighs. “This is perfect.”

"I should draw you like that some time. Only with fewer clothes on."
Roger’s not wearing anything but a pair of tiny swimming trunks. "Knock yourself out", he says, but Freddie doesn't move to get his sketch pad.

"Tomorrow", Freddie says. "The morning light is better."

The sun is just beginning its descent in the west, but they’ve still got two hours of daylight left. Roger sits up. “Oh, I haven’t even shown you the boat yet.”

“The boat?” Freddie looks dubious despite his sunglasses.

“Yeah. What do you think the berth is for?” He gets to his feet. “Come on! The weather’s perfect for it.”

Reluctantly, Freddie follows him. “It’s a very small boat. You didn’t say it was such a small boat.”

Roger looks at the boat. It’s a perfectly normal (though exceedingly well motorized) runabout. It’s usually kept in a small boat house, but when he comes down for a visit, one of the sisters’ nephew’s always brings it out, if the weather allows. “What did you expect, the Titanic? Besides, small boats are much more fun.”

“Fun?” Freddie looks dubious.

“Yeah, come on, you’ll love it.”

“It looks like something you might use on a small lake. This is the ocean. There are waves.”

Roger laughs. “There’s barely a breeze. Come on, give me a hand.” He tugs at Freddie’s hand, but he remains stubborn. “What?”

Freddie considers him a moment. “I’d rather have another Margarita.”

“You can have Margaritas on the boat”, Roger says. Well, they’d have to mix the Margaritas in the house and bring them with them because the bar on the boat is not stocked, but still.

“I’ll just get sea sick.”

“No one gets sea sick on a motorboat.” Roger starts working on the moorings.

“Are you even qualified to steer this thing?”

“Yup. Got a license and everything.” He gets in the boat and offers his hand to Freddie. “Come on. You’ll be safe, I promise. I’ll even give you a live vest, alright?”

The end result of all his pleading is that he gets to putter about at 10 miles per hour because Freddie starts yelling at him whenever he goes any faster. It’s unspeakably boring.

“This thing can go up to fifty miles”, Roger says. “The acceleration is breathtaking, it's...”

“Roger”, Freddie says through gritted teeth, “I really don’t like open water, so for the love of god, spare me the breathtaking acceleration.”

For the first time since they got on the boat, Roger truly looks at Freddie. He’s pale and his knuckles are white where he’s gripping the handles on the console. He looks tense. Frightened. Roger immediately turns the boat back in the direction of the beach. “But... you went on boats with us before. You were fine.”
“Those were giant yachts. Call me again when you get one of those.”

“But you can swim, can you?”

Freddie rolls his eyes. “It’s not that. It’s...” He swallows hard. “How deep is the water out here?”

Roger shrugs. “I’d have to check the charts to be certain, but we’re still relatively close to the shore, so... about 50 feet?”

Freddie needs a few seconds to collect himself. “So there’s 50 feet of nothing but water beneath me. It’s like heights only worse because you can’t even see what’s lurking there.”

“But... water is not nothing. You can’t fall when there’s...”

“Yes, thanks, I’m not actually stupid, you know”, Freddie snaps. He takes a deep breath. “I went snorkelling once, on Hawaii. Don’t know why, really. A boat brought us to the reef and we all hopped into the water. I put my head underwater and through the goggles it was like I was suspended in mid air. The ground was, I don’t know, it might have been 10 feet or a hundred, but I...” He breaks off, looking nauseous.

Freddie doesn't like heights. Usually gets the penthouse out of stubbornness because it’s the most expensive, but whenever there’s floor length windows he keeps away from those. And he always keeps a yard or two of distance to the balustrade of the balcony. And he never gets on an airplane without someone to distract him nearby.

Roger knows all that and he’d never dream of taking Freddie on a balloon ride or anything, but he wouldn’t have thought the concept applies to water as well. “Sorry”, he says. "I thought you’d like it.”

“I know, dear.” Freddie dares to take one hand off the handle long enough to pat Roger’s shoulder. “But I'm a land rat. Now can we get some Margaritas, please?”

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While Freddie seems content to load up his batteries by lounging around the pool and the beach for days on end (and occasionally drawing Roger in the nude), Roger has to get out and move every now and then. Luckily, there’s a brand-new Ducati in the garage, desperate to be taken for a spin.

Today, when he comes home, he immediately knows something’s off. He walks into the house, sweating in his heavy leather gear off and finds Freddie yelling into the phone.

“...on earth should that matter? So it is Sunday, so what, this an emergency and...” He whirls around when Roger comes in. “So find another one!” He hangs up.

“Who was that?”

“Mary.”

“Is everything...”

Freddie shakes his head. “Come here.” He waves Roger over to the sofa and kneels next to it. And there, in the middle of the formerly white, hand-woven cashmere throw lies the most wretched, bloodied, flea-infested handful of kitten Roger has ever seen. Its missing an ear and its tail ends in a stump, its eyes are swollen shut and its fur is a dirty clump of matted hair.
And Freddie’s looking at it with an expression like he’s witnessing the sleeping baby Jesus in his crib.

“What the...”

“Shh, he’s sleeping”, Freddie whispers and Roger knows right then and there that is a battle he cannot win, not with any army in the world.

At Freddie’s voice, the creature stirs and opens its mouth, as if trying to meow, but no sound comes out. It looks very, very young and very, very sick.

“I found him outside”, Freddie whispers. “A bird or something must have got him. He needs a doctor, I think.”

If anything it needs a priest, Roger thinks, but for once manages to keep his thoughts to himself.

“Mary’s trying to find one to come in. Do you think we should give him some milk? He looks terribly hungry.”

“Worth a try”, Roger says. They can hardly make it worse and he doesn’t have it in him to quench the hope in Freddie’s voice. “Listen, why don’t you get it some milk and I’ll see if I can find any help nearby, okay?” Because that might be a lot more practical than Mary blindly phoning people from London. Does she even speak Spanish?

Roger jogs towards the village and finds Marina, one of the sisters, in her garden, hanging up the washing. He’s briefly distracted by the sight of his own bright red pants gently fluttering in the breeze.

The next ten minutes are like something out of a bad comedy. Marina’s entire concept of the English language consists of the words “no”, “okay” and “fry-up”. Roger’s Spanish on the other hand is basically French with an accent.

First she thinks he’s sick and needs a doctor. Then she thinks Freddie’s sick. Then she thinks they’ve found a rat (“¿En mi casa?!”) and want it killed immediately. When she finally understands he’s talking about a sick kitten instead, her first approach is similar to the rat. When Roger insists of finding a “doctor animal” for it she has him confirm it three times before she finally gets on the phone, looking at him like he’s a complete nutter.

When Roger gets back to the house, he’s in dire need of a beer, a cigarette and maybe a relaxing foot massage.

“Where have you been”, Freddie yells as soon as he steps into the living room. “Eric won’t eat and he looks very poorly.”

“Finding you a vet”, Roger grumbles and peers at the pitiful lump oozing blood and pus onto his sofa. Freddie has tried to put a bandage around its tail, but it’s come half off again. There’s a half-full saucer of milk nearby and all sorts of utensils (spoons, drinking straws, mysterious kitchen implements) he must have used to try and get some milk into the poor cat. Roger’s heart goes very soft and sort of crumply at the sight. He walks over and pats Freddie’s back.

“‘Eric’”, he asks after a few minutes of watching Freddie fretting over the kitten. “How do you even know it’s a boy?”

Freddie rolls his eyes. “He’s a cat, Roger, it’s not like it matters.”
“Look, maybe he just needs some sleep”, Roger says, gently leading Freddie to the dinner table. “He’s probably very tired.”

“Yes, yes, you’re probably right.” But he can’t stay sitting down for long. Manic energy and worry drives him to peek at the little kitten again and again. Finally, he cracks. He lifts up the head of a decorative amphora on a window sill, reaches inside and marches into the courtyard for a smoke.

So that’s where he hides them.

Oh well, he’s been doing good otherwise. They both have been. Roger’s smoking has been reduced to only on nights out and after at least three drinks (which is still more than the doctor recommends, but he can feel the improvement in his lungs when he has a go at the punching back). Freddie has found out that he mainly just likes holding cigarettes and posing with them when he’s around people, which doesn’t require much actual smoking. Since they’ve been on Ibiza, Roger hasn’t seen him with a cigarette (or smelled them on him) at all.

They have to wait another 20 minutes until a beat up Fiat 500 pulls up in the driveway. A short squat man with a leather bag climbs out and peers at Roger suspiciously. “You have a sick rat, señor?”

Roger’s main job while the vet examines the kitten is to keep Freddie from interfering with him. Roger doesn’t even like cats, but still it’s heart-rendering to watch the wretched creature get prodded and swabbed and pricked with instruments ten times too big for its size (“I mainly treat goats”), but the doctor, Sergio, looks like he knows what he’s doing. At least he’s kind enough not to suggest drowning it in the pool to get it over with.

He leaves them with a 20 pound bag (“They don’t come in smaller sizes”) of powdered milk with baby goats (goatlets?) printed on it, vitamin capsules and some antibiotic ointment. Freddie writes down his caring instructions to the comma.

The next days are something to behold. Eric is in intensive care. A kind of nest of the softest blankets has been built for him by the bay windows (“so he can see the ocean”, Freddie explains). Freddie spends hours every day getting a few drops of milk into him. His hands are covered in flea bites (although the Sergio’s flea powder quickly puts an end to that, thank god). Every sign of life is noted and intensely discussed like it’s the auguries. It’s very clear that as far the hierarchy of importance in his household is concerned, Roger now ranks third.

The thing is, it works. The crusts around Eric’s eyes disappear and his tail stump starts healing. He’s taking in more food with every feeding and actively snuggles up when he’s petted. They hang up a light bulb directly over his nest for warmth and it’s like he’s soaking up the heat. After cleaning him with a wet cloth, his fur is revealed to be a soft brown with a dark tabby pattern.

One afternoon, while Freddie is dozing on the sofa (he’s spent half the night making Eric poop, proudly sharing his success story when he crawled into bed at four in the morning), Roger sits down next to The Nest with his coffee. “Hey buddy”, he says, and to his surprise, Eric actually raises his head and blinks up at him. It's the first time he's opened his eyes. They are clear and blue like the ocean. He yawns, stretches his wee paws and starts crawling toward the empty saucer on the floor nearby.

“Freddie”, Roger calls out, trying to keep his voice loud enough to be heard, but hushed at the same time so as not to disturb the kitten. Freddie doesn’t stir, so Roger tiptoes over to the sofa and pats his cheek. “Eric’s awake”, he whispers, “and he’s very hungry.”

That does the trick.
What follows, is a revolting scene in which Eric is fed and cuddled and cooed over and carried around and held up for adoration. One has got to remember that while he’s not quite looking on the verge of death anymore, it’s still an underweight handful of scraggly fur that can’t even poop on its own.

“Any more of this and I’ll get diabetes, stop it”, Roger grumbles.

“You love him”, Freddie replies and presses his face into Eric’s fuzzy belly.

“I gotta vomit.”

The problem is that Eric is way too small to be put on an airplane and taken to England, as Sergio explains to them very patiently on his last visit. Freddie and Roger can’t possibly stay any longer, however, because they have to get back to Munich and start rehearsing for th upcoming tour.

Luckily, the sisters have a 12-year old grand-daughter who loves kittens and agrees to look after Eric. She also speaks enough English that Freddie can call and question her about his adopted son’s condition whenever he feels like it.

He also leaves a worn shirt of his behind so Eric doesn’t feel too lonely.

Chapter End Notes

Some of you have been wondering whether Man On Fire still happens in this timeline. *Of course* it still happens, I'm not a monster. And Freddie is all of us :D

Also, 200 kudos today. Wow, I am absolutely floored! Thank you all so much! ☺️
They arrive late at night in Munich. After a sleep-in, a long bath and some leisurely bathtub sex, they head down to the studio. It had become something of a tradition during recording to start the day over there with a joint breakfast. Some of the runners have even learned to make a decent fry up.

John and Brian aren't there yet, so they settle in with the papers and a huge pot of tea. Their lazy afternoon is rudely interrupted however, when a dark haired, rumpled looking guy up bursts into the room and starts a monologue of apologies and weird rambling explanations. Is he a new tech who hasn't got the memo that You Do Not Interrupt Breakfast Ever? But the way he keeps talking about last night and about the upcoming tour doesn't make sense. He also seems to assume that Roger knows who he is.

"Who the fuck are you", he asks after a while. For some reason, Freddie picks up a newspaper and disappears behind it.

The guy looks between Freddie and Roger. "I'm Spike", he says, as if that explained everything. Then, when a when Roger doesn't give a sign of recognition, adds: "Spike Edney. The new keyboardist?"

Oh. Right. There had been something about a keyboardist.

Ever since the Hot Space tour Freddie insists on having an extra musician along to play the keyboard and piano (allegedly because his own playing isn't up to snuff - right! - but Roger suspects he just wants even more opportunity to prance about the stage instead of being tied up at the piano). Fred Mandel, who'd been with them for the second part of the Hot Space tour in '82 isn't available, so they need someone new.

"Hey, Spike", he says and points at an empty chair. "Hungry?"

Slowly Spike sits down looking utterly bewildered.

"So, er... so you guys..."

The door opens and Brian and John come in looking extremely hung over. They wave at them, then see Spike and freeze. They put their heads together for a moment before heading over to the table.

Brian shakes Spike's hand, looking chagrined. "Look mate, I'm really sorry."

Roger is watching the whole exchange more and more bewildered while Freddie is quietly laughing his arse off behind his newspaper. "The fuck's going on", Roger asks.

A slow disbelieving smile appears on Spike's face. "Wait a sec", he says to Brian. "You weren't here either?"

Freddie lowers the paper a fraction. "Very poor manners, Brian darling. We waited hours."

Roger thinks back to the events of the morning. He can't say that waiting for Brian and John
featured much.

"Alright what am I missing." Roger still doesn't get it.

"So none of you were there", Spike asks.

"Where?"

"The audition", John explains. "We were all supposed to be in the studio at noon, remember?"

"At noon", Roger asks. "Who the fuck sets up a time like that."

Brian rolls his eyes. "We're working musicians. It's a perfectly acceptable..."

"Noon!" It bears repeating.

"All of you had it on your agendas for weeks and no one complained."

"I have an agenda?" Freddie looks intrigued.

"Mine doesn't even start before 2pm."

Spike stares at them, amusement and anger on his face. "You fuckers stood me up. I thought I'd blown it because I overslept but you guys just forgot about it completely."

Freddie holds out the bread basket. "The rolls are rather good", he says.

Spike takes one, then doesn’t quite know what to do with it.

"Why did you miss the audition", Roger asks when everyone's settled down with their breakfast.

Spike rolls his eyes. "Got drinking with one of your crew guys. Jolly or something?"

"Oh dear", Freddie says. Never try to keep up with Jobby is a lesson each of them has learned the hard way.

"Don't remember much to be honest."

"I like your style", Freddie says.

"I think we should hire him", Roger says. "Fits in nicely with our work ethic."

Brian looks uncomfortable. "Guys, can we please hear him play first?"

Later, they all get together for a practice session. It's a bit embarrassing really.

They all launch into Radio Ga Ga, and one minute in, Spike is the only one playing.

"Been a while", Brian says into the awkward silence. "You know how it goes?"

"I've been doing little else since you guys invited me to audition", he says.

Freddie saunters over to him. "You know the words, too?"

"Of course."

Soon they're all clustered around Spike on the piano while he teaches them their own hit. They
can't not hire him after that.

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So finally, after almost two years, they're back on tour. It's a good thing they've set aside almost three weeks for rehearsals: They haven't played live together in a long time, and it shows. So much that the first concert in Brussels starts with a massive delay because they find out during soundcheck that some of the transitions don't go quite as smoothly as they want. So they race through the complete set while people are already queuing outside. Not ideal.

But once the tour really gets going, the old groove comes back. The fans are ecstatic to have them back and the new songs - especially Tear it Up and Break Free - translate really well from the studio to stage. And the audience loves to do the hand clap sequence in Radio Ga Ga (the one that the music press likes to compare to images of the Nuremburg rally. Roger had actually screamed at the paper when he read that).

The tour starts off in Belgium, but then returns to the British Isles, where they play a number of shows each in Dublin, Birmingham and London. The press have caught on to the fact that Freddie's started working on a solo album, so Freddie takes a little time at each gig to quell rumours of an impending Queen break-up. Roger's a little pissed that his own solo album (which is actually finished and in the charts - not very high, but there nonetheless) apparently doesn't merit such rumours. Don't they think he has it in him? Or that the others would just shrug and get a new drummer?

The Wembley concert for Freddie's birthday is really quite lovely. They're struggling a bit to keep the audience from launching into Happy Birthday after every fucking song and Freddie actually stops in the middle of Love of my Life to read a birthday card someone's brought for him, but of course he gets away with it.

After England, they zig-zag all over the continent. They play in Italy for the first time during a tour and then return to Brussels for a second concert. The shows are spaced well enough apart that Freddie's voice always gets enough time to recover from the stress and he sounds fantastic. It's like something's lit up inside of him on this tour; He even starts experimenting with some falsetto during Hard Life and Under Pressure, something he rarely did on stage before. It seems to Roger that while Freddie is a great musician in the studio, this is what he really needs. It's like watching a butterfly unfolding it's wings every night, soaking up the energy of the audience like it's the heat of the summer sun.

Then comes Hannover. Freddie's being his usual energetic self, flitting back and forth over the stage. They've got a good show going, but as they near the end of Hammer, something's off. Roger can't really see what's happening, but John's gesturing at him to cut everything short, and so with a simple crash of cymbals, Roger ends the song.

"What's happened", Roger asks as he kneels next to Freddie, who's clutching his knee. His right knee, the one that's only just healed from the torn ligament. "Oh fuck."

"Fell on my arse, like a prat", he hisses through clenched teeth. "Help me up, get me to the piano."

Phoebe and Ratty lead him to the chair, then Freddie waves them off. "Alright", he says. "Let's get going."

"How do you mean, 'get going'?", Brian looks thoroughly disapproving.
"Yeah, we've to get you to a doctor, now", Roger says.

"We could ask if there's one in the audience", John suggests. "Like they do on planes sometimes."

Freddie grimaces. "Don't be silly. It's just six or seven songs, and I can do them from here if I have to."

"Absolutely not!" Roger's going to put his foot down on this. It might suck for the audience, but they're in the middle of a tour and Freddie needs to be checked by a doctor right now.

"Darling, please", Freddie says in his 'why am I the only grown-up in here' voice. If they hadn't been in front of an audience of thousands, Roger's sure he'd have patted his hand. "I just need a bit of a sit-down and then..." In order to prove just how fine he is, Freddie starts to move his leg about, only to break off with a grimace of pain.

"Right", Brian says. "That's it. You go to the hospital, and the three of us can improvise two or three things on our own. Rog, you got the lyrics for the car song?"

Roger nods. What he really wants is stay with Freddie, but he'll be in good hands.

Freddie however won't have it. "No, no, no. I will not let it come to that!"

Roger crosses his arms. "Hey, what's that supposed to..."

"We'll do BoRhap", Freddie says. "Once I start playing, there's really nothing you can do about it."

"Alright", John says. "But then..."

"And Radio, Break Free, Rock You and Champions, and then..."

They argue back and forth like that for a while until Gerry gets visibly nervous in the wings.


"And you promise to keep your arse on that chair until Phoebe comes and gets you", Roger demands.

Freddie shoos them away. "You're such a bunch of girls", he sighs.

The rest of the set is a bit of a rushed affair, but the audience still celebrates them with claps and cheers as they make their way off stage, where Freddie collapses on the sofa.

Freddie is brought to the hospital and x-rayed, but apparently the damage can be treated with injections, massages and bandages. Dieter, the physiotherapist who treated him back in May, gets a phone call offering him a metric shit ton of money if he agrees to drop everything and join the band for the rest of the tour. With his help (and a mountain of pain killers), Freddie manages to get back on stage for the very next gig in Berlin only two days later.

So, after more than 20 shows in Europe, The Works Tour is shaping up very nicely. The album sells well, the set list works, and they're not half as much on each other's nerves as they were 2 years earlier. They even get some mildly complimentary articles in the British music press.

Until fucking Sun City.

Of course they'd known it would be a bit controversial, but it's not like they're the first. Elton John has played there. Frank Sinatra. Even Monserrat fucking Caballé. Besides, Queen is huge down
there. Break Free is a number one hit, and the album tops the charts too, and no one's making a fuss about selling about records there, so why should a string of concerts be that different? And of course they made sure that they wouldn't be playing to segregated audiences and they released a charity single with all proceeds going to a school for the blind and deaf. Brian even gets invited to present an award to black musicians in Soweto, and people are thrilled to have him there.

But of course, every sanctimonious arsehole with an axe to grind creeps out of the woodwork to wag their finger at them. Probably a finger wearing a gold ring mined in South Africa. It's easy enough to ignore those wankers, but it looks like all the women in his life have closed ranks, too. Melissa calls him from New York just to yell at him for ten minutes straight, while Marlene just stops speaking to him at all for a month. And when she does condescend to see him again, she keeps passive-aggressively humming "Free Nelson Mandela" under her breath. Clare chews him out as well, and even his mum - who's a lovely woman but not exactly an anti-apartheid activist - is vaguely disapproving.

Seems like everyone's turned into an expert on African racial politics over night.

Roger's never even heard of Sun City before. It turns out to be a gigantic luxury resort in a place called Bophuthatswana, which is technically an independent state (but of course it isn't really). It's not a bad place to be. There's an amazing artificial lake where Dieter teaches him windsurfing and there are so many night clubs and casinos he could visit a new one each night for a month. Apparently, any risqué kind of entertainment is verboten in South Africa proper, so - in the manner of good conservatives everywhere - South Africans flock to resorts like this to gamble away their money and watch some topless dancing. To Freddie's annoyance, the liberality doesn't extend to gay clubs, so he spends the first two or three nights moping in his suite. Eventually though, boredom and curiosity win over and he joins the rest of the band on their nights out.

They play at a huge arena called the Superbowl, and say what you will about the place, both the organization and the audience is superb. By all other measures, it's a fantastic string of shows, but even Roger can't completely ignore the fact that the only black people he's seeing around the place are cleaning staff and drivers.

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After the last show, Roger and Freddie don't fly directly back to England, but put in a brief stopover in Ibiza to pick up little Eric.

Under Maria's dedicated care, he has blossomed. He's still missing an ear and most of his tail, but he runs around after bits of string and chews on the furniture and sinks his claws into Roger's hand like a proper cat (has Roger mentioned yet that he doesn't like cats?). Freddie is over the moon and promises Eric the biggest room in Garden Lodge all to himself and treats all day long.

Until Freddie finds Maria crying in a quiet corner of the garden the next day, clutching Eric to her chest.

"No", Roger says when Freddie tells him of the change in plans. "Absolutely not!"

"But this is his home", Freddie says. "And I can come over and visit whenever I like."

"It's my home", Roger corrects. "Well, my house, anyway, and I'm not turning it into a sanctuary for stray cats!"

"I can't believe you're that heartless!"
Now that's just unfair. He's allowed this creature to live here for three months already. He's not even mentioned the destruction to the furniture and carpets this has caused. "I'm not heartless. Eric's going to be the most spoiled cat in all of England."

"I'm not talking about Eric", Freddie says with a sideways glance at Maria, who's visible behind the sliding glass door of the kitchen, preparing Eric's food. "She was sobbing!"

"Let her take him then."

"She lives in a tiny house with her parents and two cat-eating dogs."

"I'm sure they'll", Roger makes some vague wriggling motion with his hands, "all get along eventually."

Freddie's trembling with rage. "It'll be his blood on your hands."

Oh god, he's getting all melodramatic. Give him a few more minutes and he'll have himself worked up into a full-blown tantrum. "Well, you sort it out then." Roger gets up. He needs a long, hard ride on his bike right now. "But this cat is not staying in my house permanently. End of story."

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"It's terribly good of you."

"We're not talking about this."

"I just think you should know that I really appreciate..."

"Freddie, one more word and I'll turn the bloody plane around and throw the cat into the fucking ocean."

Freddie puts a hand on his arm. "Let me get you a Bloody Mary, darling."

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas to all of you who celebrate today! I'm super hung over and post this in between family things, so I hope it's up to snuff ;)
Roger is ready to blow his top when he bangs open the door to the recording studio. "Alright everyone, Christmas is cancelled."

"You're late." John's the one to deliver the traditional greeting this time.

Freddie raises his eyebrows. "Have you been a very naughty boy?"

"Bob Geldof is gathering artists for a huge charity Christmas single thing to raise funds for the famine in Ethiopia. Everyone's going to be there, but there's not been so much as a nod in our direction."

John understands immediately. "Because of Sun City?"

"Why else?" By now Roger whishes they'd just given in and never went there. Acting all humble before the Musicians Union had been bad enough, but apparently even releasing a written statement of apology and donating all the proceeds wasn't enough.

"Who d'you mean, everyone?" Freddie looks serious. He hates being left out.

"Bono, Phil Collins, Rick Parfitt, Spandau Ballett, Duran Duran, Paul McCartney, Sting, David fucking Bowie..."

"Bloody hell." Brian looks impressed. "How come we haven't heard of this?"

"Guess they don't want us show up on the doorsteps of the studio like the disinvited racist uncles at a wedding"

"And they're doing a Christmas single?"

"Yeah." Roger hands Brian the sheet. "Rick sent a copy of the lyrics. It's supposed to be released in December. Anyway, we can't release our own thing now."

Freddie looks mutinous. "Why not?"

"Because then it's us, the fascist, apartheid-supporting losers, cynically trying to make a quick buck, versus the collective of do-gooders, generously acting out of the goodness of their own hearts."

"What if our song is a lot better?"

"Freddie, musical quality has fuck-all to do with this."

"Pity though", Brian says, frowning down at the lyrics. "Because this is shit."

Freddie is immediately cheered up. "See?"

"Listen to this," Brian says. "Tonight, thank God it's them instead of you' - and we are the racists?"

John rolls his eyes. "It's probably meant to be sarcastic."
"Oh, yes, great place for sarcasm", Roger replies. "A charity Christmas single for starving children. Why not put in some dick jokes as well?"

Brian continues. "And then the refrain: 'Do they know it's Christmas?' What kind of question is that? Why, yes Bob, I think they do, because the people of Ethiopia have been celebrating Christmas since, er, Christ I guess."

"Yeah, right." Roger nods along like he totally knew that.

"Honestly, I'm kind of relieved they didn't invite us."

"What if we release our single for charity as well?" Freddie's not giving up so easily.

Brian rubs his hands over his face. "I really don't want to get into a pissing match over who's the most charitable."

"I agree", John says. "Especially since there's no way we're going to win."

"So we're just going to crawl under a stone and hide? Wait until Saint Bob offers us his hand of forgiveness?" Freddie jumps up from his chair. "This is ridiculous! I will not..."

"Can we please not do this, just this once?" Brian looks very tired. "Look, I know it's a bummer, but can we just not be at each other's throat, please?"

Freddie throws himself back into his chair with a huff, but he doesn't look like he's spoiling for a fight either.

"So what about the single", John asks. "It's a good song, we shouldn't let it go to waste."

"Christmas comes once year as far as I know", Roger says. "Why not release it next year?"

"Because we have a contract with EMI?"

"Ah, fuck them." Freddie is perking up a bit. If he can't score one over Bob Geldof, he can at least stick it to the record company.

"They don't want a bad selling single or another PR disaster any more than we do. I don't see them putting up a fight." Brian leans back in his chair.

"So we record it now, release it next year?"

Brian shrugs. "The studio's already booked, so..." He gestures towards their instruments.

"I don't know about you guys, but I'm really not in the mood right now", Roger says.

"Alright, tomorrow then? We can..."

"You know what?" Roger leans forward, arms on his knees. "Why don't we just do it around Christmas, or right before? We're all going to be in London anyway and it's going to be a lot more fun than doing it in the November drizzle."

John raises his eyebrows. "A Christmas single recorded over Christmas?"

"Ohh, do we dare." Freddie wriggles his fingers.

Brian smiles. "Never afraid to explore the new and unconventional."
"We could wear hats and silly jumpers and drink lots of mulled wine...” Now Freddie's really getting into it.

"...and put lots of bows and ornaments on Roger's drum kit", Brian suggests.

"Right, maybe this isn't such a good idea. Forget I said anything."

But there's no turning back. His band mates are already organizing a Secret Santa and discussing who's going to have to wear the legendary ugly Father Christmas hat that Brian's son crafted in nursery school last year.

At least no one suggests doing a Panto.

"There's something else we should talk about", John says when the excitement about the Christmas party (with some recording thrown in, if there's time) has died down again. "Gerry's got an outline for the America tour next year, but he needs our okay before he can go on."

"Can't do it", Freddie says. "I'm moving into Garden Lodge, so I need at least a month off."

"But that's in February, right?" John slides over a tour itinerary. "This is all in the Summer."

They all have a look at the list. "Just one show at MSG and the Forum", Roger notes. "And there's an awful lot of Midwest in there."

"What the fuck is Waterbury", Freddie asks.

John thinks for a moment. "I think we've been there before, with Mott. First tour, remember?"

"Is this supposed to be a joke? We play stadiums now, not community centres."

"Not in the US." John shrugs. "Look, we're haven't been there in two years and the last album wasn't exactly a huge seller over there, so..."

"...so we're back to the pub circuit?"

"Come on, Freddie", Brian cuts in. "We do play the Garden, it's not like..."

"No." Freddie's crossed his arms.

"Can we at least talk about..."

"No!"

Brian throws up his hands. "So what's your plan, huh? Just ignore America - which is only the most important market on the planet - until they come begging? Because that won't happen."

Freddie shrugs. "We write a massive hit. And then do a proper tour. Not this shit."

"Massive hits don't just happen", John says. "It takes work. You tour, you promote, you do the press conferences and the interviews and then maybe, if you're lucky, you get a hit."

Brian nods. "We might not be used to it anymore, but he's right. That's how it works."

"We sold out Madison Square Garden three times in a row. I'm not going back to playing Chippewaga City Hall."

Roger doesn't say anything. John and Brian are right of course. Just writing America off would be
a stupid thing to do. But it would also feel like a defeat, going back to smaller venues. That's the problem with being on top, isn't it? Eventually, the only way to go is down.

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They reconvene the week before Christmas in a studio bedecked with Holly and mistletoe. John insists on wearing a pair of antlers he nicked from the set of "It's a Hard Life", although they look creepy rather than Christmasy. Roger has no idea how he managed to get them through customs. Thick fumes of mulled wine waft through the studio. Chrissie, Veronica and the kids are there too, and even Roger (who tends to roll his eyes at Christmas sentimentality) gets into the spirit of the season.

Afterwards, he heads off to Cornwall to spend Christmas with his family. The plan is to return to London as soon as he's allowed and spend a few quiet days with Freddie holed up in his apartment in Stafford Terrace before the big New Year's Eve bash Elton's giving at the Astoria.

But then his grandfather starts talking gibberish over pudding on Christmas Eve and the holidays are spent in hospital wards and doctor's offices, waiting and then waiting some more. It takes three days and two rounds of surgery until the doctors are reasonably sure he'll survive. Then another four until he's awake enough to recognize any of them. He can't walk, barely speak and his mind is on another planet most of the time. The doctors say it'll get better but no one knows how much and how fast.

His mother toughs it out, throwing herself into organizing his care and keeping everyone informed. His grandmother on the other hand is a mess. Roger has never seen this sensible, no nonsense woman cry in all his life. Suddenly, the Astoria is very far away. He talks to Freddie on the phone every now and then, but the conversations are short, to the point. It's not something they do often and not something they're very good at either.

He stays up with his grandma playing cards at 4 in the morning when she can't sleep and strums simple songs on the guitar at his grandpa's bedside, songs he's always been humming when he's been puttering around the house. It's not much, but it's better than doing nothing.

Roger has to return to London eventually though. They'll be flying out to Rio where they're headlining a gigantic rock festival (still not the Maracanã, but bigger than anything they've done before nonetheless) next week. The last gig they played was almost three months ago and they desperately need to get some rehearsing done. So he shoves his bad conscience aside and leaves Truro.

He doesn't even bother bringing his luggage to his house in Fulham, but heads straight to Kensington.

Freddie's at the windows of his living room, a cup of tea in his hands.

"Hey", Roger says and drops his duffle to the floor.

Freddie half turns. "Hey."

Right, so he's going to have to get the hug he needs himself. He wraps his arms around Freddie and inhales deeply. Expensive cologne, a bit of styling gel. Cigarette smoke. He hasn't smelled that on him in a long time.

He draws back a little so he can kiss Freddie, but he wriggles away. "Come on", Freddie says with a faint smile. "I'll get you some tea. You're freezing."
Roger doesn't want tea, but he follows Freddie into the kitchen and takes a cup. "Are you alright", he asks. Whenever they'd spoken on the phone all they talked about was Roger's family.

"Yes, fine."

"Come on, something's up."

"I'm just tired", Freddie snaps. "And it's dark and freezing and I'm counting down the days until we get to Rio."

Roger slides his hand over the table until he can run a finger over Freddie's arm. "Want me to warm you up?"

Now, usually there are two possible reactions. Either Freddie would groan and roll his eyes and act all embarrassed at the cheesy line, or Roger would be on his back in two minutes flat. Or some combination of the two. What never happens is that Freddie just stares at the table vacantly as though he barely heard what Roger said.

"Hey." Roger waits until he has Freddie's full attention. "What's going on?" Is Freddie giving him the silent treatment because he scrapped their holiday plans?

Freddie rubs a hand over his face. He takes a long time to answer. "I..." He breaks off, pushes the cup around in the saucer for a minute. "Just a bit under the weather", he says finally and Roger is 99% percent certain that is not what he was going to say when he first started. "Look, I'm going to be absolutely horrid company for the rest of the night. Why don't you leave me to mope on my own and we see each other tomorrow at the studio for the rehearsals?"

And just like that Roger is being kicked out of his boyfriend's house.

Chapter End Notes

No offense to anyone who likes "Do They Know It's Christmas"! The boys aren't really in a place to be objective about this :) (There are diverse religious groups in Ethiopia, but Christian denominations are in the majority.)

Bit of timeline meddling again with the Christmas single. But late '84 was the worst possible timing, not only because of the Band Aid single, but also because Wham! would release Last Christmas that year.
If Roger hoped that Freddie would get out of his funk the next day, he is mistaken. He keeps up appearances while they rehearse, but he is distracted, irritable. It's not that uncommon - all of them have their days when they drive the others spare - but with whatever went on last night, Roger's concerned.

When they finally end the session in the evening, Freddie tries to brush him off yet again, but Roger can be stubborn too. So he shows up on Freddie's doorstep, a bunch of flowers in one hand, his favourite Indian takeout in the other. If Freddie acts like a sulky girlfriend, Roger's going to treat him like one.

For a second he's convinced Freddie's just going to slam the door in his face. But then he bows his head, takes the flowers and agrees to have curry in front of the telly. Maybe it's the smell of Rogan Josh that wins him over. He still ducks away when Roger tries to kiss him.

"Right", Roger says when the curries are finished. "Whatever it is I did, I'm sorry." He learned that very useful phrase when he had his very first real girlfriend. It's not that it made her any less angry - on the contrary, it would coax her out of her sulk and into outright fighting mode, during which she'd tell him in excruciating detail all the things he did wrong. Who knows, maybe it'll work on Freddie too.

"Whatever you did?" Freddie looks puzzled.

Alright, maybe he and Beth are not that similar after all. Roger switches gears. "Come on, it's obvious something's up."

"I told you I'm..."

"Tired, yeah. So what's up with that? Overdo it at Heaven?"

Freddie worries the edge of a cushion with his fingers. "I don't know", he mumbles. "That's exactly..."

He breaks off again. It takes all of Roger's patience not to grab his shoulders and shake him. "Come on, talk to me. What's happening?"

"Can we talk about this some other time? After Rio maybe?"

"After Rio? That's almost three weeks!" No way is he going to sit this out for three bloody weeks.

"Yes, but with your grandfather and all that... you've got enough worries as it is."

Alright, enough of this. "Tell me now."

"But..."

"Whatever it is, it can't be worse than what I'll make up in my head." Already the images are rolling in, only kept at bay by Roger's sheer refusal to acknowledge them. If Freddie's that determined not to talk about it, it must be something bad.
Freddie thinks about this for a moment. "Alright. Alright." He looks up at him with his deep, dark eyes. "I've got it, Roger."

"Got what?"

Freddie clenched his teeth. "AIDS. I've got it."

Roger feels the blood drain from his face. "What?" This can't be true. It just can't.

Freddie shrugs and gets up, as if that's all that's left to say. Roger hurries after him. "You stay right here." He takes a deep breath to keep his voice under control. It's not true, he tells himself, it can't be true. "How? How on earth would you..."

"I've been fucking my way through the last decade, Rog, how do you think I got it? Recreational blood transfusions?"

"But you've been playing it safe for years now, you've..." Roger cuts himself off. Oh god. Oh god please no. He takes a step back and breathes slow and deep. "Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?"

Freddie returns his stare defiantly. "I don't have to explain myself to you."

"You promised! You fucking promised me!"

"I never promised to become a bloody nun."

"I didn't expect you to!" This is not what they should be talking about right now, but it's so much easier to argue than to... "But you promised to be safe at least!"

Freddie throws his hands up. "And what is 'safe', huh? It's a guess, nothing more. They say in the New York Times you can get it from kissing now. Kissing, Roger. And I've kissed you more times than I can count and..."

"That's fear-mongering bullshit and you know it."

"No, I don't know, and you don't either, no one fucking knows anything!" His voice breaks on a note that Roger never, ever wants to hear in his voice. It's plain, naked fear. Christ, Freddie thinks he's dying and all he does is turn inquisition on him.

"Alright. Alright. Come here." Roger gently takes his arm and leads him back to the sofa. "I'm just... fuck. Look. I don't care what you did or didn't do, not right now. But please tell me what's going on."

"I'm sick", Freddie said.

"Okay. What is it?"

"I've been feeling tired for weeks."

"We've been touring and recording and the press has been..."

"Do you want to hear this or do you just want to argue with me?"

I want to tell you that you are wrong, Roger thinks. I want you to admit you've just been stupid and paranoid and tell me you're going to be alright, dammit. "Sorry."
"I'm tired, my throat's acting up, and last week, I've had a rash on my... on my arse."

"A rash? What kind of rash? Show me what..."

Freddie batted his hands away. "I'm not going to show you my rash, you disgusting creature!" He looks scandalized. "Anyway, it's fine now."

"Okay, good. Anything else? Because that doesn't sound all that..."

"I've got a lesion."

Oh shit. Oh shit oh shit no no no not that. "What kind of lesion?"

Freddie rolled his eyes. "That kind of lesion."

"Can I see? Please?"

Four, five heartbeats. Then Freddie unbuttons his shirt and tugs it aside. "Right above the shoulder blade."

There's a small, dark, oval spot, less than half an inch in diameter.

"Move into the light a little, will you? I can barely see." Roger's voice is somehow not trembling. "How did you even notice it back there?"

"New gay morning routine. Checking yourself for purple death spots. It's the latest craze, haven't you heard?"

Roger can see it in his mind: Freddie standing in front of the mirror, alone and scared, pulse jumping with every mole, every bruise he discovers.

And Roger had no idea.

The spot looks guileless under the light of the reading lamp, more brown that purple. Roger carefully strokes over it. "It looks like a mole", he said.

"I don't have moles", Freddie says.

Of course he has moles but pointing that out is not going win Roger any points. "People get moles as they get older."

"Stop kidding yourself, Roger." Freddie tugs the shirt back in place and sighs. "I'm sorry."

"What does Dr Atkinson say?"

Freddie doesn't answer. He wordlessly buttons up his shirt.

"Freddie? Dr Atkinson?"

Freddie shrugs.

"You have talked to him, haven't you?"

"What's the point? The doctors can't do anything and..."

'You fucking arsehole scaring me to death I'm going to kill you' is what Roger doesn't say, because Roger is a calm and reasonable human being. Instead he takes a deep breath in, a deep breath out.
This relationship is going to make him a fucking Zen Master.

Instead he picks up the phone. "Yes, hello, I'm calling for Mr Mercury."

"It's no use, Roger", Freddie says.

"Yeah, we need to see Dr Atkinson as soon as possible." He covers the speaker with his hand. "Don't you dare argue with me about this", he hisses. "Hm? No, it's not an emergency exactly, but we'd appreciate it if... Yes, thanks."

"Do you think having it black on white is going to make me feel better?"

"Freddie, this is so not up for discussion. Tomorrow, 7:30 a.m.? Yes, perfect."

"A.M.? A.M.? Are you mad?"

Roger puts down the receiver. "Dr Atkinson is coming in early just to see you, you ungrateful tit."

"Hm, maybe I could drop by on my way home from Heaven..."

"I thought you're so terribly tired."

"Do you enjoy that? Torturing a dying man?"

"You're not a dying man, you're an insufferable prat." That brings a smile to Freddie's face at least. "Come on, now I do need some tea. And then we'll watch a movie and then maybe we'll have a look at your bum after all."

"I've told you, it's fine."

Roger raises his eyebrows. "Hmm, maybe that's exactly why I want to have a look."

Freddie is getting into it, Roger can tell, but then his face falls. "Roger, darling, I... I don't care what happens to me but... no, that's a lie, I do care what happens to me, a lot, but if something happened to you because of me..." He shakes his head. "It's intolerable. You're innocent of all this and..."

"How do you mean, 'innocent'?"

"You know what I mean. You weren't slutting yourself out and..."

"Woah, there. Like hell I was. Not with men, but... Come on, you've known me forever. It's not about innocent or guilty. It's about fucking bad luck."

"Whatever." He takes Roger's hand. "You know I'm not good at saying no even when I should, so."

"Freddie, I'm sure you're okay."

"No." Freddie shakes his hand. "No, darling, you cannot be sure. So please. Give me this."

"Alright." Roger pulls him close, but Freddie holds back. "Hey, just a hug. No more, promise."

As Freddie lets himself be pulled in, Roger breathes his scent in deep. He is going to be okay. He has to be okay because Roger will burn down the fucking world if he isn't.
The *NY Times* article came out in late 1984.
The next days are hell. Although Dr Atkinson agrees that it's most likely just a mole, he still takes a biopsy and sends it off for analysis. It'll take about a week until the results are in and until then, Freddie has instituted a total kissing embargo. Roger's 99% sure it's all fine, but dammit, that 1% uncertainty just keeps popping up in his mind all the time. It's very annoying.

Luckily, they have two gigantic concerts to prepare for. It's unclear whether the Rock in Rio organisers are crazily enthusiastic or just plain crazy. They've built an entire city designed to host the festival and called it - of course - Rock City. There'll be 10 days of music, from 4 in the afternoon until after midnight, and every night is sold out. Many of the artists are local bands not that well known outside the Brazil, but every night will be headlined by the likes of AC/DC and Rod Steward. And of course, Queen got the big opening night. The organisers are talking about a quarter of a million people for that first night alone, but even Roger thinks that's kind of far fetched. Do you even hear the music if you stand at the back of such a vast crowd?

Remembering the hasty retreat they had to make the last time they were in Latin America, they're all a bit nervous about going back there, but as always, Brazil is good to them. It's not like they see much of the country or the city though: Every time they want to go out, there's an enormous security entourage assembled, which doesn't make for a quiet day out on the beach (or a wild night at the clubs). On the upside, their hotel is so gigantic and luxurious, it almost doesn't matter. The Copacabana Hotel looks like a mix between a colonial palace and a Soviet government building. Every one of them gets a five bedroom suite, which Roger even in his wildest days wouldn't have known what to do with.

For the first few days, they have a lot of work to do. Roger welcomes it, because working means being distracted from thinking about that small tissue sample that might be holding a death sentence. Although the playlist is slightly trimmed down compared to a standard tour gig, they're still going to play a full set and they're determined to rock this thing. No way in hell will they be upstaged by bloody Iron Maiden. So they spend a lot of time rehearsing in a small studio close to the hotel and - whenever the schedule allows - in the arena itself, to get a feel for the place.

It's during one of those rehearsals at the studio, two days before the first show that Joe Fanelli pops his head around the door. "Freddie? A call from London."

He doesn't say who it is, but Roger knows. The only other person important enough to merit an interruption during rehearsals is Mary, but she's on a well deserved break on the Bahamas with her boyfriend.

Freddie doesn't look at Roger as he walks out.

Brian and John exchange puzzled looks, but then they shrug and put their instruments away for the moment. "Take ten, I guess", Brian says. "By the way, have we got any more of those cheese pastéis?"

The whole band has become more or less addicted to Brazilian snack food, but Roger is not in the mood. He walks out into the hallway where the air is a little less stuffy and he's not directly under his band mate's watchful eyes. He takes a deep, shaky breath to steady his nerves. God, he'd murder for a cigarette right now, but he doesn't have any with him and he's not gonna go back
inside to sneak one from Deacy.

Freddie is probably, no, certainly, fine. He's not shown any of the common early symptoms. To go from perfectly healthy to getting KS is... (...not unheard of, the logical part of his brain supplies) extremely unusual. Well, quite unusual. And anyway, Freddie's been playing it safe for years now (Do you really know what he gets up to when you're not there?) and although the doctors say that you can be infected for a long time without showing any symptoms (Two years? Three years? Or maybe even more?), what are the chances? (One of his exes has got it. Do you know for how long he's been infected?) Oh god, why can't his brain just shut up for five fucking minutes. And what the fuck is taking Freddie so long? Being told you're fine shouldn't take that long.

And although he scrambles to stem the tide, in his mind the floodgates open. It goes back to Dino on his respirator, the despair on James' face, the images he's seen on the telly since then. And then he can see it all so clearly, the long, slow descent into sickness and death ahead of them. Covering it up as long as possible, lying to the fans, the press, their families even. The inevitable speculation. The treatments getting more and more desperate, always hoping that the next drug, the next miracle cure might be it. The moment of truth at the very end. He can see it all so very clearly as if had already happened.

Would Freddie want him by his side? Would he push him away? Would he allow himself to be seen, frail and sick and dependent on others?

Could Roger bear it to be there with him to the end?

Alright, he needs a fucking smoke right this minute, to hell with...

The door of the back office opens. Freddie just stands in the doorway. He pauses for a moment, then looks up at Roger and nods.

What the hell is he nodding for? What's that supposed to mean? Yes, I've got it? Yes, I'm okay? Yes, my bid at Sotheby's for that fabulous Japanese silk painting came through? (If it's the last, Freddie is so dead).

"So?" He asks, not trusting his voice for more.

"I'm... I'm fine", Freddie stammers, a little sheepishly as if he's sorry for the anticlimax. A cautious smile appears on his face.

Roger's heart soars as his knees go weak. He leans against the wall and slides down until he's crouching there. "You fucking wanker", he whispers.

Freddie barks out a laugh, but then his face grows serious again. "But Roger..."

"Yes? What?" Oh god, please don't take this away from me again.

"It appears I've got a mole."

+++ 270.000 people. 350.000 people. 400.000 people. It seems like there's no number ridiculous enough not to be quoted in the press. From up the stage, looking at that gigantic mass of people, it looks like the whole world is there.

They've all dressed in white to be visible against the dark background for those further back, a trick they picked up when they first started playing bigger gigs. They've got serious jitters before the
show, which isn't helped by the fact that they only get to go on stage around two in the morning. There's not much left to do for them except pacing and drinking light beer (Gerry has prudently cleared anything stronger from the backstage area) and snapping at each other. But once they're up there, everything clicks.

Freddie's voice is in phenomenal shape, and although he botches some lines, the energy radiating off him, fed by a crowd of at least a quarter million eating out of the palm of his hands, is sizzling. Love of my Life is a song that was written to be sung by a crowd like that.

The only real hitch comes when Freddie dons his wig and falsies for Break Free, which had worked great during the European tour. Apparently he missed the memo that the song has become something of an anthem of social justice movements all over Latin America. He visibly stumbles backwards at the unexpected eruption of boos and hisses. Later, he'd chew out Gerry for failing to warn him ("I have, Freddie. Repeatedly. Your response was 'Oh, don't be ridiculous, darling, they'll love it.'"). As soon as the drag comes off though, the crowd goes back to adoring him. The joint British/Brazilian flag he wears around his shoulders at the end smooths even the last ruffled feathers.

The next night, EMI throws a big do for them at the hotel. The party is actually rather good: The fun half of Duran Duran is there and Rod Stewart can always be counted on for a good time (plus he's also being hounded for playing in South Africa, so there's lots of whiskeys to be shared over the unfairness of the world in general and the British music press in particular). Freddie at first refuses to put in more than a token appearance (on the principle that he decides when and where to party and with whom and that he's not a mascot to be paraded around in front of boring executive types), but then Roger introduces him to a phenomenally drunk troupe of topless Samba dancers. Naturally they get on like a house on fire.

Brian on the other hand spends most of the night on the beach, where the local fan club has arranged thousands of candles to spell the name "Queen". He even helps them light the last of the candles, the old softie. Then he jumps into the pool, fully clothed. It's that kind of night.

Then they have a few days off with fuck-all to do except the daily rehearsal to keep sharp and an occasional press appearance. Which suits Roger just fine, because after the time spent apart at Christmas and Freddie's sex embargo, they have almost a month of catching up to do. And it's not just sex: it's also just lounging around in bed together without being distracted by a suspicious looking mole or a bit of irritated skin and immediately having to think of sickness and death.

It's almost like it was before, except that now, when Freddie drags him away from the lunch table and tells him to fuck him right now (his whisper is low enough that the others can't hear it, but Roger's face must have told them more than they ever wanted to know), he hands him a condom along with the lube.

Roger holds it up, a questioning look on his face. They haven't used those with each other, ever. Maybe they should have, but...

"Just in case", Freddie says.

"Just in case what?" Is Freddie afraid to catch something from him?

Freddie shrugs. "Just in case I'm... just to be on the safe side."

Oh. So it's the other way round. "Freddie, you've talked to Dr Atkinson just a few days ago. He said you're fine."
"No, Roger. He said it's not KS. I still might... It can take years until you get that."

"Not that many years."

"Summer ‘82’, Freddie says. "That's not even three years."

Summer ‘82. Frankfurt. The Hot Space tour. Roger has no idea what happened in those two weeks when they weren't speaking (‘everything with everyone’), but he has some pretty good ideas. "Fuck."

"I'm not going to apologize."

"No. Still." Roger rubs a hand over his face. Is this ever going to end? Will there ever be a point where they can say, alright, they're in the clear?

Freddie wanders over to the desk and picks up an auction catalogue, his favourite reading material (after the Spartacus guide, of course).

"Hey, what are you doing?"

Freddie shrugs. "It didn't sound like you were going to screw me anytime soon, so..."

"Yes, well, we got a bit side tracked there." And honestly, 'I might die yet' isn't a very sexy topic to get side-tracked by. "But give me a minute and I'm ready to go."

Freddie quirks an eyebrow and tosses the catalogue aside. "A minute? You old romantic."

Roger grins and pulls Freddie up from the sofa, then steers him towards one of the five bedrooms. "For you, my dear, I might make it two."

Chapter End Notes

Here's Brian with the Brazilian fans. Isn't he precious?
Not sure how to tag this. Let's give this a broad 'difficult chracters being difficult and things get a bit dark and there's inappropriate humour'-warning. Not a happy Christmas episode, is what I'm trying to say.

After their return from Rio, Roger takes the car straight to Truro from the airport to check in with his family. His grandpa's recovering well, but it's unlikely he'll ever regain full use of his left leg. His grandma is getting better as well - when she gripes at him about his hair, she almost sounds like her old self.

He only learns through a phone call that Freddie's flat has been burgled while they were away. Apparently some stalker broke in an tried on all of Freddie's clothes (which is just creepy as fuck). It's a good thing the move to Garden Lodge is imminent, although it also means that Freddie is insanely busy. He's not only organising the move (well, directing the organising that is actually done by Mary and Phoebe) and has to replace the entire contents of his wardrobe (which in itself is a massive undertaking) but he's also dead set on getting his album done before the Australia tour starts in April. It's almost finished, but for someone as finicky as Freddie 'almost' can stretch into an eternity. And when Freddie feels under pressure, the expression "prickly, moody diva" is putting it mildly. Roger prefers "bloody terror".

The elevated mood from the negative KS test result doesn't last long. Within two weeks of their return from Rio, the closeness Roger thought had grown between them has sizzled out. It's not that Roger isn't used to Freddie's moods or that he expects romantic candlelight dinners every night. But being treated like an annoying add-on that can be brushed off whenever Freddie's got more important important things to do is not his thing. So he finds his own things to do - visit his family, go out with friends, spend some time in his mansion in Surrey. He bought it with the first serious money he made from the BoRhap B-side, mainly because he likes the idea of having a mansion in the countryside. But the house also has a decently equipped private recording studio in the basement, so he has something to keep him occupied when he gets bored. Or lonely.

Today, he's just about to drive back into London when he gets a call. Freddie's supposed to come back from a three-day stint in Munich that day, but when Roger hears his voice, he immediately knows something's off.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes, just haven't slept in two days. I need to get this thing done already, it's driving me crazy. I..." He hesitates briefly. "I need another week or so here."

"Okay." Roger swallows his disappointment. He'd hoped that they'd get an evening or two for themselves that week. He understand the work comes first, but damn.

"Sorry about dinner."

Roger makes a snap decision. "Don't be. We'll have our dinner. If I drive straight to the airport I
"can be in Munich in..." He looks at his watch.

"No! I mean..." Freddie sounds almost panicked.

"Freddie?"

"Look, darling, I'm going to be locked up in the studio almost all the time. Mack is calling it a conclave - just the two of us and no one gets out until we're finished. We'd barely see each other and when we do I'd be horrible company."

Something weird is going on here. "Freddie, you... you haven't been like kidnapped or anything right? They aren't making you say this." He's not entirely serious, but this is worrying.

He can practically hear the eye roll. "Mack! Come over here and tell Roger I haven't been kidnapped."

A few seconds later, Mack's distinctive accent is on the phone. "Freddie has not been kidnapped", he says drily. "How's it going, Rog..."

"And that's enough, thank you." Freddie reclaims the phone. "Satisfied?"

"Yeah, fine." So Freddie's not in danger. He's just busy. And not very keen to see him. And Roger's being made to feel entirely expendable. Again.

Freddie sighs. "I'll make it up to you once I've got this blasted record out, I promise you, darling."

Right. That's the last straw. Freddie sounds like a businessman in a fifties movie, apologising for not making it home to dinner in time. But Roger's not a sodding housewife sitting at home waiting for Mr Important to come home. He's got his own life, his own friends. Maybe he just needs to get away for a bit. Bit of skiing. Gstaad is very nice this time of year. Or Hawaii, maybe give surfing another try.

"Sure", he says, keeping his voice light. "Actually, that suits me rather well."

"Does it?" Is Roger imagining it or is there a note of annoyance in Freddie's voice? Well, that only serves him right.

"Hmm. I've been thinking about...", his gaze catches on the glossy silver invitation pinned to the board above his desk. "...about going to New York actually. Melissa's birthday, remember?"

"Oh. Right. Good idea." Now Freddie sounds supremely unconcerned. Like he doesn't care what Roger's doing.

Another idea floats into his mind and he lets it out unfiltered. "Maybe I could ask Marlene if she'd like to come along. For company." Roger pauses a few seconds giving Freddie time to react, but there is silence. "If you don't mind."

"Why would I mind?" Freddie's voice could cut glass.

"No reason. No reason at all." He waits another moment to see if Freddie's going to say anything. If he gives a fuck about any of this at all. But apparently not. "Right. So I guess I'll see you back in London then."

"Yes. I'll let you know once I'm done here."

Oh, how terribly nice of him. Roger hangs up the phone fuming.
He had only brought up Marlene in the spur of the moment, just to see if... well, he's not quite sure why he brought her up. But right now, it seems like a bloody brilliant idea, so he punches in her number as soon as the call to Freddie has ended.

And she does sound excited at the idea. "Yeah, New York sounds great. I've still got some leftover leave from last year, so it should be no problem to take a week off. But..."

"Great! I'll see if I can get us tickets for the Met or something and Melissa will be excited to see you again and..."

"Er, Rog."

"Yeah?"

"Look, just so we're on the same page. I'd love to go to New York with you, and I've absolutely no problem to be your arm piece for the press or whatever it is this time. But..."

"It's not at all about that..." he protests.

"But", she quickly cuts him off, "I'm, well, I'm sort of in a relationship again and... and it's a bit serious this time and... well, we'd be going there strictly as friends is what I'm trying to say."

Oh. But it's not that sex is the main reason Roger asked her. Also, a mean voice inside him whispers, Freddie doesn't have to know that. "Ah. Well, that's fine, I wasn't..."

"Good. Okay."

"Right. Er. Congrats, by the way, why haven't you told me? Is it anyone I know?"

She giggles. "Er, yeah, you could say that."

He groans. "It's not Bernd again, is it?" Although the last time she dated that idiot it ended with an offer of surprise sex for him, so it wasn't all bad.

"God no. Screw that guy. No, it's... it's Bibi, actually."

"Doubledecker Bibi?" The woman with the greatest rack in Mainland Europe?

"Please don't call her that."

"You invented that name!" It didn't even make much sense, but they found it funny at the time and it stuck.

"I know, I feel very bad about it."

"Liar."

He can practically hear her eye roll. "I've seen the error of my ways, okay?"

Then he has in idea. "You think she might want to come along?" Only about 40% of that offer is driven by the thought that maybe, just maybe Bibi might be up for a threesome. The rest is pure kindness of heart.

"Oh, I bet she'd love to. But she's just started a new position. It'll be while until she can take time off. So it's just gonna be the two of us."
"But no sex." Just to make sure.

"Jeez, have you always been like that? Forget I asked, of course you have." She sighs. "No. No sex. But I'm an excellent wing man. Woman."

Which turns out to be a blatant lie. When they hit the clubs, she hangs out with Melissa mostly, prattling about... lesbian stuff, probably, but not the interesting kind. It's not that he can't pull on his own, but his heart is not really in it. It's great to see Melissa and James and the others, but there's just no escaping the fact that the one thing that ties them all together is the death of their friend - and the disease that took hold of so many others. And there's no sign of it stopping anytime soon.

One night, at her birthday party, Melissa tells him that Marco's been diagnosed with Karposi's sarcoma, the skin cancer that Freddie thought he might have.

"Fuck", is all Roger can say to that. He knows that all of them are at risk, but he hoped that maybe, miraculously, they'd get away.

"The crazies say it's God's punishment for sin", she goes on. "Thing is, sometimes I think they're right. Only they think their God is just. I think he's horrible."

He takes a drag of the cigarette she sneaked him. "Let's burn down a church."

"And City Hall next. Wankers."

He raises one eyebrow at her.

"Filched it from you. It's a good word."

He hands her the cigarette. "Wanna learn some more?"

By the time the cigarette is finished, Melissa has learned five additional British curse words, which she says will be very good for her mental health in these difficult times.

"So how's it going with your Mister?"

"He's not my... Oh why is he even bothering. Fine. It's going fine."

"Ah."

The silence stretches between them.

"Well, actually..." He shakes his head and pushes himself up from the balustrade he's been leaning against, running a hand through his hair. He's not one for taking about these things, but he misses Freddie and he's also pissed off at him and it doesn't feel like New York is making it better. "I don't know", he says. "I just don't... Got another smoke?"

She lights one for him after checking that Suki can't see her through the glass doors.

"I think he's getting bored." Actually, it's kind of amazing it's only happening now. Although that doesn't make him feel any better.

"Why do you think that?"

Roger shrugs. "He keeps brushing me off. Always got something else to do, other people to see. And when we're together, he's sort of standoffish, like he's just waiting for me to leave him alone again. And, I get it, he's got a lot going on and all, it's just..." It's like now he's decided to talk, the
"words are just spilling out of him. "It's just that it's always tomorrow, or next week, or after this and that room has been furnished, and even when we're together, even when we're having sex, he's..." He breaks off. He didn't mean to talk about that.

"He's not letting you in? Metaphorically speaking."

"Yeah, like... like he's not even really there with me, sometimes." Saying the words hurts. He doesn't want it to be true, did his best to ignore the thought the first times it's come up. "He says everything's fine, but sometimes... Sometimes I wonder if there's someone else, or... or maybe that he needs something I can't give him."

"Like what?"

Roger thinks back to that night in Munich when Freddie told him what he wanted. When Roger had promised to give it to him. And he did, he does, as best as he can anyway, and for a while he thought it was working but... maybe Freddie wants to go places Roger's not willing to follow. Or worse, wants Roger to lead him there. "Like, you know. Your kind of stuff."

"Ah." She thinks for a moment. "Anything in particular he mentioned or..."

"No", Roger snaps, then tamps his voice down. "That's the point, it's never particular. He'll say something and then I don't know whether it's a joke or he means it, or he'll give hints and when I act on them sometimes it's good and sometimes he gets offended and..." He clenches his teeth in frustration. "Like at some point he suggested bringing a girl in, and when I take action to make it happen, he yells at me. It's like I'm always playing catch up, but at the moment I don't even seem to be doing that very well."

She frowns at him. "Wait a sec. Are you saying your flying blind?"

That's actually a good way of putting it. "Yeah, basically."

"Okay, and just in very broad terms, what are we talking about? You can put it in terms of hankies if you like."

No, he wouldn't. "Just. Like." God, this is difficult. But if there's anyone who can help him sort it out it's going to be Melissa. Although she'll probably find it all really quaint. "Taking other people home. Acting jealous. Name calling. Ordering him around. Or not. Physical, like, a bit of pain? Like slapping? Being rough or just a bit too fast. Er. Sometimes I think he wants me to..." He puts a hand to his throat. "He told me about that once and I... I can't do that, I just can't." Richie had done that.

"Geez, Rog." She leans back against the balustrade. "And you're doing all that without having talked it through?"

"We did, once. Sort of. Not, like, details, but..."

"Once?" She looks incredulous.

Roger nods.

She looks like she's about to go off a rant, but then she just breathes deeply, like he does when Freddie's being a total prat. "Alright, so you never set down any limits? Ground rules? Safe words?"

"Use condoms", he offers.
"Okay, well that's something, at least. But Roger what you’re doing is really kind of risky. Emotionally, I mean. Maybe even physically. You can really hurt someone with a badly aimed slap."

"I know but... I think like maybe that's kind of the point for him?"

It looks like a light is dawning for her. "Oh, no I get the picture. Not one, but two irresponsible danger sluts."

"Hey, I'm not... He's not like... Christ, I'm doing my best, alright?"

"Do you like it?"

"What?"

"The things he sometimes wants you to do."

Not a good topic. "It's fine", he mumbles.

"Fine?"

"I don't mind most if the time, I just..."

"You don't mind?"

"Turn off the bloody echo already! It's not like I... not like I want to!" He throws the stub off the cigarette away. He doesn't want to want these things.

"Like you… oh." Melissa smiles.

"I'm not like that."

She raises her eyebrows. "But I am?"

"What no, you're..." He breaks off.

"I get off on flogging people until their skin turns purple."

"Yeah, but you... Not in a bad way."

"And you?"

"I…” He shakes his head and leans against the balustrade next to her. "It's not all fun and games", he says. "Sometimes when we’re, you know, and he talks back I remember what a brat he was just that morning and then, when I hold him down and tell him to shut up, I... I mean it. I’m not just doing it because he likes it."

"Hm."

"And even when we're not having sex, it sometimes... we'll fight about something stupid and I just want to... I have this impulse to…” He clenches his teeth.

"Have you ever acted on it?"

"No. I regularly beat the shit out of a punching bag since I'm with him, though."

"Okay. Sounds like you're doing good then."
He shakes his head. "I just don't want to be like that", he says quietly.

"Well. I wish I could be more helpful, but I guess that's just what people like us have to deal with."

People like us? "I'm not..." Melissa stars at sex parties in full leather gear and leads people with face masks around on leashes. That's a million miles away from him, isn't it? "Am I?"

"In a way. Look, there's a million different ways to be 'like this'. Not all of them involve a ton of props."

"Right."

"But no matter the flavour, there are ways to go about this that are decent and safe."

"Good. How?"

"They all involve lots of open communication."

Roger groans.

“I teach classes on that from time to time. Maybe you two could sit in on one.”

“Melissa, no offence, but I’d rather take a vow of celibacy than discuss this whole... thing in front of a dozen people.” A dozen people and Freddie, good lord.

She rolls her eyes. "Sorry to be like that, but men are fucking ridiculous. Why exactly are you guys ruling the world?"

Roger crosses his arms and scowls.

"Alright, listen, how about we meet up tomorrow night, my place and I'll talk you through some stuff, alright? I might have some reading material for you as well."

"I need a drink", Roger says, but he nods and accepts her offer.

She punches him lightly in the shoulder. "Alright. Let's go back inside. We're all out of smokes anyway."

++++

Roger's just about recovered from the conversation and when he runs straight into Ed and Marco. It's been a long time since he last saw them - and of course Marco's fallen ill in the mean time. He doesn't look too bad. Still a bulky frame in biker gear, warm brown eyes crinkling beneath bushy eye brows. There are no marks visible on his face, so maybe the treatments are working.

"Hey!" Roger claps a hand on both their shoulders. "How are you?"

Ed just nods and raises his bottle.

"Pretty good actually", Marco says. "Apart from all that slowly dying a painful death, of course. Oh, don't look like that." He waves his hand dismissively. "Gallows humour is what keeps us going."

At least that answers the question whether it's alright to raise the subject.

"You'll hear a lot more of that round here", Ed adds.
"I'll get used to it", Roger mumbles. Then he turns to Marco. "It's good to see you again", he says. "And er, yeah, sorry to hear about all that bollocks you've got to deal with."

Marco shrugs. "Thanks, man. But my body's self-destructing slower than expected, so that's good", he says. "Every few months the doctors test some new useless drug on me that does nothing against the virus but produces unexpected and amusing side effects. Like making every single food you eat taste of bananas. Or making your toes swell to the size of sausages."

"Very small sausages", Ed corrects. "The kind you'd put on a toothpick with a pickle and some cheese."

"You're absolutely revolting, stop talking now." Marco has arguably started the whole thing, but now he grimaces at the mental picture. "Let's talk about something less depressing." He grins. "Congratulations to being blacklisted by the UN. Not many of my friends can say that."

"And he has some weird friends, let me tell you."

Roger grimaces. It's not like they did it for bragging rights. "Can we please not?"

"Hm." Ed leans against the bar and crosses his arms. "Thing is, I know you and that faggot got shit for brains, but I thought the curly one and the weird one were supposed to be clever?"

"Well, it's not..." Roger hesitates a second before he launches into his practiced defense speech. Does he really want to get into this with a black guy? Not that it should matter, of course. But still. "Look, we played to a desegregated audience", he says. "We had it written into our contracts specifically."

"Oh, that's good. So what percentage of the audience was actually black?"

"Dunno, I didn't do a headcount."

"Which would be difficult to do from behind the drum kit", Marco adds. He's enjoying this.

"But was it more like 80% black, or maybe 60%...?"

Roger squirms. "Er. Not that much. But..."

"Oh really?" Ed's eyebrows shoot up and he looks puzzled. "But South Africa has an 80% black population. How weird, isn't it, that so few travelled to a white luxury resort and dropped half a years' worth of wages on tickets and hotel fare and..."

"Some of the tickets were given out free", Roger interjects meekly.

"How generous. So I assume you lost lots of money on that trip, right?"

They made an enormous amount of cash from that trip. In fact, it's the first tour they've ever played that's actually turned a profit. Even taking into account the Artists' Union fine. "Alright. Pile it on."

Roger spreads his arms and bows his head in supplication.

Ed exchanges a brief glance with Marco. "Are you asking for sympathy? Because you can fuck right off with that."

"Look, we've taking endless beatings over this, I'm just getting tired of..."

"Beatings, you say? Like a political activist in a South African jail cell, you mean?"
Roger really doesn't know what to say to that. All he knows is that this is not how he wants his fun
night out to go.

Ed's expression softens a little. "Look, I'm not trying to rake you over the coals for this, but... It was
an asshole thing to do. And I think you deserve a bit of a..." He looks for the right word.

"Spanking", Marco suggests.

"Ass-kicking", Ed concludes.

Roger sighs. "Alright. Maybe it wasn't our proudest moment. But I do think that actually it's done a
lot of good to the anti-apartheid cause, because... no, no, no, listen!" But he's cut off by collective
groaning.

"Oh no, Rog, you were doing so good", Ed sighs.

"Even showing some genuine remorse and stuff."

"But listen! The Anti-Apartheid movement got so much free press coverage out of this."

"Rog, if you try to spin this as some sort of heroic sacrifice, the ass-kicking is going to get a lot less
metaphorical."

"Just saying", Roger grumbles. It's not like he wants a medal or anything.

It's exactly the right moment to be rescued by an Old-Norse deity.

"Roger, there you are!" He claps a mighty paw on Roger's shoulder. "Can I borrow him a minute",
he asks Ed and Marco, who wave him away with a look that is half exasperated, half relieved.

"Hey, how's it going", Roger asks, still not having learned that that's a loaded question in this day
and age. Especially when talking to a gay nurse.

"Great! About three patients dying on me each week, up from a measly two last year. That's
America, eh?"

Gallows humour, Jesus Christ. He tries to find something suitably crass to say but the only thing
that comes out of his mouth is. "Fuck, that's just bloody awful."

"And that's Britain", Thor concludes. Then he gets more serious. "Honestly, I'm holding up pretty
good, but it's like a slow-motions hurricane going on. Only that people usually care about
hurricanes."

"Because it might be their own houses next."

Thor gives him a long look. "Yeah, that's... yeah. Um, listen." He gets a little closer so he doesn't
have to yell over the music. "Is Freddie alright? Only because I haven't seen him for quite a while
and..."

"Yeah, he's good. Only he's recording a solo album on top of touring with us, and moving into his
new house..." Roger is kind of annoyed that he's supposed to make excuses for him now.

"Oh, is it done? He's been talking about the damn house forever."

"It's done, yes. A bloody baroque palace, of course."
"Of course." Thor takes a drink. "Right, I'm asking because... You guys are close, right?"

Roger's not quite sure what he's asking. "We're friends, yes."

"I feel like Freddie's been avoiding me for some time. Never being available when I phone, not visiting us in New York anymore... And I get it, right, he's busy, he's got lots of other friends, but..."

It's not at all like Thor to be that hesitant. "I don't think he means it like that. It's just that his life's stressful enough, balancing London and Munich and the tours..." …me, if he can spare a minute.

"No, I think it's more than that. I think he... I probably shouldn't be telling you this but... ah, fuck it." Thor takes a deep breath. "You know John? John Murphy? He used to be part of the crew, but he's moved back to Ohio now."

"Yes, of course. Not terribly well, but..."

"He's come down with PCP. Recovered for now, but... well, you know what that means."

Oh god, another one. "I'm so sorry."

"I don't want to panic you or anything, but I know that the two of them spent a couple of nights together. It was way back, around '78 or '79, but... I think he should know."

"Right, thanks, but AIDS wasn't even a thing back then. So I don't think..."

"No", Thor replies forcefully. "We just didn't know it was a thing back then. But it was right then that the virus, LAV or HTLV-3 or whatever you want to call it, when it spread."

"Yeah, but come on. That was 6 years ago."

"With every month that passes, the CDC corrects its estimates for the length of the latency period. That's the time between the primary infection and the first symptoms of AIDS."

"Yeah, I know. But they say two or three years, not..."

"Actually, the latest average they put out is around 45 months. That's almost 4 years. And if that is the average, that means that the outliers might go back far longer."

Cold, dark fear creeps up his spine. "What exactly are you trying to say." 45 months, what is that, that's May 81, which is… damn it, that's… before the summer of 82, that's for sure.

Thor shakes his head, shrugs. "Watch out for him. Watch out for yourself."

Roger's eyes snap to Thor's face. He doesn't back down. "Oh, for heaven's sake. What exactly am I supposed to do, huh?" He's asked himself that so often, ever since he sat by Dino's side as he lay dying. Every time another piece of news comes in, every time another former lover of Freddie's tonelessly announces 'I've got it.'

Thor shrugs, picking up another beer. "What we all do. Pretend not to be scared while screaming your lungs out in the dark. Take care of each other. Look for a good doctor."

Roger scoffs. "Like they can do fuck all."

Thor's gaze is withering.
"Sorry, that came out wrong."

"Maybe the only thing worse than dying of AIDS is dying of AIDS all alone in a hospital where the doctors don't have a clue and the nurses are scared of even touching your food tray."

"Is that still happening?"

"It actually got worse once they confirmed it's a virus. That means health workers are a risk group. Of course, the AIDS virus is a lot less infectious than, say, Hepatitis, but still. If you've got kids at home... better put on that mask, that extra layer of gloves, even it scares the shit out of the frightened, confused patient under your care. Can't really blame them."

"Do you think it'll get worse", Roger asks. Every time the papers report new record numbers of people infected with AIDS he thinks that surely, that must be it. Only for the numbers to get higher in the next article.

"Yes", Thor says bluntly. "Look, the people sick today, are those who were infected around 1980. Before we even knew this thing existed. I don't think we'll see the peak until the end of the decade. If we're lucky."

"You're not serious."

"Does it sound like a very good joke to you?"

"Well, your jokes are never particularly good, so..."

Thor's face takes on a contemplative look. "You think so? Hmm, well, by the way, there's something else I wanted to ask you about."

"Alright."

"South Africa? Really?"

"Just..." Thor is laughing openly now. "What the fuck were you thinking?"

+++ After a couple of days in New York, Roger can feel some the tension in him melt away. He came here on a whim, mainly to put one over Freddie, and he brought along Marlene for the same reasons, but actually it seems like it's just what he needed. The talk with Melissa certainly helped, although he still has no idea how to go about talking to Freddie about all that. But also, just spending time with friends who aren't in any way connected with the music business is a blessing. Friends who will grill him mercilessly over a couple of gigs (which, okay, might have been slightly ill-judged), then take him out to some of the best (and weirdest) parties in town. Friends who know tragedy and will sit with him and listen when he gets drunk and talks about his grandpa.

There's a price he has to pay for all of this, of course. It's having to sit in something called a radical narrative minimalist body performance space for what feels like a week and watch a group of artistic types in loincloths writhe all over the floor, occasionally grunting, in order to represent the existential loneliness of the soul in the prison of capitalism or some shit. Roger honestly hasn't a clue. Marlene's idea, of course.

She elbows him none too gently in the ribs when he sneaks the fifth look at his watch (within two
minutes, apparently; either the damn thing is broken or they've entered a parallel dimension of space time where every second feels an hour). "Aren't you supposed to be an artist", she whispers at him.

"I'm a drummer", he growls and she presses a hand to her mouth to keep from laughing. "Seriously, what is this?" He indicates a guy with his legs wrapped up in cling film, who's clawing his way across the stage and breaking into a sort of mooing noise every ten seconds.

She frowns, ponders the sight for a minute. "The plight of the steak in the minutes before it hits the frying pan?"

"Ha", he shouts a little too loud and then whispers: "You hate it too."

"I don't."

"You do. Admit it."

"It's very... artistic", she says.

"It's phenomenally stupid."

"Christ, I never knew you could be such a boor."

"Yes, you did."

"Yeah, I did." She sighs. "Alright, let's get a drink."

"Anyway, I'm not a boor", he says after the first vodka tonic, "I just don't see the point of pretending that anything you don't understand must be art."

"But just because you don't understand something doesn't mean it isn't."

He rolls his eyes. She's glad to be out of there just as much as he is, she just won't admit it. But he really doesn't want to waste anymore time discussing it. "So. You and Bibi. What about that?"

"Nope. Not going into the salacious details. Forget about that right now."

"I wasn't angling for... Jesus Christ, I'm not completely shallow, I was asking as a friend!"

"Are you?" She still looks sceptical.

"I solemnly swear it was meant as an invitation for you to talk about your feelings and emotions and all that stuff. I will not ask what exactly you get up to in bed, or what those heavenly, perfectly shaped breasts feel like when you squish them gently together or..."

"And you never will", she says, looking extremely smug. "Shame, isn't it?"

"Although if you insist on talking about it I suppose I can't stop you, can I?"

"Right. This stops right now. She's my girlfriend, we've been seeing each other for five months, she thinks Queen are a bunch of overrated dinosaurs and she's training to become a lawyer. We're very happy, alright?"

"Alright." Christ, he's just trying to be nice and she's almost snapping his head off.

"So", she says pointedly. "What's up with Freddie then?"
Roger shrugs and pretends he doesn't notice she's framing this as 'asking about the boyfriend'. "Busy with the album."

"Still? But I thought he..." She trails off.

"Yeah, he's taking ages. Locked himself up with Mack at the studio for one final push."

"Ah. Right." She fishes a half melted ice cube from her drink. "And what about Garden Lodge, is it..."

Roger eyes snap up as he realises something. "What did you think?"

"Hm?"

"You were surprised when I mentioned the album. 'But I thought...'?"

"Oh, just... I thought you told me he was finished already."

"When would I have told you that, we haven't seen each other since December."

"I don't know, I must have picked it up somewhere."

She refuses to meet his eyes.

"He's not in Munich, is he", Roger says quietly. He knew something was off when Freddie called. He just didn't want to listen to himself.

Marlene regards him for a moment. Then she shrugs. "It's just that I met Mack the night before I flew over here and he was having a celebratory drink to finishing that - he used an untranslatable Bavarian dialect word here - of an album."

"Without Freddie."

She nods a little reluctantly. "Look I really don't mean to upset anything, I shouldn't..."

"No, no, it's..." He tamps down the rage that is bubbling up inside of him. "We've been a bit on each other's nerves lately and..." He remembers that Marlene doesn't actually know about him and Freddie, not officially at least (although that's more of a polite game of make believe between them by now), and cuts himself off. "It's fine. Don't worry about it."

He manages to finish the drinks, but then cites old age and an overdose of culture and retreats to the apartment while Marlene meets up with Melissa and Suki.

There he paces. Freddie lied to him. He made up a story just so he didn't have to be with Roger. Is he that tired of him? Is he trying to get out of their... thing? Too much of a coward to say so?

Is he having someone else?

On autopilot, Roger walks into the kitchen. Up onto the step stool, topmost cabinet, second shelf from the right. He lights up and inhales a so deeply it makes him cough and he slowly sits down on the stool.

It's not like they're married. It's not even like they're a couple in the strict sense - both of them hook up with other people from time to time. It worked well, or so Roger thought. It was honest. It's what they both wanted. Or so he thought.
But maybe it's not enough. Because if Freddie just wants to go out without Roger a couple of nights, why would he lie to him? He wouldn't have to, he could have just said. Why would he make up a story about being so insanely busy with the album?

And then out of the blue, an image of Richie appears in front of his eyes. He has no idea where this comes from. Richie's been gone for years, there's no indication he's back in Freddie's life. But maybe he did crawl back into his good graces, like a zombie in a horror movie, or someone like him, someone who'll give Freddie exactly what he wants. And much more than that.

He sprints to the phone and punches in the number. Joe picks up.

"Is Freddie in?"

"Freddie? He's in New York. Hang on. I thought he's with you."

"He's not. And I guarantee you wherever he is, it's not New York."

"Okay, that's..."

"Do you know where Phoebe is?" Because if Freddie isn't in London, and isn't with Roger either, he is guaranteed to be with Phoebe. If he's not, something is really, really wrong.

"He's..." Joe breaks off. "I don't know", he says.

"Come on, Joe, don't fuck with me."

"I don't know!"

"Then find out!"

"Roger, don't you think that if Freddie wanted us to know where he is, he'd have told us?"

"Joe, for fuck's sake, he's my..." Roger grips the receiver so hard the plastic creaks. "I just need to know he's okay. Because something's not right here."

It's silent on the other end. Joe knows something.

"Look, if you tell me that you know for sure he's with Phoebe, that you know where they are and that Freddie just wants to, I don't know, spend a week in Barcelona with his secret lover or whatever, it's fine. I don't care." Or at least he's going to pretend he doesn't as best as he can. "I'm just going to pretend this call never happened. But he's been weird last time we spoke on the phone and... what if he's being blackmailed or, or been abducted or fallen in with a bad crowd or been in a plane crash or some shit." Hasn't there been a crash in Spain just the other day? "I need to know he's okay."

Still no reply.

Roger's pondering whether he should try some more pleading or upgrade to bribery or threats when Joe finally speaks.

"I don't know where Phoebe and Freddie are", he says. "But for what it's worth, I remember an invoice for two Air France flights to Paris that came in a few days ago. I gave it to Mary because she handles those kinds of things."

"Paris?" His mind is racing. What would Freddie want in Paris? He doesn't have any special connection to the city, does he?
"Yeah. I thought maybe you'd all meet up there before you and Freddie head off to New York. But I didn't really pay it much attention."

"Right."

"He might have bought the tickets for someone else, you know. But..."

But it's a lead. "I know. Thanks."

He's just about to hang up when Joe says: "Let me know when you found them."

"Sure."

+++ 

"Hôtel Ritz Paris, bonsoir?"

"Bonsoir, could you connect me with Mr Alfred Mason, please?"

"Which room, sir?"

Dammit. Hotels have become a lot stricter recently about connecting phone calls. "Er... one of those gigantic suites. Top floor, great view, antique furniture?" It's where Freddie stays every time they play Paris. But of course he doesn't remember the exact room number.

"I'm very sorry, sir, unfortunately I cannot connect you without the room number."

But that means she has someone under that name. Which means Freddie really is in Paris. His heart picks up a beat. "Look, he's staying with Peter Freestone and Alfred Mason is not his real name, alright? He's expecting my call, he just forgot to tell me the room number."

"I'm sorry, sir, it is our policy to..."

She's got that voice. That unfailingly polite, professional granite voice (tampered a bit by her soft French accent) that tells him he could hold a bloody gun to her head and she wouldn't put him through.

"Would you like to leave a..."

He hangs up. No, he doesn't want to leave a fucking message, he wants to hear Freddie's voice and be told that everything's all right and that they'll see each other soon.

He has another smoke.

Then he writes a note for Marlene and grabs his duffel.

Chapter End Notes

I'm not trying to imply that there's a necessary association between anger management problems, domestic violence and being a Dom/Top. The discussion between Marlene and Roger is about the specific situation of two specific individuals.

It's Phoebe who answers the door. He takes one look at Roger's face and nods. But he doesn't step aside.

"Let me in."

"It's not a good time."

"For fuck's sake, Peter, I'm not some panhandler you can just tell to fuck off, I...

"Look, Roger, I'm sorry but..."

"No, fuck you, I want to see him. Now."

"He doesn't want to see... anyone right now." Phoebe doesn't move an inch.

"Then he can tell me that to my face. I'll leave if he really wants me to, but he's got to tell me himself. Let me in."

"You know I can't."

And Roger can see that it pains him to do this, but his loyalty to Freddie doesn't allow him to do anything else. That's why Phoebe is a bloody treasure. But right now, he's in the way.

Roger sighs. "Alright then." He takes a step back, like he's giving up.

Phoebe slumps a little. "I'm sorry", he says.

"Yeah, me too", Roger mumbles, before he ducks his head, closes his eyes and barrels forward. A dull pain stabs through his shoulder where it's hit by the closing door. But he pushes through, stumbling a little disoriented through the dimly lit antechamber.

Phoebe's swearing behind him, but Roger's already pushed the door to the living room open.

Freddie's on the sofa, startled by the commotion. Just seeing him there, alive and awake and in one piece it's enough to loosen the tight band that's been around Roger's chest. He hasn't been kidnapped. He didn't have a horrible accident.

"I'm sorry, Freddie", Phoebe says behind him. "Do you want me to..." he trails off.

For fuck's sake, would he honestly call security on Roger? The gendarmerie? Does Freddie want him gone so badly? His throat closes up.

"Roger", Freddie starts.

Roger holds up a hand. "Just tell me you're alright. Promise me you're okay and... and I'll leave you alone if that's what you want." He can't really take in the implication of what he's saying. How the fuck did they get to this place.

Freddie just sits there, like he's waiting for Roger to turn around and leave.
"Tell me the truth. Please. You owe me Freddie, you owe me that much." If this is the end of their relationship, he at least wants to know why.

Freddie turns his head to look at the telly.

"Come on", Phoebe says quietly.

"Do I mean so little to you", Roger asks, incredulous.

Freddie whips around. "You..." He cuts himself off with an expression of absolute fury on his face. He swallows hard. "Leave us", he tells Phoebe, voice barely controlled.

So Roger has cut through at least. The door closes softly behind him. The chatter of the telly is the only sound until Freddie hits the off switch. "What do you want from me", Freddie asks through clenched teeth.

What does he want? He wants to know what the fuck is going on. He wants to drive his knuckles into whatever it is that's making Freddie so scared, he wants to shake him until he comes to his senses and wrap him in his arms and breathe him in and...

Freddie's nostrils flare. "You can check the bedrooms if you like", he says with a voice that is a sheet of ice covering a bubbling lava flow.

Oh, that bloody... Roger has to hold himself back so hard it feels like he's about to strain something. "What I want", he says as calmly as he can manage, "is for you to look me in the eye and tell me that you are alright."

Freddie just about deflates. His face twists and he lets out a laugh that might as well be a sob. Roger automatically takes a step towards him, but Freddie raises a hand to ward him off. He takes a moment to compose himself. Then he looks up at Roger, face drained and tired. "I'm afraid I can't do that", he says, and then, before Roger can react to that, adds "Goodbye." He reaches for the remote again.

"No." Roger says. He has a horrifying, deadly inkling of what Freddie might be on about, but he won't pay attention to that, will not even acknowledge it. "Oh no, you don't..." He shakes his head. "Tell me. Just tell me. Please. Whatever it is."

Freddie stares at the floor for a moment. "I'm seeing someone at the Institute Pasteur."

For a second Roger is thrown by the phrase 'seeing someone', but then the real horror punches through. Lots of Americans travel to Paris these days, to do just that. He feels nauseous, shaky. "What... what are they saying?"

"The final results are not in. Tomorrow hopefully."

"What results?"

Just keep talking. As long as he keeps talking he doesn't have to think about it.

"A blood test. And they took a tiny bit of lymph node as well."

"But you're fine. The test was fine, just a month ago and..."

"That was a test for KS. They can test for the actual virus here."

"I didn't know they have a test", Roger says weakly.
"It's brand new. And they're doing a virus culture as well. This time I want to be sure."

"Alright, so... so is there anything..." A shimmer of hope rises on the edge of his vision. Freddie's not here for treatment. He's here for testing. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Freddie rolls his eyes. "Because you would have wanted to come."

"Of course I would have wanted to come! I just dropped 10.000 quid to get on the first available flight here. Of course I want to be with you."

Freddie doesn't quite seem to know what to say to that so Roger makes sure to drive the point home.

"And I flew coach!"

A brief smile flutters over Freddie's face. "I'm... flattered."

"So why..." Why don't you want me with you?

Freddie gets up from the sofa and walks to one of the enormous windows. He takes a cigarette from a packet on the windowsill and lights up. "What good would it have done? If the test is negative, this is a lot of ado about nothing. If it's positive..." He inhales a deep puff of smoke. "Well. Then you'll have to go through the same thing soon enough. I'd rather spare you the first round."

Let's not think about that. "Right. And if that happens, you'll fuck off to London and let me wait it out here alone?"

Freddie looks appalled. "Of course not!"

"Then what makes you think I'd want to do that to you?"

"Roger, you were a mess the last time, in Rio. You..." He breaks off, squeezing his eyes tightly together.

He's trying to protect Roger. He's gone through this entire charade because he wanted to spare Roger the pain of this moment. And while he's been sitting here, alone and scared and waiting for the results to come in, Roger had nothing better to do than run off to New York with his ex just to make him jealous. God, he's such a tit.

While Roger's still thinking about how he can possible make it up for his massive fuck up, Freddie turns around. "You weren't supposed to know", he growls. Then his eyes narrow. "How did you find out, by the way?"

"Nevermind", Roger says quickly. No need to drag Joe into this.

"No, I do mind, because that means someone betrayed me and..."

"No one bloody betrayed you, it's just... you're not exactly James Bond, are you?" He hadn't covered his tracks very well. Maybe, on some level, he'd even hoped that Roger would find him. Or is that wishful thinking again? "Anyway. I'm here now, and I'm not going away. Except..." He steels himself. "Except if you still want me to." He's promised. If Freddie wants him to leave he will.

Freddie looks at him and at the floor and at the ceiling and then closes his eyes altogether. "Of
Roger walks towards him. He looks small, vulnerable in his washed out tracksuit among the gilded Louis Seize furniture. He wraps his arms around Freddie and holds him as tightly as he dares. Freddie holds himself stiffly for a moment, but then he slumps against Roger, heavy and warm and there. "What do you need", he asks. "Anything, just tell me."

"Just stay with me."

They spend most of the night on the sofa in front of the telly. It feels like it's been a year since Roger had any sleep, but every time he drowses off, his thoughts, dreams, fantasies spiral so quickly out of control that he jerks instantly awake. He clings to Freddie, to his solid form, his steady breath. God, he cannot lose this.

"I'm scared", Freddie says at one interminable point during that endless night.

"I know", Roger says. "I am too. I'm so sorry."

"Can you do something for me?"

"Sure, anything."

"When I go in to... when I get the results tomorrow, can you stay here?"

Jesus Christ, which part of "I'm not going away" didn't Freddie understand? Does he expect Roger to fuck off back to New York first thing in the morning? "I'm coming with you", he says.

"No." One word, forceful and urgent.

"What..."

Freddie struggles to turn around without losing contact. "I can't have you... I have to do this on my own. I have to."

"But..."

"You promised. Anything. You promised."

"Yes, yes, alright. Shhh." He pulls Freddie back against him, his cheek against Roger's chest. "If that's what you want, then of course I will."

+++  

Roger is not good at waiting. He kind of hoped that after two nights with very little sleep, he'd just fall into a coma at some point and spend the time he'd have to wait for Freddie blessedly unconscious.

It's noon now. Freddie's been gone for three hours. Roger has spent an hour at the punching bag, but didn't pace himself properly, so now he's physically exhausted but still wide awake. His eyes are dry and itchy and he can't concentrate on anything for more than a minute. But when he tries to lie down and go to sleep, his thoughts just go around in circles, faster and faster, until he wants to scream.

What the fuck can take him three hours? Yes, the traffic must be hell, but still. Telling someone they're fine is a matter of minutes. (Except if they've found something. They found something and they're already discussing treatments and...)
Cognac. If ever there was a time for medicinal drinking it is now. And what else can he do to distract himself?

The bathtub is so big he has to be a bit careful not to drown in it. Especially while balancing a crystal tumbler in one hand and trying not to scatter ashes from his Marlboro into the water while Iron Maiden's Powerslave blasts through the stereo system. The water is too hot and the music too loud and together they make it physically impossible to think, which is the best he can ask for right now.

Until the water's gone lukewarm and the music's off and bright overhead lights blind him. "Urgh", he manages.

"Roger, darling, are you okay?" Freddie's face fades into view. Roger's not wearing contacts or glasses so he remains blurry. "Course I'm okay." Except his head is fucking pounding. When did that start?

There's a splash of water and then Freddie's holding up a sodden cigarette. "You feel asleep in the bath", he chides.

"I did not!" He'd just rested his eyes for a second. Two at most.

"I leave you alone for one minute..." Freddie sighs and shakes his head.

"A minute, my arse. You were gone for ages and..." He jumps up with a splash, reaching for Freddie, his face, his shirt. "You fucking wanker, are you alright? What do the tests say, are you in the clear? And what the fuck has taken you so long, I've been waiting for days here and..."

Freddie silences him with a gentle press of his thumb to Roger's lips. His expression is unspeakably soft and his eyes kind of misty and Roger's heart soars and sinks at the same time. If this is his last moment of their bright 'before', he's going to treasure it.

Then Freddie nods, and a small, brilliant smile blooms on his face. "I'm alright", he whispers. "I'm alright."

Roger's light-headed with relief. He wants to kiss him and hug him, but he also doesn't want to stop looking at his face, he wants to whoop and shout and also stay here forever, and never, ever have anyone threaten to take it all away from him again and...

+++ "Are you sure you should have champagne, dear?"

"I'm fine!"

"You fainted."

"I did not faint!" Jesus, Freddie just keeps harping on about that. "I lost my footing." The bath was slippery and his balance is not the best when his body trying to do 20 different things all at once.

"Maybe swooned is the better word. Right into my arms. Like a Victorian..."

"I slipped", Roger growls and snatches up a glass.

Freddie mouths the word "fainted", while fiddling with the stereo.

Roger drains his glass of champagne in one go just to spite him. The bubbles make his nose itchy.
It's probably stupid, on top of the cognac and the lack of sleep, but how often do you get to celebrate the fact that your best friend isn't going to die a horribly painful death soon? Besides, slipping and almost cracking his skull on an Italian marble bathtub is one hell of a wake-up call.

Airy, orchestral music is filling the room. Freddie sidles up to him and refills Roger's glass. "It's supposed to be good for the blood pressure, anyway", he says, then deftly swings around to avoid Roger's kick. Then he grins, repeats the movement. Back and forth, one-two-three one-two-three. He holds out his hand, raises his eyebrows.

And so they dance. Freddie in jeans and an old sweatshirt, Roger in a white bathrobe, hair still wet from the bath. It starts off fast and exuberant, expressing a joy is too overwhelming to name, then slows to a gentle sway of two souls holding each other. They should dance like that properly some time, Roger thinks. In suits and leather shoes, hair slicked back and a chandelier glowing above them.

They spin and twist and with every move some of the heaviness falls away. He's going to be alright. Some dark corner of his heart that had somehow become convinced that it would go horribly wrong tentatively opens its shutters to the light. Tension he didn't even know he's been holding melts away. Everything is light, as if helium balloons were tied to his body, lifting him up.

They must look incredibly silly, but who gives a toss about silly. On a whim, he dips Freddie, who gasps with affront and delight. Roger pulls him back up, but overbalances and lands on his arse, letting go of Freddie just in time so he doesn't pull him with him. Freddie grins brightly and moves around him in a cha-cha-step.

Roger doesn't feel like getting up, he just rolls onto his back, the thick silk carpet soft under him, and watches Freddie twisting the night away.

The next time he comes close, he stops to just look at Roger for a moment. Roger cocks his head and beckons him down to him. Freddie tosses his glass into a corner and drops to the floor, until he's kneeling over Roger on all fours. Roger runs a hand through his hair, down his neck, his chest, his sides until he can tuck his fingers into Freddie's waistband. Freddie's eyes flutter shut and then a month of way too little sex slams into Roger's body all at once. The lightness turns into searing heat and he pulls Freddie down and rolls them over until he's on top and can press his cock into Freddie's thigh. Oh God how he's missed this.

Freddie reaches up to kiss him, and just when Roger starts melting into him he digs his fingers into Roger's sides, just where he's the most ticklish. Roger shrieks and bats him away, but Freddie's trapping him with his legs. They end up on the other side of living room, flushed and giggly, before they finally stop for air. Roger's kneeling on top of Freddie, trapping his arms with his hands and trying to sear this moment into his memory forever.

"You didn't think I'd let you win, did you?"

Freddie quirks one eyebrow at him. "Who says you've won?"

Roger steals a quick kiss. "Feels like I've won."

Freddie cranes his neck and licks a stripe up Roger's neck. "Does it", he muses and nibbles his way further up. Roger lowers himself down a bit more to give him better access. The hot breath on his skin sends tingles down his spine.

Something makes him hesitate. He promised Melissa they'd talk about all this. Would now be a good time, when they're both happy and on top of the world? But that might just spoil the mood.
and drag them down into arguments and fighting. Roger feels like he’s been given this amazing gift. He just wants to enjoy it, for a while at least.

Besides... obviously he misjudged the whole thing. Maybe Freddie isn’t getting bored with what they have, but the last weeks have just been... yes, of course. Freddie thought he was about to die of a sexually transmitted disease. Of course he wasn’t in the mood. Of course he’d kept his distance. Also, Melissa said he’s doing well. That there are different ways of doing this. Maybe they don’t have to sit down and talk it all to death. They’re not lesbians, after all.

The decision is taken out of his hands though, because it turns out Freddie has got his own agenda.

"So", Freddie whispers when his mouth has reached the shell of Roger's ear. "Now we know I'm alright", his tongue flicks out on the t, "Do I get to fuck you?"

"What?"

Freddie lets his head fall back to the floor and raises his eyebrows, a mischievous grin on his face. Like he's daring Roger.

"No, absolutely not." Freddie knows that's not on the table, has known it since their very first time. Honestly, Roger didn't think Freddie would be all that interested. Is he?

Freddie sighs dramatically. "Prude."

Roger looks down at himself, bath robe askew, erection leaking onto Freddie's jeans, straddling his boyfriend in the middle of the bloody Ritz in the middle of the day. He raises his eyes back and Freddie. A prude. Really?

Freddie breaks into hysterical giggles. "Oh, I love the things I can do to your face."

Roger catches a bit of Freddie's earlobe between his teeth in retaliation and growls, which only has Freddie laughing harder. A joke then. Just a joke. He tries to kiss him, and ends up with a mouthful of moustache. "Urgh. Certainly not with that thing on your face!" Then he freezes, because why exactly did he say that?

But Freddie doesn't pounce. "How can you say that", he protests. "It's iconic!"

"Yes, you're a bloody icon alright. Now are you going to suck my cock or what?"

Chapter End Notes

Song for this chapter: IAMX - Running

I didn't want to end the day on such a depressing note, so I speed-edited another chapter. And now I'm going to have some champagne and drink to that fantasy.
Roger stretches himself out on the silk sheets. Say what you will about Freddie's style, his choice in bedding is superb. "This is the most comfortable bed in the world", he sighs.

"It's yours if you want it", Freddie says. He's on his back, eyes closed, hands folded above his head. He looks content, peaceful.

"I'm not stealing your bed." Roger grins and pokes him in the side.

But Freddie remains serious. "I didn't mean that."

It takes Roger a couple of seconds to understand what he's getting at. "Are you suggesting..."

Freddie shrugs, still not opening his eyes.

It's a nice fantasy. Waking up together every morning. Having a home that feels like home. Not having to pretend. "We... we can't." No way are they going to get away with that. "Just flatmates" doesn't work if you're both millionaires. Even now they have to make sure it's not too obvious how much time Roger is spending here, using different cars and smokescreens and keeping an eye out for reporters and paparazzi.

"Oh for heaven's sake." Freddie rolls his eyes at him and sits up. "I wasn't being serious, Roger."

"Ah."

"You have horrible taste and I'm not converting half the garden into a park deck for your ridiculous car collection." He swings his legs over the side of the bed and gets up, gloriously naked in the golden sunlight streaming in through the windows. "And Miko detests you, he would never forgive me."

"The feeling is entirely mutual. And it's not really a collection..."

And so they bicker and play it all off as a joke, just like they always do when these things come up. If Roger's completely honest he's a tiny bit glad that it's not really an option, because Garden Lodge... Christ, Garden Lodge is so Freddie it's a wonder there's plain water running from the taps instead of champagne. It's got golden bathroom fittings. Not gilded, but made from actual gold. It's got a boudoir, for heaven's sake. It's not that Roger doesn't like's nice and expensive things, but his style is much more modern.

The good thing about Garden Lodge is that - due to its sheer size - the number of cats doesn't seem quite as extravagant. It's like their concentration is diluted to a more tolerable degree. Roger still trips over them when he heads for the loo at night, cursing under his breath. The sight of Freddie conversing with Delilah over tea first thing in the morning, an indulgent smile on his face, almost makes up for it though.

Roger does keep a change of clothes in one of the guest rooms, though. And once he surprises Freddie by sleeping in his bed when he's due to come back from Munich on a late-night flight. Freddie's expression could have melted a glacier.
But he only stays for one or two nights at a time before retreating back into his townhouse or his mansion. One reason is that they can't be too obvious, but also, he likes his houses, and he likes being out of the city from time to time. And hanging around in Garden Lodge when Freddie's not there is just odd (although he has lunch with Mary and David a couple of times. They're terribly nice and if they know - which they must - they don't let on).

Freddie's finally done recording his solo album and with it's release slated for May, he finally has some time to wind down. They don't have a proper talk or anything, but with the spectre of Freddie's health not hanging over them anymore, things between them are a lot more relaxed. Freddie's playful and affectionate, and his mood carries over to Roger. None of them is inclined to worry much about the future right now - the present seems too precious to squander like that.

They tour New Zealand, Australia and Japan in April and May and it's pretty unremarkable as far as tours go, except that it marks the very first time Freddie gets so blackout drunk before a show that he barely makes it onto the stage. And it's all fucking Tony Hadley of fucking Spandau Ballet's fault. Freddie rarely ever has more than a drink or two before shows - his expectations of his own performances are too high for anything else. But apparently Tony showed up in Freddie's suite with a caseload of Stoly and vintage port at 4 in the afternoon and things got out of hand pretty quickly. When Freddie appears in the dressing room, it takes four people to wrestle him into his costume. They barely make it onto the stage.

"Never let me do that again", Freddie whispers to Roger halfway through the set, looking pale under his make-up. "I'm this close to vomiting all over the first row."

On the up side, back in England Jim Beach has received an invitation: Bob Geldof himself wants them for a huge charity concert in July - and he wants an answer right now. Spike, who knows Bob a little, had already hinted at something like that, but until that point they haven't received an official offer.

"If he wants us that badly, why hasn't he called sooner?" Freddie's not going to forget the slight of never being invited to join Band Aid.

Jim shrugs. "Maybe he likes making you wait? Maybe Madonna has pulled out and he needs a last minute replacement? All I know is he's asking you now."

"What exactly did he say", Roger asks. He doesn't know Bob all that well, but he can't imagine him writing a polite letter of inquiry.

Jim's expression doesn't change in the least. "He told me to 'tell the old faggot it's going to be the biggest thing ever'."

"Ha!" Freddie slaps his knee, delighted. "Then tell that sanctimonious arsehole we'll graciously accept his offer to headline the bloody thing."

"No headliners", Jim says. "Every band gets the same deal: twenty minutes, no frills."

"Twenty minutes?" John lets out a long breath. "Brian's solo alone takes up most of that."

"Better start paring down that set list then", Brian says.

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The package sits between the rest of the mail when Roger comes down to breakfast: A heavy brown envelope that looks like it contains some kind of contract or maybe bank details. Roger puts it aside with the other letters. Those things can wait. If it's something important, Jim will call him
Jim does call. Barely 10 minutes later.

"Have you opened your mail yet?"

That sounds ominous. "No."

"Is Freddie with you?"

Roger hesitates. Which is silly. This is Jim, he's known about them for ages. But still, it's weird to talk about it so casually on the phone. "Er, he's still asleep."

"Alright. Stay put. We'll be at your place in about 20 minutes. Do not open anything!"

That does not sound good. Roger eyes the packages and envelopes suspiciously. Has there been a bomb threat or something? "Who's going to be..."

"20 minutes. Please just... Just stay put and wake Freddie. And put on some coffee."

That doesn't sound like it's a bomb. If it were, surely Jim would want them out of the house? Maybe some weirdo is sending out creepy fan mail again. Those can be scary as fuck. But fan mail usually gets screened in the offices. All the mail he got today carries his private address, which very few people know.

Maybe he's got himself a stalker?

Luckily, Freddie's already up and under the shower when Roger comes upstairs. Freddie looks more annoyed than concerned when Roger tells him about the call. He doesn't like unannounced business meetings on his off days. And when Jim is involved, it is definitely going to be a business meeting.

But when the doorbell rings, it's not Jim, but Brian and Deacy. And that's when Roger knows.

"Which one is it", he asks, waving at the stack of mail on the sideboard.

John picks up the thickest envelope. "We all got one", he says. "Jim as well."

"We drove by Garden Lodge on the way here", Brian says. "Joe Fanelli gave me this." He puts down an identical package.

"What's in it", Freddie asks, but from his look Roger can tell that he knows as well.

Brian and John exchange an uncomfortable glance. "A letter from... from Paul Prenter", Brian says finally.

"I fucking knew it", Freddie hisses.

"He wants to meet with us", John says.

Roger takes a deep breath to keep himself from yelling a string of profanity. "What else is in there?" The package is way too big for one letter.

"A... let's call it a dossier."

Freddie laughs mirthlessly. "It's every piece of dirt he's managed to get on us, I bet you."
Brian nods. "That's about it."

Roger can't stand it anymore. "Let's see what he's got then."

Chapter End Notes

And thus we enter the last act.
Roger snatches the envelope from John and tears it open. There's a whole stack of papers with Paul's typed cover letter on top. It starts with 'Dear Roger' and ends with 'Yours, Paul'. The nerve of this guy. Roger doesn't bother to read the rest.

He spreads the other contents on the coffee table between them. Photos. Bank statements. Reports. Sheaves of paper.

"Bloody hell", Roger murmurs as he flicks through them. "Did he set the fucking Gestapo on us?"

"He's put a lot of work into this, that's for sure. He knows he had to step up his game from last time, and he did."

Roger pours himself some more coffee. "Right, how about... have you all seen this already?"

Brian shakes his head. "I read the letter, but only skimmed the rest. It didn't seem right to... to do this without you."

"Yes, me too", John says.

"Right. Lets have a look then." Roger looks at Freddie, who's holding a full cup of tea that must be stone cold by now. "Alright?"

"Yes", he says without moving a muscle. "Lets."

First the photos: There's a couple of them in dancing gear in front of a gay club. In one of them Roger's hand is on Freddie's hip, two fingers slipped into the waistband of his jeans. Judging from Roger's hair, they must be a couple of years old, probably taken in New York. God, have they ever really been that blatant? It must have been the '82 US tour... Yeah, that was a bit of a honeymoon period, wasn't it? Discretion wasn't really high on their agenda. Stupid.

Then there's one from the last tour: Roger, exhausted, sleeping with his head on Freddie's shoulder, Freddie pressing a kiss to the crown of his head.

"Where the fuck did he get that from", Roger asks. It's from the dressing room - very few people are allowed in there. Even fewer would dare to take photos. Roger looks up at the others. "Ratty?" He can't believe it. He's been with them forever.

John shrugs. "That's what I thought, but..."

Brian shakes his head. "That was me, I'm afraid."

"What?!"

"I know, I shouldn't have, but..." He shrugs, looking both chagrined and defiant. "I just couldn't help myself."

"And then you gave it to Paul Prenter?" It must have been taken in '84 or '85, long after they parted ways. The idea is beyond ridiculous.

"What? No, of course not. I have no idea how he got hold of it. Although there was this interim tech guy - Stevie, remember him? He helped out with my equipment some of the time and then he got fired because he kept smuggling in those stoner friends of his... anyway. Jim's making inquiries
into how Paul got all of this. He must have tapped many different sources."

The last stack of photos is a series of grainy paparazzi shots showing them getting into a car - with Michael from Munich between them, looking like a bloody streetwalker in his cut-offs and skin-tight shirt.

"Oh bloody hell." Roger gets up and heads for the drinks cupboard. Coffee is not going to cut it.

"Maybe you were just escorting him home", John suggests. "None of these pics is a smoking gun. If we put the right spin on it..."

"Later", Roger says. "We'll talk strategy later. Let's get through all this first."

It's quite a collection. There bulk of it are statements from various people they've known over the years, ex-employees, ex-lovers, former friends... Many of them are about drugs and parties gone out of hand, some implicating Brian and John as well, although Freddie and Roger are clearly the main targets. But there are some statements and interviews that talk specifically about their relationship - full of exaggerations and distortions, but too close to the truth for comfort.

There's Anton, who Freddie picked up at the Frisco back in Munich in 82: "Roger likes to choose partners for him and then watches and then sometimes he likes to take over himself." Then one bloke they hung out with in New York a few times, whose face Roger can't even recall ("Yeah, they're always going out to the seediest clubs together. Running around with a crowd of leather men and drag queens, a dominatrix... heavy stuff."). And of course, Paul himself, the chief witness: "They would head off to the bathrooms together. And once I caught Roger sneaking back into Freddie's bedroom after he thought everyone was gone. I was still there, tidying up a bit, and he ran right into me. Made up an excuse of course, but..."

On top of that, Freddie's former driver tells a completely made up story about a blowjob in the back of the limousine ("That little pissant", Freddie fumes. "He's shown up drunk on the job, twice, after I'd already given him a second chance").

Then there's bank statements showing some of Roger's donations to AIDS projects and flight bookings proving they went to Ibiza at the same time.

"How the fuck did he get all this?" Roger just can't believe it.

"Oh, you know Paul. He always knows people. And he knows how to talk them into anything."

Freddie taps the bank statements. "These all date back to when he was still working for us."

"It's from my private account!"

"Managed by the same accounting department", Brian says. "He was on a first name basis with half the guys working there."

"Fire them", Freddie says. "All of them."

"Jim's looking into it", John says.

Freddie picks up the last sheet of paper. It's different from the densely written pages: the sheet has been folded in half to fit it into the envelope. He unfolds it, then immediately slams the two sides back together. Then he pours himself a whiskey.

"Freddie?"
"I'm going to kill him. That little..." Freddie is white as a sheet and heaving with the effort to keep himself under control.

Roger puts a hand on his back, rubbing soothing circles. "Freddie, what..."

But Freddie already taken the bottle and thrown it against the far wall with a scream of rage.

Brian jumps up. "Jesus, Fred, calm down."

Freddie's fingers dig into the upholstery and every muscle in his neck stands out with the strain. Slowly, as if undertaking some monumental effort, he speaks, his words trembling with barely suppressed rage. "He broke into my flat. Back in January. That little..." He breaks off and takes another two shaking breaths.

"Alright, let me see." Roger picks up the sheet of paper. When he unfolds it, he's glad that he's holding it up so that Brian and John can't see it. It's a copy of one of the drawings Freddie has done of him on Ibiza.

It's clearly Roger, he's clearly nude, and there's clearly Freddie's signature in the bottom right corner.

"Oh", he says. "How on earth did he...?" Then he remembers what Freddie has said. "The break in earlier that year? The stalker? I thought nothing was stolen."

"I've got about million sketchbooks lying around, and it's not like I take those drawings out every night to fawn over them."

"Yes. No. So you think that it was Prenter who broke into your flat? To collect evidence against us?"

"More likely he paid off one his stooges."

By now, John' and Brian's expression are a painful mix of badly suppressed curiosity and polite non-inquiry.

"Oh, fuck it." Roger slams the painting down on the table. Both of them have received that drawing in the mail. And they will both have a look as soon as they're out of sight. Hell, if Prenter goes public the whole world will have a look.

There is a long, awkward silence.

"It's, er. It's quite a good drawing", Brian says finally. "Good line work. Very, er, life like."

"Bit exaggerated though, some of those proportions, don't you think?"

"You're this close to having your ridiculous hair set on fire, John, I am not kidding." It's a good thing Roger doesn't have a lighter in his reach.

Brian frowns down at the drawing. "What, you mean the length of his..."

"One more word out of you two and I swear I'll..."

"...lashes, I was going to say." Brian blinks up at him innocently.

Roger wants to murder him, but at the same time he's grateful as fuck that the two are able to joke about this fucked-up situation.
"I can assure you", Freddie says in his haughtiest voice, "that the only exaggeration in this picture is the amount of pigment I used for the sunrise in the background."

Roger blinks at Freddie a few times, trying to gather his bearings. "Right. Thanks Freddie. Glad we've cleared that up."

+++ Once their frayed nerves have settled a bit, they drive to the studio to meet up with Jim. They go through the material that's been sent to them once again and discuss what to do next.

Jim leans back in his chair. "As far I can see, there are four ways to go from here. One: Pay him."

"And have him come back for more in two years time?" Roger is having none of that.

"Over my dead body." Freddie apparently doesn't either.

"I'm just counting off the possibilities. Two: Ignore him and hope he's bluffing."

"Oh boy." That would mean weeks, months of trepidation.

"Three: Beat him to it. Draft a statement, come out and have it over with. That way, he can't sell the story anymore."

"And number four?"

"Go on the attack. Threaten police action, go after his sources. If he still goes through with it, discredit him publicly, paint him as a madman. This", he indicates the portfolio, "is a much stronger case than he's had before, but every single item can be undermined. The drawing? Forged by a paid art school student. The photos? Manipulated or taken out of context. The bank statements? Fake. Witnesses? Bought."

"Public mudslinging, in other words. That's what it would come down to." Brian looks skeptical.

"The last thing I want is the public to debate the authenticity of a nude drawing of me for weeks on end."

John grins. "I can just see New of the World calling up some of your ex-girlfriends as expert anatomy witnesses."

"Shut up, you", Freddie admonishes and puts a protective hand on Roger's shoulder. "Look at him. He's looking faint already."

"I'm not..." Roger closes his eyes and gathers his strengths. "Look, Jim, I appreciate your effort, but all of those options are just really shitty."

Jim shrugs. "It's blackmail. It's shitty by definition. If I knew a neat solution for that, I'd be richer than all of you together and wouldn't have to sit here."

"Can't we just have him shot? What?" John raises his hands innocently. "Just making sure we consider all possibilities."

"We can't."

"Why not", Freddie asks.
"Guys, I know this feels very satisfying and all, but can we focus on workable solutions here?"
Brian looks like he's having a migraine. "What about a combination approach? We offer him one more payment, but make it very clear that if he ever contacts any of us ever again afterwards, we'll come after him with everything we've got?" 

"That little pissant doesn't get a single shilling out of me. Not one."

"Yeah, I don't think that'll work, Bri." Roger massages the bridge of his nose. "It took him less than three years to squander everything he got last time. He might promise that this is the last time, and he might even mean it, but as soon has he's burnt through whatever we give him..."

Freddie's fuming. "We are not giving him anything!"

"...and he will burn through it, believe me, he'll be back. It's already worked two times. What's he got to lose?"

"Exactly", John says. "Why wait another couple of years to go after him? Let's do it now. Have it all out."

"Just half a year after Sun City?" Brian crosses his arms in front of his chest and shakes his head. "The press is just waiting for something like this. They won't be on our side."

"That's true", Jim adds. "The conservative papers will go after you for being queers and the liberals will go after you for hiding it and being hypocrites. The yellow press will just print whatever seems juiciest."

"Great." Roger crosses his arms and sulks. Just when everything seems to be going well for him, some arsehole comes along and ruins it all.

"What do you think, Freddie", Brian asks.

He takes a while to answer. "If it were just me..." His eyes flit to Roger for the tiniest moment. "If it were just me, if I didn't have anyone else to consider, I'd say fuck it. Let him do what he wants, I don't care." He draws patterns on the polished table top. "But it isn't just me."

And it isn't just Roger, either. It's Brian and John and their families, it's Jim and Mary and Phoebe and Joe, it's the crew and their families. Queen has become a huge business and if it fails, many lives will be upended.

They've reached a stalemate. All the options are on the table and none of them look very appealing. They go back and forth again a few times, but a solution is out of reach.

"Okay guys." Jim sits up and folds his hands on the table. "We've got two more days to come up with an answer. I think we've got as far as we can today. How about we sleep on it and meet again tomorrow?"

"Probably for the best", Roger mumbles. He's just tired of all this.

"Yeah", Brian agrees. "Just one more thing: I have opinions, obviously, and John does too, but ultimately the decision rests with you. You're going to take the hardest hit, so..."

John nods. "We're going to have your backs."

"Except if you go back to shooting him."
"Especially if you go back to shooting him." John gets an elbow in the ribs for that.

Roger claps them both the back, then quickly gets the hell out of there before he gets all mushy.

In the car, Freddie tells Terry to drive to Roger's house first, then turns to him. "We should both think about it on our own, I think. I know have to."

"Yeah, okay." He would have liked to hold him tonight. But maybe its better like that, getting it all sorted out for themselves first. "Should I come over for lunch then?"

"Yes, lunch is good."

They ride in silence. When the car stops in front of Roger's house, Freddie puts a hand on his arm, silently asking him to wait a minute.

"I said I wouldn't pay him", Freddie says. "And I won't, except..." He sucks in his lips and bites down on him, like it pains him to say it. "If we pay him, he'll be back."

"Yes."

"So the only way this makes sense is if we make sure that there can't be a next time."

"How would we..."

"Shush. I want you to think about this. We give him what he wants. And then this", he takes a deep breath and waves his hand between them, "ends. A clean cut. No more sneaking around. You get yourself a proper girlfriend. A family maybe, with Marlene, or... And I..." He laughs. "I don't know what I'll do. Maybe I should give the girlfriend thing another go as well."

This is wrong. This is so wrong. "What the fuck are you..."

"No, Roger." He's pressing two shaking fingers to Roger's lips. "You've got to let me say this."

Roger nods jerkily, holding himself back. Clearly this is important to him.

"We go back to being mates. We make music together, but our lives will be separate. When he returns in two or three year's time, there'll be nothing to tell. He'll have his old stories, but they'll be stale. We can chalk it up to malicious gossip. We can deny everything to everyone with a clear conscience. We won't have to hide anything." Freddie's eyes are burning with intensity.

"But..."

"Sleep on it. Think about it. What it might mean for you and... For your future," Freddie rubs a hand through his hair, takes a deep breath and looks straight ahead. "Goodnight."
"Is that what you want?"

"What do you..."

"Answer me. What you said in the car. Is that what you want?"

"That is not the question."

"Oh no. You do not get to... God damn you." Roger bites the inside of his cheeks until he tastes copper. It's four in the morning, he hasn't got a wink of sleep, and his boyfriend is trying to dump him. "Of course it's the question. I'm asking it."

Freddie doesn't answer. He just pulls his dressing gown tighter around himself and walks over to the window, standing there and looking dramatic in the moonlight.

"Are you trying to get rid of me?" Roger takes a step closer. "Is that it?"

Freddie still says nothing.

"Answer me!"

Freddie whirls around. "It's an out, Roger. It's yours for the taking. On a silver platter. Hand delivered."

"No. No, this is not... You don't get to do this, not again. You always take the fucking high road and leave me scrambling behind. You know, once, just once, could you do me the favour and just tell me what the fuck is going on."

Freddie stares at him, murder in his eyes. "I am trying to do the right thing", he thunders, his voice gravelly with rage. "If this were all about what I want I'd have you locked up in here for eternity so you could never run away. But believe it or not, at times I do try to be a good person. So I'm giving you an out. Maybe I'm lucky and you'll turn out to be too stupid or, or, proud or stubborn to take it, but..." He breaks off to take a deep breath.

"But..."

"No! Shut up!" Freddie points a shaking finger at him. "This will get out at some point, if not this time, then the next. And people will not be nice about this. Some people will try to kill you. Fuck, someone already did, back in New York. And even if it doesn't get out, you'll have to live one part of your life hidden away and you might think now that you can do this, but let me tell you, it will eat. You. Alive."

The raw pain in his eyes is hard to bear. This is what he had to live with, all this time. What he's trying to protect Roger from.

Roger takes a step towards him, but Freddie shakes his head. "You asked to hear this, so you fucking listen. It will ruin you. I will ruin you and worse than that, I will have to watch and I will know it's my fault. One day you'll be forty of fifty and looking back and realize that you've
squandered your chance for a family and a normal life for an aging faggot with more addictions than you can count and nothing but a couple of famous songs to his name. So don't be an idiot. Go."

Roger takes in the deafening silence for a few moments. "Are you done?" He takes the non-answer for a yes. "Good. Because that was the biggest load of bollocks I've ever had to listen to in my life."

"Oh great." Freddie crosses his arms and offended. "Great. I pour my heart out to you and...

"I have no idea what makes you think that I would ever think about you that way or that I'd...

"...all I get is insults. That's just...

"...that I'd ever just run off with my tail between my legs just because things get a bit tough. Is that what you...

"...marvelous, bloody marvelous. Next time I do anything like that, remind me to never talk to you ever again about anything...

"...what you think of me? Because as far as I am concerned you can take your noble sacrifice and shove it where the sun don't shine!"

"...you ungrateful little twit!"

They're standing directly opposite each other like two rams ready to charge.

Roger breaks first. The most undignified chortle escapes him and try as he might he can't keep a straight face.

"Stop it", Freddie hisses, pressing his lips together, but he manages all of five seconds before a grin threatens to break out as well. He turns away and presses his hands to his face, while Roger sinks onto the sofa.

"This is absurd", Roger says and holds out his hand. "Come here."

Freddie does, a little reluctantly, sitting down next to Roger. Some of the tension has drained from him, but he still holds himself up rigidly.

"Sorry", Roger says. "I shouldn't have... That wasn't my most sensitive moment."

"Not like the bar is particularly high", Freddie grumbles.

"I'm trying, okay? But it's four in the morning and your little speech in the car has been driving me bloody nuts and all I really want to do is march up to Prenter and stuff his fucking portfolio down his fucking throat. Which I'm not allowed to do, apparently."

"I know, we live in a bloody police state." Freddie rolls his eyes.

"Listen, I have no idea how I ended up here, with you, in all this. But I wouldn't have it any other way."

Freddie turns a little so he can see Roger. "Your life is going to be very difficult", he says. "It's what Mary said to me, back when... She's right, you know."

"I've been doing this for five years, Freddie. I know it's been different for me, but believe me, I've got more than a taste of what it's like."
"I don't want you to regret it."

Roger shrugs. "You'll never know until you've gone and done it, do you?"

"I mean it, Roger."

"I do too."

Freddie searches his face for something and eventually he must find it, because he nods and presses a quick kiss to Roger's hand. He thinks for a moment, then says quietly. "Mary will always be in my life."

Roger has a hard time making the connection. Mary has never been an issue between them - and why would she? "Sure."

"I'll take care of her. I promised."

"I know. It's fine."

"If something happens to me she'll get everything."

Roger stares at him. "Freddie, do you think I'm in this for your money?"

"I'm quite a bit richer than you."

"Fuck you." Roger's not even sure that's true at this point. But the mention of Mary reminds him of something else Freddie said in the car. "Marlene and I..."

"It's fine", Freddie says quickly. "I can... I know you need that and..."

"Oh, will you shut up. She's got a girlfriend, for Christ's sake. There hasn't been anything going on between us in ages."

Freddie narrows his eyes. "But you went to New York together."

"As friends." And to make you jealous because I'm an aresehole, Roger adds silently. He's not quite ready to admit that.

"Oh." He bites his lips and squeezes Roger's hands, like he's trying to say something he can't say. Then he looks up and grins. "Another lesbian ex-girlfriend?"

And then Roger has to kiss him and cling to him with his fingers buried into the lapels of his kimono.

When Freddie pulls back, he's breathless and smiling, and despite the objective shittiness of the situation, Roger can't help but join in. They can do this. Together.

Freddie sits up a little straighter. "So what the fuck do we do now?"

"First, we burrow into your ridiculous satin sheets..."

"It's silk."

"...and not think about all this for a while and get some much deserved sleep. And tomorrow we have lunch together and come up with a brilliant plan."
"Alright, let's do that."

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"You ready?" Roger stops a step from the door.

"Yes, I'm ready."

"Any second thoughts?"

"Don't be ridiculous, darling." Freddie pushes open the door to the conference room where Brian and John are waiting. They've decided to make this a band decision, so Jim is waiting next door.

"So", John says. "Have we got a plan?"

"Si", Roger says. "We have got a plan."

"God help us", Brian mumbles. "Alright then. We're ready for you."

"Live Aid is going to be huge", Roger starts. "And it's going to be our best chance to put bloody Sun City behind us. I want us to rock this thing. And I don't want the press only talking about me and Freddie fucking. So we've got to keep Prenter quiet until after the show."

"Alright", John says.

"So we'll give him the run-around until after Live Aid. Keep him in negotiations, promise him money; maybe even forward him some cash if necessary." Freddie looks his smelling something rotten, but it's what he agreed to. "We'll tell him we need some sort of guarantee that he won't return in a few year's time. Working out a proper deal, it needs some time, right?"

Brian and John nod.

"Okay, so once we're through with the show..." Roger hesitates and searches for Freddie's eyes. The determination he sees there makes him go forward. "Once we're through with Live Aid, we say we've thought it through and we're not going to pay him after all. We make it clear to him that if he goes forward with this, if he ever contacts any of us ever again, we'll go to the police. We'll connect him to the break-in at Stafford Terrace and we'll sue him for blackmail. Then we wish him all the best for the future and see what happens."

John nods and lets out a long breath.

Brian has his hands together in front of his mouth.

"Are you up for that", Freddie asks.

"How likely do you think it is that he'll actually go through with this", John asks.

"Twenty percent", Roger says. He just can't see him actually doing it. "If he actually goes public, he's finished. Discretion is the number one value in this business and if he rats us out like this, if we threaten to reveal he's been blackmailing us, no one is going to go within five miles of him."

John isn't convinced. "He'll get a lot of money out of this from the press, if he's clever about it."

Freddie also shakes his head. "I don't think he thinks like that, Roger. It's personal. He believes he's been treated unfairly. You know how he can lash out. I say 50-50."
"Oh boy", Brian says.

Roger hasn't expected that. He's made his peace with being outed if that's what it'll come to, or so he thought, but a fifty percent chance...

"Are you guys chickening out", Freddie asks, jaw set.

John and Brian exchange a look.

"Honestly, I'm tired of being jerked around by that prick", Brian says. "So I'm all for turning the heat up on him."

"You realize this might finish us, right?" Roger wants them all on the same page. "Worst case scenario: EMI drops us and we're back to the pub circuit. Only this time it might be only the gay ones that book us."

John shrugs. "I won't starve. Don't get me wrong", he says to Brian, who looks scandalized, "it's not that I don't enjoy making music with you guys..."

"Oh good, that's good to know", Brian interjects, sarcasm level turned to high.

"...but if this is it, then okay. We've had a good run, better than I ever imagined when I joined this circus troupe."

"If we're being honest, John and I will probably get out of this alright", Brian says. "It's you two who'll have to bear the brunt of it." He hesitates. "You especially, Rog."

"Why me?"

"Because people already know about Freddie, more or less. It's old news. So they'll hone in on you."

Roger hasn't thought about it like that.

"So, if Paul decides to go nuclear", John says, not so subtly changing the topic, "What's the plan?"

Freddie frowns. "What do you mean, 'plan'?"

John rolls his eyes. "If Paul goes public, I'd rather not be sitting here with my pants down..." He frowns. "Ignore that metaphor. What I mean is, we need to be ready. We need to have statements prepared, we need to agree on an official party line, we need to present a closed front. We'll need to have sympathetic journalists on hand and something to brief them with. We'll need to be able to communicate this quickly to the fans so they don't feel completely blindsided and..."

"Yeah, okay, alright, thanks Deacy." Roger holds up his hands. He hates thinking about worst case scenarios. John thrives on it. "Why don't you and Jim take care of that? Excellent."

They decide that Jim and Brian are going to take over the decoy negotiations with Paul. Jim because he's the logical person to go (and an excellent liar who'll have no compunctions about saying even the most absurd fabrications straight to Paul's face), Brian because he's calm and soft-spoken and the only one of the band who never threatened Paul with physical violence.

"Alright then", Brian says. "Now can we go back doing our actual jobs please? We've a gig to play a week from now."
So here I am thinking my tinkering with Hot Space would be a contentious issue ;)

I'd just like to take this time to politely point at three tags attached to this story: "everyone is bi" (only half joking), "Roger Taylor POV" and "unreliable narrator". They've been there from the beginning and if the implications make it impossible for you to enjoy this story, then maybe this just isn't for you. However, there's nothing in this story that prevents a reading of Freddie as gay, as long as you don't apply the strictest definition of the term. (I'd also like to point that this story is not - and never has been and never will be tagged - "bottom Freddie").

I also added a Roger-centric tag so everyone knows what they're getting into.

Anyway, I'm super excited (and a little sad) that we're in the final stretch now. Thanks for everyone who's been sharing their thoughts with me! Comment notifications are kind of slow at the moment, so it might take a while for me to respond and I might overlook some comments. Sorry in advance if that happens!
Chapter Notes

Hightened period-typical homophobia (including slurs) for the coming chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They rehearse their arses off. Narrowing down the set list to 20 minutes leads to some epic arguments that hearken back to the olden days when every b-side was bitterly fought over. John complains for days that neither Dust nor Break Free make it onto the set list, so he's the only one who doesn't have a song in the set. But eventually, he has to agree that the list they agreed on just works too well to mess with.

The day itself is mental. There are 80,000 fans in the stadium, 2 billion people watching on the telly, and so many stars crammed into a square mile that the place vibrates with tension. Roger and Brian actually get to sit right behind the Prince and Princess of Wales for most of the concert. Freddie has declined because that would require him to still for hours with TV cameras trained on him, a nightmare scenario. John sends Ratty in his stead, arguing that no one knows what he looks like anyway. Sometimes, Roger can't help but admire him.

They all meet up in the tiny backstage trailer about an hour before the show. There's not going to be a sound check, so they have to rely on their crew and sound engineers to set up everything perfectly on the first try. It's a huge stadium and they're playing in the daylight, so they've decided to wear white shirts so the crowd can see them better. Except Deacy, who's opted for a psychedelic number in pale pink instead.

Freddie's outfit is different from anything Roger's ever seen him wear on stage. Tight, faded jeans, a white vest, trainers and a studded leather belt and arm band. It doesn't sound like much, but the combined effect is breath-taking. John has to flick Roger's ear twice to stop him from staring (which is extremely annoying but effective). Freddie's mostly too caught up in his own mind and pre-show jitters to notice it.

There's not much time for inappropriate ogling though. The closer they get to their set, the more the tension mounts. They've played hundreds of shows together, they've played bigger crowds and more difficult sets, but the stakes never felt that high. There's a real possibility that this is the last time they're ever going to play to a crowd like that. No one knows what's going to happen if - when? - Prenter goes public. But for now, this is it. And Roger's going to be damned if he doesn't make the most of it.

The problem is, for most of the show Roger has very little idea how it's going. It's a good thing they've rehearsed the set so often, because the sound on stage is atrocious. He has to look to his band mates for visual clues and hope they don't deviate from the script too much, because what's coming to him from the monitors is a completely unbalanced mush of sound. He has a bit of a miscue at the end of Hammer, because it looks like Freddie's going for another repeat when in fact he's already stopped singing. But they keep it together apart from that. They've been doing this for 15 years, and Roger throws in every ounce of intuition and experience he's got.

It's only when Champions is done and he gets up from behind the kit and all he sees is a mass of clapping, waving hands that he knows they've done it.
Afterwards, all he does is talk. To other bands, to the crew, into the cameras, it's like he's a wound up toy. Later, Freddie and Brian head back out to sing "Is this the World we Created", so the first time Roger truly gets to be with Freddie is on the car ride back to London.

"What have you done out there, you crazy bastard", Roger asks. "People are talking about little else but you."

Freddie laughs, eyes sparkling. "Damned if I remember."

They all gather at Garden Lodge, him and Freddie, Brian and John with Chrissie and Veronica, Jim, Phoebe, Joe and Mary and her boyfriend David. John Hurt is there as well for some reason and he has brought a tape of the concert along. And so this is what they do with the rest of the night.

They're all piled on various sofas and armchairs rather haphazardly, so Roger gets away with snuggling up to Freddie despite all the people around them. He has seen many of the other bands from the stand, so he doesn't pay much attention, but he enjoys the drinks and the nibbles and Freddie's caustic running commentary.

The footage of the show exceeds Roger's wildest expectations. He knows they can fucking rock, he knows just how good Freddie can be when he's on, but this is just amazing. They aren't even playing to their home crowd, but still the audience just goes wild.

They did it. Whatever is going to happen next, whatever Prenter will do, this is their moment, untarnished. And no one can take it away from them.

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They have three days after Live Aid to wallow in their success.

Then Prenter loses his patience and gives Jim a final ultimatum. Looks like he's not prepared to wait any longer. Maybe he's sensing that allowing them to postpone the decision until after Live Aid has been a strategic mistake. Brian and Jim delay the date for that meeting as far as possible, but then it's clear that on Wednesday the 24th July, the cards will come down. Just two days before Roger's birthday.

The weekend before, Roger decides he's got to tell his mum. It's the very last thing in the world he wants to do, but he cannot have her know from the papers. Before he leaves for Truro he asks Freddie if he wants to do the same.

Freddie just shakes his head.

"Don't you think they should get to know from you?"

"You don't understand. We don't... we don't talk about this."

"I don't talk about this with my mum either, but..." Roger shrugs. Somehow, he's going to make himself say it, and then they'll both be very embarrassed and then, somehow his mum will come to live with it. It might take her some time to come to terms with it, but she'd still prefer this way to learning about it from the papers.

"No!" Freddie is getting angry now. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

"Alright, okay." He probably doesn't. He never understood how exactly Freddie's family works. "But if this gets out..."
"Then it'll be in the papers and they will ignore it just like they always ignore what's in the papers."

"This will be more than the occasional article, Freddie."

Freddie gets up abruptly. "I've got to go."

Roger rolls his eyes. "Freddie, come on, don't be such a..."

"I'll show myself out."

"So avoidance runs in the family, huh", Roger grumbles.

Freddie turns around in the doorway. "Go fuck yourself", he says.

The door slams behind him.

Roger thinks about driving by Garden Lodge before he leaves for Cornwall, maybe showing up with a bunch of flowers and an apology. It seems wrong to part like that, especially when his mission is to declare to his mother that he's in love with this (irrational, annoying, moody) man. But he doesn't have it in him. He gets that this is harder for Freddie than for him, but does he have to be so bloody sensitive all the time? It's like every time it's Roger who has to walk on eggshells, to apologize, to initiate making up.

It's been a rough few days for them, the euphoria after the show slowly giving way to the uncertainty of what is going to come next. And then Prenter's call, demanding a meeting. And demanding results. It's wearing them all down.

Still, why should Freddie be allowed to fly off the handle whenever he's pissed off about something?

Putting the 305 hp of his Aston Martin to the road feels freeing. Probably not the safest way to let off steam, but a hugely satisfying one.

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Roger spends the evening at Clare's house, staying the night before going over to his mother on Sunday morning. When he tells Clare, he tries to view it as a dress rehearsal.

"Wow", she says. "Always got a surprise up your sleeve don't you?"

Then she goes very quiet and calm when he tells her about Paul Prenter. There's an expression on her face that used to scare the shit out of him when they were kids. She doesn't say 'Say the word and I'll be after him with an axe', but the promise is implicit. Good to know you have allies.

When he pulls up in his mum's driveway, he stays in the parked car for a few minutes, trying to work out what the fuck he's going to say. He comes up empty.

As always, she hugs him so tightly that he's afraid his ribs might crack, then sits him down at the wooden kitchen table that is older than he is. There is tea and cake and sandwiches and the usual chatter of two people who are close but see each other too infrequently. He notices the curious glances his mother sends him. He usually has a reason for coming to Truro - a birthday, a meeting with old friends - and a schedule.

"Mum", he starts.

"What is it, dear?"
He takes a deep breath. And chickens out. "Clare told me the car's giving you a bit of trouble? You want me to have a look? Take it to the garage?"

Tomorrow, he tells himself before he goes to sleep. He'll tell her tomorrow.

Actually, he should go back to London as soon as possible, check in with Freddie to make sure they're alright, to be in touch with Brian and Jim in case anything comes up before the meeting, but he just can't bring himself to get into the car and drive back there. It's tranquil here. He takes Lily and Joseph to the beach and helps his mum cook jam from the cherry trees behind the house. He visits his grandparents and takes his grandfather for long walks, pushing him in his wheelchair.

Ever since he can remember, all he wanted was to get out of here. Leave behind the postcard-perfect landscape, the tourists, the bloody Gothic cathedral everyone's so fucking proud of. But now he's scared of being cast out. Of never being able to come back to this.

Tuesday night comes faster than he likes. The meeting is tomorrow and he still hasn't said anything. Clare gives him knowing looks whenever he drops by. Yes, of course he'd rather play hide and seek with his niece than have the most awkward conversation imaginable with his mother. He tries to sleep. He wonders just how different his life is going to be a week from now.

His mobile phone rings and he sits up on the bed.

"How's your mum", Freddie asks.

"Alright. She's alright."

"Good, that's..." He breaks off. There's a long pause. "I told Kash."

"Oh."

"That's what she said, too."

So Freddie is actually a step ahead of him. Clare already knew all his New York friends, telling her hadn't been that big of a deal. However difficult Roger thinks this is for him, how much harder must it be Freddie with his much more conservative family. "Listen, I..."

"It's driving me crazy", Freddie says. "The waiting."

"God, me too. I almost wish he'd just get it over with already."

"I still don't understand why we didn't pursue the 'shoot him' option."

"Police state, remember?"

Again, a pause. They should talk about their fight, shouldn't say? Explain, apologize, clear the air... That's what healthy couples do, isn't it?

"I'm sorry, I..."

"I can't sleep", Freddie says.

"Want me to come over?"

"Yes."
"Alright." He gets up and gets his jacket from the hook on the wall.

"But I don't actually want you to drive five hours through the arse end of the night." He can hear Freddie's smile in his voice. "But maybe you can just keep the phone beside you?"

"Yes. Yes, I can do that."

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"I've got to get back to London", Roger says over tea and scones the next day.

His mother nods. "About time. I don't think the lawn can take another mowing."

He looks up at her. Of course she's noticed something's off.

He puts his half-eaten scone back on the table. "Mum, there's something I've got to tell you." Then he stays silent. That was as far as he'd been able to write his script. He tried every possible variation of "I'm in love with a man" in his head and none of them sound like something he can actually say out loud. To his mother.

He crumbles a piece of scone between his fingers.

"Are you going to confess to me that you've dropped out of university and joined a long-haired bunch of ne'er-do-wells in order to become a rock star?" She cocks her head and frowns at him, a smile tugging at her lips. "Because you never actually did."

He grins despite himself. "Sorry, mum", he says. "I'll never be a dentist."

They sit silently for a while. Then his mum speaks up. "Roger, my dear, whatever it is, please just tell me."

He nods. "Yes, I... I just don't know how." He takes a deep breath. "You know Freddie", he asks and wants to bang his head on the kitchen table. Of course she knows Freddie, has known him for 15 years. She's always been fond of him.

But she doesn't scoff. "Yes, I know Freddie", she says.

He closes his eyes, concentrates, lines up the words so he can push them out like bullets one after the other without thinking. "He and I are together. Like a. Like a couple. And it's probably going to be in the papers soon."

He keeps his eyes resolutely on the plate in front of him.

"I don't understand."

He looks up. "I'm in love with him." It's weird how he can say it here, but not to Freddie.

"What are you talking about?" His mother looks rather suspicious, like she's expecting an elaborate joke somewhere in there. The fact that there's not a hint of humour on his face right now must tip her over. Her face crumples in confusion.

"It's true. I don't know what else to say. It's..."

She raises a hand, as if to make him stop talking. "That is what you came here to tell me", she asks in a toneless voice. "That you..."
"Yes." The word hangs in the air between them in the silent kitchen.

Then, very suddenly, she gets up and moves to the window, turning away from him. He can see her narrow shoulders rise and fall as she takes deep breaths. It takes ages until she turns back around, but when she does, there's a deep frown on her face. "Roger Meddows Taylor", she says quietly, slowly. Which always means he is in big trouble.

"Mum..."

"How could you... how dare you..." She breaks off with a choke.

Roger clenches his teeth and screws his eyes shut. It's painful. There is actual, physical pain deep in his chest that he feels at the hurt in her voice. At the knowledge that he's the cause of it.

Quick, kitten-heeled steps clatter over the tiled floor and seconds later he is engulfed in a warm, awkward, suffocating hug. "I thought you were dying", she whispers. "I thought you were going to tell me you had cancer, or, or heroin addiction or that you shot someone in a bar fight and they'd lock you away forever or...

"Mum", he croaks.

"...or that you'd done something stupid and owed millions to some loan shark or..."

"Mum, I can't breathe."

She lets go of him just enough so she can look at his face. "Don't you ever scare me like that again!"

He stares at her tear-stained face. "I... I'm sorry, mum", he stutters. He feels terrible for scaring her, but somehow it's a thousand times better than the kind of terrible he felt before. Then some of what she said sinks in. "You think I might shoot someone", he asks, incredulous.

She shakes her head and laughs, a little hiccupy. "Roger dear, you helped me gardening", she says and shrugs as if to say 'What else was I supposed to think.'

"Come on." He puts an arm around her and leads her back her chair.

She sits down and looks at him. The relief on her face slowly gives way to confusion as if the implication behind his words is sinking in only now. "What you said, I... It doesn't make sense."

"I don't completely understand it myself."

"But you're not like that."

'Like that', like the stereotypes on the telly, the sissies, the ponces, the giggling limp-wristed fairies. "There are many way to be like that."

"But... but you've always..." She shakes her head. Whatever she expects him to say, this is not it. "What about that German girl, the one in the papers that you've never brought home." A bit of chiding creeps back into her voice and Roger welcomes it for its familiarity.

"Just a good friend", he says. His mum doesn't need to know every detail of his sex life.

"But you've always liked the girls so much. Too much, actually."

"I did", he says. "I do, but..." He shrugs helplessly. How can he possibly explain it.
"Was all that just an act?"

If that was an act, he would have deserved all the Oscars for the rest of the century.

He shakes his head. "No. I don't know. It just... I don't know how it happened. Or why."

When she next looks up at him, her face has become pale and drawn. "Is it because of your father?"

What the everloving fuck? "Because of dad?!"

"Because he..." She's obviously struggling to find the right words. They don't ever talk about his dad. "He wasn't around when you were..."

"No, please mum, don't..."

"That would have been important for you, wouldn't it? I read an article about that. I shouldn't have..."

He takes her hand. "Mum. Please stop." He won't be able to live with himself if she thinks she should have stayed with that arsehole for his sake. "Dad has a lot to answer for. But not this." He holds her gaze until he can see it sink in.

Then none of them know what to say for a while.

She pours herself another cuppa. "But are you sure about this? I mean you live in such a different world. Maybe you're just... confused. What with all those people around you and..."

"I was confused. For a long time. But not anymore."

"But you... there were so many nice girls you could have had. A family, children, doesn't that..."

"Stop. Please." It still cuts deep, thinking what he could have had with Dom, with Marlene. "It's my decision."

She shakes her head. "You've always been so stubborn." She fiddles with her tea cup for a moment. Then she sets her jaw. "Freddie, is he... is he good to you? The papers write such nasty things about him sometimes." Before Roger can answer, her eyes grow wide. "He's not sick, is he? That terrible disease, does he... do you..."

Roger raises both hands to stop her. "No, mum, stop, he's alright, we're alright, it's all good." For four years, the world has ignored AIDS. And now, of all times, the papers are full of it because of bloody Rock Hudson. Talk about timing. "And yeah, he's good to me. He's a handful, but..." Not good, that phrasing, so he quickly pushes on. "He's a good guy." When he's not being a bloody terror.

"Yes, he's always been so polite. Not at all like they make him out to be." After a few seconds, she looks up at him. "Are you happy?"

"Yes." He bites his lips to keep from grinning like an idiot.

"Oh, my dear boy." His mum is tearing up again, but she quickly reigns herself back in. "I don't... I just don't understand it. You were always so..." She shakes her head, forcing herself back to businesslike. "You said something about the papers."

Roger sighs and tells her about the whole Paul saga. She is rightfully angry, and when he gets to
the point that they're going to tell him to go to hell tomorrow, she's nodding along vehemently. "It's what you should have done the first time round."

"It's not that simple."

"No, I know. I imagine it isn't."

"It'll be..." He sighs. "Everyone will know. Grandma, Uncle Bill, the neighbours. The press might be after you for a statement."

"I'd like to see them try."

"No. No, you really wouldn't!" He glares at her. She means well, but she has no idea what she's talking about. "They're like vultures. They'll wait until you're down for the count and then they'll pounce. They'll confront you with pictures of me looking sick or drunk or out of control and they'll fire at you with questions and they won't use polite language." He grips his tea tightly. "I'm very sorry, you know."

To his surprise, she just smiles at him.

"What?"

"That might just be the first time you apologized for anything in your life."

"I'm being serious."

"I know. And I appreciate your concern for me - a concern that never surfaced when the papers wrote about your womanising. Or your cocaine habit."

"I don't have a..."

"Or your speeding."

He presses his lips together. "This is going to be much worse."

"We'll see." She pours them both another cuppa. "Does Clare know?"

He nods. "No one else, though. And I think I'd like to keep it way until... until it becomes necessary."

"Auntie Trudie wouldn't mind too much, I think. And your cousins..."

He shakes his head. "I don't want to have to keep track of who knows and who doesn't. I don't want people to keep secrets for me." He realizes what he just said. "Of course, I don't want that for you either, but I just felt I had to... God, I don't know what I'm doing."

"Roger, I'm glad you told me. I don't pretend I understand, but..." She pats his hand. "I'm just so afraid of something happening to you. Always have been."

"I'm careful."

She smiles the weary smile of a mother whose son crashed his first car when he was sixteen. "Of course you are, dear."

Chapter End Notes
The first handheld portable mobile phone came out in March 1985. It was nicknamed "The Brick" :D Roger's an early adopter.

Roger crashed a van with his band mates inside when he was 16. To be fair, it was dark and foggy and there was a lorry parked right on the road, so it probably wasn't his fault.

I've been working on the talk between Roger and his mum for ages, and to be honest I'm still not completely satisfied with it. But I think it's as good as it's going to get.
London, 24 July 1985

Chapter Notes

Some body image issues ahead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The exhaustion is etched into Brian's face when they meet up after the meeting with Paul.

"It went about as well as you'd imagine. He could barely believe it at first, in fact, Jim had to use his simplest, bluntest language to make him understand that we were offering him exactly nothing..."

"Except a lawsuit", Roger interrupts.

"Yes. But once he got it he just went..." Brian mimes an explosion.

"It's what he does best", Freddie grumbles.

"We basically just sat there, letting him shout at us, repeating our lines over and over." He takes a deep breath. "Then he ran out, promising to destroy us."

Freddie puts his hand on top of Roger's. "Thanks", he says. "For doing this for us."

"Let's see what good it does."

Everyone holds their breath the next few days, ready to spring into action. But all that happens is that the after-effects of Live Aid are buoying them onwards: Sales are through the roof. The Works has been bumped up in the charts. EMI wants them back in the studio (and on tour) as quickly as possible and offers them an advance that's almost double that of last time. Hollywood director Russell Mulcahy asks them to contribute to the soundtrack to a new fantasy epic.

And they agree to it all. They don't have to talk about it: this is their moment, and they'll ride this wave however far they can ride it, because who knows what comes after.

It takes weeks until Roger stops breaking into a cold sweat every time the phone rings. The Queen offices have hired some poor girl whose sole job it is to read all the papers as soon as possible in the morning and ring the alarm in case something is published without prior warning. Roger's not used to being jumpy and anxious and it's getting on his nerves.

So he does his best to distract himself. Kinky sex with Freddie is a good outlet. Songwriting is another. He's got a first demo ready in August, a heartfelt little song about the life and message of Martin Luther King. Then Brian and Freddie get their grubby little hands on it and now not even Roger's quite sure what it's supposed to be about. World peace probably, delivered through edgy guitar riffs. The melody changed a lot different too and there's a lot more drive to it than Roger had - heh - envisioned.

Maybe he can rework the original into something else...

They decide to put out One Vision as a stand-alone single as quickly as possible instead of waiting
until they've got enough material for an album. Prenter might have vanished into thin air for now, but the threat of him going public hangs over their lives like the sword of Damocles. They can't afford to dither away the good publicity they got from Live Aid. It feels like they're living on borrowed time.

But before they head into the studio to start working on the rest of the album, it's time to celebrate Freddie's 39th birthday. And no rational argument or heartfelt appeal can bring him to abandon his longstanding plan of throwing a gigantic black-and-white drag ball at Henderson's in Munich.

"Oh, what does it matter, darling", he'd say. "If Paul decides to publish his material, another photo of us in silly wigs is not going to matter one bit."

In the end, Roger is glad he goes through with it, if only for the glory that is Brian May as a mini-skirted witch. It suits him like a dream.

"What", Brian asks when Freddie cracks up in hysterical giggles at the sight of him.

"I just can't believe how perfect this is", Freddie wheezes.

Freddie spends the month leading up to the party pestering Roger day and night over the costume he's going to wear. Which Roger is not telling. One, because it's supposed to be a surprise, and two, for the longest time he doesn't have a fucking clue. His first idea is a French Maid outfit, and he actually goes so far as to buy one from a costume shop. It's both black-and-white and showing off his legs, so Freddie would absolutely love it. But he's going to be crammed into a club with 300 other guests, all of whom will be drunk or high or both, and there's only so much groping he's willing to endure before he'll break someone's nose.

The alternative is a long black gown he's borrowed from his sister. The stretchy, clingy material looks great on her, but Roger just doesn't have the curves. At least not in the right places, and he absolutely refuses to wear any sort of shaping torture device underneath.

Marlene eyes him critically. "If you're going for funny instead of sexy it might work", she says. "Just add a feather boa and a silly hat."

Roger huffs. Not quite what he's going for. But then, at least no one's going to feel tempted to cop a feel when he's looking like a lumpy blood pudding.

Marlene looks him intently. "I've got another idea", she says.

"Okay?"

"You'll need a good tailor and it's not going to come cheap", she warns.

"I'm not wearing a bloody corset", he says. "Freddie's been pesterling me about that for weeks and..."

She grins. "Don't worry. No lace-up required."

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Roger almost knocks off his top hat when he steps out of the Bentley, but he quickly finds his poise. The heels of his shoes click crisply on the pavement as he heads to the club. Marlene, looking radiant in her glittery white dress, takes his arm and tucks an errant curl back behind her ear. Freddie's been a lot more relaxed around her since that late night conversation back in June. He's even asked Roger if he wanted to bring her along.
They enter the club with a throng of guests in the wildest costumes - there are pirates and mediaeval barons, men in thongs and suspenders or the full leather get-up, women in zebra masks, harlequins and sailors. Not everything is drag in the strictest sense of the word, but the sheer variety of the costumes will certainly please Freddie.

The man of the hour hasn't arrived yet, but Roger finds a gangly witch standing at the bar that seems familiar. Next to her is an uncomfortable looking penguin that turns out to also be a crack bass player.

"Only need to find a batshit front man and we got ourselves a band", Roger muses.

Marlene frowns. "Please. Who'd want to listen to that?"

Half an hour later, Freddie makes his great entrance, striding down a large staircase to the cheers of the crowd. Of course, when Freddie invites to a drag party, he feels by no means bound to appear in drag himself. Instead, he's chosen skin-tight harlequin bottoms, a silk dash around his waist, and a uniform jacket over his naked chest.

Roger had no idea he has a thing for uniforms up until now.

Freddie circles the room with Mary (who looks sweet rather than naughty in her freckled school girl outfit), joking with and toasting his guests. Roger quickly loses sight of him in the crowd, and he jumps when Freddie suddenly appears behind him, speaking directly in his ear.

"That's cheating", he growls.

"It's not", Roger says. "I'm Marlene Dietrich. If that isn't drag, I don't know what is."

It took Roger an obscene amount of money to bribe his tailor into recreating the tails Marlene had worn in Morocco in time for the party. But the man is a bloody wizard: it fits to a t. The trousers fall loosely from his hips almost to the ground. The sash and waist coat on the other hand are cut closely along the lines of his body. It's clearly not a standard male cut, but the femininity is only apparent at the second glance. He might even get away with wearing it to the opera. He's a rock star, after all - some eccentricity is to be expected.

Marlene combed back his hair and made it look a bit like there is a tucked-in French braid at the back. Then she darkened his lips and highlighted his cheeks.

"Careful, or I'm going to kiss that smug smile right off your face," Freddie whispers.

"Why don't you?" In here, it really shouldn't matter. And if does, Roger doesn't care.

Freddie drops his voice to a whisper. "Because once I start I won't stop." His hands tighten momentarily on Roger's waist. "Also", he continues, loud enough for all to hear, "there's two crazy German guys with cameras in here filming for my next video."

"Your next video?" Brian looks around the shrieking drag queens and jock-strapped leather men.
"You want to put this in a promo?"

"An edited version of course", Freddie says.

Roger really doesn't know where exactly the screenable bits of the video are supposed to come from. People of all sorts of gender configurations are making out on the dance floor. There's a guy, naked except for a studded collar, enthusiastically waving his dick about like it's a peace flag. The number of naked breasts per square mile, both real and fake and anything in between, exceeds that
When they stumble back into Freddie's flat at half seven in the morning, despite Freddie's assurances about screwing until noon, all they manage to do is toe off their shoes and tumble into bed before falling dead asleep. That's probably the difference between a 29th and a 39th birthday.

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Slowly, very slowly, the pressure eases. With every day that passes without as much of hint of the story in the papers, they relax a fraction more.

One Vision is a hit in England, but does absolutely nothing to revive their standing in the US, where it doesn't even crack the top 50. They don't even try with the Christmas single, and when the topic of the next tour comes up, neither of them puts up a very hard fight when Freddie rules out America. It stings, but when the rest of the world offers you open arms, a turned back doesn't look too inviting.

In December, Roger almost has a heart attack when his mum calls and asks if he'll be 'bringing someone' for Christmas. Holy shit, his mum is inviting him to bring his boyfriend. It's rather sweet, but Roger can't imagine anything worse than having Freddie sit there among his non-plussed relatives (who have no idea what's going on and why he's there) while his mother tries to act casual. Besides, they've never spent Christmas together, so it's not a big thing for them, and Freddie has a well-established routine with his family and friends back in London.

In the new year, they return to the studio in order to finish the album, which is going to double as a soundtrack for the Highlander movie. Roger uses the opportunity to nip off for a day or two of skiing every now and then. He tries to get Freddie to join him, but he might as well have suggested parachuting. High mountains, steep slopes, physical activity and cold weather is not Freddie's combo.

Still, they've got a good work flow going. Roger's on a roll. He feels like he's slipped from a tightening noose at the last second and channels his high spirits into the sort of feel-good lovey-dovey songs he used to tease Deacy about. It's a good thing, too, because Freddie seems to have gone on a break, song-writing wise, and confines himself to rewriting and sharpening his band mates' contributions. And he's a crack at that - if he ever decides to retire from the front lines, he'd make a great producer. Deacy is on vacation half the time, but of course he contributes his customary gold egg - that one seemingly out of nowhere song that is probably going to outsell all the others.

The other singles are a lot harder to decide. Roger thinks it's blatantly obvious that A Kind of Magic and Heaven for Everyone are the strongest contenders, but apparently the problem is that a) Roger's already had a single with Vision, so two more would be pushing it, and b) Heaven is too stylistically close to Friends will be Friends. Roger's suggestion that they could release Heaven instead of Friends is countered by Deacy with the suggestion that they could also just lock up Roger in a cupboard for week.

In the end, it's Brian who profits from the stalemate. The haunting ballad he's written for the movie might not have the biggest commercial appeal, but it's the one song they can all agree is strong and unique enough to be put out as a single. The instrumentation is largely provided by the London Philharmonic orchestra, which is new territory for all of them.

After the contentious issue of the singles has been decided, they all chip in to make sure they put out the best possible version of their songs. It still takes ages to get anything done, in part because
they've gone from pariahs to being the hot guys in town after Live Aid, so there are all sorts of side projects going on: Freddie writes and records songs for David Clark's new musical and collaborates with Billy Squier, while Roger and John are invited by Elton John to feature on his album. Roger also flies to Los Angeles with Brian to assist with the sound mixing of the Highlander film, which is a kind of work he's never done before. And in between, they have to shoot a ton of promotional videos for their singles. In the end, they only finish recording their album in April, which gives them about six weeks before the start of the next tour.

The first thing Roger does when the studio door closes behind him for the last time, is to take Freddie to Ibiza for a week. Turns out, Roger doesn't own a house there anymore. It's all Eric's now. He's grown into a fat (stately, according to Freddie), screeching (communicative) tyrant (fluffball), who doesn't tolerate closed doors and has claimed Roger's favourite armchair for himself. After a few days of guerrilla warfare, they reach a shaky truce in which they grudgingly share the armchair (which Freddie is forbidden to refer to as cuddling and take photos of).

In May, they appear at the Montreux Golden Rose Pop Festival, where they mime to tracks from the new album. It's silly, but the festival has always been good place for them and to be honest, Roger's glad to try out the songs in front of an audience without the pressure of a live show.

The papers, though, are having a field day the next morning. Roger thinks about hiding them from Freddie, but it's no use.

"Flabulous?" Freddie shakes the offending article in his first. "How dare they?"

"It's just a bad angle", Roger says. "Everyone's got a bit of a roll when they're leaning down and..."

"I don't have a bit a roll!"

"Of course you don't." In fact, Freddie has gained a bit of weight over the years. He's still very fit, but compared to the gangly lad with the spindly legs he used to be, he's filling out his frame a bit more. Not that Roger's complaining. It's not a bad sight at all. And Freddie's probably still like lighter than him.

But Roger's on safe terrain here. If he's learned one thing from his girlfriends it's this: if your partner complains about her weight, staunchly deny you see even an ounce of superfluous fat, compliment her on her bum, and never, ever, say "well, maybe a bit, but it suits you".

Now Freddie's standing at a right angle to the mirror, studying his belly in silhouette. Which is just a plain stupid thing to do. He stands up very straight first, then sags, takes a deep breath, then lets it all out. He pats his belly and pinches the skin over his ribs. "'Midriff bulge' indeed", he grumbles.

"Freddie, come on, stop that."

Freddie glares at himself in the mirror. "They're right", he growls. "I have gone pudgy."

"You're not the least bit pudgy, you're lovely", Roger protests, only to make a big, really stupid mistake. "And anyway, we're not twenty anymore. It's perfectly normal to gain a bit of..."

Freddie whirls around. "You don't!" He even points a finger at Roger.

"Course I do. I just don't wear skin tight shirts and stick my belly out in front of a mirror", like an idiot, he adds silently. But Freddie's already on him, tugging at the buttons of his shirt. This is normally a Very Good Thing, but now Roger tries in vain to bat Freddie's hands away.

"Off", Freddie demands. "Now."
After a bit of token resistance, both of them stand next to each other in their briefs in front of the mirror. Roger has rarely felt so stupid. Freddie wanders around him, eying him critically.

"I really don't see how..."

"Hush."

He bears it for another few seconds. "Are we done yet? I'm freezing and..."

"You look good", Freddie proclaims accusingly.

"Thanks. I know."

"Ever thought about getting a tattoo?" There's that look on his face, the one that promises a good time ahead.

"I am now." If it has Freddie looking at him like that, he's up for almost anything. Maybe something on his shoulder or upper arm that would look good in a sleeveless shirt... "Would you like that?"

"Hmm, quite a bit." He runs a finger over Roger's chest. Mentally, Roger's already thinking about designs (and, on a parallel track, about what exactly he's going to do to Freddie in the next hour or so), when Freddie's eyes lose their glassy look and he takes a step back.

"There's a bit of a love handle here", Freddie pinches him right below the waist, "but you're belly doesn't stick out at all. Why?"

You've got three years on me. Give it time."

Freddie scrutinises him. "Are you sucking it in?"

"I'm standing naked in front of a mirror, of course I'm sucking it in."

"Stop it." Freddie pokes him until he has to laugh and relaxes a bit. "Hah", he exclaims triumphantly. "Not quite a bulge, though."

"Stop saying 'bulge'. None of us has a bloody bulge, why do you let that stupid article..."

"It must be all that boxing you're doing."

Roger shrugs and gives up. He never really stopped after that horrible day in '82 when Freddie had gone AWOL - whenever he's really angry about something, he takes off to beat and kick the shit out of a punching bag. Which usually amounts to a rigorous workout three or four times a week.

Freddie puts his hands on his own (lovely, trim, absolutely non-pudgy) hips. "I'll be coming with you!"

Of course, Freddie comes with him exactly one and a half times before he gets bored by the hard, repetitive work and wandering off to have lunch with Mary instead. Only to complain bitterly about how out of shape he is all of next day.

"Look, maybe a kick-boxing just isn't the right sport for you."

"I don't think sport is the right sport for me. It's so..." He twirls his hand about. "...mind-numbingly boring. I don't know how you stand it."
"There must be something that interests you."

"Darling, my interests are fucking, drinking, doing blow and writing fabulous music."

"Pole dancing", Roger ventures. The glare he gets for that is withering. "Alright. Look, I don't know. You get bored easily, so any kind of endurance sport is out of the question, you're scared of heights, so no climbing or mountaineering, you loathe the countryside, so hiking and horse-riding are out as well, and you're scared of fish, so I don't see you taking up swimming or sailing, either."

"I'm not scared of bloody fish!"

"Alright, alright." Roger takes his hand and presses a quick kiss to it, which Freddie grudgingly accepts. "Why don't you talk to Dieter? He knows a bazillion sports. Maybe you can just tag along for something different every day."

Amazingly, that's what Freddie actually does. He informs Dieter that he'll have to close his practice for the next few weeks because he now has a new mission: Getting Freddie back in shape. And then they're off every other day to try something new Freddie might like. Roger get's the full rundown of events in the evenings.

In the end, it turns out that swimming (in pools), tennis and - for some unfathomable reason - yoga are acceptable pursuits. Roger enjoys tennis as well, so they practice together on occasion, and he's always up for a dip in the pool. He makes fun of his newfound love of yoga though - until he sees Freddie's yoga teacher. Big black eyes under a dark fringe, perfect hourglass figure, the dreamy expression of a woman who's in touch with her divine consciousness. "Right", he says as soon as Freddie's in his car. "Next time I'm coming with you."

Turns out, Roger is just not a yoga person. He doesn't want to be told to breathe deep into his genitals (however the fuck he's supposed to do that), he keels over when he tries to stand on one leg and close his eyes at the same time ("to better connect with your breath"), and his root Chakra is not in need of opening, thank you very much. Also, afterwards his body is in agony for a week. He has no idea how Freddie does it, and looking good enough to eat while doing it, too.

Roger decides that for him a punching bag and a pair of boxing gloves are a much better way to inner balance.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, they totally recorded Heaven for Everyone in 1986 and put it on the album! (According to Queenpedia, Roger did a demo of the song for the Kind of Magic recording sessions, and I think it fits in quite well with the kind of stuff he might have been writing in this time line.)

Also, I kind of want to book Roger for a body positivity seminar.

According to Peter Freestone's book, Freddie was never interested in working out, except maybe some casual tennis. I got the idea of getting him into Yoga after watching the Budapest concert - towards the end of Tutti Frutti he does some very Yoga-like moves: a pretty amazing reclining hero's pose and then he goes through chatturangha into an upward facing dog (might be chance, but it does look like he learned it somewhere). He's so strong and flexible, I think it would have been an
amazing sport for him.
London, 31 May 1986

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A Kind Of Magic Release Press Conference

"Queen has always been famous for elaborate stage shows, of course, but in recent years, other bands have stepped up. How do you think you compare?"

Roger crosses his arms. "Oh, I think we are probably the best live band in the world at the moment, and we are going to prove it."

The journalist has the gall to look surprised at that. "Really?"

"Of course! This is going to be our biggest show ever. It'll make Ben-Hur look like the Muppets." Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Brian shake his head and bite back a smile. What? It's true. Roger just doesn't see the point in false modesty. It's not that other bands aren't good. But in terms of live shows they just can't hold a candle to Queen. "No one who comes to see us will be disappointed."

"Are there still tickets to be had?"

"The UK shows are all sold out", Brian says. "But we are doing our best to organize a couple of additional concerts to meet demand."

Gerry said they could have sold out Wembley five or six times, but there were only two free dates left.

"Not always easy", Roger adds, rolling his eyes. "So many cities seem to think we're just too loud and unruly to be inflicted on their citizens."

"So the rumours are not true?" A heavily made-up girl from Melody Maker pipes up.

"What rumours?"

"About Queen breaking up? This being the last tour?"

Jesus Christ, how do they keep coming up with these stories? Is that really the most interesting thing there is to speculate about? They all go through their usual routine of deflecting and denying. They've all done it countless times before and if it sounds a bit rehearsed, well, there are only so many ways you can say "No, it's all fine, we're not breaking up, this is just silly."

"None of us is getting any younger", Brian says, "so we can't play a hundred and twenty gigs a year as we did when we were all in our twenties. But playing live, in front of those fantastic audiences, it's the most fun you can have as a band. We don't intend on stopping anytime soon."

"What about the other rumours then?" A younger guy this time, not a familiar face.

Next to him, Roger can feel Freddie vibrate with impatience. Press people can come up with rumours all day long. It's incredibly annoying, frustrating work to dispel them.

Brian sighs. "And what might those be?"
"About Roger and Freddie? Being lovers?"

It's like all the air is sucked out of the room. Freddie's gone completely still next to him and Brian's momentarily lost for words. And there's five cameras trained on their faces, filming all of this. Shit. Shit!

"Oh please." John scoffs, looking completely at ease. Or as at ease as he ever looks in a room full of people, anyway. "That old chestnut?"

"So you're denying it?"

John rolls his eyes. "There is nothing to deny. Now could we please..."

"What about this photo then", the guy asks and waves around what looks like a blown up copy of the photo Brian took of them back stage. For a moment, Roger's just glad it's not that bloody drawing of him. He desperately wants to look at Freddie, who's right next to him, but it's the one thing he cannot do.

But the rest of the journalists are on their side. They're barely looking at the photo and are trying to shush this idiot who's antagonizing the band and stealing their precious question time.

"Oh please." Brian's recovered a bit. "Now does anyone have any proper questions about the album, or the tour, or..."

"I'm offering you an opportunity here to get your side of the story out first," the guy shouts under the hisses of his colleagues, but those directly next to him, have now taken note of the photo and are whispering among themselves. Roger can see some of their security moving in to remove him if he doesn't shut up. If they move fast, they might yet shut that whole thing down.

Jim is in the wings, and now Dana from PR is running up to him, whispering hurriedly.

"The Sun is going to bring the whole story tomorrow", the journalist shouts as security closes in.

Oh Jesus Christ. Roger has no idea if this is true, but it might be true, and they're sitting ducks right now, served up to the world press on a fucking platter.

"Is that your source?" Brian is valiantly holding the line. "What a prime piece of journalism."

Roger's looking around. Can't they call up someone else with a question about music, touring, hell, his favourite dessert if need be? But all the other journalists in the room have honed in on this story now, pens scribbling notebooks, breathlessly waiting for a reaction. One of their security guys is trying to get a hold of that bloody photo, but it's in the middle of those dense rows of chairs now, out of his reach. The other two security guys are dragging the reporter off his seat, which - no matter how this whole story plays out, whether this is just a bluff or the Sun is actually bringing a story - is not going to look good. Jim seems to think along the same lines, because he calls them off a moment later.

"So no comment then", some one from News of the World asks.

"Oh, I'll give you a comment." Freddie has suddenly come to life and Roger can see Jim blanching. There's no way of knowing what he's going to say when he gets angry. And he'll be incredibly angry and frustrated, stuck in a situation without escape and beyond his control. Roger desperately wants to put a hand on his arm, to calm him down, but that's the last thing he can do right now. He doesn't even dare to look at him.
For all their careful planning, none of them ever imagined a situation like this. They are, just as John feared, caught with their pants down.

"We'll answer questions", Roger says, before Freddie can say anything else. "About our music, the tour, our fans, all day long. So?" He glares at the journalists he knows a bit better, who he maybe even likes as far you can like music journalists, challenging them to work with him here. None of them jump into the breach. He will not forget that.

"Well, in that case I think we're done here, aren't we", Brian says and gets up, as casually as he can. Now there's a storm of comments and questions, coming all at once, none of them in any way related to music. They all follow Brian's lead, get up and pretend not to hear the questions, wave a brief goodbye before ducking away into the narrow hallway behind the conference room.

"What the fuck, Jim?" How did they not know about this? How could he just let them sit there...

"Not now, Rog." Jim's all business, directing people around them while speaking into his mobile phone.

"I...

"The Sun's bringing the story tomorrow. Two entire pages, plus the front."

Oh god. This is real. This is really happening.

"This is it." Dana takes over. "Battle stations everyone."

Roger likes to think of himself as someone who's good when things get chaotic, when he's got to think on his feet and events unfold like a whirlwind around him. This time, he's got to admit looking back, he's absolutely useless.

John and Jim fall right into action as if they'd never done anything else. Brian is not as fast, but he's calm and collected and can make everything look like it's simultaneously really important and also not that big a deal. Even Freddie manages to concentrate his laser like focus - usually reserved for his art - on the matter at hand and calmly acts on the steps they've agreed to beforehand: call the people that need to know, sign the prepared statement, don't panic.

It's just Roger who sits there dumbstruck, unable to think straight for more than a few seconds at a time. Maybe it's because he's the only who truly let himself believe they'd be alright, that once 1985 was over, the story was as finished as the old year.

"Roger?" Dana crouches in front of him, holding a sheet of paper.

"Hm, yeah?"

"This is the statement we're going to hand out to the press for publication. Are you still alright with this?"

He can read the words, but forming sentences is beyond him at the moment. "Yeah, fine." They spent the better part of a day back in July crafting this. If he thought it was a good idea at the time, he's hardly in a state to make a better call now.

"Are you alright? Want me to get you some water?"

"No, I'm good, I just... I need to call people. I think." Clare. His mum. Marlene.
"Do you want me to do it?"

"No, no, just..."

It gets better once he's on the phone. Their families and close friends have all been aware that this might happen and know what to do: beware of journalists, don't answer questions, act as if nothing special is going on. Of course all of them still offer to visit or for him to seek refuge at their houses, but the last thing they want to do is give in to a siege mentality.

They're very busy preparing for a tour. (Oh god, the tour, they're going to have to play their first show not a week from now!) Their private lives are nobody's business. They're not going to hide, but they're not going to help sensationalize the whole thing either. The statement going out admits to the relationship, but refuses to respond to any details of the story. The tone is dry, dignified and makes utterly boring.

The unofficial message spread to any and all journalist, photographer and interviewer in their circle is: We're a solid granite front. Don't even try to divide and conquer. And then maybe, if you're very well behaved, one of you might at some point get the golden prize: An interview with Freddie or Roger or maybe, maybe, both of them together. But if you dig for dirt or help spread rumours, you're out for good.

Freddie comes over. It's the first time they've seen each other since they came off stage. He looks pale and tense, but composed. Much more composed than Roger feels, but he gets up from his chair on shaky legs and takes Freddie's hands. "Are you alright?"

Freddie nods, then shakes his head. Yeah, that's exactly it. Roger hugs him tight, as much for himself as for Freddie. "We'll get through this", he whispers.

"I think we're done here", Freddie says after one last shaky breath, his nose buried in the crook of Roger's neck. "I just want to get out of this place."

They all head over to a house Queen Productions uses to house record executives, guest musicians and minor royalty. It was clear to them that should the worst happen, Freddie and Roger wouldn't want to be apart - but they could hardly just spend the night at Garden Lodge, which would be beleaguered by journalists, together either.

It's a very cloak and dagger affair with decoy drivers and the whole band huddled together in the back of a van. Brian and John spontaneously offer to stay with them, and Roger and Freddie are happy to have them.

There's really nothing more to do once they reach the house, except wait for the next day when the paper comes out. None of them is in the mood for dinner and although a million thoughts go through their minds, this is not a night for talking it out.

With a sombre expression, John gets out the Scrabble board.

Chapter End Notes

The "muppets"-line is pure RT (though I haven't been able to track down the original source).
"Wohoo, you decent?" Brian knocks on the door to Freddie's and Roger's room. Or rather, wing.

Freddie yanks open the door. "You two have come a long way. I remember times when you'd just storm into my flat at all hours of the day."

"Yes", Brian says as he ambles inside, "but that was before The Incident."

The Incident involved Freddie, two Texan prostitutes, a cowboy hat and a bathtub full of Pina Colada. It is not spoken about.

"So?" Roger pours himself another cup of coffee. He's only managed to go to sleep around 4 in the morning, curled around Freddie, and it's not long past 10 now, so he really fucking needs it. They've unplugged the phone and kept the curtains closed, keeping their little bubble intact for as long as possible. Dana, Jim, Mack, even Phoebe are forbidden to visit them before Brian and John - the elected bearers of bad news - have talked to them. "What's happening?"

"You want the good news or the bad news first?"

"I want the bloody paper first", Roger snaps and snatches the rolled up copy of The Sun from John's hands.

But for all his bravado, he hesitates to unroll it. "Bad?"

Brian and John exchange the briefest of glances. "Not much worse than expected", John offers.

Roger groans. That's pretty fucking bad.

"Give me that." Freddie grabs the paper and spreads it out on the table.

"You guys got any toast in or something?" Brian wanders off in the direction of the untouched breakfast buffet.

There's the photo of them in the nightclub, of course. The triumphantly shocked headline. The "close personal" friend promising to tell the whole truth. The promise of more shocking revelations in the days and weeks to come.

And that's just page one.

"Shit." Roger has known it would be like that, of course. In fact, this is pretty exactly what he's expected, and he thought he'd be ready for it. But the thought that right now hundreds of thousands of people are seeing this makes him sick. Actually, physically sick. He pushes the coffee away and leans back in his chair.

Freddie's hand his a warm and steadying presence on his shoulder.

"You need some water, Rog?" Brian has returned with a glass. Roger takes it carefully with shaking hands. It helps a bit. He looks at the paper again, knowing there's whole pages of this inside.

"John", he says in a voice that is usually reserved for undertakers and tax officials, "can I please have one of your cigarettes."
Brian May himself hands him the packet. That's how you know you're in real deep shit.

He lights the cigarette and inhales deeply.

Freddie, meanwhile, has picked up the paper and turned the page over.

"Alright", Roger says. "I'm ready. Hit me."

Freddie stares at the page a bit longer, then snaps the paper shut and throws it down on the table.

"What? What is it?"

"Just the same old rubbish." Freddie looks at the ruffled paper as if it's a particularly disgusting insect.

Just as Roger reaches out to take it, Freddie snatches it back. "There's really no need to read all this drivel, darling."

Now he's got to read it. He sees the nervous glances that John and Brian are exchanging. Something's up. "Give it here."

Freddie hesitates.

Oh god, whatever's in there must be really, really bad. Way worse than expected. Does Prenter have more photos than he put in the package he sent them? Has he bugged Freddie's flat and printed transcripts? Has Michael talked?

"I will read it", he says quietly. "One way or the other."

Slowly, Freddie hands it over. "Get him a Scotch", he says to John. It's the fact that John obeys without protest or snarky comment that really has Roger worried.

Alright then. He flips open the page.

It's that's damned drawing of him.

On fucking page three.

Only a strategically placed arrow pointing at the signature in the right hand corner covers his dick.

Roger holds out his hand for the glass. He doesn't even feel the whiskey. "I'm going to kill them", he whispers. "I'm going to burn down fucking Fleet Street."

Brian nods. "I'll get the petrol."

John raises his hand. "Matches."

"And I'll turn your bloody deed into a ballad of such epic beauty Beowulf can piss right off."

Despite himself, Roger huffs out a laugh. He takes another sip of his drink and turns to Freddie, who looks completely serene. "You don't seem to mind all that much."

Freddie shrugs. "It's a good drawing."

Roger gapes at him. "Are you telling me you're glad they've turned me into a fucking centrefold? Because now the world can admire your skills with a drawing pad? Fuck you sideways, Freddie,
you fucking wanker!" He goes on in this manner for quite a while, cursing at Freddie who responds with utter stoicism, until he runs out of steam.

"Roger." Freddie leans forward until they're almost forehead to forehead. "If the bastard ever comes within my reach, I'll serve you his head on a platter", he whispers. It's not clear if he means Prenter or the editor or whoever burgled his flat, but it doesn't matter because what counts is the complete conviction in his voice. "Alright?"

"Alright", Roger says and steals a quick kiss from his lips.

Freddie sits back up. "The page three thing is a particularly nasty twist, but apart from this it's about what we could expect from the portfolio. So I'm saving my murderous impulses for a more productive occasion."

Roger picks up the paper again. He ignores his nude self as best as he can and skims the rest of the articles. The good thing about waking up and finding yourself turned into a page-three girl is that the rest of the coverage doesn't seem as bad in comparison. Most is taken up by an interview with Paul that contains the main counts of indictment, illustrated with some more photographs, a statement of a handwriting expert confirming the authenticity of Freddie's signature on the drawing, and a handwringing opinion piece about the new depths of depravity the Rock 'n' Roll life style has sunk to. Oh, and of course they're almost certainly both dying of AIDS.

"Right", John says as some point and subtly pushes the packet of cigarettes out of Roger's reach. "Are you ready for the bad news now?"

Brian kicks him under the table, but Roger's grateful for the gallows humour. He hopes it's gallows humour.

"What now?"

Brian raises his hands. "You've seen the worst. The good news is that EMI isn't going to drop us."

"Of course they're not going to drop us." Freddie looks offended at the mere suggestion. "We made them."

Which even he must know isn't strictly speaking true. But still.

"Anything else?"

"The coverage in the other papers is a bit more... I hesitate to say 'tasteful', so let's go with muted. The rest of the yellow press is fuming that The Sun got the scoop while they have to make do with our boring statement."

"They'll start digging too, of course", John adds. "Anyone who's got dirt on you, no matter how far-fetched, can now sell it to the highest bidder."

"We've got about two million interview requests", Brian continues. "Dana's fielding them, so don't worry about that. However..."

"What", Freddie snaps.

"There's a bit of a crowd out front. Reporters, paparazzi, you know."

"Oh great!" Roger throws up his hands. So their secret location hadn't even held out for 24 hours.
"And the studio as well."

"We could find another place to rehearse", John says, but Freddie shakes his head.

"Fuck that. We said we weren't going to hide, so we won't."

Roger nods. "Business as usual."

The idea is that if all of them behave as if nothing particularly interesting is going on (except for the very exciting fact of a brand new Queen album and a world tour), everyone else would fall into step after a while. In a way, the strategy has already worked once, with Freddie: The press would speculate about his sexual orientation, would print photos and stories - and their response was to keep on making music as if it isn't of any concern to them. Sometimes Freddie is asked directly of course, in interviews, and then he doesn't reject the rumours, but never actually responds to them either. Instead, he treats them as silly, boring, old news or - particularly effective - wildly understated. 'I'm just a big old slag, I've been fucking everything that moves for decades, everyone knows that, why are we talking about this?' Of course, the yellow press still tries to get some mileage out of that, but it takes some of the fun out of it if your victim just shrugs and goes 'You think that's shocking, darling? My, aren't you precious'.

They head to the studio after breakfast. The building has an underground garage, so they don't have to face the crowds yet. The drivers (each of them rides in his own limo, of course) slowly make their way through the crowd at the exit of the property. Flashes go off and camera lenses are pressed to the car windows, but the darkened glass screens them off.

At the studio, the throng of reporters is held back by a police and security cordon. They all do their best to act as if nothing unusual is going on. Hey, they're international superstars. What's a little press attention to them? Of course, this time the questions yelled at them are a little different from the usual ones, but still.

Inside, they actually manage to get some work done. Roger's tech Crystal grumbles a bit about being grilled about his employers' sex life on his way to work and demanding a pay raise, but for the most part, everyone's emphatically not talking about it. There's a bit on an elephant in the room feeling, but the seasoned crew is used to working with people who have their drug escapades and extramarital affairs and mental breakdowns plastered all over the front pages.

So when they decide to call it a day and head home for the evening (drinks at the pub are sadly out of the question for now), spirits are high. Of course, they have to navigate the crowd of journalists and photographers again, but that's just one stressful minute before they're all safely back in their cars.

Back at the house, they all toast to their survival of that first day.

Really, Roger thinks as he lies in bed that night, Freddie sprawled over his chest, once the first few days are over, it might not be all that bad.

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Except it just doesn't let off. No matter how much effort they put into appearing busy and focused on their music, the pressure just doesn't stop. Part of it is that The Sun keeps up a steady stream of revelations, giving all the other papers new fodder for speculation. In addition to that, the press is clearly getting frustrated by their stonewalling and the gloves are coming off.

"Are you betraying your truest fans", reporters shout as they make their way from the cars to the
studio. "What else are you lying about?"

"Are you denying rumours of bathhouse orgies?"

"Brian, John, when are you going to come out?"

And so on and so forth.

It's crazy. It's been almost week and still they make the front pages. There's a rather funny vox pop segment on the telly, in which a middle-aged lady who's clearly never gone to a rock concert in her life denounces the disgrace of it all, while a gruff mechanic type, who looks annoyed to be asked about gay sex on his way home from the pub, states they can all fuck donkeys in his spare time as long as Brian May keeps pounding out his guitar solos. The stuffed donkeys start pouring into the Queen headquarters the very next day.

The opinion pieces also just keep getting nuttier. The Mirror has found a psychologist who paints him as a sort of helpless victim of Freddie's sexual wiles: apparently his womanising is proof of his deeply troubled sexual psyche, which Freddie is shamelessly exploiting. Another one, ostensibly a doctor, reviews photos and footage of them for signs of HIV-infection. It drives Roger round the twist: They ignore the very real suffering of people dying of AIDS around the country, but have no trouble using a photo of him looking a bit tired at a press conference two years ago as evidence of his impending death.

Outwardly, Freddie is holding up a lot a lot better than him. Part of it might be that he's got more practice dealing with this kind of shit. But he also seems to grow into the role of being the down to earth one for once, the one that Roger can rely and lean on when things get tough. But of course it's wearing him down too. "I just wish this bloody tour got under way already", he keeps saying, drumming his fingers nervously against his thighs when he's pacing at night. He hasn't mentioned his parents or their reaction with a single word, but Roger assumes that Kash is running interference as far as she can. Apart from that Freddie seems determined to go through with the whole "lets all pretend this isn't happening"-routine. He refuses to read the coverage and throws himself into the rehearsals instead, determined to produce his best work ever, to be so brilliant on stage that the papers can't help but write about that instead of his private life.

Roger keeps writing furious refutations, pounding them out on his IBM. He can't actually send them out, obviously, as that would only fuel the flames, but he needs some kind of pressure valve, otherwise he's just going to explode. Another strategy is to rant at Freddie, Brian, John or some unsuspecting minder, pointing out the sheer scale of stupidity of this whole affair.

"Another assassination attempt on the pope would really come in handy right now", he growls when another front page promises a 'Shock Reveal Gay Sex Club Binge'. "Or a huge plane crash or something else for these idiots to write about." Brian gives him such a disapproving look he immediately feels a bit rotten.

Roger has regular coaching sessions with Dana where she confronts him with the wildest stuff she can make up and his job is to smile and look bored and not respond with sarcastic comments. It is torture.

But it's not he who cracks first.
Stockholm, 5 July 1986

Chapter Notes

Just a reminder that the 'heightened homophobia' warning is still in place.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I'm really sorry." Brian looks like someone confessing the murder of a beloved family dog.

Roger opens a bottle of wine. "It had to happen at some point. Don't worry about it."

"Don't worry about it? It was absolutely brilliant, darling!" Freddie rewinds the tape to watch the scene for the fifth time.

Brian grimaces. "Please can we not?"

"No, we must!" With a gleeful expression, Freddie presses play.

It happened at Arlanda. The tour finally got underway and they were all glad to leave this whole mess (or at least the worst of the British tabloid press) behind them. As always, they put on their most professional and unconcerned faces for the photographers, giving them nothing they could use for a headline the next day.

A throng of fans and press awaited them at the airport, most of them Swedish and eager not to poison the mood for the few days they'd be here. Maybe their guards were down after a couple of minutes of innocent autograph requests and "Välkommen till Sverige" banners.

"...very excited to be back in Sweden", Roger explained into a news camera. "We had a great time last time we were here and the audience really..."

"Do you let them near your children, Brian?" The bright, slightly snarling voice carried above the others.

Roger whipped his head around and saw that a young man with a goatee and a cameraman behind him was waving a photo at Brian. Brian, who was patiently signing autographs for a group of middle aged ladies, stopped in his tracks.

Time stood still for a moments and then everyone was talking at once, and security started moving them towards the cars a as inconspicuously as possible.

"...really love the Swedish audiences", Roger forced himself to say, mouth moving on autopilot. "They always go full out, amazing energy."

He felt Dana's hand on his elbow, subtly nudging him to move along. He waved goodbye to the camera and the crowd, then ducked into his car.

He was a little rattled on the way to the hotel, but assumed that nothing more would come of this episode.

Except then Jim gathered them all in Freddie's suite and put the telly on.
And there they are, right on the evening news.

"What did you just say?" Brian's face blurs and then swims back into view as the cameraman tries to keep him in focus. A hand is just visible at the edge of the frame, tugging at Brian's arm, but he shakes it off.

Other people around the reporter start yelling because they notice something's happening, so it's hard to make out the next exchange over the noise.

"You have a seven-year old son. Aren't you worried?"

"About what, exactly." Brian's voice is steely, controlled.

"You know..." The reporter sounds a little flustered, but stands his ground.

"Come on, what should I be worried about?"

"Letting him be around perverts? Men who barely have their own urges under control and..."

"That is such utter rubbish I don't know if you're being malicious or just plain stupid." Jim comes into view, urgently speaking into Brian's ear, but Brian just waves him off.

"I thought you're a man of science, Brian. It's a scientific fact that most child molesters are homosexual men and..."

"It is not a scientific fact, it's a stupid, dangerous, evil lie!" ("Now comes my favourite part", Freddie announces, while Brian groans and buries his face in his hands.) "I trust Roger and Freddie with my life, I certainly trust them with them with my children, and if anyone..."

"You willingly risk your son being recruited into that lifestyle?"

"Recruited? What are you... You stop talking about my friends that way right this minute. In fact, stop talking about my son, too. You have no right to talk about my family at all and..."

"Some people might question whether you are fit to parent if..."

At that moment, Brian is forcibly pulled away from the throng of reporters by Jim and one of the security guys. It's obvious from the way they're holding on to his arms that the scene would have developed into a complete fracas otherwise.

"Pity", Freddie comments. "I like it when people punch other people in the face to defend my honour." He smiles at Roger.

"I didn't do it to defend your honour, you twit, I did it because that stupid bastard deserved it."

"Would have done it", John corrects.

"And just so we're clear, Rog, I like you, but none of my children will ever ride in a car that you're driving."

Roger acts offended.

"Anyway." Brian looks thoroughly dejected. "Now all everyone is going to talk about is whether or not you guys are child molesters."

On the screen, the report cuts to the photo the journalist had been showing around. It's Freddie with
Jimmy on his shoulders, Roger and Brian standing next to him, smiling. It's outside and the sun is shining down on them. It's a beautiful picture and it turns Roger's stomach to think what people are going to read into it now. Freddie's great with children. He's a fantastic godfather to Mack's son - if that is taken away from him because of some idiotic rumour... But then, it's Mack, the most sensible man in the music business, who has known Freddie for ages. But still, the fact that they even have to think about this now, that they'll always have to watch out for cameras and think about how something might look to the press when they're horsing around with Brian's or John's kids is infuriating.

Anyway, if Freddie's worried about that, it doesn't show. Instead, he picks up the remote. "Again!"

This time John physically holds him back. "Please", he says. "Enough."

The whole thing is a mess, but there is one saving grace: The reporter is American. And while the British press is not exactly a gay-rights haven, when it comes to a confrontation between national treasure Brian May and some prudish American huckster no one's ever heard of, it's very clear which side to come down on. Most of the papers who think of themselves as quality press feel the need to distance themselves from the hysterical reactions on the other side of the Atlantic (and to pride themselves on their own, more polite and civilized version of bigotry).

Still, it's a relief when they all finally drive to Rasundastadion the next day to do what they do best: being the biggest rock band in the world.

During rehearsals, they went through nearly every song they've ever played to decide what would make it onto the set list. All of them feel a need to shake things up a bit - but then, the old favourites have kept appearing on the set lists for a reason: They work. They're fun to play and they get the crowd going. But they've also had quite a number of hits in the last years (and a few hopefuls lined up for single release) that they want to include. And the old-timey Rock 'n' Roll set is just too much fun to leave out (and Roger loves the opportunity to spend some time at the front of the stage and he's not going to give that up without a fight).

In the end, all of that means two things: a longer show - and a lot of medleys.

Tonight, the nervousness in the dressing room is palpable. The first gig of a tour is always special, but with everything that has come before, this night is something extra.

But when the lights go up, and when Brian plays the riff of One Vision, and when Freddie poses at the front of the stage, it's all falling back into place. There are some rough edges as there always are early in the tour, and some of the lightness and spontaneity of earlier tours is missing - they want to avoid any interaction between Roger and Freddie being scrutinised, so Freddie stays well away from the drum riser and keeps his ad-libs to a minimum. But they still deliver one hell of a show.

They had speculated whether there'd be some kind of protest at the concerts - angry chanting or signs like they got after they released Hot Space. But the only signs they see are supportive, and while Roger isn't all that comfortable with rainbow flags being brandished at his shows (they're not A Gay Band and this is not a pride march, thank you very much), it's better than having Leviticus cited at them. There are some protesters outside the stadium, but it turns out they're against apartheid, not queers. It's the first time Roger finds the sight charming rather than annoying. At least the Swedes have got their priorities in order.

The one thing that does happen is that quite a few condoms and sachets of lube are lobbed onto the stage during Break Free. Freddie takes it in his stride. He picks up a handful of them, exclaims "Oh excellent. I hope you all get laid tonight!" and throws them right back into the audience.
Afterwards, Jim wordlessly leaves a printout of the UK album charts in the dressing room.

The album's gone straight to number one.

"Well then", John says without missing a beat, "looks like my early retirement plans just got busted."

Roger likes to imagine it's a conscious fuck you of their fans to the bigoted press coverage. If he's being honest with himself though, it's likely the press itself with its relentless reporting of their every move that boosted sales numbers. Dana's mantra that even bad news is better than no news seems to be paying off.

Soon they get back into the familiar swing of touring - the craziness of going through a forced public outing is replaced by the normal craziness of playing a giant tour. Travelling, gigs, fans, hotels, after-show parties, losing all sense of space and time because Monday morning in Berlin feels exactly like Thursday night in Barcelona. Their entourage has grown so big that Roger keeps running into unfamiliar faces, who nevertheless wear the main crew badge. And why in god’s name is everyone called Dave?

Brian keeps disappearing to a recording studio somewhere in Holland, because in his infinite wisdom he's decided to produce a single with some soap star in the middle of the tour. He barely makes it back on time for the Paris gig and when he does show up he tells everyone how totally professional the nature of this collaboration was. Repeatedly. So it's pretty obvious even to Roger that there's something more going on. Far be it from him to get all high and mighty about that, but this is Brian they're talking about. Others might be able to simply enjoy a fling, but this is someone whose carefully constructed internal guilt complex is already big enough to host the World Expo.

Anyway, Brian is back now, just in time to get into a giant row with Freddie over his newest stage outfit: A giant replica crown along with an crimson ermine gown. He's so enamoured with it it's almost impossible to get him out of it again: he spends the whole afternoon swishing up and down his Paris hotel suite, waving to his subjects, randomly condemning, pardoning and knighting people and finally choosing a banana as his royal scepter. Everything is good, until Brian learns that the fur trimming is the real deal. It's a clash of deep seated convictions.

"Dozens of animals were brutally killed for your toy!"

"What do you expect me to do? Wear fake fur!?"

"Why, yes! Do you have any idea in what conditions these poor creatures are kept?"

"Do you have any idea how tawdry that would look?"

"Oh yes, god forbid there be anything tawdry about your outfits."

Freddie waves his banana. "Get out of my sight, commoner. I am not going to be insulted by a man wearing clogs."

Roger tiptoes backwards out of the room. It's amusing, watching them fight, but at some point innocent bystanders will be drawn in, and Roger plans to be far away by then.

Instead, he has dinner with Clare, who's come to Paris to watch the show and visit with Phillipe's family.

"So", he says after the preliminaries are over. "How's everyone holding up."
"Okay, so far", she says. "Mum's putting on a brave face, but it's hard for her. I tell her not to read all this stuff, but I think she does." Clare hesitates a moment. "She's started going to mass again."

Roger groans. "Those fucking..."

"I think it's doing her good. Just... let it be, alright?"

He tears a piece of baguette into tiny pieces. The sanctity of the sacrament of marriage was one of the reasons she stayed with his dad for so long, no matter how bad things got. And Father Davies always listened sympathetically when she told him what was happening, when she begged him for advice, but he did fuck all to help her.

Clare quickly goes on. "She's also complaining that you never call and asking when you're coming to visit."

"Oh really."

"And I think she wants you to bring him too."

"Yeah, she hinted at that at Christmas."

"Though you can forget about sharing a room."

"What?"

Clare nods. "He's going to stay in the guest room under the roof. She's got it all planned out."

"The world press gossips about our sex life, and she's worried that, what, he'll make a fallen man out of me?"

"Philippe and I didn't get to sleep in the same room even after Lily was born. Gotta have that ring on your finger..." She holds up her hand, waggles her finger with the gleaming gold band.

The only reply Roger can come up with is a very rude one involving cock rings, so he shuts up, drinks some wine and asks after the rest of his family.

"The family consensus is more or less that this is just another dumb thing you got into your head and that with time you'll come to your senses. Like that time you told everyone you were a communist now."

"I was twelve."

"They never forget."

"This is not just a phase, you know", he says quietly.

"I know. I've seen you two together." She gives him a warm smile, then puts a hand on his arm and leans in, eyes narrowing. "If he hurts you", she says with a quiet voice, "I'll make him regret the day he was born." Then she sits back in her chair and sips her ice water. "I always wanted to say that."

"Thanks. I haven't actually turned into a girl, you know."

"According to The Express..."

"Stop. Talking. Now." Some odious little tit who called himself an expert on the gay male mind
had run a 'thought piece' on the question of their relationship dynamics, or, as he put it in the article, who is the man in the relationship. Turns out it's Freddie because he has a moustache or something, Roger had been too furious to read the whole thing properly. Not worth his brain cells.

"Sorry. Anyway, grandma just grumbles about how hard this whole thing is for your mum. The main target of her wrath is the press, rather than you, however."

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Grandpa’s reaction was, literally, ‘at least he’s not a Tommy’. He was a bit worried you might end up marrying Marlene.”

Roger buries his face in his hands.

“And speaking of the war, once Uncle Bill had a couple of whiskeys in him at Katie’s birthday last week, he got all misty eyed and talked about the camaraderie and brotherly love of soldiers at the front. The name of his first lieutenant kept coming up a lot.”

“What?!”

Clare raises her hands. “It’s not like he came right out and said it, but…” She shrugs. “Always good for surprises, this family.”

Roger quickly refills his glass. He needs that now. Uncle Bill, bloody hell...

“And speaking of surprises”, she goes on.

“What. Does Auntie Rita run a brothel in Birmingham or something?”

She smiles and puts a hand on her belly. “How do you feel about you and Freddie being godparents?”

“You’re... congratulations!” He gets up and hugs her awkwardly over the table.

"Thanks!"

"But... didn't you say you were done?” ‘Say’ is putting it politely. Ranted was more like it, when he visited her the week after Joseph’s birth.

She shrugs. "I’m not done with sex though. And I couldn't handle the pill anymore, so I switched to checking my cervical mucous every morning but apparently that..."

Roger doesn't hear any more because he's clapped his hands over his ears and is shouting at her to stop talking.

"You're such a baby", Clare says once he's calmed down.

"And you're my sister, for fuck's sake."

"Mind your language or I'll ask Freddie to take on godfather duties alone."

"He's even more foul mouthed than me."

"Never around ladies or children."

Roger plays with his glass. "You meant that, then?"
"Yes. If you like." Philippe's sister is godmother for Lily and Clare's oldest friend for Joseph. Roger hadn't been offended that they never asked him - he's rarely around, after all. But now that she did ask, he's surprised how warm and glowy it makes him feel. It's not just a vote of confidence, but an invitation into the family, for both of them. If Freddie's doesn't come round, at least he's going to be welcome in Roger's - however grudgingly and even if he has to sneak into Roger's room like they're teenagers at a sleepover.

"I'll ask him", Roger says. Then he looks up at her. "Thank you."

Chapter End Notes

Apparently, all caterers on the Magic tour were called Dave. Except for one, who was therefore known as Not-Dave.
Wembley, 11 July 1986

Chapter Notes

Things get kind of tense and also kind of mushy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They’re buoyed by the reception they get in Europe – but as soon as they’re back on the British isles, things fall apart. They’ve been invited to play the Slane Concert, a huge outdoor spectacle organized by the Earl of Mount Charles who happens to live in the castle next door. It sounds fun, but is marred by problems.

First, there’s a lot of back and forth about whether they’ll be allowed to play at all due to nebulous ‘security concerns’. It turns out that a number of conservative groups and religious leaders have been lobbying the local council to keep a band propagating amorality and promiscuity off their lands. The Earl however is even more stubborn than all band members combined and refuses to budge, using his influence and probably a lot of money to keep the concert going. The result of all that is that they’re allowed to play, but first Jim has to put out a statement confirming that of course the band will respect Irish law during their stay in the country, which is code for ‘Roger and Freddie will not fuck on Irish soil’. This has Roger so furious that he makes sure they break the Irish penal code as often and in as many creative ways as he can manage during the 24 hours of their stay, to Freddie’s complete delight.

But maybe it would have been better to call the whole thing off. When they get on stage, 100.000 people have been waiting on the grounds all day, in drizzling rain, with plenty of alcohol to keep them warm. 100.000 Irish people.

Their set is interrupted again and again. There’s a ragingly drunk guy who climbs on stage. There’s a fist-fight involving dozens of people. Freddie does his best to calm people down and lighten the atmosphere, but it’s a thankless task. Brian is hit in the head in the head with a beer can towards the end and almost refuses to come back on stage for the encore. They had decided long before the concert to ditch the regalia along with the God Save the Queen outro so as not to provoke the audience. Now, mild mannered Brian threatens to don the damn crown and cloak himself (concerns about animal cruelty taking a momentary back seat to white hot fury) and finish the concert with a 15 minute guitar solo version of the national anthem. It’s Freddie who talks him down from the brink and patiently coaxes him back on stage for the encore. A true drama queen knows when to take a step back and let someone else’s drama take centre stage for the moment.

At the next gig in Newcastle, the crowd is much better behaved, but it’s overshadowed by organizational problems: It was planned to be played in cooperation with Save the Children, but they pulled out after the press spent two weeks discussing whether Freddie and Roger are likely to prey on children or not. The head of the organization itself apologises to them and says that she thinks the whole idea is ridiculous – but as an organization dependent on public goodwill and donations they can’t become embroiled in a discussion like that.

It wouldn’t have been that bad, if the whole thing hadn’t been leaked to the press. Having one of the largest charities in the country distance themselves from you doesn’t make for favourable headlines. A statement saying that the collaboration never left the planning stage and that Save the
Children pulled out for completely unrelated reasons can only do so much damage control.

In the end, a part of all proceeds from the British leg of the tour goes to the World Food Program, a cause they can all agree on and that is not the least bit related to children, sex, AIDS or anything else the papers can make a fuss about.

When they finally get to Wembley, nerves are frayed. They're still selling tickets and records, but the whole well-oiled machine that is Queen on tour is battling some unforeseen stumbling blocks. Things that never used to be problems, like finding promoters or venues or charities to cooperate with, suddenly take effort. Quite a number of people have stopped turning up at their parties (not because they have a problem with Roger and Freddie, of course not, it's just time constraints and other commitments...). The press have reverted to their favourite past time on slow news days: speculating about their inevitable break-up. And while the sales figures in Europe are high, in America they've plummeted below even Hot Space levels.

The thing is, the stonewalling strategy might be the best course of action for them in the long run, but right now it’s putting them all in a closet. Freddie is going to his clubs; Roger is going to different clubs, except when the whole band is out together. They’re booked into different suites and have to be all cloak and dagger about staying the night. It’s as if the past six years never happened. The whole world knows, and yet they have to hide more than ever.

Worst of all are the constraints they’re under when they are on stage. Prior to the tour, their PR team watched footage of their live shows and made them change all the things that could be construed as flirting between Roger and Freddie. Which means they have to rearrange a lot of their songs to keep out any trace of duetting or flirting, like the "Are you ready for me" - "Oh yeah!" exchange in Tear It Up, and even “Ready Freddie?” in Crazy. Brian and John have to make sure they're always standing between them during the Rock'n'Roll section like a pair of chaperones (Deacy jokingly suggests donning their Break Free outfits for the occasion). Any kind of eye contact or banter or singing at each other at any point is forbidden.

Freddie also isn't allowed to shoot off his mouth and rant about the press whenever he feels like it.

They'd agreed to it, because it sounded sensible at the time and because none of those changes seemed to be all that important on their own. But the longer the tour goes on, the more stifling it gets.

It leaves a mark on all of them. By the time they’re in London, the mood in the dressing room is irritable and harsh. Brian is obviously miles away in his thoughts and John shows up late for the sound check, mumbling one-word answers whenever he’s asked something. Roger and Freddie aren’t talking at all. They had some stupid argument about some stupid line in some stupid song last night and neither has found it in him to make the first step.

Oh well. It’s only Wembley. And it’s only going to be filmed by 15 cameras and put on video to be preserved for all eternity.

As is often the case with them, their back stage frustration make for a decent performance. Freddie's pent-up anger is transformed into pure energy and he's flitting about the stage like a caged tiger. Brian and John are spot-on during Vision and at the end of Tie Your Mother Down, Roger puts everything he has into his drum breakaway. They sail through the medley and even nail the ending of Magic, which has been giving them some trouble throughout the tour. Whatever’s happening outside in the real world, they're still delivering where it counts.

It all goes well until after Live Forever. According to the schedule, all that should be happening is Spike immediately launching into the Break Free intro. But he doesn’t. Freddie is standing close to
him; he must have given him some signal to wait. First Roger thinks he just needs a drink or something, but then he starts talking.

“You know, er... you might have heard some rumours in the press about, er...” He laughs. “I guess you heard many kinds of rumour, but...”

Oh, no, no, no, he really shouldn’t be doing this. The strategy is to give the press nothing but their music to write about. No catty back-and-forth, no underhanded insults, nothing that gives them an excuse to write about their bloody private lives again. Roger cranes his neck, trying to catch Brian’s or John’s eye. Maybe if they just launch into something? He starts tapping out the Hi-Hat-chatter of Under Pressure. It gets him a wave of cheers from the crowd, and Brian even plays the bass line on his guitar. They’ve already done that song, but maybe they can lead Freddie into a kind of impromptu reprise and then...

“Oh, will you lot shut up?” Freddie has turned around and waves a hand at Roger. Then he turns back to the audience, shaking his head. “It’s like herding cats, really.”

Roger comments on that with a resigned drum roll which earns him a chuckle from Freddie. So that’s ad-libbing, banter and direct interaction and they’re not even halfway through the show. Dana will be beside herself.

Brian has walked back a few steps so he can look at Roger. His expression says ‘What now?’ Roger shrugs. If Freddie wants to say something, there’s nothing they can do to shut him up. Except cutting his mic and forcibly walking him off the stage, and that’s a bad idea on so many levels.

“What was I saying? Oh yes. There’s been a lot of rumours lately about a certain band, called Queen, splitting up. What do you think about that, huh?”

The crowd responds with boos and hisses.

“They’re talking from here”, Freddie shouts along with a rude gesture and he gets the cheers he’s angling for. “I promise you, no matter what happens, as long as you’ll have us, were gonna keep showing up, whether certain people want us to or not.” This time, the roar of the crowd is deafening, but Freddie’s not done yet. “So forget those rumours. We’re gonna stay together until we all fucking well die.”

Roger can’t help it, he’s whooping along with the audience. Fuck yes, they will. He should be annoyed with Freddie (because that will bring them new headlines for sure, and god knows how they’ll twist his words), but Roger can’t help but grin, and it looks like it’s the same for Brian and John.

Of course, Freddie can’t leave it at that. “I suppose, er... I suppose we’re not bad for four aging queens, are we?”

“Fuck you, you crazy bastard”, Roger whispers in his general direction. There’s the headline they’ll be staring at tomorrow. He risks a glance at the wings, and there’s Gerry, biting his fist. Whether he’s trying not to laugh or cry, it’s not clear. Probably both.

Into the pandemonium, Spike’s keyboard intro to Break Free suddenly rings out. John is standing next to him and must have given him the cue. Freddie looks a little irritated (who knows what else he’s been planning to say, maybe that was just the warm up), but then he grins, raises his arms and shouts “Let’s go!”
After that it’s like a knot has been loosened. Freddie puts his heart and soul into the first verse, and Roger can’t help but do the same for his “God knows” part and then… and then Freddie is sprinting up the stairs to the drum riser to sing the fucking bridge directly at him. And what can he do? He’s fixed behind his drum kit, so he does the only thing he can – enjoy the shit out of this moment.

Throughout the tour, they’ve barely looked at each other on stage. Even during the Rock-’n-Roll-Medley when Roger is at the front with the others, they’ve never come closer than three feet. Now all bets are off. They sing into the same Mic during You're So Square and Freddie changes the lyrics to “flash those big blue eyes my way” in Hello Mary Lou. And then at the very end, he throws the Ermine gown over Roger and ushers him off stage.

Fuck the papers, the reporters, the pundits, the experts – this is what they do. And they’re the best in the world at it.

“You’re one crazy bastard, you know that?” Roger whispers to him as they head for the dressing room.

“You like it!”

“Fuck me, I do.”

“So should we…”

“The fuck do you think you’re doing?” Brian’s got his hands on his hips and he’s fuming. He briefly turns to Gerry and Phoebe, who have been waiting for them. “Out, you two, please.” Seconds later, they’re alone.

Roger shrugs off the gown and heads for the bar. “Celebrating the best gig we’ve played in ages?” He opens a beer and holds it out to Brian.

“We had a strategy. We all agreed we’d do business as usual and not stage the bloody “Roger and Freddie in love-show”. What’s next? A live proposal?”

“Jesus, Bri, calm down.” He drinks the beer himself, as Brian doesn’t seem interested in it.

“And you couldn’t do it in Zurich or Leeds or some backyard gig no one’s ever going to see, no, you’ve had to do it in Wembley in front of 70000 people and a dozen cameras!”

“Brian, darling, you’re getting all worked up about nothing! They loved it!” Freddie’s still floating on the endorphins of a good show.

“It doesn’t bloody matter whether they loved it or not. ‘Four aging queens?’ ‘Can’t get over the way you love me like you do?’ The press is going to have a field day.”

“And besides: we had a plan.” John has materialized beside Brian. “You can’t just decide to fuck our entire PR strategy just because you’re getting bored.”

Brian nods. “And especially not without consulting us and without giving us a chance to react. You had us standing there like idiots!”

“Tell you what.” Roger puts his beer aside and crosses his arms. “Our brilliant PR strategy fucking sucks.”

“Hmm.” Brian looks like he’s concentrating hard. “A single at number one, an album at number
“Brian.” Roger waits until Brian is looking at him. “For six weeks we haven’t been able to leave the house without being trailed by paparazzi. I can’t take Freddie out for so much as a bloody drink. I can’t even blow my nose without some rag printing a picture of it and speculating whether I’ll be on my deathbed soon and then Clare calls me and tells me my mum is crying because she’s scared that I'm going to die.”

Freddie puts an arm around him. It feels good, it feels right.

"And Freddie's being painted in the press as a psychopathic sex maniac who'll seduce anything that moves. There are reporter's waving those bloody headline's in his parent's face just to get a reaction out of them. His parents. Can you imagine what that must be like?"

Freddie's gone very still next to him, but his fingers are digging into Roger's shoulder. Yeah, he can pretend it doesn't matter to him, keeping up the polite fiction that all this isn't happening. But Roger has seen his expression when he's got Kash on the phone, always speaking too quietly for him to hear and pulling the door shut behind him.

Brian looks apologetic. “Christ, Rog, I understand that this is hard for you, but…”

"A couple of days ago a paparazzo sneaked around in my grandmother's backyard. He must have got some fake info that we'd be there for a visit or something."

"Shit. Is your grandma alright?"

Roger shrugged. "She thought he was a burglar and whacked him with a shovel until he scarpered." That episode would be told at family reunions for decades to come.

Brian looks impressed.

"Anyway, this was the first gig on the entire tour that wasn’t completely paint-by-numbers. Because what Freddie did out there? Shooting off his mouth and flirting with us and being a little shit? That’s what we do. That is Queen. Not bite our tongue and hold our breath and don’t look at each other because someone somewhere might think we’re all a bunch of queers.” He takes a deep breath. “I’m so sick of that.”

John looks down at his feet, deep in thought.

Brian runs a hand through his hair. “It was a good show, I guess”, he concedes finally.

“You did mess up that scale run in Hammer”, John says.

“Yes, thanks John, how good of you to remind me. God knows, I'd almost forgotten about that.”

“Ignore him”, Freddie says. “That solo was brilliant. I imagine it was because you wanted to throttle me, but couldn’t, so you gave your guitar a good bludgeoning instead.”

“You’re a mind reader, Fred.”

“Thing is though”, Deacy says, “we can’t go back and forth like that. Stonewalling one day, lecturing a reporter on anti-gay prejudice the next…”

“That was one time!” Brian throws up his hands in exasperation.

“…barely looking at each other at one concert, then Freddie serenading you on stage…”
“It wasn’t that bad”, Roger mumbles, but decides to never watch the tapes of that gig in case they are terminally embarrassing.

“We all have to be on the same page, is what I’m saying. Today was just a test run for the cameras, but the show tonight is going to broadcast internationally and put on video. We have to figure this out.”

There’s a long silence.

"I just didn't think it would take so long", Roger says. "I thought two or three weeks and then we'd be back to normal."

"You honestly believed that?" John looks like he can hardly believe Roger's naivety.

“I just don’t get it. Don’t they get bored of it?”

Brian shrugs. “Not as long as the papers are willing to pay a half a million quid for a photo of you guys smooching.”

“Half a million?”

“It’s what Robbie said. His sister works for the Express. Even if the number’s exaggerated, you two are the scoop.”

“Can’t I just give them half a million dollars?”

“What, every paparazzo in the world? Not even you.”

“Of course...” John picks up an olive on a stick and regards it like it holds the secret of the universe. “…of course they’ll only be willing to pay that much for the first picture. After that, prices will crash.” He looks at them as if expecting a big a-ha moment.

Roger waits another few seconds to see if anything else is forthcoming. “Yes, thanks, for the analysis, Mr Stockbroker. Really helpful.”

John rolls his eyes and looks pointedly at Brian as if to say ‘can you help me out there?’ Brian already has his thinking face on.

“So, what’s going on?”

“You won’t like it, I’m afraid.”

“Oh really? Something you and John came up with and I won’t like it? How unusual.”

Freddie throws himself into a chair and picks up a magazine. “They want us to put out the pic ourselves.”

“What, of you and me?” Roger looks from John to Brian, who aren’t protesting. “Are you nuts? I’m not gonna give them what they want!”

“They’ll get it anyway, eventually”, Brian says. “And that way you have full control over it. You decide which paper gets it, on what day, from which photographer.”

“And they will get bored after that. Who cares about the second man on the moon”, John adds.

“Yeah, or maybe we could just shoot a porno and send it out to every household in Britain, just to
make really sure.”

Freddie raises his eyebrows. “Now that would make us legends. John, can you hold the camera?”

John throws an olive at him.

“Think about it”, Brian says. “It could be at an after show party. We invite Rob or Mick, they take a whole set of photos of you two, holding hands, kissing, whatever. Everything you’re ever going to do in public. And then he offers them to the least vile paper that will print them. Problem solved.”

“Yes, problem solved, except our private lives will be splashed all over the front page for the vultures to pore over”, Roger seethes.

“You never minded that much when it was you with a stripper on your lap.”

One of these days, John’s gonna feel the business end of a shovel wielded by a member of the Taylor family as well. “That was entirely different, for a number of reasons, and you know that.”

“Number one being that a hot girl made you look cool instead of queer?”

Okay, no shovel needed, a fist will do.

“Whoa, whoa, Rog, calm down.” Brian throwing himself into the fray always.

“Just trying to help”, John mumbles.

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about”, Roger yells at John over Brian’s outstretched arms.

“Yes, and he’s very sorry for saying that, now calm the fuck down.” Brian steers him none too gently onto a chair.

“We should think about that.” Roger’s head whips round. Freddie, sitting there, calm as you please, chewing on a slice of apple, while Roger is defending their honour. Backstabbing bastard. “But we need to think bigger.”

“Right. Okay. Whatever.” Roger gets up.

“Roger, please...” But he shakes Brian off.

“You guys can be clever without me for five minutes. If you do go back to the porno idea, please tell me if I should bring my school girl outfit as well.” He snags John’s cigarettes from the table and storms out.

John’s being such a fucking a dick. It’s not that he’s ashamed of what he’s got with Freddie. But that doesn’t mean he wants to see them plastered all over the nations headlines. Again. And yeah, maybe he thought differently about things in the past. But that was when he was 26 and newly rich and famous. Of course you’re going to flaunt that a bit. Besides, it’s a matter of principle. He’s not going to be bullied by some wannabe journalists into giving them what they want.

It’s his first smoke in weeks and it makes his head spin. God he’s missed this. He knows he's going to regret it but he still lights a second cigarette directly after the first. He's almost finished with his third (and his lungs are burning) when Freddie appears. He takes the smoke from his hand, takes the last drag and throws it away. Then he puts a hand on Roger's arm. "Come back inside, love."
Roger takes a few steps with him, then stops.

"What is it?"

Roger looks away. "I'm not ashamed of you", he says. "Of us."

Freddie stands in front of him, very close, and puts his hands on Roger's waist. "I know", he says. "I..."

"Except I am." He blurs it out, annoyed with himself, his weakness. "Deep down, I... I don't want to be but..."

He looks up at Freddie's eyes and finds himself locked in their depth. Freddie tightens the grip of his hands. "I know", he says slowly, emphasising every word, like he's willing Roger to understand.

Roger closes his eyes and lets his head sink forward, until his forehead rests against Freddie's. "This is so fucked up", he whispers.

Freddie's arms close around him.

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They all have some Scotch and then John grudgingly apologises for being rude (although not wrong) and Roger apologises for trying to punch him (although he'd totally do it again).

"Thing is", Roger says, falling back onto the sofa. "I just don't get what the big deal is anymore. I mean, Elton, David, fucking Boy George... it shouldn't be that shocking anymore, right?"

John sighs. "Well, David has just told Rolling Stone he was just experimenting..."

Roger, who has spent a weekend with David in New York when they were producing Under Pressure back in '81, can't hold in a derisive snort.

"...and Elton's actually married to a woman now. I give you Boy George, but..."

Brian takes over. "Thing is, the big news isn't Freddie. If it were just him, no one would give a fuck."

"Watch what you're saying, darling", Freddie warns and pours himself some champagne.

"The big news is Roger." Brian continues like he hasn't heard him. "And I kind of get it. I mean, not to play up the stereotypes, but he's not like you or David or Elton. He's never pranced around the stage in a glittering leotard or declared himself a ballet devotee. Roger always had a girl or two on his arm, and he likes cars and footie and strippers. And suddenly he's supposed to be a queer? There must be some kind of story there."

"It's a bit scary", John says. "If he can get a case of 'the gay', no one's safe."

"Ha ha."

"Besides, you two are both bona fide stars. It's not like when Elton was with John Reid, who no one outside the business knows. You two are more like Madonna and Ringo or..."

Whatever else Brian wanted to say is drowned out in a wave of protest.
"I didn't mean literally, for Christ's sake, calm down the two of you." He has another drink. "Good lord, it's like working with a bunch of teenagers."

"Thing is", John says, "if you two want to live a normal life - whatever a normal life means for you two - you're going to have to live with the press taking an interest."

Brian agrees. "Yes. It's like the Royal babies."

Freddie turns toward Roger. "I don't know about you, dear, but those comparisons just get madder and madder."

"I mean", Brian says, "that they don't keep them locked up behind castle walls all the time. They know people are interested, and so they release photos, take them on outings... you know, in a controlled way."

"Oh god, is this about us doing a cutesy home story again?"

"Now that I'd like to see", John grumbles.

"I don't know, it's not like there's a script for this", Brian says. "But clearly what we've been doing isn't working for you anymore. So I'd rather think up something new than have the whole thing explode in my face."

John nods. "Whatever we do, we'll have to do it together."

"Right." Roger rolls up he's sleeves. He's wearing a red dressing gown over his stage clothes, so the effect is not quite as tough as he'd like it. "Let's think something up then."

"What, now? What about the after-show party?" Not that John would make more than a token appearance.

Freddie sits down next to him. "We're rock stars, darling. We can't possibly be there on time."

Brian takes another moment, then he sits down too. "Alright. Let's do this."

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Roger's pacing backstage. It's the last minute countdown. There's over 100.000 people out there.

The door opens and their assistants are standing ready to lead them to their positions.

Roger turns around and looks at Freddie and Deacy and Bri, all standing close together. "You all good with this?" It's one thing to say "fuck the press, let's go crazy" when you're high on adrenaline after a show. It's something entirely different to walk out there and do it the next day.

They exchange looks, then nods. No one's backing out.

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"It's so great to be here and to play in front this fantastic audience! Thanks for being here with us!"

The roar of the crowd is deafening. Brian waits until they've settled down again.

Roger wipes the sweat from his face and blinks into the spot lights. It's the middle of their acoustic set. They've played a great show so far. Everything they kept bottled up for so long had been poured into the music. They play the songs exactly as they feel right. Freddie is on fire, flirting
with the audience and stealing police men's helmets and running from one side of the stage to the other.

"This last year has been absolutely crazy for us. And the last six weeks..." Brian shakes his head and chuckles. There's some whistling and clapping. "I don't know if you've noticed, but there's been a bit of a kerfuffle in the press." Cheers and boos and jeers. "Yeah, I thought you did." He grins. "Some people get so terribly excited about other people kissing." Laughter. "Anyway, we think love is great and there should be a lot more love in the world. So all of you who love someone - your family, your kids, your partner, your friends, your dog, your infuriating bandmates", Freddie pretends to whack him with his microphone stand for that, "all of you who want to celebrate the love in your life, share a smile with the person next to you, put an arm around them and join us in this next song."

The audience has no idea what's coming next, but they are ready.

Then Brian plays a short intro on his guitar and then Freddie launches into Friends Will Be Friends.

John's bass comes in and Roger drums his fingertips against the tambourine.

It's a risk to perform this new song in this unusual arrangement. They usually have it as an encore with the full force of the drums and electric guitar behind it. It's only been released as a single a few weeks ago, so the fans don't know it off by heart like some of their older stuff. But its got the right vibe, the right message, heartfelt but not too serious, and they want to sing it together at the front of the stage (yes, even John joins in for the chorus. Very quietly.)

They sing the last chorus a capella, arms around each other's shoulders, Roger and Freddie in the middle. No more of that keeping their distance bullshit.

The message is loud and clear. We stand together. Will you stand with us?

The last notes are drowned out by the ovations of the crowd. Roger drinks it in, feeling the closeness of John and Freddie on either side of him, his arm crossed with Brian's atop Freddie's shoulders.

"Alright", Freddie says finally, and they all break apart, getting ready to move on to the next song. But then something stops them in their tracks. A new sound is emerging from the crowd, amorphous cheering building into a familiar melody. Roger's breath catches.

"...there's a golden sky, and the sweet silver song of a lark. Walk on..."

It happened before, of course, the fans singing for them. Every time they played a show on Freddie's birthday, for example. In fact, on those days the challenge was more to get them to shut up once in a while. And there was that show in Stafford ten years ago, where the audience launched into Never Walk Alone before their encore, which inspired Bri to write Rock You. But this... This isn't just a crowd keeping itself entertained. It's their fans answering their question. Yes, we will.

"Walk on, walk on, with hope in your heart, and you'll never walk alone."

He doesn't know who started it, but suddenly his right hand is linked with John's and his left with Freddie's, and then they're standing there, at the front of the stage in the glare of the headlights, accepting their fans' blessing in stunned silence.

The song ends in a huge roar from the crowd and they bow and clap to their audience, and then
Brian is hugging him, leaning down and mashing his curls into Roger's face, and then John, and finally Freddie presses his cheek against his, hot and slightly stubbly. "How the fuck are we going to follow that", Roger whispers.

Freddie takes a deep, shuddering breath. Then he takes a step back, surveys the stage, the crowd, the crew waiting in the wings. "Bo Rhap", he says. "Now." And then, without missing the beat, he turns to the audience. "Enough of this rubbish", he crows as he makes his way to the piano.

Chapter End Notes

Freddie's speech is lifted with slight alterations from the second night at Wembley in '86.
Kensington, 13 July 1986

Chapter Notes

So, this chapter is like a reverse of the previous one. We start fluffy, and then it goes to some dark places at the end. Let's tag this 'mature themes' and 'angst'. Write to me if you want to know more.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I don't want to know."

John holds up his hands. "Alright, alright. I won't say anything."

Roger sips some coffee, winces. He puts the cup down. "Okay, just one thing: Did I dance?"

"You wanted to. Freddie held you back."

Oh thank god.

The second half of the aftershow party is kind of a blur. Usually, that just means it was a good party. But this time, there's a bit more at stake.

Roger holds out another 10 seconds. "Alright, tell me."

John looks like he was just waiting for Roger to say that. "You were very... affectionate."

"Affectionate?"

John folds his hands on the table and cocks his head. "I never knew you wanted lay down your life for me."

"I don't." Right now, Roger just wants to wipe that smug smile off John's face.

"You swore an oath. It was very touching. Very Lord of the Rings."

"Careful Deacy, I'm not what you'd call mentally stable right now. And I will claim that as a defense in court."

"I was kind of worried you'd propose to me. And to Brian too. And Freddie..." John shakes his head, a wistful smile on his face.

"What about Freddie?" He'd been peacefully sleeping next to him when Roger got up, so he can't have done anything too bad, right?

"Roger you..." John thinks for a moment. "Just have a look at these, alright? Words can't do it justice."

He pushes an envelope towards him. "Maggie developed them directly after the party and then delivered a set of prints this morning."

Oh God, the photos. Because of course the night he loses his shit is also the night have a
photographer over specifically to takes pictures of him and Freddie. Shit, shit, shit! And he's stuck here with John, who won't even give him a cigarette.

Thing is, they've all been a bit euphoric after the show. An old friend of Veronica's who happens to be a photographer was there and they'd decided that she should take pics of him and Freddie being cute together throughout the night. They'd review them the next day and see if any are suitable to be leaked to the press so the vultures are satisfied.

Of course, the moment he knew there was a camera, Roger sort of froze up. Maggie did everything she could to put them at ease, and he knew that nothing would be published that he didn't give his okay to first, but... he just couldn't relax at all. It was very stressful.

So when he'd come by that tray of weed cookies, he'd taken a couple. Turns out, there was more than just a bit of weed in them.

"It's okay, Rog", John says, more serious now. "There's nothing bad in there."

Roger takes a deep breath and takes the stack of photos.

When he was a kid, his grandparents had a Labrador. Archie was the best dog in the world. He was also terminally stupid: he got confused by his own shadow and got stuck in the cat flap about once a week.

But he loved Roger. He also loved cuddly toys, playing ball, sleeping, sunshine, puddles, snow, cats, other dogs, riding in a car, lying on the sofa, going for walks, jumping into pools... and the love was boundless. If Roger returned from a two- minute trip to the loo he was greeted as ecstatically as if he'd spent a year overseas. It didn't matter how often Roger just pretended to throw the ball without releasing it, Archie would always bound off, become confused, then trundle back and yap happily at him, like Roger had just invented the best game ever.

Looks like last night he channelled his inner Archie. The expression on his face is just... He looks, very simply put, like the happiest man on earth.

There's one pic in which Brian is in full lecture mode, demonstrating something with an arrangement of glasses and ashtrays on the table. And Roger has his chin propped up on his hands and is clinging to every word, like a child that's being told the most gripping story. In another one, he has his head on John's shoulder, eyes closed, smiling beatifically, while John quirks an eyebrow at the camera, as if to say "Look what I have to put up with."

And then there's the photos with Freddie... He puts the prints down and groans. "It's disgusting."

"It is", John says. "But also kind of adorable!"

"I don't do adorable!"

"Look at that", John says, picking up a picture and shoving it under his nose. "Look at him! It's like he's woke up in paradise."

Reluctantly, Roger takes a look. He's lying with his head in Freddie's lap, looking up at him and talking about something, hands waving in the air. And Freddie looks down on him with an expression that is equal parts bewildered, charmed and besotted and like... like he's just completely, helplessly in love. It makes something inside Roger pull together so tightly it hurts.

"It's lovely, isn't it?" John's expression gone all soft.
"It's horrible. I hate it", Roger growls and snatches it out of John's hands. He's never going to give that back.

John pours himself another cup of coffee. "Look, one word from us and Maggie will delete the negatives. But I think there are some that we can use." He sorts through the pictures for a moment. "Like this one. Or this."

To Roger, they all look incredibly intimate. But John coaxes him to look at them with a more neutral eye. All they show is a happy couple at a party. An arm wrapped casually around the other. A peck on the cheek. A shared smile.

"I don't like it."

"You don't have to do it. You know that, right? All of this is up to you."

Roger puts the photos they selected aside. "I'll have to discuss this with Freddie."

"Sure." John drums his fingers on the table. "There's something else you might want to discuss with Freddie."

"What?"

"I talked to Jim yesterday night. You know, the lawyers are digging up all the dirt they have on Prenter, putting together a case so we can sue him til doomsday."

"Yeah." That prospect is something to keep his mood up when the press coverage gets particularly nasty.

John pushes his empty cup back and forth a few times. "I'm not sure how to say this."

"Oh god, what now? What else has he come up with? An exclusive interview with Freddie's private lube dealer?"

"He's been diagnosed."

"Oh." These days, you don't have to ask with what.

"Apparently he got the news a week before The Express went public with your story." He shrugs, as if to say 'make whatever you will of that'.

Roger doesn't know how to feel. He wants to feel grim satisfaction that finally, after all the decent people hit by the disease, it finally got someone who deserved it. But somehow, it doesn't come. All there is, is that dead, leaden weight in his stomach. So many. How many more before this nightmare is over?

"Will you tell Freddie?"

"Yes. Sure." Roger has no idea how Freddie is going to react. He's labelled Prenter a traitor and cut all ties, but they used to be so close. He was the one who introduced Freddie to some of the most important people in his life, took him along to the depths of the gay scene, encouraged him to explore that side of him. They were friends. And it's not like Freddie doesn't have enough shit to deal with right now.

But Roger's got to tell him. He can't keep this from him, it wouldn't be fair. And Freddie's a grown man.
John looks like he's about to get up, but then he speaks again. "Listen, I don't mean to pry or anything, but Paul and Freddie, were they... I mean is he..."

Oh god, has John been worried about that all the time? They never told him and Brian about the negative test, because, well, it was negative and there was nothing to tell. "They never, you know." He says quickly. "As far as I know anyway and..." Better not think about that too hard. "Freddie's fine. We know that. We're sure."

John's shoulders sag with relief. "Can you tell Brian, too? He didn't say anything in so many words, but..."

"Yes, I..." If John's been worried, how much worse must Brian have been? Of course, that should be Freddie's news to share, but Roger knows he wouldn't want Brian worrying over nothing for a minute longer than necessary. "I'll tell him when he gets up. I'm just he'll call Brian immediately. We just... we had no idea you were even worried."

John gives him a withering look. "Right", he says. "See you in Manchester then."

"See you."

When he's almost at the door, he turns around. "And Rog?"

"Hm?"

"Maybe next time think twice before taking drugs from strangers?"

He quickly ducks through the door before Roger can throw something at him.

They select two photos. The day they are published, Roger takes Freddie out to dinner. It's not exactly comfy, knowing that a gaggle of paparazzi are waiting outside, but it feels good to be able to do that again. Freddie takes his arm as they get out of the car, striding along, head held high.

When Freddie gets the news about Paul, he goes very quiet for a while, then decides to go out with Mary. Roger has no idea whether they talk about it or if she just understands him implicitly or if it's not about communication at all but simply about spending the night with his most trusted friend. Roger's just relieved that he knows who to turn to, that he's got the support of people he trusts.

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The next gig is in Manchester after a pause of several days, and Roger is in high spirits when he arrives for the sound check. They've hit their stride again, and nothing's going to stop them now.

Except that something is wrong Brian. He snaps at the crew, he forgets to retune the guitar between songs, he keeps messing up the set list and finally he cuts his solo short, which is unheard of in band history. He just puts his guitar on the stand and walks off, forcing the others to get back on the stage long before they expect it. They improvise something until Gerry can persuade Brian to go back on. Freddie makes something up about a tech malfunction, but the problem is clearly not with the equipment.

"Alright", Roger says as soon as they're backstage. "What's going on?"

Brian just walks out.

The other three look at each other, trying to gauge who'll be the best one to go after him. "I'll get him", Roger says. He has no idea what's going on, but Brian's been there for him when he's been
down. And he feels that even if Brian wants to be alone, right now he shouldn't be.

He finds him in a dark and quiet corner of the labyrinth of hallways that make up the back stage area. He is leaning against the wall, eyes closed.

Roger stands next to him. He doesn't know what to say, so he just stands next to him, so close they almost touch. He can feel the tension radiating off him. He's not crying, as far as Roger can tell, but he's not far from it. "That bad, hm?"

Brian draws back, nods with a clenched jaw, as if he doesn't trust his voice. Roger is so majorly unqualified for dealing with this kind of situation. John should have gone, or Freddie. They would know to something besides just standing there, watching Brian fall apart at the seams.

Then Roger says the only the he knows to say. "Come on." He puts a hand on Brian's shoulder. "Let's go for a ride."

With a grim smile on his face, Brian holds out his his hand.

He really shouldn't drive in his state, but Roger hands him the keys without another word. It's a coping method here can completely relate to. They head out of the city and Roger's content to let him drive in silence. Until Brian completely misjudges a curve and sends them skidding along the deserted road.

Roger makes him pull over and breaks out the whiskey.

Brian looks incredulous. "You've got whiskey in your car?"

"For emergencies."

"How are we going to get home?"

Roger rolls his eyes. "We'll order a fucking helicopter, I don't care. Now spill."

Brian lets his head fall back against the headrest. "It's a mess. I'm a mess."

"You don't say."

It takes Brian a long time to speak. "Anita. She's... When I'm with her it's like she really sees me."

It's the first time Brian admitted out loud she's more than just a friend and collaborator. "Alright."

"I want to be with her. So much."

"That's not a bad thing", Roger says softly.

"I can't, Rog!" Brian's voice sound like every word hurts. "I can't."

Oh God, Roger knew there would be trouble. Of course Brian can't just have an affair or a divorce like a normal person. No, he has to completely tear himself up in the process. He sighs. "Look, I know you and Chrissie go back a long way, but..."

Brian violently shakes his head. "No, you don't..."

"I'm not suggesting you kick her out in the streets, just..."

"No. No, Rog, you don't understand."
"Bri, for Christ's sake, this isn't the 19th century. Lots of people separate. There's really no reason for you to torture yourself and her just because..."

"Chrissie's pregnant."

Oh fuck. Holy mother of crap, what a clusterfuck.

"That's..." He's lost for words. "Jesus, Bri, that's like... that really bad timing."

"Oh really? You think so? That thought hadn't occurred to me at all. Thanks for pointing it out."

The muscles in his jaw work so hard Roger worries his teeth might crack.

It's almost funny. If someone had asked him 10 years ago which member of Queen is the most likely to get into this sort of drama, he'd have pointed the finger squarely at himself. This whole thing is so not Brian. In fact, it sounds very much like the plot of an episode of EastEnders, but even Roger is self-aware enough not to mention that. Instead, he fills up their glasses again and sits silently until Brian decides to speak.

"I had almost worked up the nerve to talk to Chrissie. I mean, she knew something was up, she isn't stupid. The days after Wembley everything felt so... it was so energizing, like everything was getting somewhere and I decided that I'd use the days off to do it, to talk to her about us and... I mean, she hasn't been happy for a while so... but then before I could even get started, she sat me down and told me we were going to have another baby." Brian empties he glass in one jerky movement.

"Shit."

"Yeah." Brian looks absolutely miserable. "And it's so..." He doesn't take his eyes of the glass in his hands. "It's not like there were that many opportunities for her to get pregnant, you know."

Roger very much does not want to know, but Brian was there for him when he'd been pining for Freddie, so he can be here for him now. "Hm."

"It must have been the night before that infernal press conference. I don't know how it happened, but it was the first evening in ages where were just having fun together, you know, not fighting or 'having a talk' or ignoring each other or walking on eggshells. We were just sitting together, enjoying a glass of wine... and just for that moment I thought that maybe we'd find back to how things were, I really did."

Yes, Brian always did. He'd grasp any straw, no matter how flimsy, to make himself believe that this time, they would work it out and just go back to how things were in 1973.

"But then all that craziness with you and Freddie began and we went on tour again and I was in the studio with Anita and I... and I just lost it. God, what have I done."

Roger desperately tries to think of something to say. "How long has Chrissie known?"

"She's only just realized", Brian says miserably. "Didn't expect it either."

"She's not far along then."

Brian shrugs. "Seven weeks, give or take."

"So it, you know", Roger is not well versed in these kinds of discussions. How do you put that delicately? "It might not take, right?"
"Yes, but... that's a miserable option to bank on, isn't it?"

"Ye-es..." Roger takes a moment to think very carefully about how he's going to proceed. "However..."

"You're not serious." Brian looks aghast.

"It's just an option, something to consider, I mean..."

"Oh yes, brilliant, thanks for the input, Rog. Hey, Chrissie, about that pregnancy thing, would you mind getting rid of it? It sort of gets in the way of my dumping you for my new girlfriend! Are you mad?"

Okay, that does sound bad. "Alright that's... I was just..." Now Roger needs a whiskey. "Look, you've got to be honest with her. And if you're going to leave her once the baby is born then..."

"I will not leave her!"

"But staying with her is making both of you fucking miserable!" He's not that close to Chrissie, but what information he gets filtered through via Veronica and John tells him she's not happy with the situation either.

"I promised her 'forever'."

Oh good lord. "Maybe that's not something you can actually promise. People change. Circumstances change."

Brian doesn't answer. He sits there, coiled and angry and sad, like a caged animal.

"Could you two come to an agreement? Like, you stay married for the sake of the public and the kids and the holy vows", Roger can't quite keep the sarcasm out of his voice at that last one. "But you live separately for everything else. It's not that uncommon you know."

Brian smiles in a way that is completely devoid of humour. "Like Freddie and Mary?"

Roger shrugs. "We're rock stars. We're supposed to have a sordid private life. Leave the happy family stuff to Deacy."

"I don't know how he does it."

Roger wants to shake some sense into Brian. "By actually talking to Veronica, guess. By not holding himself - or her, for that matter - to an impossible standard. By compromising."

"My father will never talk to me again if I do that to Chrissie. Either of those things."

"Well, your dad's an idiot." He's given Brian years of grief about giving up on his research. Compared to him, Freddie's parents are models of empathy and tolerance.

"Thanks, Rog. Any kind words about my mother while you're at it?"

They share a quiet smile. And another drink.

"Hey, if you ever need to talk or a place to crash, call me. At any time." Of course, Brian has a second house and enough money to stay in the Hilton Presidential Suite for the rest of his life. But that's not what this is about.
"Thanks that... thanks." He cranes his neck to look out the window at the deserted country road. "The fuck are we going to get home?"

Roger peels back a panel at the back of the middle console. "Sat phone", he says. "Brand new model. Welcome to the future. You okay with a Bentley or should I order in that chopper?"

Chapter End Notes

So, Roger might have saved a life, but he couldn't fix Brian's marriage.

The party at the beginning is not the great extravaganza that it actually was, but a smaller, more intimate affair. Remember, at that time, people were kind of pulling away from them.

"A girl is going pop out that", Freddie says, handing Roger a gigantic knife and pointing at the cake, "Just try it."

Now, Roger has his fair share of experience with both cakes and girls, and he's absolutely sure that even a dwarf-sized one wouldn't fit in there. But Freddie looks so happy and ridiculous, grinning like a madman in his yellow outfit that Roger takes the knife and plays along.

There's no girl. Roger makes the expected disappointed noises, then he hugs Freddie, who is so very proud of this silly cake with this silly little drummer on top. There are cameras and a million people crammed into his presidential suite. It doesn't matter.

Budapest is without doubt one of the highlights of the tour. It's like a mini-holiday, really: They sailed up the river Danube from Vienna on a huge ship they have all to themselves. According to Brian it's also used by Gorbachev for his travels. The weather is fantastic, the landscape picturesque and the drinks cupboard fully stocked. So much more relaxing than being cramped in airplanes or cars. Maybe they should start planning their touring schedules along the major rivers in the future.

Also, the reporters over here are so much nicer than in the rest of Europe. For one, they actually leave you alone once you answered their handful of questions. There's not much international press there, so almost all the interviewers and photographers are locals or from neighbouring bloc states. And they're so respectful, Roger truly does feel like royalty. No one over here would ask rude questions about his private life (he's not sure if it's respect per se, or if they're just embarrassed or officially forbidden to write about it). Even Freddie volunteers for some interviews.

After the concert in Wembley, there's been a surge of interest and reports, but at least in the so-called quality press the tone has changed to one of grudging respect. The yellow papers and the paparazzi are still sniffing for dirt, but who gives a fuck about those? There's the feeling that they've been through the worst and come out still alive, still together, still on top. There's a reception in the embassy and a grand tour of the city and after two days of being charmed by the people of Hungary, even Brian manages to forget his troubles for a while and crack a smile. They're going to play a huge concert at Nepstadion the next day and he's been practicing a Hungarian folk song with Freddie for days. Arguably Freddie's part is harder, Hungarian being such a weird language, while the guitar part is just five standard chords. Roger can tell that Freddie's nervous, but he's thrown himself into the personal challenge with his usual ferocity.

After the cake there's lots of toasts and then they all give a couple of interviews to the Hungarian TV crew. Then the cameras are put aside and the real party can begin.

At three in the morning, Roger finds Freddie on one of the balconies overlooking the city, an unlit cigarette in his hand. Roger swings himself up on the stone balustrade, letting his feet dangle.

Alarmed, Freddie slings an arm around his waist. "For fuck's sake, we're nine storey's up."
Roger pats the space next to him. "Come on up. I'll hold you."

"Not in a million years, love."

Roger holds out his hand. "Give me that."

Freddie lights the cigarette for him and hands it over. It's an unwritten law that they're entitled to a good smoke on their birthdays. He lets a trail of smoke flow from his mouth. The problem with being an occasional smoker is that it becomes really obvious how horrible the damn things taste. But it feels nice, sitting there quietly with the sounds of the party behind them, city lights shimmering and Freddie's warm, safe arm slung around him.

"How did we end up here", he asks.

Freddie gives him an odd look. "We took a ship from Vienna, and then a car took us to the hotel, and then..."

"No, I mean, you know. You and me."

"Ah." Freddie steals Roger's birthday cigarette and takes a deep drag. "I think it all started with some very awkward flirting, and then there was this night in Glasgow when..."

"Oh, I remember the how." Roger smiles at the memories. "I meant. Why?"

"Hm. You always liked brunettes."

"I do." He runs a hand through Freddie's hair. "But if you'd have asked me about this, about you and me, ten years ago, I'd have laughed in your face. It would have seemed ridiculous. And now... I don't know, I can't explain it. It just feels right. It's like I'm asked to explain how I ended up playing drums for Queen."

"I can explain that too. It's because I'm the better singer and Brian's the better guitarist and you're just too pretty to play bass."

Roger has been playing the drums for longer than he's known either of his band mates, and Freddie knows that very well, so it's not worth the effort to argue. "But I like playing guitar, too. And I'm a bloody good singer."

Freddie scrounges up his face. "Is that a metaphor or something? Because darling, I'm bloody wasted, so could you just..."

"It's just... I can't imagine not having that. Having you. But sometimes I do and..." He sighs. "Like it all could have turned out so differently. Sometimes I can't believe how lucky I got", he adds quietly.

Freddie's arm tightens around him. "I know", he says quietly. "Sometimes I..."

"What?"

"I can't believe how lucky I got."

It's a good thing Freddie's holding on to him because Roger feels a bit wobbly. He puts a hand on Freddie's arm, holding on as tightly as he can.

"There's been something I've been meaning to tell you", Freddie says.
"Hm?"

"There's a property right next to Garden Lodge. It's called Logan Mews."

That rings a faint bell. "Those run down cottages?" Freddie's been ranting about it from time to time. He's been meaning to buy it, but the owner asked a fantastic price, which made Freddie completely furious. 'Just because I'm rich and famous doesn't mean I'm a rip-off', he fumed.

"He sold it."

Uh-oh, new neighbours. "To who?"

"Me."

"He made you a decent offer?"

"No."

"Okay." Roger laughs. "Well, you can afford it."

"It's independent from Garden Lodge and there's a line of dogwood separating the properties. Very private. It's small of course, and there's a lot of work to be done on it, but it gets all the morning sun. And there's an added garage, big enough for two cars Joe says and..."

"Freddie..."

"I have ideas about a design but it would be entirely up to you, of course. The two cottages could be knocked together into one building and we might be able to add an extension to the south, I'm sure that would be..."

"Freddie, I..."

"If we built a fence you could even get a dog. Or if the dog liked cats, we wouldn't even need a fence. You wouldn't have to let the cats into the house, of course. Goliath would be furious, but I'm sure he'd understand eventually. And..."

Roger half turns, so he can look at Freddie and puts his thumb over his lips. "Freddie, did you buy me a house?"

Now Freddie looks a little panicked. "I could just turn it into a guesthouse, maybe add a conservatory if you don't... I just thought that... It's not like you have to live there or anything, I was just..."

Roger can feel him pull back. "It sounds wonderful", he says. Freddie's eyes snap back up at him. "Will you show it to me when we get back? Please?"

"Well, if you insist." Freddie acts cool, but his smile tells Roger how much this means to him.

"I do", he says, and kisses Freddie's nose, allowing himself to be sappy just this once. He's half drunk, so it's allowed.

Freddie straightens himself up a bit. "It's just the practical thing to do", he grumbles. "You're going all maudlin." He cocks his head and squints up at Roger. "You're wasted too."

"Yeah, a bit", Roger readily admits. He's a bit distracted because Freddie is really close.
"How wasted?" His eyes dip briefly to Roger's mouth.

"Not that wasted." He leans down, but Freddie's already stepped back and pulling him off the balustrade. He would have landed nose-first on the floor if Freddie hadn't pulled him up.

"Come on, birthday boy."

Freddie manoeuvres them through the suite that is still packed with people. They draw some glances, and it must be very obvious what they're doing, but Roger's not caring a whit. His own suite is right next door, blessedly empty, and he's due a good birthday shag.

Freddie crawls over him and slowly peels him out of his clothes.

Roger takes hold of his hands and pins them to his sides. "Fuck me", he whispers.

Freddie laughs in exasperation, trying to tug his hands free without losing his balance. "Well, I'm trying. Just give me a bloody minute."

"No. I mean. You. Fuck me."

"You..." Freddie takes a few seconds to process all the possible meanings of that sentence. "Oh."

Roger kisses a line up his neck, heart pounding. He's said it, no way back now. He closes in on Freddie's mouth, but he turns his head away.

"Why", Freddie asks. Which is just about the stupidest thing one can ask in a situation like this, right?

"Why not?"

"You were always dead set against the idea."

Roger rolls his eyes. "The whole world thinks I'm taking it up the ass anyway."

"You're drunk."

"Oh yes." Roger grins with all his teeth. "Come on. I know you want it."

Freddie looks at him for a long moment, his eyes going dark. "You have no idea."

Well, that's good to know. Roger's heart picks up a beat. Get a stupid idea, then jump in the deep end, that's what he does. It's exciting and a bit scary and he's probably going to end up hating it, but well. In for a pound.

Freddie gives him a brief peck on the lips. "But not tonight."

"What?"

Freddie wiggles his hands free and runs them down Roger's sides. He tugs his shirt from his waistband and slides his fingers under it, caressing the naked skin of his stomach.

He doesn't make any attempt to explain himself.

"It's my birthday!"

"Exactly how long have you had this brilliant idea, my love?" Freddie smiles down at him.
That sort of thing is always hard to tell for Roger. A minute? A year? It all depends on which part of his brain you ask, really. "A while."

"Uh-huh."

"Enough to make up my mind anyway. Come on", he says and lets his fingers trail down Freddie's chest, rubbing them over his nipples and pushing his hips up into him. If they don't get going soon, he'll only lose his nerve.

Freddie pushes his hands away and reaches up to cup his face. Roger doesn't like it when he does that, it makes him feel all mushy inside. "Darling", he says. "You know I adore you, right?"

He closes his eyes and turns his head away. "Christ Freddie, I don't require a bloody sonnet."

"Look at me."

Roger steels himself. Freddie's expression is so soft it makes him ache.

"What is it?"

Freddie smiles. "I'm still wearing 'that infernal moustache'"

As if he seriously gives a damn about that. "Nobody's perfect."

Freddie kisses him, then he pulls back up and sighs. "I can't believe I have to be the grown up here. I'm no good at it, you know?"

God, this is so annoying. "So don't be."

"Roger, you have a show to play tomorrow."

"So?"

"You'll have to sit on your tiny, uncomfortable little stool for over two hours. Plus sound check."

Freddie raises his eye brows, as if to say 'get it?'.

Roger had not thought about that. It can't be that bad, can it? "You're always okay."

"I also don't walk like a 90-year old after a single light yoga session."

"Light? You call that 'light'? That damned woman made him almost dislocate his spine.

"It's called practice, you twit. Now will you shut up and listen to me for once?"

Freddie's sitting up, knees on either side of Roger's hips and glares down away him, expression thunderous. It's kind of hot, actually. "Alright, then", Roger says and crosses his hands behind his head. "Make it up to me."
The concert was added after the broadcast of the second Wembley show led to an insane amount of ticket demand. The 120,000 tickets sold out in less than 24 hours after the show was announced.

It feels like half the audience is made up of friends and family. For the band, it's more than just the final gig of the tour. When they played their first show in Sweden two months ago, they had no idea if anyone would even bother to show up, if they would still have a record contract by the end of the year and if the stresses of having their private lives examined 24/7 would tear them all apart. But they stood together and came out on top, and they're going to celebrate it with everything they have.

But first, there's the soundcheck. They have enough routine that at this point in the tour, they often leave that to their experienced crew. But not a show like this.

Freddie's at the edge of the stage, hefting the mic in his hand like he's trying it out for weight. He startles a bit when Roger comes up to him, like he was a million miles away in his thoughts.

"Er, listen, you know my mum's going to be here tonight, right?"

Freddie rolls his eyes. "Yes, I haven't forgotten since you told me this morning. And last night. And over lunch." He looks like he's getting seriously annoyed the longer he's speaking. "Have I ever given you reason to believe I'd embarrass you in front of your mother? Because I really don't know why everyone's always behaving like I'm the one who..."

"No, no, no, it's not that." Roger is a bit nervous, since this is the first time she and Freddie will meet since Roger told her about them. But Freddie always gets out his best behaviour when parents are around. And she's not going to come along for the big aftershow party where things might get heated. "It's just... You know, she rarely comes to see the shows, so I thought I'd like to give her a brief shout out when we're out there."

"Oh. Yes, of course, what a lovely idea." He looks a bit surprised. Roger never did something like that before. "When?"

"The acoustic set. I'd just like to add another verse to Mary Lou, nothing fancy. She loves that song. That old timey Rock 'n' Roll stuff, you know?"

Freddie nods distractedly. "Yeah, alright, just give me a sign, so I don't forget."

"Alright, I'll talk to Deacy and Bri then, so we're all on the same page."

Freddie twirls the microphone in his fingers for a moment. "Roger", he says just as Roger is about to walk away.
"Yes." There's a deep frown line between Freddie's eyes. Roger steps a little closer. "Is everything alright?"

"It's possible that..." He clears his throat. "My mother might come too."

"What? Why?" Immediately a million scenarios sprout up in Roger's head. Will he be expected to talk to her? How's he supposed to act? How's Freddie going to cope?

Freddie throws up his hands and gestures wildly. "I don't know! I... I invited her. Like I always do. I didn't expect her to..." He starts pacing, running his hands through his hair. "Kash called and said they're getting ready to come."

Roger steps closer, takes his hands. He has no idea what to say, so he just runs his thumbs over Freddie's knuckles. "Okay. Right. Is there anything I can do?"

Freddie takes a deep breath, like he's steeling himself. "Just... follow my lead, alright? She won't say anything to you. About us."

"Alright." Roger nods, then gathers Freddie up in a hug. He wants to say that his mum loves him, that she'll come around, that this is a good sign. But that's not his place. Freddie's family has always been off limits. So he just holds him close until Freddie steps back and turns away quickly to snap at Ratty who's busy at the piano.

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In the evening, they ride in by chopper once the support acts are on stage, which gives them a splendid view of the crowd. Freddie sits in the middle, acting cool, but his fingers dig into Roger's arms every time they fly a curve.

The backstage area is one giant party. Roger's invited just about anyone he could think of: His mum, his aunts and uncles and cousins (at least the non-irritating ones, Clare, Philippe and their children, Marlene and Bibi, and the entire New York gang: Melissa, Suki, James, Thor, Ed and even Marco, who has just recovered from a bout of Meningitis that left his left leg paralysed in his right leg. He drives his wheelchair right up to a stunned Ratty with the words "Right, where's the good drugs?" Roger immediately gets him in touch with Cousin Carl. They should get on splendidly.

Brian and John have brought along their families. Roger waves hi at Chrissie and then makes sure to avoid her as much as possible. It may or may not be a coincidence that doing that leads him directly to Brian. Roger hasn't really talked to him since Manchester, but he's been quiet those last weeks, the situation clearly putting a strain on him.

"You okay", Roger asks.

"Yeah. I'm good." He looks around, then takes Roger's elbow and leads him a few steps aside, away from the throng of people. "But I've been meaning to talk to you." He takes a deep breath. "I've broken things off with Anita. You know, with the baby and all..." He shakes his head. "I just couldn't live with myself otherwise."

Internally, Roger sighs. He always, always goes back to Chrissie. And it always, always ends in tears. His parents have a lot to answer for, and they don't even have the excuse of being religious. But Roger puts on a smile. "You're way too straight laced to be a rock star, you know?"

Brian shakes his head. "I'm not a rock star. You and Freddie are, but me and Deacy... we're just a two very serious, hardworking musicians."
"Who happen to be enormously rich and famous."

"Exactly. By the way", Brian's expression lights up a little. "I don't think I've told you yet. I might have another producer's credit under my belt by the end of the year."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yes, I'm going to produce an album with Anita."

"You what?!"

Brian must take his alarm for enthusiasm. He nods and grins widely. "The single went well, so EMI offered us a contract. We'll start in September."

And they call Roger clueless. "Are you completely out of your mind?"

"Keep your hat on, Roger. It's completely professional. I've made up my mind and she knows I'm not available."

Yeah, no way that can go wrong. Spending long nights cooped up the studio, singing love songs together, poring over arrangements and lyrics until the world outside loses all meaning, then drinks after, maybe sharing a car back to the hotel... The perfect set-up for a pair of star-crossed lovers.

In fact, only a brilliant mind like Brian's could come up with such an utterly shit plan. Of the thousands of talented singers who'd jump at the chance to do an album with him, he chooses the one he can barely look at without his eyes going heart-shaped. It's because he thinks his brain is so almighty that it can overrule his heart. And his cock. And in Roger's experience if those two team up, Brian's just as fucked as any other guy.

"Sure", he says, helplessly.

"I mean it. I swore it to Chrissie. I swore it to myself."

Oh god, this is going to end in so many tears. "Right. Okay."

"I'm serious, Rog."

Yes, and that is exactly the problem. "I know", he says. Arguing with Brian when he's like that is about a useful as arguing with the cliffs of Dover. "Listen if you get stuck and need a song-writer who actually knows what he's doing, give me a call, alright? Or Freddie, he's great at that kind of stuff. Deacy too - you know how difficult it is to find a decent bassist."

Brian huffs. "That'll hardly be necessary."

"Ah, you never know. Song-writing is about more than just coming up with a clever guitar riff, you know?" And this offer isn't really about song-writing either, as surely even Brian in full denial mode must understand.

"Will you fuck off?" But he's smiling again. "Go look after your boyfriend."

The boyfriend has last been seen playing hide-and-seek with little Laura and doesn't need looking after. But Roger still walks in his direction. After a few steps, he turns back around. "I mean it", he says. "Call me if anything comes up."

Brian rolls his eyes. "Sure, Rog."
When he turns around he almost runs straight into Jer Bulsara.

"Er, hi", he says, craning his neck desperately to see if Freddie is anywhere to be found. "How nice to meet you, Mrs Bulsara. Kash." Freddie's sisters is right at her mother's side. Oh god, how is he supposed to follow Freddie's lead if Freddie's nowhere to be seen? Did she do this on purpose, seeking him out like that?

"Roger." She shakes his hand, smiling warmly. "How are you?"

"Great!" It's not that Roger didn't have his fair share of uncomfortable meetings with parents, but this is one step beyond everything that has come before. He tries very hard not even to even think the words 'I sodomize your son on a regular basis'. "And how's Mr Bulsara?"

"Ah, very busy, always busy, you know how he is."

"Yeah. Er… speaking of busy, I kind of have to…” He waves vaguely in the direction of the dressing room.

"Of course, of course. But…” She puts a had on his arm. "Once the tour is over, will you come over for tea one Sunday?"

"Tea?"

"Yes, tea. On Sunday."

Tea. At Freddie's parents house. With his mum and his sister and (oh god please no) his dad. "Er, sure. Yes."

"Lovely." She pats his arm. Kash smirks at him. "Well, we wouldn't want to keep you." They putter off in the direction of the buffet. Right to where Clare and his mum are arguing over canapes.

Roger heads for the bar. Kash and Clare will sort it out. What a night. And the exciting part hasn't even started yet.

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The concert is a perfect ending to the tour. 150.000 people, Status Quo as special guest to fire up the crowd, Freddie in stellar form, chatting excitedly with the audience and throwing everything into the performance. All of them are fast on their feet, playing off each other and improvising loosely. Their funky version of Dust is among the best they ever played.

When Roger jogs to the front of the stage with John, tambourine in hand, after Is This The World We Created, they are greeted by a huge cheer. The sea of hands, waving and clapping is amazing. John catches his eyes, eyebrows raised questioningly. Roger nods, heart jittering with anticipation. The start the Rock 'n Roll set with Square, as always. Then it's time for Mary Lou and as always since that first show in Wembley, Freddie changes the lyrics to "flash those big blue eyes my way". The cheer from the crowd almost drowns out Brian singing the second part of the verse. They sing the chorus together and when they get to the last line, two things happen: John sidles up to Freddie and whispers something in his ear and Brian launches them into the second verse instead of ending the song.

Freddie wheels round, looking confused, but then Roger gives him a small wave at him and understanding dawns on his face.
Roger steps up to his mic, pulse pounding in his ears.

"I saw your lips I heard your voice, believe me I just had no choice", he sings. "Wild horses couldn't make me stay away."

Freddie's standing about two yards away from him, very still. Roger's half-blinded by stage lights, but he swears Freddie's working hard to keep his face straight.

"I thought about a moonlit night, arms around you, good an' tight, all I had to see for me to stay." A small change of text there at the end. It's becoming a tradition. Brian joins in for the chorus, and then, belatedly, as if he's a bit dazed, Freddie joins in as well. "So Hello Mary Lou, goodbye heart."

Roger's heart is soaring as they sing the final line together. He's been thinking about doing this ever since he heard the song on the radio a couple of weeks ago and realised how perfect that second verse is. He throws a kiss into the wings where his mother is watching. Yes, she would have liked that.

As they get ready for Tutti Frutti, Freddie walks past him.

"That was for your mum, was it?"

"Of course. She's always had a thing for Ricky Nelson."

+++ They run off the stage, pumped up and excited. Last shows are always special: You know you can give it your all without having to worry about being fit tomorrow, and even those songs that you're really tired of by now (Like bloody Now I'm Here, which is a great song, but they've been playing it since the last Ice Age) are played with that extra bit of care and energy. And of course you're knackered and sick and tired of airplanes and hotel rooms and interviews and pre-gig fighting, but you also know that it won't take more than a week until you're going to miss it like hell.

They all head straight for the drinks, chatting excitedly. Phoebe, Gerry, Ratty, Jobby and Crystal, who have escorted them off the stage, are there, opening the champagne bottles and handing out towels. It's going to be just them for a while, until the doors are opened and the party really gets started. But after a minute or so, Freddie turns around and orders everyone but the band out of the room. He sits down on a chair and puts his glass away. "Can I say something?"

"Of course, Fred." Brian and John gather round.

Something pulls together tightly in the pit of Roger's stomach. His mood takes a 180 degree turn, because suddenly he knows how this is going to go. This is the end. Freddie doesn't want to tour anymore. It's all getting too much, what with him turning fourty this year and his health troubles and so on.

But no, there are no health troubles. And Freddie's been in splendid form, and seemed more enthusiastic than ever once the tour really got going. His voice is better than ever. So where is all that coming from?

Freddie looks somber as he regards each of them individually. "Let's never stop doing this."

"This?" Brian raises his beer bottle.

"This", Freddie says, waving his arm in a wide arc that encompasses the whole room. "I never
wanted to be an aging old diva. I've been... actually I've been waiting for the right moment to say 'okay, we've had a good run, but this is it'. I thought maybe after this tour. I mean, I'm turning 40 fucking years old, can you believe it? But... I don't want to stop."

The sudden levity when the weight drops from Roger makes him feel light-headed. They're not going to stop. Freddie doesn't want to stop.

"That's good, Fred", John says. "I want to keep going too. Sometimes I feel it's all getting too much, the people and the press and everything, but... but when I look around and there's Brian on my side, and you out front and Rog behind me, it just feels right."

"I don't want to stop either", Roger says, just in case there's any doubt about that.

Brian nods."Nor me."

Freddie smiles. "Even when you're 90 and have to be rolled on stage by a nurse?"

Roger sits up, elbows on his knees. "Tell me more about that nurse..."

Brian throws a paper cup at him. "We're having a moment here, Rog, could you stop being a horndog for one blessed second."

"I think we should tour until we fucking drop dead", John said. "We might have to scale back on the vodka though. Eventually. At some point."

"Yeah, I mean. I don't think we can ever go back to 70s level touring, you know, 100 shows a year, shit like that." Roger isn't even 40 and already he needs regular appointments with his physical therapist to keep going some nights. "But I can see us fucking up crowds as old codgers."

"I like the other stuff too", Freddie said. "Studio albums, solo work, collaborations. But this..." He slaps his hand down on the table so hard the beer bottles rattle. "This is it." He takes a deep breath. "And I want to go back to America. I'm not letting those fuckers get away so easily."

"Fuck yes!" Roger jumps up and pumps his fist. Then he hugs Freddie from behind and plants a smacking smooch right on his cheek.

Freddie rolls his eyes. "Yes, I love you too, dear", he mumbles. Then he freezes.

And how ridiculous is it that after all this time, after everything they've done, those words should seem like such a big thing. But they never said them to each other, always shied away at the last moment. But shied away from what, exactly?

Freddie begins to wriggle out of his grasp and no way is Roger going to let him hang like that. "You too", he whispers and tightens his embrace. He closes his eyes and wills Freddie to understand. Forever and ever if you'll have me.

Finally, Freddie relaxes against him. They're good. They're alright.

Eventually, Roger opens his eyes and takes a step back. Brian and John are suddenly intensely focused on the fruit tray, arguing over the best bits.

"Right", Roger says and walks over to the door that separates them from their friends and family. "Let's drink to that."
So, I couldn't quite fix things for Brian, but I hope that with Queen in full go-getting mode and his band-mates in place to help, Brian will have a bit of an easier time with everything that's going to happen in the next year.

I don't really have time for more today, so I decided to cut myself some slack and post the two remaining chapters tomorrow. Lets hope I'm in a state to do so ;)

Alright chaps, we're nearing the end. This is the bonus chapter I mentioned earlier: just a brief lengthy porny interlude with D/s elements before the actual last chapter. It has absolutely no added nutritional value and is not relevant to the plot. So skip or enjoy, whatever floats your boat.

(For various reasons, this chapter has largely been written on my phone. I caught a huge number of really embarrassing auto-corrections - my phone is sort of prudish - but if there are any left, please feel free to point them out to me and I'll correct them immediately.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Oh, there you are, darling!" Freddie wraps a hand around Roger's waist and pulls him in. "Where've you been? We had to make do with Phil Collins for the jam session."

Roger sees Phil near the impromptu stage, chatting with John, Marlene and Anita Dobson. "And Samantha Fox on vocals, or so I've heard."

"Hm, she's a firecracker, that one. Come on, I'll introduce you."

Now, that is awfully tempting.

"Hmm", Roger says, as if he's actually thinking about it. "You two had fun then?" They're standing in front of a huge potted plant, so he gets away with sneaking a hand under the hem of Freddie's shirt, trailing his fingers up and down his spine.

Freddie's voice goes a little husky. "I have a weakness for Page Three girls, it turns out - ouch!"

Roger's dug in his fingernails. "None of that", he whispers, lips brushing against the shell of Freddie's ear.

Because Roger has plans. It was a risk, leaving Freddie unattended at the party, as you never know in what state you're going to find him when you come back. He's scaled back on the drugs and it's been ages since Roger saw him completely wasted, but it's the end of tour party, so you never know. But he looks relatively sober - kept busy singing and flirting with busty 20-year-olds, it looks like.

"Actually, there's something I want to show you."

"What is it?"

"It's a surprise."

"Another? I barely survived your first one, I really don't know if I can take another." But he's grinning fondly and lets himself be pulled to his feet. "Are you going to serenade me again", he asks as Roger pulls him along.
Roger ignores him. He leads him away from the party, to the elevator. The attendant inside wears nothing but a short skirt and green body paint. She offers them a glass of champagne, but Roger compliments her out of the elevator. "I'll send it back up", he promises.

The ride three flights down only takes a couple of seconds, but Roger makes the most of it, walking Freddie backwards until his back hits the wall with a thud. He slides one hand into Freddie's hair, the other to the crease of his thigh, and sucks a kiss to that point directly underneath his jaw that has him melt against him.

"Alright", Freddie says when the door opens with a ding and Roger leads him out. "I think I like the way your brain works, darling. A bit single-minded, sometimes, but…"

They've just turned a corner and the hallway is completely empty, so Roger shuts him up with a deep and dirty open-mouthed kiss. "Stop talking", he whispers. He doesn't mind the talking, but Freddie likes to be told to shut up. Not that he complies.

"Hmmm, I really hope there's a bed at the end of this little excursion", Freddie mumbles as he lets himself be pulled along by Roger. "Or a car. Or a broom closet, I'm not particular."

Roger stops in front of a door and pulls out his keys. It's a bit difficult opening a door when someone keeps breathing down your neck and trying to open your fly from behind. It's also kind of fun, so he's being extra clumsy, until Freddie growls with impatience.

Finally they stagger inside the rented apartment. The huge windows offer a splendid view of the city lights, but they don't spare a glance for that.

Roger pushes Freddie into the nearest vertical surface without much ceremony. Freddie buries his fingers in Roger's shirt and holds on to him. "What are you going to do to me", he asks as his sharp teeth make contact with Roger's neck. He loves it when Roger tells him. In detail.

"Really want me to spoil the surprise?"

"I want you to spoil me."

"Hmm, how about the other way round?" Roger pulls back a little so he can look at Freddie. "This has been our last show for a couple of months. I don't plan to go near my drums for a good long while. No sitting required at all those next few days."

As he watches the understanding dawn on Freddie's face, his heart is beating faster, excitement thrumming through his body.

Freddie's eyes drop to Roger's lips. He pulls Roger back into him, capturing his mouth in a searing kiss, tugging clumsily at his shirt in a way that screams 'off, off!'

So that's a yes. Not that Roger seriously expected a no, but there had been that niggling voice at the back of his mind...

Suddenly, Freddie pulls back and takes a step aside, breaking free of Roger's hold.

"What...?"

Freddie holds up one hand. "Don't move." He takes a couple of deep breaths, chest rising and falling. "God, you..." He shakes his head. Then he sets his jaw. "I need a shower."

"But you showered after the show!"
"And then I played another, impromptu show at the party. I'm disgusting."

This is getting a bit annoying. The last thing Roger wants right now is to interrupt the flow they've got going. "I don't mind." Seriously, they had sex in much, much worse states.

"I do", Freddie says and walks in the direction of the bathroom. "I won't be long, promise."

Roger flops down onto the sofa. Why is Freddie being so fussy all of a sudden? Roger hates waiting around. He's done everything Dino's book recommends to prepare - well, most things, he draws the line at complimenting himself aloud for how 'beautifully he's coming along' - and he just wants to get going already.

But Freddie's taking ages under the shower. Doubts work their sneaky tendrils into Roger's thoughts. Doesn't Freddie want to do this after all? He likes doing it from time to time in general, Roger knows that well enough. But maybe it's not what he wants from their dynamic? Maybe he wants to keep this one sided?

This is such a stupid, stupid idea. It's not even that Roger particularly wants to do it. The prep exercises hadn't been unpleasant, but not exactly thrilling either. It's just... well, he thought Freddie wanted it and that's reason enough to give it a try. If it sucks, at least then they know and can put the topic to rest.

But apparently Freddie doesn't, if he needs that much time under the shower to get himself in the mood. He could have just said. It's not like Roger's forcing him. In fact Roger is trying to do him a favour, but all he's getting in return is...

The bathroom door opens and Freddie strides out in nothing but a towel. Roger is about to snap at him when he gets a look at his face. His skin is pink from the hot water, his hair wet and sticking up.

And the moustache is gone.

"Oh", Roger says.

Freddie smirks. "'Not with that horrible thing on your face'", he quotes.

"I got used to it", Roger mumbles. It's been two years since he last saw Freddie like this, after filming the ballet part for Break Free. He's got some good memories of that night.

Freddie shakes his head. "Lets do this right."

"Yes", Roger says, slowly coming out of his trance. Here he was, gearing up for a fight, and then it turns out Freddie's just trying to be a good boyfriend. Roger cocks his head. "Bring me flowers as well?" Then he immediately holds up his hands. "If you attempt any kind of 'deflowering' pun at any time tonight, I'll head back upstairs and try my luck with Sam Fox."

Freddie stands there and crosses his arms. "She made a pass at me, you know?"

Roger gets up from the sofa. "Did she?" It doesn't matter whether she did or not, but it gives Roger an excuse to get all stern and grumpy.

"Mhm. Quite tempting."

Roger walks slowly towards him. "Quite."
"Who knows what would have happened if you had come five minutes later." Freddie's expression is pure challenge. 'Now, what are you going to do about it?'

Roger comes to a halt about a foot apart and just looks at him. Freddie fidgets, licks his lips. After a few seconds he rolls his eyes and leans in for a kiss, putting his hands on Roger's waist.

"Stand still", Roger says, with just a hint of sharpness in his voice. Then he waits to see how Freddie reacts. If he doesn't want that tonight, he'll say so or shake his head. If he just keeps on prodding, that means Roger's going to have to try harder.

Freddie's hands fall away. He stands straight and looks at Roger to see what happens next.

Good. Roger nods and reaches out a hand to trace Freddie's face. The ridge of his eyebrows. His cheekbones, still flushed from the shower. His sharp, slightly irregular nose.

Freddie's breath hitchs lightly. He loves it when all of Roger's attention is on him.

Roger runs his fingers over the freshly shaved skin under Freddie's nose. He doesn't have much of a tan, so the skin is only marginally lighter there. Maybe it's just because he's focusing on it so much, but without the moustache his upper lip looks even more obscenely plumped up than usual. He traces his thumb over it, pressing in just a little.

Freddie lips part and he tries to catch Roger's thumb between his sharp teeth.

Unhurried, Roger places his left hand on Freddie's cheek, then plants the slap with his right. "I said still."

It hasn't been particularly hard, but Freddie gasps and squeezes his eyes shut. There's a flush creeping up over his chest. Oh yes, they're on the right track. He explores Freddie's beautiful, expressive face a bit more, uninterrupted this time, until he's looked his fill.

Then he rests one hand lightly on the side of his neck and draws back a little. "Go to the bedroom, love. Have a look in the bedside drawer. See if there's anything you like."

The last part is mainly for show. There's not much in that drawer, and Freddie likes all of it.

Roger watches Freddie's towel-clad form disappear into the bedroom and takes a deep breath. He hasn't really planned it like this. Granted, you can never truly plan these things, not with Freddie. And it's not high on his list of strengths either, so usually they just don't bother.

When he comes into the bedroom a minute later, Freddie's dumped the contents of the drawer haphazardly onto the bedspread: Lube, leather cuffs, silver nipple clamps. Roger would have been surprised if the outcome had been anything else.

Freddie has also whipped off his towel and Roger can see his cock hanging heavy between his legs. Not quite hard yet, but definitely interested. Freddie stands there, one eyebrow quirked as he waits to see what Roger is going to do next.

There are a number of things he could do. Chide him for being so careless with the toys or spank him for losing the towel without asking. Maybe that's what Freddie is angling for. Thing is, there aren't really any fixed rules. If Roger decides he wants to slap Freddie around, he'll find a reason. And if that's not what Freddie wants, he'll let him know.

It's probably not what Melissa teaches in her classes, but it works.
As Roger slowly walks towards Freddie, he still hasn't decided what he's going to do. He's going to find out soon enough. And seeing that little bit of uncertainty on Freddie's face as he tries to work it out adds an extra thrill. When Roger's close enough, he finds that all he wants to do, really, is wrap his arms around Freddie and pull him into a kiss, so that's exactly what he does. Freddie startles first, but then he melts against Roger with a small sigh. He winds his fingers into his hair, a little bit too tight like he always does, so that a shower of hot-and-cold-sparks rains down Roger's neck. He sucks Freddie's now smooth upper lip into his mouth, worries it with his tongue and his teeth until - when he finally pulls back - it looks red and swollen and completely maddening, so he immediately has to dive in again.

Freddie's fingernails dig into the back of his neck now, a sure sign that he wants to move on. And Roger's just ready for that. He moves his mouth to Freddie's ear and sucks at the small hollow underneath it. Freddie writhes against him, his naked cock rubbing against the front of Roger's jeans. Roger puts one hand on Freddie's shoulder and pushes down lightly. "Suck me", he whispers and when he takes away the arm he's still got slung around Freddie's waist, Freddie folds like a house of cards.

Roger is transfixed by the sight of that smooth, lush upper lip wrapped around the head of his cock. He runs a finger over the skin, which is a bit stretched now, and Freddie moans around him. He slides his mouth further down, until it almost touches the fist with which he's holding Roger steady, then hollows his cheek, increasing the pressure and slowly slides back up. "Hm, fuck, yeah, like that", Roger whispers. It's hard to keep his eyes open, but he's not going to look away from that spectacular sight.

After a couple of minutes, Roger feels a hint of teeth rasping along the underside of his cock. "Careful." Freddie's getting a little sloppy. Roger really, really doesn't like teeth, not even a hint of it as a tease.

It happens again, and this time Roger puts a hand on Freddie's cheek and pulls out completely, resting the tip of his cock against that damnably smooth mouth. Freddie looks up at him and the sight has Roger scrambling for his last remains sanity. "I said careful", he says as sternly as he can manage, which is probably not very.

Slowly, Freddie pulls him in again, never taking his eyes off Roger's face. And then, just as the ridge below the head goes in, the teeth are there again. Freddie quirks an eyebrow at him. So what are you going to do about it? Then, he leans his head to the side, so his cheek is resting more firmly against Roger's palm.

He's asking for it. The bastard is goading him, and Roger's going to give it to him, because that's what he always does, isn't it?

The angle is different and he takes extra care with his aim, what with his cock being only inches away. But when his hand comes down, it lands squarely in the middle of Freddie's cheek with a satisfying smack. "Open up", he whispers and Freddie's eyes fall closed as he complies.

It's a sweet and dirty back and forth, half Freddie moving on his own, half Roger guiding him along. The slaps are light, not much more than a pat really, but Freddie's breathing heavily, and every time Roger's palm makes contact with Freddie's reddening cheek, a bolt of lust surges through his body, wanting him to take more and faster and now. It's tempting, it's so tempting to just keep going and see if Freddie lets him come all over his face (that freshly shaved, smooth, beautiful face), but no. Not tonight.
He pulls out completely, panting and closer to coming than he wants to be at this stage. "Get on the bed", he rasps.

Freddie manages to look both smug and dazed, which is completely infuriating. Before he lies back, he takes the clamps, cuffs and lube off the bed and presses them into Roger's hands, like he's worried Roger might forget about them.

Roger quickly thinks through the logistics. He puts the lube on the dresser and fixes the cuffs to the head of the bed, leaving the loops loose and open. Freddie raises his arms, but Roger stops him. "Not yet." He takes the clamps and tightens them around Freddie's nipples. He tugs carefully on them to see if they hold.

"Tighter", Freddie says.

"No, this is going to take a while."

"I can take it."

"Never said you couldn't", Roger says and leaves the pressure exactly as it is.

Freddie looks like he's going to argue, but Roger quickly sits back and strips off his shirt, which always distracts him. By the time the rest of his clothes have joined the shirt in a crumpled heap on the floor, Freddie's complaints about the clamps are quite forgotten. He crawls over Freddie and lets his tongue flick first over the right, then the left nipple, very lightly. "We should get you rings one of these days", he whispers as he closes his teeth around one clamp and tugs slightly, "gold rings with a chain to hook between them. Would you like that?"

"Hmmmm." Freddie arches up into him. His cock is hot and heavy against Roger's thigh.

"You would, wouldn't you." They've been talking about that from time to time, just as they've been talking about getting Roger some tattoos. One of these days, they might actually get around to it.

But now, it's time to move on. He shuffles a bit higher on his knees and bends down to kiss Freddie. "Open me up", he whispers against his lips. He's done most of it beforehand, but that feels like it was hours ago.

Freddie blinks up at him, like he completely forgot where this whole thing is supposed to be going. Roger raises his eyebrows expectantly. They can still change course, if Freddie's already too far down another road mentally. But then he puts one hand on Roger's hip and slides the other between his legs, cradling his balls for a moment. It feels good, really good, so good that Roger just wants him to keep going for a while, but then Freddie's finger slide further back.

Roger concentrates on staying relaxed as Freddie slowly pushes a finger tip in. "Now I know what you've been doing down here all this time", Freddie says, with a chuckle. He reaches for the lube on the night stand, dribbles some of it on his fingers and quickly pushes in again, adding a second one soon after.

"I know how lazy you are", Roger mumbles. God, this feels weird. Not bad, but... yeah, weird. He distracts himself by brushing his thumb over one of Freddie's nipples, already a bit swollen, and observing the sounds he's making. His upper body is twisting, left and right, straining up against him and then pressing back into the mattress, like he can't decide whether to get away or get closer. Roger wets one finger and dabs the nipple with it, then blows on it. Freddie groans and pushes his fingers in deep and Roger gasps at the sensation. "Go on", he whispers, when Freddie stops, worried he might have done something wrong.
They keep going like this for a few minutes, Freddie working Roger open and Roger making him curse and whine with attention to his sensitive nipples.

Then Freddie's fingers are gone. "Now", he pants, head thrown back and eyes closed. "We have to do it now, I'll die if we don't."

Roger grins. Freddie's always so dramatic. "Hands in the cuffs then", he says.

Freddie slides his hands through the leather loops, fingers closing around the chains. Roger thinks about closing the cuffs, but then decides against it. That way, if something goes wrong, he won't have to worry about freeing Freddie first. And the cuffs are largely symbolic anyway. Freddie mainly likes to have something to hold on to.

Roger sits back a little, and enjoys the view for a moment. Freddie's lying on his back, but he also constantly in motion, straining against the cuffs, straightening his legs, rubbing the back of his head against the pillow. His nipples have gone red and a bit puffy, just as his lips that he keeps biting and his cock...

...his cock is hard an leaking and just as worryingly big as the last time Roger's seen it. He takes a deep breath to steady his nerves.

"We don't have to."

"I would settle for a nice long blowjob."

"Yeah, you wish, you lazy sod", Roger growls as he covers Freddie's cock in a generous helping of lube.

And then there's really nothing else he can do to draw this out. He steadies Freddie's cock at the base with one hand and positions himself above it. Getting the angle right is a bit fiddly, but he's done it that way often enough with Freddie to know what to aim for. And then the tip of Freddie's cock is right there, catching on the rim of his hole. "Don't move", Roger hisses and puts one hand heavily of Freddie's chest. "I mean it."

Freddie nods, his eyes screwed shut, hands clenching and unclenching around the chains of the cuffs.

Roger lowers himself fractionally. Christ on a bike, it feels absolutely enormous. He breathes deeply and focuses on the tips he remembers from the book. Stay calm, bear down, relax, take your time. Great tip that, 'relax'. How the fuck is he supposed to that?

He tilts his hip a little and before he knows what's happening the head has slipped in. "Fuck."

A warm, steadying hand rubs up and down his thigh. "Are you alright?" Freddie's voice sounds strained, like he's in pain too.

"It's enough", Freddie says. "We can stay like that and just... oh bloody hell."

Roger sits up a bit strighter, then lowers himself a fraction more. It's feels like he's just taken the entire bloody thing, but when he checks with his hand he realises it can't have been more than an inch. The feeling is intense, overwhelming, and can't really be measured in terms of good or bad. But it doesn't feel like he's hurting himself, so he does it again. And again.
By the time Freddie's finally all the way in, Roger's drenched in sweat and his thighs are shaking. His whole body is working to accept it, muscles straining, sweat dripping down his face. "How do you do this", he pants. "How does anyone do this?"

Freddie's staring up at him, slack-jawed and with eyes huge as saucers. "Do you have any idea what you look like right now?"

Extremely pornographic, he thinks, and probably like my head's about to explode. Roger shifts a little, trying to get used to that thing inside him. "Give me a minute", he rasps and sways his hips a little left and right. Freddie lets his head fall back, squeezing his eyes shut. The fingers of the hand he's still got on Roger's thigh dig into the skin. He's been holding himself still for so long his muscles must be screaming at him to move. Roger knows what it feels like to be surrounded by the tight heat of another body, how the need for friction can make it feel impossible to hold still even a second longer. And yet he does it. Because Roger said so.

It's that thought that gives him back that little bit of control he needs. Freddie's doing this for him. That impatient, impulsive man who won't sit still even for the five minute it takes to answer some interview questions, is lying there, not moving a muscle although he must want to with every fiber of his being, because Roger said so.

"Hands back in the cuffs", he says and immediately Freddie's arm flies up. Roger leans forward, letting Freddie's cock slide out of him just a little bit. "Move", he says and Freddie groans and slams his hips up.

"Sorry", he whispers and stills again, turning his head to wipe his sweat soaked forehead on his arm. "Sorry."

Roger's glad he didn't give him any more leeway, but damn, the thought that Freddie is fighting so hard (and losing) just to keep himself under control is one huge turn-on. "I said you could", he whispers and braces himself. "Do it again."

Freddie does, thrusting into him in the minimal space that Roger allows. He likes that he can control the depth and the angle and plays with that a bit. Then he reaches for his cock, which feels full and heavy, but isn't completely hard anymore. He gathers up some leftover lube and strokes himself in time with Freddie's thrusts, the way Freddie likes it when they do it like this. And it feels good, the way a hand on his cock always feels good, but it's not... there's no spark, no connection to that part of his brain that usually brings together all those sensations during sex and builds it into something irresistible.

No. He's not going to come like that. But he can still find ways to enjoy this ride.

The muscles in Freddie's arms are standing out, he's straining so hard against the cuffs. His hair is black with sweat and he's panting like he's running a marathon. When Roger brushes his fingers over his nipples again, he almost flies out of his skin.

"Don't make me stop", he whispers. "Please don't. I can't..."

Roger bites his lips and closes his eyes for a minute. Freddie begging him for... whatever, it doesn't matter really, gets him every time. He's tempted to do it, just for a moment, to say stop just to see Freddie comply, just because he said so. But then he just presses a little harder with his thumb. "I won't", he says. "Promise, love." And then, just to temper the sweetness is his voice, in that moment, he flicks his finger hard over one swollen nipple.

Freddie gasps and swears and throws his head back, baring the long column of his throat.
"Are you close", Roger asks and Freddie shakes his head, then nods. "Answer me."

"Fuck!"

Roger doesn't slap him, because he needs one hand to prop himself up and he doesn't dare do it one handed, not in his state anyway. But he puts one hand on Freddie's cheek and presses in suggestively. "Tell me."

Freddie bucks up. "Yes. God, yes. Please, please let me..."

Roger leans back, kneeling up a bit to give Freddie just that little bit more freedom of movement. Then he loosens the screws and pulls the clamps off in one swift movement.

Freddie's face twists and he moans in agony as the blood rushes back into his abused nipples, but at the same time he slams into Roger and then stills and... and Roger can feel his cock pulsing inside him, and he knows that he's done this, that he's made him fall apart like this.

When Freddie has calmed down again, Roger slides off him and... okay, that is really uncomfortable. And weird. And also disgusting.

But there's Freddie, lying spread out like a bloody buffet and that quickly takes Roger's mind off things. He puts one hand on his cock and starts stroking himself, while the other lands on Freddie's thigh. "Can you stay like this a minute longer?" He looks okay, but at times he needs something immediately after, a shower or time alone or a just a hug.

Freddie opens his eyes half-way and nods. With his still swollen cock and his puffy nipples and his hooded eyes and bitten lips he looks like a depraved, ancient god of sin. The sight alone is enough to get Roger's mind back on track and he speeds up the hand on his cock.

"Need a hand", Freddie asks, sounding a bit sluggish.

"Your hands stay exactly where they are", Roger grunts and a spark shoots through him when he sees Freddie's hands tighten around the chain connecting the cuffs.

He comes in long spurts over Freddie's stomach, never taking his eyes off the sight in front of him. Then he just collapses on top of him, letting the bone-deep heaviness in his body take over. God, what a night.

Freddie's hands run up and down the length of his sweat-soaked back. They'll have to move eventually, clean up the mess, take a shower, pull up the blankets around them so they won't get cold. But for now, all that counts is Freddie's strong, beautiful body safely under him and the steady rhythm of his breathing, the lines of warmth his fingers are drawing onto Roger's skin as they drowse off, just for a moment.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year!

The party at the beginning actually happened after the second Wembley show (although I don't think Phil Collins was there). In this timeline, with Freddie happy and healthy and Queen's star only starting to rise again after Wembley, it fits much better here.
Look, Dino's book is back, just as I promised! I'm sorry I didn't write the "Freddie discovers it and shenanigans ensue" scene many of you envisioned. If anyone's interested in picking up that prompt: Feel free!

The Joy of Gay Sex has a whole section on first time bottoming, and while the advice is very sensible, it's also at times hilarious. I had a lot of fun reading the section from Roger's POV, imagining how he's getting simultaneously flustered, turned on and angry as he goes along.
Roger throws his sticks on the ground in frustration. "For fuck's sake, Freddie", he shouts.

They're in the middle of rehearsals for the upcoming tour. It's not going well. It's late and his band mates are fucking morons who can't focus for one bloody minute. One band mate in particular.

Freddie just rolls his eyes and waves him off.

"I'm too old for this shit", Roger grumbles.

Freddie puts a hand on his hip. "You've been saying that for forty years, darling. Or was it fifty?"

"Because you've been a shit for at least that long."

"Count us in again, Rog?" Brian cuts through the squabbling.

They launch into the song again. It's their new single, so they really should get it right, but then Roger misses the cue for the bridge and everything falters. "Dammit", he growls. "Okay, that was me. Sorry."

"Take ten?" John asks and they all sigh in relief.

Roger pushes himself up from his stool with creaking knees and stretches his back. John is fiddling with the wiring of his amp, while Freddie flits about on stage, still energized from the music, the aftereffects of the hip surgery he's had six month ago barely showing. A little further away, Brian - who has fully merged with Isaac Newton sometime in the mid 2010s - goes over some notes with his assistant. When they're done, he pats her on the shoulder and picks up his guitar again, like he just can't help it. He does a variation of Spanish Guitar and grins up at Roger, and just then the strangest feeling comes over him. He can't say whether it's good or bad, but it's enormous and just for a second it takes his breath away. Brian's smile falters and Roger wonders if he feels it too, whatever it is, or if he's just responding to the look on his face.

Late November has always been a weird time for him. He thought it might be the weather, or the awareness of another year almost gone by.

But tonight it's different. Because it all flashes before his eyes again so vividly.

The first year after they were out, when everything they did was newsworthy. The drama with Brian and Anita and the messy divorce it all ended in, how the band pulled together around him. There's the Olympics and the other Olympics and the knighthood and Freddie and him being sappy in their matching morning suits.

His heart aches for Marco and Arturo, who didn't live to see the nineties, and Joe, who Freddie worked so hard to save, even bloody Paul, who deserved a lot but not this. His heart soars when he thinks of Ed, who rose from his deathbed and is still kicking, James who somehow escaped unscathed, of Melissa and Suki, Marlene and Bibi, his godchildren, his nieces and nephews and grand-nieces.

They say that your life flashes before your eyes when you die. But this can't be it, because there's
so much else, so much that's never been. There's Freddie on his death bed and Roger standing before the altar with Dom. There are children he doesn't know and bands he never sang in, utterly mad conversations he never had.

A hand on his back brings him back to the present. "Are you okay", John asks.

There's grief and despair, there's people he's never known who are still so achingly familiar, there's death and birth and the crushing weight of a life never lived. And beyond that there is this infinite lightness.

"Roger?"

He's either as okay as he's ever been in his life, or he's having a stroke. His knees are weak and his head is spinning. It's like this moment when you've taken a new drug and aren't sure whether the trip is going to be a good or a bad one. Scary. Exhilarating. "Just need to sit down a while. I think."

"Roger?" Freddie's face swims into view as he crouches in front of him. "John, what's happening? Why's he looking like that?"

"I don't..."

"I love you", Roger says, and although he must have said it hundreds of times, it's of the utmost importance that he says it now. "I love you so much."

Freddie stares at him, wide-eyed. "Oh my god, are you dying? Roger? John, where is... Don't you dare", he hisses at Roger.

Roger starts giggling. "I'm good. Never been better. Come here." He pulls Freddie down into an awkward hug, and John too, just because he's there.

Roger has no idea why they do it, but they nod at each other, like secret agents at the end of a successful mission. And at that, the feeling ebbs off, leaving only a dizzy shakiness in its wake.

Brian takes a deep breath and pushes himself off the wall, then saunters over to Roger, John and Freddie and the throng of worried people surrounding them. John and Freddie have just managed to struggle free of Roger's iron grip when he arrives.

"Roger, darling, what the ever-loving fuck is going on with you", Freddie demands to know, his hands roaming over his face, his shoulders.

Roger shrugs. He has no idea what to say to him.

"I still think we should call a doctor", John says.

Brian puts his arms around them. John eyes him suspiciously, like all that hugging is getting to him. "I think Roger looks alright."

"You seem awfully jolly as well", Freddie says. His eyes narrow. "Are you two on something?"

"Just happy to be here with you. It's... it's quite amazing, isn't it?"
"50 years", Roger muses. They held an anniversary gig in July, 50 years to the day after their first concert together. There's been a lot of reflection and reminiscing then, but it's only that now Roger feels the impact of those 50 years in his bones. "Half a century, good lord." He feels like he's been gifted with something incredibly precious, something he's not entirely sure he deserves.

Slowly, the frown disappears from Freddie's face. "Ah", he says, his eyes going soft. "Are you being sentimental again, darling?"

"Oh, shut up."

"He's doing that from time to time", Freddie explains to the others, "going all misty eyed at old photos and things like that. Must be his age."

For once, Roger doesn't point out that Freddie's three years older than him, or that every New Years Day he gets out the boxes full of drawings and handicrafts his godchildren made him over the years. He just takes Freddie's hand and squeezes it.

Freddie's dark eyes, made to look even larger by the glasses he started wearing (only in private, of course), bore into his. His expression grows serious, and for a moment, it looks like he's about to say something, but then he just smiles and runs his thumb over the knuckles of Roger's hand.

Then he lets go and takes a step back, breaking the circle. "Enough of this rubbish", he mumbles, which a last squeeze of Roger's hand.

"Oh thank god", John mumbles and Brian elbows him good-naturedly in the ribs.

When they're all in position. Roger picks up his drum sticks, twirls them twice in his hands. “Everyone ready? One, two”, he counts, “One, two, three, four.”

Let's go.

Chapter End Notes

Queen existed for longer, but on July 2nd 1971 they played their first gig in the classic line-up with John on bass.

Right. That’s it. One year of my life. Deep breath.

Thanks to everyone who's been along for this wild journey! It's been exhausting and exhilarating and very, very much worth it. Happy 2020 everyone!

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