



Never Too Late

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance, M-m Romance

Description: Sometimes the only way to protect your heart is to break it before they can.

Finn met the perfect man six months ago. Cillian King is handsome, filthy rich, and has an Irish accent that makes him go weak at the knees. Of late, though, Finn's remembering that if something seems too good to be true, it usually is. Because while he's in it for the long haul, Cillian is more interested in work—and Finn deserves better than to play second fiddle to an advertising agency.

When the opportunity to relocate to Paris lands in his lap, it's a chance for Finn to move on with his life.

New job. New city. New start.

Cillian was supposed to be relieved. He wasn't supposed to turn up on Finn's doorstep with words of regret and promises of doing better if Finn will give him another chance. It's too late for that. Isn't it?

Can a leopard really change its spots? If he can't, Finn doesn't know if he'll be strong enough to walk away twice.

But maybe... just maybe, Cillian's the perfect man, after all.

Never Too Late is an MM second chances dual POV novel featuring 'first' dates in Paris, two men who are meant to know each other, but really don't, cyber sex, a doomed phone, an adopted cat, and a slow burn relationship (this time) that finally gets steamy.

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Part One

Finn

Chapter One

Sex with Cillian King was never anything less than gut-wrenchingly spectacular and today was no exception. He was laughing when he finally lifted his head, the sound a joyous melody that gouged a line into my chest with a blunt knife and waggled it around a bit.

Force of habit had me reaching up to brush a lock of sweat-dampened hair back from his brow. He beat me to it, tucking it behind his ear as he rested his elbows on either side of my head and gazed down at me. “You, Finlay Prescott, were like a man possessed today. What got into you?”

“Are you saying I’m not usually good in bed?”

His lips quirked up at the corners. “I’m saying no such thing. I wouldn’t dare. You’re usually a ten out of ten, but today...” He let out a low whistle. “Today, I’d give you an eleven. At least.”

Eleven out of ten. Cillian was never stingy with compliments. That’s what made the rest so difficult. Words were nothing without actions to back them up. At least that’s what my friend told me every time I spilled my guts about Cillian to them. Talk to him, they said. Tell him what he’s doing wrong.

Yeah, talk to him. They made it sound so easy. And it wasn't like I hadn't tried. I had, on more occasions than I could count. Cillian was always so in demand that interruptions invariably prevented me from speaking.

And if I was honest, I feared being laughed at, of him leveling me with an amused look and asking me what I'd expected when I'd hooked up with the CEO of an international company. He'd started it from the ground up and nurtured it into the hugely successful thing it was today, many of their clients household names. King Enterprises was his baby, his lifeblood, and I was just... Well, I wasn't entirely sure what I was to him.

I'd thought I knew. I'd thought we were heading toward something long-lasting—until a nagging sense of unease had settled in. It had started off as a niggle, something easy enough to ignore. But then it had grown, pushing itself to the forefront of my mind and demanding to know why I was letting someone treat me the way he did.

Cillian bent his head to drop a soft kiss on my lips and I couldn't stop myself from wrapping a hand around the back of his neck to make the kiss last longer. If this was the last time I ever got to kiss him, I wanted to remember it. I let my hand stray down his back as we kissed, following the ridges of Cillian's spine until it turned into the swell of his arse. He had a body most men would kill for, a room converted into a gym in his swanky Knightsbridge flat at least partially to thank for that.

Thoughts of Cillian's flat reminded me we weren't there. Neither were we at my more modest flat where, in contrast to Cillian's gym, I didn't have so much as an exercise bike, never mind a spare room to stick it in.

I rolled my head to the side to take in the view. Even though the alcove hid the bed where we lay, I could still see the corner of Cillian's huge mahogany desk. The bed was for when he pulled such long days that going home wasn't worth it. He had

everything here: clothes, a shower, a small fridge. None of those things stopped this from being his office. And the sad truth of the matter was that we'd had sex here far more times than we ever had in either of our respective flats, Cillian frequently squeezing me in between appointments. I let out a hiss as he reached down to pull out of me so he could get rid of the condom. "Sorry," he said.

"For what?"

A slight furrow appeared on his brow. "For hurting you."

Now, or in the past few weeks? Physically? Or emotionally? I didn't say any of that. That conversation had been my whole reason for coming here today, but starting with such an antagonistic statement would do nothing but put Cillian on the defensive. We'd never argued. Probably because arguments required spending more time in each other's company than we did. Whatever the reason, I intended to keep that record intact. I'd been silent too long, but Cillian gave no sign of having noticed, already off the bed and extracting a fresh suit from the cupboard where he kept spare clothes.

I swung my legs off the bed, sweat still drying on my skin. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Hmm...?" Trousers on and shirt buttoned, Cillian had a look of concentration on his face as he knotted his tie in the mirror.

I started putting on my own clothes. "I've been thinking of making some changes. In my life, I mean."

That got his attention. Cillian's hands fell away from his tie as he swung to face me. "Like what?"

I took a mental deep breath. "Lately, I've been feeling..." I paused as the phone on

his desk trilled. Maybe he'd ignore it this time and I'd get to finish what I was saying.

Cillian held his hand up. "Hold that thought for a second. I have to take this. I'm expecting an important call."

And there it was in a nutshell. Further proof, if any were needed, that the conclusion I'd reached in the last few days was correct. There would always be a call more important than what I had to say. And if not a call, a meeting. Or a client. I came bottom of the list, and I wanted... No, I needed to be top of that list. Not all the time. I wasn't that selfish. But at least sometimes, and I didn't think my expectations were that ridiculous. But I couldn't recall a single occasion where he'd put me first. "Cillian," I said, not even trying to keep the pleading out of my voice. "If I could just..."

He continued reaching for the phone and brought it to his ear. "One minute, sweetheart."

The casually dropped "sweetheart" was like an arrow to the heart. Would he have stopped in the middle of fucking me if the phone had rung then? I wished I could say with any certainty he wouldn't have, but I wasn't sure. I finished dressing as he conversed quietly with whoever was on the other end of the line, only the occasional word reaching me with Cillian's back to me. I glared at it, wondering if he'd sense it and turn. He didn't.

"Yeah, I'll hold," he said, his voice louder. He did turn then, his gaze flitting from my fully clothed state to the still rumpled sheets. If he thought I was acting like his maid and making the bed before I left, then he was sadly mistaken. "It's been too long," he said, his gaze still on the sheets. "Two days is too long."

"Four days, actually," I corrected.

Whether it was the waspishness in my tone or the fact that I rarely corrected him on the differing way time passed in his world compared to mine, it had him frowning again. “Really?”

“Really,” I said. “We were supposed to have dinner on Wednesday, but you cancelled because something came up.”

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Cillian grimaced. “That’s right. We had to reshoot the advert for one of our biggest clients. It was an emergency.”

“An advertising emergency,” I muttered. “Someone should have called an ambulance instead of you.”

Cillian frowned. “Sorry? I didn’t catch that.”

I sure was making him frown a lot today. I shook my head before bending over to tie my shoe. “Nothing.”

“We’ll have dinner tonight!” Cillian announced. “I’ll take you to your favorite restaurant.”

With both shoes now tied, I straightened, a small kernel of hope growing in my chest. Perhaps over dinner we’d talk. I could ask Cillian to turn his phone off. The world wouldn’t end if clients and business associates couldn’t reach him for an hour or two. “My favorite restaurant?”

“The one in Covent Garden we went to a couple of weeks ago.”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. I knew the restaurant he meant, and it was far from my favorite. If I had to come up with one word to describe it, I’d go for pretentious, most of the food so tiny a morsel that I’d left the restaurant almost as hungry as when I’d arrived. I racked my brain for what had made Cillian think I liked it so much and came up blank. Still, it was spending time with Cillian that mattered. Whether that was in Burger King, or somewhere that cost considerably more. I

opened my mouth to tell him dinner would be nice, but didn't get so much as the first syllable out before Cillian swore under his breath.

He gave me an apologetic look and I already knew what was coming before he spoke. I knew because it had happened many times before. "I've just remembered I can't tonight. I promised to sit in on the new campaign and give them my input. Sorry. We'll go tomorrow night."

And then tomorrow night, it would be something else. I couldn't do it anymore. There was a time to admit defeat, and this was it. Cillian wasn't going to change, and the talk would never happen.

I turned away as Cillian resumed talking on the phone, the foibles of his Irish accent becoming more pronounced in a way that usually made me smile. I had no smiles in me today as I stared at the sheets and replayed the way we'd fucked like bunnies only a few minutes ago.

Despite my earlier vow that I'd do no such thing, I moved to smooth and straighten the sheets. It wasn't making the bed in my mind; it was erasing the memory that I'd come here to talk and, in my weakness, ended up in bed with Cillian instead.

"Do that," Cillian said as he hung up the phone.

I seized my chance. "I'm thinking of changing jobs."

"Yeah?" Cillian didn't bother to hide his surprise. "I thought you liked what you do."

"I did. I do."

"Talk to Amrita."

“Amrita?” Amrita was Cillian’s right-hand woman. Part personal assistant, part confidante. If it wasn’t for her being female and Cillian being gay, I might have wondered about the two of them given how close they were. “Why would I speak to Amrita?”

“Tell her what you’re looking for and she’ll sort something out for you. She has contacts in numerous fields. She’ll talk to them. Get you an interview. Grease the wheels, so to speak.”

“I don’t need her to—”

The phone rang again, Cillian snatching it up and offering a greeting before I got a chance to protest. Not that it would have made the slightest bit of difference. I studied him as he embarked on a conversation, his handsome features animated. Had he always been such a bad listener? I suspected he had and I just hadn’t wanted to see it.

Apart from the sex, this ‘relationship’ had been a car crash from the start. I’d thought I was a boyfriend on my way to being more. More fool me. Cillian didn’t have time for a boyfriend. He didn’t have time for anything except a fuck buddy, so that’s the category he’d neatly filed me under. And the frustrating thing was that I’d let him. What did I really know about him beyond what he did for a job, what his flat looked like, and what he liked to eat when he went to a restaurant?

Six months, and it was all surface level. What did that say about me? That all I needed was a hard body, good looks, and expensive gifts to fall in love? Because, despite his many faults, I’d fallen hard for Cillian King. It was just that sometimes that wasn’t enough. I’d learned that the hard way.

With nausea bubbling in my gut at my own naivety, I retrieved my jacket from where Cillian had thrown it in his rush to strip me out of my clothes. How long ago had that been? Ten minutes? Less? Now I came to think about it with this new spirit of

enlightened honesty, sex always happened in a rush. Where was the extended foreplay? Where was the basking in the afterglow? If Cillian felt an ounce of what I felt for him, he'd be clearing his schedule for the rest of the day.

He was still talking on the phone, the sound nothing but background noise over the whirring of my brain as I beat myself up for being a doormat. My steps were automatic as I headed for the door, the path to outside clear in my head. I just had to get there. Fresh air would help. And not looking at Cillian. Looking at him would feed the tiny seed of doubt, the one that kept telling me to give it more time, that questioned what harm a couple more weeks would do when it had already been six months?

"Finn?"

My name was said with an air of confusion. I fought against the urge to keep walking as I turned with a bright smile on my face. "Yeah?"

"Were you going to leave without saying goodbye?"

I gestured at the phone still in Cillian's hand. "You were busy. I didn't want to interrupt." My voice sounded flat, like every iota of emotion had been squeezed out of me.

Cillian must have heard it too, his face contorting into the third frown caused by me in the space of only a few minutes. Not having me in his life would be far better for his complexion. Too much time spent in my company and he'd end up with premature wrinkles. I almost laughed at the rather bizarre thought. I was the human equivalent of whatever the opposite to Botox was. Perhaps Cillian could come up with an advertising campaign for me. Used too much Botox? Face too expressionless? Spend some time with Finlay Prescott and he'll reverse the effects in no time. How would it work? Would I have to move in with them? Given there was only one of me,

I'd have to charge a hell of a lot for the service.

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“I’m never too busy for you.” I did laugh then, Cillian’s frown deepening. “Are you alright?”

How to answer that when I was about as far from alright as it was possible to be? Maybe if I said no, this would be when we talked. Only, there was still someone on the other end of that phone. Someone who presumably could hear every word we said. And I no longer had the stomach for it. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded, my throat thick. Clearing my throat helped. Enough that I could manage words. “I need to go. I have a...” Every single activity that had ever existed deserted me. “Yeah...” I spun on my heel and headed for the door.

“I’ll call you tonight. We’ll talk then.”

“Sure!” Despite the breeziness in my voice, my fingers had a slight tremble to them as I pulled the door open. Amrita raised her head from her desk outside, her expression knowing. One look at my face and it changed, though. “Are you alright, Finn?”

I forced a smile. “Never been better.”

She didn’t look convinced. “If you need to talk, I have time. We could go for a coffee. There’s a nice little place around the corner.”

I shook my head. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

“Well... you know where I am if you change your mind.”

My exit from the building from that point on passed in a blur until I was out in the fresh air I'd craved so much. Needing to put some distance between me and Cillian, I walked a block before sagging against the wall of a building. A bank? A baker's? An undertaker's. It could have been any of them for the amount of notice I took. Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I stared at the screen for a few seconds before calling a number.

Jules answered with the name of the company on the third ring, his French accent thick.

“It's Finlay,” I said. “Finlay Prescott. I've had time to think about your job offer.”

“Oh?”

I let out a slow breath. “If I haven't kept you hanging on for too long and it still stands, I'd like to accept.”

“It still stands. When can you start?”

“As soon as possible.” My words came out in a rush. “I don't know how long these things usually take.”

“I'll speak to HR and we can get things rolling. They'll email the contract to you this afternoon. We'll help you with arrangements on this end as much as we can.”

“Great.”

“We look forward to welcoming you to Paris, Finlay. I'm sure you'll add a lot to our team.”

Once I'd said goodbye and hung up, I leaned my head back against the rough brick to contemplate what I'd just set in motion. Although, that wasn't quite true, was it? I'd set it in motion a couple of weeks ago when I'd applied for the job on a whim and gone through with the online interview. My defense, if questioned, would be that I'd never expected to get it. And when they offered me the job, I still planned to refuse it. Leaving my friends and moving to Paris was an enormous step. Except, I'd just accepted it. And once I signed that contract, my decision would be final.

No more London.

No more friends.

No more Cillian King.

And that was the driving force behind it. The only way to ensure a clean break where he couldn't convince me otherwise was to put space between us. I figured two hundred and eighty-two miles should be enough.

True to Jules' word, the contract came through within a couple of hours. I downloaded it, but left it on my computer screen without signing it, spending a nervy evening staring at my phone and waiting for it to ring. It stayed stubbornly silent, Cillian's assurance that he would call me coming to nothing and not hurting any less for expecting it. Only once the minute hand had ticked into the following day did I electronically sign the contract and press the button that sent it winging its way to Paris. I'd waited for Cillian and he'd let me down. Again.

Before going to bed, I deleted all the photos I had of Cillian. I didn't have many—photos required the subject to stand still long enough to take them. After ten minutes of weighing everything up and going through every eventuality, all of them seeming to end with me caving in to giving him another chance if I saw him or spoke to him, I blocked his number. Then I called my closest friend and asked if I could

stay with her so Cillian wouldn't know where to find me. It might be the coward's way out, but I didn't trust myself when it came to Cillian King.

Chapter Two

My first few weeks in Paris were a godsend in not giving me time to think. There were new work colleagues to get to know, most of them thankfully speaking proficient enough English that I didn't have to fall back on my GCSE French. I'm sure they were grateful I wasn't asking them where the train station was, or telling them how many brothers or sisters I had, and what I liked to do at the weekend.

There was my little flat on Rue Fizeau to make feel like home, Jules apologizing more than once for how cramped the accommodation he'd sorted out for me was. He'd only stopped when I'd explained that London was much the same with living spaces, and that if I had room to swing a cat, I wouldn't know what to do with it. That, and I'd have to get a cat. Although, there was a mangy-looking ginger stray with one ear missing and only half a tail that hung about outside the building that I was tempted to try it with.

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The local area where I lived needed exploration, Jules just as apologetic about my flat not being more central. I didn't mind. It meant the neighborhood was quieter, the brasserie on the corner of my street always having empty tables available whenever I went in, which I doubted would have been the case smack bang in the middle of the Latin Quarter.

Gradually, though, I'd settled in, growing accustomed to the different methods used here in my data analysis job. I'd added enough knick-knacks, cushions, and plants to my flat that it felt like home. And I was slowly adjusting to the cultural differences between Paris and London, of which there were many. Settling in had meant I'd run out of excuses to spend time outside work with my new colleagues, which was how I'd found myself in a cocktail bar tonight when I was more of a beer man, sipping something shocking pink, and sandwiched between Genevieve and Laurent.

"You have sad eyes," Laurent said once our colleagues had dragged Genevieve onto the dancefloor and we were left alone. "Like a man who has suffered recent heartbreak." It was too close to the mark not to pack a punch. "May I ask what her name is?"

I eyed Laurent over the rim of my glass, the pink concoction surprisingly tasty once I'd gotten used to how sweet it was. I had my suspicions, although I couldn't put my finger on why, that if not gay, Laurent was at least bisexual. Maybe it was his gaze lingering overlong on a few passing men. Even if he wasn't, I had no intention of starting my time in Paris with a monumental lie that would only get more difficult to keep as time passed. "It's a him, not a her," I said quietly.

"Ah!" His lips curved up at one corner as he held his glass, Laurent's cocktail a green

color that made me think of cartoon toxic waste, toward mine. “Men are bastards. Are they not?”

I clinked my glass against his. Not because I believed in the sentiment—Cillian hadn’t been a bastard; he just hadn’t been present in our relationship—but because I appreciated the show of solidarity.

“This man,” Laurent asked carefully with his head tipped to one side, “he dumped you and broke your heart?”

I shook my head. “I dumped him.”

Laurent’s eyebrows rose so high they disappeared beneath his fringe. “But he is the reason you came here, no?” At my nod, he made a noise of consideration and studied me, his dark eyes solemn. “And how did he react to you dumping him?”

I bit back on the honest answer of ‘since my phone can no longer take calls from him, I don’t know.’ I’d only returned to my flat to pack, during which I’d stationed a friend at the window in case of any surprise visits. There hadn’t been one. He hadn’t turned up at my workplace either. Within ten days I’d been gone from both, my place of employment happy to waive a proper notice period when they were making cutbacks, anyway. Paying another three weeks’ worth of rent in London had seemed like a small price to pay for getting out of there before Cillian could track me down and demand answers. Or even worse, before I realized he hadn’t bothered. “I doubt he noticed,” I said, the cryptic comment triggering another dramatic rise of Laurent’s eyebrows.

“Tell me about him,” he said. And to my surprise, I did, the two of us working our way through a disconcerting number of cocktails while I purged myself of everything Cillian. Laurent grimaced in all the right places and proved himself to be the good listener my ex-lover had never been. After a few attempts at coaxing us back into the

group, the rest of our colleagues gave up, leaving us to our deep and meaningful conversation while they danced and had fun.

By the time I'd run out of things to say, neither of us was sober. It was just us now, everyone else having moved on to somewhere that stayed open later. It seemed like the natural order of things after baring my soul and making a new friend to lean forward and press my lips to Laurent's. After all, he was extremely handsome, and I was far too drunk to give more than a fleeting thought to the complications when we worked together.

It took longer than it should have to work out that there was only one person involved in the kiss, that while Laurent might not have pushed me off, he was only humoring me. "No," he said when I pulled back, my cheeks burning with mortification.

"No?"

He shook his head with a slight smile. "I have a policy not to get involved with people who are still in love with someone else."

The words stung like someone had taken a branding iron and burned them into my skin. "I'm not still in love with him."

"You are," Laurent said, his words gentle and without censure. "But that's okay. These things take time. You did the right thing by leaving."

"Did I?" Sober, I would never have admitted to having doubts about the decision I'd made. But, in my drunken state, all my barriers had crumbled.

Laurent held his mostly empty cocktail glass up in a toast. "You did. Cillian King sounds like a prize..." He thought for a minute. "Fils de pute!"

“Fils de pute?” I questioned, no doubt butchering the pronunciation. I couldn’t avoid hearing French everywhere and was learning it, but I wasn’t the world’s best student, and I assumed Laurent’s words weren’t in any phrase book.

“Son of a bitch,” he translated.

“Ah. Not really. He just...” I drained the last remnants of my drink, a wave of tiredness hitting me. “He didn’t want the same things I did. I wanted a life partner, someone to come home to, and he wanted...” I frowned at the question I’d never really asked myself before. What had Cillian wanted? “I don’t know. A convenient fuck, I guess. Someone who’d turn up at his workplace looking for him and he could do between appointments. I’m over it.”

Laurent’s gaze was too searching to hold for more than a few seconds before I had to look away. “You’re not, and that’s fine,” he said. “But you will be once I’m finished with you. It’s going to be my job to introduce you to the delights of Paris. We will paint the town red and you will discover that French men are superior in every single way to your English man.”

“He’s Irish,” I said absently. “Not English.”

Laurent waved the statement away like it was all the same thing to him. “Whatever. In a couple of months’ time, you’ll look back and wonder what you ever saw in him.”

“I hope so,” I said. And I meant it. I hoped a day would come where I could look back at my time with Cillian with a wry smile, rather than feeling like something too big for the space it occupied resided in my chest. And I prayed that day would come sooner rather than later.

Two months later

Laurent lounged in my newly acquired beanbag chair, long legs stretched out in front of him, and his ankles crossed. We'd become firm friends, Laurent keeping his promise to show me the sights of Paris and teasing me mercilessly about the night I'd tried to "force myself on him," as he liked to phrase it. He'd been exactly what I needed during the last couple of months. Someone to distract me. Someone who knew the reason I'd come here, but who steadfastly refused to let me dwell on it. And inch by slow inch, I'd relegated Cillian to the back of my mind, the times I thought about him growing fewer and fewer with each passing week. Which I supposed was what getting oversomeone was all about. They didn't cease to exist. You just made new connections and learned not to associate every single thing, whether it be a scent, a taste, or a remembered anecdote, with them.

"Don't take this as an invitation," Laurent said, waving a hand over his reclined state.

"You wish," I shot back.

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“Henri wishes,” he said with a slow smile.

Henri was a friend of Laurent’s. One who’d made it clear from our very first introduction that he’d like to get to know me better. So far, charming and handsome as he was, I’d resisted the urge to return his interest.

“You should go out to dinner with him,” Laurent said. “Just the two of you. He’s a gentleman. He won’t try to come home with you on the first date.”

“Maybe that’s what I want.”

Laurent laughed. “You! You’re a romantic.”

I considered his words for a moment. I’d gone home with Cillian on the first night I’d met him. Was that the point at which things had started to go wrong? Had I given him the completely wrong impression of me by letting my attraction take the reins? It was an interesting thought, even if it had me thinking about Cillian again.

Laurent leaned forward and snapped his fingers in front of my face to bring me back to the present. “Seriously though, Henri likes you. Are you going to put him out of his misery and go out with him?”

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “He’s a nice guy, but...” A knock at the door had me frowning as I got up to answer it. It was probably my next-door neighbor. If the day ended in a Y, Adeline Girard found something to complain about. I could probably sit in the dark in silence and she’d tell me I was thinking too loudly. No doubt she’d taken exception to me and Laurent being too raucous. People weren’t

supposed to laugh. They had to be just as miserable as her.

I steeled myself before I opened the door, ready to paste a smile on my face and apologize for crimes I hadn't committed, experience proving that penitence and agreeing with her was the quickest way to get her to go away. Laurent and I could go out. We hadn't planned on it, but it was better than spending the rest of the night whispering.

It wasn't Adeline Girard.

A simple noise complaint seemed like a dream come true as I took in the man on my doorstep who couldn't be here, but who very much was.

Still tall.

Still achingly handsome.

Still the physical embodiment of sex appeal wrapped up in an expensively clad package.

My breath froze in my chest, and it was all I could do to keep breathing as I stared at him.

"Hello Finn," he said, his Irish accent coming through strong. "I hope this isn't an inconvenient time to call."

Chapter Three

"Hello Cillian." My voice sounded calm despite the shock ricocheting around my chest like my insides had transformed into a pinball machine. Hopefully, my facial expression was equally bereft of my true feelings. Stay calm. Be civil. Get rid of

him. Those three things became a mantra as I stared at Cillian. There didn't need to be drama. Not after all this time. And I certainly didn't intend to be the one to instigate it.

"You look good," Cillian said.

Had he hoped I'd be a complete wreck without him? "Thank you." So formal, my inner voice mocked.

A sound from behind had me turning as Laurent joined me at the door. Laurent! How funny that after approximately thirty seconds in Cillian's company, I'd forgotten Laurent was even here. He leaned heavily against my shoulder, his body a heated brand against mine, as he surveyed Cillian with open curiosity. "This is Cillian," I said, the words feeling like razor blades in my throat. "Cillian, this is Laurent. He's—"

I never got to finish what I was saying as Laurent's slightly chilled fingers fastened on my chin to turn my head his way and kiss me. This was nothing like the kiss on the night we'd both been drunk. Not just in intentions, but also in intensity, Laurent putting his all into it. I knew what he was doing, feelings of gratitude and annoyance warring within me. I was grateful because I knew he was sending a message to Cillian to leave, and annoyed because I hadn't asked him to. Even though I let him kiss me without protest, I still wasn't sure I wanted it.

After what seemed like an age, Laurent drew back with a languorous stare that was so over the top that it made me want to laugh. "We were supposed to be having a quiet night in together, chéri," he said. "Just the two of us. Perhaps your friend could come back some other time when it's more convenient."

My 'friend' looked more rattled than I expected. A muscle ticked in his cheek and he looked about as uncomfortable as I'd ever seen him, guilt coalescing in my chest.

“I should go,” Cillian said, his gaze fixed on a space above my right shoulder. “It was a mistake to come here. I thought...” He didn’t finish his sentence, giving a small shake of his head instead. “Apologies for disturbing you.”

Whether it was the sincerity in his voice or the fact that he looked like a deer caught in the headlights, the ball of guilt became a landslide, threatening to swamp me if I let it. “Wait!” I called as he went to turn away. To Laurent, I said, “I appreciate what you’re doing. It’s sweet, and it’s protective, and I’d do the same for you, but it’s unnecessary.”

“No?” The question in his eyes begged me to reconsider. He’d provided me with an easy out, a way to drive Cillian from my door without the need to say more than two words to him. I was the one making things difficult.

“I’m sure,” I said with a nod. “I can handle this.”

“Fine.” He went to retrieve his jacket, the two men eyeballing each other as Laurent passed Cillian on his way out. It reminded me of two dogs pausing to take the measure of each other on the street.

And then Laurent was gone, and it was just me and the man I’d worked so hard to forget over the past couple of months. An excruciatingly awkward silence, as heavy as any blanket, settled over us while I looked everywhere but at him. There were questions I knew I should ask, like how the hell he’d gotten my address, why it had taken him so long if that had been his intention, and what the hell did he want? But it was hard to know where to start. So I didn’t. I just stood and waited without knowing what I was waiting for.

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“You need protecting from me?”

I dragged my gaze to Cillian’s, found it too unsettling, and concentrated on the wall in the corridor where someone had scraped off a section of paint instead. Probably someone too enthusiastic when they’d moved in or out. I didn’t think it had been me, but it could have been. I certainly wouldn’t swear on anyone’s life that I’d played no part in it. “Of course not. It was just a turn of phrase. Laurent’s French. He’s dramatic.”

“Is he your...?” The long pause had me focusing back on Cillian. This time, I forced myself to keep looking while he chose his next word carefully. “...boyfriend?”

Cillian looked tired. Which was quite the revelation when I’d witnessed him work all the hours under the sun and show zero negative effects from it, like the adrenaline and stress of heading up a successful advertising agency did nothing but energize him. I mulled over the answer to his question. Yes, would be a copout and a lie, but would solve the problem. No, would be honest, but leave me vulnerable. It was quite the quandary. “No,” I finally said. “He’s just a friend.”

“Okay.” The word was careful and had me searching for the hidden meaning behind it. “Can I come in?”

That I didn’t need to think about, the “no” tumbling out instinctively. As did moving to block the gap in the door with my body in case Cillian took a step forward. There were a multitude of reasons I didn’t want Cillian in my flat, chief among them that my place in Paris held no memories of him, and I wanted to keep it that way. And yes, if pushed, I’d admit to a fear of being alone with him near a bed. History showed

how poorly that usually ended.

“I want to talk to you.”

My fingernails dug into my palms while I considered the simple request. “And then will you go away?”

Cillian reared back like I’d struck him. It was clear he’d expected a warmer reception, which was crazy. “If that’s what you want.”

I gave a reluctant nod. “We can go out. There’s a brasserie at the end of the street that stays open late.” I held up a hand. “Wait here while I grab my jacket.” I closed the door as a precaution in case Cillian ignored my request not to enter, the automatic lock clicking into place. After shrugging into my jacket, I grabbed my wallet and keys and then stood for a moment in front of the closed door. What would Cillian do if I didn’t come back out? How long would he wait before giving up? Would he come back another night?

If the answer to that last question was yes, then I was better sucking it up and getting this over with. Taking a deep breath, I tugged the door open to find Cillian leaning against the wall next to the spot of peeled paint. At my reappearance, he straightened, his gaze searching as he waited for me to join him. I kept as much distance between us as I could without it being obvious as I led the way down the two flights of stairs that took us to the street, and then the fifty or so meters to the brasserie.

We remained silent until after the brasserie staff served us and we sat with steaming mugs of coffee.

“You speak French,” was Cillian’s opening gambit.

Despite the tension crackling between us, I laughed. “Barely. I’ve learned enough to

get by, but it wouldn't win me any awards."

"Still..."

Cillian's gaze was fixed on my face, and I regretted bringing him to a place that required us to be within a meter of each other, separated only by a table. It was too close. Too intimate. A walk would have been better. It would have provided distractions and enabled me to walk by his side rather than to have to look at him.

Here, there was no escape from the pleasing symmetry of his features. Or from the memories that seeing him again sparked in my gut.

My phone vibrated in my pocket and, glad of an excuse to look away, even if it was only for a few seconds, I pulled it out to check the screen. Laurent's message was a simple one: Are you okay? I typed Ask me later and sent it before shoving my phone back in my pocket.

Lifting my head, I pasted a smile on my face. "So... I assume you have business in Paris. How long are you here for? Just tonight? Or for a couple of days?" I was proud of my breeziness. "You're not opening another branch, are you?"

"Would that be so terrible?"

God, yes. There are one hundred and ninety-five recognized countries in the world and you pick this one. I shrugged. "It's a free country. You can do whatever you want."

Cillian propped his chin on his hand and stared at me, his brown eyes full of something I couldn't interpret, and wasn't sure I wanted to. "No, I'm not opening another branch. And I'm not here on business. I came for one reason and one reason only. To see you."

I doubted a shotgun pellet in the chest could have had more impact. Despite it being far too late to drink coffee when caffeine always had a negative effect on me, I took a sip to hide my discomfort. I doubted I'd be sleeping much tonight, anyway. It was probably far more likely that I'd lie awake and replay this entire conversation, forensically examining every part to ascertain whether I'd said and done the right thing, and beating myself up for any moments where I could have handled things better. "How did you get my address?"

"Your old workplace."

"They just gave it to you?"

"Not just... no. It took some work on my part. But, eventually. I tried your friends first, but none of them were forthcoming."

Yet, nobody had bothered to pick up the phone and warn me about Cillian sniffing around. A heads up would have been nice before he turned up on my doorstep. I could have taken evasive action, like... I don't know... faking my death or something.

Cillian turned his head toward the door, his coffee still untouched. I automatically followed his gaze, expecting to see someone arriving, but there was no one there. Just a door. He started talking with his head still turned that way, as if marshaling his thoughts was easier without the distraction of looking at me. "You came to my office. You had sex with me, and then you disappeared off the face of the earth, like you were nothing but a figment of my imagination."

I winced. When he put it like that, it sounded awful. It was awful. On a deeper level, I'd always understood that, but my emotional state at the time had been such that I hadn't seen any other option.

“I even thought about going to the police.”

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“What?”

Cillian’s gaze swung back my way. “I was worried. I thought something might have happened to you. I couldn’t get through to you on the phone and all my messages went unanswered. When I went round to your flat, you weren’t there. Or at least, you weren’t answering the door.”

“When?” I asked.

Cillian frowned. “When what?”

Great! He was back to frowning. The anti-Botox fairy strikes again. Hopefully, he’d made the most of his months of line-free skin. “When did you call me?” I sat back in my chair, familiar emotions that had nothing to do with attraction, and everything to do with promises that were never kept and being made to feel like I was second best, bubbling to the surface. “Because... I waited that night for you to call me like you said you would, and you never did.”

The slight shake of Cillian’s head reeked of confusion. “I don’t remember. It was a friend who pointed out that the call always going to voicemail after a few rings meant you’d blocked me.” He gave a bitter laugh. “She thought we must have argued. She thought I was lying when I said we hadn’t.” He wrapped his hands around his coffee cup, but made no move to drink it. “So I guess you didn’t get any of my messages?”

“No.” Such a simple answer. Yet, it suddenly felt incredibly petty. Like something a child rather than an adult would do. I refused to give in to the feeling, wrapping myself securely in the irritation of our past relationship instead. “I’d had enough. I’d

reached the end of my tether.”

“Had enough of what?”

It all came out in a rush—all the things I’d wanted to say, but hadn’t been able to. “Of playing second fiddle to your work. Of never being able to spend any uninterrupted time with you.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is true,” I argued. “Name one occasion when we went anywhere without you taking at least one phone call?” I left a deliberate pause, Cillian’s confusion growing. “See! You can’t. You can’t because it never happened. Hell, you even stepped outside on our first date to take a call. Remember that?” Cillian opened his mouth to defend himself, but I was on a roll. “So I guess the person I should really be angry at is myself, when I should have known from the start what I was getting.”

“What you were getting?”

I ignored the edge in Cillian’s voice. “Someone work-obsessed who only needed someone around when he had an itch to scratch. And I played that role for months without questioning it, because that’s apparently how much of an idiot I am.” I took a huge gulp of my coffee, the liquid burning my throat. “I would have been better off with a dildo. At least it wouldn’t have made promises it had no intention of keeping. I could count the times on one hand when you saying you’d call me, or we’d go for dinner, actually happened when it was supposed to. And I’d have plenty of fingers left over.”

A woman a few tables along raised her head, the brasserie quiet at this time in an evening. I offered her an apologetic smile, and she went back to reading her book. Either she didn’t understand English and had just reacted to the heat in my words, or

she'd decided it was none of her business. Either way, it was a useful reminder that we were in a public place. "I wasn't happy," I said much more quietly. "I wanted a boyfriend who was present in the relationship."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

Cillian's face showed his hurt, and though I hadn't asked him to come, I hated being responsible for his pain. "I tried. A few times. That last day when I came to your office, I said I wanted to talk, right?" I waited for Cillian's nod. "Well, there you go. That's what I wanted to talk about. Except... we ended up in bed instead. And then, as usual, you took a phone call straight after. Two phone calls."

"I was in my office."

I gave a harsh laugh that lacked humor. "Of course you were. You're there ninety-eight percent of the time. That's why you have a bed there. I don't know anyone else who has a bed in their office."

"Jacob Mawlinson has one. Nathan Cartwright has too."

"I don't know who either of those people are, but I'll assume they're fellow ad execs. Or at the very least, CEOs of some ridiculously successful company." Silence descended once more, and I heaved out a sigh. "I didn't want to do this."

"Do what?"

"Come across as bitter."

"No? You thought it was better to block my number, find a job in another country, and leave without telling me instead? Did you think that would be kinder?"

I traced a pattern on the tabletop. “Not kinder, no.”

“Then why do it that way? And don’t give me that crap about not being able to have a conversation with me. You could have left a voice message. You could have sent me a text. You could have written a damn email.”

“Yeah, I could have done,” I admitted as I held Cillian’s gaze. How honest did I want to be? I supposed it didn’t really matter now. “I feared you’d flutter your ridiculously long eyelashes and get me to change my mind, that I’d end up stuck in a relationship that wouldn’t give me what I needed. It seemed like the only way of doing things, and yes, I recognize it made me a coward. I’ll hold my hands up to that.”

“I’ve never fluttered my eyelashes at anyone!”

I laughed at the horrified look on Cillian’s face. Who knew that would be the part he’d take the hardest? “It was a turn of phrase. I thought it sounded better than you’d have flashed your cock at me and my clothes would have fallen off.”

“You make it sound like there was nothing between us but sex.”

“I never said that. That was just the part we got right.”

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Heat flared in Cillian's eyes. "We did get it right. Frequently."

"Yeah..." Refusing to let my mind wander in that direction, I sat up straighter. "I'm sorry things ended the way they did, and that I was too gutless to do things the way I should have done. It probably doesn't help, but running away will never be one of my proudest moments." Abandoning the rest of my coffee that I'd never wanted anyway, I stood to send a message we were done.

Cillian tipped his head back to keep me in his line of sight. "I might have messed things up and taken you for granted, but my feelings for you were never anything but real."

My heart gave a little skip and I silently cursed it for being such a traitorous bastard, while I pondered how I was supposed to respond. Thanks, would be too cold. But any other response would plunge me into a conversation I wasn't emotionally ready for. Hell, I wasn't emotionally prepared for any of this. I'd never dreamed of Cillian turning up at my door one day. Maybe I'd thought our paths might cross in years to come. But in my head that had always taken place after I'd moved back to England. In it, one or both of us were married, and we'd laugh about our short-lived relationship.

Neither of us was laughing now, though. Cillian had a slightly pained expression on his face, and my chest felt like someone had wrapped a rubber band round it. A tight rubber band that constricted my breathing. "I have to go," I said.

Cool, fresh air had never felt so good as I stepped back out onto the street, the wind whipping at my hair as I hastened back toward my flat. Relief at having survived the

encounter came to a screeching halt as fingers fastened around my wrist and tugged me to a stop.

Chapter Four

“Let go,” I hissed at Cillian as he tugged me to face him, the sparks his touch ignited wholly unwelcome.

“No! Not until you’ve heard me out properly. I hadn’t finished saying what I came here to say.”

I tried to yank my wrist back, but the movement proved fruitless, Cillian’s fingers like an iron band. Not tight enough to hurt or leave bruises, but tight enough to send the message that he had no intention of letting go until he was good and ready. “Whatever you’ve got to say won’t make any difference, so you may as well save your breath. I appreciate I owed you an explanation. I’ve given you one, so now it’s time for us both to act like adults and move on.”

Cillian shook his head, his expression as serious as I’d ever seen it. “I messed up and I take full responsibility for that. I didn’t treat you the way you deserve to be treated, and I’m sorry.” There was some satisfaction in hearing him own his mistakes, and I knew I’d replay those words later and feel a little less guilty for how badly I’d mangled ending things. Anticipating that was what he’d needed to say, I gave my wrist another experimental tug. It seemed he still wasn’t done, though.

He came a step closer and all my senses went into overdrive, the scent of his cologne hauntingly familiar. Cillian was close enough that I could feel the heat coming off him. Close enough that his lips were only a few inches away and all I could think about was how good a kisser he was.

“Let me go,” I pleaded. “It took me too long to get over you.”

Something like triumph flashed in Cillian's eyes and I realized my mistake too late: that I'd just admitted how into him I'd been.

"The problem," Cillian said quietly, his brown eyes boring into mine, "Is that I'm not over you."

"You don't know what you're saying. You're—"

"I know exactly what I'm saying. Ask me why I came here."

"Why did you come here?"

"To get you back," Cillian said with a smile. "To put right whatever went wrong between us."

"That's crazy!"

"Is it?" When I didn't answer, he searched my face. "Maybe. But I have to try. And I'm prepared to do whatever it takes."

His words sent a shaft of pure emotion through me difficult to identify. Part of it was fear that all the careful safeguarding of my heart was about to unravel. But beneath that, there was excitement, too. And I hated myself for it. Because I wanted to believe Cillian. I wanted it to be true, and that was dangerous.

Cillian's hand slid lower, his fingers interlocking with mine as he maintained eye contact. "Come for a drink with me. A proper drink. We'll talk some more. You can call me all the names under the sun if it makes you feel better."

"I don't need to call you names."

His smile was blinding in its intensity, his hand squeezing mine. “There we go. I feel like we’ve made progress already.”

Whereas, I felt like I was staring directly into the sun. Say no. Tell him to get on the first available flight back to London. Tell him he had his chance and that you’re not a big enough mug to give him a second one. “Okay. One drink.”

Despite Cillian’s choice of restaurant/bar being busy, he’d found a quietish corner. An empty table had materialized soon after our entrance, as things had a habit of doing for him—like even the universe recognized there was no point in arguing. Getting drinks proved equally straightforward for Cillian, people parting like he was Moses and they were the Red Sea when he arrived at the bar, and the bartender immediately serving him, even though there were people who’d been waiting longer.

“Do you speak French?” I asked him as he deposited a bottle of beer in front of me. I picked it up to check the label, surprised to find he’d remembered my tastes well enough to order San Miguel without having to ask. He pushed a glass toward me and I waved it off, preferring to drink from the bottle. First coffee and now beer. I really wouldn’t be sleeping tonight, but that was probably the least of my problems.

“Passably,” Cillian offered in response to my question.

“I didn’t know that.”

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He shrugged as if it was of no consequence. “We holidayed a lot in France when I was a kid. And I’ve been here on business a few times.”

“Do you speak any other languages?”

“A bit of Spanish. Even less German.”

So that was a yes, Cillian just trying to be modest. “Why didn’t I know that about you?”

The question seemed to confuse him. “I guess it never came up.”

I took a long swallow of my beer before fixing him with a stare. “I want to make it clear that me coming here with you isn’t agreement of anything.”

Cillian raised his glass in a toast. He was drinking his usual whiskey and soda. “Don’t worry. It’s clear. I just wanted to talk.”

“So talk.”

He laughed. “It takes two people. Or it’s just me talking at you.”

“Did you really come to Paris just to see me?”

“Yes.” No hesitation, his gaze steady on mine. “It was only a short flight. I didn’t cross the Andes on foot or anything.”

Despite my best efforts not to let it happen, my lips twitched. “Well, that’s disappointing.”

“If you wanted me to cross the Andes, you should have moved to South America.”

“You could have done the Alps instead.”

“They’re not that close to Paris, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“Excuses, excuses.”

Cillian’s grin had warmth spreading through my body. Agreeing to this was a terrible idea. All it was doing was reminding me of all the things I’d liked about him, while all the things that had slowly driven me crazy seemed a million miles away.

“Duly noted that next time I want to impress you,” he said, “I need to find a mountain range.”

I focused on a small group a few tables away, afraid of what I might see on Cillian’s face if I looked his way. And even more scared of how I might react to it. They were a group of five, three women and two men, the entire group talking excitedly in quick-fire French.

“Do you know them?” Cillian asked.

I shook my head, but continued to watch them. “Finlay?” Not Finn, which is what he’d always called me, even from our first meeting. The softness in his voice had me reluctantly turning back to him. “I meant what I said before, about doing anything to get you back. Just tell me what I need to do?”

My heart was thrumming so hard I could feel it in my throat, that same intensity

shimmering between us that had always been there. Maybe it would be different now that I'd been honest about what hadn't worked for me. Everyone deserved a second chance, right? After all, it wasn't like he'd been abusive, or cheated on me. "You need—"

Cillian cursed as a familiar ringtone started up. And then he answered it. "Hi, Dan, yes... I know I said I'd call you. I was going to." A pause. "...Really? What's the problem? Did they say that? Have you spoken to Jonathan about it? I'd start there if I were you. Ask him what he thinks about it and then get back to me."

I sat in stunned silence as Cillian conversed without even so much as a glance my way. Every time I thought he'd make his apologies and bring the discussion to an end, they'd embark on a new topic.

One minute passed.

And then two, still with no sign of Cillian ending the call.

When two minutes rolled over into three, I grabbed my jacket and stood, walking away from the table without looking back.

What had just happened was good, I told myself as my feet carried me toward the Seine. It was proof, that for all his words about understanding where I was coming from, he either couldn't or wouldn't change. It was justification that I'd been right to walk away. The first time, and now.

"FINN?"

I walked faster. If he grabbed me again, I wouldn't be responsible for my actions. He could take his second chance and he could shove it up his arse. "Go away," I shouted once he got close. "Leave me alone."

“I know you’re annoyed at me.”

“You think?”

“And you’re right to be. I know that what I just did was exactly what you were talking about.”

“Nothing gets past you, does it?” I’d reached the river now. I hooked my elbows over the railing and stared out at the murky water. “The sad thing is, you almost had me convinced.”

Cillian joined me at the railing, his expression one of defeat. Him knowing how badly he’d fucked up didn’t make me feel any better. Nothing could make me feel better about being so gullible. “You should go home,” I said. “Back to London, I mean. Not just wherever you’re staying.”

“A hotel,” Cillian said. “A nice one.”

“Good for you.”

His phone rang again—the sound jarring so close to the silent river—and I laughed. And then something dark flew through the air, the noise going with it. There was a plop as it hit the water, and then silence. I leaned over the railing, staring down at the spot where the object had disappeared into the water. “Did you just...?”

“Yeah!” There was surprise in Cillian’s voice. “It seemed like the right thing to do.”

“Who was it?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t look.”

“It might have been important.”

“Maybe.”

I turned to face him. “Was throwing your phone in the Seine supposed to impress me?”

“I don’t know what it was supposed to do. Just that I feared for my life if I answered it.” The ridiculousness of his answer brought a reluctant smile to my face. “Now, I don’t have a boyfriend or a phone,” he said sadly.

“Easy enough to buy one.”

“I really hope you’re talking about a phone.”

“You know they’ve been trying to get this river clean for years? And then you chuck your phone in it with zero regard for pollution.”

“Whoops.”

“Yeah, whoops,” I echoed. I stifled a yawn, the coffee and beer doing nothing to stop the late hour from catching up with me. Maybe I’d sleep after all.

“Come on,” Cillian said with a jerk of his head in the direction we’d come. “Let’s get you home. I’m assuming you’ve got work tomorrow.”

Chapter Five

It was mid-morning before Laurent succeeded in his intention of getting me alone.

We stepped outside for the illusion of privacy to where the smokers usually congregated, concern etched on my friend's face while I detailed everything that had occurred after his departure.

“And then what happened?”

“He took me home.”

“I bet he did,” Laurent said with a knowing smirk.

“Actually, he only escorted me to the door of my building.” That alone had kept me awake for an hour as I'd struggled to work out whether I was relieved or disappointed Cillian hadn't tried to invite himself in or move in for a kiss.

“So... he's given up?” Laurent asked. “He took on board what you had to say?”

“I think so.”

“Good!”

“Yeah...” Laurent’s narrow-eyed stare had me reflecting on the lack of conviction in my answer. I tried again. “So yeah, it was good. I had a chance to say all the things I never got to say, and he acknowledged that he’d been a terrible boyfriend. And in return, he got his explanation for why I left the way I did, and a recognition that it wasn’t the best way of handling things on my end. I guess it was closure for both of us.”

“Hmm... closure,” Laurent said, not sounding too convinced. “So why aren’t you happier about it?”

“What?” I studied his face for signs he was winding me up, but found none.

“It’s what you wanted, right? Cillian out of your life. That’s what you said weeks ago when you first told me about him. Only...” He paused for dramatic effect. “That’s not what I saw last night. Want to know what I saw?”

“Probably not,” I muttered while staring at my feet.

“Well... I’m going to tell you, anyway. I saw a man who still has feelings for his ex-boyfriend, who, despite being completely blindsided by him turning up out of the blue, couldn’t bring himself to pretend he’d moved on when I offered myself as sacrifice.”

“I don’t like lying,” I said. “That’s all. You don’t need to make it sound more complicated than it is.”

“Yet, you went out with him for a coffee.”

“I owed him an explanation.”

“Yet, you went out with him for a drink after you’d already given him the explanation.” All I could do was sigh at that. It was true what they said about the truth hurting. “Yet, you let him escort you home.”

“He threw his phone in the river,” I said. “I felt bad.”

Laurent tipped his head to one side and studied me. “What would you have done if he’d tried to kiss you?”

“Pushed him off. Told him it wasn’t happening. Made it clear I wasn’t one of his advertising campaigns where he could control the outcome.”

“Hmm...”

I was beginning to really hate that sound from Laurent. It reeked of disbelief. “You think I would have kissed him?”

“Much as I hate to admit it, he’s a handsome man.”

“He was handsome when I left. I still left. Nothing’s changed. I’m over him.”

“Are you? Because your actions say otherwise.”

I turned my head to study a tree a few feet away. It was a hawthorn tree unless my tree identification skills were failing me. “What are you trying to say?”

“That maybe you should give him another chance. The man threw his phone in the

river, so he's obviously starting to get it. Maybe he can change."

"It doesn't matter."

"No?"

"I gave him his answer yesterday. He's probably halfway back to London by now." I turned my wrist to check what time it was. "In fact, he's probably already there. He'll be in his office, asking his PA to get him a new phone ASAP, and making up a story about what happened to the old one, that I'd bet everything I own won't involve any mention of a river." Rather than the relief I should have felt, the words filled me with a strange sort of sadness. Which was stupid. I knew where Cillian was should I ever want to find him. I'd always known where he was. I was the one who'd left him there.

Laurent let out a breath. "All I'm saying is—"

I cut him off before he could finish his thought. "It doesn't matter. It's too late."

The rest of the day passed with astounding mediocrity as I struggled to keep my mind on work, the data I pored over refusing to play ball and analyze itself. After our chat, Laurent had given me a wide berth. I assumed I was supposed to spend the time mulling over his words.

When the end of my working day finally came, after what felt more like three days than one, Laurent was nowhere to be seen. Neither was anyone else I spent time with outside work. Which left me with little choice but to return home. The stray cat made another attempt to infiltrate the building, hoping either I wouldn't notice or would turn a blind eye to it sneaking between my legs. I shooed it away, and it gave me a disdainful look as it strutted off with what remained of its tail in the air.

I wasn't in the mood to cook, but, as I stared at the congealed mess of a microwave dinner that looked even worse than it smelled, I had cause to regret my lack of effort. Having zero inclinations to even try it, I pondered a takeaway. The knock at the door interrupted my consideration of which one spoke good enough English that my piss poor attempts at ordering in French wouldn't be required.

Laurent, here to apologize, maybe? If so, I'd gladly accept it, and then maybe I could drag him out for something to eat, where the two of us could spend the evening talking about anything except Cillian.

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My breath hitched as I opened the door. No Laurent. Instead, it seemed I was to be treated to an action replay of yesterday. Tonight, instead of his casual clothes from the previous evening, Cillian wore an expensive-looking pin-striped suit. It wasn't anything I hadn't seen before, but the sight after so long was jarring. If there was one thing you couldn't deny about Cillian King, it was that he looked good in a suit.

"Hi," he said before I could speak. "I realize this is a little strange, me just turning up at your door like this, but I saw you last night, and I haven't been able to get you out of my head since." He extended a hand my way. "Cillian King."

I stared at his outstretched hand, my brain playing catch-up with what was going on here. Did he really think it was that simple? That we could just erase the past and start again? The idea was ludicrous. Yet, I couldn't deny there being something strangely alluring about it. Like the man standing in front of me wasn't the one I'd spent six months with, but someone else entirely. Someone who'd apparently viewed me from afar, had liked what they saw and followed me home, but not in a stalker way.

There was something almost pleading in Cillian's expression as I lifted my gaze to his, like this really mattered to him. It tipped the scales and had me reaching for his hand, my palm tingling as we made contact. "Finlay Prescott. Pleased to make your acquaintance." The handshake lingered. My doing? His? Both? I wasn't sure. "So you followed me home?" I asked.

"I had to. I couldn't just let you walk out of my life."

There was no missing the double meaning. "And what is it you want from me, Mr. King?"

“To take you out. To romance you.” I didn’t realize his left hand had been behind his back the whole time until he pulled it out to reveal a single red rose. “A bit cliché, I know.”

Cillian had never bought me flowers when we were together. Maybe because we were both men. Or perhaps it had just never occurred to him. I couldn’t say there’d been any romancing at all squeezed between the hot, sweaty sex. And while that hadn’t been the deal breaker, I had to admit it would have been nice. It would have at least told me he’d given more thought to me than the quickest way to get me out of my clothes.

I took the rose. “I don’t mind something being a cliché.”

“No?” Cillian sounded surprised.

“No. There’s a thin line between a cliché and tradition sometimes.”

“I suppose so.”

“What now?” I asked.

“I hope it’s not too forward of me, but I booked a table at a restaurant. If you don’t agree to accompany me, I’ll still go, but I’ll eat alone.”

Even with the suit and the rose, the news that he intended taking me for dinner came as a surprise. I waved a hand at my sweatpants and T-shirt, my feet bare. “I’m not really dressed for dinner.”

“I can wait while you get changed. I booked the table in an hour because I thought I might need time to persuade you to go with me.”

“Because... we’ve never met before,” I said. “And you weren’t sure I would go out with a complete stranger?”

“Exactly.”

I chewed on the dilemma for a few seconds. Back inside to stare at the microwave meal, which would look even less appetizing for having stood around for a few extra minutes, or continue this charade and see where it took us?

Maybe you should give him another chance.

Not my words, Laurent’s from a few hours ago. What would he make of this? He’d probably commend Cillian, both for his creativity and for his determination, when I’d had him giving up and back in his office in London.

“Okay,” I agreed before I thought better of it. “Do you... er... want to come in and wait while I change?”

There was no hesitation before Cillian shook his head. “I’ll wait out here.”

“You don’t have to. I wouldn’t have invited you in if I minded.”

“I don’t think it’s wise,” he said. “We haven’t even gone on a date together yet, and I’m not a man who likes to rush things.”

There was no stopping the laugh that burst out of me. Because that was the opposite of the Cillian I’d known. We’d met at a party and he’d had me in bed before the night was through. Not that I’d put up much of a fight, the attraction between us instant and combustible. But yeah, we’d definitely rushed things, and we hadn’t dated before having sex.

When the look in Cillian's eyes warned me not to point out the obvious, I settled for a tactful withdrawal instead, leaving the door open a crack in case he changed his mind about waiting out in the corridor.

I threw the microwave meal in the bin before going into the bedroom to change. If Cillian came in, I didn't want him seeing what I'd almost stooped to eating prior to his arrival. In the bedroom, I went through my wardrobe, discounting most of it before finally settling on a black shirt and trousers teamed with a tan jacket. The clothes were new, bought in a shopping trip Laurent had dragged me on, so at least Cillian hadn't seen them before, which wasn't the case with ninety percent of my wardrobe. There was nothing I could do about the stubble I sported, but I spent a few minutes teasing my hair into something that looked less like I'd spent all day at work and then sat on a sofa for an hour.

When I came out of the bedroom, the flat was still empty. Conversation in the corridor had me frowning. Had Adeline stumbled across Cillian? If so, I dreaded to think about what the two of them were discussing. She was probably telling him how noisy I could be and requesting he talk to me about it.

There was no Adeline outside when I opened the door, though. Only Cillian down on his knees, not seeming remotely bothered that he risked ruining his fancy suit as he petted the ginger stray and mumbled things that sounded suspiciously like endearments to it. I closed the door quickly before it could think about darting into my flat and making itself at home.

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Cillian glanced my way, but continued to pet the cat with no signs of him getting up off the floor. “You’re a handsome boy, aren’t you? Yes, you are. It doesn’t matter that you’re missing one ear. It just gives you character. Yes, it does.” The cat was purring so loudly I could hear him, even from a distance.

“I didn’t know you liked cats,” I said.

“Love them,” Cillian said. “I grew up with three.”

“You don’t have one.”

He pulled a face. “I spend too much time at work. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“You could keep one at the office. It would even have a bed to sleep on.”

He angled a sly look my way as he compromised by climbing to his feet, but bringing the cat with him cradled to his chest. It seemed happy to nestle in as Cillian rubbed a spot just under his chin. “How do you know I’ve got a bed in my office?”

“How do I—?” And then I remembered the game we were supposed to be playing, that we’d only just met and this was our first date. “Right... Lucky guess.”

Now he was vertical, Cillian’s gaze slid over me appreciatively. “You look good.”

“Thank you.” It seemed churlish not to offer something in return. “You don’t look half bad yourself.”

Cillian returned his attention to the cat. “I’m sorry I can’t take you with me, buddy, but I’m trying to impress a new man I met and threes a crowd. Maybe we take you home first.”

“He doesn’t have one. He’s a stray. One that shouldn’t be in the building. He must have sneaked in with someone. You have to be careful not to open the door too wide or he’s in here like a shot.”

“He just wants to be somewhere warm. Don’t you, buddy?” The cat purred louder and looked like he’d happily spend the rest of eternity in Cillian’s arms if it was on offer.

The empathy in Cillian’s voice made me feel bad for every time I’d shut the cat out without a second thought. Of course, it would rather be inside than out at this time of year. We might have hit early spring, but temperatures were still low most days. “I suppose we could leave him inside, rather than throwing him out on the street. It’s not like he can do much harm roaming round the building.”

Cillian deposited the cat gently on the floor and it scurried off down the corridor. “What cat?”

I rolled my eyes as I followed him to the exit. I guess I’d officially taken leave of my senses and I was doing this. There was no other way to describe going on a first date with your ex-boyfriend.

Chapter Six

I’d gone way past second thoughts and all the way to sixth and seventh before we even reached the restaurant. This must be how Cillian landed all the big advertising contracts. He found an unusual angle and persuaded the other person that it was in their best interests to go along with it. And I’d fallen for it. Pretend we didn’t know

each other and simply start again? Yeah, right? How ludicrous was that?

One glance at where Cillian was taking me and all those thoughts coalesced into one massive hell no. Guy Savoy was the most exclusive, and therefore, the most expensive, restaurant in Paris. I'd never been, and I'd had no inclination to do so. I assumed it was all tasting menus and making foods that weren't remotely flower-like look like a rose. Foie gras and sweetbreads when I was more of a simple steak man. Actually, even that was pushing it. Nine times out of ten, I'd settle for a burger.

And it wasn't just the venue, it was like being catapulted back to a time where I'd let Cillian shepherd me wherever he wanted to go, too grateful for the breadcrumbs of his company to make any complaints about it or to tell him I'd rather go somewhere else. Well, I'd left that person in London, and there was no way I was turning back into him. "No!" I said, coming to a grinding halt a few meters from the door. "Because I already know how this will go."

Cillian turned with a frown. "How what will go?"

"This!" I waved a hand at the restaurant, the doorman discreet enough to pretend he hadn't noticed our approach. "I'll order food I don't like because it's the best of a ridiculously complicated menu, and while I'm trying to convince myself it's not that bad, you'll be on the phone and I'll have no one to talk to. I may as well have stayed home and eaten the microwave dinner for all the enjoyment I'll get out of the evening."

A multitude of emotions flickered across Cillian's face, like he couldn't decide which one to settle on. "I don't have a phone."

"Pfft... right? Like you didn't go out today and buy a new one."

"I didn't." He held his arms out to the side. "Check if you don't believe me."

An unshakable conviction about being proved right had me stepping forward without considering whether it was a good idea. He obviously thought he could call my bluff. Well, I'd show him.

I realized my mistake as soon as I lay hands on him, warmth seeping through the silky fabric of the suit, and Cillian's hard muscles beneath the fabric making my palms tingle and a certain part of my anatomy sit up and take notice.

My instinctive reaction was to let go and step back. Yeah, he'd love that, wouldn't he? His new phone going undetected just because I didn't have the balls to go through with what I'd started. It was for that reason that I ignored my traitorous body's reaction and gave him a good going over.

His left jacket pocket was first, my search revealing nothing but a hotel keycard. The right jacket pocket only contained an opened pack of mint chewing gum. "Fresh breath," Cillian said with something that sounded suspiciously like amusement. "Very important on a first date."

I shoved the chewing gum back into his pocket with more force than it required and moved onto his trousers where my search unearthed his wallet and, as my fingers moved too close to the swelling behind his fly, a sharp indrawn breath that said he enjoyed being pawed far too much for my liking.

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“I told you I don’t have a phone,” he said when I finally ran out of places to search and stepped back.

“Fine,” I conceded. “I believe you.”

An awkward standoff followed, with the two of us eyeing each other. It was Cillian who finally broke the silence. “So... what I’m getting is that you don’t want to eat here. I thought you liked this type of place.”

I stared at him, aghast. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

“You not saying anything to the contrary. But then”—he let out a sigh—“you didn’t say anything about a lot of things.” He took a few steps away from the restaurant. “Come on.”

“Where?”

“Somewhere else. Your choice.”

“Really?” There was no keeping the disbelief out of my voice. “I thought you’d booked a table.”

Cillian shrugged. “They’ll give it to someone else when they realize I never showed up. It happens all the time. It won’t be a big deal to them.” He hooked his arm through mine, the gesture not intimate enough that I could raise a complaint without making myself look ridiculous, but bringing me close enough to trigger a cascade of unwanted feelings. Feelings that were supposed to be dead. But then, if they were, I

wouldn't be here, would I? I would have stood my ground and told him to get lost.

If Cillian noticed my sudden silence, he didn't comment, seeming happy to carry out a one-sided conversation about the previous times he'd visited Paris.

"Have you ever brought anyone here?" I asked as I steered him left down a side street.

Cillian pondered the question for a moment, appearing momentarily perplexed. "No."

I lifted a disbelieving eyebrow. "I don't care if you did." A blatant lie if ever there was one, but I had pride. And I'd rather know if he'd brought a string of men here over the years. It would make it easier to walk away when he fucked up again. Maybe that's why I'd agreed to this, to gather ammunition to make myself feel better when things invariably went to shit.

Cillian shook his head. "I've never been the romantic getaway type."

"You don't say," I drawled. "I can't say I noticed."

"I should have taken you away," he said, his voice quiet.

"Where?"

"Barcelona. Milan. Here. New York. Amsterdam. Anywhere where there was something worth seeing."

"We were only together for six months," I pointed out. "If we'd gone to all those places, you'd never have gotten any work done."

"Maybe not, but we might still be together."

I tried to visualize the scenario he'd painted and just couldn't. "It wouldn't have mattered where we were. You'd have been on your phone, and I'd have been left to my own devices." I tugged Cillian through a doorway before he could argue, the next few minutes spent being shown to a table by a smiley waitress and furnished with menus. The place I'd brought Cillian to was more of a cafe than a restaurant, his suit looking completely out of place amongst the relaxed clientele. He didn't seem unduly bothered, though, as he perused the menu. Feeling my eyes on him, he lifted his gaze and offered me a smile, something lurching in my chest. "Have you been here before?"

I nodded. I had. Enough times that I didn't need to check the menu to know what I wanted to order. "This is one of Laurent's favorite places to eat."

"Your friend who likes to kiss you?"

"My friend, who is so supportive, he was worried for me, and did what he thought was best at the time."

Sensing blood in the water, Cillian's eyes narrowed. "Why was he so concerned?"

The timely return of the waitress to take our orders saved me from answering. "The food here is great," I said quickly once she'd departed, determined not to let Cillian resurrect the previous topic of conversation. Because, the one thing I had to cling on to was never having admitted how deep my feelings for him had run. It was possible he'd worked it out from my decision to put so much space between us, or from me blurting out the previous day that it had taken me a while to get over him, but I didn't feel there was anything to be achieved by laying it on the line.

By the time the food arrived, Cillian had remembered his other mission of pretending this was a first date. "Tell me about yourself," he said, chin propped on his hand as he gazed across the table, brown eyes sparkling, and a small smile on his lips.

“You already—” I stopped myself for two reasons. If I was going to refuse to play this game, the right time would have been back at my flat when he’d first started it, and because it wasn’t true. Cillian and I had skipped all the niceties of getting to know each other and gone straight to fucking. He might know exactly how I enjoyed having my cock sucked, and what made me come quicker. But beyond that...

So, I told him about my upbringing in Oxford with one brother and one sister, before I’d moved to London for work. I told him how I’d gotten into data analysis, Cillian doing an excellent job of pretending interest when I went off on a tangent and enthused about the simplicity and beauty of numbers. And I told him about my time in Paris so far, the things I’d seen, and what impressed me about the city.

Cillian shared amusing stories of the escapades he and his brother had gotten up to when they were growing up, their similar ages meaning they’d hung out together more than siblings with a larger age gap might. I found out about the early days of him setting up the advertising agency, the trouble he’d had getting a bank to lend him the start-up money making me see his work ethic in a whole new light. He told me about an early advertising campaign that had gone badly wrong, and how it could have been curtains for the agency had he not handled the fallout so well. I didn’t mind that the conversation had strayed to work when it was telling me so much about the man himself.

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The conversation flowed so freely that I was slow to recognize that we were the last two left in the cafe, and that the staff were cleaning up around us. “We better leave,” I said, “before they throw us out.”

“Yeah,” Cillian agreed, his obvious reluctance heartwarming. Even as I thought that, I warned myself against being swayed by it. I didn’t know how Cillian had pulled it off, but this really had felt like a first date. One that had gone so well, it would be all too easy to forget about our history.

“We should get separate cabs,” I announced once we emerged out into the night air. “Your hotel is in the opposite direction to my flat.”

“Not a chance,” Cillian insisted. “What kind of date would I be if I stuck you in the back of a cab and simply waved you off?”

“A practical one.”

Cillian laughed, but it didn’t deter him from flagging a single cab down.

No doubt he had plans for us. Plans that involved inviting himself into my flat, so the evening could reach its natural conclusion. And I’d be lying if I claimed to be mad about that. I hadn’t had sex since that fateful day in Cillian’s office, so it seemed apt that we’d pick up where we left off. At least this time, it would be in a better location.

The brief journey passed in a companionable silence, Cillian’s thigh warm against mine. He’d already announced his intention to pay the fare, just as he’d done with the meal, so when we drew up in front of my building, I jumped out. Cillian got out, but

bent to say something to the driver, presumably for him to drive off, before following me over to the door of my building.

“I had a lovely time,” he said when he reached me. “Thank you for agreeing to come out with me.”

“Thank you,” I gently mocked. “So formal.”

He smiled. “I’m practicing being a gentleman.”

“You weren’t one already?”

“No... I don’t think I was.”

The amount of introspection in his tone had me searching his face. He stared steadily back, the seconds stretching for long enough that I decided to seize the bull by the horns and speed things up a bit. “You should come in. We can...” I trailed off as Cillian started vigorously shaking his head.

“No,” he said. “I’m a gentleman, remember?”

“Well, yeah, but...”

He leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead, the skin continuing to tingle long after he lifted his lips. “Sleep well, Finn.”

It was only once he’d backed away that I realized the cab still idled at the curb, the instruction to wait rather than to go, meaning he’d had no intention of coming inside. I watched as he climbed into the back again. He lifted a hand in farewell, and then he was gone, leaving me puzzling over the rather abrupt end to the night. That was two nights spent with him that hadn’t ended the way I’d expected.

The lights in the hallway of my building always stayed on, meaning I had no problems seeing the ginger cat sitting right in front of my door like he'd been waiting for me to return home. I regarded him warily as I drew close. "The kind man isn't here, if that's who you were hoping for. You need to find his hotel."

The cat stared balefully up at me, apparently in no hurry to move. "He likes cats. I don't. Especially not mangy looking ones with half a tail and one ear missing." The cat's response to that was to wind itself around my legs and meow as I fitted my key in the door. "You can't come in. You should be glad I'm not throwing you out on the street. You can thank Cillian for that."

Despite my speech, I expected him to dart between my legs. Because, since when do cats do what they're told? Instead, he just watched as I opened the door and walked in. I turned back to see him sitting as good as gold on the mat, a twinge of conscience plucking at my chest. "Fine," I said after a few seconds of our gazes being locked together. "You can come in tonight, and then tomorrow, you'll need to find somewhere else."

The cat trotted in obediently like it understood every word, which was ridiculous when he was a French cat and I'd spoken English. While he set about sniffing everything in sight, I took my coat off. "You see, the thing is," I said to the cat, "that I barely recognize this new version of Cillian, and I don't know how to feel about that." I searched through my cupboards until I found a can of tuna, the cat making a beeline for me as soon as the can was open, its meows increasing in volume as I dumped half of the contents of the can onto a plate. "Obviously, he's on his best behavior and that won't last. But it's still messing with my head because this Cillian... Well, he's even more attractive, and I can't tell you how dangerous that is."

I set the plate down and the cat tore into it like it had never eaten before. "You can have the rest for breakfast before you go back out on the street. Even I'm not mean enough to throw you out without giving you something." I watched him eat for a

while, surprised by how relaxing it was. “The mistake was not going along with Laurent when he pretended to be my boyfriend. Cillian was walking away. I was the one who made him come back.”

The cat glanced up at me as if to say “too late.”

“Yeah, I realize that,” I argued. “It’s way too late. But none of this changes the fact that I was never over him, that I was just fooling myself I was.”

I was still mulling over the night’s events when I went to bed. I’d only been there ten minutes when the door creaked open. There was a soft pad of paws across the carpet, and then the mattress gave slightly, a warm, furry body curling up right next to me and purring so loudly it made me smile. I reached down and petted him, surprised by how soft his fur felt. “What happened to your ear?”

In news that would surprise no one, the cat didn’t answer. “If he asks me to go out with him again,” I said. “I’m going to say no. I need to call a halt to things now before I’m dragged back down the rabbit hole I worked so hard to crawl out of. Before I start believing that there’s a chance of him changing.” Yeah, it was melodramatic, but in my tired state, I didn’t care. I fell asleep with my fingers buried in the cat’s fur.

Part Two

Chapter Seven

My hotel wasn’t as luxurious as the places I usually stayed in when away from home. There was a simple reason for that: I’d booked it myself, using the not so tried and tested method of carrying out zero research, typing ‘hotel in central’Paris in the search bar, and then booking a room in the first place that had rooms available, rather than letting Amrita handle it.

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There was nothing wrong with it, though. It had a bed to sleep in, a perfectly serviceable room service menu, and a phone I could use with mine languishing at the bottom of the Seine. I smiled at the memory of Finn's face as he'd watched it sink below the surface. Seeing that moment of genuine surprise had been worth every occasion since that I'd reached for it, only to find it wasn't there. Although I'd never admit it to Finn, it felt like someone had chopped my left hand off, the temptation to buy a new phone a constant niggle. So I could hardly blame Finn for his lack of belief in me.

I turned on my laptop and waited for it to fire up, automatically opening my email once it had. Regret was instantaneous, as hundreds of new messages loaded. The ones from Amrita stood out a mile, mainly because for the last few she'd abandoned any attempts at subtlety and gone for block capitals for the subject line, the most recent entitled TALK TO ME, OR SO HELP ME GOD, I WON'T BE RESPONSIBLE FOR MY ACTIONS!!!!!!!!!! I clicked on it, the message content simple and to the point: If you're dead, I need to know that. You're not answering your phone and you're not responding to emails, so I don't know what other conclusion I'm supposed to reach. I guess if you're dead, you won't care how many people are on my back because they've also tried to reach you with just as little success. But on the off chance you're not dead, call me and let me know you're still breathing.

I didn't bother reading through the rest she'd sent, guessing they'd be variations on the same theme. As I'd only been incommunicado for two days, it made me think I was too accessible if going off grid caused that amount of panic in such a brief space of time. You think, Finn's voice drawled in my head. I accessed the cloud backup, where thankfully all my numbers were stored, one name catching my eye before I found Amrita's.

Acting purely on impulse, I picked up the hotel phone and called the number. “Adam speaking,” a cheery voice said after only a couple of rings.

“Hey, Adam. It’s Cillian.”

“Cillian?” He made no effort to keep the surprise out of his voice. “What can I do for you after all this time?”

“Has it been that long?”

“Three years. Maybe even four.” A momentary pause followed. “Yeah, bloody hell, four. Time flies. I’m surprised you’ve still got my number.”

Despite the man on the other end not being able to see, I shrugged. “I was hoping you could answer a question for me.”

“Go on.”

“What was I like as a boyfriend?”

There was a long silence on the other end of the line that I interpreted as stunned, before Adam let out a laugh. “Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Humor me.” Adam and I had been together for close to a year, which was about the longest I’d spent with any one person, so I figured if anyone was qualified to answer the question, he was.

“What are you angling for here?”

“The truth.”

“Okay...” A longer pause while Adam thought about his answer. “As a boyfriend, you were no more and no less than what we both needed at the time.”

I frowned at the rather cryptic answer. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means neither of us wanted anything serious. We wanted someone around to scratch an itch when the urge took us. Which, if you remember, we were both so busy with work, wasn’t that frequent. It meant neither of us had to waste time dating or hooking up with some random, and we could just get right down to the nitty gritty.” Adam seemed to read between the lines of my lack of response. “I’m guessing that’s not what you wanted to hear. I thought you wanted the truth?”

“I did,” I gritted out. “That doesn’t mean it’s easy to hear. You make it sound like I used you.”

“We used each other,” Adam said, his voice calm. “Our split was mutual, remember?”

“Yeah.” I remembered. And I’d lauded myself for the incredibly adult way we’d gone about things. Now, though, it was taking on a different slant. One that neatly slotted in with Finn’s reading of the way things had gone between us. Only, unlike Adam, he hadn’t been on board with it and had expected more from me, and I’d either been too blind or too stupid to see it. Probably both. The gut-wrenching thing was, I’d wanted more, too. I just hadn’t known the work required on my part to achieve it. I’d had genuine feelings for Finn. I still did. It was why I was here. It was also why I’d rung a man I hadn’t spoken to for years to conduct a post-mortem of our past relationship that I expected he would rather have avoided. I cleared my throat. “How are you

doing now?”

“Married,” Adam said with a smile in his voice. “Coming up on two years in March. We’ve just started looking into surrogacy, actually. We’re hoping two will soon become three.”

“That’s great!” I said. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks. How about you? I’m guessing something triggered you asking me what you were like as a boyfriend?”

“I met someone, but I screwed things up. I guess... I wanted to work out if my behavior was a new thing or part of a pattern.”

“I see. Sorry to hear things didn’t work out between you.”

“I’m going to get him back,” I said with far more conviction than I was feeling. “I’m going to prove that nothing is more important to me than him.”

“Yeah? Well, good luck!”

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We made small talk for a couple more minutes before saying our goodbyes. And then I made the second call, Amrita taking longer to answer than Adam had.

“It’s me,” I said.

“Where the...” The pause provided the swearword she wasn’t prepared to say in the office where someone might hear. “...are you?”

“Paris,” I admitted.

“Oh, well... lovely. I hope you’re enjoying your jolly that you didn’t bother telling me you were going on? How’s the Eiffel Tower? Still standing? How about Notre Dame? Have they finished rebuilding it yet?”

“Not a jolly,” I said quickly, before she could really get going and list every major landmark in Paris. “Finn moved to Paris.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah... oh.”

“Have you seen him?”

“Yeah.”

“And how did that go?”

I thought back over the last couple of days, recalling the look on his face when he'd opened his door to find me standing on his doorstep, how he'd let rip and pulled no punches in telling me why he'd left, and his reaction to the restaurant I'd taken him to. I remembered how quickly time had passed last night while we'd chatted over dinner, how I'd found out so many things about him I'd never known, and the disappointment in his eyes when I hadn't kissed him goodnight when he'd expected me to. "It's had its ups and downs."

"And you couldn't call me and tell me what you were doing?"

"My phone is at the bottom of the river."

"Pardon?"

"You heard."

"I heard, but I couldn't make sense out of it."

"I threw it in there. It was a... grand gesture."

"Right."

"Listen... I need you to hold the fort until I get back. Tell anyone that asks for me..."
I shook my head. "I don't care, really. Tell them whatever you want to tell them."

"Can I tell them you've gone abroad to throw yourself on your ex-boyfriend's mercy and to beg for his forgiveness?"

"I'd rather you didn't tell them that."

"That's what you're doing, though, right?"

“In a manner of speaking.”

“And is it working?”

I grimaced. “I don’t know. Sometimes I think it is, and then other times... It’s only been two days. I need longer. I’m taking longer.”

“You’re the boss. I can’t tell you what to do.”

I smiled at the blatant lie. “Yet, you frequently do.”

“Well, I would have told you not to throw your phone in the river. To come up with a different grand gesture.”

“Too late.”

Amrita let out a little sigh. “I always liked Finn.”

“Me too.” I cleared my throat against the wistful tone that had slipped out. “I just wasn’t very good at showing it. I’m going to get better.”

“Flowers,” she said, “and chocolates. Go old-fashioned. Don’t take no for an answer. Well, unless it’s sex. Then you should always take no for an answer. You should also take maybe as no, and basically anything that’s not yes as no.”

“Great advice,” I said with an eye-roll.

“What if you’re successful?” she asked. “What then? Are you going to drag him back to London by his hair?”

“I’m not a caveman.” Amrita might have phrased it in her typical call-a-spade-a-spade fashion, but it raised a good point about what would happen if I was successful in winning Finn back when we lived on opposite sides of the English Channel. “I don’t know. I’ll have to cross that bridge when I come to it. Maybe I’ll sell the agency.”

“No, you won’t.”

“No, I won’t,” I admitted. “Maybe I’ll open a Paris branch and put you in charge of the London branch.”

“What if I want to move to Paris?”

I shook my head at how ornery she was being, even though I knew her well enough to know that I should have expected it. “As always, you’ll do whatever you want and I’ll thank you for it.”

“As you should.” There was amusement in her voice. “It’s like they say, ‘behind every great man is a great woman.’”

“And no one is greater than you.”

“You should save your sweet words for Finn.”

“I should,” I agreed. “I’m going to need them.” I went over to the hotel window to gaze out of it. Given I was in Paris, the view was uninspiring. I craned my neck to see if I could glimpse the Eiffel Tower, but there was none to be had, the hotel room facing the wrong way. “Why didn’t you ever tell me I was fucking up so badly with Finn? You’re never usually shy about sharing your opinions. If I’d known, I might have been able to fix things before he left the country.” The silence told me Amrita was reluctant to answer. “Go on. I can take it.”

She sighed. “Because I thought he was like all the rest.”

“‘All the rest!’ You make me sound like a complete lothario.”

“There have been quite a few over the years.”

“Maybe,” I admitted grudgingly.

“And none of them were ever that serious. So... I assumed Finn was the same. I even thought about warning him off you.”

“You what?” There was no need to fake the outrage in my voice.

“I told you. I liked him.”

“And you didn’t like”—I paused to make mental quotation marks—“all the rest.”

“Not as much as Finn. He’s a sweetie. And completely oblivious to how good looking he is, which is an endearing quality.”

“Maybe I should give him your number.”

“Darling, if there was any part of him, or me for that matter, that was remotely straight, I’d already have given it to him. Although, I invited him out for coffee many times after you giving him a good rogering made him sad.”

“Me, giving him a good rogering did not—” I gripped the phone tighter. “Can we not use the word rogering? We’re adults.”

“One of us is. The other lets their boyfriend move to a different country.”

“You’re fired.”

“Again?”

“I mean it this time.”

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“Course you do. That’s why you’re smiling.”

“I’m not smiling.” I made a concerted effort to straighten my face. “Was he really sad?”

“Sometimes!”

“Shit!” The word was hard to force out around the sudden lump in my throat. “He shouldn’t give me another chance. He should forcibly march me to the airport and put me on a flight back to Heathrow.”

“He should, but him not doing that should tell you something.”

“What?”

“That he still has feelings for you. Don’t fuck it up this time, Cillian.”

“Don’t say fuck in the office.”

“Or what? You’ll fire me?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m still fired from the last time.”

“You’re reinstated.”

“Thanks.”

“And now you’re fired.”

“Oh, I’m devastated.” We both laughed at the conversation we’d had so many times before. “Are you going to get a new phone?” Amrita asked.

“Not yet.”

“How am I supposed to contact you, then?”

“I’ll call you.”

“Fine. Say hello to Finn for me. Tell him he deserves a really nice man in his life and not to settle for anything less than the best. And then make sure you prove to him, that’s you.”

“I will. I intend to. No matter how long it takes.”

“Call me if you need me.”

By the end of the second conversation, I felt wrung out, and the hardest phone call lay ahead. A check of my watch told me Finn would still be at work, so I grabbed my coat and went for a long walk.

It was strange to have time on my hands when I wasn’t used to it. Finn was right about one thing: my life did mainly consist of work. I loved my job, but if I carried on the way I was, I risked that being all I had. And was that what I wanted in twenty... thirty years’ time? A successful advertising agency that made shitloads of money, but no one to leave it to when I died because I’d never had the kids I’d thought I would. Did Finn want kids?

I laughed to myself, a passing woman shooting me a strange look. Pondering Finn's attitude to an extended family was somewhat getting ahead of myself. I could see him as a father, though. He'd make a great one. The kind who attended all his son or daughter's school plays without fail, and who had brilliant advice to offer no matter what stage of their life they were at.

What kind of father would I be? An absent one, my subconscious insisted. The kind who doesn't get home from work until after their son or daughter is already in bed. Rinse and repeat until one day you wake up and they're in their teens and you wonder why all you get them from on the rare occasions your paths cross is backchat. And that's assuming your marriage actually lasted. It'll be far more likely that your husband got fed up with being the sole caregiver and left you. Just like Finn did when he came here. As glimpses of a possible future went, it was bleak.

It was so bleak that I did a U-turn and headed back to the hotel, newly bolstered with plans of creating a different future. And that all started with Finn. My feelings for him had been strong enough to bring me here, and strong enough to ignore all the telltale signs of him not exactly being thrilled to see me, of him not regretting what he'd done, and of him doing it again if he got the chance. I needed to press on with my original plan: a fresh start where we did things the right way. And then, and only then, could I ensure the bleak future I'd just envisioned never came to pass.

Finn took long enough to answer his phone that I feared he was otherwise engaged. Maybe with Laurent—the handsome Frenchman who I'd itched to punch in the face for kissing Finn. "It's me," I said in answer to his slightly breathless hello.

"Oh."

There was one of those small signs again. "Hotel phone," I said. "Therefore, the number isn't blocked."

“Easily rectified,” he said semi-seriously.

“It’s Friday today.”

He gave a small laugh. “Interesting! A speaking calendar. I’ve heard of the speaking clock, but that’s a new one.”

“Tomorrow’s the weekend.”

“Yeah, the weekend always follows Friday.”

“Do you have any plans?” The pause was too long for Finn just to be thinking about his answer. “Spend it with me,” I said quickly, before he could make up a lie.

“Doing what?”

I made up an itinerary on the spot. “I’ll pick you up at eight and we’ll go for breakfast. I’ll find out who does the best croissants in Paris and we’ll go there. Then we can do something touristy. Visit The Eiffel Tower. Or go to The Louvre. Or do something else, if you’d rather. You’ve probably already done those things.”

“I haven’t,” Finn admitted. “Most of my friends here are French, so aren’t interested in doing anything touristy.”

Sensing a chink in his armor, I carried on. “We’ll find somewhere nice for lunch. Somewhere we can just watch the world go by. In the afternoon, we can take a stroll down the Champs-Élysées or go on a river cruise. Wherever the mood takes us. And then we’ll go for dinner. Nowhere posh. I’ve learned that about you now. Just somewhere that does good food and where we can talk some more. Like we did last

night. You enjoyed last night, right?”

“Cillian...”

The edge in his voice had panic coalescing in my chest. “Don’t say no. One weekend, Finn. That’s all I’m asking for.” There was pleading in my voice, but I didn’t care. “Let me romance you for two days. Let me show you what it could have been like if I hadn’t had my head stuck so far up my arse that I couldn’t see daylight.”

At least that got a laugh from Finn. “And then what?”

“What do you mean?”

“What happens after we’ve spent two days together?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Maybe you’ll realize that everything you ever thought about me was right, and you’ll be pleased you can move on with your life with a righteous glow of satisfaction.”

“Maybe...”

I took heart from Finn not sounding too convinced. “Say yes.”

Silence. This time, I let it hang between us until it was excruciatingly painful. For me, anyway. I couldn’t speak for Finn. If I could, this conversation would already be over.

“What happens if I say no?” Finn finally ventured. “Do you turn up at my door, anyway? I moved to Paris. That was supposed to be a no, but you took no notice of it.”

“That’s not fair,” I said. “You didn’t even tell me what you were intending, never mind give me a chance to say goodbye or talk you out of it. And yes, I take some responsibility for my part in that. Not all of it, though. You admitted yourself that it wasn’t the right way to go about things.”

“I feel like...”

When Finn went silent, I prompted him. “What?”

“I feel like we’re going around in circles.”

“One weekend,” I repeated. “How terrible can it be?”

“I’m not worried about it being terrible.”

I smiled at the nugget of honesty. “I know. You have my word that things will never go back to the way they were. I fucked up once. I’m not stupid enough to do it again.”

“Easy to say.”

“Which is why I’m asking you to let me show you. Just give me a chance. No pretending that we’ve only just met. No raking each over the coals for past mistakes. Just me and you enjoying each other’s company and having a nice time together. Two days. Forty-eight hours.”

“Is this how you do deals?”

“No. I go in a lot harder. Because I don’t care as much about the outcome. If they choose to go with someone else, it’s their loss. If you choose to go with someone else, it’s mine and no one else’s.”

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Finn's indrawn breath was shaky. "You never answered my question about what happens if I say no."

"I leave you alone," I said, the words scraping like razor blades in my throat. "I go back to London and you never hear from me again. I'll think of you, but I won't contact you. You have my word on that." I got to a count of twenty before Finn spoke.

"Okay. I'll spend the weekend with you. No baggage. No grudges. Just me and you."

Relief had me feeling like I'd grown a foot taller. "I'll see you at eight tomorrow."

"I'll be ready."

Chapter Eight

My palms were sweaty as I stood in front of Finn's door. Far sweatier than the first time I'd showed up here when I'd half expected him to slam the door in my face. I might not have known—or understood—his reasons for leaving, but I would have had to be stupid not to realize that I'd fucked up. People didn't just up and move to another country on a whim. They did it to escape situations they were no longer comfortable with, and make a fresh start. And they weren't usually keen on the things they'd left behind pursuing them.

In retrospect, Finn slamming the door in my face would have been less painful than his friend's performance, where I was forced to watch him stick his tongue down Finn's throat. Someone stabbing me in the chest and twisting the blade would have

hurt less. Nothing had been sweeter than the relief I'd felt at discovering it was simply an act.

I ran a hand through my hair to fix any loose strands and took a deep breath before knocking. I was early, but better early than late, and if Finn wasn't ready, I was happy to wait. Barely a beat passed before he flung the door open. Our outfits were alike; we both wore blue jeans and jumpers—mine black, his green—with a white pattern—that brought out the color of his eyes. Rather than running an appraising eye over me as I was doing to him, he fixated on the object in my hands, his brows drawing together. “You brought me cat food? How romantic.”

“Oh.” I held up the box of cat biscuits, heat rising in my cheeks as I stared at it. “I kept thinking about that cat. It was skinny, and I thought I could give it at least one good meal. Only, it's nowhere to be seen. Hopefully, someone's been kind enough to take it in.”

Finn crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the doorjamb, his smile crooked. “Who'd be stupid enough to do that?”

“Someone might. If I lived here, I would. I hope nothing's happened to it.”

Finn laughed. There was a split second where I reconsidered everything I knew about him, if he was cruel enough to laugh at a cat's demise. Then, he shoved the door open wider to reveal a familiar ginger cat washing itself on the arm of his sofa. “You took him in?”

He rolled his eyes. “It was supposed to be for one night. But he made himself so at home that I didn't have the heart to throw him out. And he's actually quite sweet, so...” Finn shrugged. “I guess I have a cat.” He plucked the box of cat biscuits from my hand and gave them a shake, the cat interested enough in the noise to stop washing and sit up. “All contributions to the cat-that-eats-more-like-a-pig fund

gratefully accepted.” He headed back into the flat, turning when I didn’t follow. “Come in. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m not wearing shoes. And I’m not ready to go gallivanting around Paris barefoot.”

“I can wait outside. I don’t mind.”

He leveled me with a hard stare. “No baggage, remember? Or was that just lip service?”

Accepting his point with a slight inclination of my head, I stepped inside and let the door close behind me. Recognizing a friend, the cat immediately leaped off the sofa and came over to say hello. He wound himself round and round my legs until I gave in to the inevitable and crouched down to rub him behind the ears, his purr growing louder once he gotten what he wanted. “Have you thought of a name for him?”

Finn glanced up from tying the shoelaces of his trainers. “Pain in the arse.”

“Bit long to have to shout and somebody might take it as an invitation.”

“Have you got any suggestions? It’s your fault he’s here, so the least you can do is help name him.”

“Something French,” I mused. I looked around while Finn was otherwise engaged. It was tidier than his place in London used to be, but I suspected that was more about him not having had the chance to mess it up yet, rather than turning over a new leaf. Potted plants were already encroaching, and I doubted he’d done more than look at the pictures in the French magazines.

“Van Gogh!” Finn said with something close to triumph. He circled a finger at the side of his head. “You know, on account of the missing ear.”

“Van Gogh was Dutch, not French.”

“I didn’t say it had to be French. You were the one that said that. You’d have me call him Eiffel or something.”

“Champs-Élysées?” I suggested with a grin.

“Too posh.”

We were still suggesting names when we sat down in a small cafe overlooking Notre Dame. In what I took as a good sign, the day had all the hallmarks of being a lovely one weather-wise, the temperature warm enough, even at this early hour, that we’d foregone the option of a table inside to watch the world go by instead. The only downside was Finn producing a pair of sunglasses, which robbed me of the sight of his long-lashed green eyes.

I gave serious contemplation to whether my phone at the bottom of the river would like some sunglasses for company before reminding myself there was a world of difference between throwing my own things in and throwing other people’s in. This was supposed to be a perfect date, an opportunity to prove to Finn that he’d be making a huge mistake if he let me disappear from his life. Not convince him he was right.

Finn made an appreciative noise as he took a bite of his pain au chocolat and washed it down with a gulp of coffee. “You’ve gone quiet,” he said once he’d swallowed.

“Just thinking.”

“About?”

“Names.” I figured the white lie was better than telling the truth. A bolt of inspiration hit as I stared at the elaborate brickwork of Notre Dame. “I’ve got it!” Finn quirked an eyebrow and didn’t look convinced. “You wanted a name that wasn’t perfect, right? That sums up his slightly unusual appearance? And I wanted something French.”

“I don’t remember it being half your cat, but yeah.”

My gut filled with warmth at the idea of sharing something like that with Finn. First, a cat, and then maybe a few years down the line, kids. I still had an awful lot of damage control to do before that became anything but a pipe dream, though. And I needed to remember that he’d said we didn’t share a cat. “Quasimodo,” I said.

Unlike all the other names that Finn had summarily dismissed, some silly, some serious, he thought about that one, tipping his head to one side as he considered it. “That does kind of fit,” he finally admitted.

“French and imperfect,” I said.

He nodded. “Quasimodo, it is.”

Finn shifted in his seat, the movement bringing his thigh closer to mine. My fingers itched to reach out and touch, the urge so strong that resisting took willpower. Not being allowed to touch was the hardest thing about our estranged relationship since my arrival in Paris. At first, because I knew it would be unwelcome, and then in the

moments where he'd mellowed toward me, because I hadn't wanted to risk being accused of trying to seduce him in case it ruined everything.

Finn had said it himself when we'd raked over the ashes of our dead relationship—the relationship I'd killed—that sex had never been the problem. Therefore, that part didn't need fixing. It needed placing reverently on a shelf like the finest of bone china, only to be brought down when the time was right, and to be handled with the utmost care when it was.

When I broke from the rather strange analogy of comparing Finn to something I might take on *The Antiques Roadshow*, he'd removed his sunglasses and was staring at me with a quizzical expression. "What do you think might happen if you touch me?"

Surprised by his directness, I weighed my answer. "If I'd tried it that first time I came to see you, probably a punch in the face."

"Probably," Finn conceded with a wry smile. "But what about now?"

"I don't know. Your feelings about my presence in Paris seem to oscillate from one moment to the next. It's hard to keep up."

Finn grimaced. "Fair. And true. But you know why that is."

I did, but his request that I articulate it surprised me. "Because you still have feelings for me, but you wish you didn't. You'd rather fight it with every fiber of your being."

"Do you blame me?"

"No."

Finn's thigh jiggled up and down, muscles flexing beneath the denim. "You should try it and see what happens."

"You're baiting me now?"

"Maybe." He left a deliberately long pause. "Maybe not. You won't know unless you try."

I half expected him to retract his leg as I reached out cautiously. He didn't, my fingers curling around his knee. I left my hand there, warmth seeping into my palm and everything suddenly right with the world. Sun. Good food. And a handsome companion. What more did you need in life?

"Bit different," Finn said after another bite of his pastry, "to the night we first met. I don't remember you being shy about touching me then."

I let my hand stray further up his leg. Not high enough for anyone looking over to be scandalized, but high enough that it became less like friends and more like lovers. "I don't remember you being shy about being touched."

Finn leaned forward over the table. "What do you remember about that night?"

"I remember a very boring party, and working out how early I could leave without upsetting anyone. And then I remember looking across the room and seeing you."

"Did your heart skip a beat?" There was an amused look on Finn's face that said he was taking the piss and didn't believe that for one moment.

"Pretty much."

He laughed. "Right..."

“It did. You were by far the best looking man there that night. That’s why I made a beeline for you. It was only the length of the restaurant, but it was the longest walk of my life.”

Finn frowned. “Why?”

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“Because... I had this little voice in my head saying, what if he’s not gay? Or what if he is, but he didn’t come to the party alone and he’s already got a boyfriend? Or, even worse, a husband?”

“And instead, I was very much gay. And very much single.”

“And we went home together,” I said, the memory not as happy as it should have been.

“Yeah,” Finn agreed. He lowered his voice, so it didn’t carry to the surrounding tables, all of them occupied. “And we screwed against the wall of your living room. We didn’t even make it as far as the bedroom.”

And that was why it wasn’t a happy memory. “You deserved better.”

Finn shrugged. “I had no complaints at the time. At least you took me for dinner the next night. Just for the record, I class that as our first date. Not the bonkathon of night one.”

“That phone call,” I said, “the one you mentioned when we were in the brasserie, the one that I went outside to take and you weren’t happy about. I want you to know that it wasn’t what you thought.”

Finn’s thigh twitched slightly beneath my hand. “No?”

“I rang Amrita.”

“Right,” he said, “your PA. That’s exactly what I thought.”

“She is my PA, yeah. But you know she’s far more than that to me.” When Finn nodded his assent, I continued. “I rang her to tell her I’d met a wonderful guy. Someone who was sexy, but who could also make me laugh. I know it sounds crazy considering how I treated you afterward, but I really felt like all my Christmases had come at once.”

“It does sound crazy,” Finn said. He sounded more sad than annoyed, though. “And that was one phone call out of the hundreds that followed.”

There was no arguing with that. “I haven’t missed it,” I said. When Finn raised an eyebrow, I elaborated. “Having a phone. Being bombarded with calls from dawn till dusk. Whatever happens between us, it’s clear that I need to make some changes, that I need to find a better work-life balance before I find myself alone forever.”

Finn raised his coffee cup in a toast. “Then this trip has been fruitful for you.” He finished his coffee and stood, my hand slipping from his thigh. “Come on. Someone promised me a day packed full of activities. And so far, as nice as the coffee and pastries are, we’ve just sat on our arses and moaned about the past. No more mention of it today, alright? It comes firmly under the category of baggage.”

“Agreed,” I said as Finn pulled me to my feet. That was a sentiment I could get fully behind.

Chapter Nine

Finn giving me permission to touch opened the floodgates and, whether it was gentle touches on the shoulder, or a hand on his hip to guide him away from crowds, I didn’t seem able to stop myself. We chatted about meaningless stuff while we were in the queue for the Louvre, and then we wandered around its galleries for hours until we

could no longer ignore the rumbling of our stomachs.

Deciding we didn't want to eat within the packed confines of the museum when there were so many wonderful places in the city, we headed back outside. We found a small bistro instead, both of us bypassing the snails on offer to have French onion soup—because if you can't have it when you're in France, when can you?—with crusty bread.

By the time we went for a stroll along the Champs-Élysées to the Arc de Triomphe, I could no longer resist the urge to reach out and take Finn's hand. There was a risk it would jerk him out of the peaceful thrall we'd fallen into, as comforting and cozy as any blanket, but it was a risk I was willing to take.

Finn stopped suddenly as I slipped my hand into his, looking down at our entwined fingers with an unreadable expression. "Is this okay?" I asked, my heart thumping an irregular rhythm in my chest. I hadn't asked a boy if I could hold his hand since I was fifteen, and I was just as nervous now as I'd been then. Maybe even more nervous because I knew how much was at stake.

He stared at our hands for a few seconds more before a small smile slipped onto his face. "I never took you for a hand-holder, Mr. King."

I shrugged, ignoring the heat I could feel invading my cheeks. "I'm discovering a lot of things about myself on this trip."

We started walking again with our fingers interlocked, the simple intimacy feeling so right that it was embarrassing to contemplate why in six months of having Finn in my life, I'd never held his hand. Not even once. What an absolute waste. If I needed any more proof that I'd been a prize idiot, there it was.

Finn gave my hand a squeeze. "Like what?" I groaned inwardly. I should have known

Finn wouldn't let a statement like that go by without questioning it. I tugged him over to a shop window, hoping the display of expensive watches might distract him. He didn't even look at them, his gaze remaining locked on my face. "No, really. Like what?"

I gave up on the shop window, and we started walking again. "Do you want a list?"

"Yeah, I do. I'm interested."

"I work too hard."

"Well, duh!"

"I'm in danger of ending up a rich but lonely old man."

"You missed handsome. You'll be a rich, handsome, lonely old man."

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“Oh well. That’s so much better.”

Finn shrugged. The quirk of his lips gave away his amusement, though.

“I’ve learned I’m a prize idiot.”

“I already knew that.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I need to make changes. A lot of changes.”

“How are you going to do that?”

There was an edge to Finn’s voice that said the answer mattered more than he was willing to let on. It was a shame, then, that I didn’t have any answers for him yet. “I don’t know. That’s the tough part. It’s going to take time to work out.”

Silence crept in for a while after that. We kept holding hands, our fingers finding their way back together when crowds forced us apart. We ate dinner as part of a river cruise that took us on a tour of Paris along the Seine, Finn joking that if I’d come looking for my phone, he’d jump off the boat and swim back home.

We didn’t arrive back in front of Finn’s building until gone eleven. It had been a long day, but a perfect one. Or at least that was my interpretation of it.

“So...” Finn said as he came to a stop and turned to face me, the glow of the streetlight making his cheekbones appear even sharper than they already were. “I suppose I better go in and check that Quasimodo hasn’t gotten up to any mischief in my absence. I expect he’s hungry as well.”

“Probably.”

Despite his words, Finn made no move to turn and go inside, staying exactly where he was, like his feet had become glued to the tarmac. Finally, he let out a frustrated sigh. “I know what you’re doing, you know.”

“What I’m doing?” As I wasn’t aware I was doing anything, my confusion was genuine.

“This whole not kissing me thing. You’re trying to drive me crazy.”

A strangled laugh escaped from my throat. “If I am, it’s backfiring, and I’m driving myself crazy at the same time.”

Finn moved closer, tipping his head back to regard me with an inscrutable expression. “So... you should kiss me. And then you should come inside with me and we can go to bed together. It’ll make spending the day together tomorrow easier, save you having to traipse all the way back to the hotel, just to have to come back in the morning.”

I brushed a lock of hair back from his temple while I contemplated the fact that his words made perfect practical sense. More than that, though, it would mean getting to strip him out of his clothes and see the body I hadn’t seen in so long. The sharp line of his collarbone. The hollow of his hip. Dusky pink nipples that pebbled at my touch. Soft inner thigh. A cock that curved slightly to the right, and that felt like the perfect size when I sucked it.

The list of things I wanted to do to Finn was almost endless. And I wanted to take my time like I never had before. Not just suck and fuck him until we both came in a shuddering orgasm, but to tease him and see what noises he might make if I slowed everything down and tormented him a bit. And he'd just invited me to come upstairs and do all of those things.

My intention had been to drop my arm back to my side once I'd brushed his hair back, but I found my fingers lingering, Finn not helping matters when he turned into my touch. "Why are you waiting for me to kiss you? You could kiss me." My voice was husky. With emotion? With arousal? Both probably. Nerves no doubt played a part, too. I hadn't kissed him because I wanted to get it right. Was now the right time?

Unfortunately, there was no handbook to be had on how you dug yourself out of a metaphorical relationship mineshaft that you and you alone had dug. I'd come to Paris with only one certainty: the knowledge that I wasn't ready to let Finn go without a fight. How to do that had required constant strategizing and rethinking in the few days that I'd been here, as well as a refusal to take Finn's words at face value and read between the lines. Like walking a tightrope.

A weaker man would have balked on the first night when Finn had made it clear how unhappy I'd made him. No man liked to hear that. Especially when I'd remained oblivious to it, too wrapped up in myself to see the signs. I was in this for the long haul. Not for a night or two, so in my mind, as impractical as it might seem with him in Paris and me in London, we had all the time in the world.

Even as I thought that, my fingers drifted to his chin, and I leaned forward to bring our lips together. The day hadn't been perfect, I realized, as Finn wound his arms around my neck and we kissed. Now I had him in my arms and he was responding enthusiastically. Now it was perfect.

Enthusiasm didn't mean we rushed things. We savored the kiss like we were tasting

fine wine rather than each other. It was inevitable it would eventually deepen and that tongues would get involved, that hands would grasp at fabric, and small sounds of pleasure would escape between kisses. His? Mine? It was impossible to tell.

When we eventually eased back from each other, we were both breathless. I drank in the intoxicating sight of Finn's desire for me: the flushed cheeks; the dilated pupils; and the redness of his lips. He looked like a man who'd been well and truly kissed, and I was insanely pleased to have been the one to do it. "Our first kiss," I said quietly.

Finn laughed. "Yeah, right?" He cocked his head to one side and regarded me curiously. "Why wasn't our actual first kiss anything like that?"

I thought about it, recalling pushing Finn against the wall the very second I'd gotten him inside my flat. It had been all simmering lust and haste. A means to an end rather than something that should have stood alone. "Because I was too busy getting you out of your clothes," I answered honestly. "My priorities were skewed."

"Ah, yeah, that's right," Finn said in a tone that wouldn't have been out of place if I'd just revealed the eighth wonder of the world.

We were still pressed together and I luxuriated in his body heat for a few extra seconds before reluctantly putting some distance between us by stepping back. I knew that in the short-term accompanying him upstairs would be wonderful, but I needed to keep thinking long-term, which meant forcing my brain to decide rather than my cock. We'd rushed everything the first time, and it had crashed and burned.

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Finn let out a little huffing sound. “Just a kiss.”

It was more a statement than a question, but I answered it anyway. “For now.” I jerked my head to the doorway a few feet away. “You should go before my resolve crumbles.”

This time, Finn didn’t argue, smiling as he stepped back. “What time, tomorrow?”

“Eleven,” I said. “It’s been a busy day and we’re both tired. We need a good night’s sleep if we’re going to do tomorrow justice.”

Finn nodded. “Eiffel Tower, tomorrow. I’m never going to find a Parisian to go with me. Laurent would rather die than go there.”

“Eiffel Tower,” I agreed. “Whatever you want to do. I’m at your disposal.”

Finn didn’t comment, but there was a softness in his eyes that said he understood the sentiment. “Night, Cillian.”

“Night, Finn.”

Only once he’d disappeared into the building and the door had closed behind him, did I turn and walk away. I was still smiling when I reached my hotel, one or two of the night staff giving me a quizzical look as I passed. “It’s been a fantastic day,” I said to one in explanation. “Très bonne journée.” He nodded, looking even more confused.

Chapter Ten

We shared a kiss at the top of the Eiffel Tower, looking out across Paris. The number of people around prevented us from prolonging the kiss as we had the previous night. Neither of us was keen for our romantic moment to be captured for all the world to see on some foreign tourist's camera.

"Did you know," Finn asked as we admired the view, "that this held the record as the world's tallest building when it opened in 1889?"

"I did not."

"Although, its height changes depending on the season." He laughed at my slight frown. "It changes by thirteen inches."

"That's a lot of inches."

He winked. "Isn't it? More than any man needs."

As I wasn't ready to pop a boner at one of the world's most visited tourist destinations, I quickly brought the conversation back to the original point. "Go on, explain."

Finn slid a hand into mine and my heart skipped a beat, him instigating the intimacy making me miss the first part of what he'd said.

"...iron."

"Iron," I repeated dumbly.

"It expands and contracts depending on the temperature. So in summer, it can be seven inches taller, and in winter when it's cold, it can be six inches shorter. Thirteen inches."

“I can do the maths,” I said with a smile. “I might just be an advertising schmuck, rather than someone who works with numbers, but even I can work out the difference between seven and negative six.”

“Just thought I’d help you out. And I don’t think the founder of a successful business gets to describe themselves as a schmuck.”

“Maybe not,” I conceded. “Amrita calls me far worse on a daily basis though.”

“How did you two meet?” Finn asked. “I know she’s far more than a PA to you. More like your right-hand woman and your advisor. And I suspect her wages are far superior to that of the average PA.”

I laughed at that. “That’s true. Sometimes if I piss her off, she’ll ask for a raise. The record is four salary hikes in a single year. Small ones. But add them together and they were pretty hefty.” A gust of wind blew, our position at eight hundred and three meters, making it feel more like a gale. I automatically pulled Finn into my body to shelter him from the worst of its effects.

“My hero,” he said with a laugh. “What are you going to take on next for me? Rain? Hail? Snow?”

“Next time, I’ll let you be blown off the side.” I was laughing, too, though. And the best thing was that Finn hadn’t stepped back, his body a heated line against mine through the layers of our clothing. I wrapped an arm around him and kept him there, rubbing slow circles over his shoulder blade with my thumb. This was better than sex. Way better. Because sex was something you could do with anyone. Whereas true romantic feelings were far rarer. Not that my dreams hadn’t been full of what-if scenarios after last night. What if I hadn’t left Finn alone and gone upstairs with him instead? What if I’d listened to him on that last day and given him an opportunity to tell me what was bothering him?

There was no changing the past, though. Whether that was minutes ago, hours ago, or months. There was only living in the present. The right here and right now. And it felt like I was getting better at being able to appreciate it for what it was.

“Is there a reason you’re not answering my question about Amrita? Did the two of you have a torrid affair you don’t want me to know about?”

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“Good God, no! She’d eat me alive.” It was noticeable that Finn didn’t argue. “In the early days of the agency, I did all my best thinking at a local coffee shop. I used to get a table in the back and work on storyboards for campaigns.” I smiled at the memory of a life a million miles away from the one I lived now. In many respects, I’d been just as happy. Maybe even happier.

Finn’s slight frown said he didn’t know how the two things linked. “She worked there,” I explained. “She always seemed to get stuck with the night shift, so our paths crossed frequently. Some nights, particularly when the weather was bad, only the two of us were in there. One night, she got bored enough that she sat down and asked what I was doing. And you’ve met Amrita. She was no different when she was younger. She was just as opinionated back then as she is now. So she had zero qualms in telling me what she thought of my ideas. I scrapped entire campaigns and went back to the drawing board just because she told me something was crap.” I smiled. “And on those rare occasions when her eyes lit up, and she began talking with her hands, I knew I was onto something. She became my bestsounding board. And nine times out of ten, she was right. I don’t know if I’d have been as successful without her in my corner.”

Another gust of wind blew, and I gathered Finn close again, Finn just smirking this time. “And to cut a long story short, we both reached the same conclusion after a few months, that she was far better at what I did than at what she did, so I offered her a job.”

Finn nodded slowly. “Sounds more like you should have made her a partner.”

“I tried,” I said with a laugh. “But she wasn’t having it. She said she didn’t have the

right qualifications, that people wouldn't take her seriously. Instead, she turned herself into my secret weapon. Her words," I added when Finn raised an eyebrow at the terminology. "You have no idea the things people are prepared to say in front of a PA that they wouldn't say if they realized she runs straight to me and tells me everything."

"Clever," Finn said with something close to admiration in his voice. "It's a shame you're not straight, you could have married her."

"Except she's not straight either."

"No?" Finn seemed genuinely surprised by the notion. "I'm going to have to take my gaydar in for a servicing."

"You should," I agreed. "She's had the same girlfriend for six years. The two of them are ridiculously happy together. It's enough to drive people crazy with jealousy."

"Even you?" Finn queried with a glint in his eye that dared me to tell the truth.

"Before... no. But more recently..."

"How recent?"

"Tell me some more facts about the Eiffel Tower. Astound me with your knowledge."

"You think I won't know any more, don't you?"

"Maybe."

Finn thought for a moment. "It was yellow at one point. They painted it to preserve

the iron. Guess how many painters it takes to paint it.”

“A lot.”

“That’s not a number.”

“You and your numbers,” I teased.

“Guess.”

“Thirty.”

“Higher.”

“Forty.”

“Higher.”

“A hundred.”

Finn sighed. “Too high. You should have continued with your strategy.”

“I wasn’t aware I had one.”

Finn rolled his eyes. “Thirty... Forty... what comes next?”

“Fifty.”

He let go of my hand to give me a slow handclap. “Well done.”

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I gave a mock bow. “Thank you. I can’t even remember what the question was now.”

“Number of painters.”

“Right.” While we took the stairs back down to the second level, Finn regaled me with more facts, including that the tower had taken two years, two months and five days to build, and that Hitler had ordered its destruction during the second world war, but that the man tasked with carrying it out had been so shocked, he hadn’t done it.

“You should be a tour guide,” I said once we reached the bottom of the one thousand six hundred and sixty-five steps. I hadn’t counted them; it had been another one of Finn’s facts.

“I’ve probably bored you to tears.”

“You haven’t,” I said, my answer coming as something of a surprise even to me. It was true, though. I could listen to Finn talk about anything he was enthusiastic about. So why didn’t you? Why didn’t you ever spend a lazy Saturday morning with him in bed and just talk about stuff that didn’t really matter? Picturing that scenario and the way it should have gone had an ache forming in my chest that no amount of rubbing would ease.

“Now what?” Finn asked as we walked away from the Eiffel Tower.

“Your choice.”

Finn’s choice turned out to be a restaurant we stumbled across down a side street.

“See,” he said once I’d enthused heartily over the food. “There are plenty of places without a Michelin star where you can get a perfectly good meal. And you get a decent amount of food on your plate without re-mortgaging your house.”

“No Michelin starred restaurants,” I drawled. “Duly noted. I should have taken you to Burger King.”

Finn smiled. “I wouldn’t have complained. They do good milkshakes.”

I shook my head in mock reproach. “A milkshake. Who even are you?”

Finn grinned unabashedly. “The same person I always was. You just needed to look past the seemingly cultured exterior to the boy inside who’s never grown up and has a bit of a sweet tooth.”

I propped my chin on my hand and studied him. “More like I got lost in your eyes and couldn’t see anything beyond that.”

Finn groaned. “Oh, please. Don’t start getting cheesy, or I’ll have to get up and walk out.”

“What country are you going to this time?” I grimaced. “Sorry. That was a low blow.”

“It was,” Finn agreed. “And it broke our embargo not to rake up the past.” He softened his words by smiling. “Besides, If I’ve learned one thing from you following me here, it’s that next time I need to make sure no one knows where I’m going.”

He might have meant it as a joke, but the thought of such a thing happening was still wounding. Searching for a distraction, I focused on the small dance floor at the center of the restaurant, a live band having played enthusiastically ever since we arrived.

Most of the songs were instrumental only, but every now and again, a female singer stepped in to provide husky vocals in French.

“What’s she singing about?” Finn asked, following my gaze.

I listened for a moment, my smile wry once I worked it out. “Love. It’s a song about two estranged lovers who never seem to be in the right place at the right time.” There were only two couples on the dance floor, their demeanors a complete contrast. While the older couple didn’t look like they gave two hoots what anyone thought, the younger pair had an air of embarrassment about their movements. They were still brave enough to get up in front of everyone and give it a go, though.

“Dance with me,” I said on impulse.

Finn laughed. “Yeah, right?”

“I’m serious. Why not?”

“Because... I can’t dance. And neither can...” Finn stopped abruptly, his brow creasing. “Can you dance?”

“Not really.” My gaze strayed back to the younger couple. They’d loosened up a bit, more interested in staring into each other’s eyes. “But we should challenge ourselves sometimes. Try something new.”

“Great. Good advice. I’ll book a pottery class. Or go to Zumba.”

“Dance with me, Finlay Ian Prescott.” I stood and held out a hand.

Finn tipped his head back and stared up at me, his eyes narrowed. “When did I ever tell you my middle name?”

I shrugged. “No idea, but you must have done. Or how would I know it?”

“If I did, I’m surprised you were listening.”

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“Baggage,” I chided him. “You know what isn’t baggage? Dancing. We’ve never done that before.” I wagged my fingers at Finn. “Come on. What’s the worst that can happen?”

“I could trip over and fall flat on my face and people will laugh. And it’ll somehow get back to my workplace. And then they’ll laugh. I have to live here. You don’t.”

“I’ll buy you a milkshake,” I said with a wink.

“Oh well, in that case.” He took hold of my hand and let me tug him to his feet. “If we get homophobic abuse aimed at us and end up in a fight, I’m letting you know now that I’ll be informing the police that it’s one hundred percent your fault.”

“Only if they speak English,” I pointed out as I pulled him onto the floor and into my arms. Neither of us really knew how to dance, but it didn’t take us long to figure out that being plastered together and moving semi-rhythmically was enough. There were no homophobic insults thrown our way. In fact, I was pretty sure that at one point someone said “aww” as I gained enough courage to spin Finn around.

“This isn’t so bad,” he finally admitted once we’d been there for about ten minutes and neither of us had tripped over the other’s feet.

“We should take dance classes,” I said. “I think we’ve got a natural aptitude for it.”

“You do, do you?” Finn was laughing, the green eyes alight with mirth making something clench in my chest. “I’m not sure I’d go that far.”

“We could learn to...” I cast about for the name of a dance. “I don’t know, do the tango or something.”

“The tango!” Finn tipped his head back. “U-huh. What else?”

“The waltz.” He arched an eyebrow, challenging me to come up with more. “The... fandango.”

“Not a dance.”

“Not yet. But we could invent it. It’ll become the world’s biggest dance with both old and young desperate to learn how to do it. A dance craze like no other.”

“There’s the ad exec we know and love,” Finn said with a slight eye-roll. “Always looking to sell something as the greatest thing. Even if it doesn’t exist yet.”

There was no arguing with him, so I kissed him instead, more kissing than dancing happening from that point onwards. There were moments where we almost forgot we needed to keep it PG13, both of us laughing when we had to cool things. As ideas went, it was the cherry on top of what had already been a perfect weekend.

I waited until the last possible moment to spoil it, the twinkling lights of Paris our companion, as we walked hand in hand toward Finn’s building. “I have to go back to London soon,” I said.

Chapter Eleven

Finn’s fingers tightened around mine momentarily before he let go altogether. The silence that followed was deafening while I wished with all my might that I’d waited. I could have called him the next day and we could have discussed it over the phone. At least then, I wouldn’t have had to suffer the absence of his touch. And any hope of

being able to retrieve what I'd lost shattered as he shoved his hands deep into his pockets. "Finn?"

"When?"

He delivered the single word as sharp as a whip crack. So sharp that it was all I could do not to reel back from it. "I don't know. Soon. I've been here five days already."

"Five whole days," Finn drawled. "Someone give the man a prize for his stamina."

"Don't be like that. You knew I had to go back eventually."

"Yeah," he said, the lack of emotion in his voice worse than if he'd carried on being angry.

"It's not like I could just stay here forever. I have people relying on me. An entire workforce."

"You do indeed."

I carried on walking, the realization that Finn had come to a grinding halt and I was alone taking a few seconds. I turned to find him studying his watch. "What are you doing?"

"With my watch? Would you believe checking the time? People originally invented watches for that purpose. I understand your confusion, though, in this age of tracking everything from step count to sleep quality with them. But I thought I'd stick to the traditional. I was just thinking about how late you can get a flight. I reckon if you head straight for the airport, you might be in luck."

Yeah, I'd definitely played this all wrong. It seemed I was just fated to keep fucking

up with Finn. “I don’t want to get a flight tonight.”

“Early tomorrow morning, then. You could sleep at the airport.”

I retraced my steps to close the space between us. I ached to reach out and touch him, but knowing he would rebuff any attempt at contact, I curled my fingers into my palms instead. “I don’t want to go. I’d rather stay here.” With you. I didn’t say the last two words out loud. It would have been overkill, and Finn wouldn’t have been receptive to them.

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“Stay here then.” Finn’s eyes flashed a challenge.

“You know I can’t.”

He tipped his chin up, his eyes glittering. “I assume you always had it in mind to fly back after the weekend?”

Had I? Maybe subconsciously, but I’d done my best not to think about it. Every conversation I’d had with Amrita, though, had added another thing to the list that needed doing, every other sentence from her seeming to end in “when you get back.”

Finn started walking again, his pace brisk like he had somewhere to be, and the quicker he got there, the better. I hurried to catch up with him. I bet he just couldn’t wait to put a few inches of wood between us when he closed the door in my face. “I shouldn’t have said anything today.”

Finn’s laugh was bitter. “Let’s be honest here. It’s not you, it’s—”

I seized hold of him and dragged him to a stop before he could complete his thought. “Don’t you dare trot out that tired old line. It’s not you. You’re perfect.”

Finn snorted. “Hardly.”

Spotting a cafe still open, I tugged him inside, Finn’s protest weak at best. While he went to sit at a table at the back, I ordered, keeping one eye on him in case he made a run for it. Since he hadn’t told me what he wanted, it was left to me to decide. Given the lateness of the hour, I went for hot chocolate for both of us.

Finns muttered “thank you” as I deposited it in front of him, nearly had me smiling. Only Finn could remain so polite while being pissed at me.

For a moment, we sat in silence, neither of us looking at the other. I broke first. “I’m sorry. It’s not like I deliberately kept anything from you, but I admit I could have handled it better.”

Finn leaned forward to wrap his hands around his mug. “I know. There was a moment out there when I thought it might be some sort of twisted revenge, but now I’ve thought about it properly, I know it’s not.”

I frowned. “Revenge?”

“For leaving the way I did,” Finn explained. “You follow me to Paris. You wine and dine me. You stir up old emotions, and then as soon as you’ve got me feeling things I don’t want to be feeling, you leave. You know, tit for tat.”

“I would never—”

“I know,” he said. “It was a passing thought and then I dismissed it.”

At least that explained how quickly he’d gone from angry to disappointed. “I would have slept with you,” I pointed out, “had that been the case.”

Finn locked his gaze onto mine. “Why didn’t you?”

“Because... we jumped into bed at the drop of a hat when we first met, and I wanted to do things differently this time.”

Finn’s nod was slow and considering. “I would have slept with you, you know. Maybe not the first night, but definitely the second.” He smiled, but it was tinged

with sadness. “Apparently, it doesn’t take much to get me into bed.”

“I’d like to think that’s more about how sexually compatible we are than you having loose morals.”

Finn dropped his gaze, his fringe falling over his eyes. “It’s probably a bit of both, if I’m honest.”

I waited for him to lift his head back up. “This doesn’t have to be the end. It’s just a...” I cast around for the right words. “It’s an obstacle.”

Finn’s eyebrow arched. “It’s a pretty big one.”

“Only if we let it be. We can talk. Every night. We can video call.”

Finn tapped a rhythm I didn’t recognize on his untouched mug of hot chocolate. “Right.”

“You don’t believe me?”

He heaved out a sigh. “You have a very poor history of communication. And that was when we were in the same city. I believe you think you’ll keep in contact. I even believe that you’ll manage it in the short-term... a few days... Maybe even a week if you try really hard. But it’ll tail off.”

I shook my head vehemently. “It won’t.”

Finn sat back in his chair. “So... just to be clear... You’re suggesting we have a long distance relationship?”

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“I guess so.” I took the plunge and reached across the table to cover Finn’s hands with mine, the warmth of the hot chocolates spreading from his to mine. “I’m suggesting whatever keeps you in my life.”

“And what are we to each other, exactly?”

Whatever you want us to be. I didn’t say that. It was too pat, too easy to force the ball back into his court, and he deserved better. “Boyfriends,” I said, making it sound definitive rather than adding the question mark I wanted to add.

Finn’s “hmm” in response wasn’t that promising.

“If asked,” I continued, “I want to say that I have a wonderful boyfriend who currently lives in Paris, and that it’s not the ideal scenario, but that we’re making the best of it until we can work out a solution that works for both of us.”

“And what am I supposed to say?”

I let go of his hands to wrap them around my mug. “That you’re currently shackled to an absolute pain in the arse who doesn’t deserve you, but that we all have our crosses to bear, and that’s yours.”

Finn laughed, the sound giving me hope. “What about if I say a handsome pain in the arse instead?”

“That makes you sound shallow. Like you’ll put up with being treated like shit for a good pair of cheekbones. And we both know that neither of those things is true.”

Finn rolled his eyes. He lifted his mug to his lips and regarded me over the rim while he took a drink. "I must be mad to even consider saying yes to this. But then..." He shook his head wearily. "I was mad to give you the time of day when you turned up out of the blue. I was mad to go on a date with you. And I was mad to spend the weekend with you, so I don't know why I'm surprised. You even made me dance."

He said the last bit with such disgust that I couldn't help but smile. "You enjoyed it."

His nose wrinkled. "Maybe."

"Definitely."

"If you're leaving tomorrow," Finn said slowly, "you should come home with me tonight, so that we can say goodbye to each other properly."

"There is nothing I'd like more," I said, my voice raw with emotion, "than to strip you out of your clothes and kiss every single inch of bare skin I uncover." When Finn shifted uncomfortably in his seat, I smiled. "But I haven't earned that right yet. Something that precious should take more than five days of being on my best behavior."

"It's not a test," Finn said, his expression disgruntled. "And maybe I don't want to be something precious. Maybe I just want to be held down and fucked. It's been a while."

Now we were both horny. "How long?" He didn't even need to verbalize his answer, his expression bringing a smug smile to my lips. "Really?"

"I've been busy! I moved to a new country, started a new job, and I had the flat to sort out."

I held my hands up in mock defense, still grinning from ear to ear. “You don’t need to make excuses.”

Finn shook his head, his cheeks flaming. “Shut up.”

“If it helps,” I said, “that was the last time for me as well.” I took a swig of hot chocolate. “It’s almost like we were still hung up on each other.”

“Or I was busy.”

“Or you were busy,” I parroted. “And still hung up on me.” Finn shook his head, but there was no disguising the slight twitch of his lips. I leaned over the table to bring us closer. “I’m gonna be the best damn boyfriend you’ve ever had.”

Finn gave a little laugh. “Words are easy. Backing them up with actions is far harder.”

Part Three

Finn

Chapter Twelve

“So you didn’t have sex?” Laurent asked, my friend having dragged me away from our place of work to subject me to an inquisition that even the finest of torturers would have been proud of.

“I said so, didn’t I?” I wasn’t about to apologize for the waspishness that had crept into my tone. I also wasn’t about to admit that any abstention had come from Cillian either. What Laurent didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him. I took a seat on a park bench—the park just down the street from where we worked, and far more scenic

than hanging about in the smoking area.

Laurent twisted his body round to face me. “What is your definition of sex?” he asked. “Perhaps it is different in England than here.”

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“You’ll be telling me next that sex in France doesn’t involve three sheep and a grandfather clock.”

Laurent flicked a hand at me. “Do not use humor to avoid answering the question. You were the one who came to me with the sad face and told me Cillian was returning to London today. If you didn’t want to talk about it, you would have stayed silent.”

“All we did was kiss,” I admitted. “Nothing else.”

“But the first time you were together, you were at it like badgers, yes?”

“I wouldn’t put it quite like that. And I think you mean rabbits.”

“Rabbits. Badgers. Squirrels. Hedgehogs. It is much the same.”

“Never work for the RSPCA.”

“And what happens now?” Laurent asked, his gaze sharp.

“Honestly?” When he nodded, I fixed my gaze on two children playing at the opposite side of the park. They were laughing as they ran around in what looked like a game of tag. I didn’t know what the French name for it was, and I suspected Laurent might blow a gasket if I chose this moment to ask him. “I expect he’ll try at first, but that it’ll tail off as he becomes embroiled in his work. Out of sight, out of mind, and all that.” Admitting that felt like we’d failed already, but it was better to be realistic about the chances of it working.

“And what about when he breaks your heart again?”

Laurent getting straight to the crux of the matter had a lump forming in my throat that made it difficult to swallow. I took a deep breath in, filling my lungs full of fresh air and then releasing it in one smooth, controlled movement while I got myself together. All the while, Laurent’s dark eyes bored into me as he waited for an answer. “Then... I guess you get to tell me I told you so, and that I could have avoided it if I’d just gone along with your dastardly plans.”

“You think I am that poor a friend? That I would mock your trusting nature, and take delight in your poor fortune?”

I lifted my gaze from the loose thread I’d been plucking at on my trousers to find Laurent looking genuinely wounded. “No! Of course not. You’d be within your rights to say it, though. You were the one who tried to save me with the sacrifice of your lips.”

Those same lips quirked slightly. “Kissing you was not so terrible.”

“Glad to hear it. Although, you may want to work on your chat up lines. ‘Not so terrible’ isn’t exactly what every man dreams of hearing.”

“Chat up lines?”

“Your wooing technique,” I explained. Laurent’s English was so good that I frequently forgot it wasn’t his first language. In fact, I usually only remembered when we ate out and he chatted to people in rapid French that I didn’t have a hope in hell of keeping up with.

“Ah, wooing,” he said, looking thoughtful for a moment. “You may also want to remember that I was the one who urged you to give your Irishman another chance.”

“Cillian,” I said. “He has a name.”

“We will see. He has yet to earn one with me.”

Despite the seriousness of the conversation, I laughed. “My relief that you’re on my side grows and grows.”

Laurent smiled. “As it should.”

“And in answer to your earlier question,” I said. “I don’t know what I’ll do if he breaks my heart again. I never admitted to him he broke it in the first place.” I shrugged. “He may have worked it out, but we never discussed it.”

Laurent contemplated my words for a moment. “I think you broke his as well.”

“Yeah?”

“He followed you here, didn’t he?” I gave another shrug, my shoulders feeling tight. Laurent studied me for a moment. “If he breaks your heart again, you will be okay. We will get a place together—”

“I have a cat,” I interjected. “I forgot to tell you. Cillian’s fault. It only has one ear and half a tail.”

Laurent frowned, but didn’t let the news derail him. “We will get a place. You, me, and the ugly cat.”

“He’s not ugly. Quasimodo has just had a rough time. I need to take him to a vet and find out how old he is, and if he needs any injections or anything. I was going to ask if you’d accompany me and translate. I think the conversation might get a little more complex than telling the vet what my favorite lesson at school was and why.”

“We will visit the vétérinaire,” Laurent said with a nod. “Now, can I finish what I was saying?”

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I waved a hand to tell him to continue. “Sorry.”

“We will live together. Me, you, and the unfortunate and not so aesthetically pleasing cat. You will stay busy...” He thought for a moment. “Nights at the theater.” Never having been a huge fan of the theater, I frowned at that, but let him continue without further interruption. “We will taste all the wines in France.” That sounded better. A way of drowning my sorrows cunningly disguised as something cultural. “We will get bikes and take long cycle rides.” Hopefully, before the wine rather than after. “You will have rebound sex with Henri.”

I wasn’t letting that one go without comment. “I think he might have something to say about that.”

Laurent shook his head. “I know my friend. He will be fine with it.”

“What else?” I asked, growing more invested in this wild after-Cillian fantasy the longer it went on.

“Hmm...” Laurent looked off into the distance, thinking hard. “We will buy an old car... Something classic... and we will restore it to its former glory so we can drive around in it on the weekends.”

“I didn’t know you had any mechanical knowledge.”

“I don’t. But how hard can it be? We will learn.”

I burst out laughing and after a few seconds, Laurent joined in. He reached over and

grasped my shoulder. “Maybe the car is a little too far and we stick to the bikes. But my point is, we can do whatever takes our fancy. The world is our...”

“Oyster,” I finished for him before it ended up being some other sort of sea creature.

“What does that even mean?”

“Honestly, I have no idea.”

Laurent accepted that with a slight blink. “And all of this...” He waved his hands in an expansive gesture that was very European. “Is just a plan for if things don’t work out.”

“Yeah.” I thought about the last few minutes of conversation. “It’s almost going to be a letdown now if things work out. I don’t get to live with you, ride a bike, drink all the wine, and sleep with Henri, whether or not he wants me to.”

Laurent grinned. “We can still do some of that. Just not the living together or sleeping with Henri part.” He checked his watch. “We are late returning from lunch. If Jules catches us and questions our tardiness, you must look heartbroken, so I can say I was consoling you.”

“Sneaky,” I said. “I like it. Although, I should probably warn you that my acting skills aren’t that good.”

Cillian called me that evening, making it less than twenty-four hours since we’d last spoken. It was a promising start, but I wasn’t about to make too much of it. Anyone could manage one day.

“Hey,” he said, his voice soft.

“Hey yourself.” Despite the effort to keep my feet firmly on the ground, there was no keeping the smile out of my voice.

“This is my new number.”

“Did you buy the phone at the airport?” I was only half joking. I wouldn’t have put it past him to do exactly that.

“Amrita already had it for me when I showed my face in the office. Actually, she gave me two phones.”

“Two phones! Ah yes... That’s so much better than one. Now you can have two conversations at the same time.”

“This one,” Cillian continued without reacting to the slight bite in my voice, “is my personal one only. I’m going to be careful who I give this number to. Amrita has it obviously, and I’ve given it to my family. But so far, that’s it.”

“And the other phone?”

“The other is my work phone. It’s still got the old number. Anything work-related from now on will come through that number. Meaning, when I don’t want to be disturbed, I can switch it off. It’s off now.”

The pause that followed said he expected some sort of congratulations for finally joining the millions of people that had employed that technique ever since the invention of the mobile phone. “Amrita’s idea, I assume?”

“Well, yeah, but...”

“I hope it works,” I said. And I meant it. Not just for the sake of our relationship, but

for Cillian's future mental health. He might handle long hours of work now. But what about when he was in his fifties? His sixties? A time came when everyone needed to slow down.

"It will," Cillian said. "I'm going to switch it off at the same time every day."

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“What time?”

A pause that lasted longer than a beat. “I don’t know. I need to work that out.”

“Because there’s a vast difference,” I stated, “between switching it off at five and switching it off at nine.”

“I know that.”

“So what time?” I pressed. “You should make that decision now.”

“Five is too early.”

“Okay. So what time isn’t too early?” The long silence that followed already had me shaking my head. “Words mean nothing, Cillian. It’s actions that count.”

“You’re being very hard on me.”

“I am, but it’s for your own good.”

“Seven?” he suggested.

“You don’t need my permission. You’re a grown-ass man in your thirties.”

“I’m not asking for your permission. I’m asking for your opinion.” Cillian’s words were deliberately saccharine sweet. “If I can’t ask for my boyfriend’s opinion, then it makes you nothing but eye candy. And while, you might be the most attractive,

handsomest eye candy that ever walked this earth, you're too smart to be just that."

"Flattery will get you everywhere."

"Will it?" Cillian's voice was husky with a whispered promise.

"Yeah," I agreed. "It's just a shame you put the English Channel between us so you can't collect." Cillian's answering groan had me laughing. "Well, you did."

"I'm a fantastic swimmer."

"I'm sure boners make excellent flotation devices."

Cillian's soft chuckle had me feeling better about everything. "What time?" I urged, determined to get an answer out of him. I doubted he would keep to any boundaries he set, but if he didn't set any, he would be even less likely to adhere to them.

"Six thirty," he said. "That's reasonable."

"And what time will you switch it back on?" Cillian's groan said he hadn't even considered that side of the equation. "What time do you get up?" I prompted. As his ex-boyfriend, it was a question I should already be able to answer. Or at least have an inkling, but I didn't. We'd never spent a single night together. Even on that first night when we'd ended up in bed together only a few short hours after meeting, I'd taken the non-verbal hints and left before dawn broke.

"Five."

"In the morning? Jeez! You're headed for a heart attack if you don't slow down. Why five?"

“I have a lot to get through during the day,” Cillian said defensively.

“You need to learn to delegate. And not just to Amrita. She can’t be the only person in the world you trust.”

“I trust you.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not coming to work for you. I know nothing about advertising. Apart from that a barely clad muscular man strutting moodily down a street in black and white makes me buy male fragrance products in the hope it will make me as cool as them.”

“You and the rest of the world.”

“In reality, though, it just makes me smell nice while I trip over paving stones.”

“Seven,” Cillian suggested, dragging me back to what we’d previously discussed.

“For getting up or for switching your phone back on?”

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“Switching my phone back on. I can’t lie in bed for two hours doing nothing.”

“If only you had someone to lie there with you.”

“Why didn’t we ever do that?” Cillian asked, his tone pleasingly wistful.

“Because you never invited me to stay. And although the invitation was there on the extremely rare occasions you stayed at my place, you never took me up on it.”

“I was a terrible boyfriend.”

“Yeah, we already established that. You’re working on being a better one.” Realizing how harsh my words sounded, like I’d placed all the blame firmly at his feet, I sought to do some damage control before Cillian changed his mind about me being worth it and hung up. “We’re working on doing better. And for me, that means saying what’s on my mind, which is why it seems like I’m being hard on you. I haven’t learned how to do it nicely yet. I’ll get better at it. And... just for the record, I’m not trying to change you. I’m just...”

“Trying to make me work less so you can spend time with me.”

“Yeah.” I was relieved he got it. The last thing I wanted to do was come across as some sort of haridan he couldn’t wait to get away from.

“We’re going to work.”

“I hope so.”

“Tell me about your day,” Cillian said.

I did, leaving out the part about my heart to heart with Laurent, but detailing everything else. And then he told me about his day. The time flew by and it was surprisingly late before we finally said goodnight to each other and hung up.

Chapter Thirteen

The evenings for the rest of the week had passed similarly: Cillian would call and we’d chat for what felt like a short amount of time, but turned out to be hours. No topic was off the table, whether that was holiday destinations Cillian kept meaning to visit, but never got around to—I did really well during that conversation not to point out that there was only one person stopping him from going wherever his heart desired—or major plot holes in films we’d both seen years ago.

Tonight though, he hadn’t rung when he was supposed to, and my flat vibrated with the silence. Quasimodo watched with his head slightly cocked to one side as I turned my phone over and over in my hands, the movement doing nothing to make it ring. “I know what you’re thinking,” I said when he hadn’t blinked for over a minute. “You think this is the beginning of it, and that I should be surprised he lasted as long as he did.”

The cat continued to stare. “I didn’t take you in, so you could sit and judge me. Yes... I could ring him. But then what if he doesn’t answer? It’s making a thing out of it, isn’t it? And things have been good. Really good. Is half an hour really such a big deal?” I checked my watch and grimaced. “Okay, not half an hour, an hour. But still...” I turned the phone over again. “Anyway, I don’t know why you’re side-eyeing me. You’re Cillian’s biggest fan. If he walked in here now, you’d push me out of the way to get to him.” Quasimodo turned his back on me and started washing his face. “The truth hurts, doesn’t it?”

Another hour passed, a familiar sense of dread settling in the pit of my stomach. I'd dared to dream over the past few days as I'd gotten to know him better, and he me. I'd seen a future where Cillian's epiphany about his work/life balance, about what it would take to make our relationship work, was honest and genuine, and I'd truly believed he was prepared to jump through whatever hoops were necessary to make changes.

"Okay," I finally said, once Quasimodo's grooming routine had reached a satisfactory conclusion and he'd started pacing, the remnants of his tail twitching. "I'll call him." It rang and rang before going to voicemail. I didn't leave a message because I didn't trust myself not to be irrationally abrasive. "So he's busy. No big deal. It's one night."

I was in the bathroom when my phone finally rang. The land speed record came close to being broken as I sprinted back into the living room, almost tripped over Quasimodo, and snatched it up. "Hey! I was worried about you."

"Were you?" said a female voice. "That's really sweet. No one ever worries about me."

It took me a moment to place the voice. "Amrita?"

"Finn," she said warmly. "Long time, no speak. Or should I say..." A cascade of French followed, spoken far too quickly for me to decipher more than the occasional word, and I wasn't a hundred percent certain sure they were accurate.

Her being able to speak French didn't surprise me. I had an inkling there weren't many things she couldn't do. She really had been wasted in that coffee shop before Cillian had stumbled across her. "Right," I said, not understanding what I'd just agreed to.

“You’re probably wondering why I’m calling you.”

“It crossed my mind.” A tingle of panic raced up my spine. “Is it Cillian? He’s alright, isn’t he?” How awful would it be if the reason he hadn’t called was because he couldn’t, and I’d been thinking the worst of him.

“He’s fine, don’t worry. An emergency cropped up. A work one, not a personal one.”

I’d once mocked him for talking about advertising emergencies, rubbishing the very idea of them. Therefore, I had to work hard to keep the cynicism out of my voice. “What sort of emergency?”

“The sort where one of our major clients has gone absolutely ballistic and no matter how many monkeys we threw his way, wouldn’t be pacified by anything less than talking to the organ grinder himself.”

“And Cillian couldn’t find five minutes to ring me himself and explain?”

There was amusement in Amrita’s voice when she answered. “Well, the last time I saw him, he was being sworn at in three different languages.”

“Three! Impressive.”

“Isn’t it? Anyway, he begged me to call you. He seemed to think you’d break it off with him... again... if you thought he’d simply forgotten to call. And no matter how many times, I pointed out that the Finn I knew is far more rational than that, he wouldn’t believe me. So here I am passing on the message that Cillian would much rather be whispering sweet nothings to you than verbally sparring with a man who believes he knows more about advertising than Cillian does.”

“You make me sound like an absolute nightmare,” I said with a grimace.

“Not a nightmare. Just...”

“Go on. You can be honest.”

“I think you’re waiting for Cillian to mess up again, and he knows that. And he fears falling short of your expectations and losing you for good. He knows he won’t get a third chance. He likes you Finn. Hereallylikes you. But you have him over a barrel, and that’s not a good basis for any relationship.”

I chewed on her words for a few moments. “Can I ask you something, Amrita?”

“Sure.”

“As an observer, and as someone who knows Cillian better than anyone, how do you see us ending up?”

I braced myself for the answer, knowing she'd be brutally honest. "I can see the two of you being disgustingly happy together once you work out how. The how is the difficult part."

"Yeah, it is," I admitted.

"But you won't get there by holding back. You're either willing to give things a proper go, or you're not. Don't keep him dangling on a piece of string, if you're just going to give up on him at the first sign of trouble."

"I wouldn't," I said. But we both knew it was a lie.

"And if he knew I'd said that to you," Amrita said with a sigh. "He would probably fire me. For real, this time. I know who he'd choose if it came down to a choice between me or you."

I laughed. "Yeah, right?" The silence that followed my statement said she hadn't been joking. "This conversation won't go any further," I said. "You're important to Cillian. Therefore, you're important to me as well."

"You see," she said. "That's the type of thing a girl likes to hear. So... can I buy a hat or not?"

"A hat?"

"For the wedding."

"Whose wedding?"

She made a sound in her throat. "It's a good job you're pretty."

“What?”

“Nothing. I didn’t say a word. So yeah,” she said after a pause. “Cut him a bit of slack, would you? He already got it in the neck for taking off to Paris the way he did.”

“From who?”

“Me. Shareholders. His sister because he was supposed to be having dinner with her. Clients who couldn’t reach him when he threw his phone in the river.”

“He told you about that?”

“Yeah, he told me.”

“It was sweet,” I said, unable to hold back a smile at the memory.

“It was stupid, was what it was.”

“But sweet.”

“If you say so.” I could hear the roll of her eyes as clear as day. “Cillian’s always had a flare for the dramatic.”

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“I like that about him,” I said. “I like more things about him with every day that passes.”

“Have you told him that?”

“I...”

“Yeah, I thought so. Holding back,” she said, “making him bend over backwards to please you. I guess you’re entitled in a way, but these things have a habit of coming back to bite you in the ass, if you’re not careful.” There was a rustle of paper, and then. “Jesus! Is that the time? If I don’t go home now, there won’t be any point in going before I need to come back.”

“Can you pass a message on to him before you go?”

“Depends what it is.” Amrita’s hackles were raised; I could feel it.

“Ask him to Skype me before he goes to bed. Tell him it doesn’t matter how late it is, that I’ll wait up for him.” Silence followed my statement. “I want to check if he’s alright,” I added quickly. “It sounds like he’s having a really shit day. He might need someone to talk to, someone to make him feel better.”

“I’ll tell him,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“And Finn?”

“Yeah?”

“Just so you know, I’m equally hard on him. He doesn’t get a free pass to mistreat anyone, like he did to you. But...”

“It’s in the past.” I finished for her. “Time to move on.”

“Bingo! He gets it. I’m going to buy that hat, so don’t let me down.”

“I’ll try not to.”

It was nearly midnight before the familiar sound emanated from my laptop speakers. I rushed over to accept the call, Cillian’s profile filling the screen as I slid into the chair. It was a different Cillian than the one I was used to seeing. This one looked like he’d been through the wringer. He had tousled hair; shadows under his eyes, and sported dark stubble. He was also shirtless, my eyes drawn to the perfect symmetry of a muscular chest that I hadn’t seen since that fateful day in his office when we’d last fucked. “Oh, I’m sorry,” I said before he could speak. “I was waiting for a call from my boyfriend, but I seem to have clicked on an Only Fans account instead.” I let my gaze drift slowly over him, making no attempt to keep the heat out of my eyes. “Whatever you charge, though, I’m happy to pay it.”

Cillian laughed, the sound weary. “For you, it’s free. Actually...” He sat up straighter with a slight glint in his eye. “There is a price.”

“Name it. First-born child? The one remaining ear of my cat?”

“I suddenly feel very naked,” Cillian drawled. “Perhaps I’d feel less so if I weren’t the only one sitting here without a shirt on. Only if you’re comfortable, though.”

He’d barely finished his sentence before I was pulling it over my head. I dropped it

on the floor and Quasimodo made a beeline for it to check out its functionality as a new bed. Because in his little cat brain, there couldn't be any other reason for me doing something except to please him. We really needed to have a word about who was in charge.

Cillian devoured me with his eyes as I leaned back in the chair, my nipples immediately pebbling from the scrutiny. It was strange. We'd seen each other naked more times than I could count on the fingers of both hands, but this felt new, like we were two completely different men, and therefore, back to square one.

"I'm sorry I couldn't call you when I was supposed to," Cillian said with regret in his eyes. "I wanted to."

"I know. Amrita explained."

"Did she? Or did she make things worse? Because sending her into a situation is a bit like playing Russian roulette, and you're never sure what you're going to get. She has very strong opinions, and she's not afraid to share them, even if the other person isn't that keen on being forced to listen to her take on things."

"She was fine. We had a good chat. She made me see a few things in a different light."

Cillian frowned. "Like what?"

"Just... things." I leaned closer to the screen. "How are you? Are you okay?"

"I thought you'd be angry with me. Or at the very least, upset. I didn't even make it a week before dumping you for work. Which is precisely what I promised I wouldn't do."

I considered the words I wanted to say, Amrita's little speech still ringing in my ears. "It's unrealistic to think you'll always be able to put me first. You run a business. I understand that. And sometimes, things will come up. Important things. All I ask is that you try to put me first most of the time. Which, you've been doing," I added quickly. "And I've really appreciated it."

Cillian looked taken aback by my words. "I've been trying."

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“I know. I can see that.” Given we’d gone off on a slight tangent, I repeated my earlier question. “How are you? Did you talk your client down from the ledge?”

Cillian let out a frustrated sigh. “I think so. Unless he works up a second wind while he’s asleep. It happens sometimes, people agreeing that we’re the experts and putting themselves in our hands, only to take exception if the finished product isn’t what they expected. Common sense goes out of the window and they forget that we’re the people who know how to sell something. I wouldn’t mind if he’d had ideas of his own that we’d ignored, but he didn’t. He was a blank slate.” Cillian seemed to catch himself. “Sorry. I’m probably boring you to tears.”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I wasn’t interested. You look exhausted. Tell me if I’m keeping you up and you just want to go to bed.”

Cillian leaned forward over the desk and shook his head. “No! It’s good to talk to you.” He smiled. “Skype was a good call. It means I can actually see you.”

“I’ve missed you,” I admitted, as surprised by my own words as Cillian seemed to be, if the slight rise of his eyebrows was any indication. “I have,” I said more definitively. “I don’t want you to think that this is some sort of game to me. It isn’t. It never has been. Any defensiveness, any holding back on my part, is just about protecting myself.” There. Take that, Amrita. I can be vulnerable if I want to be.

“I know.” Cillian’s gaze bored into me for a few seconds. “I miss you too. I wish I was there.”

“What would you do if you were?”

A slow smile spread across his face. “Do you really want to know?”

My breath hitched at the implied promise in his eyes, and I considered my answer before responding. “Yeah. I do.”

Chapter Fourteen

Cillian let the silence go on for long enough that the anticipation almost had me crawling out of my skin before he spoke. “I’d drop to my knees in front of your desk and I’d crawl forwards until I was between your thighs. I’d push them farther apart and then I’d undo your zipper with my teeth.”

“With your teeth,” I said, a slight tremor in my voice. “I’m impressed.”

“You ain’t seen nothing yet.”

“Then what?”

“I’d pull your trousers down to mid-thigh and bury my face in your groin, so I could feel you getting hard. You’d wriggle on your chair in a desperate plea for me to take your underwear off, but I wouldn’t. Not straightaway.”

“What if I begged?” I asked. “Would you do it then?”

“Try it,” he said, “and we’ll see. You need to undo your trousers first, though.” I stared at him, my sluggish brain taking a moment to get on board with what he was suggesting.

“We don’t have to,” he blurted. “No pressure. I’m happy just to talk.”

“No! I want to. I just...”

“Just what?”

“I’ve never done it,” I admitted.

Cillian smiled. “Neither have I. Why would I when I’m usually in the same city as anyone I might be interested in doing it with? It could be fun, though.”

I reached beneath the desk and undid the button of my trousers, the sound of my zipper as I pulled it down absurdly loud in the silence.

“My teeth,” Cillian reminded me.

Laughing, I lifted up to push my trousers to mid-thigh as Cillian had described, my cock tenting the front of my underwear. “I couldn’t use my teeth. I’m not that flexible.” Arse back on the chair, I parted my thighs.

“Can you feel my hot breath?”

“Yeah.” The funny thing was, I could. It was like Cillian was simultaneously between my legs and on the screen in front of me.

“I’ve found the head of your cock and I’m tonguing you through your underwear. Can you feel it?”

I ran my finger gently over the tip of my cock through the fabric to simulate the movement of Cillian’s tongue. “I can, but it’s not enough.”

“You taste so good.”

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“Take my underwear down,” I said, already completely lost in the fantasy.

“Ask me nicely.”

“Please! I’m so fucking hard. I need you to suck me.”

“Not yet.”

“Cillian...”

“Patience... We’re gonna make this last. I’m gonna rub you through your underwear first.”

I changed the stroke of one finger to massaging myself with the heel of my hand. It was still frustratingly unsatisfying through the fabric, but it was better than nothing.

“Not too hard,” Cillian said. “And slow.”

I slowed down, the stimulation even more inadequate. “Faster,” I urged.

“Not yet. I want to see you.”

I shuffled my chair back from the screen. “How’s that?”

“Yeah... Nice.” Cillian’s voice was breathy. “You’re so hard. Run your thumb over the tip. Yeah, just like that. Feel how damp you are. I can see it seeping through your undies.”

I glanced down to find there was indeed a damp patch, my cock producing pre-cum in greater quantity than I was used to. When I went to pull my underwear down, Cillian made a warning sound in his throat. "If you do that before I say you can, I'm ending this call."

"You wouldn't do that."

"Try me."

There was a hard glitter in his eye that said he wasn't bluffing. "I want to get my cock out."

"I know you do," Cillian coaxed. "I'll get it out soon, I promise. You just have to wait a while longer."

"How long?" I sounded like a petulant child who'd been told he couldn't have any more sweets, and I didn't much care.

"Soon. Just keep rubbing." That noise in his throat came again when I increased the pressure. "Not that hard. We wouldn't want you coming in your underwear."

I took a deep, shuddering breath in before letting it out again. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been this aroused. In fact, I wasn't sure I'd ever been this aroused before. "You're killing me," I admitted.

"I know." There was amusement in Cillian's voice. "At least you're getting to touch yourself."

I fought through the veil of arousal to look at Cillian properly. He lifted both of his hands in a demonstration that they were above the desk. "Are you hard?" I asked.

“As a rock.”

“Show me.”

He scooted back in his chair, his suit trousers doing nothing to hide the hard line of his cock as it pressed against the fabric. “Stroke it,” I ordered.

He ran featherlight fingertips along the length, the groan that escaped his lips only inflaming my ardor more. “Fuck,” I said.

“Yeah,” he agreed. He took his hands away again. “Remember, I’m not here. I’m on the floor in front of you. I’m pushing your thighs wider apart.” I obediently spread my thighs wider, Cillian making a sound of pleasure, which made a pleasant change from the sounds of warning he’d become so expert at. “You wore white underwear for me today. I heartily approve. Do you know why?”

“Why?”

“White doesn’t hide much. I can see the dark shadow of your hole. It’s making me remember how good it feels when it’s stretched around my cock and you’re taking me deep.”

My cock was a throb so pronounced that I fancied I could hear it, the sound as loud as a drum. Or maybe that was my heartbeat, my body one enormous mass of need and desire. My eyes had closed, my breathing ragged.

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“Do you have lube?” My eyes snapped open at the question to find Cillian staring at me, his cheeks flushed and his pupils dilated. “We’re going to need it because I’m going to finger you while I suck you.”

“In the bedroom,” I said, my voice sounding like it belonged to someone else.

“Get it. Don’t be long. If you’re longer than thirty seconds, I’m ending the call.”

Despite knowing that was bullshit when we’d come this far, I still ran to the bedroom like my life depended on it.

A startled Quasimodo raised his head from where he’d plumped for the bed over my discarded shirt. He watched me with wide eyes while I fumbled the bottle of lube out of the top drawer of my nightstand and exited the bedroom just as quickly as I’d arrived. “I’d stay in here if I were you,” I shouted over my shoulder. “Unless you’re happy to see some things you won’t forget in a hurry.”

Breath whooshed out of me as I plonked my arse back on the seat and brandished the bottle of lube like a trophy.

“Who were you talking to?” Cillian asked.

“My secret lover. I keep him in the bedroom.”

“Not funny,” Cillian grumbled. “Do you know how relieved I was when I finally tracked you down to find out you weren’t seeing anyone?”

“No. Why don’t you tell me?”

“Later.” His gaze drifted down my chest to where I’d automatically spread my legs again on sitting, my cock not having deflated in the slightest. “We have that to deal with first.”

“It was Quasimodo,” I said absently, my mind already back on the burning need to take my cock out, my fingers clenching reflexively on my thighs.

“Good to know he’s in the bedroom and not watching.” Heat flared in Cillian’s eyes again. “I’m on my knees in front of you. I run my fingers over your cock and I squeeze your balls.”

“Yeah,” I said, automatically providing the actions as he said it.

“I’m desperate to suck you, to taste you, to take you as deep down my throat as I can. Tell me how much you want me to blow you.”

“I want that,” I said. “I want it so much.”

“I peel down your underwear.” Relief slammed into me. “Slowly,” he cautioned. “I want to draw out that moment of anticipation of seeing your cock again. It’s been so long.”

I hooked my fingers in the waistband, drawing the moment out for as long as I could. Eventually, though, there wasn’t enough fabric to hold it back and my erect cock escaped its confines to slap against my abdomen.

“Beautiful!” Cillian said with admiration in his voice. I went to stroke it and he made that noise in his throat again. “Not yet.”

“I’m beginning to hate those words,” I said. “They feel like revenge.”

Cillian’s laugh showed signs of strain. “They’re definitely not revenge. I just don’t want this over and done with in two minutes. And you’re primed to blow far too quickly if I let you.”

“That’s what you get for tormenting me.”

His fingers went to his trousers, making quick work of the fastenings before tugging both underwear and trousers down in a swift move that couldn’t have been more different from the way he’d had me do it. I drank in the sight of Cillian’s cock, my memories not having done it justice.

He plucked a bottle of lube off the table, which he must have sourced even quicker than I had when I’d gone to the bedroom, and squeezed a good amount into his palm. “What do you want to do?” he asked. “Want to do this?” When his lubed fingers dropped to his cock and drifted along the length of his bare shaft, I was the one who groaned.

Cillian’s smile was pure devilment as he gave his cock a firmer stroke. “It feels so good,” he said. “Especially with you watching. It makes me want to sit here and get myself off without you touching yourself.”

“Oh whoops, my finger slipped and I ended the call,” I deadpanned. “And how did this start off all about me, and end up with you being the only one getting off? You were meant to be blowing me.”

Cillian’s hand stilled, and he inclined his head in recognition of the point. “You’re right.” He jerked his chin to the bottle I’d left next to the laptop. “Lube!”

“I’m not sure I like this bossy side of you,” I said as I picked it up.

“Your cock says you do.”

“My cock has repeatedly shown that it’s unfit to make important decisions. If it was up to my cock, I’d never have left London. My cock would have me bent over your desk now.

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“I never fucked you over my desk.”

“You should have done,” I shot back as I squeezed lube into my palm. “You’d have been closer to the phone.”

“Ouch!”

I pressed on regardless, determined to extract my pound of flesh for Cillian being such a fucking tease. “You could have fucked me while talking on the phone. Best of both worlds.” It was disappointing that all I got was a slight eye-roll for my comment. “Both hands,” he instructed when I went to put the lube back down.

“It’s flattering that you think I need both, but my cock really isn’t that big.”

He laughed. “I promised you were getting fingered.”

“Ah, that’s right, you did. And I have zero problems with that plan.”

“Good!”

Cillian said nothing as I finally lowered my hand to my cock and got to touch. I could feel his stare burning into me as I closed my fist around my cock and gave it a couple of strokes, shockwaves shooting through me as my palm grazed the sensitive glans. Cillian was right about one thing. If I wasn’t careful, this wouldn’t last long. “When do you want me to finger myself?”

“Not yet,” I mockingly mouthed in time with Cillian as he predictably rolled out the

phrase that seemed to sum up tonight. “I’ll tell you when.”

“Right.” I slid down in the chair, a glance at the screen confirming all the important parts could still be seen. Although, I’m sure Cillian wouldn’t have been shy about telling me had I robbed him of the sight. There was a moment where I pondered how an innocent video call to check he was okay had turned into this before I shoved it to the back of my mind. For two men incredibly attracted to each other, five days spent together doing no more than kissing, and close to a week of talking to each other without straying into anything sexual was an achievement in itself.

For the next few minutes, my only focus was on giving my rigid cock the attention it craved while watching Cillian do the same. We hadn’t done anything like this while we were together. So getting to watch him pleasure himself, to see sweat bead on his brow and his chest, and the rosy flush spread on his skin, was beyond exquisite. Every now and again, I had to stop for fear of coming, my breaths coming in ragged pants. I leaned forward during one of those breaks, drinking it all in.

Cillian’s lips quirked. “Enjoying the show?”

“Very much so. I’m wishing I’d hit the record button.”

“It’s not too late.”

“You’d let me?”

A momentary pause. “I trust you. It’s not like you’re going to put it on Pornhub or anything.”

“That depends. Do you get paid?”

“No idea.”

“Maybe next time. I’m greedy. I want the entire show. Not just the last act.” I sat back in my chair, holding my lubedfingers up to the camera. “Speaking of which, these poor guys are wondering why they were called into work today if there’s nothing for them to do.”

“Maybe I’ll record myself and send it to you.”

“You should,” I said huskily. “One a day.”

Cillian laughed. “I’ll have Amrita put it on my schedule. She can work out where I can squeeze a morning wank in.”

“Not my problem. I’m just the client waiting for you to deliver the promised goods.”

Cillian grinned. “You sound like numerous clients I’ve had over the years.” He jerked his chin at the fingers I still held in the air. “Go on. Start with one.”

“Well, I wasn’t planning on shoving my entire hand in.”

His hand stopped moving on his cock while he watched me shift position on the seat so I could spread my thighs even wider and tip my hips up. Fingering yourself on a chair wasn’t an ideal situation, but I was determined to make it work. The first lubed finger slid in relatively easily, and I combined a lazy thrust of the digit with resuming the movement of my hand over my cock.

“Gorgeous,” he said. “Makes me wish it was my cock, though, so I could feel how tight and hot you are.”

“Makesmewish it was your cock. How would you fuck me?” I asked as I introduced another finger to make the fantasy more realistic.

“Exactly as you like it.”

“Which is?”

Cillian’s sly grin said he knew full well that I was angling for more dirty talk, but that he was happy to provide it. “Deep and hard.”

I fingered myself harder, my muscles straining with the effort of holding the approaching orgasm back. “Yeah?”

Cillian’s hand sped up, the lube providing a satisfying squelching sound beneath his palm. “You like to be dominated.”

“I do,” I admitted, too horny to even think of denying it.

“You’re not happy if you don’t have a few bruises to show for it.”

I distinctly remembered a time or two when I’d admired the finger mark bruises on my hips from where Cillian had gripped me hard. His astute realization of how much I liked it surprised me, considering his lack of interest in other aspects of our relationship. “Yeah...”

“Can you feel me sliding over your prostate?”

I introduced another finger, the stretch catapulting me to another level of sensation. “I can.”

“You’re going to come soon, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.” I closed my eyes and leaned my head back, external stimuli too much when all my focus was on the twin points of pleasure of cock and arse. It robbed me of the sight of Cillian stroking his cock—I should have pressed that record button—but there would be other times.

“I’m going to come too.”

And then there was no more talking, just gasps and groans as two men brought themselves to orgasm. When mine hit, it had all the hallmarks of delayed gratification and was far sharper and intense for it, cum splattering across my torso. Blood roared in my ears as I fought to slow my breathing. Had I called out? If so, I probably had about thirty seconds before Adeline Girard came hammering at my door, demanding to know what I was up to. With that in mind, I eased my fingers out of my arse and peeled my eyes open to find Cillian looking pleased with himself. I’d missed his orgasm, but the evidence of it was all over his chest.

He smiled when he saw me looking. “I don’t know whether to be pleased or jealous that you came harder than when we were together.”

“Not jealous,” I said croakily. “It was still down to you.”

“Glad to hear it.”

We stared at each other for a moment, both of us unable to keep the smiles off our faces. Cillian dropped his gaze to his chest. “We should probably clean up.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “If my legs still work.”

The next couple of minutes were spent in washing my hands and wiping, my reflection in the mirror above the sink looking happier than I’d seen it in a long time. “You are so fucked,” I said to it, “and I don’t just mean sexually. I hope you realize

that. You're just as in love with him as you ever were. Maybe even more."

When my reflection had nothing to offer to the conversation, I turned away. I put a shirt on before returning to the computer, Cillian having done the same. "You probably need to go to bed," I said as I sank back onto the seat. "I bet you have an early start."

"I'd rather talk to you. Who needs sleep?"

"Every human being since the dawn of time."

"Well, I'll just have to be superhuman, then. Unless... you need to go to bed?"

I shook my head. If Cillian asked me to sit here all night, I probably would. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Death and taxes."

I snorted. "Sounds fun."

"No? Okay... You can tell me some more facts about the Eiffel Tower."

"I think I might have run out."

"Notre Dame, then... Or the catacombs."

I sat up straighter. “Ah, well... the catacombs. There are loads of creepy stories about them, if you’re interested.”

Chapter Fifteen

“Phone sex,” Laurent said with a slight raise of his eyebrow.

Saying a silent apology to the plate of perfectly cooked roti de chevreuil bordelaise that I’d previously devoted at least ninety-five percent of my attention to, I put my knife and fork down. “Video sex, actually. We decided we’d embrace all the twenty-first century has to offer.”

Unlike me, Laurent managed to multi-task with his plate of paupiette de porc, chewing his mouthful slowly and swallowing before responding. “It is all the same.”

“Not really. One’s just sound, which means you’ve got to rely on dirty talk and heavy breathing, and one has picturesandsound. And I’ve got to tell you that with something like that, pictures make all the difference. I mean, how do you know on the phone that it’s not like one of those sex lines where they sound like they’re giving it their all, but really they’re sitting there reading a book?” Laurent’s eyebrow hitched up another inch. “I saw a documentary on it. Maybe people put more effort into it here than they do in Wigan.”

“Wigan?”

I waved a dismissive hand. “Not on the tourist map if you visit the UK, so I wouldn’t worry too much about it. It was just the first place that came to mind. I can’t

remember where the documentary was based.” I thought hard to recall it. “Maybe somewhere in Wales. I seem to remember one girl having a slight Welsh lilt when she spoke.” I picked up my glass and took a swig of the wine. “Now Wales is somewhere you should visit. Very beautiful.”

“You can take me to Wales,” Laurent said.

“Deal,” I agreed. “We can take our mythical bicycles.”

Laurent jerked his chin at my abandoned plate. “The venison is not to your liking? I can ask the waiter to take it back and bring something else.”

I picked my cutlery up again. “The venison is fine.” I resumed eating while Laurent studied me. “Spit it out.”

Laurent turned his wine glass round by the stem. “It is just that it has been a few weeks now, has it not?”

“You know it has. What’s your point?”

“He has not come here, and you have not gone there despite London and Paris not being a million miles away.” Which was true. We’d talked about it, but I still wasn’t in the right headspace to go back to London yet, and Cillian’d had obligations, both work and family-based. “I can’t help wondering what the future looks like for the two of you when you live in different cities. Does he think that if he waves his cock around enticingly for long enough that you will abandon everything here and move back to London?”

“‘Waves his cock around enticingly’? You have a strange idea of virtual sex, if that’s what you think happens.” Laurent’s shrug said that I was getting hung up on semantics. “And he’s said nothing about me moving back to London.”

“But has he said anything about moving to Paris?”

“There are no expectations between us.”

“So... You just remain in limbo forever?”

I sighed. “I know what you’re saying.”

“Oh good, because I was beginning to feel like I must have talked in French, and we both know how poor your French is.”

“It’s getting better,” I stated defensively. The slight twitch of Laurent’s hand around his glass said that was my opinion, but that his was a little different. “It is.”

“Of course,” he lied.

“I ordered for myself today.” Laurent’s little smile was a giveaway, even as he tried to suppress it. “What? What did I say?”

“I presume your intention was to ask the waiter if your steak came with salad?”

“That’s what I asked.”

“What you actually asked was whether the deer ate salad. Very close,” he said with a smile.

I thought back over the conversation, remembering a moment where the waiter had seemed a little confused, and where Laurent had stepped in. “It’s important to know how well fed things are before they end up on my plate.” In truth, it made me want to become a vegetarian.

“Anyway, we were talking about the Irish man?” Laurent reminded me. “We should stay on track.”

“Cillian,” I corrected. And then after a pause, “You’re worse than Jiminy Cricket.”

“Who?”

“Pinocchio’s conscience.”

“I am just concerned. You are not getting any younger.”

I laughed. “You’re older than me, and I don’t see you dating anyone.” Not unless he’d kept it a secret, which, given how often he poked his nose in my business, would be incredibly galling, if so. “Are you seeing anyone? Woman? Man? Inanimate object?”

He rolled his eyes. “We are not talking about me. We are talking about you. I’ve said it before and I will keep saying it. Talk to the Irish man. Ask him what the future holds. If he does not give you the answers you need, then it will only be more painful in a year’s time. Do not spend years locked in some strange status quo where neither of you are truly happy, but cannot see another way of doing things. You are happier, but you are not happy. You can dress virtual sex up all you like, but at the end of the day, it is still your own hand giving you pleasure rather than someone else’s.”

As always, no matter how blunt Laurent’s words might be, there was a ring of truth to them. Enough that they stung, and I had to force myself not to react to them the way a rabid dog might and come out fighting. I settled for levity instead. “You just want to get going on the matching bicycles.”

Laurent smirked. “More like, Henri wants to get going on the rebound sex. He wanted to join us tonight, and I had to tell him we would talk about your feelings for most of the night and it would be incredibly boring. Which, if you think about it, is

not that far from the truth.”

“Well, if that doesn’t put him off me, I don’t know what will.”

Laurent wasn’t listening to me anymore, his gaze focused on something on the far side of the restaurant. I twisted round in my seat, but when I couldn’t find anything that warranted that much focus, turned back. “You could just tell Henri that I’m not interested in him, and that I never will be.”

“I have told him that. He is not to be deterred. He is made of stronger stuff.” Laurent might have responded to me, but his gaze was still fixed elsewhere.

“Sounds like a stalker, if you ask me.”

“Hmm... maybe.”

“I don’t think you’re supposed to agree that one of your closest friends is a stalker.”

“Yeah...”

I twisted round again to look behind me. There seemed to be some sort of kerfuffle happening in the area where Laurent’s attention focused, a few of the restaurant staff having drifted across to deal with it since the last time I’d looked.

As one of them moved aside, her hands raking through her hair in an obvious sign of growing agitation, I could see the source of the upset. A man, who I would have put in his mid to late fifties, was gesticulating wildly.

One such gesticulation had an empty glass careening off the table. It hit the floor with a crash, tiny fragments scattering in every direction. He was obviously drunk, his body language that of someone who’d had a drink or eight before coming out tonight.

Alerted by the sound of breaking glass, more people turned to stare.

“We should go,” Laurent said. He showed how serious he was about the idea by standing, leaving me staring up at him open-mouthed.

“Or...” I said, gesturing at our still half full plates and wineglasses, “we could finish our meal first. Just a thought. And I hope you’re not suggesting we run out without paying, because I’m not ready for a life on the run in a country with a language I don’t speak. I could agree to anything in prison without knowing what I’ve agreed to.”

Laurent sank back into his seat, his body language oozing reluctance.

I eyed him with a frown, trying to work out what was going on here. Did Laurent just have a really low tolerance for drama? Or was it something else? “Do you know him?”

“Who?”

“The man you haven’t taken your eyes off for the last five minutes.” I turned to get another look. He’d shaken off the staff and was coming this way. “He seems to know you.”

“He’s my father.” Laurent’s expression said he really wished he didn’t have to admit that.

“Oh...” There wouldn’t have been a lot more to say to that revelation, even if it hadn’t coincided with the man reaching us. Up close, sweat glistened on the man’s brow, and his rumpled clothes hinted at him having slept in them. He leaned against the table, the wood groaning, but thankfully bearing the extra weight and staying upright. “Ssssson,” he slurred in an English accent that surprised me.

Laurent said nothing. His hands curled into fists, though, his knuckles going white.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m Finn. Finn Prescott. I’m a friend of your son’s.” He turned my way, the movement almost throwing him off balance before he righted himself. A struggle to focus followed. One that I wasn’t entirely sure he was victorious in. “Perhaps now isn’t the best time to...” I stalled at that point, my understanding of the situation when I’d only known he was Laurent’s father for approximately three seconds, leaving me with no clear idea how to proceed. Why was he here? I assumed it wasn’t just a coincidence and that he’d been looking for Laurent. “Yeah...” I finished vaguely. “Perhaps not the best time.”

His head swung back round to his son, the table rocking. I automatically snatched my wine glass off it before it became the second casualty of the evening. “Yooou haven’t been answering my callsss.”

“No,” Laurent said, the single word laced with bitterness. “Take a hint from that.”

“I jussst wanna talk. That’sss all... jussst talk. Fathers to sson. The two of us. Like old... timesss... like before.”

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“It can’t be like before,” Laurent said tartly. “Maman was still alive before and you were... Well, I won’t say completely sober, but you were sober more than you were drunk. Now you’re just...” He waved a hand, the gesture reeking of frustration and weariness. “I tried to help you, but you wouldn’t be helped.”

“So you... wasssshed your handsss of me, threw me away like I wassss nothing more than a piessse of rubbish, like I wassss sssshit on your ssshoe.”

“You see, this is why I can’t talk to you,” Laurent said. “Because as soon as I say something you don’t want to hear, you get nasty. And you never want to just talk. It’s always about money. I assume that’s why you’ve tracked me down?”

A struggle happened on the older man’s face that was easy to read. He wanted money, but he also wanted not to prove his son right. “I...”

“Yeah, I thought so,” Laurent said with a laugh. “When don’t you? But if I give you money, it will all go on whiskey. And I told you a while ago that I’m not contributing to your death fund any longer.”

A noise behind had me turning away from the unfolding drama to where two male uniformed officers were wending their way between the tables. I assumed the restaurant staff had called them when attempts to make their unwelcome guest leave of his own accord had met with failure.

Some customers were already getting up and leaving, clearly not up for the evening’s entertainment, while others had absolutely no shame in openly gawking in our direction. I was surprised they hadn’t pulled their chairs closer to avoid missing

anything.

Laurent relaxed slightly when he saw the approaching police. “You should leave, Dad,” he said. “Before they arrest you. I’m not bailing you out, and you don’t have anyone else to do it.”

As soon as the two officers reached us, Laurent’s father threw up his arms. “Okay... Okay... I’m going. You don’t have to manhandle me. I jussst came to talk to my ssssson.” He backedoff, narrowly avoiding crashing into several tables on his way out.

The police watched him go, the taller of the pair saying something into his radio once Laurent’s father had left the restaurant. A brief discussion in French followed between the officers and Laurent, which involved a lot of head shaking on Laurent’s part, and a lot of nodding in response from them. I understood almost none of it. There was still a long way to go on my French.

Their departure left Laurent and me staring at our cold plates of food. After a few seconds, Laurent shoved his plate away from him. “Sorry about that,” he said, his cheeks suffused with color. “That was my father, and in case you couldn’t tell, he’s a drunk. He always liked a drink, but when my mother died of cancer a few years ago, it seemed to push him over the edge. I have no brothers and sisters, so it was basically just me and him. Before you ask, yes, I have tried rehab. He’s been three times, and he’s always back drinking within a few weeks, so it’s akin to throwing money down the drain.” He took a long swig of his wine. “So there you have it.”

“He’s English,” I said.

Laurent laughed. “You seem more surprised about that than him being a drunk. He is English. My mother was French. Born in Paris. Died in Paris. Lived here all her life.” He held up his glass in a mock toast. “But... she had that one fateful trip to London

where she met a man and fell in love. He moved here within a couple of months, because... and I'm directly quoting my mother here, 'long-distance relationships never work. If you can bear to be away from them for that long, then you're settling for crumbs, or you just don't want it enough.'"

I would have gotten the double meaning in his words even without the slight raise of his eyebrow. At least, it shed light on where his insistence that Cillian and I needed to sort things out for once and for all came from.

Laurent waved an arm at the waiter, who came over immediately. "Plus de vin!" he requested. The waiter nodded and scurried off. "More wine," Laurent translated for me. "Which I know is quite the ironic reaction to our evening being ruined by my drunken father, but..." He shrugged.

"I'm sorry," I said, because it was all I could think of to say.

One corner of his mouth pulled up in a crooked smile. "It should be me saying that." He waved a hand at my half eaten venison. "You didn't even get to finish your meal."

"It's not like you asked him to come here."

"No. I certainly did not." Laurent nodded his thanks as the waiter deposited another bottle of wine and agreed when he offered to take our plates.

"You know what the good thing about not having finished the main course is," I said.

Laurent propped his chin on his hand and shook his head. After the confrontation with his father, he wore weariness like a shroud.

"Dessert without guilt," I announced with a smile. "I don't know about you, but I'm going to order the most sugar-laden, fattening thing I can find, and I'm going to eat

every single last speck of it.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Laurent said, leaning across the table to fill my wineglass to the brim. Once they were both full, he raised his glass in a toast and I mirrored the movement. “Here’s to...” He thought for a minute, his gaze distant. “Let’s toast to people we are better off without.”

I hoped he wasn’t referring to Cillian as I echoed the toast.

We had three desserts over the next hour. One each and one to share. We washed them down with a great deal of wine, more than I would usually have drunk. I couldn’t offer Laurent much, but I could offer solidarity. Laurent’s family and Cillian were both off the table as topics of discussion.

By the time we left the restaurant, neither of us walked that steadily, Laurent leaning heavily against my shoulder. “I am so glad,” he said as the cold air hit us, “that I am not remotely attracted to you.”

“Thanks,” I said with a laugh.

“No, no, no,” he insisted. “It is a good thing. Romantic partners are easy to find. They’re everywhere...” He gestured wildly at a streetlight and I half expected to see some young beau hanging from it. Of course, there wasn’t; it was just a streetlight. “Everywhere,” he repeated.

“For you, maybe.”

“Henri,” he said, as if that proved his point without further argument. “You only have to crook your finger and he’d come running. I think it’s the accent,” he mused. “But... you’re missing my point.” He seized hold of my shoulders to bring us both to a stop. “Friends. Good friends are much harder to find.”

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“Right. You’re...” I stopped myself before I added the word drunk. The last thing he needed was to be reminded of tonight’s incident, or to be made to feel like the apple didn’t fall far from the tree. “You’re feeling sentimental.”

We reached the point where we’d normally go our separate ways, Laurent stumbling slightly. “Come on,” I said, “I’ll take you home.”

Laurent raised his wrist to unearth his watch from his sleeve in a gesture that took far more effort than the simple action warranted. “And miss your hot video date. I am not being blamed for that.”

“He’ll wait. It might even do him good to be on the opposite side of how it feels for a change.”

Laurent shook his head and backed off a few steps. “I’m fine. I live four streets away. What do you think is going to happen?”

“I don’t mind,” I insisted.

“Not necessary.” He backed off a few more steps and made a shooing motion. “Be gone. Have your video sex.”

Judging by the smirk of the person who’d passed us at that exact moment, their understanding of English was perfectly fine.

“Laurent...”

“You’re still here,” he said, taking another couple of steps.

“Fine. Night Laurent. You know where I am if you need to talk. Lord knows you’ve been a great sounding board for me since we met, so it’s about time I returned the favor.”

Laurent gave me a two-fingered salute before turning away. Once he’d disappeared around the corner, I turned for home, shooting Cillian a quick text to say I’d be late getting online.

Chapter Sixteen

Cillian leaned closer to the screen with his eyes narrowed. “Are you drunk?”

“No,” I lied. “Well... maybe a bit.” I explained about the evening’s events, Cillian proving himself a good listener without the distraction of phone calls.

“I know you don’t like Laurent,” I finished by saying, “but...”

Cillian snorted. “You don’t have to like someone to feel empathy for them being dealt a shit lot in life. I wouldn’t wish that sort of situation on my worst enemy. Besides, it was more that your friend obviously didn’t like me. It made me wonder what you’d told him.”

I grimaced. “Nothing that wasn’t true. I didn’t make you out to be the devil incarnate, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Glad to hear it.” Cillian grinned. “Anyway... that’s in the past, and hopefully he’s warming to me now that he can see I’m not going anywhere.”

“Erm...”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

I wouldn’t get a better opening. “He’s just concerned we’re not addressing a few things we should be.”

Cillian frowned. “Like what?”

“Like the future.”

“I see.”

“I mean, what is the plan?” I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans, my heart rate increasing. “Are you expecting me to move back to London? Or...?” I finished with a shrug.

Cillian blinked a few times. “I...” He trailed off as my phone rang.

“I’ll ignore it,” I said.

“It might be important.”

I checked my watch. It was late for anyone to be calling, even considering the fact that France was an hour ahead of the UK. A quick glance at the screen showed it to be a local call rather than an international one. It wasn’t a number I recognized.

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“Answer it,” Cillian said.

“I’m not you. I can ignore calls.”

“If you don’t answer it, you’ll spend the rest of the night wondering who it was.”

“It’s probably a wrong number.”

“Answer it and find out.”

Curiosity warred with the need to prove something to Cillian. As that wouldn’t achieve a damn thing in the end, I snatched it up before it went to voicemail. “Hello?”

“Monsieur Prescott?”

“Oui.”

A torrent of French followed from the woman on the other end. “Wait, wait,” I interrupted before she could really get into the flow and there was no stopping her. “I don’t understand. Do you speak English?”

“Oui, désolée. You are friend of Laurent Dupont, yes? You are the last number he called on his phone.”

“We met for dinner tonight. Is he there? Did he lose his phone? If so, I can get it back to him.”

“I am...” A long pause followed. “I do not know English word, sorry. I am une infirmière.”

“Infirmière?” I looked to Cillian, his French far stronger than mine.

“Nurse,” he supplied.

“Nurse,” I echoed, cold fear seeping into my chest.

“Ah, yes. Thank you. We wish to contact his family.”

“Why?”

“Are you a friend?”

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid Monsieur Dupont was involved in an accident?”

“What sort of accident?” My palms were clammy, and I was finding it difficult to breathe. I’d known it wasn’t a good idea for him to go home on his own after everything that had happened, especially given the amount of alcohol he’d imbibed, but I’d let him do it, anyway. I’d let him convince me he’d be fine, and obviously he hadn’t been.

“He was hit by a bus.”

“A bus! Jesus!” Cillian might only be getting one side of the conversation, but the look on his face said it was enough for him to add two and two together and come up with the right number.

“Is he...?” The words dried up in my throat and I didn’t want to give the thought hammering away at my brain, life, in case it somehow made it true. Laurent had been my rock since I’d moved to Paris. His presence had made everything easier than it might otherwise have been.

“His condition is serious,” the nurse said. I forced myself to take a deep breath. ‘Serious’ wasn’t dead, and that was important. “We found a number for his father, but there was no answer. We will keep trying.”

“Right,” I said. He was probably somewhere sleeping off the worst effects of the alcohol binge. Either that or he’d started on his next one.

The rest of the conversation passed in something of a blur as I extracted the name of the hospital and attempted to gain more information on Laurent’s condition. The latter proved impossible, the language barrier too great for the nurse to describe his physical state in English. The thought kept niggling that Laurent could translate, but of course he couldn’t, because he was lying unconscious in a hospital bed—I’d been able to glean that much—and if he could translate, then the conversation wouldn’t be necessary. When the call ended, I stared into space, trying to sift through my thoughts.

“Finn,” Cillian said softly.

I jumped at his voice breaking into my thoughts. “It’s my fault.”

Cillian frowned. “It’s not your fault.”

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“It is,” I insisted. “I knew he was upset after the run-in with his father, and I knew he’d had too much to drink... More than I had. Yet, I still let him go home on his own. What kind of friend does that make me?”

“There was no way you could have known what would happen.”

Despite recognizing the truth in his words, they did nothing to stop the guilt from gnawing away at me, the list of what-ifs growing ever longer in my head. What if I’d told him not to drink so much? What if I hadn’t joined in so enthusiastically? What if I’d stood up and left when Laurent had wanted to? Then there would have been no conversation with his father, and ergo, no major upset, and he wouldn’t have needed to drown his sorrows.

Even before the point where I’d let him talk me out of escorting him home, there were so many other ways the evening could have gone that would have had him safe at home rather than lying in a hospital bed. Why hadn’t I brought him back here with me? That was a simple enough question to answer, though. Because two’s company and three’s a crowd when you’re planning an intimate tête-à-tête with your boyfriend, even if it was only over video.

While putting your boyfriend first wasn’t a crime, it spoke more to the nagging insecurities I still had about how invested Cillian was in our relationship than anything else. It wouldn’t have killed me to take a rain check for one evening and put Laurent first. But, oh no, I’d been too worried about Cillian taking that as permission that he too could start being more relaxed about our meetings.

“Finn?”

“I have to go to the hospital. Once I’m there, I can find someone who speaks English to tell me how he’s doing. I need to be there when he wakes up.” If he wakes up.

“Of course.”

I stood and spun away from the computer without bothering to end the call.

“Finn?”

I whirled back round to find Cillian regarding me with obvious concern. “Remember, I’m on the other end of the phone. Call me if you need me.”

“It’s late,” I said with a shake of my head. “You need to work tomorrow.”

“Screw work!”

Despite the tumult going on in my head, I laughed. “You have no idea how many times I’ve dreamed of hearing you say that.”

“Yeah, well... Now I have. And I mean it. If you need me, call. It doesn’t matter what time it is.”

“I will,” I assured him. “Thanks.”

Like most hospitals, the Hôpital Bichat at Porte de Saint Ouen was busy, even at this late hour. Finding out which ward they’d taken Laurent to, tested my fledgling French to its limits. Finally, though, I found the right place, an orderly ushering me into a small waiting room of people who looked exactly how I felt.

I took the plastic chair closest to the door, hoping to waylay any obvious member of the medical team that came in and question them about Laurent’s condition. I’d

grown used to most of my requests of “parles-vous anglais?” being met with a shake of the head, because they honestly didn’t, or because they were too busy to communicate medical information in a non-native language.

For the first time since being here, I questioned my decision to move to Paris when there were other countries much farther if I’d really wanted to escape from Cillian, with much less of a language barrier. Canada or USA, to name a couple of options. Or Australia. If I’d moved to Australia, I could have had a decent tan by now.

More to fill time than for any other reason, I typed out a text to Cillian. If I’d moved to Australia, would you still have turned up on my doorstep? I had no expectation of him answering. He might have said I could call him, but the persistent ringing of a phone was far more likely to rouse him than a message coming through. I presumed in the time it had taken me to get here and locate the correct ward, he would have gone to bed.

I was wrong, the answer coming back in less than a minute. Wherever you went, I would have found you. I’d barely read to the end before another message came through. That sounded less stalkery in my head. And then, How are you? Has anyone told you anything yet?

Not yet, I replied.

As if on cue, a doctor chose that moment to enter the room. Shoving my phone in my pocket, I jumped up. “Laurent Dupont?” I questioned. When he turned in my direction, I pressed on. “Parles-vous anglais?” The shake of his head was predictable, but no less frustrating for it. What was the point of being here if nobody could tell me anything?

I was halfway to sinking back into my chair and resigning myself to not finding out what had happened to Laurent until he could either tell me himself or the unthinkable

happened, when a dark-haired petite woman who'd been sitting quietly at the other side of the room rose to her feet.

"Perhaps I can be of assistance," she offered in a French accent. "My name is Elyna and I am an English teacher. I could translate for you."

It was all I could do not to grab her and kiss her, the relief of finding someone who could help almost making my legs give way. Over the next few minutes, with Elyna's help, I discovered doctors had admitted Laurent with a broken leg, a head injury not deemed too serious but largely responsible for his unconscious state, and a punctured spleen requiring immediate emergency surgery. Laurent was on his way to the operating theater for a procedure to either repair his spleen, or, if that wasn't possible, to remove it. They expected it to take at least a couple of hours. While the news wasn't great, it could have been worse. And at least now I knew.

I thanked Elyna profusely once the doctor had left with assurances that he would let me know when Laurent was out of surgery. She smiled and insisted I come and sit with her, taking my hands in hers and saying it was nice to use her English for something other than teaching children. We also swapped numbers in case she was no longer here when the doctor returned, or in case I had any other language-related problems during my time in Paris.

By the end of the conversation, I felt like she was my guardian angel. Made new friend, I texted to Cillian. She translated for me. I followed that up by detailing all the information I'd found out from the doctor.

Is he going to be alright? Cillian texted back.

I think so was my response. As long as the surgery goes okay.

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Are you staying at the hospital?

Yeah, I replied. I'm going to try to work out a way that they'll let me see him once he's out of surgery. Someone should be here to hold his hand.

If I were Cillian, I doubt I could have resisted a cutting remark to his announcement of holding another man's hand, but he was made of stronger and more decent stuff than me and only said, You're a good friend.

Go to sleep, I finally said.

I'm fine.

GO. TO. SLEEP.

Yes, sir!

My phone fell silent after that and I resolved to let Cillian get at least a few hours before he was up with the larks to do whatever it was an advertising mogul did all day.

Two hours passed extremely slowly, even with Elyna going out of her way to chat with me. She introduced me to her friend, Andre, his brother also in surgery for a perforated ulcer. She told me about her family, pulling out her phone to show me pictures of her husband, two children, and their black labrador Beaumont.

The plastic chair became increasingly uncomfortable as more time passed, pacing

within the confines of the small room not helping once I had to sit again, and copious amounts of the awful vending machine coffee doing nothing to stop the yawns from escaping once the clock passed three in the morning.

Despite my discomfort, I was almost nodding off when Elyna nudged me. “A handsome man is staring at you.”

I sat up with a jerk, considering for a moment as I followed the direction of her gaze that perhaps I’d fallen asleep after all. Because I couldn’t think of a better explanation for Cillian being here, when only a few short hours ago he’d been in London in front of the familiar backdrop of his living room. But here he was, as large as life and twice as handsome, his slightly rumpled appearance doing nothing to detract from his good looks.

“Do you know him?” Elyna whispered.

“Yeah,” I said as I stood, Cillian coming my way. “He’s my boyfriend. He’s supposed to be in London, though.”

“Lucky you,” Elyna said with a smile. “Men who will rush to your side in times of need are in short supply. You should hang onto him.”

Perhaps not moving as far as Australia had been a brilliant decision, after all.

Chapter Seventeen

I met Cillian halfway to carve out a sliver of privacy for us within the confines of the small room. “How are you...? I don’t...” I flipped my wrist over to stare blearily at my watch. “And this quickly?”

The twitch of Cillian’s lips said he found my inability to follow a thought through to

completion amusing. “You needed me,” he said simply. “So here I am. Was that the wrong thing to do?”

He still wore the suit he’d worn to work that day, and although I knew he would have shaved that morning, enough hours had passed for dark stubble to cover his jaw. Rather than making him look scruffy, it made him look rugged and manly. It was hard to remember a time I’d wanted to kiss him more as I stared at him. Maybe the night when we’d first met, and I’d realized that of all the men he could have gone for, the handsome stranger only had eyes for me.

His eyebrows drew together, and I realized too late the question I hadn’t answered while I’d been gawping at him. “No!” I blurted. “It’s not wrong. It’s not wrong at all. I can’t tell you how pleased I am you’re here. I’m just surprised, that’s all. Especially seeing as you said nothing about coming.”

“Even with calling in a favor and using a friend’s personal jet, I didn’t know how quickly I could get here. I didn’t want to get your hopes up that I’d make it to the hospital.”

“But here you are,” I said with something close to wonder in my voice. Giving myself a mental shake, I reached for him. “Come here.” I might not be able to kiss him without the risk of raising some eyebrows, or even worse someone lodging a complaint about the gay love-in happening right under their noses, but a hug was well within the bounds of reasonable expectations within a hospital setting.

Cillian was warm and so comforting after the night I’d had, our hug continuing for as long as I could draw it out without it looking weird. When we did finally break apart, he was smiling. I drew him back to where I’d been sitting, Elyna looking absurdly pleased at the turn of events for someone I’d only known for a few hours. I introduced Cillian to Elyna and Andre, and then Cillian squeezed himself into the seat next to mine.

“Laurent isn’t out of surgery yet,” I explained to him. “Which, I’m trying not to take as a bad sign.”

Elyna reached over and patted my hand. “It is better the surgeon takes his time rather than rushing.”

“Elyna,” I said, with some fondness, “has been keeping me sane with reassuring comments like that all night.”

“She’s right,” Cillian said. “It doesn’t mean there’s been any complications. He might even be out of surgery, but no one’s found the time to come and tell you yet.”

“Maybe,” I admitted.

The wait went on for another thirty minutes, Cillian’s hand on my knee a warm and reassuring weight. When a nurse entered the room and made a beeline for me, I jumped to my feet. “Laurent?” I questioned. “Is he okay?”

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Elyna acted as my interpreter again, the cold edge of panic gradually receding as the nurse told us that Laurent had come through the surgery, and that although the anesthetic meant he wouldn't wake up anytime soon and his spleen had needed to be removed, he would be absolutely fine.

"Can I see him?" I asked. "Just for a few minutes."

The nurse frowned. "Êtes-vous de la famille?"

I didn't need an interpreter for that one. "Non... But..." I didn't get any further, the nurse already shaking her head. "I guess I just go home then," I said dejectedly. A glance at Cillian revealed an expression I'd only ever seen him wear at work, his jaw set and his eyes narrowed.

"Leave it to me," he said. "Elyna, could I borrow you for a few minutes? Would that be too much of an imposition?"

"Not at all," she said, almost falling over herself in her haste to go with him.

He pressed a gentle kiss to my brow. "Wait here! I'll see what I can do."

"Cillian, you don't have to..."

He winked, and then he was gone with Elyna in tow. Andre shrugged as I sat back down, but didn't comment. They were gone less than five minutes, a triumphant expression on Cillian's face when they reappeared. He gestured for me to join him as a smiling Elyna returned to her seat. She made an exaggerated fanning motion with

her hand. “So persuasive. I almost swooned.”

“He’s in advertising,” I said. “It comes with the job.”

She winked. “But I bet it’s not always delivered with such charm and panache.”

“Probably not,” I admitted. “I think that’s the Irish blood. You know, the kissing the Blarney Stone, and all that.”

“I only got you five minutes,” Cillian said as he led me out of the room and down the corridor. “And only you’re allowed to go in. I need to wait outside.”

“Five minutes is fine,” I said. “I’m beyond grateful. Thank you. I just... need to see him.”

“Bear in mind he won’t look great,” Cillian advised. “Remember, he’s just gotten out of surgery and that he’s had one hell of a shock to the system. Apparently, there’s a lot of bruising and swelling.”

“A bus hit him,” I pointed out. “I’m not expecting him to look great. I just need to see him...” I gave an embarrassed little laugh. “Well... breathing.”

Despite my assurances to Cillian, the first sight of Laurent was like being hit in the chest with a battering ram, and I stood at the edge of the room, reluctant to venture any further. After giving myself a good talking to, I edged closer to the bed. After all, I’d asked for this and Cillian had done everything in his power to get it for me. It would be beyond ungrateful after all the effort he’d put in to turn around and say I’d changed my mind and I’d wait until Laurent regained consciousness.

For a moment, I seriously considered that someone had given Cillian the wrong room information as I stared at the swollen-faced man in the bed, unable to recognize

Laurent. It wasn't until I focused on the hair that I relaxed slightly. The hair was unmistakably Laurent's. And as I ran my eyes over the parts of him not hidden beneath the white hospital sheet, the small tattoo of a wolf on his right biceps was a giveaway as well.

Laurent was attached to various machines, the heart rate monitor showing the peaks and troughs of his individual heartbeats providing some reassurance. "Hey," I said, even though I knew my voice wasn't about to rouse him. "You look like you had a fight with a bus and came off worse."

I moved to stand right next to the bed, reaching out and laying my hand over Laurent's, careful to avoid the drip that fed directly into his vein. "They wouldn't let me in to see you, but Cillian waved his magical persuasion wand and wrangled it. And no, that's not a euphemism. I'm not talking about that part of his anatomy."

I frowned at the words I'd just said. "I probably should have started by saying that Cillian jumped on a plane tonight and he's here. Which is... yeah. You'd probably have a more cynical twist to put on it if you were awake. So..." I gave his hand a squeeze. "Wake up soon, yeah, and then you can tell me Cillian's true intentions in rushing to Paris."

The door creaked open, a nurse appearing in the doorway. He didn't need to say anything for me to know my time was up, and that it was better not to push things. "I have to go," I said. "But don't worry about anything. I'll let work know what's happened and that you're going to need some time off." I grimaced at the realization that neither of us was going to be making it in tomorrow—or more accurately today, the clock having passed midnight long before I'd ever reached the hospital. "And I promise I'll be back to see you tomorrow as soon as I've had some sleep. You can make up some story about how it was all the bus's fault." I gave his hand one last squeeze before heading for the door, Cillian waiting outside.

“I don’t have a hotel,” Cillian said once we’d stopped off to say goodbye to Elyna and Andre and were waiting for the lift to take us down to the ground floor.

“You’re staying at mine,” I said, fatigue hitting me hard now the adrenaline was wearing off.

“It seemed better to come straight to the hospital from the airport and worry about that later.”

“You’re staying at mine,” I repeated.

“I don’t want to assume anything. I didn’t come here for that.”

I cast him a sidelong glance as the lift arrived, and we stepped into it. “Please don’t make me argue with you. I’ve been awake for the best part of twenty-four hours, so I don’t think I’m capable. And if you think I could manage anything sexual at the moment, then you need to readjust your expectations of what a normal human being is capable of.”

“A normal human being?” Cillian questioned with a slight lift of one eyebrow.

“I.e. not you.”

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“Wow! I didn’t realize I was abnormal.”

“You know what I mean. We’ve already discussed the fact that you get up at some ungodly hour in the morning.” I glanced at my watch, laughing when I saw it was a few minutes past five. I angled my wrist so Cillian could see it. “There you go. Time to get up.”

Somehow, and I hadn’t even seen him lift a hand, so I had no clue how he’d done it, Cillian hailed a passing cab and bundled us both into the back of it. His suitcase had appeared from nowhere as well.

“Magic case,” I said. “Do you click your fingers and it appears?” I lay my head back against the seat and tried not to fall asleep there and then. I didn’t try that hard, though, my eyes still closing. “Are you a leprechaun? Should I follow you to your pot of gold?”

“If you want,” Cillian said with a smile in his voice. “I think you’ll be disappointed, though, when you arrive and find it’s a building you hated so much that you ran away from it the last time you were there.”

“I didn’t run away from the building,” I mumbled. “I ran away from you.”

“Oh, well, that’s alright then.” There was a slight pause before Cillian said, “I left it with the lady at reception. The idea didn’t appeal to her initially, but—”

“But you convinced her,” I said with a smile. “You turned on the charm and she caved to the inevitability of doing whatever you wanted.”

“Something like that.” There was a slight lull in conversation, and then, “You make it sound like it’s a crime.”

“It’s fine,” I said, my eyes still squeezed tightly shut. “As long as you only use your powers for good and not evil.”

I must have dozed off then because the next thing I knew, the cab had come to a stop and Cillian was tugging me from the back of it. He supported more of my body weight than I did, propping me against a lamppost while he paid the driver. He kept casting furtive glances back at me, like he expected me to topple over if he left me alone for too long.

“Unlike me,” he said as he retrieved me from the lamppost and did a stellar job of maneuvering both me and the suitcase toward the entrance to my building, “you definitely need your eight hours of sleep.”

“I’ve been getting less than that,” I said dreamily as Cillian delved his hands into my pockets rather than ask for the key. He found it in the left pocket of my jeans, the way his hand brushed against my cock, making me rethink my earlier assertion that I wasn’t capable of anything sexual. Maybe if it was quick, and stimulating enough to keep me awake. “Some man has been appearing on my computer screen and keeping me up at night with his delectable dick.”

Cillian’s snort as he fitted the key in the lock and we tumbled inside the building said he’d be teasing me for that description later when I was more *compos mentis*. I roused enough when faced with the stairs to be more help than the typical sack of potatoes with getting up them. Cillian was still in possession of my keys, so he unlocked the door of my flat when we reached it. I’d left all the lights blazing and the heating on in my haste to get to the hospital.

“Toasty,” Cillian said. “You could grow tomatoes in here. Where’s the control for

it?”

“Kitchen,” I said, happy to let him deal with it. A soft, padding noise on the carpet heralded Quasimodo coming to find out what was going on. I got a few moments of his attention before he clocked Cillian’s presence and headed for him. Bending over to stroke the cat, Cillian peered up at me through his fringe. “Where am I sleeping?” He jerked his head toward the couch. “Because I’ll be fine there, if that works better?”

“Bed,” I said, my vocabulary apparently reduced to only one-word answers. I headed that way, shedding clothes as I went and not caring where they fell. That could be a problem for tomorrow. Anything but getting a couple of hours’ sleep could be a problem for tomorrow. I didn’t even bother with a visit to the bathroom before climbing into bed in just my underwear. I dimly sensed Cillian’s presence in the room and the rustle of his clothes coming off, but my eyes remained firmly shut, and I couldn’t muster the energy to open them.

“I switched the heating off,” he said as the mattress gave beneath his weight. “And switched all the lights off.”

“Thanks.” I burrowed further into the pillow. “I need to be up soon to call work and let them know I won’t be in, and what happened to Laurent.”

“I’ll set an alarm.” Cool lips pressed to my temple. “Night Finn.”

I might have answered, or I might have fallen asleep and left Cillian hanging. There was no way of knowing.

Chapter Eighteen

I’d like to say that lucidity came in several slow stages when I awoke, but in reality it

came with a cold, wet nose and a face full of whiskers being pushed into mine. “I’m not dead,” I mumbled.

Speech seemed to satisfy Quasimodo enough for him to jump off the bed and leave me blinking myself awake. The other side of the bed was empty, the momentary thought occurring that the previous night had been nothing but a bizarre dream. And then someone—Cillian—cleared his throat in the living room and I realized the entire thing, Laurent’s accident, my night spent at the hospital, and Cillian rushing to Paris to be by my side, had all been real.

I turned my wrist and stared at my watch, the sight that greeted me sending a flare of panic through my system just as effective as any cold shower for shedding the last strands of sleep. I narrowly avoided getting tangled in the duvet as I leaped out of bed, not stopping for clothes before bursting into the living room. “I thought you were going to set an alarm.”

Cillian looked up from the screen of his laptop, his air of serenity a startling contrast to my wild-eyed panic. “I did set an alarm.”

“You were supposed to wake me. I needed to call work.” I ran a hand through my hair, most of it plastered to my head. “I was supposed to be there at nine. That was four hours ago.”

Cillian gestured to the seat at the other side of the table. “Sit down.”

“I can’t sit down. I need to find my phone. I’ve only worked there for a few months. Jules is going to think I’m a complete flake.”

“Finn, sit down.” The stern voice did nothing for me. Him holding my phone up so I didn’t have to search for it, had me sinking into the seat, though. When I stuck my hand out for it, Cillian didn’t pass it across.

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“I set an alarm, and I got up,” he explained. “I didn’t see any reason we both needed to be up.”

“I already told you, I—”

“I called your boss.”

Surprise had me blinking at him for a few seconds. “You did?” He nodded. “And said what?”

“That Laurent had been in a nasty accident and was in hospital, and that you’d kept a vigil until he’d gotten out of surgery in the early hours, that you hadn’t gotten to bed until a ridiculously late hour, so wouldn’t be in today. But that you’d be back tomorrow. Did I miss anything?”

I shook my head. Movement had me looking in Quasimodo’s direction as he jumped on the sofa, the stub of his tail twitching. “I need to feed Quasi. He’s probably starving.”

“I already did that. He got breakfast before I did. I cleaned his litter tray as well, so you don’t need to worry about that.”

I sat back in the chair and crossed my arms over my chest. “Have you done anything else?”

Cillian considered the question for a moment and then gestured toward the kitchen. “There’s a pot of coffee in there for when you want one. And I bought croissants for

both of us. They're in a box on the counter." His brow furrowed. "I spoke to Amrita to explain why I was mysteriously missing from the office. Oh, and I spoke to a couple of clients as well. I think that was it." He cocked his head to one side and studied me. "Are you pissed at me?"

"I'm trying to be, but I'm failing miserably. You make those of us who aren't superhuman look bad."

Cillian waved the compliment—or maybe it was a criticism; I wasn't entirely sure myself—away with a flick of his hand. "You needed to sleep." He took a sip of his coffee before remembering something. "Oh, and I called the hospital, as well. Visiting hours start at three. Which"—he glanced down at the time on the laptop—"gives you just enough time to shower, shave, dress, and eat breakfast. I was going to wake you at half-past one if you hadn't stirred by then. I've booked a cab for a quarter to, so we get there in plenty of time."

"We?" I questioned.

He smiled. "We," he confirmed. "And no, I don't know if Laurent's awake. I tried to find out, but I hit a brick wall. I guess we'll find out when we get there."

I might not have had a full night's sleep, but there was a lot to be said for showering and eating breakfast for feeling like something other than roadkill. And if I was honest, there was something relaxing about being able to sit back and let someone else take charge: a role Cillian was obviously born for. "Why didn't I ever see this side of you before?" I asked as we pulled up in front of the hospital and Cillian paid the driver.

His expression was quizzical as he turned my way. "What side?"

I laughed as we started for the entrance. "The take charge side. It's very attractive."

“Yeah?” Despite Cillian trying really hard to hold back his smile, it still escaped. “It’s not too bossy?”

“Not when it involves me getting extra sleep. I’d be a zombie now if you’d gotten me up when I wanted you to. Plus, I should have set my own damn alarm if I was that bothered.”

“You were so out of it I’m not sure you were capable.”

“Yeah, there’s that,” I agreed. “You haven’t answered the question, though.”

“I guess... because I was stupid, and I poured it all into work rather than what really matters. There wasn’t a lot of Cillian King left for you.”

“Just the one part,” I quipped with a sideways glance and a smirk.

He laughed. “Yeah, that was all for you.”

“I just had limited access. More like a rental than ownership.”

Our coded conversation brought us all the way to the lift, Cillian standing aside to let people pass as we timed it perfectly and one arrived. Our visit turned out to be an anticlimax, Laurent still unconscious. A nurse—this one speaking fluent English—assured me it was perfectly normal and that it would only be a cause for concern if forty-eight hours passed with no sign of improvement. Either Laurent looked slightly better as I sat by his bed and carried out a one-sided conversation, or I’d just grown accustomed to his bruised and swollen appearance.

Cillian, meanwhile, melted into the background to give me some privacy, and then embarked on the longest jaunt to get coffee the world has ever seen or is likely to, given there was a vending machine right at the end of the corridor.

We grabbed ingredients to cook on the way home, Cillian proving himself just as capable in the kitchen with rustling up a salmon-based dish as he was everywhere else. “What aren’t you good at?” I asked as we ate the meal and Quasimodo devoured his share of the salmon.

“Erm... tightrope walking.”

“Have you ever tried it?”

“No.”

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“That doesn’t count, then. Because for all you know, you might be a natural at it. It has to be something you’ve tried, and that you failed spectacularly at.”

“I lost you,” he said quietly. “I wasn’t very good at that.”

It wasn’t so much the words that got to me, but Cillian’s crestfallen expression when he said it, like he still hadn’t fully come to terms with how badly he’d botched things between us. “Well...” I said cheerfully, determined to banish that haunted look from his face. “The good news on that front is that I’m not dead, and that we’re here together now.”

“Yeah,” Cillian agreed, his eyes soft.

We cleaned up together, the specter of the night ahead with all of its unanswered questions hanging over us. It was Cillian who plucked up the courage to lay things on the line first. “If I stay tonight,” he said slowly, “things will happen. So if that’s not okay, tell me to find a hotel.”

“Things?” I teased.

“Sexual things,” Cillian said with a glint in his eye. “Things we’ve only been able to talk about over the past few weeks and not put into action.”

“You’ve made a lot of promises,” I pointed out. “If you stay, you’re going to have a lot to live up to. I think you even promised me multiple orgasms in one night.”

Cillian gave an embarrassed little smile. “I didn’t say that. My cock said that.”

I dried the last plate and placed it back in the cupboard. “The moral of that story is not to let your cock do all the talking.”

Cillian laughed. “I’ll try to bear that in mind next time I embark on an odyssey of online sexual encounters.” There was a long pause while he emptied the water out of the sink and watched it swirl down the drain. “Seriously, though. I need an answer.”

I counted to ten before responding, trying to ensure that I wasn’t doing what I’d just accused Cillian of and thinking with a part of my anatomy not equipped for measured consideration. “I think we’ve waited long enough. Don’t you?”

Cillian propped his hip against the sink and turned to face me. “That’s not a question for me to answer. Only one person can make that decision, and that’s you.”

“I already told you I would have slept with you on the second night you were in Paris.”

“Which is why I want you to think carefully about it. I can wait as long as it takes for you to be sure.”

I imagined the scenario he’d painted for a moment. Me, sending him to a hotel, and then the two of us spending the night in the same city, but apart, after so many nights of telling each other exactly what we wanted to do to each other online. It would be ridiculous, and I couldn’t promise it wouldn’t end in one of us video calling the other. “Stay,” I said. “I want you to.”

Cillian scrutinized my face for a few seconds in a way that said he was searching for something before nodding, the corners of his mouth twitching up into a smile. “In that case, can I take you to bed?”

“Yes, please.”

When he held out his hand, I took it without hesitation, the two of us making our way toward the bedroom in a fashion that wouldn't have been out of place in a Jane Austen novel, only minus the breeches. It was very different to the way we'd crashed against the wall in a conflagration of heat and desire the first time we'd ever had sex. Different was good, though. Different was what we needed.

Chapter Nineteen

With Quasimodo safely outside the bedroom and the door firmly shut so he couldn't sneak in and disturb us, I turned to face Cillian. "Don't be too gentlemanly."

"Define gentlemanly."

"I'm not made of glass."

His eyes slid over me in an X-rated perusal that left very little to the imagination. "You're right," he said. "No glass. Just flesh and bone and muscle." His gaze lingered on the thick line of my erection pressing against the front of my jeans. "There might be some parts that are as hard as glass, though. Maybe even as hard as diamond."

My heart thrummed behind my ribcage, heat washing over me in a wave that threatened to burn me alive if I didn't get it under control. Was there such a thing as being too aroused? Present circumstances would say it was entirely possible.

Cillian pulled me against him and I melted, fingers wrapping around his biceps to give myself some stability. "This is stupid," I said with a laugh.

"What is?"

"We've had sex before. Many times... in person... online. So it's crazy that this feels like the first time."

“It’s not crazy,” Cillian said, his breath warm against my neck and his hands moving in slow circles over my back that somehow managed to be just as soothing as they were arousing. “I feel the same. I want it to be the first time. I got it so wrong before.”

“It wasn’t wrong,” I insisted.

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“It was! I treated you like a burger when I should have treated you like caviar. I devoured you in one go when I should have savored you.”

My hands slid to his lower back, plastering us even closer together. “I’m digging the metaphor, but can I be something other than fish eggs?”

Cillian made a sound that was half snort, half laugh. “A lobster?”

“Still too fishy for my liking.”

“Wagyu beef?”

I nodded. “Yeah, that’ll do. I’ll be Wagyu beef. And in order to taste me, you need to unwrap me.”

“Not yet.”

I mock growled at the familiar words being brought back into play. “I’m beginning to think you’re a sadist.”

“Maybe,” Cillian admitted as he moved us closer to the bed. “But once I strip you, I’m going to get distracted, and I want to do this first.”

This was kissing me, and I had zero complaints. In fact, as we became reacquainted with each other’s lips after a long absence, it suddenly seemed bizarre that this was the first time since Cillian had been back in Paris. But then, we had spent most of that time at the hospital or traveling to and from it. And we might have shared a bed last

night, but exhaustion had ensured I had no recollection of it beyond him getting in.

“God, I missed this,” I said between heated kisses. I couldn’t get close enough to him, Cillian seeming to feel the same, our bodies straining against each other. “I need more arms.”

Cillian laughed, the vibration tickling my lips. “What?”

I wriggled the fingers I had curved around his arse and then tapped the back of his neck with the hand I had hooked there. “I can only touch two places at a time. I’m greedy. I want it all.”

Cillian stole another kiss, his mouth a heated brand against mine. “First, you don’t like fishy stuff, and then you want to be an octopus. Make your mind up.”

“I never said I wasn’t contrary.”

“No, you didn’t,” he agreed as he pushed me down on the bed so I was sitting. When I automatically reached for him with plans to lie back and have his body cover mine, he refused to follow me down. “Do you remember that first night online?” he asked as he dropped to his knees on the carpet in front of me. “The fantasy that kicked it all off?”

“I remember,” I said, my voice husky.

“I want to do that. Only for real. Is that okay?”

“More than okay.”

He looked up at me with long-lashed brown eyes full of heat as he pushed my thighs apart and then crawled into the space he’d created. Leaning back on my elbows, I

tried to remember how to breathe as he made quick work of the fastenings of my jeans. When he ordered me to lift up, I did, letting him pull my jeans down to mid thigh. In line with the fantasy, he left my underwear in place. “What happened next?” Cillian teased. “You’re going to have to jog my memory.”

“You licked my cock through my underwear,” I urged, too turned on to do anything but tell the truth.

“That’s right,” Cillian said, “I did.” The wet warmth of his tongue against my throbbing dick had me crying out as he bent his head. He traced the length of it, probing and sucking, the fabric of my briefs rapidly becoming sodden. To my relief, he didn’t drag it out like he’d done in the fantasy, reaching the part where he yanked my briefs down to leave me bare to his gaze far sooner.

I only had a couple of seconds to marvel at how hard I was before Cillian swallowed me down, his tongue probing into my slit to hunt down traces of pre-cum, like it was the nectar of the gods.

“Shirt,” I said between gasps, the constant rub of fabric beneath my grasping hands not doing it for me.

He obliged, pulling off my cock with an obscenely loud pop and yanking his T-shirt over his head in one swift move. He wasted no time in getting back to it, tendrils of sweet pleasure wrapping themselves around my nerve endings as I gave myself over to Cillian’s lips and tongue. It was better now that my hands could explore bare skin as he sucked me. I made the most of it, running my fingers over muscled shoulders... the curve of his pecs with their slight covering of hair... the peaked nipples that nestled within... and taut back muscles.

He pushed me right to the brink and then stopped, my breath coming in ragged pants as I wriggled out of my T-shirt, and Cillian pulled my jeans and underwear off the

rest of the way. “Now yours,” I demanded while I maneuvered myself so I was the right way round on the bed and my head was on the pillow.

“Mine,” Cillian agreed as he stripped with no regard for teasing. Mere seconds passed before he joined me on the bed, the brush of his bare skin against mine making me groan. Now that we’d dealt with our clothes, we kissed again. Cillian had always been a great kisser; I’d just wished for more of it. Well, it seemed my dreams were coming true, my lover in no rush to move the foreplay on. “We can’t kiss forever,” I said, when we eventually stopped for a breather.

“Why not?” Cillian challenged.

“Well, for one, you have a business to run.” I ran my hand down his chest and encircled his cock, feeling the familiar weight and heft of it and remembering fondly the things it could do. My arse clenched at the memory of how good it felt stretching me and rubbing over my prostate. “And then there’s this little guy.”

“Less of the little, if you don’t mind.”

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“Then there’s this monstrous guy that’s so big that me getting my hand around it must be a figment of my imagination.”

“Slight overkill, but I’ll take it. What about him?”

“He’s not going to be happy with just kissing.” I gave the cock in my hand a couple of firm strokes to prove my point, Cillian biting his lip to stop himself from moaning.

“He’s not in charge. I am. He had his turn, and he fucked things up.”

“Oh, so it’s his fault, is it?”

“Yep.”

“Good to know who we’re blaming.”

“Isn’t it?” With a devilish smile on his face, Cillian rolled me onto my back. I wasn’t shy about my body, so I was happy to let him look his fill. Besides, he’d seen every inch on camera over the past few weeks, and possibly had it recorded for posterity. We’d both danced our way around wanting to make dirty videos to enjoy later, without ever confirming if we had. And to be honest, I liked the ambiguity of it. It turned me on to think that Cillian might have spent time thinking and reacting to me when I wasn’t around. I’d ask him one day. But not today. Today, there were far more interesting things going on. Like the fact that Cillian was currently peppering my chest with kisses.

He paused, peering up at me through his eyelashes. “I never kissed you enough

before, but I'm going to make up for it starting now." And for the next ten minutes, he did just that, barely an inch of my body escaping his attention as he drove me crazy until I was squirming beneath him.

It had reached the point that Cillian proving he could do extended foreplay risked going on all night if I didn't take matters into my own hands. With that in mind, I rolled him so I was on top. With hands braced on either side of him, I returned the favor of him blowing me and swallowed him down. His breathy exhalation of "Jesus!" less than a minute into it had me smiling around the cock embedded in my throat, which was no mean feat. We might have joked about the size of Cillian's cock, but it wasn't small.

Tension crept into his body in gradual stages, his chest suffusing with a rosy glow accentuated by the sweat that had broken out, and his fingers raking through my hair in a wordless plea either to stop or to continue until he came. Well, the latter certainly wasn't happening.

When I reached for the condom and rolled it over his spit-slick cock, Cillian didn't comment, his expression saying I could do anything I wanted to him. "I'm going to ride you," I said, "until we both come. And then we're going to rest and do it all over again."

"How long are we going to rest for?" Cillian asked breathlessly.

"Five minutes."

"Ambitious."

I hid my smirk as I added a generous amount of lube to Cillian's sheathed cock. "If you're not up to it, then just say."

“I’ll certainly give it my best shot.”

“That’s the spirit!”

Cillian had no complaints about my choice of position, heaving himself up against the headboard for better control as I threw one leg over him and braced myself. He ran a hand over my chest reverently, the thumb that brushed over my nipple sending shockwaves through my body. “I reckon,” I said as I reached behind myself to grasp hold of his cock and hold it in place, “that this has already lasted five times longer than any of our previous fucks.”

“Yeah...” Cillian said, his tone so guilty that I immediately felt bad for bringing it up.

“Hey!” I said, leaning forward to kiss him. “It’s just an observation. Nothing more. Now buckle up. Because things are about to get fun.”

“Things are already fun...”

Cillian’s last word became more groan than speech as I lined myself up with his cock and gravity did the rest to ensure the head of his cock breached me. I hovered there, thigh muscles straining as I rode out the slight throb of pain.

Cillian’s hands settled on my hips supportively. “Okay?”

“Yeah.” I managed a smile.

“Take your time.”

I laughed. “Are we going for some sort of record? Or have you taken up tantric sex?”

Rather than answering, Cillian kissed me, taking hold of my cock and stroking it at

the same time. The twin distractions had me sinking fully onto his cock almost before I knew it, Cillian's smile of victory clarifying that it had been intentional.

"Don't stop," I urged as I started a slow rise and fall, the hand that Cillian still had on my hip aiding in my balance. Slow wasn't enough for either of us for long, Cillian surging up as I slammed down. "Going to come," I gasped out, the thick length inside me providing too much stimulation as it rubbed against my prostate for me to last long.

I took over, stroking my cock in tandem with Cillian's thrusts as he grew more and more desperate to come, his fingers digging into my hips as he changed to deeper thrusts that had me dangling on the precipice of coming. "Oh, God! Oh, God!" I said over and over again. "So fucking close."

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“Yeah,” he panted. “Come for me. Paint me with your cum. I want to see it.”

I couldn't have said who came first, the two orgasms close enough together to be almost simultaneous. All I knew was that when it hit, it was nothing short of spectacular, and that I spent at least a few minutes slumped against Cillian's chest with his arms wrapped around me before finding enough energy to deal with the condom and clean-up.

“This,” I said when both of our heart rates had returned to normal and we lay under the covers with my head pillowed on Cillian's biceps and his fingers tracing patterns on my scalp, “was what I really wanted. Not multiple orgasms. Not teasing until I beg. Not a sex act that lasted as long as a marathon. Just this.”

Cillian's fingers stilled before resuming the motion. “At the risk of sounding stupid, I don't understand.”

“You always jumped straight out of bed after sex. At the office, it was understandable. At my place, though, you always had to leave to be somewhere else. And at your place...” The memories stung for a moment before I reminded myself that the past could only hurt if I let it. “At your place, there was always something that commanded your attention. Usually the dreaded phone call. So I took the hint and left.”

“You could have stayed.”

“Could I?” I turned my head to better see Cillian's face. “And do what? Lie alone in your huge bed wondering what you were doing that was more important than

spending time with me once you'd come?"

Cillian shook his head slightly. "We must have spent some time together after. I'm not a Duracell bunny. I do need rest."

Despite the seriousness of the conversation, I laughed at the image he'd conjured up. "We didn't. And I'm not saying that to be cruel. I'm saying it because it was one of the biggest things missing from our relationship. Great sex is... well, great. But intimacy matters more. To me, anyway." The silence that followed my little speech was deafening, Cillian's expression pensive. I had an inkling he was running through all our past sexual escapades to find an occasion when I was wrong. Well, good luck with that, because I wasn't.

Finally, Cillian let out a sigh. "I'm sorry. It shouldn't have been like that. It must have made you feel like crap."

"It did," I admitted. I plucked his hand off the sheet and played with his fingers. "Crap enough that I ran away to Paris."

He pulled me in tighter, his arms wrapping around me. "You know how they have the Golden Raspberry awards for films? Like the opposite of the Oscars."

"Yeah?" I said with a frown, not sure where this was going.

"I should have won whatever the equivalent is for boyfriends."

"Maybe."

"Definitely."

"It's in the past," I said. "And I'm not bringing it up to twist a knife in your ribs. I'm

bringing it up to make it clear what's important. You know, communication and all that jazz. What I failed so miserably at before."

"I've got it," Cillian said, his voice tinged with regret. "Loud and clear." There was a pause for a few seconds before he spoke again. "Only, in what is really unfortunate timing, I do need to take a leak. I'm allowed to leave the bed for that, right?"

My response was to almost shove him out of it, Cillian laughing as he regained his balance. "As long as you come back," I shouted after his naked backside.

"You can time me."

"I am. Fifteen seconds and counting." I was smiling, though. The smile was still on my face when Cillian returned. As Cillian padded back across the room and got back into bed, Quasimodoslipped through the open crack of the door, portraying feline displeasure at being shut out.

My smile grew wider as we resumed our earlier embrace. Yeah, this was what it was all about. Orgasms were great. But this closeness, Cillian wanting to spend time with me even when his cock was no longer hard, was better. And I intended to soak up every single second of it.

Chapter Twenty

Returning to work provided a contrasting blend of emotions. Sadness and disconnect because the lack of Laurent at his desk every time I glanced that way, even though I knew he was going to be okay, served as a stinging reminder of the events of the past couple of days. And a light feeling in my chest I just couldn't shake when I recalled that I'd be returning home to a flat with Cillian in.

How long would he be there for? Well, that was anyone's guess, and in true dig-your-

head-in-the-sand-ostrich-style that would have had Laurent rolling his eyes, I hadn't asked—and Cillian hadn't volunteered the information.

Tomorrow, though, was Saturday, so I was confident any return to London wouldn't happen until after the weekend, which gave me three evenings to wallow in the newfound intimacy between us. And the sex wouldn't be too bad either. Neither of us had pushed for Cillian to keep his word about wringing multiple orgasms from me. As far as I was concerned, quality won over quantity any day, and I had no complaints on that score.

Work done for the day and buffeted by the phone call I'd made mid-afternoon to the hospital where they'd informed me Laurent was awake, I took the stairs up to my flat two at a time. The faint buzz of music coming from behind the door allayed any nagging doubts I might have had about getting home to find Cillian elsewhere. Adeline Girard wouldn't be happy, though. If I could hear the music from the top of the stairwell, that meant she'd be able to hear it, too.

I had a sneaking suspicion she sat in silence sometimes to listen out for something to complain about. I'd once dropped a pan, and for a woman in her sixties, she'd removed remarkably fast to knock on my door and demand to know what was going on, in what had felt like less than a minute since the pan had hit the ground.

There was a slight tremble to my fingers as I unlocked the door. Nerves or excitement? Probably a bit of both. I forgot to be either as the door swung open and I took in what had become of my living room since I'd left for work a mere nine hours ago.

It was full of things. The most noticeable of which was a giant cat tree in the corner boasting so many levels that it stopped just shy of the ceiling. There were three cat beds of varying sizes and design, a giant cat wheel the likes of which I'd only ever seen in You Tube videos, a scratching post, a tunnel, a radiator bed because

apparently three beds weren't enough, a robot litter tray, and various other toys scattered around on the carpet.

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I was still trying to take it all in and make sense of it when Cillian appeared. “Hey!” he said, hooking an arm around my waist and greeting me with a kiss on the cheek that had I not still been transfixed by all the cat stuff, would probably have been domestic enough to make me swoon. There were times during our ill-fated first attempt at a relationship where I would have cut off my arm for something as simple as that kiss. “I hate to be the one to break it to you,” I said. “but I think Quasimodo sneaked on your laptop while you weren’t looking. You might want to check your bank statement.”

There were a couple of seconds of confusion before Cillian got it and smiled. He gave an embarrassed little shrug. “I figured he could do with a few things.”

I finally got around to letting the door close behind me and dropped my work bag on the floor. “This is not a few things. There was a moment when I walked in where I thought I’d taken a wrong turn and walked into a pet shop instead.”

Cillian grimaced. “Too much?” He surveyed the array of cat stuff, as if trying to see it through fresh eyes. “Some of it can probably go back. Not the cat tree because he’s already been on that, and he likes it. And we played with some of the toys, so we probably can’t return them now that he’s bitten and clawed them, even if we wanted to. He likes the tunnel. He spent an hour in there while I had lunch. Maybe the litter tray?”

“It self cleans, right?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Sounds much easier than me having to do it.”

Cillian nodded. “It automatically weighs him as well. It’s really useful for monitoring their diet and checking they’re not overweight.”

“Has he been in the wheel?”

“Not yet.”

“Maybe the wheel can go back. It’s rather big.”

Cillian followed as I wandered into the kitchen to explore the interesting smells coming out of it. “I just thought with him being an indoor cat, he might need the exercise now.”

“Good point. We’ll keep it.” I hastened to correct myself. “I mean, I’ll keep it.” Although the “we” could have been me and Quasimodo rather than Cillian and me. Too late for that realization when I’d already made it into a thing, but if Cillian had picked up on it, he didn’t comment.

The kitchen was where the music was coming from, Cillian’s laptop playing something I didn’t recognize. I waved a hand at it. “You’re going to have to turn that down or we’ll have my next-door neighbor hammering on the door. She is not a fan of any sound above a whisper.”

“Ada?”

I turned slowly to face Cillian. “Who?”

Cillian jerked his head toward the flat that adjoined mine. “Ada from next door. Lovely woman. We had a long chat earlier.”

The struggle to wrap my head around what he was saying took some time. “You call her Ada?”

Cillian lifted the pan lid to stir the contents inside. “She insisted I did.”

This was beginning to feel like I’d walked into a parallel universe. “Did I bang my head?”

Abandoning the pan, Cillian was in front of me in a flash, probing gently at my scalp. “Did you? I can’t feel anything.” He tugged me closer to the light. “I can’t see any bruising or swelling. Have you been experiencing any dizziness or nausea? What about double vision?”

I pushed him off. “I didn’t bang my head. I’m fine. I just feel like I did.”

“Why?”

I shook my head. “Cat things. Cooking. Ada.” I waved a hand at him. “You’re even wearing an apron.” He was, the black apron emblazoned with I’ll feed all of you fuckers across the front. “I don’t think I saw you in anything except a suit, or naked, the entire six months we were together.”

“Yeah,” he said, glancing down at it. “It was this or Mr. Good Looking is Cooking, which seemed a little too arrogant. Ada thought it was funny. Although, I think some of it might have gotten lost in translation.”

“I need to sit down.” True to my word, I went back into the living room and threw myself down on the sofa. A hard lump under my thigh proved to be a fuzzy blue mouse when I extracted it. I stared at it, small beady black eyes staring back at me. “Where is Quasimodo?”

Cillian perched on the arm of the sofa. “In his cat condo in the bedroom.”

“In hiswhat?” My voice was at least three octaves higher than it should have been.

“His cat condo,” Cillian said with a nod. “I had to get rid of the bed, but I figured you wouldn’t mind. Not when Quasi has had such a hard life.” The three seconds he maintained a straight face before his lips twitched to reveal he was talking crap were three seconds too long. “He’s on the bed,” he said. “I think he wore himself out exploring all the stuff.”

“You’re not funny.”

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Cillian slid off the arm to sit next to me on the sofa. “No, maybe not. I should have asked you about all the stuff before I bought it,” he conceded. “I admit I may have gotten a bit carried away. It didn’t seem that much when I had it in the basket.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “It’s sweet.”

“How was work?”

“Weird,” I admitted. “Everyone was really somber because of Laurent, and it was really odd to be there without him. It made me realize how big a part of my life he’s been since I moved to Paris.”

Cillian’s nod was understanding. “I figured we’d have dinner and then head to the hospital for evening visiting hours.”

“That sounds good.”

He smiled and leaned forward to drop a kiss on my lips. When he tried to draw back, I wrapped a hand around the back of his neck and turned it into a proper kiss. One kiss led to two, and then before I knew it, I was lying on the sofa with Cillian on top of me, and we’d been there for some time. “Dinner will burn,” he said. The words might have expressed concern, but him rutting against my thigh said the opposite.

I stole one last kiss before pushing him off, my cock no less hard than his was. “Dinner,” I demanded. “One of us has worked hard today.” Despite my jibe, I was still a little nonplussed. I might have looked forward to coming home and finding Cillian here all day, but I’d honestly expected to find him glued to his laptop, and to

have to peel him away from it. If this was a new version of Cillian, though, I'd take it.

Dinner turned out to be chicken stew served with a bean salad and crusty bread, my pleasure in eating it completely genuine. "I rang the hospital earlier," I informed Cillian when I was halfway through eating. "Laurent is awake. I asked them to pass a message on that I was coming to visit him."

"That's a relief," he said, his words sounding genuine.

"I know you two don't get on," I said carefully, "but—"

"I've met him once," Cillian pointed out. "The entire experience lasted two minutes... thirty seconds of which were spent with his tongue down your throat, which, yes, I took exception to. And the other minute and a half was him looking at me like he was fantasizing sticking a knife in my gut and twisting it."

"He wasn't that bad," I argued. At Cillian's slight eyebrow lift, I gave in. "Okay. Fine... Yes, he was. You weren't exactly friendly either."

"He was kissing my boyfriend! What was I supposed to do? Thank him? Give him some tips on what you like?"

"Ex-boyfriend," I corrected as gently as I could. "We were definitely exes at that point."

"Yeah..." Cillian admitted, looking about as unhappy as it was possible for a man to look. "Don't remind me."

"And now look where we are," I said. "Back as boyfriends, and everything is..."

My pause went on for too long, Cillian's brow furrowing. "Everything is what?"

“Nothing.” I returned to eating my stew in earnest, aware of Cillian’s gaze burning into me, but refusing to meet it.

“Both phones are off,” Cillian said. “Just in case you’re waiting for one of them to ring and save you from having to answer.”

“Both?” I questioned.

“Both. So spit it out.”

“I was just wondering when you were going back to London?” Even saying the words had icy dread settling in my stomach. “I’m guessing Monday.”

“I’m not going back.”

I jerked my gaze to his, expecting to see evidence Cillian was making a joke. But if he was, there were no external signs of amusement, and he wasn’t usually that good at keeping a straight face. I waited an extra few seconds just to make sure. Nothing but earnestness stared back at me. “What do you mean?”

“I’m staying here.”

“That... what... How...? When...? Why...?”

Cillian did smile then, my stumbling over words seeming to amuse him greatly. “The why is easy. You’re here, and you said it yourself. I can’t expect you to just move back to London. That’s not how things work. When? Well... now. I’ll need to bring some more stuff over, obviously, but that’s easily done. How? I don’t really understand that question, so I’m struggling to know how to answer it.”

I stared at him, aware my mouth was hanging open in what was probably an

unattractive fashion, but unable to get my jaw to cooperate to do something about it.
“What about work?”

“Ah, well...” Cillian held a finger up in a way that said the point he was about to make was an important one. “It came to me on one of those nights on video where we were... Well, you know what we were doing. You were there.”

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“What has cybersex got to do with running an advertising corporation?”

“Cybersex...” Cillian said with a snort. “Makes us sound like we’re robots.”

“Focus,” I demanded. “Work?”

He nodded. “I need to attend a lot of meetings to do the job I do. I’ve always assumed that I need to physically attend those meetings, but it’s simply not true. Eighty percent of clients don’t require the personal touch, and would be perfectly happy with my presence in whatever shape or form that happens to be, including over video. Which means, I can work from home.”

Cillian’s expression said he’d come up with quite the loophole and was waiting to be lauded for it. “Well done,” I drawled. “You’ve just reached the same conclusion that millions of people reached during the pandemic, only years later.” Cillian opened his mouth to make a comment, but I got in there first. “You mentioned eighty percent of your clients. What about the other twenty percent? Aren’t you concerned they’ll go to one of your competitors?”

“I hired an assistant,” Cillian said. “It’s early days, but he’s showing a lot of promise.”

The revelations just kept on coming in this conversation. “When did you do that?”

“When I got back to London.”

“And you didn’t think to mention it.”

“I didn’t want to get your hopes up.” He reached across the table and took hold of my hands, his thumbs rubbing across my knuckles. “I’ve been doing my best to sort out the mess I created.”

“Mess?”

“Us being apart. It’s not ideal.”

“No,” I said weakly. “It isn’t, but...”

“But?”

“I don’t know.” I shook my head, still struggling to wrap my head around the conversation.

“You didn’t think I’d move here?”

“I didn’t think you could move here. Or that you’d even want to. I thought the best we’d manage was going back and forth at weekends. I figured I’d eventually end up moving back to London if things worked out between us.”

“If?” Cillian looked slightly sick at my word choice.

“Yes. If. It’s not a foregone conclusion. We couldn’t make things work the first time, so what’s to say we won’t cock it up a second time?”

“We won’t.”

“You can’t guarantee that.”

Cillian’s brown eyes were unblinking as he stared at me. “What am I missing here?”

“Practicalities,” I lied. “Like”—I swept my arm in a wide arc meant to illustrate the living room—“are you just intending to move in here? Because this is not a big flat. When Jules got it for me, he didn’t take two people living in it into account. Why would he when there was only me? You’re talking about working from home, but working where? I’d say you could get a desk in here somewhere, but that was before you filled it with all the cat stuff. And my internet connection is okay, but it’s not great. I can’t guarantee that it won’t cut out in the middle of one of your important meetings.”

Cillian waited until I’d run out of steam. “Do you want me to move to Paris?” When his question met with silence, he frowned. “Just be honest, Finn. If you don’t want me to, then now’s the time to say it. I never assumed that I’d move in with you. I figured that’s something we’d discuss, that perhaps getting a bigger place together might be on the cards. Somewhere with a spare room that I could turn into an office. And yes, maybe I had that in the back of my mind when I got all the cat stuff. Which, is not cool when I hadn’t even spoken to you, but we both know that communication isn’t my strong point.”

“It’s neither of our strengths,” I conceded.

“We’ll get better at it.”

“Yeah...” Even I could hear the lack of conviction in my voice. I knew what was bothering me, but I just couldn’t be needy enough to lay it on the line like that, even if it was furthering the lack of communication issue. It was already too late, anyway, Cillian leaning back in his chair with defeat written all across his face.

“I thought it was what you wanted,” he said, his voice tight. “I had it all planned out in my head. We’d get a nice place together. You, me, and Quasimodo. Maybe with two spare rooms. One for an office and one for all the cat stuff, so we’re not constantly tripping over it. I’d work during the day while you were at work, and then

the evenings and the weekends would be ours. I might have to take a few business trips, but I figured that would be okay as long as I kept them to a minimum, that you'd understand that sometimes they're unavoidable. Hell, I thought you might even want to come with me on a few, depending on where they were."

The picture he was painting was lovely, except for one glaring problem. He continued as I got up and started clearing the table. "I was even thinking about how long you're supposed to be together before you propose, whether it's different if you're making a second go of things, like whether that means it should be a shorter or longer time before it happens." I stilled, my heart beating a furious tattoo in my chest. He gave a little laugh. "I guess there are no rules, or rather you make your own rules. Love always makes everything seem so easy in the films."

I dropped the plates with a clatter and rounded on him. "Love!"

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He looked taken aback by my veracity. “Yeah, love.”

I prodded him in the chest, because it was that or hit him, and a prod seemed the lesser evil of the two. “You start with that,” I said, my voice an octave higher than it should have been. “You don’t slip it in as an aside while you’re doing your woe is me monologue.”

“It wasn’t a...” He gave himself a mental shake. “Not the point, Cillian. You know I love you.”

“Do I?” Two octaves higher. At this rate, I’d be an opera singer before the night was through, which was a career change I hadn’t banked on. “How? I’m not psychic.”

“I said...” I waited while Cillian thought things through. “I must have said.”

“When?” I questioned, annoyed enough not to let it drop. There’d be time later once I’d raked Cillian over the metaphorical coals to let those words sink in and bathe in their magnificence. “Did you say it when you were in Paris last time? Did you turn up at my door and say, Finn, I can’t let you go because I’m hopelessly and madly in love with you?”

“Well, no... That would have been a bit full on.” Cillian grimaced. “And probably extremely humiliating given that you then locked lips with another man a few seconds later.” He held up a hand. “I know it wasn’t your doing, that it was Laurent’s, but it still happened.”

“Changing the subject,” I said tartly. “If you didn’t say it then, maybe you said it in

the five days we spent together?”

“No,” Cillian conceded.

“Then it must have been during one of our late-night conversations. Either on the phone or on video. Do you remember saying it then?”

“I think,” he said slowly, “that I might have assumed through my actions that you knew.”

“I didn’t.”

He gestured to the seat I’d vacated. “Can you sit down?” He tipped his head back. “It’s difficult to have this conversation with you towering over me.”

“You could stand,” I suggested obstinately. He grabbed my wrist and pulled me onto his lap. “Or I could sit here,” I added. “Here’s good.”

Cillian reached up to palm my cheeks. “I love you Finlay Prescott. I think love was such a foregone conclusion ever since the first day we met that I convinced myself we’d work with very little effort on my part.”

I screwed my face up. “That’s a terrible excuse.”

“I know. And I was wrong. Clearly, I was. And I intend to spend every day from now until eternity showing you how sorry I am that I ever took you for granted.”

“Eternity, hey?” I said. “That’s a long time.” I wanted to keep Cillian hanging for longer, but there was such softness in his eyes, such yearning, that I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. “I love you too. I left because I loved you.” Cillian’s frown was understandable. “It was too painful,” I explained, “to be stuck in what I felt was a

one-sided relationship. I would have lost all respect for myself if I'd put up with it any longer, and I didn't trust myself not to give in if I stayed in London."

"So you came here," Cillian said.

"So I came here," I echoed. "And I thought that would be the end of it, that I'd eventually meet someone else."

"Laurent?" Cillian questioned with an expression too neutral to be real.

"No, not Laurent," I said with a laugh. "He made it clear very early on that we weren't going to be anything but friends. I didn't know it at the time, but he's got a lot going on. I think the last thing he's looking for at the moment is a relationship."

"Good," Cillian said. "Because I'd almost feel guilty for hating a man who recently got out of surgery and is lying in a hospital bed."

"Almost?" I questioned with a smirk.

"Almost," Cillian confirmed. "I'd manage it, but it would take effort."

"Speaking of Laurent," I said, with a glance at my watch. "Visiting hours started forty-five minutes ago."

Cillian brushed his lips over mine with a frustrated growl that made me smile. "When we get home," I said, "I'm going to take you to bed and get you to say those words repeatedly, and I'm going to say them back."

"I'll hold you to that," Cillian said as he tugged me to my feet. "But first, let's see your annoying friend."

“He’s not annoying.”

Cillian’s snort said he was yet to be convinced of that.

Chapter Twenty-one

We arrived at the hospital to Henri just leaving Laurent's room, the handsome Frenchman's face lighting up with a smile when he saw me. I had no idea why he'd pursued me with such dedication since my arrival in Paris, when I hadn't exactly been a barrel of laughs. Perhaps he had a thing for moody men. In which case, I fit the bill perfectly.

"Finlay," he said, his accent stronger than Laurent's. "I did not know you were coming tonight. Had I known, I would have made my visit later, so it coincided with yours. No matter, we are both here now. Perhaps when your visit is complete, we can get a drink somewhere and discuss Laurent's recovery. The broken leg is going to mean he will require his friends' help. And we are both his friends, are we not?"

Henri hadn't looked away from me once, Cillian apparently achieving invisibility in his eyes. "We are," I agreed. "Tonight's not a good time, though, Henri."

"Non?"

I shook my head. "No. I'm sorry."

"I'll hire a nurse for him," Cillian said with a bite in his voice, "if that's what's required. Therefore, no tête-à-tête between the two of you is needed."

Cillian inviting himself to the conversation forced Henri to either acknowledge his presence or risk coming across as rude. Henri delayed turning his head long enough that I knew he was tempted to ignore Cillian. I had an inkling Henri knew exactly

who Cillian was as the two men eyed each other like they were contestants in an episode of *The Bachelor* and I had the starring role.

I hadn't thought to mention Henri to Cillian. Why would I when nothing had happened between us and I'd never given Henri even the slightest encouragement? No doubt Cillian was wondering why one of Laurent's friends seemed hellbent on getting me alone. Seizing hold of Cillian's hand, I yanked him closer to my side. "Cillian, this is Henri. Henri, Cillian. Cillian's my boyfriend. We're recently reunited."

The two men shook hands, contact between them as minimal as they could make it and it still classify as a handshake. I was beginning to think all I'd needed to do in London to wrest Cillian's attention away from his work was to have another man show interest in me. If only I'd realized that, it could have saved us both a lot of trouble.

"I see," Henri said, his throat bobbing. "Well, that's..." He trailed off, either unwilling or unable to complete his thought. He tried for a smile in my direction, the action not quite coming off. "Laurent will be very pleased to see you." With that, he turned on his heel and made a hasty departure.

"I think you just broke his heart," Cillian said as we watched him leave.

"At least I stopped you two from dueling in the car park."

A slow smile crept over Cillian's face. "I would have won."

"What makes you so sure?"

The smile grew wider. "I work in advertising. I fight dirty. He wouldn't have stood a chance."

I gave the statement the response it deserved, which was to roll my eyes. “Wait here,” I instructed. When Cillian opened his mouth to argue about being so summarily dismissed, I slipped inside the room and closed the door before he had a chance to. I’d just narrowly averted one pissing contest, so I wasn’t up for Laurent and Cillian getting into another one so soon.

Laurent was propped up on hospital pillows, and while he didn’t look great—more of his face covered in purplish bruises than wasn’t—it was a vast improvement on that first day when I’d had to search for evidence it was really him. His smile when he attempted one was lopsided, and short-lived.

“Does it hurt?” I asked as I approached the bed.

“Does what hurt?”

“Smiling.”

“Always,” he quipped. “Why smile when you can frown? I learned that from a pasty Englishman.”

I pulled a plastic chair closer to the bed and sat. “That pasty Englishman being me, I presume?”

“Of course.”

I rubbed my hands over my thighs while I tried to think of something to say. I’d spent two days lamenting the fact that I couldn’t talk to him, and now I could, the words just weren’t there. “I’m sorry that—”

“Don’t!”

“You don’t even know what I was going to say.”

“You were going to apologize for not escorting me home, like I am some... damsel...” He paused after the word, waiting for my nod of confirmation that he’d used the correct word before continuing. “Some damsel in distress and you are my big, butch security guard.”

“Well, yeah, that was what I was going to say, minus the damsel and the big, butch security guard part, anyway. If I’d come home with you...”

“If you’d come home with me, maybe the bus would have hit both of us. You do know the driver lost consciousness and swerved off the road, and that it wasn’t that I in my stupidity stepped in front of it?”

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I winced. “No, I didn’t know that.”

“Well, there you go then. You need to know the full story before you go apologizing for things that are not your fault. You just missed Henri, by the way.”

“I saw him.”

Laurent hitched himself higher on the bed, the slight gasp that escaped his lips giving away the effort it took. He slumped back against the pillows and studied me from beneath his eyelashes. “Want to tell me why you’ve got stubble rash on your neck?”

I automatically lifted a hand to my neck and rubbed it before realizing my mistake. “I haven’t.”

“No. But it is interesting that you thought it might be possible.”

“I was upset,” I confessed, “after your accident. Cillian rushed to Paris to support me.”

“And?”

“And things have been good.”

“How good?”

The words came out in a rush. “He’s been staying with me, and he’s going to move here. He’s got plans for the two of us to get a place together. And...” Heat rushed to

my cheeks. “He told me he loves me.”

“Hmm...” The familiar noise of consideration made me hanker even more for those times when I’d been able to talk at Laurent rather than to him. “And where is he now?”

I jerked my head toward the door. “Outside, waiting for me. I thought it best if I came in on my own.”

“That wasn’t very kind of you, Finn,” Laurent chided. “You better invite Cillian in.”

It was a toss up what was more shocking, Laurent finally deigning to use Cillian’s name, or him wanting the other man inside his hospital room. Despite my misgivings, I got up to do as Laurent had instructed. I wasn’t about to argue with the man who’d lost his spleen. I’d just reached the door when Laurent called after me. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

I turned with a frown. “For what?”

“I got run over by a bus so you two could finally have sex in the same room.”

“I never said—”

Laurent’s scathing look stopped me in my tracks. “Oh, please. It’s written all over your face. And you talked, right? And sorted everything out?” I nodded. “Then you should be extremely grateful that I was the catalyst for bringing him back here. I expect to be the best man.”

“We’re not—”

“Not yet. But if you do.”

I yanked the door open before he could say more, Cillian exactly where I'd left him. I stood aside and swept an arm out in front of me. "You have been cordially invited to visit with Monsieur Dupont."

Cillian stepped inside, putting an arm around me, that was either proprietary or protective depending on your viewpoint, as we walked toward the bed. "You look rough," Cillian said to Laurent in lieu of a greeting.

Laurent angled his head my way. "You may have to translate... You know, on account of the thick accent." It might have been convincing if he hadn't said it with a smirk.

I nudged Cillian. "Say something nice."

He looked disgusted at the idea. "Why do I have to be the one to—"

"Because I got run over by a bus and I'm in a vulnerable state," Laurent interjected, sounding anything but vulnerable. "And I'm still coming to terms with the loss of my spleen." He reached over and rapped on the cast that came up to mid thigh through the covers. "Oh, and I have this to contend with." Laurent crossed his arms over his chest, tipped his head slightly to one side, and waited.

Cillian looked like he was chewing on a wasp. "Maybe we could..." I said, starting to feel guilty that I was letting this happen.

"I'm glad you're not dead," Cillian said flatly.

"That is so sweet," Laurent said with fake saccharine sweetness. "Isn't that sweet, Finn?"

“It’s something,” I said.

Laurent cleared his throat. “I’m glad you’re not dead too, Cillian.” He looked to me again. “See! We can get along for your sake.”

If that was getting along, there was an awful lot of work to be done before I could leave them in a room together.

“I need a few minutes alone with your boyfriend,” Laurent said to me, as if reading my mind.

“I don’t think...”

Cillian leaned over and kissed my cheek. “We’ll be fine. I have many faults, but—”

“You do indeed,” Laurent half coughed, half said.

“I have many faults,” Cillian repeated with a steely glare Laurent’s way, “but attacking a man in a hospital bed is not one of them.” He flicked a hand Laurent’s way. “And he couldn’t attack me even if he wanted to. He’s as weak as a kitten.”

“Kittens still have claws,” Laurent pointed out. “It pays to remember that.” He lifted his gaze my way. “You’re still here. Shoo.”

“Shoo! I know you didn’t just say that.”

“Please shoo?”

“Better,” I grumbled. When I still didn’t move, both men stared at me. “Fine,” I said, throwing up my hands in a gesture of defeat. “Have at it.” I backed off a couple of steps. “Just... don’t make things worse. Either of you.”

I regretted my decision as soon as I was out in the corridor, pacing doing nothing to improve my disposition. I comforted myself with the knowledge that raised voices would carry, and as yet, there were none. An agonizingly slow five minutes passed with no sign of Cillian. Another two crawled by before he finally appeared. “He wants to sleep,” he said, “so he said he’ll see you tomorrow.”

I peeked into the room to find that Laurent had slid down in the bed and closed his eyes. Leaving him to it, the end of visiting hours rapidly approaching anyway because of our late arrival, I caught up with Cillian and fell into step beside him. “Well?” I questioned when he said nothing. “Are you going to tell me what the two of you talked about?”

“I think he mostly made threats of what would happen if I don’t treat you the way you deserve to be treated.”

“He either did or he didn’t.”

Cillian’s brow furrowed. “He slipped into French halfway through, so it became difficult to keep up with him. There was definitely something about my balls and a vise. Unless, it was his balls, and then I’d be far happier never knowing what was said.”

“He’s a good friend,” I said. “I’m lucky to have him in my life.”

“It’s actually quite nice,” Cillian admitted, “to know that someone is lurking in the background, ready to tell me if I screwup.” He laced his fingers with mine. “But... if you tell him I said that, I’ll deny it.”

I smiled, but said nothing.

Sweat still dried on my skin as Cillian turned on his side so our faces were close together on the pillow. “You still haven’t told me what you think of my plan.”

I settled myself more comfortably. “Which part?”

“Me moving to Paris?”

I tamped down on the flicker of excitement that made me want to grab him and initiate the next round of sex, despite only minutes having passed and neither of us being physically capable of that quick a turnaround, and concentrated on the practicalities rather than the emotion. “Do you really think you can make it work? What about your family? What about Amrita? Have you spoken to them?”

“Of course I have. My family wants whatever makes me happy. Although, they’re a little confused why I’m moving countries to be with someone they’ve never even met.”

I let out a huff of laughter. “I bet they are. Me and them both. My family will want to meet you, too.”

“We should have a big family get together,” Cillian proposed. “Get it all over with in one fell swoop. We could book them all into a hotel here.”

“My family would like that,” I said. “They keep talking about coming to see me.”

“And as for Amrita...” The corners of Cillian’s lips twitched up into a smile. “She’s a smart cookie. I think she saw the writing on the wall when I dropped everything to come here the first time, and she’s been waiting for me to get my act together ever since.”

“You’ll miss her,” I said, phrasing it as a statement rather than a question.

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“You think I’ll get enough time to miss her without her being on the other end of the phone or a video call?”

“It won’t be the same,” I pointed out. “I just want you to have thought everything through. I can’t afford for you to do this and then regret it a couple of months down the line.”

Cillian reached over and tucked a rogue lock of hair behind my ear. “I can’t afford that either. Not unless I want to end up with my balls in a vise courtesy of your protective mother hen.”

I laughed. “I bet Laurent didn’t say that.”

“I bet he did.” Cillian was silent for a few moments. “So I’m moving to Paris. What about the rest of it?”

“The rest of it?”

“A new place together? A bigger one. Maybe one more central.”

“I wouldn’t be able to pay half the rent.”

“You could pay what you pay here. Or nothing at all. Whatever you’re comfortable with.”

“You don’t think we should take things more slowly?”

“Do you?” The intensity of Cillian’s gaze said he was trying to guess my answer from micro-expressions before I said it.

I rolled onto my back and stared up at the ceiling. There came a time when you had to stop guarding your heart against future heartbreak and just go for it. That didn’t mean letting go was easy. Cillian might have wormed his way back into my life through slow degrees, but only one person decided how firmly planted he was in it.

“I love you, Finn, and all I want to do is make you happy. So... just name your expectations and I’ll endeavor to meet them. Want to live together... great. Don’t want to live together... not so great, but I’ll cope, and I’ll still move here and work on getting you to change your mind, whether that takes months or years.”

I rolled back onto my side and pulled him in for a kiss. “I don’t think I can handle a Cillian King move in together campaign. I’m not strong enough for it. So...” I announced, letting it hang there for just long enough that I could savor the hope in his eyes. “We better move in together straightaway, and I don’t care whether that’s a palace or a hovel.”

Epilogue

One year later

How’s Greece? Is Cillian behaving himself?

The text from Laurent had me tearing my gaze away from where my boyfriend, dressed only in the briefest pair of swimming trunks, entertained a small crowd by the pool. Curiosity to find out what they were talking about hadn’t yet overridden the languor brought on by the heat of the day, so I’d stayed put, letting Cillian do his thing.

I shifted myself into a more comfortable position on the sun lounger before replying. Define behaving himself.

Not working came through only a few seconds later. I snapped a quick photo of Cillian and sent it to Laurent as a response. The movement had Cillian pausing his conversation and looking my way with an eyebrow raised in question. I knew what that eyebrow meant. If I waved him over, he'd drop whatever he was doing and come over to check I was alright.

When I shook my head, he relaxed. I blew him a very showy kiss, just to sock it to the busty brunette in a skimpy red bikini who'd spent the last five minutes positioning herself carefully to show my boyfriend all her best assets, two of which would be in Cillian's face if she leaned any closer. She frowned as he blew one back, her dreams of being the future Mrs. King no doubt left in tatters.

Oh, for... Can you tell him to put it away? I returned my attention to my phone, the cursor still flashing as Laurent typed something else. But before he does, ask him to turn round so I can see him from the front? Purely for research purposes. Not because I find him remotely attractive.

I snorted. Of course not.

I suppose physically he's okay. He needs to be to make up for the personality.

Shaking my head, I put my phone down. Cillian and Laurent were both determined to pretend a feud still existed between the two of them, even though I knew for a fact that they were perfectly capable of having a civil conversation when I left the room. I knew, because I'd eavesdropped a time or two, and as soon as I was no longer there, they chatted amicably. It just seemed to entertain them too much to drop their antagonism completely, and as a result, I had to suffer their veiled—and sometimes not so veiled—digs.

The sun lounge next to me creaked as Cillian eased himself into it, all bronzed, glistening skin and masculine beauty. Sometimes I still found it difficult to believe that from such a poor start, we'd turned things around to where I had zero complaints. Well, maybe not zero. But any complaints I had were nothing that didn't plague the average relationship.

There were still days where I had to lure Cillian away from his computer, but I'd discovered a tried and tested method of achieving that in record time. A slow strip, and a trail of breadcrumbs—or in this case clothes—leading to the bedroom currently having a success rate of at least ninety-nine percent. I just had to make sure I didn't appear on camera when I did it. There had been that one time, but Amrita hadn't seemed to mind that she'd gotten an eyeful.

Cillian had been right about the two of them remaining in close contact, Amrita already having visited Paris three times in the past year, our spare bedroom in our much more spacious new place meaning she didn't have to stay at a hotel and that the two of them could talk shop to their heart's content while I was at work.

There'd been business trips along the way, Cillian returning to London a handful of times over the past year, as well as visiting Italy and Spain. But, like this one, there'd also been holidays. Times where I got him completely to myself and he even left his work phone back in Paris, relying on Amrita or Gage, his new assistant, to tell him if anything urgent required his attention. So far on this trip, his phone had stayed blissfully silent on that front. If something cropped up, I'd learned not to take it personally and to make the most of having some time to myself.

Our close families had met, Cillian paying for them all to come to Paris for a long weekend. Given my parents were aware of this being a second attempt at making things work, they'd been naturally cautious. They'd mellowed though as Cillian had worked his magic. As for his parents, they couldn't have been lovelier, his mother relieved that in her words, "someone had finally shown Cillian that work wasn't the

be all and end all of life.”

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Cillian jerked his head at the phone still sitting next to me. “Who were you talking to?”

“I’ll give you one guess,” I said.

“Laurent,” he said, spitting the name out like it was something sour on his tongue.

“You like Laurent.”

“He is slightly less obnoxious than he used to be.”

“He’s looking after our cat, remember?” He was, Laurent offering to take Quasimodo when the cattery we used didn’t have space on the dates we needed. Seeing him spoil Quasimodo rotten made me wonder why we’d never thought to ask him before.

“We need to find him a boyfriend,” Cillian said.

“Laurent’s bisexual.”

Cillian shrugged. “Fine. Or a girlfriend. He looks at men more than he does women, though.” He had a point; I’d noticed that too. “I mean,” Cillian continued, “if you stand far enough away and squint, Laurent’s not that grotesque.”

“I’ll tell him you said that.”

“No need. I’ll tell him myself.”

“I think the whole thing with his dad means he doesn’t want to drag someone else into it.”

Cillian went silent for a moment, his expression pensive. “That’s very noble of him, but if he found the right person, they’d understand, and the support would be good for him.”

“See,” I said with a smile. “I knew you liked him.”

“I’m just trying to come up with a solution that’ll have him coming around less. I still get flashbacks, you know.”

“It was one kiss.”

“One too many,” Cillian grumbled. “How would you feel if you walked in on me kissing Amrita?”

I swung my legs off the sun lounger to face him. “Honestly?”

“Yeah?” Cillian said with a challenge in his eyes.

“I’d pull up a chair and get popcorn. And I’d probably call an ambulance and have them on standby for whatever was left of you when she’d finished with you.”

“Good point,” Cillian conceded.

He reached across the space and lay his hand on my bare thigh, the loving look in his eyes one I’d been on the receiving end of more times than I could count, but that I never grew tired of. “Will you come for a romantic stroll along the beach with me tonight?”

“Erm...” I pretended to think about it. “I’ll have to check my schedule.”

“Finn...”

I laughed at the note of frustration in his voice. “I’ve checked it and do you know what it says?”

“No. What.”

“Do whatever the incredibly sexy man wants you to do.”

“Anything?” Cillian queried with a glint in his eye.

“Almost anything,” I qualified. “Anything that won’t get us arrested and thrown into a Greek prison.”

The beach at sunset was beautiful, the low sun on the horizon casting a fiery glow across the sky and turning the brilliant blue of the day into shades of orange, pink, and purple. “Look at that,” I breathed. “Isn’t it gorgeous!”

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“Yeah,” Cillian agreed. But he wasn’t looking at the sky, he was looking at me.

I rolled my eyes and shoved him away from me, laughing. “Don’t be cheesy. It doesn’t suit you.”

He clutched a hand to his chest in feigned offense. “You’ll be telling me next that I’m not allowed to look at you.”

Grabbing hold of his hand, I dragged him farther along the beach. “You can look. You just can’t compare me to a sunset.”

“What about a summer’s day?” At my blank stare, he elaborated. “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? Thou art more lovely and temperate.”

“Alright, Shakespeare.”

He laughed. “At least you recognize it.”

“I’m not a complete heathen.”

“Not a complete one, no,” he said with a smile.

We walked on, both of us barefoot and the weather still warm enough that neither of us had our shirts fastened. “Is there a reason for wanting to get me alone in a romantic location?” I asked after a few minutes.

Cillian turned with a slight frown, something about what I’d said bothering him. “I

wasn't planning on proposing, if that's what you're thinking?"

"Damn!" I said, doing my best to keep a straight face. "I better cancel the party I've arranged for us back at the hotel to celebrate our engagement." When he still looked troubled, I squeezed his hand. "I'm joking. I'm going to be the one to propose when the time is right, anyway."

His frown grew more pronounced. "Why?"

"I'll do a better job of it."

"That is simply not true."

"We'll have to agree to disagree with that."

"It's not true!" Cillian said, his outrage growing. "I sell dreams for a living. If I can't sell myself as the perfect husband, then I need to quit and find something else to do."

I was grinning now, unable to hold it back. "We'll have two proposals. One for each of us. And someone can judge who does it best."

"Who?" Cillian questioned, his tone suspicious.

"Laurent," I said, pouring gasoline on the fire.

"Right. Like he would ever choose me over you."

"Well, it can't be Amrita because she'll always go for you."

Cillian shook his head. "Why are we discussing a proposal like it's some sort of reality show?"

“You started it.”

He pulled me to a stop, taking hold of both of my hands so we faced each other. “I brought you here because I wanted to thank you.”

“For...?”

“Giving me a second chance when I really didn’t deserve one. Most people in your shoes wouldn’t have.”

“They would, if they were still secretly in love with you.” Cillian’s smile said he appreciated that sentiment more than he would admit. “Besides,” I said. “I should thank you. You could easily have decided it wasn’t meant to be, but you didn’t. You followed me to Paris, and you refused to give up, even when I didn’t exactly welcome you with open arms. “

“I think,” Cillian said, his eyes soft. “No! I know that if I’d given up, it would have been the biggest mistake of my life. There’s only one Finn Prescott, and he’s all mine.”

“He is.” I gestured around us. “And you dragged me out to the middle of nowhere, miles away from a bed, to tell me that. If you think I’m getting sand in my unmentionables, then you’re wrong. I might love you to the moon and back, but I have limits.”

I had no defense as Cillian struck with the speed of a cobra and threw me over his shoulder. “What are you doing?”

He turned back the way we’d come, refusing to let the soft sand bother him as he set off at a steady jog. “Getting you to a bed as quickly as possible.”

“That sounds like a plan.” We had a few moments of peace while I gave in to being

carried like a sack of potatoes, and if I was honest, rather enjoyed it, before Cillian muttered something. “What was that?”

“I said my proposal will be better.”

“We’ll see,” I said sweetly. “Time will tell.”