



# The Meet Queue-t

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Twelve hours. One fake relationship. What could possibly go right?

Tessa Nelson is done with love. After her ex-fiancé cheated and her mum died, the only thing she's looking for is closure. That's why she's waiting in the longest line of her life to pay her respects to the Queen's coffin. It's what her mum would've wanted.

She didn't expect to find Oliver Murphy: a warm, quietly funny history professor who makes her feel seen. When her ex appears out of nowhere (seriously, what are the chances?), Oliver doesn't hesitate to play along after she blurts out he's her boyfriend.

Fake dating never felt so real.

But the Queue must come to an end, and so will they—unless she's prepared to risk the one thing she's been protecting.

Her heart.

**Total Pages (Source):** 29

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:00 pm*

## Chapter One

If you had asked me a month ago what I'd be doing on the eve of my twenty-fourth birthday, I would probably have said eating takeaway in my pyjamas while watching reruns of Love Island. Or maybe having a cheeky pint at my local pub before heading home to eat takeaway in my pyjamas. While watching Love Island.

And yes, that's not very exciting. I know. Honestly, I do. Birthdays are made for wild parties and strippers and—no, wait, I'm thinking of hen parties. Totally different.

But twenty-four is an intermediary year. I'm not twenty-five, which feels like a tipping point on the imaginary scale, and I'm not twenty-one, or even twenty-two, which Taylor Swift made an Important Year.

(Not that twenty-two was a great time for me, unless you count the year I failed my degree and moved back home to work in my granny's bakery as a win. Which, for the record, I do not.)

Anyway, my point is, I had no grand plans for my birthday, and I was fine with it. Eating Chinese on the sofa while looking at impossibly hot people trapped in a villa together was more than a good enough way to welcome my mid-twenties. And after losing someone important to you, big milestones lose their glamour. It's just another reminder of the time that passes without them. So staying in and doing nothing sounded great to me.

But just over a week ago, Queen Elizabeth II died, and so did my chance of a quiet birthday. You see, Mum loved the Queen. And when the opportunity to see her coffin

to pay our respects came about, I knew I needed to do this. Because if Mum were here (as in, with us in the material plane), she would want to be here (as in part of this queue).

So now I'm here. Stepping into her shoes. I thought it would be cathartic in a way, like saying goodbye to Mum all over again, but instead I'm shuffling forward at a speed a slug would find insulting. It's 9:42 p.m., and at the rate we're moving, I have no expectations of reaching Westminster Hall before morning.

Happy birthday to me.

I rub my gritty eyes as we pass a screen that tells me I have another twelve hours of estimated wait time ahead of me.

Fantastic.

That's what you get for finishing a full day's work and getting the train straight down to London. At the time, I had all sorts of grand ideas in my head about grief and cultural phenomenons, but now I just wish I'd brought my slippers.

Ooh, a takeaway would go down a treat round about now, too.

Other people seem way more prepared than I am, carrying backpacks filled with yummy snacks and thermoses sending steam spiralling towards the streetlamps. It's only when I got here that I realised just what I'd signed myself up for.

At least I should have plenty of time to contemplate my mistakes.

Deep joy.

My stomach rumbles. My veins protest the caffeine drought. One espresso at dawn

is not enough to sustain a human in this capitalist world. I'm practically suffering from withdrawal symptoms. Not to exaggerate, but if I don't get a coffee before tomorrow morning, I will die.

Behind me, a woman shushes a young child—seven?—who is probably going to make tonight hell. He's tired and whiny, clearly distressed about the lack of places to sit and the infuriating pace of the queue.

Me too, kid.

His mother has her hair pinned in a messy bun, coat sliding half off her shoulders as she stares at her phone and attempts to ignore her spawn. I turn away, glancing at the couple standing directly ahead of me instead. Unlike the grumping child, they seem oblivious to the painfully slow movement all around them. In fact, they seem oblivious to everything but each other.

Once, I wanted that. A marriage so filled with adoration that we couldn't get enough of each other. Vomit-inducing love.

Now, I think I'd rather take the vomit. At least that way, you're not worried that the vomit will cheat on you and gaslight you about it. If anything, you want the vomit gone.

Huh, maybe there are more similarities here than I thought.

I turn, away from the nauseating proof that love still exists, to the man beside me. When he joined, he already had his Kindle in his hand, and for the twenty minutes we've been here, he's been reading like his life depends on it. For all I know, maybe it does. If it's an Olympic sport, he would definitely have a chance of getting gold.

Once again, the queue grinds to a halt, this time under a streetlamp. The kid

complains at his exhausted mother, but I take the opportunity to examine my companion more closely. At a guess, I'd say he's in his late twenties or early thirties, with black-rimmed glasses that slide down his nose periodically and a well-fitted black turtleneck under a grey coat. He's cute, in a nerdy way. In a 'I would bang my professor' kind of way.

Then he looks up.

And holy shit, his eyes—a deep brown framed by long dark lashes—send him straight from nerdy-cute to hot. Embarrassed, I look away, but not before we make eye contact. Meaning he knows I've been watching him.

Fantastic.

I let the breeze from the Thames cool my flaming cheeks as I pretend the river is the most exciting thing in the world. Ten seconds pass with excruciating slowness, and once I think enough time has elapsed, I risk another glance at him.

He's still staring at me, brows drawing together. We make eye-contact again. This night couldofficiallynot be going any worse.

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“I wasn’t staring,” I say in possibly one of the most bare-faced lies that’s ever left my lips.

He blinks in confusion at the blatant untruth. “Obviously not.”

“I mean”—there is no way for me to salvage this—“I just looked at you. Once. Or twice. Because you’re reading.” My face burns hot all over again, and I make one final attempt to explain away my overt and obvious checking out. “I’ve never seen someone read while queueing before.”

“I see,” he says, enough dryness in his voice that I want to cringe into an alternate universe. A smile teases the corner of his mouth. “Well, what do you suggest I do in one of the longest queues of British history?”

I fold my arms. “You could . . .” My voice trails away as I contemplate his options. I’ve been twiddling my thumbs, replaying awkward encounters from the past five years, and staring at cute strangers, but I can’t say I’d recommend it. Then the rest of his sentence hits, and I forget about the lack of laid-on activities. “Wait,” I say. “You think this might be one of the longest queues in British history?”

“You don’t?”

“I hadn’t really thought about it before now. But—” I take a second to assemble my thoughts. “Surely it can’t be, though, right? I mean, history goes back alongway. And a lot of it isn’t documented. Can this queue right now really be the longest ever? We’re Brits. Queueing is our thing.”

His face shifts, becoming more angular and intense, the focus in his eyes palpable. “The term ‘queue’ was coined in the nineteenth century,” he says, and it’s as though he’s placed himself in another box—this one named ‘lecturer’. “Likely because of the invention of factories, where people were forced to queue in and out. For a substantial proportion of British history, there wasn’t the population nor the need for queueing. And until the twentieth century, the word was viewed as French. So while queueing might be our thing now, it hasn’t been for very long.”

My mouth drops open. “Wow. Should I have been taking notes?”

He ducks his head, and although it’s dark, I think I see a flush sweep up his cheeks. About time he took his turn. “Sorry,” he says. “Occupational hazard.”

“Let me guess. Teacher?”

“Lecturer.” He holds out a hand. “Dr Oliver Murphy. I work in the history department at York.”

I knew I was right about his bangable professor vibes. For a second, I stare at him, wondering if he’ll notice me wiping my palms on my jeans. His fingers twitch, like he’s already regretting the hand, so I grab it and shake. A good, firm shake my dad would’ve approved of, if I’d had a dad. “I’m Tessa Nelson.”

“Nice to meet you, Tessa.” He considers me for a moment. “So, why are you here? To pay your respects?”

“In a way.” Not to the Queen precisely, but he doesn’t need to know that. “What about you?”

“Because this is a momentous occasion,” he says, like it’s obvious. “This is a place where history is being made. How could I not be here and see it happen?”

“I don’t know, because it means waiting in a queue all night?”

“I had three coffees before I joined. I’m set.”

I have to laugh, and his gaze drops to the hole in my lip where my piercing used to be. Just as quickly, he looks away, and I heft my bag more firmly on my back. “You work in the history department, huh?” I ask.

“That’s right.”

“What kind of history?”

“Broadly? Renaissance. Seventeenth century is my favourite, but sometimes I teach seminars on the social structure of the fourteenth century.” His eyes are gleaming behind his glasses, but he physically stops himself before he can launch into another lecture. “But specifically? I study the Bubonic plague.”

“The plague,” I repeat, and stifle a grin. “Appropriate, all things considered.”

“The similarities we saw when COVID first happened were astounding,” he says earnestly. “So many of the same behaviours were in place. Did you know that in the sixteenth- and- seventeenth century, they used to force isolation?”

“What, like lock people in their houses?”

“That’s precisely it. And not only them—if they lived with a family, they were all locked in together, padlocked in, for a minimum of forty days.”

“Didn’t that just mean everyone in there died?”

“Not always everyone. But if they got infected, there was a good chance they would



die, yes.”

“God.” I wrap my arms around myself and shiver. “That’s . . . Wow.”

The queue moves again, more decisively this time, and I look out over the Thames, glittering with the city lights. Just behind us is Tower Bridge, and opposite is the Tower of London. A far cry from my small hometown in Leicestershire, but there’s a strange beauty to it, all these lights glimmering off the water, and a sense of aliveness that zips through my veins. Not just from London, but from the queue itself.

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He's right that this is something momentous. Not in that the entire country is mourning a person that most of us never met, but a sense of unification, somehow.

"What about you?" he asks, breaking me out of my thoughts. "What do you do?"

"Me? Oh." Well, let's see. I started doing an English degree and got so close to graduating, only to drop out in my third year. Then, because I had no idea what to do, I went back home and worked in Granny's bakery. "I'm a . . . baker, I guess."

"You guess?" He frowns, and it's kind of annoying how cute he is, to be honest. This would be way easier if he were intrinsically unattractive. "Sorry, I don't mean to pry."

"You're not prying," I say with a sigh. "I opened myself up to the question. I am a baker. The 'I guess' was because I'm not sure how much I want to be a baker."

"Oh. Why is that?" He frowns down at me, Kindle forgotten in one hand, and it's as though he really cares about the answer. The gesture is so unexpected, I don't quite know how to feel about it. Or what to say. I chew my lip.

"I fell into it, really. And I never fell back out." Before he can ask anything more about my hopes and dreams—which I am not sharing with a stranger, no matter how adorable his floppy, too-long hair is—I ask, "What about you? Always wanted to study the plague?"

He chuckles, which gives me plenty of opportunity to notice how nice his voice is. Not too deep and gravelly, not too nasally. Just . . . nice. Which is weird, because I'm

not usually into 'nice'. My track record more features the 'garden asshole' variety.

"Who doesn't want to study historical diseases, am I right?" He pats his pocket, coming out with a buzzing phone. As he stares at the screen, his smile dies. I don't catch the name, but I do catch the way he hesitates before glancing at me, as though weighing what to say. "I'm sorry," he goes with. "I have to take this."

Waving at him to go ahead, I step away, giving at least the illusion of privacy. Not that there's much to have here—I can practically hear the sweet nothings the couple ahead of us are whispering to each other.

Still, it's the thought that counts, right?

I focus on the glittering water and not on the sound of his voice.

It doesn't work.

"Mum," he says, a false note in his bright voice. A pause, where I pick a song in my head and attempt to listen at top volume. *We Don't Talk About Bruno* is the first one that comes to mind, so I embrace it. Mentally crank it up.

Despite my best efforts, I hear his exhaustion as he says, "No, everything's fine. Where's Dad?"

Another pause. I sing along to the music in my head under my breath.

"It's okay," he says quietly. "It's okay, Mum." A pause. "Yes, it's Oliver. Your son. Yes. Can you fetch your husband? Do you know where he is?"

"I need a wee," the boy from behind complains.

Excellentidea.

EvenEncantoisn't enough to drown Oliver out. Or hide the way his brow creases and he glances uncomfortably in my direction. So, I take the opportunity to visit the pop-up toilets. It's obvious he doesn't want to give me this insight into his problems, and why should he? We're strangers. Besides, I don't have room for anything else in my life. Especially cute, nerdy men with parental issues.Especiallywhen, once this is over, we're never going to see each other again.

## Chapter Two

BythetimeI'mback to my place in the queue, Oliver has finished his phone call. He's back to reading, but when I slide in beside him, his gaze returns to me.

"Hi," he says. "Welcome back."

"I recommend not peeing if at all possible," I say. "The conditions are not favourable."

"Noted." He lowers the Kindle and clears his throat. "Sorry about . . . uh, the interruption."

"It's fine." I glance up at him. "Everything okay?"

"Yes." He runs a hand through his hair, making it stick up all directions. Sighs. "No. I don't know. It's complicated."

"Hey, I'm just a stranger. You don't have to talk about it. But if you want to, I can listen." I gesture at the queue ahead of us. "And it's not as though we don't have time."

His smile is small, but warm. “Thanks.”

I nod and turn back to the front, ignoring the loved-up couple. If he wants to talk about it, he can go ahead. If not, I’ll go back to doing my thing. There’s a large discography in my head just waiting to be played.

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“It was my mum,” he says at last. “In case that wasn’t immediately obvious.”

I resist the urge to give him an entirely weird thumbs up and just nod encouragingly.

“Yeah, I figured.”

“She . . . has Alzheimer’s.”

Oh. Shit.

Grief hits me hard and fast. Grief for him, because Alzheimer’s sucks, and grief again for me. Like that first day, like all the days after, when the force of it knocks you on your back and pummels you until you can’t breathe.

The kind of pain you think you won’t survive.

“I’m so sorry,” I say.

“It’s okay.” He rubs at the space above the bridge of his glasses. His frown eases. After another second, he says, “My dad lives with her. She was diagnosed fairly recently, so most of the time she’s okay, still herself, but sometimes she gets confused. Just sees my number in her phone and calls.” Another hesitation, like he’s searching for the words but doesn’t know where to find them. I don’t dare say anything that might break the spell. “It’s like she knows I’m important to her, but often she doesn’t know why. So I guess she’s calling to find out. But when she’s that confused, she needs someone there to look after her, so I need her to get my dad, and it’s just . . .” He scrubs another hand through his hair. “It’s difficult.”

My heart hurts for him. Attending Mum's funeral was one of the hardest things I've ever done, but at least she knew who I was until the bitter end. I can't imagine being forgotten by the person who's supposed to love you the most.

"Sorry," he says, glancing sidelong at me. "That was a bit heavy."

"It's okay. I think sometimes it's easier to talk to a stranger than a friend about this stuff." I wrap my hands around my elbows. "That sounds really tough. I'm sorry. It's always hard when someone you love stops being . . . who you love."

He makes a thoughtful noise. "Speaking from experience?"

"I don't have anyone with Alzheimer's," I say quickly. Just a cheating ex-fiancé. "That was just a general statement."

He nods, and silence falls between us again, but this time he puts his Kindle in his bag, like he's committing to our conversation, even if it doesn't exist right now. The queue moves gradually on, and we're pulled with its tide.

He turns to look at me, the lenses of his glasses reflecting the light from the nearby lamp. His mouth is soft, though it's probably best I don't look at his mouth too much. For my own sanity. Getting a crush now would be a terrible, terrible idea.

"Mind if I ask you a personal question?" he says.

"Terribly." I grin at his expression of shock. "I'm kidding. What is it?"

"I can't help noticing you're here alone."

Ouch. Another blow to my fragile heart. I cover it with a shrug. "So are you."

“Touché. No one I know wanted to come.” He raises a brow at me in a clear challenge.

“Me neither,” I say. It’s the truth, sort of. Granny would have come if I’d asked—but I needed this one thing to be just mine. Mine and Mum’s. I just hadn’t realised, before I came here, what being on my own meant.

It meant being alone.

To distract myself from the depressing thoughts, I reach for my phone. Half past ten. Bedtime for me, usually, seeing as I got up at half five. At least tomorrow won’t be an early start. Or maybe technically it counts if you haven’t slept beforehand. Honestly, I don’t know how all-nighters are considered as, apart from mistakes.

Yawning violently, I shove my phone into my back pocket. I’ll sleep when I’m dead, as Granny always says.

“Want a coffee?” Oliver asks, and without waiting for a response, digs in his bag, pulling out a flask. “You look tired.”

I can’t summon the energy to be offended. “Pretty sure that’s an insult.”

“Pretty sure that’s an observation, seeing as you just yawned wide enough to swallow the moon.”

I accept the thermos and wrap my hands around it, but it’s not warming. Probably because that’s the entire point of a thermos. “Don’t you want it?”

“Thanks to the incredible amount of caffeine I ingested earlier, I think I’d just jitter straight into the Thames. You’d have to fish me out.”



I stare at the water, black in the darkness except for the lights superimposed on the surface. “If you jitter yourself in there, you’re on your own.”

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A lopsided smile crosses his face, giving me an excellent view of my Achilles heel. He has a dimple. Just one, and I can feel the way my heart does its best to clamber out of my chest. No men should be allowed dimples. “You mean you wouldn’t jump in there after me?”

“You already gave me your coffee,” I say, holding up the little cup. Steam rises into the air, tickling my face. “What more could I need you around for?”

“My scintillating conversation?”

“What person even uses ‘scintillating’ in a conversation?”

“Me, evidently.”

Evidently. He even talks like a professor. It’s weirdly endearing.

I take my first sip of the coffee and close my eyes. It’s bitter and dark and caffeinated and it’s everything I need on a cold Thursday evening. Maybe I even groan a little.

“Good?” he asks, amused.

“You’re in luck. I might not awkwardly fall asleep on you after all.”

A beat. “You say that like I’d mind.”

I open my eyes and look at him sceptically. “You wouldn’t mind a strange woman with blue hair and a nose piercing falling asleep on your shoulder?”

He tilts his head, giving me a slow up and down that makes heat curl in my toes. “You say that like I wouldn’t mind someone whodidn’t have blue hair and piercings falling asleep on me.”

“I’m not exactly everyone’s cup of tea,” I say.

“Maybe not everyone’s, but . . .” He lets the thought trail away, and another thrill runs through me. I’m used to people looking at me disapprovingly, like somehow my aesthetic choices have some kind of moral implication. Strait-laced Oliver didn’t strike me as someone who’d be into my vibe.

But maybe he is. Maybe I’m judging him the way I hate other people judging me—making assumptions based on physical appearance. The thought that maybe he might be interested makes my stomach twist with anticipation.

Stop it. We’re in a queue. Nothing’s going to happen, and you’re still recovering from your broken heart, remember?

“I like it,” he finishes. “It’s nice.”

I snort. “Nice?”

“Bold? Daring? Exciting?” He gives me a deprecating smile. “What adjective would you prefer?”

“Anything but nice. It’s such a bland word.”

He scans my face, but I don’t know what he’s looking for, and he doesn’t give me any indication as he jams his hands in his pockets. “If you say so.”

In my brain, Henry Tilney from Northanger Abbey resurfaces, ready to do battle. Oh,

he says. It is a very nice word indeed! It does for everything. He was right then, and it still applies now. It's a get-out-of-jail-free card when people aren't sure what else to say.

I wind a lock of my blue hair around my fingers and look at it. Mum would've hated it. She was all about fitting in, about being part of something greater and not drawing attention to yourself, and that I could do something that so goes against those values would've grated. Blue isn't exactly subtle.

When she died, I felt as though I lost myself. The hair was a step on the way to finding myself again.

Tossing the rest of the coffee back, I hand the flask to Oliver. "My granny hates my hair," I say, to stop my mind's endless wandering in circles. It's not like I haven't thought about this stuff before, but I could happily go a while longer without thinking about it again. "And my nose ring. And my lip ring—I've taken that one out, but maybe I'll change my mind." I shrug. "But anyway, I like blue, so why shouldn't I dye my hair to match?"

Oliver nods, like this all makes sense to him—the university lecturer who lights up when talking about ancient diseases and still wears an old-fashioned wristwatch. "It suits you," he says.

"If you say it's nice again, I'll throw you into the Thames myself," I warn.

He grins. "I mean it. Not everyone can pull off blue hair. I couldn't when I tried."

That's so unexpected, I stare at him, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. "You dyed your hair . . . blue?"

"Purple, actually, though it was a while ago now."

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“I can’t imagine you with purple hair.” Or any colour hair that isn’t brown, honestly. It suits him, the brown, adds to the glasses and the turtleneck and the professor chic vibes he’s got going on. I can’t picture him in anything else. Like he was born a little serious and a little cute.

“Hang on, let me show you.” He rifles in his pocket for his phone as we move steadily onwards. We’re making good time. Maybe we’ll see the Queen before sunrise and I can get the closure I need without spending my entire birthday on it.

I wrap my arms around myself as I think. Tomorrow is Thursday, and I took it off from work. Technically, I also work Fridays and Saturdays, but I know Granny will understand if I need more time. She’s good like that, gruff but surprisingly emotionally resonant.

Oblivious to my inner thoughts and the morbid turn they’ve taken, Oliver thrusts his screen in my face. “Here.”

The man in the picture looks to be in his early twenties and is about as far as it’s possible to get from the history lecturer in front of me. He’s wearing eyeliner and his long hair is swept up in a long wave that sinks slowly over his head. The spikes look hard with hair gel, and honestly, I’m impressed they’re staying in place. He’s also wearing a ripped T-shirt and chains on his black jeans. Metal-studded leather bands wrap around his wrists.

It’s a statement. One I can’t reconcile with the watch-wearing man in front of me.

“This is different,” I say after a moment, glancing between the two versions of him to

pick out the similarities. His eyes are the same, brown and liquid, and the shape of his jaw and mouth is the same. But the rest . . . not so much. “Wow. I mean . . . Wow.”

He eyes me cautiously. “I’m going to take that as a compliment.”

“I didn’t know you had it in you. Although your hair isbarelypurple.”

“It’s definitely purple,” he says with a grin. “Let me find another photo.”

I have no objection to seeing more goth Oliver—which is the least goth name I can think of—and when he hands me another picture, I take the phone eagerly. His hair is indeed a rich shade of purple, brought out by the sun, and in this one he’s standing with his arm around a girl. She’s sporting bright red hair and a wide smile. They look happy.

“Okay,” I admit. “Purple hair.”

“Thankyou.”

“Why did you abandon your goth phase?” Into somethingsodifferent.

“I kept it for undergrad, but when I started my PhD and taught other students, I decided I should look more professional.”

The turtleneck and coat combodoeslook good. He looks professional. But there’s something about the man in the picture, about the way he smiles, that makes me think the current version isn’t embracing every part of himself.

“It’s your body,” I say after a few seconds, trying to judge my words and weigh them before I toss them in his direction. “If it makes you happy, and you express some part of yourself through whatever, I think you should go for it.”

“Not sure the faculty would agree.”

“Screw them. Metaphorically speaking,” I add. “Probably don’t actually screw them. That right ruin that whole ‘air of professionalism’ you’re going for.”

The corner of his mouth twitches into his lopsided smile. “I’ll bear that in mind. Thanks for the invaluable career advice.”

“When you change because it’s what other people expect, I think you lose pieces of yourself.” Before I can say anything more and embarrass myself, I tap the girl in the picture. “Is she your girlfriend?”

“She was.” He takes the phone back and stares at the couple on the screen for a second before exiting the photos app and locking it again. “We dated for most of uni, but broke up when we went our separate ways.”

I sneak a look at his left hand to see if there’s any sign of a wedding ring—nothing, not even a tan line. “Ah, that sucks.”

“It happens.” He doesn’t look too cut up about it. “She moved to Finland anyway, so.”

“Oh. Huh. Finland.” I try to picture what I know about Finland, which is very little. It’s cold there. They speak Finnish. That’s about it.

“What about you? Do you have a partner?”

“Me? No.” I laugh, then laugh harder, because after Brandon-the-dick-fiancé-who-cheated, my attempts at dating have been . . . notenormouslysuccessful, let’s say. “No, not even a little bit. I don’t exactly have the best luck with men.”

He looks genuinely surprised, which is sweet. “Really?”

“Dating is hard. I’m not very good at it.”

“I don’t believe that.”



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“You’d be wrong.”

“Okay,” he challenges. “What makes you so bad?”

Where to start. “As soon as I’m in a date situation—meal, walk, visiting the pencil museum—I just freeze up,” I say, gesturing hopelessly. “You know, I just stand there full creepy alien, like Mark Zuckerberg, which either means the guy talks about himself the entire time, or he thinks I’m an idiot. Or both.” Which has happened, by the way. Up to and including the pencil museum—which is not a euphemism, and I’ve never been able to figure out if I’m relieved or disappointed. At least if it was a euphemism, we’d have had something to talk about.

The queue has stopped again and a man in a bright yellow hi-viz jacket walks along the Encampment, saying something in a walkie talkie. A few people call out to him, but a burst of static emerges from the little black box, and he holds up a hand. “There’s been a bit of a delay,” he calls, and people quiet to listen. I guess that’s something to be proud of, in a weird way, about this whole situation. Everyone just pulling together, no questions asked. “There are toilets two hundred metres ahead. Please get in touch with one of the staff or volunteers if you need anything.”

The screen with the queue time skips to sixteen hours.

### Chapter Three

It’s two minutes to midnight. Because I have nothing better to do, and Oliver has engaged in conversation with the frazzled mother behind me—who was clearly a Queen stan and is genuinely upset by her death—I watch the time tick closer to my

birthday.

Almost twenty-four.

Logically, I know I won't feel any different. My life will be the same mess it's been all year. Nothing will change. Mum will still be gone, and I'll have had my first milestone without her.

But when the clock hits 00:00, I blow out a breath, and there's a tense feeling in the pit of my stomach. A message comes through from my bestie, Rosalie, in New Zealand.

ROSALIE:HAPPY BIRTHDAYYYYY SWEATPEA, I LOVE YOU SO MUCH

ROSALIE:\*SWEETPEA

ROSALIE:don't judge my spelling okay

ROSALIE:autocorrect did not have my back

TESSA:Thanks!! Love you too!

ROSALIE:you better be having drinks on me. are you having drinkson me?

TESSA:No drinks. Currently in The Queue.

ROSALIE:to see the Queen???

ROSALIE:i didn't even think you liked her??

TESSA:Mum did

ROSALIE:oh

ROSALIE:omg

ROSALIE:PRETEND I DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING. I LOVE YOU LONG TIME  
BESTIE. ENJOY SEEING THE QUEEN

ROSALIE:and after, have a drink on me, okay?

TESSA:Will do

Oliver glances at the screen. "One of your so-called disastrous dates?"

I slip my phone into my pocket again. "Nah. My best friend. She's in New Zealand, but she just texted to say happy birthday."

His eyes widen, and why does he have to have such gorgeous eyes? I could fall into them, like drowning myself in melted chocolate. "It's your birthday?" he asks. "Today?"

"I mean, technically. Now it's past midnight."

"And you're in the queue. Alone." That fact seems to really hit him, and he pulls off his bag, unzipping it and rifling through. "You should've said something."

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:00 pm*

“Honestly, it’s fine. It’s no big deal, just a birthday.”

He comes back up with one of those four packs of chocolate muffins you can buy at the supermarket. “Here,” he says, offering the squashed plastic box to me. “It’s not a cake, but it’s the best I’ve got.”

“Oliver.” I don’t quite understand why there’s a lump in my throat. It’s a totally irrational reaction, especially considering one of the chocolate chips has smeared across the inside of the plastic. The muffins look half melted and squashed and . . . kind of perfect, actually. “You really don’t have to do this. I chose to be here.”

“And you can choose to accept my humble offering.” He pops the lid and takes one out, offering me the other three. “Just have one, Tessa. We can eat it together.”

“Tess,” I say. “My friends call me Tess.”

“And my friends let me buy them terrible food and then pretend it’s good.” He offers it to me again, waving it in front of my face so the scent of chocolate and processed baked goods floods my senses. “Unless . . . Crap, are you vegan? Gluten intolerant? I didn’t even think.”

Ugh, he’s even cuter when he’s flustered, and before I can let myself regret it, I pluck a muffin from the box and take a bite. It’s warm and soft and chocolatey, melting on my tongue a little, and even though by any normal standards it’s subpar, it still manages to be the best muffin I’ve ever eaten.

“Thanks,” I say, running my tongue along my teeth before I smile at him. “This is

amazing.”

“You don’t need to be polite, you know. It’s about the worst birthday cake I’ve ever offered anyone.”

“I wasn’t expecting any birthday cake at all this year, so.” I take another bite before I can show him how weirdly emotional this entire thing is making me. Clearly I’m sleep-deprived, because no supermarket muffin should make me feel like this. Chocolate or no.

“I wonder what the hold-up is,” he muses, moving to the wall beside the Thames. It’s not a particularly high wall, maybe waist height for me, but in one smooth movement, he’s clambering up until he’s standing on it, towering over the rest of us. He peers along the line, looking for the source of the disturbance.

“Get down,” I say, filled with visions of him tumbling backwards and dying before my eyes. “You’d have more luck finding out what’s happening online.”

He grins at me, and there’s something wicked about the expression that makes me flush. Also, it reveals his dimple again, which is an extremely dangerous weapon that should only be deployed in matters of emergency.

I stuff the muffin in my mouth before I can think too much about that one dimple and the way it gives him an adorable, lopsided expression. To my relief, he sits back down. To my not-relief, he pats the stone beside him. “Come on up.”

I eye the wall, but there’s no dignified way I’m getting up there without either scrabbling around or falling to my certain death. “Thanks, but I’ll pass.”

“Here.” He holds out a hand. “Let me help.”

“Do you crave your immediate demise?”

“Tess.” He laughs at my expression and I fold my arms, tucking my hands away so they won’t be tempted to take his. “I won’t let you fall.”

There should be a law against being so beguiling. I am an independent woman who can make her own decisions, but when he looks down at me through his lashes, I’m apparently stripped of all autonomy, because I take his hand and allow him to power me up the wall.

“Ouch!” I crack my elbow against the stone and that weird, tingling, hollow feeling shoots through my arm. Cursing, I topple sideways into him, my forehead smacking against his chest, and he catches me with his other arm. I feel him tense to hold us in place.

Shit. He smells incredible. I’ve face-planted his chest, but the only thing I can think about is breathing more of his scent in. He smells like the cosy corner of a full library—all new ink, old pages, and macchiato steam. Underneath it all is the fresh scent of laundry. I flush, again, and I’m glad it’s mostly dark as I shove myself off him and regain my balance. Not my dignity, though—that has long gone and I doubt I’m ever getting it back.

My elbow still throbs.

“You okay?” he asks, even though I almost headbutted him off the damn wall.

“I am so sorry. Are you okay?” I wince. “I knew at least one of us would get injured.”

The corner of his mouth tips up in a little half-smile and I swear my heart misses a beat. “I think I still have all my ribs.”

“Intact?”

“Pretty sure.” The smile widens. “How’s your elbow?”

“Uh.” I hold my arm up, forearm swinging loosely. “I think it’s still attached?”

He runs his fingers across my arm in assessment, and the contact is so unexpected, I freeze. “Looks fine to me. Couple of minutes and it should be back to normal.”

I flex my fingers experimentally and shift away from him (knowing me, I’ll get distracted enough I’ll fall into the Thames, and that really would be a disaster) to look around us at the queue. Along with the air of hushed excitement, there’s a sense of solidarity.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:00 pm*

Mum would have loved it here.

She'd have loved every freaking part of all this queueing up together. She'd have made small talk with the cutesy couple ahead of us, and entertained the small child behind with stories about the Queen. This atmosphere I'm feeling now, this sense of belonging to something larger than myself, would have made her feel alive.

"History in the making," I murmur, and to my horror, my throat is tight. Thinking of Mum always does that, especially when it's in public places like Tesco (her favourite supermarket) or the botanical gardens (another of her favourite places) or apparently, in the queue.

"Are you all right?" Oliver asks.

"Yeah, I—"

"Tessy!"

At the sound of the male voice, deep and familiar and awful, dread surges through me. My heart, never the most reliable organ, lurches out of my chest and splatters against the ground. I suck in a sharp, hard breath, and dig my palms into the edge of the stone wall to stop them trembling. This can't be happening. Absolutely, categorically cannot be happening right now.

"Tessy," he calls again, and when I look up, I'm forced to confront the fact that this is happening. Brandon, the man I thought I was going to marry, the man I devoted four years of my life to, is walking towards me with a pretty girl by his side.



“Hey, Tess,” he says as he approaches, waving at me. I don’t wave back. I might just be incapable of waving, or moving, or speaking, or doing anything but freezing in shock, because the last time we met, when I chucked him out of my mum’s house, didn’t I specify that I never wanted to see him again? This, right now, is included in ‘never’. Maybe I should have put it in writing or something. Got him to sign a contract that states he needs to keep a distance from me at all times or I’ll stab him in the back with a butter knife.

Never mind bringing slippers to the queue—I should have come prepared for imminent violence.

Oliver frowns at me. “Who’s that?”

My breath whooshes out of me, and just like that, I can talk again. “My ex,” I hiss through teeth so gritted I could probably crush entire worlds between my molars. “Shit.”

Statistically, this should be impossible. There are millions of people who live in London. Thousands in this queue alone. And sure, he lives here now, after he got that fancy job, but the fact he’s here? To pay his respects to a queen I didn’t even think he cared about? The odds are not on his side. Not even a little bit. This is a coincidence beyond the realm of coincidences.

But the universe doesn’t pay attention to statistics or odds, and he comes to stand in front of me with the megawatt grin I used to adore before I realised that 1) it was smarmy, not charming, and 2) he used it on lots of other girls.

I can’t believe he’s using it on me now like I’m glad to see him. Like he’s glad to see me.

Has he forgotten the blowout fight where I screamed at him, threw his toothbrush in

his face, and told him to get out of my house? To never come near me again?

“Tessy,” he says, grinning up at me. I hate that stupid nickname he gave me. Hate everything about his stupid face. No good ever comes from blonde men, no matter how tall they are, or how white their teeth. “You’ve dyed your hair blue.”

The first time we’ve seen each other since we broke up because he cheated on me multiple times, and that’s the first thing he can think of to say?

Yes, Brandon. My hair is blue. I’ve got three new piercings, including one you’re never going to see. It’s been a year and I’m a whole new person you don’t know any more.

But for four glorious years of my life, I thought I loved him, hard enough I could forgive all the other stuff, like his tendency to sleep with other people. Sunk cost fallacy, I guess, because I was so terrified of letting this relationship fail. Letting him down. Letting Mum down.

Turns out the only person I was letting down was myself, but hey ho. You live and you learn.

“Thought it was time I needed a change,” I say. From you.

“Almost didn’t recognise you there, but I’ve gotta say, you stand out.” He waves a hand at the gorgeous woman standing beside him. “This is Gracie.”

Of course it is. Of course his new girlfriend’s name is fucking Gracie because she’s grace and light and beauty and everything I tried so hard to be for so long.

Here’s the thing about Brandon. He is a grade-A dick and I despise him, but he works in marketing and he’s good at it. He’s apparently got the kind of face people want to

throw money at. All he needs to do is have lunch with prospective clients and they're about ready to hand over their bank details and the keys to their house. Meaning when he turns that dazzling smile on Oliver, I'm ready to do battle.

"Who's this?" Brandon asks, just enough possessiveness in his voice that it spurs me into action. I'm a rational woman, and I do the only thing left to me under the circumstances.

I grab Oliver's hand and say, "This is Oliver. My boyfriend."

Entire suns are born and die in the time before someone else speaks. I replay the line in my head, trying to hear it differently each time, the horror growing stronger with each beat of silence.

Boyfriend. I called him my boyfriend. Shit, shit, shit. What if he calls me out on my blatant lie? What if he doesn't want to stand in as my emotional-support fake-boyfriend at the drop of a hat?

I wouldn't even blame him.

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:00 pm*

For a micro-second, he stares at me, probably waiting for the other shoe to fall. For the world to make sense again. There's a flicker of something across his face, and I'm certain this is the moment when he's going to publicly reject me. This is the end to a very promising friendship-slash-flirtation, and Brandon is going to think I never got over him and I'm just waiting for him to take me back, even though the exact opposite is true, and—

Oliver's hand, slack around mine, tightens. His expression smooths out, and he adjusts our fingers so they're linked. "Hi," he says easily, like I haven't just thrown him to the metaphorical sharks.

This man. I could kiss him.

"Boyfriend," Brandon repeats.

Oliver's hand twitches before he smiles. "That's right," he says, and it's like I can finally breathe again. Turns out while those suns were taking millions of years to die, I was holding my breath.

I turn to Gracie, giving her my biggest—and fakest—smile. "So long have you guys been together?"

She frowns, glancing at Brandon, and he hesitates. I immediately know the answer is before we broke up, but the wave of sick hurt doesn't bowl me over like I was expecting.

Scumbags be scumbags. I'm glad to be rid of him.

Oliver looks at me, brows slightly pinched, and I just know he's picking up on all this subtext. The hesitation, the drama, the 'other woman'. All the while, Brandon is glaring at Oliver. Apparently, in his mind, I'm not allowed to move on. He's allowed to date again, sure, but not me. I'm supposed to be perpetually pining, mourning him as the 'one who got away'.

Hah. Tough titties. I'm the one who got away from him, and good riddance.

"What about you?" Brandon asks. "How long have you been together?"

I panic, flailing for an answer that feels real, but Oliver saves me. He places our joint hands on my thigh, thumb sweeping over my skin in a soothing gesture. I do my best to ignore the fact the contact sends sensation rushing up my body right to my overly dramatic heart.

"A few months," he says. "We're just enjoying spending time together, seeing how things go."

"Ah, the honeymoon phase." Brandon nods. "I remember. Be patient with her."

I gape at his audacity, but Oliver has tensed up beside me. "Excuse me?"

"Nothing, nothing. Just saying." Brandon waves a dismissive hand, then turns back to me. "I heard about your mum, Tess. Would've come to the funeral, but I couldn't make it up north in time."

It's like he dunked me under the frigid water of the Thames. I turn cold instantly. I'm used to people bringing her up, even mentioning that they're sorry, but Brandon is different.

He was there when we got the news about her cancer, when treatment after treatment

didn't work. One minute he was comforting me, and the next he was outscrewing his way through our town's population. Girls I went to high school with, even college with. Gracie too, probably.

It was like a routine. He'd come home, help me make dinner for Mum, talk for a bit about his day, ask me for sex. When I refused, he'd stick around a little longer until it was time to put Mum to bed, then he'd leave to sleep with someone who'd let him. You know, someone whose mother wasn't actively dying in the same house.

Weird I wasn't in the mood. Fucking astonishing.

Oliver's hand tightens on mine, and I'm pretty sure I've stopped breathing again. My lungs hurt, but I'm not sure if that's oxygen deprivation or just the fact I'm facing the man who broke my heart in a thousand different ways. Who just pulled the scab off the greatest wound of my life.

My blood is lava, but while there's so much emotion boiling inside me—fury a big one—the second I let even a drop of it out, I'm going to break down. And he doesn't get to see that.

He doesn't have any damn right to that. Not any more.

I swallow it all back down and keep my voice flat, empty. "Let's not pretend either of us would have wanted you there."

"Aw, don't be like that, Tessy," he says. "You're not still mad, are you? You don't need to be dramatic about it."

Dramatic? I'll show him dramatic. But before I can do something that might be potentially illegal, like planting my fist in his face or pulling his ear off, Oliver reaches across to put his other hand on my knee, blocking my easy descent from the

wall.

“Brandon,” Gracie whines, clearly bored with this conversation all about me. “Let’s go. We don’t want to lose our place.”

“You know I can never argue with a face as pretty as yours.” He flicks her on the cheek and glances up at me. “Let me know if you can see anything ahead, Tess. I’m not far away.” He taps his phone like I kept his number and didn’t block his ass the second he left. “Or just shout.”

“Sure,” Oliver says, still leaning over me slightly. It takes me a second to realise his body language is protective. “We will.”

We. Like we’re a unit. Brandon dislikes that as much as I like it, and I have the joy of watching irritation skip across his features before he walks away.

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:01 pm*

But he glances back at me like he can't help it. One arm is still around Gracie still, but his eyes are on me. Probably pissed that I've found someone else after telling him he was my one and only.

Kind of ruined that for yourself, Brandon.

Then he's lost to the crowd and Oliver leans back so he can look at my face. "So," he says. "What was that about?"

### Chapter Four

How do you explain to your very new fake boyfriend that your ex-fiancé was a cheating asshole who deserves to be shanked by a prison inmate making do with a toothbrush?

Or that your mother recently died of cancer and you're still trying to figure out what life means without her?

I realise I'm still clutching his hand, so I release him and stare back over the Thames like it's going to give me all the answers. To no one's surprise, it doesn't. Beside me, Oliver sits quietly for a second, letting me sort through my feelings. I have too many—again, to no one's surprise—and I've never been good at expressing them in any sort of healthy or sensible way.

He told me about his mum. I should be able to do the same. But the words just don't come.

After a few more minutes of silence, he nudges his knee against mine. "I know I'm



just a stranger,” he says. “But if you want to talk about it, it’s not as though I have anything better to do right now.”

I lace my own fingers together in my lap. “Sorry about—all of it. Brandon is a douchebag.”

“Were you together a long time?”

“Four years. Eighteen to twenty-two. We broke up last year.”

“Good.” He pauses. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“No, it is a good thing. He wasn’t very nice to me.” I loosen my hands and reach for my hair again, twirling it between my fingers. “Sorry I made out like you were my boyfriend. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“You didn’t.” His shoulder bumps mine. There are so many places our bodies are touching, and it feels as though at some point he’s going to release and pull away, but he doesn’t.

“I held your hand,” I point out.

“Wow, better call the police,” he deadpans.

I sigh, but it turns into something approaching a laugh. When I glance at him, though, my laughter fades. My gaze meets a soft brown one, framed by thick lashes partially obscured by his glasses. I have the sudden urge to take them off, see what he would look like without them.

Maybe I really would drown in him then. Maybe his glasses are the only things tethering me to sanity.

“Thanks,” I say. “I really mean it.”

“You’re welcome.” His mouth twitches into that lopsided smile, dimple popping. “I really mean it.”

I don’t know when his face got so close to mine, but I can see every tiny mark on his skin. Smile lines around his eyes. It’s like looking through a door and seeing a hint of what he might look like when he’s older. There’s a mark on the side of his nose where his glasses have dug in.

His hand comes up, taking my wrist and drawing it down from my hair. I’d forgotten it was still there, still twisting. When I was a kid, I used to twirl my hair into knots as I was going to sleep every night. And every morning, Mum had a nightmare brushing them back out again. Guess it’s a habit that’s never gone away.

I feel his breath on my lips. His fingers flex on my wrist, and I expect him to let go, but he doesn’t. Skin against skin. Goosebumps break up and down my arms. His eyes are a mystery, but that tiny twitch of a lopsided smile isn’t. I can’t look away. He doesn’t seem to want to, either. Even though there’s no need to keep pretending, he hasn’t created any more distance between us. If anything he’s closer, closer, leaning in until our noses almost brush. My heart is pounding in my chest, a jackhammer into concrete, and every place he touches me burns.

I want him to kiss me. To silence my thoughts with his mouth and the release of tension in my gut. Anticipation twists in my stomach.

His gaze drops to my lips.

I stop breathing.

A yell slices through the darkness. Oliver glances away, and the moment is gone. He

leans back, dropping my wrist, and I cradle it against my chest. All around us, unease spreads through the crowd, people shifting and muttering. Something has gone wrong.

Oliver clambers to his feet. “Stay here,” he says, even though if I attempted to walk along the wall, there’d be a whole new reason to scream.

I say nothing as he leaves to see what’s going on. My body is still buzzing from that almost-kiss, but the new tension around us submerges that feeling under a layer of uncertainty. The queue wasn’t moving anyway, but now there’s a sense of stifled momentum. I wrap my arms around myself.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:01 pm*

“Heart attack,” someone says, and the word spreads like wildfire.

“An ambulance is coming.”

“At least he’s still conscious.”

“Do you think they’ll close the queue?”

My breath catches in my throat and my chest pinches. Surely not. Surely they won’t close the queue because someone got a heart attack. That sounds callous, and maybe it is, but we’ve all come here for something. For me, it’s Mum. If they send us away now, if I came all this way for nothing—

The panic spreads, hot and uncomfortable in my chest, burning right down to my toes, and I hop off the wall. If I can’t fulfil this last dream of hers, how can I move on? It’s not like I’d make her proud any other way—she wanted a teacher or a scientist and I’m neither. I dropped out of an English degree, for God’s sake. Started baking cakes because I didn’t know what else to do.

Shoulders tense, I pace back and forth in my little section of the queue. People are bunching up now, and concern emanates from everyone around me. The couple ahead are praying for the man with a heart attack. The mum behind me is fending off questions about what’s going on from a boy who should have been in bed many hours ago. My feet ache.

Still no sign of Oliver. What if he got kicked out? A pulse of irrational fear rocks through me, and I pull out my phone to distract myself. A string of unwelcome texts

from an unknown number sits in my notification bar.

UNKNOWN NUMBER:It was good seeing you today.

UNKNOWN NUMBER:I hadn't realised how much I missed you

UNKNOWN NUMBER:You look amazing btw

Brandon. Gross. I don't even want to know what he thinks he'll achieve with these messages. Wrinkling my nose, I block his number, then delete the messages. He doesn't get to text me like he didn't burn down our life together. I hope Gracie dumps him. Publicly.

With that done, and the wail of sirens in the distance, I have nothing to do but wait for Oliver to come back and try to ignore the awful weight in my chest.

According to time, as mutually agreed upon by society and recorded on my phone, Oliver takes eleven minutes to return.

According to the stress in my body, he's been about three days.

"Everything's okay," he says as he jumps down from the wall beside me. My knees go embarrassingly weak with relief. "The paramedics are there now." His gaze roves over my features and whatever he was going to say next dies away. "Are you okay?"

"Yes."No. "Is he going to be all right?"

"I think so. There was a doctor already at the scene, so I just helped out." He shrugs modestly. "I have a first aid certificate."

I give a slightly wet laugh. God, have I been crying? "Dr Oliver Murphy, saving

people every day.”

“Tessa.”

I recognise that voice, the one people use when they know something’s wrong and they’re trying to cajole you into telling them what—all concern and half pleading. I hunch my shoulders and do the thing I know best: deflect. “Do you think they’re going to close the queue?”

“Not unless people start dying of exposure.” He gives me a reassuring smile, and like the idiot I am, I cling to it, needing the reassurance. Stupid, maybe, but sometimes we all need stupid things. I rub my hands up and down my arms, trying to stave off the goosebumps. He’s right that they wouldn’t close the queue unless people were getting hurt in related incidents, rather than a probably unrelated heart attack, but I can’t help overthinking.

So many things could go wrong before I get the closure I need.

“Tess? You’re shaking.” Oliver runs a hand up my arm to my shoulder, and when I don’t flinch away, steps closer. This is how close we were on the wall, but this time the energy is very different. He smells offensively good. Instead of kissing him, I want to burrow my face in his shoulder and never emerge again. Maybe I can cocoon in his warmth and just stay in stasis.

When he slides his arms around me, pressing me against his body in one gentle but smooth motion, I don’t fight it. Just let him hold me. One hand soothes across my back, thumb tracing slow lines. His cheek rests against the top of my head.

I relax into his embrace, which is a mistake, because then I make a noise that sounds remarkably like a sob. My voice cracks.

He just holds me closer. Waits. One hand rests on the nape of my neck. Not too much pressure—I could pull away if I wanted to—but just enough to make me feel wanted. Secure. If my knees were to give way, I think he might catch me.

I raise my hands to his waist, fully intending to push him back, but I end up fisting the material there instead.

“Brandon said something about your mum,” Oliver murmurs into my hair. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to, but I think I might understand, at least a bit.”

That’s the thing that breaks through the last of my inhibitions. Because even if his mother hasn’t died, he’s still lost her, in a way. Maybe even in a worse way. If anyone is going to understand grief, it might just be this man.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:01 pm*

“She had cancer,” I say, shifting slightly. My nose presses against his neck, and his arms tighten around me. Just tight enough I can barely breathe, but let’s face it, I wasn’t doing much of that anyway. “They tried everything they could, but it was terminal.” The word no one wants to hear. “After we found out, we still had some time—about two years—and we made memories and did what we could, but there are only so many things you can do with someone who’s so tired and who needs so much care. Chemo itself nearly killed her.”

He’s silent, a pocket of warmth in the coldness that has become my life.

“She died a month ago. It’s been . . . hard. But she loved the Queen. Like, loved her. With everything going on, she felt like the Queen was one good reason to be proud of being British.” I take a deep breath. “If she were around now, she’d have been first in the line to see the coffin, and it’s—it’s the one thing I can do. For her. To say goodbye.”

Breath blows across my hair, shifting it, and I feel his body move under me. “So that’s why you came here alone? For closure?”

“Yeah.”

The hand on my neck moves into my hair, and I let him hold me for a few glorious seconds more. Granny is amazing—she really, really is—but she’s very no nonsense. We hugged and cried a lot in the earlier days, but then she threw herself into her work. That was her way of dealing with grief, to make something from it. Mine was to fall back into myself and carry around this weight in my chest that stops me from wanting to do anything.



Mum wanted this amazing life for me, and I've let her down.

I break away from Oliver and wipe my fingers under my eyes. As nice as this is, I can't get too comfortable relying on him. He's a stranger, even if he doesn't feel like one any more.

"Anyway, sorry about that." My fingers come away black, and I smudge the heels of my hands over my cheeks. My eyelashes feel wet, and it's a relief the sun isn't close to coming up yet, because I'm a mess. I avoid the light from a nearby streetlamp, just in case.

Oliver's hand touches my side, the kind of thoughtless gesture someone you know really well might do. "You don't have anything to apologise for."

"First I made you pretend to date me, and then I cried on you." I cringe at his turtleneck, certain I'm going to find stains all over it. At least it's black. "I'm not usually like this."

"Like what? It's not a crime to have emotions, Tessa."

"Pretty sure what I've done to your jumper is a crime." I use my sleeve to wipe away what might be a smear of snot. If the ground could just open up and swallow me right now, that would be great. "If you were going to call the police for the hand-holding, I don't know what you'll do over this."

"Something drastic," he agrees. "What do you think, the death penalty?"

I laugh. It's thick and mucus-y, but at least it's something. Determinedly, I face the front. "Do you think we'll get there before dawn?"

"At the rate we're moving?" He gives a quiet snort. "Unlikely."

“What about you?” I ask. “Will it be a problem if the queue is delayed?”

“You mean, will my students survive without me?” His lopsided smile grows. “I’ve already rescheduled my lecture for today. It was at 9 a.m., so only my three regulars will have noticed.”

I pull a face, because when I was at uni, I was not one of those regulars. “9 a.m. lectures are the worst.”

“You went to university?”

Oh here we go. “Yes. Kind of. In a way. I mean, I went, but I never actually . . .” I clear my throat. “Graduated.”

He just nods. No judgement from the man who loves higher education enough he never left it. “What did you study?”

“English. But only because I didn’t know what I wanted to do, and it seemed like a pretty good bet.” And it might have been, if I’d finished.

“I wouldn’t have got through an entire English degree, either,” he says with an easy smile. “You should’ve done history.”

“So I could learn about the plague?”

“Believe it or not, other things happened.”

I laugh then, and he smiles across at me, tossing a lock of hair off his forehead. He really does need a haircut, but I like the fact it’s too long. I wonder what it would look like if he spiked it or shaved one side, like he had when he was at uni. Weird how we were both so different back then—him with his purple hair, me with my mousy

brown.

“If you could do anything in the world,” he says, “what would you choose?”

“Anything?”

“In the world. No barriers.”

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:01 pm*

Huh. I think about it for a moment, pursing my lips and chewing the inside of my cheeks. Not teaching, not baking, and not caring for the sick—those three I’ve had experience in, and I’m not a fan.

The only thing that’s ever really appealed . . . it’s silly, really. A pipe dream. Something I’ve never told another person in my life.

But I’m never going to see Oliver again. If I give him my secrets, it won’t matter.

“If I could do anything,” I say, “I would write webcomics.” I watch for him to smirk or raise an eyebrow or make a sarcastic comment about starving artists, but he just nods.

“What kind of comics?”

“I’ve had a few ideas. Fantasy, horror, romance, whatever—but the one I’m thinking about right now is this woman moving into a haunted apartment.” I sink into the story and find my stride. “The ghost who lives there is just lonely, but most people freak out when he tries to make contact. And she’s this struggling . . . I don’t know. Journalist, probably. He makes contact by trying to help out with some late-night projects, finishing them for her. They start communicating through notes in the apartment and their bond gets stronger, so he becomes corporeal and they start figuring out how to send him on to the next plane of existence.”

When I trail off, Oliver says, “And?”

“And they fall for each other,” I say, feeling stupid. After meeting Brandon, I can’t

imagine Oliver thinks I have much experience in the realm of love and romance. And what if he thinks romance is a stupid genre to write? Maybe he's one of those guys who thinks that the only good books are literary ones written by white men in the previous century.

"Well obviously they fall for one another," he says. "I figured that was a given. I mean, what happens at the end?"

Oh. In anticipation of his rejection of the whole idea—or maybe just his quiet dismissal—I wasn't prepared to answer this question. "I haven't decided," I admit. "Either they decide that love transcends even death and they work something out together, or they decide to sacrifice their relationship so he can move on and she can be with a person. You know, an alive one." Really, I know the answer and which one she—they—should choose, but the romantic, selfish part of me wants them to be together.

"You could let your readers decide?" Oliver suggests.

"For that, I'd need togetreaders."

"So why don't you just start writing and posting it online? There are loads of places you could put it."

The question of the century. "Time," I say, which is half of the answer. The other half is that I'm scared. It's easier to never try than to try and fail—to know you're not good enough. "What about you? If you could do anything in the world, what would you do?"

"Travel through time," he says with a dimple-popping, eye-crinkling smile that makes my heart perform gymnastics in my chest. "But failing that . . . research. Help people find new answers and discoveries about the past."

“So what you’re doing already?”

“Pretty much. But with a little more freedom.” He runs a hand through his hair, which falls back over his forehead. I wonder if the freedom he’s talking about is within himself, not within his work. “You’ll have to tell me if you ever start up this webcomic,” he adds. “I’d like to read it.”

I face the front again, because there’s about no chance I’m going to write this thing—not write and illustrate it. Not in my free time. But the support, even from a stranger, lights a fire in my chest that no matter how hard I try, I can’t seem to douse.

## Chapter Five

The queue doesn’t move for what feels like forever. Volunteers hand out blankets, and as they wait, people set up camping chairs and share food and stories. I should probably join them, I know, but I’m too anxious to make smiling small talk. Oliver was confident the queue wouldn’t be delayed for long, but the longer we’re in one place, the more I worry all this will have been pointless.

So I pace. I take advantage of the space around us and walk back and forth as I stare at the screen and wait for the numbers to change. Wait for the sixteen hours to turn to fifteen, to thirteen.

After a while, an elderly lady joins me. Dressed in hiking boots, walking trousers and a walking stick, she looks more ready for a hike up Ben Nevis than a paltry ten-mile queue. “Quite right,” she says briskly as an introduction. “In this temperature, staying still is a recipe for disaster.”

“Oh.” She has to be at least sixty, maybe more, but her short white hair is tipped with magenta and her movements are more energetic than mine have ever been. “Yeah.”

“Want a pork pie?” She produces a small pack of them from her pocket, like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat. Just like Oliver’s chocolate muffins, they’re squashed and crumbling, but at the sight of them, my stomach rumbles. “They’re vegan.”

A vegan pork pie—who’d have thought. But who knows, maybe they’re better than the original. That won’t be hard. “Are you sure?”

“My niece is about your age, or a fraction older,” she tells me, opening the packet and holding it out to me. “And she loves a pork pie.”

Well, I can’t really say no to that. I pull one from the packet. “Are you here with anyone?”

“My nephew, but he’s sleeping.” She jerks her thumb at a tall man in his early thirties, hunched over in a small camping chair that looks about ready to swallow him whole. “Tried offering me the chair, the poor dear, but if I sit down now, I’ll never get back up again.”

The pork pie is terrible in the best way, and I take a big bite, crumbs spraying to the ground. “It was good of him to come with you.”

“Good of him?” She snorts. “I’m the one who got dragged along. Cried when the Queen died, he did.”

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I do my best to recover with a mouthful of food. “It was a very difficult situation for a lot of people.”

Her eyes are bright under the streetlamps as she looks at me. She might be the wrong side of sixty, but nothing about her bearing or words makes her feel elderly. “Politician, are you?”

“I mean . . .” I fumble for the words. “It’s a big deal. She was the Queen. A load of people looked up to her, and she’s our longest reigning monarch. A constant for so many people.” And death is sad, I want to say, but from her expression, she would laugh in my face. Death is our only guarantee—although the hows, whys, and whens are always an unknown.

“She was old.” She stamps her walking stick against the stone with a clack to emphasise her point. “Old people die. I hope my nephew doesn’t cry like that when I’m gone. I had a good life and so did she—a long, healthy life, which is more than a lot of us can boast.”

“Yes, but . . . Does that mean people aren’t allowed to grieve?”

“He didn’t even know her.” After another clack of her stick and an appraising gaze, she holds out her hand. “Thelma.”

“Tessa.”

“Short for anything?”



“Just Tessa.”

“Hmm.” She gives me a nice, firm shake and drops my hand again. I have a brief, hideous worry I was sweaty, but she doesn’t wipe her palm against her trousers. Phew.

“I like your hair.”

It’s always a toss-up with old people if they’ll like or hate it, and I touch the messy waves self-consciously. Enough time has passed since this morning that even though I brushed it and did my best to be presentable, that’s long gone. “Thanks.”

“Your boyfriend is a real gentleman.”

“What?” I glance over to where she’s gesturing with her stick—that thing’s purpose seems to be as an aid to her speech, not her balance—and see Oliver giving his blanket to the old couple ahead of us.

Seriously, what does this man eat? Why is he so good? I feel like it should be a trap, except he notices me staring and gives me a little wave, and my heart flutters.

It. Flutters. Not just because I find him attractive, but because . . .

Oh no.

No, no, no, no. Absolutely not.

After Brandon broke my heart so spectacularly, I wrapped the remains in barbed wire. No one was getting in—I made sure of it. Never say never, but I didn’t think I’d be ready any time soon. A crush, yes. One of those adorable ‘he’s hot and I’d like to kiss him’ crushes that doesn’t mean anything, sure. But not feelings.

Only along came Oliver with his muffins and hugs, and my heart has put itself back

together enough to flutter.

But I'm being ridiculous. So what if he's adorable and sweet and everything Brandon wasn't? So what if I want to grin like an idiot every time I see him smile? We're just two ships in the night. Tomorrow, we'll go our separate ways. This doesn't have to mean anything.

Thelma doesn't seem to notice my crisis. "Where'd you find him?" she asks, chuckling. "I tell you, love, I've been looking for a man like that all my life."

I'm still staring at Oliver as I say, "Why, didn't you ever marry?"

"Do I look like a woman who married?" she demands. "No man ever caught me long enough to tie me down."

I think Thelma might just be my hero. "You weren't tempted to settle down even once?"

"Once," she admits, and like a habit, she rubs her third finger, right where a ring would sit if she had one. I had a ring there too, once. "I thought he was the one."

"What happened?"

"I woke up and realised he wasn't half as good as I wanted him to be, and I wasn't prepared to settle for anything other than the best." She offers me another pork pie. "Eat up before you waste away."

There's absolutely no chance of that, but I take it anyway, because I'm pretty sure she'll hit me with that stick if I don't. "Do you regret it? Not marrying him?"

"No point in regretting the past, love. Only thing you can do is look to the future."

Though I'll tell you this for free—I might have regretted it if I'd managed to get me a man of that calibre." She smacks her lips, which is wholly inappropriate given he's young enough to be her son. "He's been watching you walk around over here. Don't you think it's time to go back to him?"

"What about you?" I ask.

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“I’m not on my last legs yet. And someone has to shut my nephew up before he wakes the dead with that snoring. No matter how much fuss this country makes over the Queen dying, now she’s gone, they won’t want her back.” She gives a wicked cackle and heads back to her nephew, whom she prods with her stick. Poor guy.

Oliver’s perched on the wall again by the time I reach him, and I hop up beside him, this time with fractionally more grace. “Here,” I say, offering him my queue-issued blanket. “You look cold.”

“I’m fine.”

I roll my eyes and thrust it into his arms. “Yield some of your moral high ground and just accept it.”

“Mymoral high ground?” He raises an eyebrow, but takes the blanket, shaking it out and draping it over both our shoulders. “Who’s your friend?”

“Thelma. She’s . . . a character.”

I’ve been looking for a man like that all my life.

Stupid thing to say. She doesn’t even know Oliver. I don’t know Oliver.

“Hey,” he says, and his shoulder grazes mine as he leans over to look down the line. “I think we’re moving again.”

People cheer. I don’t, but a noise escapes me that’s partway between a sigh and a

groan. Oliver hops off the wall and offers me his hand. I use it to jump down, but let go as soon as I'm safely on solid ground again.

"Who taught you to be such a gentleman?" I tease. "Is there anything you don't do?"

He glances at his hand, then at me. "This is your idea of being a gentleman?"

"You offered your blanket to those people."

"I run hot. And you offered your blanket to me, so who's the gentleman now?" When I scoff, he raises an eyebrow. "I don't think it has anything to do with being a gentleman, Tessa. I think it's just not being a piece of shit."

Like Brandon.

"Well, I dunno," I say. "You'd think that basic kindness shouldn't be too hard to find, but I've dated plenty of other losers. The bar is practically underground at this point."

"Apparently," he mutters. We're still under the blanket together, and although we're not touching, I can feel his body heat. We move forward one step at a time, left then right, totally in sync. "Okay," he says, and it's a challenge. "Worst first date."

"Oh man, you want me to pick just one? Impossible."

"Fine, I'll go first. Picture this—me at twenty-four. On a Tinder date. She walks in and looks younger than her picture, but she insists she's twenty-one. Right until she orders a drink and pulls out fake I.D."

I cringe, already knowing where this is going. "How old was she really?"

"Fifteen. The second I found out, I left."

“Oof.” I purse my lips as I look up at him, trying to figure out how many years twenty-four was for him. “How long ago was that?”

His dimple winks at me. “Trying to get my age?”

“Well, for all I know, you might be a very youthful fifty-year-old.”

“Ouch. I’m pretty sure that was an insult.” He deadpans it, but there’s a curl at the corner of his mouth that gives him away. “I’m thirty-two.”

Eight years. “Huh. Fifty would’ve been a stretch, then.”

He pulls a face. “I’d like to think so. What about you?”

“You already know. Twenty-four. Same age as you were on your disaster-date.”

“No, I mean worst first date,” he says, and I want to smack my forehead.

“Oh, right.” So many to choose from. I think for a minute. “Probably when he brought his mum along. This was—hmm, about six months ago now? Thought I should get back out there, try dating casually, have a bit of fun. I wasn’t ready for anything serious, especially with Mum declining, but after everything blew up with Brandon, I think she just wanted to see me happy. So yeah. Tried online dating.” I drawl the words out, stretching them. “Let’s just say it didn’t go well.”

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“Let’s just circle back. What do you mean he brought his mum? To the whole date?”

“Yeah. Turns out he’d built this fantasy about us in his head, and because we’d messaged a bit beforehand, he thought the date was something serious, I guess. I don’t know. Either way, she thought we were really seeing each other and wanted to meet me. To hear her, you’d think we were one step away from a quickie wedding. Couldn’t block his number fast enough.”

Oliver pushes his glasses up his nose with his forefinger. “Sounds like you dodged a bullet there.”

“Of gargantuan proportions,” I agree. “But honestly, I feel sorry for him. He was twenty-seven and I don’t think had ever made it past a first date.”

“I wonder why,” Oliver says dryly.

“But I don’t feel too bad, because while his mother gave me the Spanish Inquisition, he just sat there and ordered more wine. For himself.”

Oliver gives a bark of laughter that sends warmth streaming to my cheeks. “No, you’re right, he deserves everything he got. The question is, did you charm his mum? I figure that was the actual point of the date.”

“I think so. When we left, she graciously asked me when I wanted to see them—them—again, and when I told her this wasn’t going to work out, she had the audacity to look shocked. Like she couldn’t possibly imagine why I didn’t want to repeat the experience.” My groan is theatrical. “She even suggested I kiss him. While

she was right there.”

“Okay, you win. I can’t even compete.”

“I’m not surprised,” I say, before my brain can catch up with my mouth. “You don’t exactly look like you’d struggle with dating.”

He sends me a look of pure confusion. “What makes you say that?”

I eye the metaphorical hole I’ve just dug for myself. Good job, Tessa. “I just mean . . . You’re a nice guy. Cute. Funny. A professor. You seem like a catch, you know?”

His next gaze is searching, and I will my body to stop overheating with my superpower blush. “I’m flattered, but no.”

“Oh.” I clear my throat, forcing myself not to ask any questions about his dating history, and trying not to feel as though he just shut me down. A minute passes in awkward silence, the blanket still warm around my shoulders and our arms brushing, but at that moment, the queue stops, providing a natural end to the conversation. A flashing sign blares to one side, informing us it’s 5:29 a.m. on the morning of September the 16th. I yawn, and seconds later Oliver hands me a second flask, this one containing tea.

“Here. You look like you need it more than I do.”

My stomach warms, though maybe it shouldn’t, and I accept, sipping it in the hopes it’ll stave off my headache. If this were a normal day, my alarm would already have gone off.

“Tessa!” Brandon pushes his way to where we’re standing, practically bowling the sleepy little boy over. He waves a quick apology.



I don't bother hiding my scowl. "What do you want?"

"It's your birthday!" He claps a dramatic hand against his head. "I can't believe I forgot."

Oliver stands closer, letting the blanket slide from our shoulders so Brandon can clearly see the arm he has slipped around my waist. It's a hook to my heart, a jolt of electricity through my body that sends my nerve endings tingling. The contact sends much-needed strength through me—the confidence I need to face Brandon head-on, rather than feeling like I need to curl into a ball and let his words wash over me.

He has no power over me anymore. Not in the past or the present. Definitely not in the future. It's a liberating thought.

I lean more into Oliver. Partly because I want to, and partly because I know it's going to rile Brandon up again. "What business is it of yours?"

"Seriously?" He juts his bottom lip out like I hurt him. "After everything we went through?"

I study him for a long moment. I used to think he was everything, better than anyone else I could ever aspire to be with. But now, with his blonde hair scraped back and his eyes full of secrets, I don't even find him surface-level attractive.

"Everything we've been through," I say. "Do you want me to remind you of what we've been through, Brandon? How you cheated on me?"

He looks like I slapped him across the face. And then he has the audacity to look offended, face turning a blotchy red that looks like shadow in the early dawn. "So now you're putting it all on me?" he demands. "We were barely even together. You kept everything so vague. I kept messaging, trying to figure stuff out, but you kept

blowing me off or telling me you were busy. So yeah, I messed up. But at least I was trying. I would've been there for you if you'd just let me."

"That's enough," Oliver says, and when I look up at him, his jaw is tight. If it came down to it, I don't think he'd win in a fight, but the idea that he would stand up for me makes me want to cry. "Leave her alone."

Brandon's eyes narrow, zeroing in on where Oliver and I are touching—and there are a lot of places. As though Oliver realises this, he tugs me even closer, pressing his lips to my hair. I'm shaking, I realise. He isn't, but the tension in his body snaps into mine.

Brandon was never violent. Not once. That's not his style. I don't think he would pick a fight in the middle of the street, especially when there are so many witnesses, but I've never called him out—never humiliated him—like this before.

There's a commotion behind us, people parting, and someone strides through the crowd, stick held aloft.

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“Hey,” Thelma calls. “You there. Boy.”

Brandon turns, full of aggression and way too much testosterone, but when he sees her, he stops. In Thelma, he’s more than met his match. She’s a force of nature, and I lose myself in a daydream of her tornado-sweeping him headfirst into the Thames, just as he deserves.

She prods him in the arm with her stick, and I come back to earth. This isn’t as good as the Thames, but I’ll take what I can get. “Your girlfriend left,” she tells him.

For a second, I don’t think he processes it. Then he swears and spins, looking for Gracie. I can’t see her, either. If she’s left him—finally—good for her.

“Why don’t you go look for her?” I ask him, leaning into Oliver’s warmth. “Before she escapes, just like I did.”

He swears again, spitting the word at me, and gives me the finger before he storms back through the crowd. A few people laugh. Some clap, though they’re applauding Thelma, not me. My hands are still shaking.

Top tip: when dealing with unwanted men, use a stick.

Thelma clucks her tongue. “Men like that are why I never married.”

I tip my head back into Oliver’s shoulder, twisting so my mouth is close to his ear. “She’s my idol,” I whisper.

He doesn't take his eyes off her as he whispers back, "You already have the hair."

I giggle, and Thelma turns her attention to us, clacking her stick against the ground decisively. Maybe it's my imagination, but Oliver seems to straighten under her gaze. After a moment, she nods and returns to her place through the crowd. Slowly, attention drifts away from us.

I twist in Oliver's arms so I'm looking up at him, and his head tilts to look down at me, the corners of his mouth pulling into a wry grin. It's not quite daybreak, but it's getting closer, and the darkness has been replaced with a soft grey light.

"What are the chances she would have beaten him if he didn't move?" he whispers.

"Certain," I whisper back. His other hand settles on my other hip, and the embrace feels so natural, I don't even question it. The blanket draped across one of his shoulders slides down his back like a blue cape. "She's a tyrant, I think."

"Good thing she stepped in. I don't think I'm quite as formidable."

He's not. But I smile up at him anyway. "I appreciate you sticking up for me. I can't believe I wasted four years of my life with that guy."

"A friend of mine did a full medical degree before deciding it wasn't for him and going into economics."

"Are you comparing Brandon to a medical degree?"

Oliver wrinkles his nose. "Yes?"

"Unfair comparison. A medical degree is useful."

He laughs, the sound unexpectedly rich, and not-unwelcome warmth unfurls in my chest. I'm going to regret this tomorrow, but that's a problem for Future Tessa. For now, I just want to sink into this moment like a hot bath. His hands are still on my hips, and mine are tucked together against his chest, fingers curled into my palms. The boundaries between what's real and what isn't are blurring—neither of us has stopped pretending, even though Brandon's gone.

And honestly? This doesn't even feel like pretending. Even though we're standing in a queue of people large enough to make history—or so he thinks—I feel as though we're alone in this moment. Just us.

His eyes dance between mine, and Thelma's voice replays in my head. I've been looking for a man like that all my life.

In the end, it's fear that makes me lean away. Not because I don't like this feeling with him—no, that's not the problem at all. The problem is I like it altogether too much.

## Chapter Six

It feels like forever and no time at all before we reach our destination. The closer we get, the more my stomach curls itself into knots. This is it. The moment I've been waiting for. Ahead, rising into the sky with its gothic towers, is Westminster Hall. There's still a snaking queue leading inside, but we're so close I can almost taste it. Although I've been awake all night, I'm wired up on coffee and anticipation, and as everyone moves inexorably on in quiet reverie, I hop from foot to foot.

“Tessa.” Oliver takes my arm, halting me mid-step. “You're making me nervous.”

“How does it feel?” I ask, looking at his face. Day has well and truly dawned now, and I can see the slightly bronzed colour to his skin and the precise shade of his

brown eyes. Both things I could have stood not knowing, seeing as I'm never going to see him again. The more things I know about him, the more I'll have to miss.

“How does what feel?”

“Being part of history.”

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“Oh. That.” He looks around, and there’s the same quiet contemplation on his face that’s reflected in the muted conversations around us. Everyone is excited about what’s coming, and maybe a few people are nervous. Ahead, a woman silently wipes under her eyes.

Thelma was wrong. Death might be inevitable, but that doesn’t make it any less sad. Any less of a loss.

“It’s like living history,” he says, and shakes his head. “I can’t explain it. Like we’re on the cusp of something. We’ve left an era and we’re about to walk into a new one, and being part of this gives the limbo meaning. In the future, people will write about this moment. It’ll be documented for the ages to find and interpret. People will study Queen Elizabeth II’s reign the same way they studied Queen Elizabeth I’s. So much has happened.” There’s quiet wonder in his voice, and even though not everything the Queen did was good, the fact remains she saw so much happen over the course of her lifetime.

“It feels like being part of something bigger,” he finishes after another moment, one so delicate I don’t dare break it in case it shatters. “And I guess that’s special.”

“It is special,” I murmur. “Are you glad you came?”

His gaze drops from my face to take in all of me before finding my eyes again. “Yeah. I’m glad.”

I look away before I can blush. The queue is moving forward with more direction and purpose now, and every step is bringing us closer. Ten more minutes, maybe, and

then we'll be inside.

My stomach drops at the thought. Despite my exhaustion and the ache in my feet, I don't want this journey to be over. I don't want to walk in there only to leave and for that to be it. So much is riding on this being the closure I need, but what if it isn't? What if I walk out of there and it doesn't change anything?

Oliver's looking at me now, but I don't dare look at him in case he sees everything I'm afraid of written across my face. "What about you?" he asks quietly. "Are you glad?"

Even now, I don't have the courage to confess my innermost thoughts. "Yeah," I say after a second. Then with more conviction, "Mum would've loved it here. Everyone coming together. The energy. The queueing all night. She'd have written about it in her journal and brought it out at every family gathering between now and her own funeral. This would've meant a lot to her." My throat closes. I can't finish my sentence, but I think it into being anyway. And I wish she could be here.

I wish it wasn't just me doing this without her, thinking of her, missing her. Every day, I think surely it's going to get easier. That one day, I'm going to stop thinking about everything we missed out on, stop going to message her a meme she'd enjoy, or tell her about something funny that happened.

She would've loved Oliver, too.

His hand finds mine, just for a second. It should be weird, but we've spent so much time together over the past few hours that it doesn't. His skin is warm and smooth against mine as he squeezes and lets go. "I'm sure she'd be proud of you," he says, and the lump in my throat swells again. All I can do is nod.

He gives me time and space to recover. We approach the doors to Westminster Hall. I



want to turn and run.

“Tess,” he says. “I have a question. About . . . after.”

Oh no. Anxiety clutches at my heart. “What do you mean, after?”

“After we’ve seen the Queen.”

“Yes, but what do you mean?”

Maybe picking up on the tone of my voice, he tilts his head, glancing down at me with a line between his brows. “I mean I have today off, and I figure you do too, and I thought—”

“I don’t see how that would work,” I say, each word brittle like frozen glass. “We don’t live in the same parts of the country. You live in York.” I say it like he’s in another country, not a couple of hours away by car. “And we barely know each other.”

He looks at me steadily. “Is that what you think?”

“We just—” I wave a hand, gesturing between us, panic rising in my chest. It swallows all other feelings. The memory of how it felt for Brandon to hurt me. The fear of falling again, because it would be so easy to fall for Oliver, and I’m too trapped in anxiety and self-doubt. He’s a professor, and I’m lost. I’m a mess. Battered and bruised and still figuring out what living means. It would be stupid to pursue the possibility of anything with this wonderful, unattainable man.

But I want to. I desperately want to keep talking and laughing, putting off the moment of goodbye until saying goodbye would be unthinkable. I want to kiss him, to let him hold me, to learn how he tastes and sounds. Brandon had killed desire in

me—or so I thought. But Oliver’s mouth, soft and warm, and the way his breathsmells like coffee and chocolate—everything about him makes me want in ways I’d forgotten.

He makes me think I could be whole again.

But at what cost?

I don’t have room in my life for any more heartbreak.

None of this makes it easier to say, “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Why?”

“Because . . .” I close my eyes. “You’re a nice guy.”

A pause. Then he sighs, so soft I barely hear it. “And I know how you feel about nice.”

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“It’s not that!” I insist. “It’s just—you’ve seen my track record. Who says I’m in a place where I could handle . . . anything?”

“I’m not asking you for that, Tessa.” When I open my eyes, he’s looking at me like he can see right through me. “This isn’t me trying—”

“I know.” My words are too sharp, but that’s the only way I know how to protect myself. “That’s not it. I just don’t want to, okay?”

He nods once, slowly, something in his face shuttering. “Okay.”

I wait, but there’s no more. He doesn’t try to convince me, doesn’t say anything at all. The lump in my throat drops to my stomach, and I cup my elbows. I’m not entitled to anything from him, just as he’s not entitled to anything from me.

I take a deep breath through the tightness around my chest and refocus on Westminster Hall. The reason I came. This is what I’m here for, not some history buff in a tight-fitting turtleneck whose glasses keep sliding down his nose. Closure, then home. Back to my safe little life.

The thought doesn’t give me the comfort I hoped for, and I chew on my hoodie sleeve.

Oliver doesn’t look at me again.

Our section of the queue gets closer to Westminster Hall. The great doors arch above us. Soon we’re going to be there and I’m going to see the coffin. The awkwardness of

it hits in full force. I didn't know what to do with Mum's coffin at the crematorium. I just stood and looked at it and wished it didn't exist, because once she was cast into ash, I couldn't bring her back.

Volunteers check our bags and warn us not to use our phones inside, and then we're on the steps leading up to the hall, two lines of us leading down either side of the great room. Rafters splay across the ceiling, dark and aged. There's a sense of sombreness here that I didn't feel outside, a sense of ancient sorrow and tranquillity.

In the centre of the room, on a red carpet, is the coffin.

Although the room is enormous and old enough I can feel the history seeping through the doors, the coffin is all I can look at. It's draped in purple and flags, with a giant golden cross standing in front. Four Queen's Guards stand in vigil, heads slightly bowed.

Inside that coffin is the body of the Queen.

Emotion unexpectedly sweeps through me. All around, people are grim-faced, uncertain. No one ever knows what to do when they're confronted with death and grief. It's a private thing, but there's nothing private about this. She gave her life to the country, and so the country gets to see her in death.

Beside me, Oliver is silent, his face pale and drawn as he takes it all in, this moment in history, creeping onward just like the queue.

Here you go, Mum, I think, casting the words into the ether. Who knows, maybe they're together up there, in Heaven. I don't know if I believe there's a solid place where the dead can gather, but in the days after Mum first passed, it was the only thing that kept me going. The thought that my twenty-three years on the planet with her weren't all I was ever going to get.

People are weeping. Quietly, because it would be inappropriate, somehow, to give over to unrestrained grief. A few people bow solemnly to the coffin as they pass and the gesture spreads through the crowd until everyone is bowing. Opposite, on the other side of the line, a woman presses her fingers to her lips in a kiss. A small child stares with round eyes.

It's an incredible experience, the grandeur and the unification—the sense that we came together with a purpose no matter our origins. No one here is causing trouble. It's a bubble of respect and love and breathlessness.

I follow the prompting of the crowd around me and bow.

All too suddenly, the queue moves on until we emerge back out into open air once again. It's the fresh, dewy sunlight of a new day, and the feel of it on my face is like waking up.

“Beautiful,” someone around me whispers. I tip my head up to the breeze, loving the way it toys across my face. That was . . . a lot. There are so many feelings inside me, I don't have the space for them.

When I think of my mum, though, there's still that ache in my gut, the one that makes me feel like I've been punched. I did this for her, and it was an amazing experience to be part of, but she's still gone.

I gasp, leaning against a building. All around, the world keeps spinning, people keep moving. They're walking and driving and cycling to work as the end of the week begins, but I'm trapped in limbo as I suck in a breath. One after the other.

This was meant to make me feel better. It's my birthday.

But I don't want to celebrate my birthday. I want Mum back with me. I want this

stupid nightmare to be over.

Heads bob past as more members of the queue move into the light, just as I did, and people slowly disperse. The sense of wonder and awe is still hanging over us, but it's dimmed now, and the real world is washing through. I search the faces for one I recognise, but the person who has been beside me this entire time is gone. Oliver has gone.

I shouldn't have expected anything else. Of course he's gone. He suggested we could stay in touch and I threw that back in his face. But somehow I hadn't thought he would leave immediately. I thought I'd have a few more moments with him. I hadn't thought this would be the end.

New grief spears me.

"Hey, girl." Thelma taps into view, clacking that stick against the ground. "That was a lot, huh?"

"Yeah." I wipe the back of my hand over my eyes.

“Where’s your boyfriend?”

Good, a nice straightforward question that requires absolutely no backstory whatsoever. I toy with the idea of lying—“he’s got work to do”—but there’s something about her sharp gaze that tells me she’d see through me, anyway. Plus, I’m a terrible liar, which is why Oliver pretending to be my boyfriend helped me out so much, because there’s no way I could have pulled that off on my own.

Now he’s gone.

“So.” I take a deep, shuddering breath. “He’s not . . . my boyfriend.”

Those eyes—hazel—narrow, but she nods. “Sounds like you need a drink.”

“I think I need an entire bottle.”

“Tea will have to do you, love. It’s not even eight in the morning.”

A fair and valid point for anyone who hasn’t been up all night. Still, I guess, at a push, tea will do. “Fine. Do you know a good place?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

The place she has in mind is a small but stylish café off the main road. After telling her nephew to entertain himself for a change, she leads me straight there. It’s a bohemian kind of place with wooden lattice walls and pot plants overflowing with flowers and greenery.

“Now,” she says once she’s seated opposite me with a steaming mug of tea in her hands. I opted for caffeine-free chamomile in the hopes it would calm me, but so far, it hasn’t worked. I’m so hyped up, I’m about ready to jitter to Mars. Or maybe right into the Thames, just like Oliver threatened. “Why don’t you tell me what’s going on?”

There’s no point in concealing anything, so I fill her in on the basics, which takes a surprising amount of time. By the time I’m done, my tea has almost gone cold. I run my finger down the side of the mug, tapping it with my nail as I chew the inside of my cheeks.

“I told him I didn’t want to be involved after we saw the Queen, and I guess he took it to heart,” I finish.

“And you’ve changed your mind?”

“Um. No.”

“No?” She raises her eyebrow. “So you don’t want to be with him.”

“I don’t even know he means it like that,” I say, feeling like I need to defend myself. Feeling seen in the very worst—and best—of ways. “Maybe he just meant as friends.”

“And I’m a giraffe,” she snaps back. “It was as plain as the nose on my face that he was interested in you.”

The nose on her face is particularly . . . prominent. “Yes, but—”

“Don’t give me any of that.” Her eyes are shrewd as they rest on me, green spearing through the brown of her iris like darts. “You came here because you know there’s something lacking in your life.”



“No, that’s not it. I came here because my mum—”

“Because you think a dead woman is going to care whether you see the Queen’s body?” That stick smacks against the ground again. Several queueing people glance around. “Your mother, admirable woman though she may have been, will have wanted you to live.”

“I am living.”

“You’re taking the easy way out. You’re not sure what you want to do, so you’re living through someone else’s eyes because that takes the pressure of deciding away from you.”

Wow. Ouch. That was a hefty bomb to chuck at my chest this early in the morning. Late in the night? Whatever. “I don’t know what I want.”

“What you want, girly, is that boy you just said goodbye to.”

“I didn’t say goodbye.” My nose tingles and I sniff, pushing the feeling away. “He didn’t give me a chance to say goodbye.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“Go home?” I offer, and the stick clacks alarmingly close to my foot.

“No. Try again.”

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:01 pm*

“I’m going to . . .” I sigh, because I know what she’s after, and that’s just not possible. “Look, I hate to break it to you, but this is real life. I can’t just chase after him. I don’t even know where he’s gone.”

“And I bet if someone had asked whether your ex was a few rows behind in the queue, you’d have said that was impossible,” she says, eyes narrowed into slits.

“Statistically unlikely,” I correct.

“Yet he was there.”

“Unfortunately.”

“So what makes you think you can’t find your man?”

“He’s not—”

“Listen to me, because I’ve been on this planet a hell of a lot longer than you.” She leans over the table, and I mimic her, ready to receive the piece of advice that’s going to change my life. Because, let’s face it, I desperately need to get my life in order somehow. “You’re a quitter.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

I gape at her, mostly because she’s right, and I did not appreciate the way she

delivered that message. “I’m not aquitter. Not going after a strange man because you think we had a connection isn’t quitting.”

“No? Even when I tell you he looked at you like you’re the only thing he saw?”

“He didn’t . . .” I pause, because I don’t have an excuse for this. If I deny it, is that because I’m afraid of it being true? Am I afraid to hope? “What do you want me to do about it?”

“Do you really not know where he’s going?”

Logically, he’ll be getting the train back to York, because that’s where he lives. And logically, that means he’ll be going to King’s Cross Station.

Logically, there would be no harm in going there, seeing as Ialsoneed to catch a train—there’s no requirement that I commit to chasing after a strange man I just rejected. It could just . . . happen. Incidentally. Whoops.

“Okay,” I say after a second. “But I don’t know what you expect me to do.”

She snorts. “Talking to him would be a start. Come on, love. How can you expect to find happiness if you don’t take hold of it with both hands? Good things don’t just drop into your life, you know.”

Considering Oliver dropped into my lap, I would beg to differ, but . . .

Ah, shit.

I chug the rest of my tea, which is tepid and frankly disgusting, and swing my bag over my shoulder. “I have to go. Thanks, Thelma.”

“Go get him.”

I give her a weird two-finger salute, which makes her chuckle. “Stay cool,” I say, and barrel through the café and out onto the street.

## Chapter Seven

I’d always thought seeing the Queen would tie off this chapter of my life with a neat bow, and that would be it. The end. Moving on.

Instead, I’m here, sprinting from the Tube to King’s Cross Station, flinging myself up stairs like I’m an Olympic athlete—without any of the Olympic athlete attributes like speed or agility or fitness. My legs are burning. I’m gasping like I’m underwater and sweat is snaking down my back. I pause to take off my coat, wrapping it over my arm as I run again.

The next train that leaves for York leaves in exactly twelve minutes. Of course, this is the UK and our train service is hardly known for its punctuality, but still. I’m running out of time.

My heart feels like it’s going to burst from my chest with the effort of running this far and for so long, and pushing through these people is like swimming against the tide. Why does everyone move so slowly? It’s like being trapped in another perpetual queue.

There. Escalators. I power down them, grateful to everyone for their escalator etiquette as I hurry past. Quick. Then I’m on Platform 15 when I need Platform 7. I spin, getting my bearings.

Train departs in ten minutes.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:01 pm*

That means it's already here, surely, but this damn station is far too large for me to see everything. I can't even see the platform. If he's even here at all—I might have completely misread the situation and he's having a nice chill time wandering around London while I'm sprinting down platforms like an idiot.

I'm not sure at what point I gave up pretending I wasn't looking for him, but Thelma would be delighted at the thought of it. I can practically hear her cackling.

Please be on the train. Apart from anything else, this is more cardio than I've done in a year, and my T-shirt is stuck to my back under my hoodie. If it ends up being pointless, I will have made myself wheeze for nothing. Anyone who says exercise is good for you is a dirty liar.

Panting and disgusting, I haul myself onto Platform 7 and run to the train. I can't see Oliver waiting, but in all fairness, there are enough people here that I can't make out much at all.

“Oliver!” I call, waving my hands. People stare at me. “Oliver?”

Nothing. Just more eyes on me, awkward and confused.

“Oliver.”

Okay, probably not on the platform. I look at the train, take a deep breath, and plunge into the nearest carriage. Five minutes. I storm down the aisle, calling Oliver's name. Faces turn to me, but none are his. He's not here. I go down carriage after carriage, but although I keep calling for him, and although I keep scanning all the people there,

still finding their seats, I can't find him.

He's not here.

Not here.

The whistle blows and I have about thirty seconds to leave the train. Even then, I stare at the passengers and the two carriages I haven't checked through.

You're a quitter, my inner Thelma tells me. Not helpful.

But this isn't quitting, this is practicality. I don't want to go to York. This is an East Coast train, meaning it's not going even remotely in my direction, and my anytime return doesn't cover this line.

Damn it.

I make it back onto the platform just in time for the train to pull away, and it feels like a failure. My hands are shaking as I pull out my phone and type a message to Rosalie.

TESSA: On a scale of 1-10, how crazy am I for chasing a guy I've known for 12 hours across London?

I'm not expecting an immediate answer, so when she doesn't so much as read my message, I just sigh, shrug, and put my phone away. I already know the answer, anyway: a full ten on the crazy scale.

"Tessa?"

I freeze at the sound of his voice, because it can't be.

Slowly, I turn on the spot to see Oliver standing behind me, coat open and that obscenely close-fitted turtleneck on display. His bag is hanging loosely over oneshoulder and he's looking at me like I've turned into a giant pumpkin.

"Tessa," he says again, and takes a step forward. "You're . . . sweating."

Crap. I swipe a hand over my forehead and, for good measure, along the back of my neck, lifting my hair so I can air myself out. "Yes. I, um, ran."

"I can see that. Do you need to sit down?"

Yes. "No. I actually came looking for you."

"Yes," he says, pushing his glasses further up his nose. "I heard."

"You did? I didn't see you."

"You're seeing me now." He shrugs, but although it's a callback to our previous banter, something's different. The dimple lurks in his cheek, but he doesn't smile. Just watches me, waiting.

"You left," I blurt out. "And you didn't say goodbye."

His shoulders stiffen. "You made it perfectly clear that you didn't want me to stick around."

Here goes nothing.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:01 pm*

“I’m sorry,” I say, and although his expression doesn’t change, I think maybe his eyes soften. “I said that because I was scared. Petrified, to be honest, because everyone I’ve ever cared about has left me. And you’ve met Brandon. It’s not like I’m an expert in the love department.” I twist my fingers in the hem of my hoodie, knotting them in the material. “And I’m afraid because when I look at you, I can’t see a single reason why you’d want to be with me.”

He takes a single step towards me. “Tessa.”

I hold up my hand to stop him. “Let me finish. I had a speech planned out in my head and everything.” I take a deep breath. “Ever since we got the diagnosis, I think I’ve been scared of wanting things for myself in case they get taken away. But that’s not living. And Mum would want me to live. She’d want me to want things in life.” My lips are dry, so I moisten them, trying to find the courage to say the next part. But he’s patient, giving me the space I need to say it, even though he’s already missed his train because of me, and I can’t waste that patience. “Coming here,” I say, the words tumbling over one another, “the thing that made me feel better wasn’t any of the things I was expecting. It was meeting you.”

Silence. His eyes are warm, face soft, mouth curving up at the corner. The stiffness has left his demeanour, but he’s still not saying anything, and I wonder if I was totally misreading the situation. If he’s not interested in me, then I’ve made the biggest fool out of myself. Already, I can feel myself cringing back into a ball at the idea of it.

“Is that the end of your speech, or did you have anything else planned?” he asks.

“That was the end. You can speak now. If you want to.” My nerve fails me. “Or,” I



say, turning on my heel, “we can pretend this whole thing never happened.”

He reaches out and grabs my arm, preventing me from fleeing. “Tess,” he says, and my name is magical in his voice. “Do you know why I got off that train?”

“You were on the train?” I frown. “I was looking for you everywhere.”

“I got off the train,” he continues, “because I felt it too. And if you had something to say to me, I wanted to hear it. What does that tell you?”

“That you’re going to miss your train?”

He huffs something that might be a laugh, but I’m no longer scared he’s laughing at me. “I’m going to pretend you’re being deliberately obtuse.”

“Sometimes, when you talk, you remind me that I never finished my English degree.”

He rolls his eyes, and when he looks back down at me, his gaze drops to my lips. My heart stutters. “Shut up,” he says, bringing his thumb to my chin. Then my bottom lip. His other hand is still around my elbow, and our chests brush together. I can’t remember when we got this close, but I never want to move away. My boot nudges his shoe. His breath whispers across my face.

“Shutting,” I whisper. “Are you going to kiss me now?”

His eyes crinkle as he smiles, and his nose bumps mine. I can’t breathe, but in the best way. For the first time in years, I feel alive. Heart beating, skin singing, nerves dancing. There’s excitement in my stomach and anticipation in my chest, and it’s all because of this man.

I don’t know if twelve hours is enough time to fall in love with someone, but it’s

definitely enough to make me feel like I'm flying as he finally closes the distance between us. His lips brush against mine, finding their rhythm, and I fist my hand in his jumper so I don't get carried away. But when he leans back, assessing my response, I chase him. He laughs a little, and I catch the sound in my mouth. Our teeth bump, and this time it's my turn to laugh, but the hand on my chin slides in my hair and I tilt my head just slightly, and we slot into place like we were born to do this. Our tongues meet, and he makes a tiny sound in the back of his throat, fingers tightening on my elbow. I tug him closer.

I can feel my pulse in every part of me. This is electric. Bottled lightning. Nothing has ever felt like this before, and I can't tell if it's because I'm deliriously tired or because of him.

I suspect I know the answer.

Heat slides through my body with every movement of his mouth against mine, and I want him everywhere.

When he finally breaks apart for real, his eyes are glazed, and I'm pretty sure mine are, too. I push his glasses back up his nose and he grins at me, that dimple flashing. I press my finger against it.

"I think I first wanted to kiss you when I saw your dimple," I say. "It's my weakness."

"I first wanted to kiss you when you lied and told me you weren't staring at me."

"We hadn't even had a conversation by that point," I protest, but I'm blushing. "Also, you're supposed to believe me when I lie to save face."

"It was adorable. And I fell for it immediately."

I can't believe he's so open about admitting to liking me. That's something I'm going to have to get better at.

Baby steps.

"I really was surprised to see you reading," I say, because it's true. Even if that wasn't strictly the reason he caught me staring. "What was it, anyway?"

"Assassin's Apprentice by Robin Hobb," he says, the hand on my elbow moving to the small of my back, keeping me flush against him. "I fully intended to read my students' papers while queueing, but that didn't happen."

"Book too good?"

"That, and I found something I'd rather be doing."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:01 pm*

I know what I would rather be doing, but I have a sneaking suspicion it would be illegal in the middle of King's Cross. So I tilt my head back and look up at him. "What now?"

He pretends to consider, but his hand slides up to the side of my face. "I think," he says, like he hasn't already made up his mind and I'm not fully on board, "I'm going to kiss you again."

I stand on my tiptoes to make it easier for him. Never say I'm not accommodating. "You have my permission. That and more."

Heat flares in his eyes, and he takes my bottom lip in his teeth, tugging gently. I gasp, the sensation unlocking something in me. "Is that so?" he murmurs.

"All we need is somewhere private."

"Tricky here." His lips ghost across mine. "I'm not prepared to get arrested. But," he muses as he threads his fingers idly through my hair, "there is another train to York in three hours."

Three hours. I can do a bit with three hours, so long as we find somewhere to go. A hotel room, maybe. I've never rented one, but—

"I was thinking," he says, cutting off my thoughts before they can go too haywire, "that maybe you could get on the train with me."

My mind goes blank. I gape at him. "To . . . York?"

“That is where I live, last I checked.”

If I go to his house—flat, whatever—for the weekend, I’ll basically be admitting this is going to be a longer-term thing than just a fling. But isn’t that what I want?

My phone buzzes in my pocket, probably Rosa confirming that I am in fact a full ten on the crazy scale.

“I’ll pay for your ticket,” he adds. “And I wasn’t saying that like I expect anything from you, I just—”

“Okay.”

He blinks. “Okay?”

“Okay.” I beam up at him. Risk officially taken. “I’ll go to York with you. And for the record, it is definitely okay to expect things from me. So long as you ask nicely.”

“I think I can probably agree to that.” The hand in my hair slides to the back of my neck. “You’ll tell me if this is moving too fast for you?”

“I will,” I say, although there is basically no chance of that. No way am I going all the way to his house, taking the metaphorical plunge of staying with him to see where this could go, and not sleeping with him.

His mouth tilts into another smile, and I can already imagine what his place is like—covered in books and cluttered in that warm, homely way that already makes my heart ache at the thought of having to leave it.

So maybe I have it bad. Maybe that’s okay.

Maybe I didn't come to London for closure—I came here for a new beginning. I just didn't know it at the time.

And maybe when I get home, I'll start that webcomic after all.

I take Oliver's hand, sliding my fingers through his. They tighten around mine, and I release a long breath. Happy birthday to me.

## Chapter Eight

Very few things survive in the face of sheer and unrelenting exhaustion. Including, as it turns out, my very noble intention of sleeping with Oliver. After we left King's Cross and I gave Granny an update that I wouldn't be back until Sunday evening, we found a small café that serves breakfasts. Eggs Benedict for me, and two croissants for him.

We sit in companionable silence as we eat. That's another thing I've noticed about him—his ability to be silent. To make silence feel like a choice. One that's comfortable, like it's enough that we're in the same space, occupying the same air. Only our fingers touch across the table, and it's an absent gesture. He's lost in his thoughts, and I'm lost in trying to keep my eyes open.

"We can nap on the train," he says.

"Or," I say, "we could nap here."

"I don't think that's allowed."

"Spoilsport."

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:01 pm*

“Just trying to make sure we’re not arrested.”

I lean against his shoulder. “I don’t think sleeping in a public place is a crime. And I’m prepared to find out.”

“I’ve fed you so much coffee. How are you still sleepy?”

“How are you not asleep? Aren’t you about a million years old?”

That earns me a prod in the cheek, and I grin up at him. While I am joking about taking a nap in this cute little café—probably—I’m not joking about being tired enough to risk it. It’s just past mid-morning, and all the caffeine in my system has done is make me crash out.

But Oliver has other plans for us. After finishing the remainder of his double espresso, he drags me around the Tate Modern so we can quietly abuse all the modern art (why is it so weird, anyway?). Then he whisks me past the Globe, and finally we find ourselves in the McDonald’s just outside King’s Cross. There, we pick at a burger and fries and make up wildly unrealistic stories about the people who pass us by. I tell him about Thelma and her life advice. He tells me a bit about his childhood in rural Yorkshire.

Once we get on the train, though, our conversation dries up. Not because we don’t want to talk, but because the possibility of sleep is finally on the table, and neither of us can resist. We curl up into each other, and I think it takes me about five seconds to sink into dreamland.

I wake up a disorienting amount of time later with drool on my chin. The train is slowing, and Oliver's hand is on my shoulder. "We're here," he says, his bag already over his shoulder.

Barely functional, I allow him to take my hand and lead me off the train and through the fog of time and space to reality again. The afternoon air bites my cheeks as we emerge onto a street. Directly opposite is an adorable Tudor-style bus stop, where two teenagers share a cigarette, and behind that is what I think might just be the ancient city walls.

I scrub my eyes to wipe the grit away, then wipe underneath them belatedly to catch any smeared mascara.

"How are you feeling?" he asks.

"Like I woke up in a different dimension." I run a hand through my hair and squint at our surroundings again. "I'm still not convinced I'm in the right one. This is York, right?"

"No," he deadpans. "We're in Leeds." When I mock glare at him, he cracks a smile. "I live about a twenty-minute walk away. Do you want me to call a taxi?"

I consider that for a second, then shake my head. "A walk should wake me up."

"You know, we do have tomorrow too," he says. "And the next day. It's fine if we get back to mine and all we do is sleep."

Technically yes, he's right. That would be fine. And honestly, it would be kind of cute. There's something weirdly wholesome about just sleeping with someone. But I only have this weekend with him. We haven't mentioned what comes after—if there even is an after.



If this is all I get, I don't want to waste a moment of it.

"I can sleep when I'm dead," I say, and gesture for him to lead the way. "Let's go."

We end up walking along the ancient walls almost the entire way, and when we get there, I'm not surprised to find his house overlooks those very same walls.

"Some view, huh," I say as he unlocks his front door.

"It's why I chose it."

"That doesn't come as a shock." I follow him inside, kicking off my shoes as I see him do the same. It's surprisingly nice—not a mansion by any means, but there's an open-plan kitchen and living room, with another small door leading to a downstairs bathroom. The floor is the kind of glossy wood I would skate over on my socks if I were here with a friend and not . . . Whatever Oliver is.

I turn in the middle of the room to find Oliver just standing there, watching me, his bag slipping from his hand to the floor, his eyes molten.

"Is everything okay?" I ask, my smile drooping. "I just—"

"Tessa," he says, dropping the bag fully and coming to stand in front of me, cupping my face in his hands. So serious, intent on whatever he's thinking.

"Yes?"

"I'm going to kiss you now."

"Okay." I breathe the word, and he meets it with his breath, his mouth. Unlike at the train station, where we were still learning each other, this is deeper, needier. His hand

comes up to trail across my jaw, and no part of my body is thinking about sleep now. I'm awake, alive, illuminated. We kiss and kiss and kiss until we're both dizzy with it, until I stumble backwards. He follows me, his mouth chasing mine, and the back of my knees hit the arm of his sofa. They buckle, and I just have time to gasp in alarm as I lose my balance, tumbling back on the cushions.

A peal of laughter escapes me as Oliver stands beside the arm, looking down at me, perplexed. His glasses slide down his nose.

I sit up and grab his jumper, and tug him down after me. He catches himself awkwardly, one hand braced against the seat beside my head. His body covers mine.

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 8:01 pm*

I can't stop laughing.

"That," he says, still holding himself above me, "wasn't quite what I had in mind."

I reach up to curl my hand around his neck. "I don't know—there are some advantages to this position."

His knee comes to rest between my thighs. "Perhaps," he allows. "But there's not a lot of room here."

"We can make it work." My voice is breathy, the laughter exchanged for something more heated. "You can't have everything."

"No," he says, husky and thick as honey. "But it turns out you can have some things."

I arch my back into him as he kisses the side of my neck. His weight is pressing me into the sofa cushions of the sofa, but I push back, wanting the contact, the friction. We're wearing too many clothes, but the position we're in makes it difficult to remove any. I slide one hand into his soft hair while the other grabs his jumper and holds on. I've done that so many times since we've met, and I've only realised now it's because I don't want him to leave.

His teeth scrape against my neck. I groan. He groans. His hips shift against mine, and a delightful tingle of awareness mixed with heat runs through me at the feel of his erection.

Oliver wants me. Dr Oliver Murphy wants me.

“I love your hair,” he mumbles against my skin. I smile up at the ceiling.

“You told me you thought it was nice.”

He nips my ear in retaliation. “I thought it was beautiful, but you can’t say that to a stranger.”

“You think I’m beautiful?”

He pauses, leaning back and taking my cheeks in his hands, palms hot against my face, his eyes staring solemnly down into mine. “I think you’re stunning, Tess.”

I keep wondering if I’m hallucinating this, if a day is long enough to fall for someone, but when he’s looking at me like that, I have my answer—yes. Yes, a day, eighteen hours, however long we’ve been in the queue and after, is enough for me to want this man. Not just now, pinning me underneath him, but tomorrow. The next day.

He brushes my hair back from my face tenderly. “We don’t have to rush things if you don’t want to.”

“Are you kidding? I want to rush things.” I grip his hips with my knees, and his eyes go dark. “I don’t want to waste a single second I’m here with you.”

Oliver’s serious expression splits into a smile that makes my heart melt. “Okay,” he says. That’s all he says, but when he slides his arms underneath my back and flips me up so he’s sitting and I’m straddling his lap, I know he means business.

Maybe we can get it on right here. What are the chances he’d have condoms stashed away somewhere in here? As my knees press into the cushions, and I steady my hands on his shoulders, I give the room another sweep. Bookshelves on both walls of the living room space, all filled with what look like Very Serious Books shelved right

alongside a variety of weighty fantasy tomes.

My gut is saying a no to the condoms.

But then he kisses me again, and I don't have enough space in my brain for other thoughts about where we should be. Just here is right—just here is perfect. I'll stay here forever so long as he keeps kissing me. His fingers slide underneath my hoodie, toying with the sensitive skin around my hips, the small of my back. I shiver, and his lips curve against mine. Heat swells in me. Answering the slight tug of his hands, I rock against him, pressing against the part that wants this as much as I do. His breath shudders.

I don't know how much time passes. It could be seconds. All I know is his mouth—when it leaves mine, even for a second, I chase it—and his hands. I memorise every part of him.

“I've never done this before,” I say breathlessly as I break away from him to strip away my hoodie. Then my top. He sits back and watches me, cheeks flushed and eyes dark behind his glasses, as I unhook the back of my bra and toss it aside.

“What? Sex?” He looks slightly panicked.

“No.” I laugh. “This. Go to someone's house and hook up with them. Just like that.”

“Is this just a hookup to you?”

“No,” I say.

“Good. Me neither.” His fingers flex on my hips. “Can I touch you?”

“I didn't take my top off so you can just look.”

He laughs, then cups my breasts. I've always been a little bottom heavy—all hips, no boobs to speak of. But he makes me feel as though I have a handful for him to play with, and when he slides his thumb over my nipple, I shudder with the sudden rush of sensation.

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“Beautiful,” he whispers again.

“My natural hair is mousy brown,” I tell him. I don’t know why—he’s already shown me he likes me for more than my blue hair. But I need him to know the real me.

He half-smiles, still concentrating on my chest. “I like brown too.”

“And I have a lip piercing sometimes.”

His gaze snaps back to my jaw at that, and he brings a finger to the corner of my lip where the hole still sits. “I’ve seen that.”

“Some people don’t like it.”

“I think we’ve established I’m not most people.” His fingers are still impossibly soft against my lip. “Why don’t you wear it?”

“Granny doesn’t like it. After Mum . . . I try and keep the peace at home.”

“Do you live with her?”

“No. But she lives close by and I work for her. It’s a small town,” I explain, feeling self-conscious. He owns his own house, but Mum never owned hers. I’ll inherit a bit of money, but nothing much.

“No pressure, but I don’t mind if you want to wear it.” Removing his glasses with one hand, he takes my fingers and presses them to his eyebrow, where I can feel a small

dimple. “You’re not the only one, remember?”

“Do you miss it?”

“Sometimes,” he says, but there’s no bitterness in his smile. “Academia’s a bit of a time suck. You can get lost in it.” He returns his hands to my hips, squeezes. “I think maybe it’s worth getting lost in something else for a change.”

I look down at his turtleneck, which he’s still wearing, and slide my palm across his chest. “On Sunday,” I say. “I’ll need to go home.”

“I know.”

“What—” I have to force myself to keep my voice steady. “What happens then?” I chance a glance up at him.

He’s watching me steadily, still holding me just as tightly. “What do you want to happen?”

“I don’t know,” I say, though it’s a lie. “I don’t want this to end.”

He smiles then, leaning in for a kiss. “Then it doesn’t have to.”

“Just like that? This is crazy.” I laugh as I kiss him back, tugging at his jumper. Like the flick of a switch, the intensity notches up. He helps me remove his turtleneck, then his shirt. Skin. I run my hand along it, marvelling at the smooth softness, the hair. He’s slim built—not massively muscular, but toned enough that my questing fingers encounter muscle. At the same time, his hands explore my body. Breasts, hips, stomach, back. We’re all messy hunger. Hot and slow, then fast and needy. I rock against him again, again, needing clothes to be off, needing more.



He seems to read my mind, or maybe he just thinks the same thing, because he breaks the kiss to say, “Upstairs.”

“Oh thank God. I thought you’d never ask.” I wiggle back off his knees, just managing to steady myself on the arm of the chair. My knees have lost their structural integrity. I’m not sure how I’m going to make the stairs, but I do know I will manage it somehow, even if I have to crawl.

He adjusts himself as he stands, and I watch the motion avidly. I think my mouth waters. I’m so hot for this man, it’s not even a joke. Funny to think when I first saw him, I thought him only passably attractive. And now I’m captivated by every movement, every expression in those brown eyes.

I want his hands on me. I want terrible, nonsensical things, like to wake him up with coffee in the morning and to read all his fantasy novels while he’s marking papers. I want to know what a life lived with Dr Oliver Murphy could be like, though I already think I know. Like your favourite book, a little worn at the edges, filled with a story you’d read again and again.

He takes my hand and leads me upstairs to his bedroom. It’s a small room, neat, but I don’t have time to notice anything but the bed, because he’s pushing me down on it—or maybe I’m pulling him down over me on it. Either way, he settles between my thighs like he was meant to be there, and our kisses turn bruising, intense. We start with nibbles and become devouring.

I offer myself to him.

He gives back for every piece he takes.

My fingers dig into his skin. I want to be gentle, but I want him too much. My hands shake.

“Let’s get naked,” I say, and reach down his body even as we’re lying chest to chest, trying to find his waistband.

He rolls off me and pauses, fingers on the buttons at the top of his jeans. “You’re sure you want this?”

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“You’re asking me this now?” Because he doesn’t quite seem to understand the urgency of the situation, I undo the button and zip at the top of my jeans, sliding them down my legs. This morning—yesterday morning, technically—I wore granny panties and didn’t bother shaving. That seems a shame now, but I don’t have the time or energy to care, not when he’s looking at me with eyes dark with focus and heat burning off him.

“I’m asking because we’re moving fast,” he says.

I scowl at his unmoving fingers. “You’re not.”

“I mean—”

“I’m more sure about this than I’ve been about anything in my entire life,” I say.

That does the trick. Or maybe it’s the way I lift my knees into the air and tug my panties down my legs. Either way, he’s finally spurred into action, and he proves me wrong about not moving fast, shucking his jeans and boxers off in record time.

Our mouths collide in a way that’s messy and a little rough, and we both laugh, breaking apart as we find a position that works. His hand slides up my thigh to between my legs, and I let out a little gasp. He does, too, and I reach for him. Hot, silky heat. There’s moisture beading right at the tip, and I swipe it away with my thumb. He shudders, and maybe in retaliation, maybe out of his own need, he slides a finger inside me. I go still, tight and loose all at once. Pleasure prickles through me. I grip the closest thing to me—his pillow—as he slides up my body, half on top of me, leaning just enough to the side so the hand between my legs can maintain its lazy

rhythm.

Ordinarily, I'd be all about the foreplay. Brandon never invested in it much, only preparing me enough for him to slip in easily. Oliver looks like he might be there for the long haul, brow crinkled in concentration and mouth slightly pursed. But for once, I'm too impatient.

"Oliver," I say, my voice a whine. "I want you."

What I'd actually meant to say was I want you inside me. Or maybe even I want you to fuck me. Instead, the words I do say—just those, just that I want him—hang in the air between us. He huffs a breath, pressing his forehead against mine, and I clutch at his upper arms.

"Condom," he says.

"God, you're romantic."

He pinches my thigh as he retreats, opening his bedside drawer and pulling one out. I knock his hands away so I can do it, unrolling the slick latex down his erection. He watches me, eyes dark, then guides me on top of him.

"I like the view like this," he tells me huskily.

Fine by me.

The press of him inside me is exquisite. Everything in my body tightens as our bodies finally align. His hands are loose on my hips, letting me set the pace, but as good as mind-numbingly slow is, I need more. Faster. I pick up the pace, and he seems to understand what I need, thrusting up, meeting me halfway. Sparks erupt behind my eyes. The tension ramps up in my body too fast. His hands are everywhere, his mouth too as he pulls me down to lie across him, nipples brushing the soft hair on his chest,

my lips against his. Hot kisses, tender and urgent all at once. One hand is on my ass, urging me into a rhythm that suits us both, and the other is trailing up and down my spine.

Pleasure shimmers through me. I feel as though someone has plugged me into a mains outlet, but instead of pain, I'm being rocked with something brighter, more wonderful.

He pushes into me harder, and I lose the last grip I have on control. I fall apart. Muscles quivering, his mouth swallowing my cries, body jerking. He slows, seeming to sense what I need, and it's only when I've come back to earth again that he starts to move. Long, deep, certain thrusts, his eyes on mine.

"I can't remember the last time I wanted anyone the way I want you," he says, voice tight with strain. Then his climax takes him too, eyes going hazy and his breath hitching. He doesn't groan, but I watch the wash of pleasure across his expression, and it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

It's too soon to be in love, I'm sure of it, but as we lie in each other's arms after, my ear against his racing heart, I wonder if I could be close. If this weekend will cinch the deal.

He's not the only thing I want for myself. It's time to start living, not just surviving. But I was floundering in the dark, and he took my hand, handed me a torch, let me figure out a way of switching it on and finding my own light.

"I don't think I'm ever going to want to leave," I say into the sunlit room.

I feel rather than hear his smile, just as I feel the way he presses a kiss against my hair. "I think I'd like it if you stayed too."

We don't speak after that. Just lie together until we make love again, this time more

slowly. We fall asleep, wrapped in each other's arms.

By the time he makes me breakfast the next morning, I'm almost certain I'm in love with him.

By the time I leave for Leicestershire, I'm certain he's in love with me, too.

And for the first time in a long time, I think I know what my future will hold.