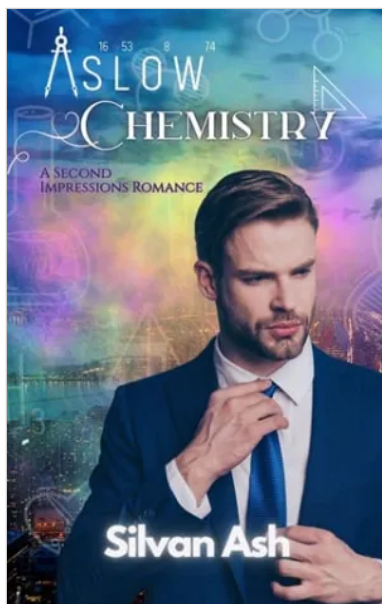




Slow Chemistry (Second Impressions #2)

Author: *Silvan Ash*

Category: Romance

Description: What is the equation for instant attraction?

Charlie Rust is thirty-one and getting impatient. He's got everything in his job as a chemical engineer figured out, down to the last unit process. His romantic life, on the other hand... is in desperate need of troubleshooting. Time to swallow his pride and phone a friend for help getting a date.

Luke Irons is tall, blond and posh – and that's literally all that Charlie remembers about him from a decade ago. Surely that can't bode well for them hitting it off.

And yet, despite an inauspicious beginning, it turns out to be the best first date Charlie's had, ever.

After so many disappointments, can Charlie bring himself to trust that this time will be different? And will the end product of this chemical reaction be the true connection he's been hoping for all along?

Total Pages (Source): 13

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Chapter one

Slow reaction: a chemical reaction that takes a long time to complete. Example: the oxidative rusting of iron.

“Well, Charlie, old boy,” Dr Will Bradford says, his voice a little crackly over the mobile phone as I quickstep my way back to my apartment on the Salford Quays.

“Of course I’ll help, but I’m not sure you’ve asked the right person.

My Priya tells me that matchmaking really isn’t my strong suit.

And the two people who immediately spring to mind have only just fallen in love with each other. ”

“What?” I ask wearily as I approach my apartment block, squinting against the glorious glow of the late summer sunset.

Will’s pretty much the only uni friend that I’ve properly kept in touch with over the years.

A decade ago, after finding out I was the only person from my not-so-fancy area of Burnley to be accepted to Cambridge to read Engineering (yep, ‘read’ being posh-speak for ‘study’), I’d moved into my student room at Sidney Sussex College fully expecting to be an outsider for the rest of my uni life.

Thank goodness for lanky, floppy-haired, cheerful Will, who’d been a second year

medic, and who'd lived in the room right across the hall.

Someone else would probably have ignored the short, awkward, gay, tousle-haired boy with the broad northern accent after the fifth time he'd shot back into his room to avoid a conversation, but Will had seemed oblivious to all that.

Over time, he'd managed to integrate me (peripherally at least) into his diverse friend group.

I'd had a massive crush on him at one point, but thank heavens that's long past. Straight boy crushes just aren't cute after a certain age.

So we're still friends, and overall I'm super glad that, a few years after I landed a job as a chemical process engineer for a water firm in Manchester, he ended up deciding to do his medical training in Liverpool so that he's only an hour's drive away.

"Yeah. I'm delighted. But it's a shame for you, of course. Davey's lovely. And Rob's lovely too, so I'm sure at least one of them would have liked you if they'd still been single. Sadly, they're a bit tied up being lovely to each other."

I resist the urge to press my palm to my forehead as I lean against the door to my building. "Will. Stop telling me about these lovely people who aren't single. This is fucking embarrassing as all heck for me, so just please. Are there any single gay guys you could set me up with?"

"Why would it be embarrassing for you?" The man has the nerve to sound wounded. "You know, I distinctly remember telling you about both of them last year. If you'd listened, it might all be different right now."

"Will." I enter my building and punch the button to the elevator a little harder than I need to, so that I don't have to reach through the phone to strangle him.

“Right. Sorry, I know, that’s not helpful.” He pauses. “Oh! Do you remember my friend Simon?”

“Forget it.” I hang up on him as the elevator doors open and stomp in.

As the doors close I stare at my reflection, only slightly distorted by the faint imperfections of their metallic surface.

The circles around my hazel eyes stand out starkly against my pale skin.

My cinnamon brown hair is a little too long for its usual quiff, and just looks untidy after a week of long hours.

I’m mentally exhausted. These past few years have been consumed by work and impressing my bosses.

And yeah, I’m doing well at work, having been promoted to senior process manager last year, and yes, a fair number of the high-ups seem to like me.

But, as was the case in school and uni, it’s the posh white men who just seem to sense something lacking in me, who will always favour the colleagues who have more in common with them than the gay guy who was raised by a very working class single mother.

Call it daddy issues, or whatever, but I’ve spent so much of my life chasing their approval.

It’s time I start building a life outside of work.

Thirty-one isn’t too late for a guy to find love. Is it?

And I've tried. But the usual apps haven't gotten me anywhere. There have been immediate nos and dating no-shows, and worse, a handful of dates where I'd thought we'd hit it off, only for me to never hear from them again.

I still think Will's choice is more than likely going to be terrible, but I can at least trust that he'll make sure not to set me up with anyone obviously horrible.

My phone rings immediately after I get out of the elevator. It's Will. "Why did you hang up?" Oh no, I just know he's got that bloody wounded puppy dog look on his face.

"You were about to set me up with flipping Simon again, Will."

"What's wrong with Simon?"

"He lives in fucking California, Will!"

"He does not! He lives in fucking San Francisco!"

I slam the door to my apartment and sling my satchel onto the floor next to my shoes. "That does not make it any better!" Deep breaths, Charlie. Axe-murdering your friend is bad.

"I don't get why the distance makes him any less nice." Will sounds a bit sulky.

I hear a quiet voice in the background as I throw myself onto my old leather couch and kick my shoes off.

Ah, Priya's there too. Will's girlfriend is almost as tall as him, elegant, and honestly the only person who is nice enough for my friend.

I've met her a few times, and if I had a single straight bone in my body (not like that, get your mind out of the gutter), I think I'd be head over heels for her too.

She is however usually accompanied by her two terrifying friends, whom I suspect may be genuine cartoon supervillains.

"Priya has made the excellent point that long distance relationships are harder to maintain," Will helpfully fills me in. "She's right."

"Yes, she is," I sigh, very maturely refraining from shouting obscenities at him.

"Anyway, please just think about it. I'm tired of putting myself out there to strangers and getting written off seconds later. I'm ready to give anyone a shot, as long as I don't need to fly across a continent to meet them.

Put some feelers out. Um. Maybe don't mention my dismal track record with relationships. "

"It isn't dismal at all," he says loyally, immediately reminding me why I'm friends with him. "You just need to meet one person who's a good fit, and before that, well, everything else is experience so that you know how to value what you're getting."

"You big girl's blouse," I tease.

"Hey, that's sexist... wait. Charlie Rust, you are a genius!"

"Thanks for finally acknowledging it," I say dryly. "But why?"

"Because you've reminded me of someone who will be perfect for you." I narrow my eyes and wait. "You remember Luke Irons?"

“Who?” I ask blankly.

“Luke Irons,” Will repeats more slowly, as if that gives me a better idea. “He was at Sidney with us.” I think through all the guys I know from our college in Cambridge. Nothing. “Architecture.” Nada. “He was a fourth or fifth year when you started.” Zilch. “He was on the rugby team with me.”

“Okay, I still have no idea, but no, Will. You know I never got along with any of the posh crowd.”

“He’s not that posh, come on.”

“Will, you’re a terrible judge of poshness,” I laugh. “Er. Why does a girl’s blouse remind you of him?” I can’t think of a reason that’d be an issue. Maybe he does drag? That would be pretty interesting.

“Because he came to Formal Hall that one time on a dare while only wearing his girlfriend’s blouse and a ballerina skirt. Don’t you remember? I don’t think I’ve ever laughed that hard since.”

“Oh.” It turns out it is an issue after all, because Luke Irons sounds like a complete twit. I have vague memories of the guy, but nothing clear at all. Some generic rugger bugger with broad shoulders and a too-loud laugh? “Girlfriend?”

“Yeah, don’t worry though, he came out ages ago.

I wouldn’t set you up with a straight guy.

” I totally wouldn’t have put it past Will.

“He moved up here a few months ago, to be a partner in some fancy architecture firm

in South Manchester. You should totally meet up. I think you'd really hit it off. ”

“Um.” I immediately start thinking of reasons to decline that won't sound too harsh.

“Charlie.” Will sounds uncharacteristically stern. “I distinctly remember you saying a minute ago that you'd give anyone a shot, as long as it was geographically feasible.”

“I did,” I say extremely unwillingly, kicking my battered coffee table absently with my besocked toe.

“Maybe then you should give him a chance, instead of writing him off before you even have a chance to find out anything about him.”

Darn it. “You're right.”

“Good. I'll speak to him.”

The memory of the recent chorus of rejections causes a wave of nervousness to run through me. “Sure. It's okay if he doesn't want to, but maybe don't tell me if he's not interested.”

Will stays silent for a second. “Alright,” he agrees.

He pauses, and when he speaks again it's slow and measured, like he's carefully considering what he says.

“You should know that I remember what this feels like - this process of searching and hoping and getting over disappointment. Just make sure you remind yourself that you're a wonderful person with a ton of amazing qualities to offer. ”

I blink back a slight wetness in my eyes, touched. “Thank you, Will.”

“Any time.”

"Yes, Mr Evans. Instrumental error, as suspected. Heavy metal concentrations are well within acceptable limits after all." I fiddle with my pen, drop it, and dive under the table to fish it back up, managing not to make any sounds into the phone as I do so.

"Good work, Rust, your team solved that one quickly. I'll mention you at the directorate meeting later. Thanks for the update." My boss hangs up, and I take a second to enjoy the rare scrap of praise before meeting the amused eyes of Cath, my colleague and friend.

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I've lucked out on getting to share an office with Cath; spending the entire work week sharing space with someone I didn't get along with would have been awful.

Cath is only a couple of years older than me, but she exudes the air of someone who has it all together, something I despair of ever emulating.

And she's still smiling at me. "What?" I demand suspiciously.

"Nothing." She tucks a strand of chestnut brown hair that's escaped the messy bun fastened by a hair clip back behind her ear. "You just have the same look on your face as Lizzie does when we put a star on her reward chart."

"Shut up," I laugh. I've always had a thing for praise. Sue me. "I'm not that bad." I discreetly check my phone under the table. No messages.

Cath smirks. "If you say so." She swivels her chair over to my desk. "So. Now that drama is over, what's going on? You're very twitchy today."

"I am not," I say indignantly, making a point to ignore my phone now that Cath has noticed something, and rearranging the stationery holder on my desk.

"Ugh, have you stolen one of my pens again?"

"I take a replacement from my desk - also perfectly organised - and arrange the pens so that they form a perfect ring again."

Cath rolls her eyes, playing with the buttons on the sleeve of her pantsuit absently.

"Honestly, Charlie. Your serial killer desk is the reason the team hates to meet in our office. I thought you were going to murder Mike when he kicked your bin over by accident."

"It's just being organised." I've found it's the easiest way for me to handle the sometimes rapidly shifting demands at work - at least my desk is immaculate, and my work tasks are mapped out at the start of each day clearly enough that I don't have a meltdown the twentieth time an unexpected issue crops up that day.

"It's anal retentive is what it is. I shudder to think what your flat must look like."

"It's a fucking mess." I shrug, a bit self-consciously. "I think I use up all my anal retentive-ness on work. At home I'm completely... what's the opposite?"

"Anal expulsive." Cath laughs as I stare at her incredulously. "No, seriously. Freud's theories are very strange."

"You don't say." I jump as my phone vibrates against my thigh.

Gah. It's just Mum, asking if I've seen the craft video she'd sent earlier of someone carving a watermelon to look like a rose.

I type in a quick response with a thumbs-up emoji and a smiley face, because if I don't she'll just resend it - and more than likely make me watch it again during my weekly visit home.

"Yep, not twitchy at all," Cath says dryly. "You've gone red, Charlie. Spill."

I clear my throat. "One of my friends said he'd try setting me up with someone, that's all. I'm just waiting to hear from either of them."

Cath practically levitates off her seat. "What? Oh my god. Finally! Tell me everything."

"Oi," I say indignantly. "What do you mean, finally? And there's nothing to tell yet. Some guy who is an architect. I really don't know any more. He might not even be interested."

Cath leans back. "Well, his loss if he isn't." She grins. "As I said, I'm very happy to share Pete with you as long as you agree to help us with parenting duties."

"Thanks," I say acerbically. "Last I checked though, your husband is still completely straight."

"Everyone's a bit bi." She waves her hand dismissively. "All the gay romance books say so."

I shake my head. "Anyway," I say, because I don't particularly want to imagine being in a throuple with Cath and Pete. "You were telling me about Lizzie and her star chart."

Cath gives me a wry smile, clearly not fooled by my unsubtle attempt at changing the topic, but understanding enough to go along with it. "Yeah, it was a bit of a disaster at first..."

A message from an unknown number comes through early the next afternoon, and my heart does not skip a beat when I see it.

Hey Charlie, this is Luke. Hope it's alright that Will gave me your number. How's it going?

I reach over the back of the sofa for the multi-coloured throw I keep there, wrapping

it around myself as if he can somehow see through the text that I'm sitting in my briefs, covered in biscuit crumbs.

Hi! That's absolutely fine, I'm good. What are you doing with your Saturday? Good gods, I'm terrible at this.

The answer comes quickly, which is gratifying. Just having a quick rest at home in between tennis this morning and dinner with some friends later. You?

Well, I can't really say that my entire weekend plan consists of chewing through the contents of my cupboards and watching Star Trek reruns. Not too much right now, finalising some plans to go out later. Yep. Specifically, plans to go to get a takeaway and restock my shelf of snacks.

It takes about ten minutes for the next message to come through, by which time I've put myself through an impressive range of unreasonable emotions. Nice. He adds a thumbs-up and a smiling face.

Right. I know how to text people. This means the ball is in my court. And I have to be charming, and brilliant, and the next thing I say should be enough in itself to make this Luke combust in passion for my sparkling personality.

So I start typing. And stop. And erase and start again.

Faaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaark.

I've only recently become aware that my reaction towards potential dates is...

complex. I'm not sure I feel the same sort of hopeful excitement that Will and others have described to me.

Nope - the turmoil that these situations creates within me often seems more like dread.

Sure, I desperately want them to like me. But, also... not so much?

Hey, I didn't say I've got it all figured out. Have you? Didn't think so.

I realise after a while that I've hesitated for way too long, and panic, because if he's looking at his phone he's just seen three dots appear and disappear for ages, and knows beyond doubt that I am neither charming nor brilliant.

And so in an attempt to make the best of it I just send him a smiley face.

Those poxy dots start appearing and disappearing on my screen now, which obviously means he's thinking about how to blow me off. So I just wing it and add, It looks like it'll be rainy later so better bring a waterproof out with you!

Oh Charlie. What are you doing? You're friendzoning yourself. Correction. You're mom-zoning yourself.

The response surprisingly isn't 'goodbye forever'. Quite right, you might want to do the same.

And, Would you like to catch up in person at some point? For lunch some day?

YES. Yeah, that sounds nice! When works best for you?

Tomorrow too soon? Half past one?

Sure! I type, before I realise I now have a date in less than 24 hours, and have a small freak out where I start frantically trying to tidy my couch, as if he knows where I live

and is coming over right now.

Okay. Maybe I am a tiny bit excited about having a date. It's been the first in... heck, it's been months. And it's been well over two years since I've even gone on to have a second date. And sex - let's just say there have been a few fallow years.

Who knows. Even if this doesn't work out (and the statistics haven't been favourable up till now), maybe there'll at least be a good ploughing in the horizon.

My phone buzzes before I can do much more frantic ineffectual tidying.

Great. I've made a reservation. He sends me the address to a little bistro that I've never been to before, despite it being in Manchester city centre.

I do a quick internet snoop. Great. It's one of those poncy places that is going to charge us an arm and a leg for a small salad.

Intellectually, I know I'm no longer a poor kid living on a shoestring budget, and that I now make enough money that I can afford to go to places like this.

But what's so horrible about a nice mid-range place, where they serve you hearty portions for half the price?

Well, I've been to a few of these places now for fancy meetings; I can power through.

But if choice of restaurant says anything about personality, there's a fair chance that he'll soon realise I'm from a completely different social class, and just disappear from my life like every other guy since forever.

No. Positive thinking. I'll give this Luke a fair chance, like I promised Will.

Best behaviour. Most believable fake smile.

Fanciest non-work outfit. Freshly shined shoes.

I'll laugh at all the right places, show interest, share my best stories.

Maybe he'll see what he wants to see. Maybe it'll be enough.

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Chapter two

Human failure (e.g., in chemical plants): a cause of accidents attributed to human factors, including accidental errors of action or thinking, or intentional violation of protocol.

I reach the bistro a few minutes early, so I hide in a charity shop a few doors down, pretending to browse while I check my reflection in a second-hand mirror.

The quiff looks... passable. I've got my best (read, only) slate grey sport coat on, paired with a royal blue shirt and charcoal trousers which are just a tiny bit tight around the rear.

I look my best, which is actually surprisingly decent.

Great, some snooty lady has just spotted me checking my arse out. I leave with the weight of her judgmental glare hot on my back.

It's now one thirty, so flustered or not, it's time. I enter the bistro, and someone shows me to our table. Luke Irons is waiting, and he stands to greet me.

Okay, wow. So he doesn't look much like my vague memories would suggest, but I guess it's been a decade and I've changed a little too.

As I remembered Luke is pretty tall, and a fair bit broader than me in the shoulders. His dirty blond hair is now cropped short, and he has a faint hint of stubble over a strong jaw. His eyes are a lovely shade of green. There's a friendly smile on his face

as I approach.

He's wearing a dark blue suit with a crisp cream-coloured shirt and royal purple tie, which all look well-tailored and expensive. Bastard. My own getup looks pedestrian in comparison.

He's exactly the type of man whose attention I've always craved. And I've always felt an undercurrent of resentment for the way they made me feel.

"Charlie," Luke says, and his voice sounds surprisingly gentle for his stature. "It's lovely to meet you again." His voice is refined, hinting at years of expensive education and mingling amongst 'the right kind of people'.

"Is it?" I horrify myself by saying, and I backpedal furiously. "I mean, thanks. It's lovely to meet you again too. Sort of." He looks a bit taken aback. "No - I mean it is lovely to meet you. It's the 'again' that I meant. I'm not sure we ever properly met."

He frowns a little as we take a seat. "Well. I suppose we weren't close, but I'm not sure I would say that."

Is he kidding? I'm pretty sure we barely crossed paths. "Well, I know we have mutual friends," I say tentatively.

He regards me for a second. "Ah," he says quietly. "You definitely don't remember then."

"Remember what?" I'm distracted by the waiter passing us fancy drinks menus.

When I look back up, he actually looks faintly upset. "It's just that we've actually talked, for a bit. It was just the once though. It's not important." He glances down for a second, and when he looks back up the smile is back on his face.

"Oh." Crap. It's awkward already. Clearly I've had a conversation with him at some point, probably during some event in our college while we were at uni.

And I've forgotten it completely, so he must think I'm an arsehole. Well, that's my chance at a good first impression well and truly gone now. "Um. Sorry?"

"It's genuinely not important." He picks a drinks menu up, the picture of composure and calm.

I, on the other hand, am conscious of the beginnings of a spiral.

I've always had this tendency, to some extent, when important things aren't going well.

When living circumstances meant that my mum and I had to move halfway through Reception year at school, when I was only five, from Burnley in Lancashire proper to Crumpsall in the northern part of Greater Manchester, I distinctly remember my first day in my new school.

After agonising for ages over a colouring task that I was convinced I was completely messing up, I'd eventually approached my teacher and burst into tears.

Turns out I'd been doing it completely fine.

My spirals since then haven't ended in floods of tears, of course. Well, mostly not. But when I'm worked up about something, when it's high stakes, and when things aren't smooth sailing to begin with - common sense shuts down and panic sets in.

I'd tanked a few job interviews this way, in the past. And more recently, dates. One misstep, and disaster ensues. It's gotten worse the more I've struck out.

So, quite likely unbeknownst to my date, I'm now simultaneously mad at myself for already fucking up, worrying about how little I can afford to keep being such a disaster, and, very unfairly, annoyed at Luke Irons for daring to be the sort of person whose approval I care about at all.

I might be a bit of a mess.

"Any idea what you'd like to drink?" Luke asks breezily.

"Um," I say eloquently, realising that I've been burying my nose in the drinks menu for the past couple of minutes without reading a single word.

I flip through it again. The bloody thing is pages and pages long, and I...

I just want a fizzy drink. But then I'll seem unsophisticated, and that'll be another strike against me, and...

"Charlie."

I look up. Luke's staring at me. Shit. I probably look sweaty and unappealing. I definitely feel it.

"Charlie. Are you alright?" His sea green eyes catch my gaze. It's hard to look away.

"I'm fine." I'm not fine. This is quite literally the worst first impression I've made on a date, ever.

Before I realise I'm doing it, I'm standing, pushing my chair back under the table.

"Sorry," I tell Luke, who just looks bewildered.

“It turns out I’m not really feeling so great.

I should go.” I pull some money out of my wallet, place it on the table, and hightail it out of the stupid posh bistro.

I know the city centre well enough that it’s no effort to duck into a tiny alleyway behind a few cars that are probably parked there illegally, even though my vision is blurred by sudden tears. At least no one gets to see me wring my hands and wipe my eyes.

“Charlie.”

“Holy fucking fuck!” I say, in a very manly voice that doesn’t at all resemble the screeching of a fishwife. I turn, heart pounding. Bloody Luke Irons has just crept behind me.

“Sorry,” he says. “I just thought... I wanted to check if you were alright.”

I laugh breathlessly, running a hand through my hair. Oh good, I’ve knocked it out of place now as well. “I’m fine. Shit. I’m really sorry.”

Luke appears concerned. “I’m worried that I’ve done something to upset you, but I’m afraid I’m not sure what it was.”

I quickly wipe my eyes once more, and blink at him. Does he really think that it’s something he’s done? “No. I mean, you haven’t. I... I don’t even know. I’m just really bad at dates. Don’t blame Will - he doesn’t know that I’m this much of a disaster when it comes to dating.”

“I’d say that Will has no leg to stand on when it comes to dating performance,” Luke says curtly, startling a laugh out of me.

He's right. Will, up to the point where he started dating Priya, had had an absolutely tragic dating record.

"And anyway, while I know we don't know each other that well, I think it would be impossible for you to be bad at dating. "

"That's... kind of you to say." That's bullshit, is what I actually want to tell him. "They're never going to let me set foot in that bistro again, are they?"

Luke chuckles lowly, and the sound sends a tingle down my spine. "I don't think they'd mind all that much. After all, you did tip them twenty pounds to sit down for three minutes."

"I did? Wow, I'm a big spender," I joke weakly, and he smiles.

He reaches into his jacket pocket, and produces a twenty pound note. "I believe this is yours." I frown, and he explains. "I did ask you on the date, after all. So I left the tip on our behalf."

I take the note from him. "You didn't have to do that," I protest. I'm not fully sure how I feel about having my money returned to me - maybe I should feel offended at his high-handedness?

"I wanted to," Luke says simply. He grins, and for some reason, I can't help but smile in return. "Besides, I should probably have chosen a better place for our date."

"Good god, are there posher places than that?" I demand without thinking, and he snorts.

"I would hope not. I thought the host was going to get a neck spasm, from how intensely she was looking down her nose at everyone." I stifle another laugh.

“You probably know I’ve not lived in Manchester for very long.

I should have done a bit more research on where I was taking you.

I was just hoping for a quieter, low-key place where we could talk and get to know each other.

” He coughs. “And it’s also possible that I wanted to impress you a little bit. ”

“Impress me,” I repeat slowly, very aware that I must seem completely thick.

He seems to get it, which must be a minor miracle in itself.

He actually looks mildly abashed. “That’s right.

I’m not sure if you realise this, Charlie, but I’ve only ever heard nice things about you.

Not just from Will.” He names a couple of people I’d known in university, people I’d have called friends back then, with whom I haven’t kept in touch.

It feels odd, thinking back and realising that I may have let important friendships fall by the wayside in my efforts to distance myself from the person I was in university. Maybe I’ll reach out. Maybe some of them will be happy to hear from me.

Luke’s still there, waiting patiently for me.

Crap. I’ve been in my head for ages. “I’m not sure what to say,” I confess, because I feel I owe him some honesty.

“You’ve been really nice and I’ve made a terrible impression.

” I square my shoulders. “Could I... could I buy you a coffee? Maybe show you a few places that I like around here? That way, when you next ask someone out, you’ll have a few more options to work with.

” This might be a lost cause, but Luke’s been so decent that he deserves to gain something from today’s shitshow.

He smiles. “I’d like that.”

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We grab a coffee in a small cafe just off Deansgate, before heading southeast in search of food.

Now that there's not really any pressure to impress him, I'm relaxed enough to keep up a steady conversation with him.

It's nothing particularly profound, just family, siblings or the lack of them (I have none, Luke has a younger sister), work and the like.

The weather's balmy enough that we shed our coats, and Luke pockets his tie and undoes the top button of his shirt, revealing an intriguing tuft of dark blond hair which I'm polite enough not to stare at. Much.

Luke's background in architecture means that he's able to offer new perspectives on the cityscape I've traversed for years, telling me bits and pieces about the buildings.

Just before we turn off Deansgate onto John Dalton Street: "You've really never been in the John Rylands Library just further down there?"

It's a real treat in there - the Reading Room ceiling is just breathtaking.

There's a lovely story behind how it was built as well. Will you let me bring you sometime?"

And just as we cross onto Princess Street, with the Town Hall on our right: "I'd love to go in there someday.

It's being restored right now, but I've seen so many pictures of the interior.

It's meant to be just a perfect example of the Victorian Gothic revival movement.

"He pauses to sip his Americano. "Apparently a fair number of movies were filmed in there, because it looks so much like Westminster Palace."

We wander into the fringes of Chinatown, and since he says he's not particularly hungry I steer us into a small bakery instead of a proper sit-down place.

I think I do a fair job of disguising the fact that my stomach's trying to digest itself, but the amused glance Luke gives me when I tuck into my pork floss bun suggests that he's not completely fooled.

He's polite enough not to comment though.

The conversation lulls while our mouths are busy - don't - and yet, the initial awkwardness doesn't seem to resurface. I guess being friendzoned isn't so bad after all.

Just past Chinatown is Manchester's Gay Village, Canal Street, which at 3pm on a Sunday feels completely different from the rare occasions I've convinced myself to visit at clubbing hour.

Rather than going into one of the pubs, we grab a seat on one of the benches in Sackville Garden, next to the Alan Turing memorial.

"It's actually really peaceful here in the daytime," I observe, squinting against the bright sunlight.

"It is," Luke agrees. He folds the paper bag that formerly contained our lunch neatly,

and pockets it. “Well, apart from during Pride.”

I laugh. “Yeah. Did you come last summer then?”

“I did. I was almost certain I was going to move here by then anyway, so I thought I’d give it a try. It was nice. Crowded, but I guess that’s Pride anywhere these days.”

I nod. “So we were both here, somewhere in the crowd, last August.”

He smiles down at me, and my heart skips a beat. “Yeah. That’s a shame. It would have been nice to have seen a familiar face.”

“Yep.” I don’t add that I’d found it really lonely, walking here alone past loads of couples holding hands, some with a kid or two in tow.

“So.” Luke picks at a crumb on his trousers, and I lift my gaze guiltily as he looks back up, so that he doesn’t realise I’ve been gawking at his thick thighs. “I’m pretty sure you were out of the closet in Cambridge. Was that when you first came out?”

“In sixth form. I actually told my mum way before I told anyone else though.”

There’s a wistful look on his face. “How was she with the news?”

“She didn’t even blink. She just waited for me to spit it out, and hugged me, and told me that she’d pretty much known for years. Apparently I’d been pretty obvious.” We share a chuckle. “You?”

“Just before graduation. It was after...” Luke pauses, and opens and closes his mouth a couple of times, before he seems to change his mind. An old sadness surfaces in his beautiful green eyes. “My parents didn’t take it brilliantly. It’s taken a while for them to get used to the idea.”

“I’m sorry.” I reach over tentatively to touch his forearm, not sure if he’d appreciate the gesture.

He gives me a small smile. “Don’t be. They took some time, but they’ve come round, and my sister was always there for me.

” He turns to look at the statue of Alan Turing.

“Besides, it’s worth remembering that there were others who followed the same path from Cambridge to Manchester, only seventy years ago, who weren’t so lucky. ”

We sit in contemplative silence for a few more moments. It’s broken by a small snicker from Luke. I look at him.

“Sorry. I was just thinking what a terrible line of conversation I’ve started for a first date.”

I grin at him. “Yep, that’s true. Absolutely dreadful.”

He inclines his head in mock-seriousness. “I humbly beg for your forgiveness.”

I consider this. “You are forgiven,” I tell him gravely.

He shoulder-bumps me, and we share another smile. Whether or not Turing approves of our frivolity, I suppose we will never know.

I expect Luke to make his excuses after that, but he doesn’t.

Instead, he suggests that we continue to wander around, and we locate a Thai restaurant for an early dinner.

It's here that I discover Luke has a digestive tract lined with asbestos, and he discovers that my spice tolerance is fairly terrible, when I immediately start tearing up and sniffing after a single sip of his tom yum broth.

He does let me have a sip of his ice coffee though, which helps, after my fizzy drink just sets my mouth on fire once again.

And manages not to laugh at me all that much.

He also finally lets me go half on dinner, after having insisted on paying for everything beforehand because of 'first date rules'.

We then saunter back towards Piccadilly Gardens because it turns out we've both parked around there, and loiter about the statue of Queen Victoria with yet another coffee each.

I'm buzzing a little, and I'm not sure if it's the caffeine or the company.

We talk about everything and nothing. And at no point do I feel as if he's getting sick of me.

In the end, I'm the one who reluctantly tells him I've got to be heading off, because it's approaching 8pm and I'm hopeless at work through the week without enough rest the night before.

Luke walks me to my car, apparently because it's a 'first date sort of thing to do'.

I pause when we reach it, wishing we'd had a few more hours in the day, and turn to thank him for how great it's been.

My words get caught in my throat when I catch his gaze. He steps just a tiny bit

closer.

“Charlie,” he says, and he sounds the tiniest bit breathless. “May I kiss you?”

I can’t answer for a long second, my voice held prisoner by the overwhelming sense of joy that has overtaken my senses. It seems that, subconsciously, I’d still been hoping for a little more than just friendship after all.

He’s still staring at me, so I nod and whisper, “Yes.” One hesitant step closes the distance between us.

I rise onto my tiptoes. He bows his head. I wonder if he can hear the pounding of my heartbeat. It fills my eardrums with a staccato beat.

The tip of his aquiline nose brushes against my cheek as he dips closer. The stubble of his five o’clock shadow, which had appeared some time during our afternoon’s odyssey, raises goosebumps as it brushes over my smooth skin.

Our lips meet gently for only the briefest of moments, strangers in a chance meeting, before parting ways again.

I have two seconds to feel disappointment before Luke dips his head down again, pressing his mouth to mine just a little more firmly.

There’s the faintest scent of cologne on his skin, persisting despite our day in the city - a woody scent.

I rise towards him eagerly this time, sufficiently encouraged by our second joining as to dare rest my hands gently against his chest, feeling the warmth of his body through the thin material of his shirt.

This time when he draws back, his large hands rise to cup the angles of my jaw ever so lightly, and he stares at me for a long moment before our lips meet a third time.

This time, lips part and tongues are granted permission to explore, and I well and truly lose track of how long we stand there, leaning against my battered grey Ford Focus, in a cosy little space where everything begins and ends with the two of us.

When it ends I'm glad that I'm leaning heavily against my car, because it feels like my knees might give way at the sight of Luke, green eyes hungry, lips looking ravished.

We're both breathing deeply. "I suppose," he says slowly, "I suppose we should probably wind this down for tonight." He smiles crookedly. "First date rules and all."

"First date rules can fuck right off," I say with feeling, and he chuckles.

"I know. But, and maybe this doesn't make full sense to you, but it's important to me that I do this right by you.

" He leans in to kiss me on the cheek this time, and oddly, this is the kiss that makes me blush the most with its sheer sweetness.

"If you're willing, everything in its own time.

" He opens then shuts my car door for me, and stands back and smiles as I drive off in a daze.

When I get home I ring Will first. He picks up, sounding a little sleepy. "Oh hey Charlie. How did it go, old boy?"

"He kissed me," is the first thing I think to say. "I think that means it went well?"

“Excuse me for just a moment,” Will says calmly.

I assume he must want to put the call on mute, but he evidently doesn’t manage, because I hear him whisper in the background in a wondering tone, “Priya, I think I may be a genius at gay matchmaking.” There’s some quiet whispering and he clears his throat.

“Sorry old chap. Yeah, it does sound like it went really well! Have you got plans to meet Luke again?”

“Not yet.” I hug myself as the familiar feeling of self-doubt looms again. “He didn’t ask. Maybe he doesn’t want to?”

“Charlie.” Will’s voice takes on that bloody scolding tone again. “You just told me the man kissed you. I think you should take that as a strong hint that he might want to see you again.”

But now the doubt is there, I can’t shake it off quite that easily. Unwanted memories surface of times when I’d thought things had gone well, only for there to be no response to my follow-up texts asking for a second meeting. “You can’t know that, Will,” I sigh.

“Take the chance, Charlie,” Will says patiently.

I breathe in. I breathe out. “Okay.”

We say a quick goodnight, and I text Luke. I had a great time today. Dinner on me next time?

And thank every deity that might be out there, a response comes before I have time to freak out. I had a wonderful time too, Charlie. And yes, let’s do dinner. When are you

free?

I do have to pause to do a small victory dance before I send my response. There's a grin on my face that stays there all the way till I drift off to sleep that night.

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Chapter three

Catalytic oxidation: a process whereby the rate of oxidation of a compound is rapidly increased by the use of a catalyst. Example: use of appropriate filter media accelerates the oxidation of iron, allowing it to be precipitated and filtered out of water.

“So let me check if I have this right.” Luke pauses to have a sip of his lager. “Your job is to get iron out of water by turning it into rust.”

I laugh, spearing a chip with my fork and stuffing it into my mouth.

“Well, sort of. My team’s job is to make sure that the water we process is pure enough to drink and use.

That does include removing dissolved metals, like iron.

And yeah, we mainly remove that by oxidising it so that it precipitates out, which we’re then able to filter out.”

He nods thoughtfully. “Nominative determinism,” he eventually says.

“Bless you?”

He chuckles. “It’s just that observation that people tend to end up in lines of work that are related to their names. Like loads of people called Butcher end up actually being butchers, and all that. You literally work with rust.”

I smile over the table at him. “I mean, it’s not exactly rust...”

“Close enough.” His teeth shine white in the candlelight.

He’s wearing a comfortable-looking cashmere V-neck jumper over a chequered shirt with the top button unfastened, and showing me tantalising glimpses of dark blond chest hair as he moves.

He leans in whenever I speak, and I keep catching whiffs of the same cologne he wore on our last date.

For our second date, Luke’s suggested a midweek dinner at an unassuming pub in Didsbury, which is within walking distance of where he lives and only a short drive for me. The staff are friendly, the ambience is warm and welcoming, and my food is gorgeous.

I’d been worried that the connection we’d shared on the first date might have been some sort of fluke, but it seems so far like things are going strong.

We’d texted a fair bit in the three days between Sunday and today anyway, and this evening the conversation has just flowed as if we’ve known each other for years.

It feels effortless on my part, and as nearly as I can tell he seems to be enjoying my company.

The only thing distracting me is watching those perfectly formed lips as he eats his dinner, knowing as I now know how soft those are and how good they felt against my own mouth. But I don’t want to put him off, so I stay on my best behaviour for now.

“So what about you?” I ask over a mouthful of lemonade. “I mean, I know you’re an architect. What buildings do you design?” Is that a stupid question? I’m not even

sure.

He nods. “The firm I’ve joined actually takes on a pretty wide range of projects.

Community buildings, conservation work, offices, all that and more.

My area is sustainability - making sure our builds are optimised so that energy consumption is reduced as much as possible.

A lot of it is about insulation, heat recovery from ventilation systems, and airtightness.

” He grins. “This is usually where peoples’ eyes start glazing over. ”

“People mustn’t be very clever then,” I say smartly, and instead of finding it rude, he snickers. “I mean, if you want to talk efficiency and optimisation, find a friendly engineer. It’s practically the whole point of any kind of operating system.”

I’m acutely aware that things are going well - things seem to be going so well that I’m freaking out in the back of my mind.

I can’t remember the last time I’ve been on a date that has felt this natural.

And so, it’s impossible to completely drown out that little whisper in my head, that’s been asking: And if even this one doesn’t work out, what chances are there left for you then?

Today must be a good self-esteem day though, because with only a little effort, I give that voice a kick in the seat of the pants and continue to enjoy my evening.

He convinces me (with very little effort) to share a slice of cheesecake with him.

It turns out licking my lips has the effect of making his sea green eyes darken a shade, and making him shift in his seat.

The effect is also reproducible on repeat testing.

“Careful, Charlie,” Luke warns, though there’s only humour in his voice. “Naughty boys don’t get nice things.”

Now it’s my turn to squirm in my seat. I know I’m blushing, and he looks a little smug, so I snipe back, “If you were planning to send me off to bed without dessert, you’re a bit too late.”

He hums noncommittally. “That’s true.” He looks pointedly at the cheesecake, which has almost disappeared - almost all of it into my gob.

“Whoops.” I grin at him. “Sorry.”

He chuckles, and pushes the plate towards me. “It’s alright, poppet. Have the last bit.”

And I do, while pretending that being called a pet name hasn’t made me feel fuzzy and warm inside.

When we leave the pub, Luke asks me if I want to nip over to his house for a coffee.

I’m a bit surprised, but I figure I’m totally up for it if he is.

We jump into my car, and he’s polite enough not to comment on the mess of raincoats, magazines, grocery bags and umbrellas that clutters the back seats.

It’s a literal two-minute drive before we’re pulling into his driveway in a quiet cul-de-

sac in West Didsbury, which looks the picture of suburban bliss.

His house is a detached residence with an exposed brick exterior, and there's a sleek-looking black saloon car parked next to mine.

"I'm trying not to feel too jealous at all the space you have here," I tell him as we shed our coats and shoes in his small foyer.

He grins. "After years of living in a shoebox in London, I just absolutely had to have some space for once. It's still a work in progress, mainly because I only want to get stuff that I actually like, but it's started feeling like home now."

"It's pretty awesome," I say, looking round the living room he's led me into.

There's a massive mirror high on one wall, making the already spacious room appear larger.

A huge telly is suspended across the other wall, and I spot a games console attached to it.

A glass-fronted bookcase in natural oak stretches across one corner, half-filled with books and small decorations.

A square coffee table with a glass inlay pulls focus to the middle of the room, and comfy leather couches face it on either side.

Two stand lamps illuminate the room with a warm glow.

It's not showroom-tidy, in that there's a pair of sneakers shoved into a corner, a couple of creased architectural magazines on the table and a mostly-empty coffee cup on the table (which Luke quickly spirits away), but it's definitely a far cry from the

mess of my flat on the Salford Quays.

I make a mental note to do an intense spring clean before I ever let Luke step foot into my place.

Luke returns pretty quickly with two mugs of coffee.

“Decaf as promised.” He winks. “Wouldn’t want you wired all night again.

” We’d texted late into the night after our first date, at least in part powered by the caffeine trip from the many, many coffees I’d chugged during the day.

He sits down next to me, his broad thigh close to but not quite touching mine.

“Thanks.” I sip, and shift in my seat, unsure if I’m meant to be... initiating something. Just go for it, Charlie. “Should we... can we kiss again?” I’ve thought about it so much over the past few days. More than just thought about it, to be honest.

He sets his cup down and smiles. “I was hoping you might want to.” He shifts closer and his thigh brushes mine, sending sparks of electricity up my spine. He leans in, less tentatively than last time, and presses his lips to mine.

This time I’m more confident, knowing that I have implicit permission.

A couple of seconds into the kiss I lift my hands to his shoulders, and let them roam over his arms and torso.

He seems to enjoy this, if the quiet sounds he’s making into my mouth are any indication.

Heartened by the response, I let my hand roam lower.

Luke tenses a little and gently catches my wrist. “Whoa, Charlie,” he says softly. “Slow down.”

Oh. Oh crap.

I zip right to the edge of the couch. He lets me go instantly, even as I start speaking. “Shit. I’m sorry. I thought...”

Luke’s also speaking at the same time. “I’m sorry, Charlie. It’s not that I don’t... I just...”

We both stop talking simultaneously.

I’m the first to restart. “I thought... when you asked me over for coffee...” It’s hard to speak past the lump in my throat. Maybe it’s my heart, which is pounding a mile a minute in my chest.

Luke winces. “Oh. That is... Yes, I see what happened.”

I’m paralysed by a combination of horror and complete, utter mortification. “I’m sorry. I should go.”

He reaches out to hold my hand, and even though the touch would have delighted me a few seconds ago, right now I barely register it as a comfort. “Please don’t, Charlie. Not like this. Let me explain.”

I blink at him. “You don’t... there’s nothing to explain. I... I should go.” My heart continues to beat at my ribcage, trying to drown everything else out.

His green-eyed gaze bores into me. “Stay. Please. Just a few moments.”

I stare at him for a long second, and nod numbly.

He sighs, and looks down at our joined hands for a second.

“I’m sorry you got the wrong idea, Charlie, and I’m even more sorry that I’ve upset you.

” For the first time, I realise that he looks as wretched as I feel.

“I should have been clearer. I asked you back here because it seemed like we were having a great time, and I wasn’t quite ready to say goodnight yet.

” His thumb strokes over my knuckle, and I realise my breathing is slowing, even though I hadn’t even been aware that I’d been hyperventilating to begin with.

“I may have also been hoping for a bit more making out.”

The admission surprises a short huff out of me. He gives me a cautious grin and continues.

“I really, really like you, Charlie. And that means that I want to take all this slowly. Maybe I’ve misunderstood, but I... I had a distinct impression that you wanted me to be an old-fashioned gentleman. And I wanted you to have everything exactly as you wished.”

I frown. An old-fashioned gentleman... there’s something tantalisingly familiar about his voice saying those words, but I can’t quite make the connection.

I mull over it for a few seconds, before I realise that I’ve just been staring at him like a creep.

“I’m just really...” I blink hard at the sudden tears that have sprung up, and I look down so that he can’t see me.

“I’m embarrassed,” I make myself admit croakily. “And you must think...” I can’t continue.

“Poppet.” I find myself enveloped in a tight, warm embrace.

Luke’s hug might be a tiny bit magical, because even the full-on meltdown I’d worked myself into seems to halt in its tracks, giving way in grudging steps to a soft calm.

I wind my own arms around him cautiously, reassured when it only makes him squeeze me tighter.

At some point he presses a few soft kisses to the top of my head, and it’s strange how that seems more intimate than the times his tongue has been in my mouth.

He shifts after a while, but only so that he can look me in the eye.

“Just continuing on from that,” he says in a low voice.

“If you want to know what I think, that you want more with me - it makes me very, very glad.” I shiver at the hunger in his gaze.

“And I’m very much looking forward to the things we’ll do together, hopefully very soon. ”

I swallow, and his pupils dilate even further so that his eyes almost look black in the lamplight. “Okay,” I say stupidly. “That’s... good.”

He gives me another quick kiss, followed by another which is deeper and longer, and a third.

“Right,” he says after an eternity, pulling back slightly. At some point I’ve practically ended up in his lap, and he doesn’t try to shift me. “I think we’d better stop, because, Charlie Rust, you are sorely testing my resolve to be a gentleman tonight.”

I’m feeling cheeky enough to bat my eyelashes at him. “Oh really.” I’m aiming for coy and coquettish, but I suspect I probably just sound like a camp cartoon villain.

He pokes my side, and I squeak, because I’m extremely ticklish. “Yes. Don’t tempt me, poppet. I’ve made a promise and I’m keeping it.”

I squint at him as I disembark his lap reluctantly. “A promise to whom?”

He shakes his head, a fond smile turning his already handsome face into a work of art. “It’s not important. Now pick up your cup, we’re drinking coffee now.”

“What a horrible thing you’ve just asked me to do,” I say gloomily, and he laughs.

I leave only a little later, after a long hug and a lingering kiss at the doorstep.

I realise that I already miss him, and alarm bells should be ringing in my head at how quickly I’m falling for Luke Irons, someone whose name I barely remembered a week ago.

But instead, there’s a sweet, fluttering feeling in my chest. I’ve not felt it for so long, I’ve almost forgotten it. It feels like hope.

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Chapter four

Root cause analysis: a systematic approach to identify the underlying causes of problems or failures, in order to implement appropriate preventative solutions.

O n Saturday morning my phone rings just as I'm starting to think about getting out of bed. I glance at the screen. It's my mother. I pick up, stretching lazily. "Alright, Mum?"

"Hullo, love." Mum's familiar voice chimes down the phone. Her Burnley accent, like mine, has been watered down over the years, but is still identifiable in the flatness of the vowel sounds and the occasional Lancastrianism. "I've a job for your clever little fingers."

"That sounds terrible," I retort and she snorts. "Did you drop an earring down a sewer grate? If so, pass." I pause. "Everything alright?"

"Don't worry, love, there's nowt wrong. I need an extra pair of hands is all. See, Margie down the road were panicking about the favour boxes for her Ellie's wedding tomorrow and I said I'd help, and I've only now seen how much work it's likely to be.

There's no way our Sue and I'll get it all done before the wedding planner needs them this evening." She still uses the Lancastrian contraction of the word 'the' into a glottal 't' sound.

So did I, until people at uni down south started making fun of me.

It's odd sometimes, to think of the things I've given away and changed, all for people I care nothing about and won't be meeting again.

"Charlie?"

"Sorry, Mum. Of course. I'll pop over now. Um, do you think we'll be done by two? Three at the latest? I have a date later."

She pauses for a minute. Then, "Charlie! You sure kept that quiet."

"It's pretty new," I say defensively. "There's not a lot to tell yet."

"Okay," she says easily, but I know I'll be getting questions later. "Run over now and we'll get started. You'll be home well in time for your big date."

"It's not a big date," I grumble, but she's already put the phone down.

I park across from Mum's terraced house in Crumpsall about twenty minutes later. I have to mount the curb so that other drivers can get past on the narrow street, my wheels scratching noisily in the grit.

Mum and I moved from Burnley to this area of north Manchester when I was five, out of my grandparents' house. She's never told me the full story of why we don't talk to them, but the bits and pieces I now know suggest that she had good reason.

I wave at old Mr Zhang, who lives a few doors down. He waves back, though his yappy little spaniel drags him around the corner before I have time to call out a greeting.

I'm buffeted by the confusing mix of air freshener and freshly-baked bread as I open the door to Mum's house. "I'm home," I shout through the doorway, using my foot to

nudge her sandals aside, towards the overflowing shoe rack.

"Come in, love," she calls from the living room.

I nip in and... "Oh wow." The living room is usually pretty cramped anyway, and Mum's decorating style is, to put it lightly, busy. She likes anything cute, dainty and colourful, and there's a story attached to each ornament.

Today, she's cleared all the usual decorations off the oval coffee table and both the side tables, and they're all stood neatly on spotless hearth. In their place is a literal mountain of bags and baskets. Mum's hovering over them, peering into each one with a cheery look on her face.

"Jee-z, Mum," I say as I clamber over the clutter to kiss her cheek, remembering at the very last minute not to 'take the Lord's name in vain'. "What's all this?"

Mum gives me a bright smile. Her sharp features would look stern, if not for the permanently sunny expression on her face.

She'd only come up to the bridge of my nose while standing on her tiptoes, and there's a cardigan around her thin shoulders despite the warm weather.

Her long bob is the same cinnamon brown as my hair, and there's barely a hint of grey in it despite her being in her mid-fifties now.

"I told you, Charlie, Margie's Ellie gets married tomorrow, and they needed a hand with the favour boxes. "

"Why didn't... What did she... How many people are going to this bloody thing?" I demand.

“Around a hundred-fifty,” Mum tells me serenely. “They’ve a big family, on both sides.”

“And why isn’t Margie doing this herself?”

Mum shrugs. “She’s busy. Or she forgot. But she were in such a state when she called over earlier, I couldn’t hardly have said no.”

“Mum,” I sigh. The whole neighbourhood knows that if you need a last minute favour, Natalie Rust is the one to ask.

She directs me onto a seat on the couch, and plonks a plastic box full of small multicoloured beads into my lap. “I couldn’t well have let Ellie’s wedding get ruined, now, could I? Now come make yourself useful, love, and start with these. Sue’s on her way down.”

“What am I even doing with them?” I ask plaintively.

I suspect Mum would have ignored me, but Sue bustles in from upstairs, in a fluffy grey housecoat. Her long grey hair is tied back in an elegant ponytail. “Oh hello, Charlie!” She makes her way over to give me a hug. She smells like lavender and cigarettes.

I give her a kiss on the cheek, and wordlessly gesture at the madness surrounding us. She rolls her eyes heavenward and shakes her head.

Sue’s been in Mum’s life for the past seven or eight years, and I’ve known about her more or less since the beginning of their relationship.

I wish I could say that I’d been as clued in to Mum being bi as she’d been to me being gay, but it had been a massive surprise when she’d told me she was with Sue.

I'd taken a while to warm up to the tall, soft-spoken woman, but it was mainly because I'd never had to share Mum's attention before.

I'm still not sure we're as close as we could be, but we're comfortable in each other's company, and I do think Mum's happier with her, so I'm glad she's where she is.

"There you are," Mum says, accepting a quick peck on the cheek from her partner. "Now listen, and this'll be over quick. You take one of these small cardboard boxes, and..."

It was not over quick.

Mum eventually puzzles out how to construct and fill each favour box, but it's a while before we figure out an efficient way to work so that we're not constantly in each other's way.

Sue wanders off to make us a brew, and we suddenly find another basket containing tiny bottles filled with glitter, and so we have to gingerly reopen the twenty or so favour boxes that we've already completed, and figure out how to fit in this extra item.

I'm pretty close to swearing at this point.

"So, Charlie," Mum says lightly. She'd not even batted an eyelid at the setback. "This lad you're dating. What's he like then?"

"Ugh, Mum," I grump, but I've never learned to keep secrets from my mother, so I fill her in on the two dates as we work. She listens, nods in the right places, and doesn't interrupt. Her hands don't stop moving, but they do slow as she regards me closely.

“Hm,” she says when I finish.

“What do you mean, ‘hm’?” I ask irritably. “Mum, we’re never going to finish if we don’t speed up.” Sue must be harvesting tea leaves, because it can’t take this long to make tea.

Mum raises one eyebrow. “Come on now, love. I know when you’re holding things back.”

“I haven’t!”

“Charlie.” She fixed me with a gimlet eye. “You’ve described every fact about your dates with this Luke. I could retrace your steps and recreate every meal and drink you had. But you’ve said nowt about what he’s like, or how you felt. I asked about the lad and you gave me an engineering report.”

This is what I mean about never being able to keep secrets from Mum.

Loads of people underestimate her when they first meet her, a small, friendly lady with a regional accent, working in the local library.

What they don’t know is that she’s probably read every single book in there, and then some.

More importantly, to my knowledge, no one has been able to get anything past her in the past thirty years.

Sue and I sometimes joke that she’s psychic.

I scowl at her. “Okay. He’s tall. Blond. Pretty good-looking, if you like the type.”

“Charlie.”

I give up. “I like him,” I confess. “Even though it’s just been two dates. He seems nice. But I’m not getting my hopes up. That’s just a recipe for disappointment.”

“Disappointment,” she echoes. It’s not a question.

I stare at the half-constructed favour box in my hand. “You know I’m not one to get ahead of myself,” I say nonchalantly. “We’ll just have to see how this plays out.”

She puts her own half-done favour box aside now, and I nearly throw my hands up in exasperation. We’re still going to be doing this at midnight, and I’m going to miss my date. The look in Mum’s eyes, though, makes me stop as well.

“I’m sorry, love,” Mum sighs. “I’ve been hoping you’d have worked through this in your own time, but I think you’re wanting a small push.”

“Work through what?”

“This tripe you’ve been talking,” Mum says bluntly. “About disappointment and not getting ahead of yourself.”

“I don’t want to get into this,” I start, but for maybe the first time ever, Mum speaks over me.

“No, Charlie. You’re never this cagey about a date, so I know this Luke doesn’t feel like just any other lad. So we’re talking about it, or I know you won’t give him a chance. Don’t let your father walking out on us make you run away from someone you actually like.”

I take three deep breaths, like she’s always reminded me to do, because just the

mention of it sends a jolt of rage through me. It still works; my heartbeat slows enough for me to reply. "I don't let him make me do anything."

"Charlie."

I squeeze my eyes shut, because looking at the pity on her face is unbearable. "What do you want me to say, Mum? It's not news to me; I know already. But I can't not think about it, every time things go well, and it's the worst it's ever been, because..."

"Because?"

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"Because this feels like it could really be something," I whisper, as if saying it any louder might attract disaster. "And that just means it'll hurt more when it ends."

Mum regards me silently for a moment. I figure a hug and some words of comfort are on the horizon, but I'm surprised when instead, she reaches over and flicks me on the forehead with a finger.

"Ow!"

"That were for saying the daftest thing I've ever heard," Mum tells me calmly.

I rub my forehead. "Gee, thanks Mum."

She ignores the sarcasm. "You're welcome. I need you to listen, love. Your father and me, we weren't some big wonderful love story. He didn't start off good and then suddenly change one day; I knew he weren't a good man way before he walked out that door."

"Really?"

"Aye, love. So stop thinking every fellow you meet is a monster waiting to rip the mask off his face."

I sit back, nearly squashing a couple of completed favour boxes with my elbow. "I always thought you might think the same way about men, to be honest. Ow! Son of a... what was that for?" I rub the back of my head.

Mum narrows her eyes at me. "Language. Believe it or not, Charlie, I'm not with a woman because your father made me think all men can't be trusted. Don't be trying to mansplain my bisexuality."

"Sorry," I mumble ashamedly.

"You're alright, love. Just stop giving that man all this power over you."

I purse my lips. "Right. Just like that. I'm all fixed now, thanks Mum."

"Don't do that with your mouth, you look like you did as a baby when you were doing a number two. And of course it won't just disappear. But if you face it, and you talk about it, and you work on it, and you let the people around you help, it'll get easier with time."

I look into her warm brown eyes as a thought occurs to me. "Mum," I start tentatively. "How did you deal with it? When we had to move here, and it was just you and a little kid?"

She smiles gently. "It weren't easy, I'll be honest. But, you know, if you let people in, you'll be surprised how many good people are out there, who only want to help.

Just take old Margie. You don't know how many times she's talked me out of a black mood over a cup of tea while you and Ellie were playing. "

"Oh, so that's why she's calling in the favour now," I joke, but I make a mental note to call in on them once all the wedding furor is over. Clearly, Mum's helpfulness towards the rest of the neighbourhood isn't as one-sided as I'd thought.

Mum's eyes twinkle. "Maybe. Or she's just being forgetful old Margie." She starts filling favour boxes again. "So, love. Try again. Tell me about this boy Luke."

I busy my hands with our task again, and take my time to think through it.

Sue quietly joins us, placing a steaming cup of tea each in front of me and Mum.

She pats the back of my shoulder gently as she goes back out for her own, and I'm pretty sure she's heard the whole exchange from the door.

Clearly she'd wanted to give us space. I smile at her as she nips back in with her own cup, and retreats to her armchair in the corner to silently but deftly tie lilac-coloured ribbons into neat bows to the finished boxes, pulling a scissors blade across the open ends to create the perfect curl.

I take a sip of tea before I finally answer.

"He seems kind. Respectful. It feels like he's really interested in getting to know me, and listening to what I think.

And I already really like him. But..." I gulp down more tea, hoping it'll help me tamp down the swell of confused feelings. "I'm terrified."

"Why, love?" Mum's voice carries with it three decades of memories, of warm hugs and comfort.

"It's just too good to be true." Just admitting that makes my chest ache a little, my emotions trying to steel themselves against a future blow. "Maybe he isn't what he seems to be, or maybe he'll decide I'm not good enough for him, or..." I take a deep breath, and let it out.

"You're good enough for anyone two times over," Mum says instantly and firmly. "What cause has he, to think any different?"

“I don’t know.” I don’t want Mum to get the idea that I’m ashamed of our background, because I’m not. And Luke’s given me no reason to think he’s anything but a good person.

Mum seems to guess at least part of it anyway. “Charlie, you’ve done so well for yourself in your life. If this lad is a good one, and if he likes you, it won’t matter how you were raised or how he was raised.”

“It might not matter to start with, but sometimes - sometimes it does later on.” I peek at Mum from under my eyelashes, suddenly petrified that I’ll reopen old wounds.

Mum shakes her head, but surprisingly, Sue beats her to it, speaking quietly in her clear, genteel Edinburgh accent.

“As your mother says, a part of this is about trusting that there are people out there who are basically decent human beings. And when you give them a real chance, they may show you that they like you for who you are.”

Mum shoots her a loving look. I muse, not for the first time, that I’d love to know more about Sue’s past, before Mum.

“So that’s it,” Mum adds. “If you think he’s a good one, give him a real chance and see what happens.”

“It’d be easier if you’d given me your psychic powers,” I retort. “I can’t read people like you do.”

“So tell him to come over here then,” she says simply, and I scoff. “No, love, I’m serious. Get him over, and see how he is with us.” She grins. “We could use another pair of hands anyway.”

“Mum! I’m not going to ask him to come join your impromptu sweatshop!

” The thing is, now she’s suggested it, I can’t help but wonder if it might be a good plan.

If Luke can’t handle being here with Mum, the whole thing is a non-starter anyway.

And at least I’ll know, before things get any more serious.

And if they do get along... So I send him a quick message on my phone.

Hey. Sorry I have to ask, but... how flexible are you about what we do today? The plan had been to spend time over at my flat, and I’d said something about cooking dinner.

He replies nearly instantly. Hi! I don’t mind at all. Are we still ok to meet up? No worries if not, but I am really looking forward to seeing you.

That makes me smile. Wait till you hear what I’m suggesting first, I type, and explain.

“Is he coming?” Mum asks, and I look up to see that she’s practically hovering over me.

“Ugh, Mum, stop your mithering,” I complain. The accent and the slang always makes an appearance soon after I step foot into this house, and I briefly wonder how Luke’s going to react to this. I check my phone. “He’ll be on his way soon.”

“That’s cracking, love.” She settles back down.

My thigh starts to jiggle, and I know my nerves are already starting to build. “Mum?”

“Aye, love?”

“Is it fair? To start something with someone, when I’ve got stuff to work through? Don’t people always say you shouldn’t be bringing loads of baggage into a relationship?”

Mum catches my gaze fondly, and after a beat, she laughs.

“Mum! Rude.”

“Sorry, love. I weren’t meaning to make fun of you. But… here, Sue, you know what I mean.”

I turn to look at Sue, who actually does seem to know what she’s on about. “I think she might be trying to say, Charlie, that you’re making this a bit more dramatic than it really is. You’re a well-adjusted young man, with one or two specific hang-ups.”

“It still seems unequal,” I protest.

She tucks a stray lock of hair behind her ear, and smiles crookedly at me. “It’s not a chemical equation, darling. And here’s the thing about adult relationships. The other person’s almost certainly dealing with something or other as well. Just make sure there’s some give and take.”

This all sounds lovely in theory, I want to argue. But I’m sitting there, in a room full of wedding favours and trinkets and love, and as Mum and Sue exchange another fond glance, I realise that if anyone in my life knows what they’re talking about when it comes to relationships, it’s these two.

Chapter five

(Chemical) reaction optimisation: a process of altering the parameters of a chemical reaction to improve cost, product yield, and/or purity.

L uke calls me a few minutes later, and I duck into my old room upstairs to take the call.

I've moved most of my stuff out over the years, but Mum's kept a few old school trophies and posters on the wall, and always makes sure the bed is made so that I can stay over whenever I might want, so it still fundamentally feels like my own space.

"I'm at the shop," he says quickly, and he seems a bit out of breath. "I wanted to bring something over, but then I realised I have no idea what your mother would like. Do you think she'd appreciate flowers? Chocolate? Wine? A cake?"

I realise with a flash of warmth that he's nervous. That's a promising sign, right? "She'd say you shouldn't, but if you do want to bring something, she does love practically all forms of chocolate. A selection box or something will put you in her good books."

"Grand. Good. Right. And her partner?" I'd mentioned Sue to him a few days ago.

"She'll also love the chocolate. Seriously, don't worry about it too much. They're not fussy. And you're coming to help out, so they're pretty much guaranteed to like you."

"Okay. That's good." He still doesn't sound convinced, bless him. "Anything else?"

“I’d dress down. We’re all pretty informally dressed today.

” I send him a quick selfie of my T-shirt and joggers combo, just for reference.

“Besides if you come in wearing a suit, I think you might melt after twenty minutes in their living room. You’d be really impressed at the thermal efficiency,” I add, just to see if the small joke helps him relax.

It works; he chuckles. “Fair enough. I’ll see you soon then.”

It’s just under an hour, and we’re about seventy favour boxes in before he knocks on the front door. “I’ll get it!” I say quickly, nearly tripping and ending face-first on the carpet in my haste. I get to the door in one piece, and fling it open, grinning at the sight of him. “Hey.”

Luke looks stunning in the late August sunlight.

He’s wearing a thin, slate grey T-shirt which shows off his broad chest and wide shoulders.

There’s a healthy dusting of dark blond hair along his forearms. His light blue jeans cling to his thighs and shins in very flattering ways.

He’s holding... “Luke, that’s probably a few too many chocolates,” I tell him, trying not to laugh.

He glances at the pile of selection boxes in his hands, the tip of his nose turning a little pink. “I might have panic-bought one of every kind I could find,” he confesses.

Impulsively, I rise onto my tiptoes to press a kiss onto his surprised mouth.

“It’s sweet,” I tell him. I call into the next room.

“Mum, we’ll just be two seconds.” I lead him to my car, and we deposit about half of the chocolates there before heading back in.

“There. That’s... well, it’s still a lot, but they’ll fit in the house now. ”

Luke huffs a soft laugh. “Don’t think I’m fooled; you’ve just moved all those chocolates to your car so that you can have them to yourself later on.”

I nudge him with my elbow, but I’m secretly glad he’s making jokes; hopefully he’s not feeling too nervous then. “Well, it’s all very right and proper. We are dating; chocolates are a very acceptable gift.”

“What an excellent suitor I am,” he deadpans, and I snicker.

"Come on then, excellent suitor."

I show him in, and we all get through a quick round of introductions with minimal awkwardness. Mum and Sue are predictably delighted with the chocolates, and I'm instructed to go put the kettle on, because a fresh brew is deemed to be vital.

I'm ambivalent about leaving Luke in there with Mum; part of me is suddenly convinced that this is a bad idea, and that everyone will end up not getting along and it'll all end in tears.

Who in their right minds drops a surprise parent visit on someone on their third date?

But I can't keep nipping back in without coming across completely unhinged, so I stew through the kettle boiling and the tea steeping before hurrying back into the living room.

Oh. And they're just chatting normally. So I've just been projecting my neuroses on them. Luke's telling Mum about his sister Vic, who is an actuary working in Birmingham. He seems at ease, and as nearly as I can tell, Mum seems to be too.

"Ta love," Mum says as I set her mug down on the windowsill, next to a small collection of crocheted animals. "Here, you sit down now."

Hm. The box containing small butterfly stickers has moved from the couch next to Luke, onto the one free stool that I was going to perch against. Mum's being very unsubtle about encouraging me to sit next to him.

There's not much space cleared on the couch, so we're pressed together from shoulder to elbow.

His forearm brushes against mine as he reaches for his mug.

Thank fuck for loose jogging bottoms. I don't want two of the three people in this room to ever see me with a full-fledged boner.

The third... he's very welcome to see it. Hopefully soon.

I get a grasp on the situation (not an euphemism for my cock) after a couple of minutes' silent concentration on Ellie's bloody wedding arts and crafts nightmare. When I tune in to the conversation around me again, Mum's explaining who Ellie is to Luke.

"...old Margie down the street, Ellie's her granddaughter. She always used to stay over at Margie's when her parents were at work, so she and our Charlie used to play with each other."

"Ellie was always in charge of what we were playing," I inform him. "Apparently

being three months older meant that she was always the boss.”

Luke grins. “I can’t imagine that went down well with you.”

Mum rolls her eyes heavenward. “The racket the two of you used to make, when you argued. And you never learned to just let it be either; the times I’d come into the room and find her sitting on you.”

Luke looks highly entertained.

“She was always super sneaky,” I say defensively. “And freakishly strong.”

“She changed her tune though when these two got to Year Seven,” Mum tells Luke gleefully. “She started coming after him for a whole different reason.”

I shudder. “Don’t, you’re reminding me of a terrible time in my life,” I say, though it’s a little difficult to keep a straight face next to Luke’s growing smile.

“She decided that she wanted me to be her boyfriend,” I explain to Luke.

“Apparently, I was just cute enough to be worthy of dating her, but not so cute that she’d risk actually catching feelings for me and ruining her lifelong dream of marrying some guy from a boy band... Blue, I think?”

“Wow.” Luke’s green eyes sparkle. “I mean, how could you resist such a flattering offer?”

“I know.” I lean very slightly against his shoulder, enjoying the closeness. “It was so difficult not to fall to my knees in gratitude.”

Luke leans in to whisper something to me, and if I weren’t in my mum’s living room,

I'd very likely fall to my knees for a different reason as his lips brush the sensitive curve of my ear.

"She's wrong anyway; you're way too cute, and I'd imagine anyone dating you would be at a very high risk of developing feelings for you. "

"Uh," I say stupidly. I'm pretty sure my face is on fire, but the lovely warm feeling that's blossoming in my chest leaves no space for the usual self-doubt or worry to come through.

When I compose myself a little and look around the room, Mum's still keeping her hands busy, but the smile she sends my way is all encouragement and shared joy.

"So. Yeah. Obviously she's long since been done with that horrifying phase of her life.

I've not met this guy she's marrying, but for his sake, I hope he's a patient one. "

"Oh, give over," Mum says brightly. "She's not so bad now."

I wrinkle my nose. "Yeah. Which is why she's been so, so chilled about the wedding."

Mum and Sue laugh. "We've been getting weekly updates from Margie about Ellie's wedding drama for the past two years," Sue explains to Luke. "There's been a meltdown at least twice a month about something or other."

"She's a good girl really," Mum says staunchly. "But I'm sure Margie will be right glad when it's over."

"She'll have a few weeks' peace at least while Ellie's on honeymoon," I say glibly, reaching over Luke to hand a few more boxes to Sue for her epic ribbon-tying skills.

I come very close to tripping over his ankle and landing over his lap, and he steadies me at the last minute with a quick hand over my hipbone.

I'm pretty sure my face can be used as a direct heat source as I sit back down, and it's even harder to concentrate on Ellie's bloody boxes afterwards.

When Luke excuses himself to use the washroom upstairs, Mum gives me another knowing smile. "Well, love," she says slowly. "What do you think?"

"What are you talking about," I demand in a low whisper. "The whole point of me bringing him here was so that you could see what you thought of him!"

She shrugs, and that fucking irritating Mona Lisa smile stays put on her face. "It were, and I have. As much as I can in a few minutes, at least."

"So why aren't you telling me, you... you swamp witch?" I ignore the surprised titter of laughter from Sue across the room.

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“You need to think this through for yourself, Charlie. And decide, carefully, what you want to hear off me. I know you and Sue like to joke, but I’ve not got a way to see what anyone is thinking, and I’ll never, ever, tell you to take my advice over your own when it comes to your heart.

So decide for yourself first, what use will you have for what I think of this boy Luke?

” Her expression has stayed the same, but I now notice the hints of tension behind her eyes.

“If I have no good to say of him but you keep him around, what I say will always be there between you and me. And worse, if I say he’s wonderful and that I like him, will you cling on to that later if we’re both wrong, and keep yourself unhappy because of that one thing I say? ”

I hold her gaze. There’s an ancient echo of pain there, one that she rarely shows to me.

I know my grandparents hadn’t always taken her side when my dad had left, and I know now, as an adult, that she can’t have found that easy to accept.

Some wounds scab over, some pain fades, but the memories linger.

Luke returns so we drop the conversation, and as we talk about weather and travel I allow myself to properly think about what Mum’s said.

Of course she’s right. She can’t be the one telling me what to do with Luke, or any

other relationship.

That's on me to figure out. What was I expecting her to say to me?

'Go ahead, I can guarantee this man will give you the happy ever after you wanted'?

And now I just sit there and fidget, because I need to speak to her more. And I can't very well tell Luke to eff off for a few more minutes and wait in the hallway while I do it.

Luckily, I'm still an engineer, so practical solutions are still my forte.

"Shirt!!" I say altogether too loudly, out of the blue, interrupting the conversation about the time Mum and Sue went to Copenhagen and were disappointed by how small the Little Mermaid statue actually was.

All of them jump. "Sorry. Mum, you were saying that you managed to get that oil stain out of my white shirt. I need it for... my Monday meeting. Can you show me where it is so that I don't forget? "

Mum looks like she's trying really hard not to laugh at me, but thankfully she follows me upstairs to my old bedroom. I shut the door quickly and turn to her.

"You're right, and I know I need to take my own advice first. Whatever your impression of him is, it wouldn't be fair to use that and nothing else to make my decision.

So here it is." I take a deep breath and let it out.

"I already know I like him, and if he feels the same way, then I'm really keen to see if this works.

But..." I grab Mum's small, careworn hand on impulse.

"What you think always matters to me. It mattered when I was deciding on uni, and jobs, and houses, and it matters to me now. I don't think I want to be with someone that you couldn't at least learn to love, at some point.

" I squeeze her hand. "You don't have to tell me what you think right now.

But whenever you feel there's something to say? "

"Oh, love." I may be short, but she still has to get onto her tiptoes to kiss me on the cheek. "Of course I will. For what it's worth, he seems a nice young lad, and you're to bring him over here whenever you want."

I'm not sure why this feels like a glowing recommendation despite Mum being the human personification of sunshine and positivity.

"I will." I hesitate. "He doesn't... he doesn't remind you too much of someone?

" Unbidden, half-remembered images stir of a crisp, cold voice saying a succinct goodbye, and a stiff, besuited back disappearing out of the door.

Mum smiles. "The only people he reminds me of, love, are you, and maybe your friend Will. You've all worked hard to get where you are in life, and near as I know, none of you have stepped on anyone to get there.

" She pauses. "Well. except the time you trod on little Vince Jackson's back to climb up the playground ladder. "

"I was five!" I snark at her, but she's made me grin as she always does.

“We’re lucky his ma had a sense of humour, anyway.” She reaches into a dresser drawer as we move towards the door. “Here, take your important white shirt. And count yourself lucky I don’t tell Luke it’s been lying in this drawer for four months now.”

“Don’t you dare!” I nudge her with my elbow, and she just laughs.

Luke gives us a curious look when we return, but doesn’t comment. I brush my hand against his as I sit down, and that seems to reassure him.

“Almost done,” Sue comments brightly, and indeed, at long last we’re nearly finished with Ellie’s favour boxes of doom.

“We have you to thank for it being done so soon, I think,” Mum says to Luke, looking at the neat way the various boxes of items are now organised in order of which goes into the boxes first.

Luke flushes and looks pleased. “Not at all. I have to say this has been quite fun.”

“Be careful,” I warn. “Say that again and you’ll be enlisted into helping out here forever with the rest of us.”

He nudges me with his shoulder. “I honestly wouldn’t mind.”

Heart, keep guard of yourself. It’s too soon to fall just yet.

“Would you both like to join us for dinner?” Sue asks me, her hands finally coming to a rest after setting the last box down. “We were just going to get something from the Spice Kitchen.”

“Another time, thanks,” I say quickly, even though my stomach is weeping at missing

out on my favourite lamb biryani.

But it's only the third time Luke's met me, and it may not be time yet for him to see me unhinging my jaw and devouring an unholy amount of Indian food.

Maybe a few more weeks, if all goes well.

Mum clasps Luke's hand as I hug Sue at the door. "You two come back to see us soon," she tells him.

"I'd like that," he says softly.

"Ta-rah now!" Mum calls as she closes the door.

I glance up at Luke, who looks utterly charmed. I'm pretty used to it; that's the expression almost everyone has when they come to meet my mother. "She's just so lovely," he tells me.

"She's taken," I respond drily as we walk towards our cars.

He laughs. "That's alright. I sort of have my eye on her son anyway."

I thought I was too old to blush this much.

We both drive our cars back towards my apartment, reverting more or less to the original plan of just hanging out.

I direct him to the car park I usually use, which is only a short walk from the apartment complex, and, ever the gentleman, he takes the excess boxes of chocolate from me, tucking them under his arm so that all I have to hold is the stupid white shirt.

I tentatively let my free hand brush against his as I walk beside him.

He takes the hint and reaches over to hold my hand, and the pure joy that this simple action sparks within my chest feels like the first bloom of spring.

“This is nice,” Luke says neutrally as I lead him towards one of the many exposed brick apartment blocks.

“I’m not sure I want to stay here forever,” I confess. “I do like my apartment, mostly. But - and I know it sounds stupid - I miss going upstairs to bed.”

He laughs. “Believe it or not, I know what you mean. After years of living in a shoebox in London, I started having very similar thoughts.” He squeezes my hand lightly.

“Yeah. Oh well.” We’re at my building and I don’t want to let go of his hand. So after minimal one-handed fumbling I manage to find my key, and lead him through into the elevator bank. He smiles at me. “What’s up?”

“Nothing.” He shrugs, and shifts his weight from one foot to the other. “Just musing that your accent’s shifted back after leaving your mum’s house.”

“Ah. Yep.” I peek at him from under my eyelashes. “It tends to do that.”

His smile never leaves his face. “It was nice. It felt like you were more relaxed.”

“You don’t think it’s strange, that I haven’t kept the accent?” The elevator pings, and we step in.

He brings his free hand up to his jaw, rubbing at the stubble on his chin.

“I don’t. I remember reading an interview of Sir Ian McKellen - did you know he was born in Burnley like you?

- and he talked about how he had to get rid of his Lancashire accent when he went to Cambridge.

Apparently some people said some things, and he felt he’d get further if he sounded a bit more like everyone else.

” He tilts his head. “I’m guessing it’s a little bit like that?

” At my nod, he continues, “So no, I don’t think it’s strange.

I do think it’s a shame that you felt you had to.

” He leans in as the elevator doors open.

“I think your voice sounds lovely either way.”

I just about stop myself from doing a happy little wriggle. “Thanks,” I say awkwardly. “Yours is too.” All the distractions so far have meant that I only realise, as I’m opening the door to let Luke in, the number of things I’ve forgotten to get done. “Ah, crap.”

“What’s the matter?” Luke asks, pausing in the doorway.

“Um. I meant to clean up, but Mum called and I completely forgot.” I glance around.

I mean, it’s not a complete dump, but this is definitely not what I’d consider guest-ready.

A pile of folded laundry is sitting on my kitchen counter right next to us, my cartoon cat briefs and a bright red thong taking pride of place on the top.

There's no way Luke hasn't noticed them.

The cushions and throw on the couch are placed in a way that it's obvious I've been lying down with my feet up, and there's a pair of used socks on the TV cabinet.

I've not put my dishes away, and my tea towels are bunched up next to the sink rather than folded. "Sorry."

"What on Earth for?" He glances around. "I love how you've decorated the place."

I look back at him as I hurriedly transport my clothes to the bedroom.

"What? Oh. Thanks." The place may not look at its tidiest, but I've made an effort, over the years, to make sure this place at least feels like a home.

Apart from books, my bookcase houses a small display of mementos from places I've visited over the years.

A tapestry of the Tree of Life hangs on one wall, surrounded by pictures of me, Mum and Sue.

The throw and plush couch cushions may be mismatched, but I've chosen them for comfort rather than appearance.

A large shag rug takes up the middle of the living room, which is soft enough that I've been known to nap on it instead of the couch or bed.

I bustle back in after dumping the entire pile of clothes into my closet without

separating them, even though knowing I've left them unsorted makes my brain itch a little.

"Sorry. Have a seat - I'll just..." I zip past him, rearranging the cushions and throw on the couch with ruthless efficiency. "There."

He takes a seat as I trot back towards the kitchenette to fill the electric kettle. "Coffee? Tea? I have juice, and lemonade, and... milk?" I put the kettle on to boil and stick my head in the fridge to make sure.

"Charlie." I jump at the sound of his voice, which is right behind me. I turn, and he gently grasps hold of my shoulders, and lightly steers me to lean against the kitchen counter. His eyes are twinkling. "Breathe, poppet. What's turned you into the Road Runner all of a sudden?"

"Meep meep," I say lamely, but it still garners a laugh from him. "Sorry. I'm nervous."

"Nervous?" He's not removed his hands from my shoulders, and his thumbs stroke rhythmic patterns that seem to help all the tension in those muscles melt away.

"It's been a very long time since I've brought a date back here." I'm sure he'd be put off to know exactly how long it's been.

He just shrugs. "That's alright." He grins crookedly. "It makes one feel special, knowing they're part of a very exclusive club."

I know he's trying to make me feel better, but I can't quite work up a smile in response. "I'm not sure it's been exclusive on purpose," I confess. "And I'm conscious I need to make a better impression than I already have."

He moves in behind me again, loosely wrapping his arms around me.

Our height difference is such that, with only a little slouching on my part, my head's tucked comfortably under his chin.

"I have a suggestion. How about we both agree to stop trying so hard to make a good impression? That's what seems to work best for us. "

"Okay," I relent, savouring the feeling of leaning against his strong frame.

I want to say he's convinced me with his compelling argument, but honestly, he could probably suggest that I get an embarrassing tattoo over my nether regions and I'd still agree as long as he let me stay there, body and mind silenced by his calming presence.

The kettle boils, and I reluctantly leave his embrace to prepare our drinks. At least once I bring our mugs over to the living room and sit down, he immediately shifts closer to me. I turn my face up towards his, and our lips meet and part against each other.

"I've missed this," I say after a while, and immediately wince because I'm coming on too strong.

The miracles continue; he just smiles. "So have I."

Our mugs of tea go cold. Neither of us care.

After a while, I pull back. I've climbed into his lap at some point, and his dilated pupils and the light flush on his face suggest to me that he really doesn't mind all that much. "Right. Um. What would you like to do now?"

Luke grins. "I quite liked what we were just doing."

I poke his broad chest lightly. "So did I, but I feel like we should be doing something date-related."

He leans back, folding his hands behind his neck. "As you wish." He inclines his head gravely, but the twinkle in his eye reassures me that he's still in good humour. "What would you like to do, poppet? We've deviated somewhat from the third date blueprint today, so I'd appreciate some ideas."

"What?" There's that odd feeling of déjà vu again. "Say that again."

"I'd appreciate some ideas?" He frowns a little, and I'm very nearly distracted by the way his brows knit together and how it makes me want to smooth them back to their usual relaxed state with a light finger.

"No. Before that. Third date blueprint?"

I recognise that expression. The man looks like he's been caught with a hand in the cookie jar. "Yes," he says very slowly.

Third date blueprint. Old-fashioned gentleman. First date rules.

I remember.

"The May Ball."

He nods.

Chapter six

Metastability (chemistry): An intermediate energy state within a chemical system.

Metastable mixtures may appear stable for long periods of time.

This may change when a catalyst is present.

Example: under normal conditions, the conversion of water and carbon dioxide to bicarbonate is very slow, but is almost instantaneous when the catalyst carbonic anhydrase is added.

Ten years ago, in June of Charlie's third year at the University of Cambridge...

"Right, you're done! Go get changed, and have a great time - you've earned it!"

I'm not particularly sure I've earned it, but nevertheless I gladly scurry over to the cloakroom to change.

It's the end of my third year in university, and this period of the academic year feels no less strange after having experienced it twice before.

May Week is when everyone's finished their exams but most of us are waiting for our results, so the atmosphere of mixed relief and nerves is...

unusual. Despite its name, it's also in the middle of June - like many things here in Cambridge, it only makes sense because of tradition.

Tradition is also pretty much why I'm here in Clare College in the middle of the night, doing a quick change from a nondescript black T-shirt and jeans combination to black tie and a simple black domino mask - the cheapest rentals I could find.

Loads of people have told me that I have to experience a May Ball, because, like going punting on the River Cam and grabbing a greasy meal at Gardies after a night out, it's just something you've got to do at least once as a Cambridge student.

And since a ticket to these events just isn't cheap, I'd decided to take advantage of the 'half on, half off' deal that a fair few college May Balls offer, and work for half of it so that I can attend the other half of the event without having to splurge for a ticket.

Clearing drinks for the first half of the night has meant that I've missed out on a fair bit of the entertainment, but it does mean I can drink now, which is something, I guess.

As I wander into the crowd and successfully locate a glass of Prosecco, I note to myself that the worry that's been in my mind since the beginning of the event has been entirely justified.

Like the time I'd nearly stranded my punt in the River Cam by dropping the pole, I've done this wrong.

Watching the masked guests talk, laugh and move in groups, I'm reminded that the whole point of these events is to attend them with friends.

And most of mine had other plans this year, apart from a few who'd decided to go to a different May Ball - one that didn't have the half-work half-play deal.

I look around, but I don't recognise anyone behind their masquerade masks.

I spend a moment wishing whoever decided the theme of this ball will have a lifetime of soggy chips and stubbed toes.

So I down my Prosecco and get another, and wander.

At least Clare College is pretty - I've walked through its gardens on countless occasions because its bridge is one of the more convenient ways to get from the backs of the river into town, and when the weather is good I always tend to linger.

It's not one of the larger colleges, but I've always thought of it as one of the prettiest.

I meander into the sunken garden, a smallish rectangle of ground which is a few inches lower than the surrounding gardens, with a little lily pool in the centre.

It's pretty dimly lit so the shrubbery around it is swathed in shadow, and I'm not entirely sure that the ball organisers intended for us to be allowed in here, but equally no one's appeared to tell me to clear off.

I perch on one of the benches and try to decide if I should even bother to tough it out till the Survivors' Photo in the morning.

"Hi."

The voice, which isn't far away, makes me startle. A tall guy is standing a few feet away, his face hidden behind an elaborate Venetian mask. I squint into the darkness.
"Hi."

He approaches and sits down next to me. "Great, I did think it was you, Charlie. I hope you don't mind me joining you.

I spotted you a few times earlier on but you were busy working.

” His voice is deep and warm, but not exactly familiar.

His mask covers the entire top half of his face, swooping up on the left side to curl into two jagged horns.

I can’t make out the colours in the low lighting, but one panel has a series of music notes in it - I highly doubt it’s a cheap rental.

It’s too dark to be sure even of the colour of his hair.

There’s a faint hint of aftershave in the still air - a sort of woodsy scent, with none of the chemical harshness of the cheap stuff I use sparingly.

“No, that’s alright,” I say awkwardly. Help. He clearly knows me, and I don’t have a clue who he is. Maybe I’ll figure it out if he talks some more. “Have you come with anyone else?”

“Just some friends. A few of them have called it a night and a few others are... somewhere.” He waves his hand vaguely in the direction of the music.

Gah. That doesn’t help me with his identity at all.

“I’ve always liked these gardens, so I thought I’d come see what they looked like in the middle of the night.

” He glances around us. “There’s something quite magical about them in the dark, isn’t there? ”

“Yeah.” The deep shadows wash out the bright colours of the summer blossoms, and imbue the shrubbery with a blend of mystery and sleepy tranquillity. “I’ve always liked it here too.”

He takes a sip of his drink as the conversation stutters to a halt. Then, unexpectedly, “You know, Charlie, I’ve always meant to say this but I’ve never found the right time. I think it’s... it’s brave of you, to be out and proud like you are.”

“Thank you?” My response comes out more like a question.

He huffs out a soft laugh which seems to linger in the still summer air. “I hope that didn’t come across as being too rude. I just think... I mean, I know, it must take a lot of courage to come out. And I admire you for that courage.”

Right. “Thanks,” I say slowly, not sure if I’m reading the situation correctly. “I’ve been lucky so far. And the world’s a different place from how it was even a few years ago.”

“True.” He fiddles with the stem of his glass, and I can see, even in the half-light surrounding us, the tension in the muscles of his back. “I’m not sure I could be that brave.”

It seems like I’m being called upon to prove that courage now, because I have a split-second choice to make.

If I’m wrong, it’s possible that my companion is going to be very upset, and there’s no one else around to help if things take a horrible turn.

But. If I’m interpreting this correctly, this is an implicit request for help.

As I said, I’ve been very lucky with how accepting people have been of me being gay.

And with that comes a duty to pass along some of that acceptance.

I take a single sip of my drink. “If I’m reading this correctly, I think you might be being brave right now.” He glances down at me silently, so I push on. “You already know I’m gay. We’re alone. If there’s something you’d like to get off your chest, I promise I’m not going to judge.”

The line of his throat moves in the dark as he swallows once. “I... Charlie, I think... No, I know... I’m gay too.”

I reach over to clasp his free hand in mine. “Congratulations,” I say softly. “Welcome to the club.”

He laughs, a little wetly. “Thank you. I’ve been too scared - absolutely petrified - for a long, long time to tell anyone.”

“It’s a hard thing to say. But it gets easier.” I can say that much, at least.

He squeezes my hand once before letting go. His palm is a little sweaty, but feels soft and warm. “I guess that makes sense. Again, thank you. I don’t think everyone will be quite this accepting when I tell them that I... that I’m gay.”

“Maybe not everyone. But some will.” He clearly doesn’t need to hear negativity tonight; it sounds like that’s all he’s heard in his own mind for long enough. “And when you’re ready to go searching, there’ll be a whole community out there who are ready to support you.”

He nods. “All I seem to be able to say tonight is thank you. I... I appreciate this.” His voice is steadier than before and the arch of his back less tense.

“It’s no problem at all. I’m honoured that you told me.” I shift awkwardly, still very aware that I don’t know who he is.

If he figures that out, things are going to get super uncomfortable.

So I try to lighten things a little. “So, that’s your first coming out over and done with, but there are a lot more firsts, and they’re going to be a lot more fun. ”

“Are they now?” His voice has gone a little deeper, and I catch a glint of even white teeth as he smiles.

“Shut up.” I nudge him, grinning. “I wasn’t even thinking about that. I meant, like, your first date with a guy.”

He takes a deep breath, and lets it out. “That’s right,” he sighs. “I’ve not allowed myself to think about that just yet. What’s it like?”

I wince. “Maybe I’m not the best person to convince you of the joys of dating guys. I really haven’t had many dates, and honestly, I can’t say any of them have been brilliant.”

“Really?” He cocks his head to one side curiously. “Honestly, that seems like a bit of a shame. What’s not been good about them?”

“Well...” I squirm.

“Charlie. I’ve just told you something really personal.” His tone is now light, and his grip on his glass has relaxed. “Telling me about a couple of dates is nothing compared to that.”

Well, if he puts it that way. “I’m not sure. I think maybe I’m just not good at dates?”

He’s silent for a second. “I think,” he says slowly, “it would be impossible for you to be bad at dating.”

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“It is possible. Some people just are.” I gulp down some more Prosecco, and rub the back of my neck, itching to loosen my collar.

“I’m sure some people might be. What I meant was, based on how lovely you’ve been with me tonight, I think it’s just not possible that you’re the reason the dates haven’t been good. I think, perhaps, the people you’ve dated just haven’t known how to ensure you have a great date.”

Thank goodness he can’t see my face heat in the darkness. “Um. That’s nice of you to say.”

“I meant it.” He leans back, his shoulder brushing against mine. “So, just between friends, tell me about your ideal first date.”

I let out a surprised laugh, which seems to echo in the still air. “Really?”

“Really. I’m curious. After all, I have yet to ask a boy out on a first date, so I could use all the pointers I can get. If I were to ask out someone like you, what should I do so that they have a good time?”

“Uh.” I’m sure there’s no subtext to the question, but that doesn’t stop me from feeling like the warm summer air has just heated up a couple of degrees.

“Well.” He waits patiently as I try to give him something that doesn’t sound like generic bullshit.

“I personally think having lunch or a coffee probably works better as a first date than

dinner. It feels like less pressure. Does that sound stupid?”

“Not at all.” I can just about make out a smile from the shadows under the Venetian mask. “Tell me more.”

“Um.” Crap. Half of what I’ve said has just been meaningless sounds. “Somewhere pretty quiet is nice - not deserted, but just somewhere a bit low-key, where you can actually talk and listen to each other.” I glance back up at him. “And you’re bored senseless now.”

“Quite the opposite.” His free hand twitches once before he jerkily pats my arm, and retreats.

“It all sounds really nice so far - like you’d have a great chance at finding out if there’s a connection.

So what’s your thoughts on who pays? I’ve only ever been on dates with girls, and I’ve always been very happy to pick up the bill.

Will that offend another chap? What are the rules? ”

“I don’t think there are fixed rules,” I laugh. “It probably depends on the person?”

“Maybe you should make them,” he grins. “What are Charlie’s first date rules for bills and payment? I’ll be the scribe.”

“Hear ye hear ye,” I begin, and he nudges my shoulder, chuckling.

“I decree that the person asking the other out shall henceforth be responsible for the bill on the first date, unless other arrangements have been made prior to the commencement of said date. Such is my judgement, now and forevermore.”

“Excellent.” He inclines his head gravely. “I shall endeavour to abide by the tenets - or well, the single tenet - of Charlie’s first date rules, for the rest of my life.”

“Then may you have much success with your first dates, and may each end with an excellent kiss.”

“Ah, so the first date rules allow for a kiss then,” he says knowingly, and I squirm again.

“Of course - but only at the end, and only if it seems to have gone well.”

"With tongue?"

"Maybe." I draw the word out slowly. "But not the first kiss. Maybe the third?"

His laugh is like a bell in the darkness. "I'm very glad to hear you'd condone such a thorough snogfest."

Thank goodness again that he can't see the colour on my cheeks. "Hey! I'm not advocating a full makeout session for just any first date. There has to be some sign that it's gone well."

"Oh of course, there are more first date rules." His tone remains lightly jocular. "Pray tell."

"Well." I'm just making things up at this point, and if someone told me this was how I'd spent the second half of May Ball, I'd probably have assumed it would be terrible - I sure as hell wouldn't think I'd be having such a great time.

"If the date goes at all past the sit-down coffee or meal, you're allowed two kisses.

If you share any further food or drink, three. "

"What gets you four kisses?"

"Oh no, you only get three on the first date. Such are Charlie's first date rules."

"Are there such defined rules for a second date?"

"No no," I say in a mock-patronising voice, and he chuckles lowly. "The second date just has general guidelines."

"Amazing. Do go on. But first, are dinner dates now permitted?"

"More than permitted. They're encouraged."

"Are they now?" He leans in slightly closer, and I very nearly stop breathing from the urge to make my lips meet his. Do not creep the guy who's just come out of the closet, Charlie! "What is the official recommendation regarding venues? Does it need to be a particular kind of restaurant?"

"Nothing too fancy, I think." I pretend to ponder on it for a second. "It would be a tragedy if the food were the highlight of the date, after all."

"Indeed." He's still amused. This is amazing - I don't think I've captured the attention of a gay guy this well for this long, ever.

It's probably the novelty of being open on his part, but that doesn't mean I can't enjoy the connection while I can.

"What happens afterwards? Is a more thorough kissing session within the guidelines?"

“Well, not at the restaurant,” I say in a scandalised voice, and he breaks out into loud, carefree laughter, filling the summer air with a new, comfortable warmth. “However, the guidelines do allow you to invite your date back to yours for coffee afterwards.”

“Ooh,” he says, voice still full of mirth. “So it’s that sort of date.”

“Hm? No. No no no.” I poke him with my elbow as he lets out another guffaw.

“No, the guidelines are very clear on this. Both parties shall remain old-fashioned gentlemen on the second date. Kissing, and maybe a little over-the-shirt touching is permitted. Everything else contravenes the second date guidelines.”

“Be an old-fashioned gentleman - noted.” He says this slowly, pretending to jot it down onto a piece of invisible paper. “You know, I thought you said this was just general guidance,” he points out cheekily.

“It may be, but you’d be wise to follow it closely,” I retort. “Otherwise it throws off all the plans for the third date. The... I need a good word to reflect how detailed the plans are. Laws? No, that sounds wrong.”

“Maybe a third date blueprint?”

“Yes,” I say excitedly, clasp his forearm in excitement before realising. The muscles under his suit tense for a second, and I let go reluctantly. “Uh. Yes. The third date blueprint is very, very comprehensive. Best not risk going into it with any preexisting deviations.”

Bright eyes peer at me from behind the elaborate mask. “Really. Pray tell.”

“Heed me carefully, scribe,” I intone in a grave voice. “The third date blueprint is...” I rack my brains for more nonsense. “You... spend time alone with each other, you

make sure to have fun and that you sort of know each other, and then you're free to do whatever comes naturally to you."

The guy blinks, and after a second, he shakes his head as he starts to laugh. "Oh yes. That is very comprehensive."

"I've run out of ideas," I say defensively, but it's impossible not to smile at him in return. "How about you contribute to the plan."

He hums, and leans back. I try not to stare at the line of his throat in the moonlight. "I think you're right though. I'm sure what works best for one couple isn't going to be the same for another, and by the third date you should have some idea about what you might both enjoy."

"I haven't had many third dates," I admit. I've only had one - we'd lasted only a few weeks before the twat just started ignoring all my texts. I'd found out from mutual friends that he'd found someone else.

"I've only had them with women," he replies. "Some of which have been fun, but I've always been conscious that I haven't felt for them the same way they may have felt for me."

"That's a bold sweeping statement," I tease. "Chances are at least one of them was also in the closet and spent the date wishing that you were a girl."

"Very true," he chuckles. "So, when you say that the third date blueprint allows you to do whatever comes naturally..."

I clear my throat, feeling shy. He does not need to know that my experience amounts to a couple of half-hearted fumbblings with other similarly inexperienced lads, nothing more.

“Yes, sex is permitted but not mandatory. Is it weird to say... you’ll probably think differently, but there are a lot more firsts to enjoy on the way full-on banging, and there’s something to be said about enjoying each step at a time.

” I try to swig more Prosecco, but my glass is empty, so I end up pretending to swallow air.

“Sorry. That sounds tremendously lame, I know.”

“Honestly, I don’t think it does at all.

” He’s leaning in again. I have to fight the urge to snuggle into his side - it won’t do to scare away the lovely guy who’s just come out to me who just wants to talk about dating.

“Actually, it sounds very sweet. Hopefully... I hope that I get the chance someday to have dates like that with... with someone who feels the same way.”

My breath hitches, and gosh, how has it gotten even warmer? Our faces are so close together. I take a breath, and...

There’s a commotion just past the shrubbery to the left, and there’s a girl’s voice - somewhat deep and raspy - calling out something that I can’t quite make out. She sounds absolutely trashed.

My companion shakes his head. “Oh no. That’s one of my friends.

I need to go and check that she’s okay.” He stands, and looks down at me.

His back is to the moon, and my mind transforms his silhouette into that of a Byronic hero, miles apart from the warm, earnest confidante he’d seemed while speaking to

him.

“I... maybe I’ll catch up with you after I check that she’s alright? ”

“Of course.” I was hoping to work it into the conversation somehow that I don’t know his name or how he knows me, but now seems like a terrible time. “I’ll just go get another drink - come find me whenever.” There. This way he knows to come and approach me.

“Alright.” He hesitates, and then suddenly he’s grasping my hand, pressing warm lips to my knuckles.

My body reacts like it’s been shocked by a bolt of lightning, and I barely keep myself from falling over.

“Thank you. It’s been absolutely lovely talking to you.

We’ll speak again soon.” Then he’s gone.

But we don’t speak again soon. After taking a few moments to steady myself, I foray back out amongst the May Ball crowd, but hour after hour passes and I drift through the dwindling crowd of increasingly inebriated folk, alone.

Have the realities of coming out, tolerable in the quiet darkness of the sunken garden, become too intimidating for him in the bright lights of the ball?

I can’t imagine that it was some sort of elaborate prank; he’d seemed far too genuine for that.

But maybe he isn’t ready for more than a chat in the dark just yet.

I stay until the next morning despite being absolutely shattered, but he doesn't reappear even for the Survivors' Photo at the end of the ball.

Part of me wonders, all the way through summer and then through my Master's year afterwards, if he will get in contact, if someone I know will sit down next to me one day at lunch, and reveal their true selves unmasked.

But no one does, and eventually I stop listening for that half-remembered voice in every overheard conversation, and, in the increasingly rare occasions that I reminisce on the experience, I simply allow myself to hope that I've made one other person's coming out a little bit easier.

Chapter seven

Combination reaction: a chemical reaction in which two reactants combine to produce one product.

“ T he May Ball.”

He nods.

I must sit there for an absolute age, staring at him and trying to make sense of what I’ve just realised. “You came to talk to me in the sunken garden.”

“I did.”

“You... you came out to me.”

Luke smiles cautiously. “You were the first person I told, Charlie. I’d had my eye on you for a while before that, even though we didn’t know each other very well at all. I’d always thought... well, I’d always thought you were very nice, and wished that we’d known each other a little better.”

“Oh.” I don’t even know what to say for a long moment. “You... I didn’t manage to find you for the rest of the night.”

He looks inexplicably pleased. “You stayed then - I always wondered.” He shakes his head.

“My friend - Lucy, I don’t think you knew her - managed to get her foot caught in a tree root and land oddly.

Her ankle was the size of a melon by the time I found her, and I ended up dragging her over to the first aid tent while she tried to tell me she could tough it out.

I ended up spending the rest of the night waiting with her at Addenbrooke's Hospital
A it's just whatever we want, when we want it. "

"How about... I figure out something to make from the food in the kitchen and we find an old movie to watch?"

"Good plan." Luke grins, and generally looks so adorable that I just have to lean forward and kiss him again.

I end up making cheese and ham toasties with tinned tomato soup - I make a mental note to stock up on more food options now that I have someone else to share meals with - and we put on a generic 2000s action movie that both of us have seen before to watch while we eat.

We end up talking over most of the movie, alternately poking fun at bits of the movie that don’t make sense and sharing previous experiences and stories.

Quite a bit after the food has been consumed and as the movie’s sequel has automatically started playing, I realise that we’ve gradually shifted so that he’s more or less lying on top of me, hands slowly roaming across my body and lips grazing mine.

Neither of us have glanced at the TV screen in ages.

One of his hands has been exploring below the belt, gently palming the bulge

straining under the front of my joggers and then sliding around my waist to trace the curves of my arsecheeks.

I can feel his own erect length pressing against my thigh, and as I tentatively reach down to grasp it he lets out a breathy noise that has my dick twitching in my briefs.

I squirm and gasp as his hand slips under my joggers.

“Not too fast,” I warn him in a broken whisper. “It really has been a long time.”

There’s something wolfish about his smile as he bends down to slip his tongue into my mouth again.

“I know.” He trails a line of kisses across my cheek to my ear, and I buck against him.

“As you once said, there are loads of firsts to experience, and I’m going to make sure we take our time to enjoy them thoroughly. ”

“Oh yeah?” I nearly swallow my tongue as he gently closes his teeth over my earlobe.

“Very, very thoroughly.” His eyes are dark as he captures my gaze. “Shall we take this to the bedroom? You’re looking a little... overdressed.”

“You too,” I manage to get out. “I... whoa!” I yelp as he sits up, and with barely any effort, lifts me into his arms.

“Sorry.” Luke grins down at me, not looking at all sorry. He carries me into my bedroom, and deposits me lightly onto my rumpled bed sheets.

As promised, we take our time. Clothes come off slowly, as we uncover and reveal

new parts of ourselves to each other.

Hands stroke, clasp, grip. Mouths kiss, suck, nip.

I take a few minutes to tangle my hands in the tuft of wiry blond hair on his chest. Luke finds out that the insides of my thighs are incredibly sensitive, and pauses his explorations to press light kisses to them and listen to my strangled moans.

I peel off his tight boxer briefs before he gets to my own underwear.

He rests compliantly against the head of the bed, looking down at me as I run eager fingers over the thick pillar of his erection and gently tug at his heavy balls.

I glance up at his face through my eyelashes, enjoying his look of ecstasy as I slide both hands up and down his length.

He threads a gentle hand through my hair as I rest my lips over the tip of his cock, not pushing, just letting me suckle at it while I build up the confidence to take more of it into my mouth.

I can't get the last third of it down - it has been a while, and he's big - and after the second time I gag he tugs at my shoulders, shifting me up to press a firm kiss to my lips.

"I think I can do it," I insist stubbornly.

Luke smiles. "We're enjoying our firsts, poppet. Here, it's my turn now." He pulls my briefs down slowly..

"I'm already super close," I warn him urgently as he clasps my dick, which is straining upwards, moist with precome.

“Good.” He pushes me back onto my haunches and starts moving his head down towards my hard-on, starting a series of firm strokes as his other hand closes around my buttcheek, the tip of his middle finger grazing against my clenched hole.

“Luke - fuh... fuck...” I groan as I unload string after string of come onto the hair on his chest. He halts in his descent, looking surprised for a second before he resumes the rapid milking of my cock, until finally I have to put a hand on his to stop him as I get too sensitive.

As I catch my breath, I give him a sheepish smile. “I did say I was super close.”

He looks down at the mess I’ve made on his chest, then up at me.

I yelp as the world spins, and suddenly I’m on my back and he’s straddling my thighs, jacking himself off with urgent strokes.

“Fucking hell, Charlie,” he gasps. “That was so hot.” He rubs his heavy erection against my belly. “I’m going to...”

“Do it,” I demand, reaching up to grasp his meaty, firm thighs. “On me.”

He groans loudly, arches up, and paints my entire torso with his heated spend. The sight of him looming over me, flooding my chest and belly with his sticky release, is so hot that my softening cock twitches one last time, making a valiant effort to stand.

Luke lowers himself gently onto me, making sure not to crush me, and kisses me lightly. His wiry chest hair scratches against my nipples. “That was brilliant.”

“Absolutely fucking amazing,” I agree dreamily. I wrap my legs around his thighs. “You know we’re going to stick together if we don’t move soon.”

He chuckles. "I honestly can't bring myself to care right now." He rubs his nose against mine. "We can shower in a bit."

"Together?" I ask hopefully.

"Of course, poppet." The rakish smile reappears. "After all, I have a feeling that you're in need of a very thorough scrubbing."

I wrinkle my nose, pretending to be offended. "Hey. Are you saying that I look dirty?"

"My apologies, I shouldn't have assumed.

I think I'll just have to carry out an inspection and find out," he replies, and I can't help but laugh, pressing my sweaty forehead against his as I relish the feeling of being entwined with this remarkable man; body, mind and soul.

This wonderful man, who'd flitted into my life a decade ago and left a permanent imprint; who has kept a little piece of me in his heart, and in showing it to me now, has restored something to me I thought I'd lost.

I've never been particularly spiritual, and I don't really buy into karma or fate, but - and maybe this is all the post-coital hormones talking - but something about this feels...

inevitable. As if, even if Will hadn't set us up, even if Luke hadn't moved up to Manchester, our paths would still have crossed sooner or later.

And whatever happens next, is exactly what is meant to happen.

Luke tweaks my nose gently. I blink, and look at him. "Hello, poppet. Where did you

drift off to there?”

I shrug, not knowing how to tell him what I’ve been thinking without it sounding way too serious too quickly. “I’m just... really happy,” I confess, shy in a way that seems ludicrous given what we’ve just been doing together.

Those warm green eyes seem to see all the thoughts that I’m not ready to put into words. “Me too, Charlie. Me too.”

Epilogue

End product: The final material or substance left at the end of a series of chemical reactions.

Four months later

I slowly drift back into wakefulness from a deep, untroubled sleep.

Despite the chill to the air over my face and neck, the rest of my body is warm and relaxed under the heavy duvet.

Even better, a strong body is pressed against my back, and familiar lips are pressing kisses to the back of my neck as a firm hand rolls me onto my front and guides my thighs apart.

I keep my eyes closed, but there's no hiding that I'm awake as a deft, lube-covered finger probes and breaches my hole, which is still wet from the attention it's received earlier in the morning. And last night. I sink my teeth into my pillow, but a pleading moan still slips out.

There's a warm laugh as minty breath skitters across my earlobe. "Good morning again, poppet. You're still nice and tight." I cry out as a second digit joins the first.

"Ngh," I respond coherently as the strong fingers stretch me from inside, and curl round to caress my prostate. "Please." I alternate between pressing backwards on those talented fingers, and pushing my aching erection against the rumpled sheets.

“Really?” The deep voice has a mocking note to it. “Aren’t you still full from the second load earlier?” A gentle kiss to my ear reassures me that there are no ill intentions behind the teasing. “Brace yourself, Charlie.” The fingers withdraw, pulling another broken sound from my throat.

Despite the warning, the slick, girthy spear slides painfully slowly into my loosened hole, and a firm hand on the small of my back stops me from pushing back to speed its journey. By the time I’m fully impaled, my pleas have descended into complete incoherence.

“Patience,” the voice in my ear says silkily. The firm, strong body presses me down into the mattress, preventing me from thrusting my hips back. “You’re going to stop squirming now, and be good - and then you’ll get what you want.”

“Luuuuuuke,” I complain, but I stop and wait obediently.

“Good lad,” he says, and kisses the blush on my cheek that always appears when he praises me like this. “Ready?”

“So ready.” I tighten my muscles around his cock, and he chuckles into my ear.

“Okay then, poppet.” He pulls out oh-so-slowly, and pauses, then with a sharp snap of his hips he pushes all the way back in.

“Fuck!” My hand flies back to grasp at his hip, and he catches it midway and places it back next to my head.

Another stroke, just a little faster. And another, speed building.

Soon, he’s thrusting into me at a punishing pace, his thick cock grazing the sensitive nub of tissue within me with each inward stroke.

I can't stop the moans that escape my throat, growing in intensity as he fucks me harder and harder.

"Where do you want me to come?" he growls into my ear.

"Inside me," I whisper back, and with one, two, three final thrusts, he presses so deeply into me that I see stars, and the usual heat fills me to the brink of discomfort.

Before I have a chance to catch my breath, he rolls me onto my back, guiding my hand to my cock and clasping his own hand over mine, bringing me to my own completion as I writhe and cry out against him.

I roll onto my back once Luke gently pulls out of me, resting my forearm over my eyes dramatically. "No more. You're killing me."

He laughs, running a soothing hand down my chest. "Alright, Madame Butterfly." He sounds a little smug. "You know, you were asking for it." He taps my nose lightly. "Hey, don't go back to sleep again. We've got to drive to the Liverpool Docks to meet Will and Pri and the guys; we'll be late."

"I'm awake," I grumble, turning to nuzzle into his broad chest instead of actually getting up. "And that's lies and slander. In what way was I asking for it?"

He snorts. "Do you maybe remember following me through every room of the house swooning over pictures of this big muscly Rob guy, and telling me how Will very nearly set you up with him?"

"He pokes me in the side as I try not to giggle."

"And speculating how many rounds of sex you'd have every night?"

"He pokes me again, making me scream out in laughter."

"I was just asking questions," I say innocently. "What happened to the old-fashioned gentleman I went on all those dates with?"

He kisses me soundly on the mouth. "He found out that you like him being a little bit possessive from time to time, and wants to give you what you want." He pats me on the bum. "Up, poppet. We do need to get ready."

I stand, wincing a little at the ache within me. Man, he really did give me what I was asking for - I'm going to be sore for a while. "Seriously though, it would be nice if we got along with these Rob and Davey guys. We could use some gay couple friends."

"Won't happen if we're late," Luke quips, ushering me into the upstairs bathroom and turning the shower on.

I make quick work of showering and getting dressed, and head downstairs. Luke's already pouring a carafe of coffee into two thermos flasks, and looks alert and dashing in a russet pullover and jeans - as usual, he's beat me to getting ready.

It's only been a couple of months since I moved in to Luke's house, but I already feel completely at home there.

I barely miss my old flat; all the decorations that had made it a home have found their own places amongst Luke's things, and the slightly longer commute to work is no bother when I get to come back to Luke every evening, and the comfort of our shared home.

Mum and Sue are regular guests, and his parents and sister were over for a weekend last month as well.

Plans are being made for a joint Christmas, which makes Luke excited every time we speak about it.

Luke hands me my thermos. "Ready?"

I smile at him, taking it and throwing him his car keys, which he catches deftly. "Ready. But I'm warning you now, if Will starts going on about how he's a genius at matchmaking, I might kick him in the shins."

"Oh, go for it," he replies as I lock our front door and we get into his car. "Last night he texted me that he was looking forward to meeting up with his 'two greatest success stories'."

I shake my head. "I've changed my mind. I'm going to dunk him into the river Mersey. Be ready to be my alibi when the police come knocking."

Luke laughs. "Okay then." His hand hovers over the gearstick as he looks at me fondly. "I love you, Charlie Rust."

I lean in for a quick kiss. The declaration still makes my heart sing, however many times I hear it. "I love you too, Luke Irons."

The End