



# Someone Like You

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** Phil Hanson landed in Scotland after a nasty burnout and a depression diagnosis forced him to take a step back from his hectic writer life. His fiancée Abigail, a native Glaswegian, is only too happy to return home after ten years in the States, but Phil has a hard time adjusting to his new life.

That is, until he runs quite literally into Ian Galloway, a mountain of a man whose witty humour is, if possible, even more charming than his impressive looks.

From fake running buddies to true friends, Phil and Ian begin to realise that the bond between them is getting harder and harder to dismiss as simple friendship.

**Total Pages (Source):** 39

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:03 am*

He didn't know them — the happy couple laughing side by side by the stove.

The space was dimly lit, the orange glow of a crackling fireplace casting long shadows across the room, outlining the silhouettes of the man and the woman with a wobbly golden halo.

Their laughter filled the cinnamon-scented air — a deep rumble and a bubbly giggle mingled into an oddly heartwarming sound.

The postcard-like perfection of the scene was both surreal and mesmerising — irresistible .

He was disappointed that he couldn't see it more clearly.

He never could. The dream was always blurry and, despite standing in the middle of it, he always felt like it was out of reach, in another reality.

Outside, glimpses of brown and grey poked out of the endless expanse of snow as the sky at the horizon faded into shades of purple and pink .

There was something peaceful about such surreal scenery, something that enhanced the warmth and the cosiness within the room and between the couple.

He wanted to belong here.

To this place.

To these people and what they had.

But he wasn't allowed to get to them.

Every time he thought he was finally close enough to grasp a shred of their joy, he was jolted from the vision and back into his bed, as unfamiliar as the room around it.

Tired.

Sad.

Empty.

He hardly ever dreamed nowadays, but when he did, it was always them — the laughing couple out of his reach who made happiness look so easy and attainable.

And every time, when his eyes cracked open, any memory of them was gone, leaving behind a sense of incompleteness he'd never been able to make sense of.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:03 am*

PHIL

Philip Jonathan Hanson hadn't felt like a human being or anything remotely close to it in months, maybe years, and, in retrospect, he'd been quite a fool to believe he could somehow prevent this from interfering with his life.

Despite the highs and lows, however, he prided himself on being a rather convincing impersonator of a functional adult: every day he rolled out of bed, trudged to the bathroom, splashed some cold water on his tired face and tried to ignore the purple circles under his eyes and the greying brown stubble lining his jaw, then washed down his daily dose of Seroxat, and finally proceeded to school his best smile into place before going downstairs to wish his fiancée a good morning.

Abby loved being here. She had been thrilled to move back to her hometown after a whole decade away.

She'd made herself perfectly at home in Chicago, in Phil's demure bachelor pad in West Town, but she had never stopped waxing about the wonders of her Scotland, her homeland, while making a name for herself at one of the largest banks in Britain.

Phil had always listened, indulging Abby's enthusiasm, because he loved his girlfriend and was only happy to do whatever made her happy.

Deep down, however, he'd never felt attracted to Scotland — or anywhere else, for that matter — probably because he was too fond of his consolidated routine in the Windy City: every day a different café, just himself and his laptop, a manuscript to work on, a huge cup of coffee and a bag of M&M's at hand.

Simple.

But nothing was every truly simple with a firecracker of a woman as a partner, and Abby had revolutionised Phil's lifestyle so smoothly and effortlessly that he hadn't even realised he'd somehow evolved into an unrecognisable social butterfly until one Saturday night, during a party in his own honour, he'd found himself at the top of the Willis Tower, looking down at the city with the funniest of thoughts casually passing through his head.

I could jump.

Being only a bit of an idiot, Phil had realised that such a consideration wasn't normal to make while celebrating your new, bestselling novel surrounded by friends and family, journalists, and renowned colleagues.

Not everyone had a book hitting the New York Times best seller's list on release day, so obviously jumping off a 110-storey building wasn't exactly the first instinct one would be expected to have in the middle of a toast to his own success.

It wasn't even the idea per se that had unsettled him — everyone had intrusive thoughts from time to time —, but rather how appealing it had sounded.

That was when Phil had come to the conclusion that something must not be quite right with him.

He'd told his fiancée, of course — he and Abby told each other everything — and she'd taken it surprisingly calmly, but definitely not well.

After a lot of coaxing and cajoling, Phil had been persuaded to see a therapist, who, only five sessions in, had diagnosed him with chronic depression with a side of severe burnout, and instantly put him on Seroxat.

Phil had also been strongly advised to take a prompt break from every source of stress, which he'd soon realised encompassed the entirety of life as he knew it.

Abby, who was nothing but pragmatic, hadn't even blinked at the doctor's suggestion for a drastic change of scenery, and before Phil knew it she'd presented him a fully fledged plan for their new life in Glasgow — not Glasgow, the small village in Scott County, Bumfuck Nowhere, Illinois, like Phil had initially assumed, but Glasgow as in Glasgow, Scotland. Europe .

As in a whole different continent .

So here he was, six months after the diagnosis that had turned him into brittle glass in the eyes of everyone he knew, dragging himself down the stairs towards the inviting smell of fresh coffee wafting out of the kitchen, ready to kiss his beautiful girlfriend and tell her how good he felt today.

He glanced down at the bracelet around his left wrist: white and pink beads spelled 'U R my sunshine' with a yellow sun bead instead of the word sun .

He'd found it on the ground at the airport right after landing in Scotland, with a broken carabiner attached to it, suggesting that it'd probably been a charm on someone's bag.

Deeming it a good omen, he'd decided to keep it, but now it just felt like it was mocking him.

He was still convinced he was meant to find it, though, because what were the chances of such a girly thing fitting a grown man's wrist?

Perhaps one day this finding would make sense.

Abby was at the counter, dark hair tied up in a ponytail, glasses on her nose, beautiful as ever.

She was scrolling on her phone while taking nibbles from a banana muffin, her favourite.

On the window sill sat her favourite mug, the one that said ‘Tiny, whiny, and ready to bite’ .

She was tiny. Phil was no small man, standing at a dignified six foot, and Abby was more than a whole head shorter than him and so petite he could lift her up with one arm.

It had been hard for someone as dainty and young-looking as her to be taken seriously as a financial advisor in such a cut-throat industry, but Abby’s unshakable determination was the reason Phil had fallen in love with her and it had always been the key to her brilliant career.

“Hiya!” Abby beamed as soon as she noticed him. She accepted his kiss on her cheek and readily returned it, scrunching her pretty nose at the feeling of his stubble under her lips. “We’re still not shaving?”

Phil stifled a sigh. Shaving was one of those tasks he had a hard time reintegrating into his habits. He was still struggling with showering daily and couldn’t possibly try any harder than that.

There’d been a period, back in Chicago, when he would lie in bed all day and couldn’t find it in himself to take care of himself, not even when Abby’s pleading tears had mortified him so intimately he’d considered moving into a hotel to relieve her of that sorrow.

But after a few weeks of therapy he'd managed to slowly weave showers back into his routine, fuelled by nothing but love and guilt towards Abby and her undying patience with him.

'One little step at a time,' Doctor Raji had said, and Phil was living by it as best as he could, which meant that, for now, there was no room for shaving regularly in his freshly restored Functioning Adult portfolio.

"Tomorrow," he promised, accepting the cup of coffee Abby was handing him. She rolled her eyes: tomorrow had been his answer for the past couple of weeks.

"Aihan says she needs me in London starting next month." Abby gave Phil a meaningful look.

"I'd feel better going if I knew you had someone to rely on while I'm away.

" She stroked his cheek with a silent plea and he felt awful for letting her worry so much about him.

All Abby was asking of him was to make one friend.

He could do that. He had plenty of friends back in Chicago, surely it wouldn't be hard to make new ones on this side of the pond.

Meeting new people wasn't the issue. It just tended to be slightly more complicated when you barely set foot out of the house.

Even back home, Phil had never been an outdoorsy person.

Not before Abby, anyway. He was happy in his home office or in one of his trusted cafes, with little to no disturbance and the pleasant company of his characters.



Phil was a writer, had been a writer way before getting his PhD in English Literature almost twenty years ago, and not even once had he wished to be someone else, doing something else.

Just because he lived in a different city now, it didn't mean there would be a different him: he was here to heal, not to get a personality upgrade.

All he wanted was to find his writing spark again.

"You need friends, Phil." Abby's tender tone shook him out of his ruminations. "It's been two months... You don't even know the name of our next door neighbour."

False. The man next door was one Sarif Eid, lover of nature and animals. Phil had found an envelope from Greenpeace addressed to him in his own mailbox a few days back. He caught the drift though.

"I'll be in and out of town every week," Abby pressed on.

"I need to know you won't be rotting in here all alone.

" A light caress trailed down his face. "Why don't you go out, get some fresh air?

You haven't even touched your running shoes since we arrived...

Maybe a run will get some dopamine into your system...

" Soft brown eyes locked into Phil's, melting away his will to argue.

He couldn't let Abby leave with the burden that he would be alone with his intrusive thoughts: she barely dared to leave him unsupervised for a few hours a day.

Soon she would be needed more and more in London, he had to make sure she could focus on her clients without fearing for her fiancé's wellbeing.

Besides, he was putting on some weight around his middle...

"You know what? A run sounds good." He offered Abby a big smile that made her light up like a Christmas tree and earned him a crisp kiss on the lips.

"That's my boy!"

Abby left to do errands half an hour later.

Alone with his breakfast and the rising sun peering at him through the buildings on the other side of the street, Phil decided he'd aim for three miles to test his legs.

Running was part of his recovery plan and Doctor Raji had been adamant about the importance of committing to a regular exercise schedule and a healthy diet if he wanted to cut down the medication.

Doctor Raji had also recommended getting plenty of fresh air and finding new stimuli, but Phil only had the energy to unignore one recommendation at a time.

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After completing the testing task of putting the dishes in the dishwasher and cleaning up the counter, his autopilot led him back upstairs, where he diligently brushed his teeth, made the bed, and folded his pyjamas.

His will to exist had almost entirely evaporated by the time he finally opened the wardrobe.

Nonetheless, he was proud of himself for sticking to his promise long enough to get to this point, and that gave him a little extra motivation to grind on.

Finding his running clothes was no easy feat: he vaguely remembered shoving them into some drawer while unpacking the suitcases, but also piling more useful stuff on top of them — useful like the formal suits he was supposed to be wearing for his seminars at Glasgow University, if he ever found the guts to pencil one in.

When he finally managed to dig up a pair of sweatpants and a hoodie, he slipped them on and placed himself in front of the mirror, trying and failing to understand how he'd allowed himself to become the raggedy loser staring back at him.

He was still handsome, despite the swollen bags under his eyes and the greying beard.

His body wasn't as fit as it used to be before the burnout and he doubted it'd ever get back to that impeccable shape, but if he started running again there would surely be an improvement.

His feet felt like lead. He dragged them across the brand new hardwood floor Abby's parents had replaced before moving to Italy after their retirement just a couple of

years back. Phil wasn't a fan of the choice, but one couldn't look a gift horse in the mouth.

Outside the day was warm and rainy. Autumn was around the corner and Phil still hadn't ventured too far around the city. The only part he knew was the portion of the West End closest to the apartment and Kelvingrove Park, which was where he was headed for his lazy jog.

It wasn't half as bad as he'd feared: after the first couple of challenging miles, his muscles warmed up and his legs began feeling less heavy.

He was surprised to discover he still had some stamina left in himself and enough breath to speed up a little when he felt his body was ready.

The familiar burn of exertion put a satisfied grin on his face.

He threw his head back, relishing the drizzle on his sweaty skin, and realised he was feeling somewhat close to good for the first time since...

He couldn't even remember when it'd been the last time he hadn't felt like a useless lump of decaying meat.

He owed Abby a big thank you for persuading him to do this.

He skirted along the River Kelvin, startling a group of ducks napping by the path, and sprinted past the skatepark towards the old fountain. As he circled around it, he checked his heart rate on his smartwatch: 150. Not bad, considering he'd been an utter slug for months.

He grinned to himself, a rush of adrenaline pumping through his body.

He looked up to decide which direction to take, when suddenly everything went black.

Next thing he knew he was lying on his back with a throbbing pain radiating from his tailbone.

He had to blink a couple of times to gather his bearings: the fountain was looming above him, as grey as the sky, and a massive dark figure advanced in his visual field.

“You alright, mate?”

Phil groaned, pushing himself up on his elbows. Before he had a chance to even think about standing up, an iron grip seized him by one arm and effortlessly put him back on his feet.

“Are you alright?” he was asked one more time by a voice so deep that he felt it in his chest.

“Been better,” he grumbled, flexing his back experimentally to make sure that everything worked properly.

“Not every day you run into a human brick wall.” He glanced up grouchy at the unreasonably tall stranger.

“Thank fuck.” His voice quivered a little as he processed the guy’s appearance: a six-foot-five mountain in shorts and an unzipped sleeveless hoodie under which a wet tank top clung obscenely to an array of rippling muscles.

It was a miracle Phil had just bounced off all of that without breaking anything .

As if reading his mind, a thick, dark eyebrow rose on the guy’s sweaty face.

“You sure nothing’s broken there?” Bright blue eyes shone in the pale sunlight, framed by jet black hair tied back in a thick ponytail.

There was a twinkle in them, something Phil couldn’t define, unless he was ready to describe a guy’s eyes as charming , which he definitely wasn’t.

“Yeah, pretty sure.” Bruised ego aside, Phil was more or less unscathed, save for a slightly dry mouth that couldn’t have any correlation with the fall. He’d better bring a bottle of water on his next run. “Didn’t see you coming.”

“Aye, no harm done.” A conciliating smile spread in the middle of the guy’s dark beard, and, between that and the pain in his arse, Phil was ready to start a fight, even more so when the guy added: “You don’t see many senior runners around here.”

“I’m forty-five, jackass!” Phil spat, feeling a flare of heat around his ears.

His rage didn’t seem to affect the stranger’s defiant grin. “Nice to meet you, Forty-Five. I’m Ian.”

“For fuck’s sake...” Phil turned away to make sure Ian couldn’t catch the glimpse of unwitting amusement through his annoyance. He wasn’t going to laugh at a stupid dad joke from a guy who’d carelessly knocked him to the ground.

A low chortle shook Ian’s hefty chest. “Not big on humour, eh? Let’s start over, shall we?” He stretched out a huge hand to Phil. “Ian Galloway.”

Phil almost snorted, but then his look trailed up Ian’s bare arm, finding a good-natured expression on his face, and despite himself ended up ruefully shaking the man’s hand.

“Phil Hanson.”

A corner of Ian's mouth curled. "Handsome indeed."

"Hanson," Phil spelled out more clearly, his ears flaring hot again.

"Ach." Ian's absolutely not charming eyes sparkled with mischief. "You new round here?"

"You know every single person in Glasgow?"

"You look lost."

Phil blinked at the oddly accurate remark. Not that he was actually lost. Not spatially, anyway.

"Kinda new, I guess." He gave a lacklustre shrug and finally let go of Ian's hand, which was about as hot as Phil's ears felt. "Is two months in the country considered new?"

"Practically just landed."

"That's how it feels."

Ian's watch bleeped, a high-pitched, repetitive sound that irritated Phil right away. Ian tapped the watch and the bleeping stopped. "That should've been my finish time. You owe me."

"Excuse me?"

"For runnin' into me."

Phil's eagerness to start a fight came back, even stronger than before. He wasn't

going to be patronised by the person who had factually caused the incident.

“ You ran into me! ” he grunted, nostrils dilating. “ You owe me! ”

Ian chuckled, thoroughly unimpressed. Something about it caused an odd tingle at the nape of Phil’s neck. “Alright, big man. What about a coffee?”

Phil’s mouth opened, but no sound came out, nor did he know what he’d intended to say. The situation had abruptly taken an unexpected twist and, unprepared to respond to an invitation , he somehow found himself jogging with Ian towards an Italian café just around the corner.

All the way there he couldn’t shake off an inexplicable impression that he’d just fallen for some kind of scam.



## Page 4

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IAN

There was nothing Ian loved more than a slow, self-indulgent Saturday breakfast watching the rain through the window of his kitchen with a bowl of protein porridge in his hands and the sweet purring of his cat Kibble slumbering in his lap.

The sun was just rising. He liked to sleep in on weekends, if he didn't have any off-the-books appointments or particular errands to run.

His weekly schedule was tight enough, what with his professional services taking him all over the city, and sometimes even outside.

He was lucky enough to have a few decent maintenance contracts with local companies which granted him a steady income, but he took private jobs as often as he could, because making ends meet in Glasgow was no longer a piece of cake for a self-employed electrician.

Kibble had a chronic renal condition and her food was insanely expensive, not to mention the vet bills.

He didn't mind: they weren't wealthy, but they had a respectable flat in a fairly decent area and more than enough money to get by.

All in all, Ian considered himself a fulfilled man.

Today's plan originally involved nothing but boring yet necessary chores, like cleaning the flat and sorting out some bills he'd conveniently avoided for the past

couple of weeks, but when he saw the rain subside into a light drizzle he couldn't resist the temptation of a relaxing morning run.

The recent bad weather had forced him to stick to the gym's treadmills, so he wasn't going to pass up an opportunity to make the best of one of the last days of summer.

“What d'ye say, Kibbs? Should Daddy ignore his responsibilities for a wee run?”

Kibble flicked an ear, her purring intensifying, and that was about all the encouragement Ian needed to make his final decision.

Pumped, he rushed to the bedroom and laid Kibble on the bed to get dressed.

She was a half drowned little rat when he'd found her, stuck in the grid of a drain, barely breathing.

He'd spent more money than he could afford at the time to get her back on her paws, waking night and day to feed her and make sure she was okay, completely smitten with her bulging eyes and huge, disproportioned ears.

He'd seen the gratitude in her eyes as he nursed her back to health, and here she was now, thirteen years later, the chubbiest, happiest cat in the world, bossing him around 24/7 like the spoiled diva she was.

She kept a drowsy eye on him while he got dressed, letting out a little 'eh' when he bent down to kiss her head before setting his smartwatch and heading to the door, nearly forgetting to grab the keys on the way out.

Mrs Daniels greeted him from her window; he waved back, pretending not to know she'd be watching him until he was out of sight.

She was a beautiful, lonely woman who evidently needed more attention than her husband could give her and she had never tried to hide her liking for Ian since the day they'd moved into the building.

Ian, on his own part, had always been polite to her, especially because any electric appliance the nice lady owned had a suspicious penchant for breaking in mysterious circumstances, which meant Ian was summoned to check her TV more often than he got to watch his own.

He knew she did it just to stare at his arse as he knelt on the ground to work.

He didn't care. It was honestly earned money.

He'd never given any signs of being interested in the woman, nor had she ever tried to make a move on him. His conscience was clear.

It was less than two miles to Kelvingrove. Normally he'd have avoided the park as it tended to be crowded on warm days like today, but he trusted that the rain had kept most people indoors and out of his way. Like most things in life, running wasn't half as enjoyable without some peace and quiet.

He took the long way to get some more miles into his route, his clothes damp by the time he reached the park, minuscule droplets dotting the strands of hair that had escaped the ponytail under his hood.

It felt so good he could've easily kept going for hours, just him and the rain and the twittering birds.

His father Thomas accused him of being a sociopath, which was unfair, because Ian had friends and even saw them often enough, as long as there was a football game that lured them all into the same pub.

Maybe calling them friends was an exaggeration.

Drinking buddies might be a better definition.

But still. Ian wasn't a sociopath. Just a lone wolf at heart who preferred keeping to himself whenever possible.

When he turned the corner and spotted the old fountain, he checked his watch: eight miles done, two left.

If he hurried, he could treat himself to one of Sandra's coffees and maybe a croissant before the morning rush.

Spurred by the prospect, he sped up, closing his eyes for a moment to enjoy the rain on his face and the anticipation of the best coffee in town gracing his taste buds.

The elation didn't last long. Halfway around the fountain something bumped into him and forced him to halt abruptly.

Or rather... someone . There was a guy whimpering on the ground, his face scrunched in pain.

Ian's eyes flitted to the edge of the fountain to make sure it was well out of the fall's trajectory, then back at the sorry fellow, who was struggling to sit up .

"Here." Ian grabbed his elbow and put him on his feet. The guy wasn't big, but hopefully sturdier than he looked. "Are you alright?"

The guy massaged his back with yet another whimper. "Been better. Not every day you run into a human brick wall." A surly glare shot up at Ian. "Thank fuck."

American. Of course. A respectable Glaswegian would throw fists first and whine later.

“You sure nothing’s broken there?”

“Yeah, pretty sure.” The guy brushed his damp hair out of his face, still glaring at Ian. “Didn’t see you coming.”

“Aye, no harm done.” said Ian. He was pretty sure the stranger expected an apology, which he wasn’t going to issue, since they were both accountable for the accident. “You don’t see many senior citizens running around here,” he added, just to tease, but the guy missed his humorous intent.

“I’m forty-five, jackass!”

Ian couldn’t help a chuckle. “Nice to meet you, Forty-Five. I’m Ian.”

“For fuck’s sake...”

The guy’s voice sounded much younger than he looked.

Even younger than Ian himself, but it couldn’t be.

It wasn’t the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes or the grey streaks in his unkempt beard that made him look old .

It was something in his eyes, a pale green-brown that must look quite striking in the sunlight.

The look they bore, though... It was dull and melancholic, almost desperate, but in a quiet, bashful way that suggested how hard the man was trying not to look it.

Ian lost his voice for a moment. He had never seen eyes like those — so empty . A pang of guilt made him backtrack on his attitude after the first couple of false starts.

“Let’s start over, shall we? Ian Galloway.

” He stretched out a hand. The man glanced down at it as though he was considering spitting into it, which would have earned him Ian’s absolute respect, but eventually, in an admirable display of self-control, he grudgingly shook it. His grip was surprisingly strong .

“Phil Hanson.”

Ian caught the same tightness he sensed in Phil’s throat reflected into his expression.

That tormented look only enhanced the scruffy attractiveness of his features — features whose attractiveness would’ve been perfectly ordinary and uninteresting if his nose hadn’t been visibly crooked to one side.

“Handsome indeed.”

A red tinge crept into Phil’s neck and up to his ears. “ Hanson .”

Ian’s eyes widened innocently. “Oh.”

His smartwatch bleeped, reminding him he’d failed to complete his route on time, meaning he technically hadn’t earned his post-run treat, but to hell with that.

He wasn’t going to skip his favourite moment of the week just because an American idiot had disrupted his schedule.

Besides, he was kind of intrigued by this guy.

“That should’ve been my finish time,” he announced, tapping the alarm off. He arched an eyebrow at Phil. “You owe me.”

“Excuse me?”

“For running into me.”

Phil scowled. “ You ran into me! You owe me! ”

Ian snickered to himself. Too easy.

“Alright, big man,” he said complacently. “What about a coffee?”

\* \* \*

La Dolce Vita had - hands down - the best espresso in Glasgow, and maybe more people would see it if social media hadn’t glamourised blasphemous horrors like iced lattes and frappuccinos.

He was glad the café wasn’t more popular, though.

He would’ve hated seeing one of his favourite places invaded by hoards of influencers and curious tourists.

La Dolce Vita was for few, selected connoisseurs.

Sandra, the owner, was proud of that. She liked Ian because he loved her coffee and gladly did odd jobs in her café in exchange for a smile and a cup of her special espresso corretto .

When they walked in, Sandra was more than a little surprised to see he was not alone.

Across the ten years he'd frequented this café, he'd seldom brought someone along.

He considered his Saturday morning post-run coffee a sacred moment of bliss and his weekend self had zero tolerance for human interference, save for those few people who had implicit permission to interact with him, if strictly necessary.

Every Saturday he came here, sweaty and dishevelled, was warmly welcome by Sandra's sweet accent, and sat down at the small table by the window facing the park with his beloved coffee, maybe a croissant, and savoured his peace until Sandy kicked him out to make room for the lunchtime customers.



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“Mornin’,” he greeted, awkwardly aware of Sandra’s dumbfounded face. He gave way to Phil and closed the door behind him, clearing his throat as he said: “Two espressos, Sandy, will ye?”

“One decaf, please.”

Sandy blinked, her attention shifting to Phil and then back to Ian. When her eyebrows lifted high above her glasses, Ian knew exactly what she must be thinking and gave her a warning look that deflated her like a disappointed balloon.

“Two espressos,” Sandra echoed, recovering from the shock with admirable aplomb. “Grappa, tesoro?”

“Moonshine?” he translated to Phil, who was studying the place and its old bookshelves stacked with dusty volumes, the mismatched Victorian furniture bathed in the golden light of the chandeliers hanging from the ceiling.

“No, thanks,” he said after quickly checking his watch. A spark of interest animated his expression, bringing up a softness in his features that was almost endearing.

Ian gave Sandra a nod. “Just for me, thanks. Let’s go sit down,” he then told Phil with a peculiar tingle in his stomach.

Phil went straight to Ian’s usual spot and eased himself down into Ian’s armchair with a muffled groan, leaning back into it with a sigh of relief.

“Want me to phone an ambulance?” Ian quipped, earning a one-eyed side eye.

“It was my first run in forever, excuse me for being out of shape. Didn’t really help being crashed into by a fucking ox . ”

Ian took the other armchair with an amiable chortle. “Next time we can try to crack that nose back into place.”

“Nah, man.” Phil shook his head. The ghost of a smile surfaced on his lips and he touched his nose. “This bad boy landed me my better half, I wouldn’t change it for anything in the world.”

The fondness in his tone tickled Ian’s interest. “I’m listening.”

Phil’s smile broadened as he stared ahead of himself. “I was at this country music concert in Nashville with some colleagues. Too much noise, drunk people everywhere... Not my thing, but you gotta go with the flow, right?”

“No,” said Ian and Phil lifted a bewildered look on him. Sandra interrupted them before either of them could say anything, her plump frame taking up half of the nook they were squeezed into.

“Here we go, boys.” She placed the two coffees and two glasses of water on the table, along with a bowl of sugar sachets.

“Thank you, Sandy.”

Phil stared at the water as if not really knowing what to do with it, so Ian picked up a glass and showed him.

“Water first. To clean your mouth.” He took a long sip of cold water, gingerly imitated by Phil, who then grabbed one of the small cups and took a sniff, grimacing at the intense aroma.

“Nothing like your usual watered down mud, eh?” Ian laughed, then grabbed a sugar sachet and threw it at him.

“Thanks.”

“So, country concert.”

“Ah.” Phil poured the entire sachet into his cup and stirred. “There was this jerk harassing a girl at the bar. Bigger than you, if you can believe it.”

Ian grinned over his coffee. “You rescued the damsel in distress?”

“No.” Phil laughed and the subtle winks at the corners of his eyes became more obvious.

“She had no problem fending for herself. I just got caught in the brawl and took an elbow to my face.” He took a cautious sip and shuddered, but didn’t put the cup down.

“That was four years ago, and the girl who broke my nose is now my fiancée.”

Ian sat back, downing his espresso corretto in a go. The grappa burned from his throat down to his chest. Meet-cute stories made him sick, but he was relieved to hear that this guy with so much hurt in his eyes had something good to go home to.

“Bet she got with you out of pity.”

“That’s what I’ve always thought.” Phil leaned back, legs sprawling out as he sank lower in the seat.

There was a tiredness to his body language that lay deeper than physical exertion, as

if gravity had a heavier pull on him, crushing him down.

“Thank you for this, by the way.” He lifted up the cup in Ian’s direction.

“It’s good. Takes some getting used to, but...

” He brought the cup to his lips and gulped down the rest of his coffee, humming in satisfaction.

Ian let out a noncommittal grunt. Normally, he’d have had a clever quip ready on the tip of his tongue, but his wits were failing him.

It didn’t help that Sandra kept making faces at him from behind the counter and mouthing things like ‘He’s cute!

’ or ‘Where did you find him?’ . Thankfully, Phil was facing the other way.

Sandra had elected herself as Ian’s honorary mum after finding out his mother Sheilagh had died when he was a teenager and had been acting accordingly ever since, but after Ian’s latest breakup she’d become apprehensive, constantly reprimanding him for being too cranky and closed off, and while Ian was grateful for her concern, he also kind of missed the luxury of being a stranger who could mope around without being questioned.

He studied Phil while the man was busy checking out a book he’d found on the ground and marked down all those minor details he’d missed: thin lips with a scar right in the middle of the Cupid’s bow; a touch of green in the brown of the irises; pierced earlobes, almost closed off; a pink bracelet peeking out of a cuff of his hoodie.

A deep line ran between his knitted brows while he read random pages, and when he

licked his lips and shut the book closed, Ian was almost startled .

“I should probably go,” said Phil, setting the book down. He pushed up to his feet, not without a mild whimper that snatched a half grin from them both. “Shut up, man.”

Ian held his palms up. “Didn’t say a word.

” Then he stood up to shake the hand Phil was offering him.

Their gazes met and they stilled mid-shake in an odd glitch that had no explanation.

Phil’s eyes bore into Ian’s with a glint that hadn’t been there before and a corner of his mouth quirked up.

Ian mirrored his expression. “Until we run into each other again.”

The curve of Phil’s lips turned into a full smirk that transformed his face completely, leaving Ian staring for way longer than necessary.

Handsome indeed.

“I’ll see you around, old man.” Ian let go of Phil’s hand and stood back.

Phil nodded, his smirk still in place. “See ya, kid.” He waved at Sandra and complimented her for the coffee before pulling his hood up and stepping out into the rain.

Without him, the air in the café seemed more breathable.

Sandy’s gaze immediately zeroed in on Ian, but he cut her off before she could utter a single sound.

“Whatever you’re about to say, it’s a no.”

“But he looks so nice!”

“Aye, bet his fiancée agrees.”

“Oh.”

That was enough to shut Sandra up for that day and the next few days.

Ian went out to run at the same time on Sunday, then again at sunrise every day for the whole week, and never crossed paths with Phil and his haunting eyes again.

All good.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:03 am*

PHIL

The small of his back and his knees ached when he got out of the shower. He did his best to stretch it out, with scarce results. His joints just weren't used to that kind of exertion any more — or any exertion at all, for that matter.

Through the fogged mirror he could see the faint beginnings of a bruise surfacing in his left buttock.

The spot felt hot and tender and slightly swollen.

He should have applied some ice to it, but he was too tired to bother.

All he wanted was some cold grapefruit juice and his couch, but since the former was off-limits, he had to settle for orange.

As he limply leaned back into the cushions with the carton of juice, though, a strange epiphany hit him: he was physically tired, but his mind was uncharacteristically quiet. Clean .

His head fell back, eyes closing to relish the foreign sensation.

It was like catching a whiff of fresh air after being buried alive for months.

He felt better than he had in a long, long time.

This was definitely worth mentioning in his next session with Doctor Raji.

Maybe not all of it. Some details could be skipped, like the fact that he'd almost thrown fists with a stranger for something relatively stupid.

Doctor Raji would accuse him of self-sabotaging yet another chance to get out of his shell, and she would be absolutely right, so he wasn't going to mention the annoying behemoth in their next session.

He chugged down half of the juice while scrolling on Instagram, watching his friends and family carrying on with their lives through a profusion of meaningless posts of beaches, drinks, dog walks...

He didn't like any of them. He didn't like them.

He envied them. Envied a time when he could take pleasure in those trivial everyday things that now felt like a chore.

He'd kill to be able to go out for dinner and see it as a treat.

As of now, the mere idea of doing any of the activities he saw in those posts sounded like a threat .

He'd gone his jog, though. Good enough. 'Baby steps,' Abby always told him, 'you don't need to climb mountains overnight.'

A glimpse of muscles swelling under damp black fabric flashed beneath his eyelids.

Phil's eyes burst open as he almost choked on his own saliva.

He set the juice down, coughing so hard tears welled up in his eyes while desperately trying to catch his breath.



As soon as he managed to regain his composure, a sudden urge to do something — anything — took over him.

There was a cabinet in the small bathroom upstairs whose doors had been assembled upside-down: it'd been driving him crazy since they'd moved in, but he'd never found the willpower to fix it.

But that moment sounded like the perfect moment to finally tackle it.

He'd just finished adjusting the hinges when Abby walked in, hair frizzy from the humidity.

“Hey!” Her smile faltered when she saw the screwdriver in Phil's hand, but then her attention moved to the cabinet and the smile expanded again, ten times wider. “You fixed it!” She was making it sound like he'd extinguished world hunger.

“It's just a cabinet,” he said, tossing the screwdriver into the bag on the ground .

Abby looked like she wanted to argue, but she was smarter than that and just smacked a kiss on Phil's cheek. “Thank you for your service.”

It wasn't ‘just a cabinet’ and Phil knew it. It was the first productive thing, however insignificant, he'd done since the burnout, and that had to count for something. He couldn't wait to tune into his next therapy session with bragging rights .

“How was your run?” Abby inquired.

This time Phil was able to block the glimpse of rippling pecs out of his mind before it could affect him.

“Good,” he said in a tone that he hoped would sound nonchalant. “I managed to go

almost five miles straight and lived to tell the tale. Kinda.”

“Kinda?”

The nonchalance flew out of the window as Phil thought back to the incident. Twinkling blue eyes. That deep voice taunting him.

He shifted from foot to foot, crossing his arms. “I had a little mishap with this other runner. Nothing serious,” he quickly clarified, seeing Abby’s face fall, “but wait until you see the bruise on my ass.”

Abby giggled. “Did you have a Hallmark movie moment with some sexy knockout?”

A hot flare spread in Phil’s stomach. “You could definitely say that,” he heard himself reply. He had not intended to say that, but Abby didn’t notice his fumbling.

“Oh, really?” she teased. “Was she prettier than me?”

Phil snorted. “He definitely had bigger tits than you.”

“Mmm, interesting.”

“More like infuriating .”

Abby’s expression turned from amused to apprehensive. “Please, tell me you didn’t pick up a fight.”

Phil stifled a groan. He’d recently developed anger issues — a common side effect of Seroxat, he’d been told —, which had just added to the list of reasons why he tended to avoid social situations.

“You have no idea how badly I wanted to,” he admitted .

Abby brought a hand to her forehead with a mournful sigh. “ Phil ...”

That old pang of guilt Phil had been living with for months jabbed his chest again. He didn’t deserve someone who cared about him as much as Abby did.

“What if I told you,” he promptly added, “that we had a good laugh about it over a coffee?”

“Really?”

“Yep. There’s this lovely café by the park, La Dolce Vita . We should go some time.”

But Abby wasn’t listening. She had brought her hands to her mouth and looked like she was about to cry. “I can’t believe you actually interacted with someone! Any chance you’ll be seeing this guy again?”

Phil swallowed. The flare in his stomach was back, hotter than before.

No, he didn’t want to see Ian Galloway again, not even from afar.

But Abby looked so proud of him, and so hopeful, that Phil figured it couldn’t hurt to indulge her.

He’d been a terrible boyfriend in the last year, barely present mentally, even less physically, and Abby had been nothing but a supportive angel to him, sticking with him through all his shit without ever asking for anything in return.

If he could give her just a crumb of solace, he would.

“Could be,” he said with a shrug. Good answer: vague, noncommittal. Worked for everyone. It was definitely worth the light Phil saw spreading across Abby’s features.

“I know this is hard for you, okay?” Abby took his face between her hands, the pads of her thumbs stroking his jaw.

“I don’t want to force you, but... Maybe don’t look a gift horse in the mouth?”

” She looked up at him with those Bambi eyes of hers.

“Promise me you’ll be nice if you run into this guy again. ”

There wasn’t much Phil could do to resist that pleading look. If he wasn’t willing to try for himself, he had to do it for Abby.

“Sure.” He tilted his head impishly. “I’ll buy him flowers and take him out for dinner.  
”

“Phil!”

“Okay, okay,” he laughed, startling himself. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed .

Abby looked shocked, too, but in a good way. She held up her little finger in front of him with an encouraging smile. “Pinky promise?”

And at this point it just came naturally to Phil to hook his own little finger around hers and promise that, starting tomorrow, he was going to try and be a better version of himself.

\* \* \*

Holding up the promise was easier than expected, because through the whole week Phil didn't even need to make an effort.

He went out every morning around 9, ran his five miles, popped into La Dolce Vita to grab a quick decaf espresso, then rushed home feeling galvanised and regenerated. No Scottish beefcakes in sight.

When, on Wednesday, Abby asked if he'd seen Ian again, an innocent lie rolled out of Phil's mouth before he could stop it.

"Yeah, we're starting to hit it off. He's not as bad as I thought."

"See?" Abby beamed. "I told you things would be looking up!"

Phil had trouble falling asleep that night, harrowed by his own insincerity.

He wanted to believe it was for the best, that there was nothing wrong with wanting to make it less distressing for Abby to leave for her business trips, but Thursday came and another little lie slipped — 'Yeah, Ian showed me a new route today' — and another one on Friday — 'I'm keeping up just fine with his pace' — and on Saturday morning Phil woke up feeling like crap after a night of restless tossing and turning, that old impression that something was missing stronger and more debilitating than ever.

When he went to the bathroom, he cringed at the state of himself: puffy eyes, dark circles around them, worse than usual. He let the water run until it was ice-cold and washed his face several times, hoping it would take away some of that ghastly air he had. Predictably, it didn't do much .

Abby was in the master bathroom, buried neck deep in mint-scented bubbles that filled up the tub to the brim. She had a towel around her head and her eyes closed, but

one eye cracked open when she sensed Phil's presence.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

A foot lifted out of the water and dragged sultrily along the border of the tub. “Wanna join?”

‘No,’ Phil thought way before his automatic response to that kind of question kicked in and he apologised one more time for not being in the right mood for that .

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:03 am*

He'd been warned that Seroxat often caused a decrease in libido and arousal, but it hadn't made much of a difference to him: he'd already been there before the meds and the burnout.

Perks of untreated depression, and now, apparently, treated depression.

If he'd barely cared about sex before, now the thought of it almost annoyed him.

Sometimes he feared he'd never be able to feel sexual desire again and it crushed him, not so much for his own manly pride, but because Abby deserved a future husband who could take care of her and fulfil her needs, but the more days went by, the more he believed he couldn't be that man for her. Not any more.

"Your loss," said Abby waving him off, no trace of disappointment in her sweet, girly voice. "Breakfast might still be warm if you hurry up."

"Thank you." He smiled with a heavy heart and trudged downstairs.

He wasn't hungry, but ate everything he found waiting for him because the very least he could do was show some gratitude for Abby's hard work.

Back upstairs, he found his running clothes, still warm from the dryer, splayed out on the bed, waiting for him.

He sighed. He didn't feel like running, but he knew that if he skipped one day he'd likely relapse into his apathetic lethargy and he couldn't ruin what little progress he'd achieved, nor Abby's expectations.

He could tell from the very first mile that his body wasn't really into it.

The sound of his own feet dragging against the ground irritated him to the point he decided to walk, and even that wasn't great.

The weather was a tad better than the week before, overcast but no rain, and some shy blades of sunlight even made an appearance here and there through the clouds.

It was a perfect day for running, if only Phil hadn't felt so sick inside.

A light cramp in his calf gave him an excuse to slump down on the rim of the fountain.

The very moment he touched the stone he doubted he'd be able to get up any time soon.

He bent down to grab the tip of his foot and stretch the cramp out.

There had been a small but significant improvement in his mobility since he'd started stretching regularly.

Just two months ago he wouldn't have been able to do any of that without embarrassing himself.

He rubbed the tense muscle and after a couple of minutes the cramp dissolved, meaning his excuse to pointlessly sit here also dissolved.

“Waitin’ for me, Handsome?”

That voice...



That damn voice whose deep, warm timbre spread goosebumps of vexation all over his arms. He turned back, finding Ian standing behind him in a black t-shirt that was surely too snug to be comfortable and a half smirk plastered on his face.

Phil sprang to his feet, all demotivation wiped by a sudden burst of energy that ignited his body and mind alike.

“You’re late,” he quipped, so readily that Ian let out a muffled laugh through his nose. His smirk, however, didn’t waver.

“We had an appointment? Must’ve slipped my mind.”

He was clever, Phil had to give him props for that.

Quick wits, wry humour. Remembering his promise to Abby, he wondered if meeting Ian again was a sign.

There was no harm in trying: if it didn’t work out, he could walk out of this with his head up high and his conscience clean. He had to do this. For Abby.

“Do you have a minute?”

Ian scowled. “What’s up?”

Phil sighed, passing a hand over his mouth as he sought the right words.

“I kinda lied to my fiancée about our encounter last week. ”

Ian’s perplexity grew. “What exactly about that required lying?”

Phil needed to sit down again. Confessing his personal troubles to a stranger wasn’t

on today's agenda.

"She's been nagging me about making friends since we got here." He pressed his lips together and another sigh escaped through his nose. "I may have told her we've become running buddies for her peace of mind."

"There are worse lies to tell," Ian commented, looming above him. Phil didn't dare to look at him.

"I've never lied to her before. I feel... dirty."

"Then don't lie."

"I can't! Her job requires frequent trips to London and she doesn't..." Phil trailed off, burying his face into his hands. He had to give Ian something if he wanted him to understand. "I'm on antidepressants."

"Ah." Ian's head tilted knowingly. "Got you there."

"I think she doesn't trust me to be alone with myself." Phil eyed Ian guiltily and received an unexpected sympathetic nod in return.

"She needs to know someone's got your back."

Phil blinked. That was a much better phrasing than 'She wants someone to keep an eye on me'. He could tolerate that — someone having his back. He'd never been one to rely on others, but, then again, he'd never fallen this low before.

A foot poked his shin. "So?"

Phil glanced up: Ian was staring at him with a cocked eyebrow.

“So what?”

“Let’s do this runnin’ club thing.”

No fucking way , Phil wanted to reply, but his conscience refrained him.

It probably wouldn’t last, as Ian was positively a much better athlete than Phil was, but they could give it a shot, if only to spare Phil the burden of lying to Abby.

Worst case scenario: it’d actually work out and perhaps he’d finally get back in shape. Win win.

He locked eyes with Ian and a shiver coursed down his spine. The man had a hand stretched out to him, a hint of dimples at the edge of his beard. Much to his own amazement, Phil took it .

“Just running,” he stressed. “No talking.”

Ian’s dimples deepened. “Your lungs can’t handle both?”

“You know what? Never mind.” Phil tried to pull his hand away, but Ian chuckled and yanked him to his feet instead.

“Off that flat arse, old man. I’ve still got three miles to go.”

“ My ass isn’t —” Phil bit his tongue. He wasn’t going to fall for this guy’s antics. He could be the bigger man. Figuratively. “Whatever. Let’s just go.”

“You sure you can keep up?”

“Fuck you.”

“At least buy me a drink first.”

Phil scoffed to mask a laugh. He kind of liked this guy’s humour. Not that he’d ever admit it.

“What will a coffee get me?” he quipped back, and this time it was Ian’s turn to scoff.

Phil chalked up a point for himself.

\* \* \*

Entering La Dolce Vita again was like walking back into a dream etched in Phil’s senses rather than his memory: the smell of wood and dust typical of old libraries mixed with the aroma of fresh coffee brew, the soft light, the clinking of the ceramic cups Sandra was stacking on the rack above the espresso machine...

The sense of familiarity it gave him was a mild shock.

“Welcome back!” Sandra cooed as soon as she saw Phil. She abandoned her cups to rush to the counter.

“Same as last time?” Ian asked Phil.

“Yes, please.”

Sandra placed an elbow on the counter and leaned forward conspiratorially. “Am I to expect you boys every Saturday?”

“Maybe more,” said Ian. “If Phil can get his arse out of bed a bit earlier during the week.” He gave Phil a solid pat on the back.

“Name the time and I’ll be there,” Phil grumbled as Ian nudged him to move forward.

It was a busy morning and the cosy table by the window was taken, much to Phil’s disappointment, and the only spot available was a tiny table in a secluded corner with an equally tiny semicircular sofa that forced them to sit elbow by elbow.

Ian was struggling to accommodate his legs. “Bit tight, eh?”

“It would be perfectly comfortable if there weren’t so much of you.”

“Someone’s jealous.”

“I’m too concerned about keeping myself together on the inside to give a fuck about what I look like on the outside.”

Phil instantly regretted his burst of honesty. It wasn’t like him to overshare, especially with a stranger. Not that he talked to many strangers in general. He turned to Ian, mortified by the amount of self pity that had seeped into his words, but Ian didn’t seem uneasy.

“Keep working on the inside,” he said. “The outside’s doin’ alright.”

“I can’t tell if that’s an insult or a compliment.”

“Both. Don’t sell yourself short.”

“Jesus.” A weird sensation coiled around Phil’s sternum and spread to his throat, tingling in his ears.

He tried — he really tried not to give in to it, but there was no controlling it: it bubbled up from his chest and broke out without his permission, a genuine, hearty

laugh that cleaned up something inside him on its way out, like water washing away a clot of grime.

It was like a noose had just loosened its grip around his neck.

He could still feel the mark it had left in his flesh, but that was nothing compared to the amazement of breathing again.

Ian's face was a mixture of mirth and disbelief. "It wasn't even that funny."

"It wasn't," Phil had to concur. "God, I hadn't laughed like this since—" His mouth shut. He couldn't remember since when. Couldn't remember the last time he'd let out a laugh that hadn't been a polite ruse.

Ian waited for him to finish the sentence; when it became obvious it wasn't going to happen, he asked: "Perks of the pills?? "

People usually walked on eggshells when Phil's depression came up.

They were embarrassed and dismissive, eager to avert the conversation to less uncomfortable topics.

Even Phil's oldest friends hadn't really known how to behave around him after his official diagnosis, as if just talking about his 'condition', as they called it, could somehow make it worse or trigger some negative reaction.

Getting asked about it so straightforwardly was refreshing.

It made Phil feel less like a broken toy and more like an actual person.

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“My shrink calls it SNRI-induced apathy,” he answered just as straightforwardly.

He pursed his lips, raising a cynical glance on Ian.

“I call it ‘these drugs took the suicidal thoughts out of my head, but also the taste out of my life’ .” Ian pinned an unreadable stare on him. “Sorry, too much information.”

“Did that laugh give you a bit of taste back?”

Phil couldn’t help the smile that spread far higher than his facial muscles were used to as he heard himself reply, both baffled and amazed: “It did.”

His gaze met Ian’s. Phil detected some kind of elation in the way those blue eyes weighed on him. Gentle. Kind. Understanding .

Phil’s stomach swooped. He felt warm — warm everywhere. Even inside. Especially inside.

“Here we are, guys. Sorry for the delay.”

A young woman broke into the bubble of silence that had formed around Phil and Ian. She deposited two coffees, two glasses of water, and a sugar bowl on the table, plus a small plate with some biscuits on it. “On the house,” she told them, her smile broadening as it lingered on Ian.

“Thanks, Anna.”

Phil waited for her to leave, then pulled a cup to himself. “She likes you,” he commented casually while pouring half a sachet of sugar into his coffee. He studied Ian’s reaction, or lack of thereof. All he got was a side eye.

“She’s twenty-five .”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“I’m thirty-seven .”

“So what? My girlfriend’s ten years younger than me.”

Ian shook his head. “I have nothing in common with a twenty-five-year-old.” He took his water, downed it in a gulp. “We’d bore the shit out of each other.”

“Or maybe she’d get you out of your comfort zone.”

“Don’t think so, mate.” Ian put the glass down and picked up his espresso. “There’s a reason it’s called a comfort zone: leaving it makes you uncomfortable . Dunno about you, but I’m too smart to make myself uncomfortable intentionally.”

Phil stirred his sugar, focusing on the grainy texture grinding under the spoon.

The cogs in his brain were fighting to elaborate on what Ian had said.

He could see the sense in it, he agreed with the reasoning, but he remembered his life before Abby: just himself and his books, his apartment. No social life. No friends.

A sad, lonely life.

His brow furrowed. With hindsight, he couldn’t remember ever seeing his life as sad



and lonely before he started dating Abby.

“So, Phil...” Ian took a biscuit. “What brought you to Scotland?”

Phil had his cup halfway to his lips when he noticed the second glass of water, still full next to Ian’s. He drank that first.

“I had a nasty burnout last spring,” he said. “I was strongly advised to take it easy for a while, go somewhere quiet where I could ‘reconnect with myself’ and shit like that.”

“And Glasgow is somewhere quiet ?”

“Compared to Chicago? Backwater country village.” Phil tasted the espresso: still too strong, but he managed not to grimace this time. “Abby was born here, has a nice apartment in Partick.... It was the most sensible place to go.”

Ian chewed pensively on his biscuit. A crumb got stuck in the beard on his chin; Phil couldn’t stop thinking about brushing it away. “Has it helped?” Ian enquired. “Movin’ here.”

The crumb fell, releasing Phil from his stupor. He had to concentrate to remember the question.

“Abby’s happy. ”

“Not what I asked.”

No, it wasn’t, was it?

“I’m... doing okay, I guess.”

“You miss your old life?”

‘No’ was the answer Phil’s mind automatically supplied.

His old life of big public events, parties, barbecues, weekend trips...

He didn’t miss the hectic rhythm of any of that.

The truly good thing about moving to Glasgow was the sweet, unconditional peace it had granted him.

Abby had some old friends she was catching up with and making new ones at work, at the gym...

She could make friends anywhere in no time, even at the grocery store.

Her bubbly spirit didn’t know rest and none of her habits had changed from Chicago to here, because Abby had an innate superpower Phil had never had, would never have, and deeply envied: resilience.

“It was a frantic way of living,” he said earnestly — way more than he’d ever been, even to himself. Saying it out loud felt like dropping a massive boulder he’d been carrying on his back for years without a reason. “I’m a writer, you know? A quite successful one. I don’t mean to brag—”

“Didn’t think you were.”

Phil’s cheeks relaxed into a small smile.

“I love writing, but in the last couple of years I’ve realised I don’t love being a writer.

Not sure it makes sense.” He cast Ian a wary look.

Ian stretched an arm along the back of the sofa, sprawling out as far as his legs allowed him.

Their thighs touched. The tips of his fingers skimmed Phil’s back and a shiver ran down Phil’s spine.

“Writing is a passion,” he said. “Being a writer is a job.”

That was exactly it, spelled out more clearly than Phil himself had ever managed to. Beaten at his own game.

“The job was all about showing up and smiling for an audience. Lots of ass licking, too. I’m not cut out for that.

I rolled with the punches because I thought I’d grow into it.

Spoiler alert: I didn’t.” He clicked his tongue, annoyed by his own weakness.

“Does it sound ungrateful if I say it feels good to have pulled the plug on it?”

“No. ”

Phil laughed. Ian wasn’t a man of many words, and yet a single syllable spoken by that rough voice was enough to quench the guilt plaguing Phil’s conscience.

“I’m still struggling to find my footing,” he went on, much less despondently. “I don’t know how to go back to who I used to be... before .”

“You got money problems?”

“No. My books sell well, I have a steady income from renting out my apartment in Chicago, and even if I didn’t, Abby wouldn’t hesitate to make a kept man out of me. Why’d you ask?”

“You can afford to heal on your own terms. Maybe instead of tryin’ to go back, you should focus on movin’ on.” Ian pushed the plate of biscuits in front of Phil. “Just an idea.”

Phil wasn’t a sweet-tooth nor a food enthusiast, especially since starting the medication, but the biscuits had an inviting buttery smell, so he leaned onto the table with folded arms and picked one up, rolling it around between his fingers.

“Wow, that was... really deep.” He turned a touched look to Ian, and for a moment everything went quiet and still.

Then Phil popped the biscuit into his mouth, smirking sardonically as Ian’s massive chest started shaking with a soundless laugh.

“Shut up and finish the coffee before it gets cold.”

\* \* \*

It was way past midday when Phil got home. He expected Abby to be angry, or at least worried, as he’d only noticed the notifications of her two voice notes on his smartwatch when he reached their front door.

The spicy smell he found upon entering suggested Abby had ordered Indian takeout for lunch — one of Phil’s favourites.

“I’m back!” he announced. He followed the clattering noises coming from the kitchen. “Abbs? Sorry, I lost track of time...”

Abby was emptying the dishwasher with AirPods in her ears, swaying her hips to the rhythm of something that sounded like a Lady Gaga hit Phil couldn't name. She wasn't startled when he touched her arm, nor did she admonish him for being so late.

"You look satisfied!" she exclaimed instead, taking in his ruffled hair and sweaty clothes.

"It was good," he said sheepishly. He hadn't expected Ian to take him by his word and actually challenge him to show up for an early run twice a week in addition to what apparently now was their Saturday run .

So now Phil had a 5 AM alarm set for Mondays and Thursdays, the first real appointment he'd committed to since arriving in Scotland, and he wasn't even sure how it had happened.

Abby was, of course, ecstatic to hear that.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to your new playmate?" she asked when they sat down to eat.

Phil was starving. The quick shower had brought out a soreness in his muscles, but at the same time he felt energised, as though the exertion had recharged him rather than tired him out.

"Ian isn't very social," he said, wolfing down three forkfuls of rice in a row. He didn't know why that remark put a smile across his mouth.

"Of course it's another lone wolf!" Abby poured herself some red wine, then switched to the water jug to pour some into Phil's glass. "You could invite him over for dinner. Just the three of us."

Phil couldn't object that he'd only spoken to the man twice, because he'd let Abby believe they'd been running together on a daily basis for over a week — which still didn't sound nearly enough to have someone over for dinner, to Phil — but Abby had entirely different friendship standards.

"I'll try," he promised. The bright side of this was that, if Abby met Ian, there was hope she'd stop nagging Phil about his asociality.

"What does he like?"

"Uh... Italian?"

"Oh, brilliant! I can ask zia Bruna if she can make us lasagne! Make sure he has no intolerances."

"I will. "

Phil was dumbfounded by how smoothly he was answering questions he wasn't even listening to. The situation was escalating way too fast. At this rate by the time he and Abby got married he'd be standing at the altar with Ian as his best man.

The most staggering thing was that, all in all, he didn't completely hate the idea.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:03 am*

IAN

I an Galloway wasn't fond of surprises, curveballs, or anything unanticipated in general.

He prided himself on being a reliable man, a reliable worker, and in return he expected the world to show him the same courtesy.

Plans needed to be stuck to, timetables respected, promises kept.

It was a simple ground rule that had always helped keep his stress levels to a manageable minimum.

This was why he couldn't fathom how on earth he'd ended up befriending a guy who'd quite literally crashed into his life out of nowhere

It was unclear even to Ian himself how the situation had unfurled: there had been an incident, a few nearly heated exchanges, and then he'd found himself sitting in Sandra's café with this complete stranger like it was normal for him to share his sacred Saturday espresso with just about anyone.

The truth was that Phil had caught him off guard.

Ian had grown up collecting stray animals, often injured, from the streets, and as soon as Phil had lifted his belligerent frown from the ground Ian had seen the same dismay of a bird caught in a storm in his eyes, the instinct of fighting to stay alive hanging on a thinning thread of soul-deep tiredness.

But Phil carried his inner exhaustion with a sprinkle of self-deprecating humour that had made him inexplicably likeable to Ian, even though after two weeks of regularly running together they still liked to pretend they couldn't stand each other.

The 'no talking' rule hadn't lasted long.

They enjoyed talking to each other, whether it was for teasing purposes or serious conversations.

What Ian truly appreciated about Phil was that he didn't wallow in self-commiseration: he spoke openly about depression and the eerie thoughts it could put in your head, about his struggles with therapy and healing, and Ian's respect for him had only grown when he'd realised how much of that determination to pull through came from Phil's devotion for his girlfriend.

"Still with me, Handsome?" he asked, glancing to his side.

"Just because I'm quiet, doesn't mean I'm struggling!" Phil panted. His face was flushed and sweaty, but he was keeping up. He had the stamina of a practised runner, even though his breathing wasn't as smooth as it once must've been. Nothing a couple of months of training couldn't fix.

Ian wasn't used to small talk, anyway: he worked in silence, had his drinks in silence at the pub, even when he was watching football with his fellow Celtic fans.

But Phil's slow, calm voice and his intelligence made him a pleasure to listen to, even when they disagreed on a subject.

"You've got somethin' on your mind when you go quiet like that."

"I tend to zone out when I'm thinking."



“Don’t think too much, it’ll give you more wrinkles.”

“I think you’re jealous of my wrinkles.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“They give me a sophisticated charm. While all you have is your lame two-hundred-seventy pounds of beef.” He skimmed a meaningful look down Ian’s body as they crossed the street towards the park .

“Twenty stone, actually,” Ian rectified, for the sake of accuracy. “That’ll be two-hundred and eighty pounds of beef for you.”

Phil let out a choked snort.

They sprinted into the park for the last couple of miles of the day.

They’d been graced by some sunlight lately and everything was lush and bright green, the last vestiges of summer before autumn.

Phil went silent again for a long while.

They stopped at a fountain to drink and freshen up before going to the café.

Ian was crouched to wash his face when he heard Phil sigh above him.

“Abby wants to meet you.”

Ian pulled himself up, wiping his face with a sleeve of his hoodie.

“One dinner, that’s all I need,” said Phil, forehead creased up in an imploring

expression. “Think you can pretend you like me for a couple of hours?”

Ian, whose social skills were limited, to put it mildly, didn’t know what to say. He was curious to meet Abigail, but didn’t want to lie in her face. Unfortunately, he didn’t want to let Phil down either.

“Best I can do is ten minutes.”

A side of Phil’s mouth quirked up. “Still longer than I can pretend to like you .”

Ian chuckled low in his throat. Every time Phil countered him, his irritation dwindled a bit more, submerged by a warm wave that always caused him to lose track of the conversation for a split second.

Go on , a hungry voice inside him wouldn’t stop whispering.

Keep running that mouth. It had gotten so bad that even losing the upper hand at this verbal sparring was a pleasure.

Phil bent down to drink, then rubbed a wet hand over his glistening face. “Do you take bribes?” he enquired, glancing up at Ian.

“What’s on the table?”

Phil put a hand on his knee to push up to his feet. “Authentic home-made Italian meal,” he groaned. “Red wine included.”

“Deal.”

Phil’s jaw fell. “Really? That easy?”

“I was willing to sell myself for a slice of frozen pizza. ”

“Whore.”

Ian felt that warm flare again. He pushed it away the same way he pushed Phil away from the fountain, but, unlike Phil, who indulged the nudge and jogged off towards the main path, the warmth stayed there, rooted in Ian’s chest. Immovable.

Glasgow hadn’t looked so crowded in weeks: people were coming out of the woodwork to take advantage of what would probably be the last sunny Saturday of the season and, as expected, the outside tables of La Dolce Vita were already taken when Ian and Phil arrived.

As they reached the zebra crossing, Ian spotted something that made him take a step back. Phil shot him a questioning look.

“Better go somewhere else today,” Ian muttered.

“What’s the problem?”

“My ex.” At one of the tables on the other side of the street, a couple of lovebirds were sharing breakfast under the sun. They looked perfect together: him, tall and handsome, and her, pretty and confident. Made for each other.

Phil checked them out and let out a whistle. “Damn, she’s hot.”

“The other one.”

“Oh.” Phil looked again. “Damn, he ’s hot.”

Ian cast him a wry chuckle. He was over Jamie, but the scars remained. He wasn’t

particularly keen on crossing paths with him, especially if he had that kind of company.

Phil studied the merry couple, then Ian again. “Bad breakup?”

“See the ginger? Her name was basketball practice before he grew the balls to tell me about her.”

“That’s vile .”

Ian shrugged. “At least he was honest. Eventually. I just don’t think I’m ready to deal with all their lovey-dovey shite just yet.”

Phil hummed pensively. Ian was about to drag him back into the park, but he felt a strong grip around his wrist pulling him back. Phil’s hazel eyes were ablaze with determination when his fingers intertwined with Ian’s. An impish grin tugged at his lips. “Let’s throw it back in his face. ”

It wasn’t hard to guess what he was plotting. His hand was warm and firm in Ian’s; he looked excited, like a child who was proud of his mischief, and that genuine excitement infected Ian as well.

“Leave the talking to me. If you want to say something: short, blunt sentences. Look at me, not him.”

“Quite the schemer, eh?”

“It’s my job. Trust me.”

Ian arched an eyebrow at him. “I do.”

The flush on Phil's face spread down to his neck.

They crossed the street hand in hand. As they approached the café, Phil muttered: "Pretend I just said something hilarious."

Ian didn't need to fake his amused reaction. It was ridiculous for two grown men to be doing this over something so stupid, but it was all worth it when walking past the happy couple a surprised voice exclaimed, " Ian? "

They halted, looking around as though they had no idea where the voice had come from.

"Ah, Jamie." Ian offered the gaping man a condescending nod as Phil let go of his hand to circle his waist with an arm; Ian's arm moved spontaneously around his shoulders. "How's it going?"

But Jamie wasn't looking at Ian. He was transfixed on Phil, who was grinning so besottedly Ian nearly lost it. Phil was a guy who didn't go unnoticed, even more so now that he had this dishevelled air adding to his charm, and definitely knew how to seduce an audience with his presence.

Jamie licked his lips; his Adam apple bobbed. "Good, I'm... good." His gaze shifted to Ian. "You look..."

Phil swiftly placed a hand on Ian's chest. "We're gonna be late for lunch if we don't hurry."

"Yeah, yeah." Ian adjusted his arm around Phil and offered Jamie and his girlfriend, whose name escaped him, an apologetic smile. "It was nice seeing you, J. Have a good day."

On the way into the café, Phil's hand casually slipped into the back pocket of Ians' jeans.

"They're still looking, play along. "

"You didn't have to squeeze ."

"Squeeze what ? It's all steel!"

Despite Phil's tone, Ian suspected it wasn't entirely an insult. He stalked off to their usual table by the window, trying to keep his cool. It wasn't every day that he found someone intellectually stimulating and fun.

No one came to take their orders: Sandra and Anna knew their habits by now and shortly after sitting down they already had their coffees laid out on the small table.

Ian grinned inwardly watching Phil add sugar to his cup: he'd gradually cut down to half a sachet and could now handle his espresso quite decently, although his microexpressions were still as comical as ever.

Phil raked his hair back as he stirred the sugar and a pattern of veins surfaced up his forearm, the sleeves pushed back to the elbows.

A pink bracelet stood out among the dusting of pale hair.

"I really like this place," he observed after downing his water. "I always tell myself I should get my laptop out and spend an afternoon here, see if I can get some words down..."

"Then do it."

“I don’t know...” Phil rubbed a hand behind his neck. “Since starting the medication, I haven’t been able to... to feel properly, you know?”

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:03 am*

Ian didn't know , nor could he imagine what it must be like. All he knew was that it sounded awful.

“How long is the treatment supposed to last?”

“Until I feel better. So maybe forever.” Phil exhaled a colourless laugh. “What’s the point of being alive if the only thing keeping me going is a stupid pill?”

“A stupid Phil ,” Ian corrected. “It was a good one,” he protested when the object of the pun pierced him with a scowl that may or may not be tainted by a trace of mirth.

“You could’ve gone down the easy route,” he insisted.

“Instead you chose to fight. You , not the pills. The pills do their job because every morning you wake up and choose them over giving up. Quit being such a cunt to yourself. ”

Phil laughed — heartily, this time. “Getting my ass handed to me by a surly Scot wasn’t on my bucket list.”

“Get used to it.” Ian made a pause, then remembered what had sparked the debate in the first place. “Give it a bash — the laptop thing. What’s the worst that can happen?”

“Nothing, I guess. I’m just really good at finding excuses not to try new things.”

“What happened to getting out of your comfort zone?”



“Smartass,” Phil huffed before cowardly hiding behind his coffee.

“So, this dinner...” Ian slumped back in his armchair and crossed his arms. “Do I need to dress up? Bring anything?”

“Dress however you like and bring...” Phil made a vague gesture. “I don’t know... Dessert?”

“Hm.” Ian would have to ask Sandra to bake him a cake. He wasn’t a great cook.

“Any allergies I should be aware of?”

“Just idiots,” Ian deadpanned.

Phil pursed his lips, nodding sympathetically. “Autoimmune diseases are the worst.”

Ian had a hard time fighting back a snicker. This guy never missed a beat.

They both managed to keep a straight face, but the laughter was right there, in the smug look they shared. A look that was longer and way more intense than necessary.

Ian had the unpleasant feeling that something was slipping out of his hands one inch at a time — something he should be holding on to but couldn’t.

He didn’t want to give it a name, didn’t even want to think about it, but he felt it, the pull of Phil’s gravity drawing him in, towards this man who walked with his personal hell in his pockets and still managed to effortlessly keep up with shameless teasing and quick-witted jests.

“You’re a clever bastard, Phil, I’ll give you that.”.

“Takes one to know one.” Phil held out his cup mid-air; Ian half-heartedly clinked his own against it .

Phil had this glint in his eyes, a light that hadn’t been there the first time they had met. It made him look younger. Stronger .

It made the flare in Ian’s chest warmer.

\* \* \*

He didn’t know how he was supposed to dress for an informal dinner.

Most of his wardrobe was occupied by cheap workwear and workout clothes.

He found a blue pullover that seemed decent and threw it on the bed with his newest pair of jeans and a leather jacket which he hoped didn’t make him come across as aggressive.

He was nervous and couldn’t understand why. Everything was in check: he was as polished as he could get, had the tiramisu Sandra had kindly made for him, and a nice composition of flowers for Abigail.

The West End address he punched into his phone led him to an elegant residential area Ian couldn’t have afforded if he worked around the clock.

He was lucky enough to find a parking spot right in front of number 9 of Fairlie Park Drive at 7 PM sharp.

The place had a brand new Georgian door painted dark green and plump hydrangea bushes filling the flowerbeds at the sides of it; the glossy brass plaque on the wall read: ‘A. Carswell, P. J. Hanson’ .

Ian rang. Seconds later, the door nearly burst open.

“Ian! It’s so lovely to finally meet you! I’m Abby!”

A step back was required for Ian to be able to look the woman in the eye as she shook his hand with a staggeringly powerful grip. She was exactly how Phil had described her: petite, beautiful, and blooming with life.

“Wow.” Bright dark eyes examined Ian head to toe. “Phil wasn’t kidding when he said you’re a unit .”

Ian had never been this close to blushing. He blamed it on Abigail’s candid honesty taking him aback. A unit . Very pleased with himself, he wondered if those had been Phil’s textual words.

He handed Abigail the flowers. She was so small that for a second she disappeared completely behind them .

“Oh, they’re beautiful!” She beamed up at him. “You didn’t have to! Come on in!”

A small hand beckoned Ian inside, to a mouth-watering smell that swept away any remaining doubt about this invitation. Good food was always an unregrettable choice.

“I was starting to think you didn’t exist!” said Abigail as she briskly led the way to the kitchen. Phil was by the sink; he turned around when he heard them walk in, the white t-shirt stretching across the wide shoulders. A lopsided smirk stretched his lips.

“Where are my flowers?”

“My bad. I’ll remember next time.” Ian placed the bag with the dessert on the island.

“This one needs to go in the fridge.”

Abigail pulled a vase from a cabinet and padded out of the room. “Phil, offer him a drink while I find a place for these gorgeous flowers!”

Phil popped the tiramisu into the fridge. He looked good in his casual clothes and his hair neatly slicked back, but not better than he did with a hoodie and messy hair. After folding the plastic bag with millimetric precision, he cast Ian a gleeful look.

“You clean up nice.”

“I know.”

“Son of a bitch,” Phil tittered under his breath.

“You, too,” Ian noted. “Clean up nice.”

It was a shameless understatement.

Phil’s beard, which had been unkempt since they’d met, was finely trimmed, short enough to reveal the pale skin beneath and a sharp jawline. His hair was shorter, too, with an undercut that suited his fine features. If he was attractive before, now he looked straight-up dashing.

Ian gulped, but his mouth was dry. The kitchen was hot and way too small for his taste. He shrugged off his jacket and draped it on the back of the closest chair, pushing the pullover’s sleeves up to his elbows. It didn’t do much.

“Yeah, it’s a little too hot in here.” Phil went to open the window above the sink. “Want something fresh? Wine? Beer? ”

“Water.”

Phil looked gobsmacked, but still got Ian the water he'd asked for. He even threw a couple of ice cubes and a slice of lemon in it.

“Show-off.”

“Peasant.”

Ian took the glass from Phil's hand but forgot about it the moment he met Phil's gaze.

The softness in it caused his brain to short-circuit.

He couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. A raw want punched him, filling him with an unsettling mix of euphoria and sadness.

He had to set the glass down, afraid he might crush it for how tightly he was holding it, but kept his hand around it, because he didn't trust himself to leave his hands unoccupied.

Phil was too close, and his closeness too tempting .

“What a sight for sore eyes!”

Ian and Phil jumped. Abigail was on the doorway, wearing a giant smile, and suddenly they weren't close any more, but three feet apart and staring at the ground.

Fortunately, Abigail's contagious liveliness wiped away the lingering tension in less than a second.

The oven beeped and she rushed to it to take out a fragrant casserole of lasagne that could have fed a family of six.

“I hope you’re hungry, Ian, because there’s a no leftovers policy in this house.” Abigail exchanged a glance with Phil.

“If I wasn’t hungry before, I sure as hell am now.”

They moved to a small dining room where the table was already set.

A sample of the flowers Ian had brought sat in a crystal vase at the centre of it, along with a couple of bottles of wine, a bottle of Pepsi, and a jug of water.

Save for restaurants, Ian had never sat at a table with real linen, let alone with floral decoration.

“We don’t eat like this, normally,” Phil conveyed, reading right through him. “Someone’s middle name is Overkill .”

Abigail laid down the casserole and stood back with her hands on her hips to admire the general presentation. “It’s just nice to be a wee bit fancy sometimes. We don’t have guests every day.”

Her tone was breezy, but it put a heavy hunch in Phil’s back as he sat himself down .

The dinner was as pleasant as the food was good, and the company was even better. Abigail was a formidable woman, sunny and bristling with energy, and unapologetically proud of her successful career in the world of finance.

“I was only twenty-five when I was transferred to Chicago. It’s good to be home.

” She stretched out a hand at her side to lay it on top of Phil’s.

The pea-sized diamond shining on her finger put a bitter taste in Ian’s mouth.

“My only issue is the trips out of town, but knowing Phil can hang out with you if he feels lonely is such a relief!”

“Phil doesn’t feel lonely ,” Phil gritted through his teeth, but half of the comment got swallowed by a phone going off somewhere in the flat.

“You know what I meant,” said Abigail, pressing a kiss to his cheek before shuffling out of the room.

Ian cleared his throat. “Bit much, don’t you think?”

Phil sighed, facing the other way. Half of his food, which had been a meagre portion to begin with, was still on the plate, untouched.

“So we’ll be hanging out while she’s away?” Ian pressed on sardonically. “Remind me again what our plans are? I must’ve forgotten.”

Phil shot him a sideways glare. “It’s just a little white lie to let her get on with her life.”

“I don’t like lies.”

“Yeah, neither do I,” Phil snapped, then his voice dropped to a contrite murmur. “I just don’t want her to fret every time she has to leave because she thinks I’ll be rotting in bed or worse.”

“Is that a legitimate concern?”

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:03 am*

“Some days are harder than others, some are better. It’s just that my idea of better doesn’t coincide with Abby’s idea.

” Phil blew out some air through his nose, as if squeezed from the inside.

“Wherever she goes, she’s the life of the party,” he said.

“She thrives when she’s surrounded by people and activity .

I’m pretty much the opposite. She respects it — always has —, she just...

doesn’t get it. And this means that whenever I seek isolation, she worries it’s getting bad again and I might do something stupid, when all I need is just... a breather.”

Ian understood the sentiment down to the very bottom of his soul, but could also understand Abigail’s apprehension.

“She cares about you.”

“I know,” Phil cut him off. He rubbed the side of his neck, head hanging helplessly.

“I’ve been such a dick to her so many times and she’s still—” His cracking voice forced him to stop and take a breath.

Ian felt for him. He’d have never imagined that so much strength and so much fragility could coexist in the same person.



“She’s engaged to someone who’s a ghost of the man she said yes to.

” Phil’s eyes were vacantly fixed on the table, lost somewhere distant.

“I wish she would just... move on without me.”

Ian could read between the lines: ‘She deserves better, but I’m not selfless enough to leave her.’

It took an awful lot of guts to admit that, if just implicitly.

That wasn’t something you could say in the face of the woman you loved, not when she was so determined to stand by you no matter what.

Abigail was a rare kind of person: loyal through and through, and not out of guilt or responsibility, as Phil believed.

“I’ve known that woman for two hours,” Ian stated, “and can tell that she loves you to the moon and back.”

“Yeah, and because of that she’s stuck with a loser who hasn’t touched her in over a year.”

Abby’s laugh resonated in the flat, muffled and distant.

A laugh full of joy that didn’t belong to someone who was unhappy with their life.

And yet the sound of it shrouded Phil with sadness, adding further weight to the invisible burden hunching his shoulders.

Ian didn’t know how they’d got to this level of intimacy, but Phil baring his most

vulnerable side to him toppled something inside him.

Seeing Phil like this ignited a fierce instinct he'd ever felt before — not for humans, anyway.

An urge to comfort. To embrace and protect .

He poured himself some wine, hoping it'd wash away the bittersweet constriction in his chest. "Have you considered," he said after a swig, "that you might be more important than sex to her?"

Phil's sombre expression said that, yes, he'd considered it, and it wasn't a consolation. The very opposite, in fact.

"This is not what she signed up for."

"And yet she's still here, meaning she accepted the update to the terms and conditions."

Phil reached for his glass, stared sourly at the Pepsi swirling inside it. "I can't become her husband when the best I've been to her in the last two years is a lousy friend."

"That's more than a lot of husbands out there can say."

Phil ducked his head with a silent laugh. "You're a skilled rhetorician." The gaze that lifted on Ian was a pinch less burdened and brimming with that haunting softness again. "Ever contemplated being a writer?"

The only thing Ian was contemplating at the moment was so foolish and forbidden he felt ashamed of himself.

“Nah.” He turned to the wine again, draining the whole glass, but it didn’t make any difference. “I’m just good at yappin’.”

Phil smiled. “That’s what I thought.”

Ian couldn’t bear to look at him. Phil didn’t miss the change in his mood and scrutinised him with a deep crease between his brows, mutely asking what was wrong. Ian was saved by Abby’s return.

“Sorry, it was my mum.” A halo of sunshine spread in the room as Abigail came in. She laid the tiramisù on the table, then took some small plates out of a cupboard behind her “Everything alright here?”

“Peachy,” said Phil with his eyes still glued into Ian’s. He, too, had the look of a deer caught in the headlights, and though the conversation resumed smoothly, Phil’s question still lingered in the air, floating around Ian, begging to be answered.

But Ian didn’t have one, didn’t know why he felt responsible for a man who wasn’t his to care for.

‘But I know it’s happening, and it tortures me. ’

He chased the quote out of his head before the rest of the poem unfolded and made things worse.

An hour later, on the way home, he couldn’t remember what the tiramisù tasted like or what they’d talked about while they ate it. He’d sat there, chatting, conversing, but he hadn’t really been there.

He’d been trapped in his head with thoughts that had no business existing, too weak to ignore them, too stunned to fight them, riddled with guilt and shame that couldn’t

fully overshadow the unnamable warmth dwelling in his chest.

There was a new text notification on his phone when he got home from an unknown number.

When he opened it, his heart sank. Kibble ran to him, meowing sweetly, and demanded to be picked up.

With Kibble nestled over his shoulder, he leaned back against the door and reread the text twice, elation and remorse battling in his conscience.

Everything he couldn't admit he wanted, handed out to him on a silver platter with a blessing .

He felt dirty — a dirty, selfish opportunist, because he barely had any hesitation when he texted back: 'I've got this.'

PHIL

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

He leaned onto the sink with a stifled groan, horrified by his own reflection.

He hadn't looked so battered in weeks. The grey had crawled back into the bags under his eyes, which were blood-shot and swollen.

What a sorry spectacle to wake up to. Though wake up wasn't quite accurate, since he'd barely got a total of four hours of sleep in two nights.

An unknown restlessness had possessed him, replacing his usual flat insomnia with an endless agony of tossing and turning that had forced him to move to the guest bedroom to avoid disturbing Abby.

A double dose of trazodone had been as useful as plain water, but that was the highest dose he could take without health hazards.

He'd tried everything else that usually helped: a snack, a walk, some TV...

All useless. He felt... empty . Like something was suddenly missing and he couldn't tell what.

And it didn't make any sense because, if anything, his life was improving by the day.

He hadn't lost anything... Why would he feel like something was missing ?

He'd been in Glasgow for months and had never felt like this until now — like he was limping, gasping for air.

He managed to push himself through his morning ritual, but it was more challenging than usual: the light was too bright, the water too cold, his throat too dry to swallow the pills.

Shuddering at his own reflection, he heard the echo of a gravelly voice calling him Handsome in a tone that over time had lost part of its playfulness, sounding less and less like a joke and more like... He didn't know what to call it.

He could've used some of Ian's mockery right now, if only to find some motivation to kick himself into gear. Spite was a miracle fuel. But Ian wasn't here now, and it was probably for the best, because Abby hadn't stopped gushing about him since Sunday night.

"He's a delight!" she'd chirped right after Ian had gone home. "And so good-looking! You didn't mention he was so handsome!"

The remark had made Phil uncomfortably hot.

"Oh, yeah, despicable of me to appreciate someone for their personality," he'd retorted, but the sarcasm had only added to Abby's hype.

"You like him."

"He's... tolerable."

"Is he single?"

"That's very straightforward of you."

Abby snorted. “I could introduce him to Tammy.”

“I’m not sure he’s into women.”

Phil didn’t know why he said that. He was quite positive Ian was into women, as his only objection when being teased about potentially dating Anna had been her age.

The chances he’d find Abby’s cousin interesting, however, were high: Tamara was as pretty as Abby, just taller and a couple of years younger, and she was sharp enough to be a good match to Ian’s wit .

Phil’s stomach churned. He couldn’t stand the idea of someone else bantering with Ian. But even if there was someone else who could hold their own with him, a part of Phil was aware that the natural chemistry he and Ian had had right off the bat had set the bar pretty high.

Not that it truly mattered. It was a mere question of pride.

The other question of pride that was plaguing Phil was his growing desire to get back into writing. Failing would be a humiliation he wasn’t sure he could endure, but he felt strong and vital enough to take a risk.

Telling Abby required almost more courage than the intent itself. She was a big fan of his work, had been since before meeting him, and she, like tens of thousands of other readers around the world, was patiently waiting for a new novel by the P. J. Hanson.

“I’m considering getting a bike,” he said on Wednesday morning over breakfast

Abby stopped mid-chew, lowering the spoon into her porridge. “A bike.”

“A bicycle ,” Phil clarified, then shrugged one shoulder. “I could go to the café with

my laptop, see if I can get something done...”

One of the reasons he liked La Dolce Vita so much, besides the excellent coffee and pastries, was that Sandra’s Italian accent was so much easier to understand than the local Glaswegian.

The woman’s maternal ways were also a welcome plus: Phil couldn’t deny he relished getting special treatment, even when he occasionally showed up without Ian.

“That’s a fantastic idea!” Abby let out a happy squeak, clapping her approval.

Phil knew she was going to carry that joy to work and spread it onto everyone she met.

People were going to assume she’d won the lottery or something, when the lame truth was that her boyfriend had finally gathered the guts to pick up his sorry life again. “Have you seen something you like?”

“There’s this shop near Glasgow Green, caught my eye as I jogged past it the other day.”

“You’re finally getting acquainted with the city! ”

“My local guide is annoying but very competent.” Thanks to Ian, Phil was learning to navigate Glasgow’s streets without the aid of Google Maps. There were a couple more cafés he’d spotted that he was curious to check out.

The reflection startled him. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt curious about something.

“I like the model they have in the window.”



“We should go and get it!”

“We should,” said Phil, but the topic died there, so he put it on the back burner, secretly relieved he had an excuse to put off this dare he’d made with himself.

The next week, however, the day before leaving for London, Abby called him to the hallway and Phil found her posing with the shiny black mountain bike he had seen in Bilsland’s shop window, plus a brand new backpack for his laptop.

An elated grin lit up Abby’s face. “Happy birthday!”

Phil shook his head with a helpless smile. “It’s not my birthday.”

“It’ll be your birthday at some point.”

His birthday was in April, six months away, but that was an irrelevant objection, because nothing could stop Abby when she had a goal, particularly if the goal in question involved helping Phil get back on his feet.

Unable to reject the gift, Phil pulled her into his arms and pressed a kiss to her forehead, squeezing her to himself.

“I love you,” he whispered against her temple. “So damn much.”

Abby hummed, enjoying the hug, then rose on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

Ever since Phil had started growing distant and aloof in the early days of his depression, she had never tried to force any display of affection on him, nor had she ever made him feel bad for not kissing her or touching her the way a partner was supposed to.

She was content with whatever Phil was willing to give her, even when what he gave her was nothing.

“I love you, too, you old fool.”

And Phil held her tighter, wondering why this embrace so full of affection wasn't numbing the sense of emptiness he carried inside .

This is not enough , whispered a cruel voice in the back of his head.

Phil felt sick — not for the appalling thought per se, but because, deep down, he was afraid there might be truth in it.

\* \* \*

On Tuesday morning Phil was up before sunrise to escort Abby to her cab to the airport.

“I want pictures every day,” she demanded with a hand on the door and one on Phil's cheek. “And I expect to see some mud on that bike when I come back.”

“Promise.”

“Don't be too hard on yourself if it doesn't work out right away, okay? We're here to take it easy .”

“I'll see what I can do. Text when you arrive.”

Abby stamped a kiss on Phil's beard. “See you on Sunday.”

Phil stood there in his robe and pyjamas, watching the cab drive away with a strange

melancholy creeping under his skin.

Abby had enough faith in him to leave him alone, unsupervised for days...

He couldn't disappoint her. Dragging himself back inside, anxiety started mounting in his chest. He sensed the beginning of an incoming panic attack when it was just a hint of dizziness and a slightly faster pulse; he reached the kitchen with a swimming head, poured himself some water, and took small sips between deep breaths, which he sucked in through the nose and slowly released from his mouth.

The attack tailed off. Phil gradually regained control of himself and the space around him slid back into focus.

He was hungry, but just putting a bowl of cereal together sounded like climbing a mountain at the moment, so he decided to do what Doctor Raji had recommended he did when he felt overwhelmed: find a small task and reward himself once he completed it.

The small task he chose was changing into proper clothes, which he managed to fulfil despite the extra challenge of climbing up the stairs.

His reward was collapsing on the couch to think about taking the bike for a ride around the neighbourhood, maybe as far as La Dolce Vita , and make the most out of the day, but when the night came all he had achieved was emptying the dishwasher and finally making himself that bowl of cereal for dinner after skipping breakfast and lunch.

Functioning was hard without the moral obligation to meet someone's expectations.

He was careful not to miss any steps of his nighttime routine before going to bed, as neglecting just one out of laziness would make him lose track of all the others.

Like a robot, he washed his face, slapped some moisturiser on, brushed his teeth, folded his clothes, and got his pyjamas from under the pillow.

It felt like everything that had happened between stripping them off in the morning and slipping them back on that night had been so irrelevant he might as well have stayed in bed.

He met his own gaze in the window, tired and dejected, and reprimanded himself for indulging in such dangerous thoughts.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:03 am*

It was still lurking, the apathy that had transformed him into a breathing corpse for months, sucking all the will to live from his soul.

He couldn't fall back into it, not after all the hard work he'd put into scrubbing it off himself like sticky grime.

A wise man had told him ' You chose to fight' and that had reminded Phil of the unimaginable strength he'd managed to summon to get himself through his darkest days.

He couldn't succumb to the demons in his head again.

He wouldn't .

He had the most wonderful fiancé, his runs with Ian, and life was finally starting to taste like something again. He had too much to lose: fucking up wasn't an option.

When he climbed into bed, he felt even more tense than usual.

He rolled to the other side and closed his eyes, bracing for another sleepless night, but the next thing he knew he was in a park at dusk, and Ian was there, fixing the wiring of a lamplight while humming a song to himself.

Shirtless. Dream Phil was reading out instructions to him from a sheet and Ian kept saying 'I don't care about that shit, I follow my gut!

' and Dream Phil insisted rules existed to be followed, while Conscious Phil couldn't

understand the meaning of any of it.

‘Forget about this shit.’ Ian pried the sheet out of Dream Phil’s hands, balled it up, and threw it away in the shapeless darkness. ‘Do things your own way, ye feartie!’

And they were close — dangerously close. And Dream Phil was intoxicated by the heat radiating off Ian’s half naked body, his now empty hands yearning to reach out and...

A stab of sunlight blinded him.

Phil groaned, shielding his eyes. It took him a second to be fully awake, his mind still fogged by sleep. He’d dreamed . He couldn’t remember what, but still. He hadn’t been able to remember any of his dreams in a while. He’d also got a decent sleep, apparently.

Odd.

Awesome, but odd.

Yawning, he pushed himself up, threw the blankets aside, swung his legs over the side of the bed, and froze.

He was hard .

His nails dug into the mattress as he glanced down at his crotch with his jaw hanging open. He hadn’t had a full hard-on in over a year .

His heart jumped in his throat. Shock mingled with elation in the blood pumping faster and faster through his veins.

He knew this had to do with the dream, because he could still feel the arousal it had left behind, but his memory was blank, offering nothing more than vague impressions he couldn't piece together: a park, darkness...

A piece of paper? And heat. A heat that had triggered a desperate want inside him.

A jolt of electricity coursed across his body, pooling right there .

He chuckled, amazed. It was the closest to arousal he'd experienced in ages, and it felt good .

There was nothing left of the sullen man who'd gone to bed the night before when he stepped into the shower. The morning wood was gone by the time he got out, but the elation didn't subside .

He'd just wrapped himself into a towel when the bell rang. Trotting downstairs, he cursed Abby and her skincare addiction: they were getting more deliveries than a mail office. He didn't even check before opening, used to meeting the same delivery guy every time, but it wasn't Boyd from Evri.

"Took you long enough," said Ian's gruff voice.

Phil frowned. "What are you doing here?"

Unfazed by the sterile reception, Ian pulled his phone out of the back pocket of his jeans, cleared his throat, and started reading: " Hey, it's Abby!

Hope you don't mind me stealing your number from Phil's phone.

I'll be in London for a few days. Feel free to pester him whenever you want.

He won't be thrilled, but you're bigger than him .

I'm counting on you. ” He paused, blue eyes dropping to the towel around Phil's hips and then slowly trailing back up in a scorching wake. “Nice outfit.”

Phil's ears burned. Suddenly very aware of how underdressed he was, he held onto the towel as if afraid it might fall off.

It was hard to believe Ian could make him feel so self-conscious when in his old gym group Phil had been the tallest and one of the fittest. Also the most popular among women, but that was irrelevant now.

His abs weren't taut any more, his biceps had lost their definition.

Clothed, he could still effortlessly turn heads, but without clothes he looked undeniably flawed .

“Fuck you,” he sputtered.

“You wish.” Mischief glinted in Ian's look before being replaced by a serious scrutiny. “You eaten?”

Phil was still processing: Ian at his doorstep, looking as striking as ever, the dark hair tied back in a ponytail, while Phil was virtually naked and still very preoccupied with the boner he'd just reluctantly washed away in the cold shower.

“Don't you have to go to work or something?” he groused.

“Not until 9. Oh, by the way.” Ian bent to the ground to pick up something Phil hadn't noticed and handed it to Phil with a shit-eating smirk. “I'm a man of my word.  
”



It was a bunch of flowers. Phil took it by reflex, too baffled to think . Sunflowers and hydrangeas and some minuscule white buds he couldn't name.

“Jackass,” he laughed, but there was a flattered undertone to it. Fresh flowers weren't cheap and, even if it was just a joke, Ian had remembered. He appreciated the commitment to the bit.

Ian tilted his head. “I'm not here to intrude.

Just wanted to check on you. And give you the flowers.

” His smirk ticked up on one side. “Have a nice day, Handsome.” He stepped back to leave, putting up a stoic facade, like a rejected child playing tough.

Phil rolled his eyes so hard they nearly got stuck backwards.

“Oh, for fuck's sake!” He peevishly stepped aside and held the door wide open so that Ian could come in, which he did without the slightest hesitation, leaving Phil standing there with a bunch of flowers cradled in the crook of his arm and Sarif from next door gawking at him while retrieving his mail.

Phil waved at him. “Don't tell my girlfriend.” And then he retreated inside. He tailed Ian to the kitchen. “Make yourself comfortable,” he deadpanned.

Ian glanced back at him. “You're comfortable enough for the both of us.”

“Oh.” Phil had completely forgotten about his state of undress. “Yeah, I should probably...”

“Don't bother on my account.” Ian's attention skimmed down his torso. “I'm not complainin'.”

“That makes a change.”

Ian chuckled, but didn't look away. Phil felt that look in his groin — felt it like he hadn't felt anything in way too long. It spread a heat he had lost all familiarity with, clouding his mind in a way that was almost inebriating. He'd forgotten about this, how good it felt.

“I'm gonna go get changed,” he announced, glad to have an excuse to seek some privacy.

Upstairs, he downed his pills, took his time getting dressed, waiting for the heat to wear off.

When he returned to the kitchen, Ian had tossed his jacket in a corner and was leaning back to the counter, scrolling through videos on his phone.

Phil had brought a vase for the flowers; he placed them on the window sill, where they could soak up the rare sunlight the day had been graced with.

“You didn't have to actually show up, you know?” he noted.

“You told Abigail we'd hang out when she was away.”

“So?”

“So I'm not a liar.” Ian gave Phil a pointed look. What he meant was perfectly clear and absolutely out of the question.

“Oh, no. No, no, no, that's not gonna happen.” Phil made a sharp gesture. He had no idea why he was so averse to the idea: he liked spending time with this man, maybe even a bit too much.

Phil's stomach chose that exact moment to let out a loud growl that earned a snicker from Ian, who headed straight to the fridge and started rummaging around in it.

"What are you doing?"

"You're hungry and I missed breakfast to come see your pretty face. If you're not feedin' us, I will."

That gave Phil's executive dysfunction a much needed kick. He wasn't going to just stand there while someone else made him an omelette or whatever Ian was planning to make with those eggs he'd pulled from the fridge.

"This is my kitchen," he stated firmly. "I do the cooking."

Ian cast a sceptical glance at him, then, with a snort, relinquished the eggs.

"Sit," Phil ordered. Oddly enough, Ian acquiesced, grabbing the closest stool and taking a seat at the counter, hands clasped in front of him.

More than a little bemused, Phil got to work, opting for pancakes, since they were one of the few things he could decently pull off.

Muscle memory kicked in right away; as he gathered the ingredients, he was all too aware of Ian's smug look following him, and once again he had a feeling he'd just fallen into a scam.

But then something else dawned on him, something so mind-blowing he nearly dropped the milk carton.

He was cooking .

Not just shoving junk food or leftovers into the microwave, but actually preparing a real meal starting from scratch.

Stunned, he froze in the middle of the kitchen, grinning at his own hands while trying to remember when it had been the last time he'd cooked for himself.

Months. Likely close to a year. Abby would never believe this. He couldn't wait to tell Doctor Raji.

"Hope you like pancakes," he said, turning back to Ian, who was watching him intently with a hint of dimples just above the line of the beard. "I can make scrambled eggs if you prefer—"

"Pancakes are grand," Ian gently interrupted him. A warm tingle tickled the nape of Phil's neck.

"Coffee?"

"Yes, please."

"Is decaf alright?"

"Aye."

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Ian would have certainly preferred an espresso, but Phil was banned from using Abby's moka , because the first time he'd been near one Abby's aunt Bruna had caught him washing it with soap and apparently for Italians that was a capital sin that fell just below murder and pineapple on pizza.

Phil had his own American coffee machine: for once Ian would have to stoop to drinking 'muddy water' .

He filled up a mug and pushed it to Ian, who was clearly refraining from grimacing the same way Phil had grimaced at his first espresso in La Dolce Vita .

"You sure you don't want some sugar or milk?"

"Positive."

"Guess you don't get to look like that eating sugar, huh?"

Ian must have detected the hue of bitterness in Phil's words, because he said: "You add more protein into your diet and you're a step closer to lookin' like this."

Protein was the last of Phil's problems. It was the vacuum in his soul that had devoured all the willpower that had kept him in flawless shape since his twenties.

He was doing the bare minimum, just because low-intensity workouts were part of his recovery therapy, but his figure was very far from its former glory .

He filled up a mug for himself, avoiding the sugar. "It's too late to salvage this

wreck.”

Ian took a long swig of his coffee, kept it in his mouth for a moment, watching Phil with slightly narrowed eyes, then swallowed.

“Quite attractive for a wreck.”

Phil scoffed, but quickly realised Ian wasn’t just teasing as usual.

“You mean it,” he marvelled.

“‘Course I mean it, ya dick.” Ian’s stern stare left very little room for doubt.

“You find me attractive.”

“I’m sure a lot of folk do. It’s not exactly hard to believe.”

It was , at least according to Phil’s rationality. His dry mouth, on the other hand, begged to differ. He was flattered. This and the look from before were just stroking his starved ego.

The pancakes preparation provided a welcome distraction. Phil sensed Ian’s stare as he cut down some mango to throw into his Greek yoghurt bowl; a couple of the pancakes nearly burned, but, aside from that, for being his first cooked meal in forever, the result wasn’t bad.

“See? Protein,” he said, pointing at the bowl. He offered some to Ian, who gladly accepted. Phil was absolutely indifferent to the white smudge the yoghurt left on Ian’s moustache, so much so he didn’t avoid looking at him until he wiped his mouth.

Ian occupied an awful lot of room. The kitchen, a spacious one for British standards,

had shrunk to the size of a cubicle the moment he'd entered it and, though there was the whole width of the counter dividing them, Phil felt very much like they were pressed together like they'd been that time at the café, only not side to side, but in front of one another, without a safe nothing to stare into.

Because if Phil looked up from his plate, there was a six-foot-five colossus occupying the entirety of his view.

It was like he couldn't breathe properly, as though Ian's bulk wasn't just taking up all the space, but also all the air.

And yet it felt oddly... familiar. Just sitting together in silence, companionably, comfortably, like old friends.

Except they'd known each other for just a few weeks and Phil had never been so at ease with people he'd known for years, if not decades.

With Ian, he felt like he didn't need to adapt his natural behaviour to fit in.

Ian got him and, above anything else, Ian respected him — his true self, not the charming persona Phil had fabricated to deal with the world.

It was surreal — the second surreal event of the day. And it wasn't even 8 AM.

Phil made a lame attempt to strike up a conversation by asking Ian what he was up to for the day, but Ian's brief, flat answers didn't leave much room for small talk, which Phil had never been fond of anyway.

He was simply trained to fill silences, because experience had taught him that people preferred meaningless jabbering to a silence they didn't know what to do with.

Phil happened to enjoy silence. It was refreshing to be with someone who shared his aversion for prattle

“There’s Celtic versus Real Madrid tonight,” Ian began at some point. The plates and the mugs were empty, 9 AM was ticking closer. “I’m going down the pub to watch it. Fancy joining?”

The only sports Phil occasionally followed were basketball and rugby, and sometimes wrestling, and he wasn’t big on any of those.

“I have zero interest in soccer,” he admitted, “but why not? Abby’s a very passionate Celtic fan, I’d have probably watched the match with her if she’d been home.”

“Knew that woman was special.”

“She is. Just a bit apprehensive.”

Just saying that made him feel childish and ungrateful.

Apprehension was the lesser evil when people found out you were depressed, after all.

The worst was when they believed everything going on with you was bullshit.

Phil’s own father had chosen none other than Christmas lunch to inform Phil that having a son who required psychological therapy was an embarrassment.

The exact words had been: ‘What kind of pansy needs a shrink to deal with his own shit? Grow some balls and walk it off like a real man!’ At which Abby had set her cutlery down, wiped her mouth, and amiably told Mr Philip Hanson Senior that he could stick his bigotry up his arse.



Then she'd dragged Phil out of his parents' house for the last time in his life, and neither of them had looked back since.

He told the story to Ian, so that he could understand just how truly special Abby was.

"She's a literal angel. There's just no way to convince her that solitude doesn't bother me. The contrary, in fact."

Ian swirled around the puddle of coffee remaining at the bottom of his mug.

"I assume it's a bit unsettling for her.

" His deep, grazing voice trickled down Phil's spine, leaving goosebumps in its wake.

"You had a buzzing social life with her, and now you don't leave the house...

I reckon what she sees is a man who's lost something...

" A knowing gaze pierced Phil. "Not one who's trying to get something back. "

Phil's jaw fell slack. He, a seasoned novelist, had never been able to spell that out so concisely and efficiently.

Ever since meeting Abby, his life had taken off and he hadn't realised how draining it had been to try and keep up with it until he'd hit rock bottom.

To Abby, the point of recovery was to get back to how it was before the burnout; Phil had different aspirations: after recovering, he was hoping to return to how it was before the cause of the burnout, before that chapter of his life that most people would've called glamorous .

Ian was right.

Ian had been right since the day he'd told Phil he should move on rather than try to go back.

\* \* \*

That night, Ian showed up at Phil's doorstep at 7 in a sinfully tight t-shirt in green and white stripes that made his chest look even larger than usual.

Phil cocked an eyebrow at it. "Couldn't find a comfier size?"

"It was a comfier size," Ian countered. "Twenty years ago."

It was hard to envision Ian as a seventeen-year-old boy, shorter and smaller, maybe a bit lanky — nothing like the handsome devil he was now.

Had he ever looked naive or had he always had that cocky aura?

What did those dimples look like without a beard?

It was less than half a mile from the flat to the pub and, while they walked there, Phil's imagination kept straying back to a younger Ian and what he must've been like.

"There's pictures," said Ian out of nowhere as they turned the corner onto Crow Road. "For the right price."

So Ian was a mind reader now. Phil was tempted to play dumb, but Ian was too smart to buy it, so he asked instead: "What did you look like when you bought that shirt?"

"Tiny. One-eighty soaking wet, if I was lucky. Long blond hair. Still dashinglly

handsome, obviously.”

“Surely not as modest as you are now. Wait, did you just say blond ?”

“Aye.” Ian’s hair was so dark it was close to black. It was hard to imagine it blond .

“Not sure what happened.” He paused, then asked: “What were you like?”

“Twenty years ago or as a teenager?” There was a significant difference. An eight-year gap didn’t seem much now, but Phil was already an adult when Ian wasn’t even of age.

“As a teen.”

“Ah.” Phil scratched the back of his neck. “I guess you could describe me as a scrawny Eminem wannabe. Quite pathetic, to be honest.”

Ian stuffed his hands in his jacket’s pockets with a lenient shrug. “Weren’t we all at that age?”

“I’ll believe you ever looked pathetic when I see those photos.”

“ Lookin’ pathetic and feelin’ pathetic isn’t the same.”

Unarguably true. It made Phil feel better to be reminded that looks didn’t always reflect how one felt inside.

“There it is.” Ian pointed at an old-fashioned pub at the end of the street. Big golden letters on a dark green wooden background spelled The Smiddy . Before pushing the door, Ian turned to Phil: “You sure about this?”

“I’ve been to a pub before, you know? ”

“I’ve had a wisdom tooth removed before, doesn’t mean I liked it.”

Phil felt a smile bubble up from deep in his chest. This was why he was here: to chase this feeling, the peculiar thrill he felt whenever this guy outwitted him and made that smug face Phil was trying so hard not to grin at now.

He gave Ian a shove. “Shut that pie hole and buy me a drink.”

It was already crowded inside, a muffled chatter saturating the air.

Every table was taken, every stool at the counter occupied; many patrons already had one or more empty glasses in front of them.

Ian greeted several people on the way to the counter; the barman waved at him, gesturing him to approach.

“Thought ye weren’t goin’ to show, Galloway! Everyone else is at the match.”

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“I brought a guest.” Ian hooked a thumb in Phil’s direction, who raised a hand in greeting, receiving a nod in return.

“What can I get you? Pint of Tennent’s?”

Phil was about to intervene, but Ian was way ahead of him: “We’ll take two Cokes.”

“Coke!” The barman threw his head back in a boisterous laugh. “Nice one! Two lagers coming right up!”

“Cal .” Ian placed an elbow on the counter, leaning forward. The guy sitting nearby pulled himself aside, looking alarmed. “I said Coke . Unless Phil here prefers something else.” Ian turned back with a questioning look that Phil instantly dismissed.

“Coke’s good,” he said, hoping Ian could see how grateful he was for the backup. “Pepsi, perhaps?”

Cal popped them two bottles of Pepsi; they refused the glasses they were offered and took their drinks to a small booth in a corner that was miraculously empty. When they sat down, Phil noticed there was a reason for that: a hand-written note propped to the menu said ‘Reserved’ .

“Go ahead,” Ian coaxed.

“But it says—”

“It’s reserved for us. ”

Phil took his seat with that simple sound reverberating in his ears.

Us.

Why was he feeling so giddy over a random syllable?

Ian sat beside him and set down the Pepsis.

It wasn’t a good spot to watch the game, unless they both sat sideways, as the screen they had the best view of was at the opposite side of the room.

It was, however, a secluded corner with no immediate neighbours and Ian had conveniently positioned himself between Phil and anyone who might try to squeeze in later.

“Thank you,” Phil whispered.

Ian didn’t bat an eyelid. “What for?”

Phil finally blurted what had been building up on the tip of his tongue for weeks: “Everything.” Ian went unnaturally still, glued to the screen ahead of them, but Phil could tell he had his full attention. “If you hadn’t bumped into me that day—”

“ You bumped into me .”

Phil bit down on yet another grin. “—I doubt I’d haven been able to live up to my good intentions. Running is giving me some juice back... Feels good. And it’s all thanks to you.”

Ian's Adam's apple bobbed. His knuckles paled around the bottle in his hand. "Anytime."

"We should take a pic for Abby," Phil said. He waited for a sign of protest from Ian, but was surprised to feel him scoot closer. Phil turned his phone into selfie mode. Ian had to reach past Phil's back to lean on the bench so that they both fit into the frame.

"Cheer up, old man!" he huffed then, in reproof to Phil's tepid expression.

It wasn't like Phil didn't want to smile.

He was just afraid that allowing himself to smile would expose how unreasonably content he was to be there, in an unfamiliar place crammed with unfamiliar people, next to a guy whose sole presence made up for any discomfort.

He gave it a try, relaxing his muscles so that they reflected how he felt, and watched his features open up on the screen, brightening, emphasising the lines at the corners of his eyes.

He couldn't believe how much he'd aged in just a couple of years.

But then Ian smiled, too, and Phil's perception of himself changed.

He saw past the wrinkles and the grey in his beard, the tiredness in his eyes.

He saw the man Ian called Handsome and for the first time something sank in: there had never been any sarcasm in that moniker.

When he sent the photo to Abby, the arm around him disappeared, slipping away with a brush of fingertips that sent a shiver down his back.

“Say hi to her from me,” said Ian.

Phil obliged and started typing. “You two really hit it off, huh?”

“You’ve got a rare gem, hope you know that.”

“I do,” said Phil. The same sadness that had caught him in the kitchen a few days prior descended on him again, polluting his contentment. “She shouldn’t be with someone like me.”

A glare of disapproval hit him like a slap.

“Abby’s all sunshine and energy, and I’m...

” He glanced down at himself with sagging shoulders.

With him, Abby was like a wild sparrow locked in a cage, and the fact that she loved her cage so unconditionally made everything even harder for Phil, who’d torn all the bars away, hoping the sparrow would just leave and be free, to no avail.

“The first time I considered killing myself, it sounded so logical in my head. It was like... like when there’s a noise that drives you crazy and covering your ears isn’t enough...

You have to kill the source to stop it. In my case the source happened to be...

being alive.” He could still remember the sick sense of elation he’d felt in realising dying was a viable option. “It just... made sense, you know?”

“No,” said Ian. “Makes no sense to me. It gives me chills that it made sense to you .” Phil was used to the tirade that usually came at this point: ‘You have everything a



man can wish for, what on earth are you depressed about?' , 'There's people out there who have real problems' , and so on.

But none of that came. "The amount of pain it must've taken to convince someone as intelligent and educated as you that suicide was a logical step...

I probably couldn't have taken it." Ian made a pause, locking eyes with Phil, as solemn as he'd ever been. "But you did."

It was just three trivial words, but the effect they had was an instant confidence boost that helped Phil sit up a little straighter, lifting some weight off his hunched shoulders.

He had never talked so openly about this, not even with Abby, ashamed, but also afraid she wouldn't understand.

He didn't have this issue with Ian: Ian wasn't influenced by the past, didn't have a Before Phil to make comparisons with. Ian saw him , not the man he'd become.

"I didn't do it for myself. I already felt dead inside, so why not go through with the whole package?

Like... 'Oh, this glass is broken, might as well dispose of it' .

My life felt like that. But then I thought of Abby, and how much she'd suffer if I'd died...

And picked therapy over jumping off a skyscraper. "

Phil's heart was racing. Opening up about his mental illness wasn't his forte, but Ian had never made him feel like he should pretend , and over time Phil's defence

mechanisms had evolved to automatically switch off around Ian, whose presence had the singular power to make any space feel like a safe space.

No shame. No guilt. Just honesty and respect.

And, once again, Ian didn't disappoint him.

"I don't know much about depression, but I know it kills people.

I know it takes a lot of courage and an awful lot of strength to put someone else's pain before your own.

Be proud of yourself." Ian raised his Pepsi, expecting Phil to do the same, but Phil didn't feel like he had anything to toast for.

"She'd have gotten over it. She'd have moved on, found someone else..."

"I don't think she wants someone else." Ian took Phil's hand and placed the bottle into it, coarse fingers urging Phil's to close around the glass. "For the last time: stop being a cunt to yourself ." And then he lifted Phil's hand up to finally get the toast he was after. "Cheers."

Phil shook his head, but his laugh was real this time. Being repeatedly called a cunt by a raging Scot was quite a humbling experience .

The match started and that sense of sadness faded, smothered by the rising excitement in the atmosphere.

Scottish soccer fans were as loud as they were passionate about their teams, which unfortunately meant that soon there were dozens of people screaming at the top of their lungs every other second, making Phil wish his drink was whisky.

After the umpteenth mass scream, he was having a hard time following the game.

He couldn't say he wasn't enjoying it, so far it had been surprisingly entertaining and he loved the energy of these people, but the skyrocketing decibels were giving him a headache.

It wasn't long before Ian picked up on his discomfort.

"Not your thing, eh?"

Phil let out a faint groan. "We could place it right at the border of my comfort zone."

"You could've said no if you—"

"I would have if I'd wanted to."

Celtic scored. The exultation it caused was so deafening The group of young men at the adjacent table jumped up to celebrate, louder than anyone else. Phil flinched before he could control himself.

"Lads!" Ian yelled. "Mind toning that down a bit? My head's killin' me."

The boys looked like they were tempted to just tell him to fuck off and start a fight, but when they took in Ian's size, one by one they docilely sat back down.

Phil glanced at Ian, whose eyes were firmly trained on the match. "We can leave if that headache is so bad."

"I'll live." The light curve that Ian's mouth took was simultaneously infuriating and heart-melting.

Phil felt that surging warmth in his chest again, and this time it was impossible to downplay it as a mere flattered reaction.

A shadow of awareness settled on him like a feather slowly drifting to the ground.

He left it there, sweeping it under a rug of neglect, because he couldn't possibly deal with the depth of it now .

The game wasn't half as boring as he'd feared, albeit not quite as gripping to him as it was to everyone else in the room.

To be fair, he mostly liked it because it gave him a chance to witness how passionate Ian was about Celtic: he tensed when things got concerning, startled up and then deflated at every missed goal, yelled at fouls, and — Phil's favourite part — jumped up and threw his fist in the air with everyone else when the team scored.

Shockingly enough, observing Ian absorbed him so much that the noise faded out of his ears and his head.

In the end, Celtic crushed Real Madrid 4-1.

Ian refused to stay for the celebrations.

“We kicked those cunts' arses, that's all the celebration I need.”

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But Phil knew they were leaving because Ian wanted to drive him away from the mayhem, which Phil couldn't have thanked him enough for, because, as fun as it had been, the sensory overload had drained him.

The cool air of the night was a balm to his buzzing head. He still had the thrumming echo of the noise of the pub in his ears. It felt very different from the dull, numbing static his goodbye party in Chicago had put in his brain. Less harsh. Less overwhelming. Almost bearable.

“Was it too much?”

The low rumble of Ian's voice washed over Phil like a caress, bringing him down from his musings.

“It was alright,” he said without even thinking, surprising both Ian and himself. “I mean it,” he stressed, in response to Ian's sceptical look. “Thanks for telling those guys to tone it down.”

“Someone has to look after you if you won't.”

Phil glitched. He'd expected Ian to joke about it, or playfully mock him, as usual. An open admission wasn't a counterattack he was prepared to take. The shadow he'd swept under the metaphorical rug poked its head out, sniffing Phil's wavering. He kicked it back.

“I can't believe you're such a gentleman under that rough exterior,” he said, only half joking .

Ian snorted.

“You got me flowers, bought me a drink,” Phil counted on his fingers, “almost got yourself in a fight for me, and now you’re walking me home...”

“You’re big enough to get yourself home. My car’s right there.” Ian hinted at a spot ahead of them. Phil realised, much to his own disappointment, that they’d arrived at his door.

They lingered in the middle of the pavement, as if unsure about what to do next — as if ‘Thanks’ and ‘Goodnight’ hadn’t been the most logical things to say at this point of the night.

Thunder rumbled weakly above them; dark clouds had invaded the sky, gathered by the rising wind.

A raindrop fell on Phil’s cheek, one hit the tip of Ian’s nose.

They didn’t move. There was electricity in the air, and it wasn’t due to the approaching storm.

Phil didn’t want the night to end. He felt light and serene and the usual tiredness that crept into his bones at the end of the day was nowhere to be found.

Ian was studying him closely, the pale glow of the lamplights seeping through his dark eyelashes to paint long shadows on his cheekbones.

He had thin lips, like Phil, but while Phil’s met in a straight line, Ian’s upper lip drew a pointed bow in the middle, which gave him a permanent roguish expression that would’ve been annoying if it hadn’t been, much like the rest of the man, so damn endearing.

Ian took a deeper breath and his pecs swelled, making Phil feel like they were locked in a closet rather than standing in a deserted street. Ian was watching him with a wistfulness in his eyes, something unspoken that Phil was drawn to without knowing why or how .

He swallowed.

Ian's lips stretched under the dark beard. "Better go get some kip, old man."

The gentleness of that tone messed with Phil's pulse, stealing a few beats. A yearning he couldn't identify itched beneath his skin. All he managed to get out of his dry mouth was a croaky: "Drive safe. "

"Yes, Mum."

The pinch of irony shook Phil out of his stupor. He blinked, feeling like a bubble had popped around him, shifting the world back into focus. He was able to return the irony almost seamlessly:

"Text when you get home."

"Aye."

Mischievous blue eyes caressed Phil down to his soul, and then Ian was walking away, muttering 'Goodnight' and 'See you tomorrow' .

Phil hung on to the promise of that 'tomorrow' to persuade himself to go inside rather than stare at Ian's back like an idiot.

Ten minutes later, as he sat by the kitchen window to watch the rain while his chamomile brewed, his phone pinged.

Ian

I'm home

Got yelled at for breaking midnight curfew

Phil chortled at the attached video: Ian's chubby calico cat, Kibble, rubbing herself all over her human's shins, howling like a rabid siren.

You

Tell your boss I take full responsibility for your tardiness

Ian

She's just a cat, Phil, she doesn't know what tardiness means

You

Jerk

Ian

Now go to fucking sleep

I want you at the fountain at six sharp

You

I don't need a babysitter



Ian

Prove i t

Phil didn't have anything clever to shoot back. He was giddy, inebriated by the scent of the flowers sitting next to him on the sill, an ear-to-ear grin stretching his lips as he sipped his chamomile.

It took a minute to sink in.

Giddy.

Ear-to-ear grin.

It sounded so foreign .

As foreign as the idea of himself buying a bike because he wanted to go places or resuscitating his laptop because he was feeling like trying to write again.

Feeling was a word that hadn't applied to Phil in a long, long time.

Numbness had dug its cold tendrils so deep inside him that he'd given up all hope he'd ever feel like a sentient being again.

Some, Abby included, considered going from wanting to die to not feeling anything at all an improvement, as if the fact that he was still here to tell the tale made any difference at all.

For months the only proof he had had that he was still alive was that he was still breathing, and now all of a sudden he was feeling all sorts of things — clumsily, because his heart had been a sterile desert for so long that it'd lost its ability to retain

and process emotions, but he was feeling .

It'd been like this since he'd started running again.

Since meeting Ian , one might argue.

A knot of mild panic clogged his throat.

Third surreal event of the day: there was a possibility he might feel something for Ian Galloway.

IAN

He was playing with fire.

Things were escalating fast and he was too selfish and too masochistic to just walk away.

It was wrong, and it was stupid, but it was too late to do anything about it, anyway: he was addicted.

Addicted to Phil's wry humour and his sharp comebacks, how he never missed a beat, even when Ian played his best cards.

Addicted to that brokenness that made Phil appear so brittle when he was, in fact, the strongest, bravest person Ian had ever met. The most loyal, too.

Phil, who had come all the way from America to disrupt the natural order of Ian's life.

Phil, with his brooding air and eyes way older than his forty-five years.

Phil, who couldn't be any more off-limits if he tried.

Ian pressed his forehead to the cold tiles of the shower, biting down on a curse .

He was fucked .

And a git.

When he'd seen Jamie with Irene, or Iris, or whatever her name was, he'd feared it'd punch him with nostalgia, but that hadn't been the case.

Because Phil had taken charge, and while that had helped Ian get through a potentially unpleasant situation, it had also made him realise that Jamie, whom he had once believed to be the love of his life, was now as relevant as a speck of dust on his sleeve.

A simple brush had swept him away, leaving room and clarity for another realisation: having Phil tucked under his arm felt unfairly right .

Not just because he fit there so damn well; for a straight guy, he'd played the gay boyfriend part surprisingly confidently.

Provided Phil was straight.

Not that it would've made any difference. Ian just wondered.

He'd been prepared for questions after stumbling across Jamie, but none had come.

'That's my ex boyfriend,' he'd said, and Phil hadn't bat an eyelid.

Straight men tended to be wary of blokes who liked blokes, and Phil's behaviour hadn't changed after finding out Ian liked men.

If he'd asked, Ian would've been happy to let him know he was bisexual, but Phil hadn't asked and nothing between them had changed.

Perhaps sexuality genuinely didn't matter to Phil.

Ian had just thought that that kind of conversation would spontaneously lead to some answers he was looking for.

‘I like men, but not exclusively,’ he would’ve said, and that would’ve provided Phil with a cue to reply: ‘I like women, very exclusively.’ Which would’ve pretty much settled it.

But that line hadn’t been drawn, and even though Phil had a gorgeous, doting girlfriend — fiancée — and had shown no sign whatsoever of being anything other than a convinced heterosexual, save for a brief and unserious comment on Jamie’s attractiveness, Ian still felt like something had been left hanging between the two of them, unfinished.

He jammed a fist into the wall, shutting his eyes tight. Those few minutes in front of Phil’s building had really tested his morals. The lack of any personal space and those eyes looking at him like they needed him, vulnerable and almost hopeful ...

Those damn puppy eyes would be his undoing.

He turned the water to cold and stood under it until his limbs went numb, wishing he could give his feelings a cold rinse as well.

He’d just teamed up with a colleague to tackle a big rewiring job in a posh building under renovation in Cleveden Gardens and he couldn’t fuck up: if he did well, it’d be a gateway to more high-paying, moderate-effort contracts, meaning he’d be able to afford Kibble’s food and vet visits without any sacrifices.

In fact, the term sacrifice would likely disappear from their household. If he did well.

Kibble jumped on his lap as soon as he sat down for breakfast and rubbed herself on his flannel shirt the entire time.

Something about his work and running clothes drove her crazy.

He reckoned it was his scent, which clung to the fabric no matter how many times he washed it.

Kibble had a fine nose: she could smell bad meat and bullshit from miles away.

Once Ian had had to send away the wifi technician because Kibble wouldn't have him in her house; he'd later found out that the guy had been caught pocketing valuable items from the houses he'd worked in.

"It's going to be good for us, Kibbsy, you'll see," he told her, kissing the top of her fluffy head.

She purred loudly, revelling in the scratch of his beard.

"Dad's going to be able to buy you the top brand.

" Kibble let out a little content trill.

Ian chortled. "Do I get a kiss?" He bent and Kibble placed her paws on his chest to pull herself up and touch her nose to his lips.

Ian couldn't resist grabbing her whole head, peppering it with kisses. "That's my girl."

He met up with his colleague at the building.

McLean had a big squad of electricians, but none as competent as Ian when it came to rewiring, not even McLean himself.

It was a weird experience for Ian to be a team leader.

They worked almost nonstop from 8 to 4, with a quick hour lunch break that Ian invested in a workout session in the building's private gym, then he was free.

He wasn't used to being done so early: his days normally weren't over before 7, so he didn't really know what to do with the spare time until he got a text that stopped his heart for a second .

He was waiting at a red light, humming along with the radio when the text arrived. He picked up his phone with an eye on the traffic and was more than a little surprised to find out it was from Sandra.

Sandy

Your boy is so dreamy

Ian had no idea what that was supposed to mean until a photo appeared below the text, still blurry.

He tapped on it and his boy filled the screen: Phil was sitting at their usual table by the window with a pot of tea and a half eaten slice of pie sitting at the side of the laptop he was focused on.

His brows were furrowed in concentration, a pair of black glasses sitting on his crooked nose.

Dreamy.

That was the word. Not just handsome and charming.

That was the feeling Ian got staring at that picture.

Though he had to admit, it wasn't just at the picture .

The car behind him honked. The light was green. Ian dropped the phone to the passenger seat and pushed the accelerator.

La Dolce Vita was on the way home. He could stop by and say hi, maybe squeeze in a treat. It'd been a long day, he'd earned one.

By the time he got there, the café was crammed, as it always was at this time of the day, which was why Ian preferred early mornings. A corner of his mouth curled when he recognised the fancy mountain bike propped to the wall in a corner behind the counter. So Phil was still there.

Ian asked Sandra for a spritz , which she bounced back to Anna, who took the order with a thumbs-up and a radiant smile.

Everything would've been so easy if Ian had liked her . A lively young woman, the partner everyone expected to see with a man like him. Hilarious that the one person Ian could see himself spending the rest of his life with was the exact opposite of that definition.

“Showing up at rush hour? You've got it bad, son.” Sandra's grin was so insufferably knowing that Ian nearly turned on his heel .

“Shut up, Sandy.” He slapped twenty pounds on the counter. “This should cover the spritz and whatever the old man took.”

“Oh, didn't like me calling him your boy, did you?”



Ian ignored her, took the spritz Anna placed in front of him mumbling a 'Thank you', and moved on.

"You can't take a joke, Ian Galloway!"

Phil's head popped up from the laptop at the sound of Ian's name. The way his entire face lit up with a smile when he saw Ian approach hurt in ways Ian couldn't describe.

"What are you doing here?"

Ian removed a brand new backpack from his armchair and sat down, upset that there was no helmet in sight. "Sandy tipped me off." He collapsed against the backrest, stretching his legs out under the tiny table. "I think she's in love with you."

Phil's eyebrows arched. "Can you blame her?"

The sarcasm lacked the usual bite of Phil's humour, rather sounding bitter and self-deprecating.

"Not one bit."

A brief hesitation delayed Phil's half-hearted smile long enough for Ian to catch a glint of dismay in his eyes.

Ian loved everything about that expression: the parted lips, the subtle knit in the eyebrows, the fleeting stillness...

There was confusion, but it was mingled with something else, something raw and hungry that made Ian's knees weak and his heart achingly heavy.

Don't, Phil. Don't look at me like that. It's not fair.

After raking a hand through his hair, Phil took his glasses off to rub his eyes with a faint groan. “What time is it?”

“Not even five.” Ian downed half of his spritz, relishing the bitterness of it. “Had a productive day?”

“Not really.” The glasses got tossed on the table as Phil shut the laptop. “I just sat here rewriting the same ten lines over and over again. Oh, and ate like three slices of pie.”

Ian gave him a proud pat on the shoulder. Phil stuffing himself with pie when he normally just ate because he had to? What a day.

“How long have you been here? ”

“All afternoon.”

Phil was tired, Ian could tell just by how dim his spirits were. It must have been a mild shock to his system to spend a whole afternoon in such a chaotic place.

“So, let me get this straight: you — who don’t leave the house — have spent the whole afternoon in a public place, working , and you have the nerve to act dejected ?”

Slouched low in his armchair, Phil cast him a bellicose glare, which left Ian no choice but to kick him under the table.

“Don’t give me that attitude, you prick.” He detached a finger from his glass to point it threateningly at Phil. “It was a productive day: you got out, spent some time around humans, ate , did your shit... Give yourself your flowers.”

“Thought you were my flower guy.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:03 am*

Phil's defiant expression ignited a forbidden desire in Ian that it was getting harder and harder to ignore.

"Always," he replied, as serious as Phil had been playful. He drained the last of the spritz, set the glass down with a satisfied sigh. "But you gotta learn when you owe flowers to yourself."

Phil pinned those eyes on him — eyes that were old and scarred and tired but slowly learning to smile again.

He said nothing, didn't move. The playfulness in his expression faded, replaced by gratitude and something else that Ian wasn't arrogant enough to label as fondness.

Something so intense that it forced Ian to look away to escape the impression that his ribcage was closing in on his lungs.

"Shall we call it a successful trial day?" Phil proposed.

"Good enough."

They fell quiet. Ian still wasn't looking at Phil, but he could tell Phil was looking at him. It was like he could feel it — on his face, on his neck, down his arms...

"I like your outfit."

Ian glanced up to catch Phil's stare lift from his chest to his eyes. All he was wearing was a tattered blue shirt on top of an old Motorhead t-shirt and jeans.

“Tartan looks good on you. ”

Ian smirked. “You should see me in a kilt.”

Phil’s gaze drifted south, then slowly up again. “I should.”

Ian wasn’t an idiot: he knew flirting when he saw it, knew what the tip of Phil’s tongue swiping to the side between his teeth signified.

He just wasn’t ready to confront any of it, not when his own share of problematic feelings was already hard enough to live with.

There was no room for what ifs . Hearts were such breakable things.

“Any plans tonight?” he asked, just to change the subject.

“Abby’s going out with some friends, so I’ll probably just beach myself on the couch and watch rugby.”

“Sounds like a dream night.”

“Wanna come over?”

The fact that Ian wanted so badly to say yes right away was already a red flag.

He’d rushed all the way to the café just because Phil might be here...

The prospect of a whole night together, undisturbed, even just watching sports, was a temptation.

He wanted nothing more than a bit more time with Phil: joke with him, laugh with

him, call him a cunt just to remind him to love himself more...

Little things. But being alone with him was a dangerous territory to wander into, no matter how innocent their intentions were.

“My wee princess’s been home alone all day,” Ian said, thinking that it’d settle it, until he saw the disappointment melting Phil’s hopeful expression. He cursed inwardly. His principles weren’t sturdy enough to withstand that kicked puppy face. “You could come to mine?”

Phil’s lips parted, but no sound came out. That thin gap between them called to Ian, insinuating treacherous thoughts into his head — his thumb on Phil’s chin, ghosting along the lower lip, warming up in his breath as his arm folded around...

“How far is it?” Phil asked. “I biked here.”

The shattered reverie left a bittersweet taste behind, an emptiness in Ian’s hands he still couldn’t shrug off after flexing his fingers multiple times .

“Not far. But we can put your bike in the pick-up,” said Ian, trying to blink the remnants of the pipe dream away. “Can’t let you cycle around at night without a helmet. Or at any other time of day, for that matter.”

Phil pinched the bridge of his nose with a weak groan. “It’s on my shopping list, I swear.”

“Mh.”

Ian left him to gather his stuff and went to the counter to hand Sandra an extra tenner for the unforeseen extra pie. Sandra gave him a fiver back.

“One slice was on the house. He’s a delight.”

Ian pocketed the note, biting back on the sarcastic rebuttals piling up in his mouth. As if he needed a reminder of how lovely Phil was. How charming, how brilliant, despite his many burdens.

Phil arrived seconds later, phone in hand, asking Sandra for his bill.

“Already taken care of, love.” Sandra poked a thumb towards Ian, who got a scolding side-eye from Phil.

“No need to thank me. Get your fancy bike and let’s get out of here.”

Phil turned his bogus irritation to Sandra. “How do you stand him?”

“I don’t. He’s just really easy on the eye.”

\* \* \*

Compared to Phil’s, Ian’s flat was a humble shack, but he was proud of it. It was his , the roof he’d put over his own head after years of hard work and sacrifice, and no mansion in the world could compare to it.

When he opened the door, he had no time to warn Phil about the real owner of the place: Kibble came sauntering from the kitchen with her trademark fluctuating meowing that always seemed too long for her little lungs. As soon as she saw Phil, she halted and cowered, ears flattened backwards .

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Ian laughed. He kneeled to the ground and extended a hand out, but Kibble refused to move.

A low growl rattled in her throat before she spit out two hisses in a row at Phil, who wasn't moving, either, looking as worried as Kibble was angry.

“She's not used to strangers, are ye, girl? ”

“Yeah, I'm not used to cats, either,” said Phil uneasily. “I'm more of a dog person.”

Ian rolled his eyes. “He's a pain in the arse, but he's a good guy, Kibbs, I promise.” He scooped her up and settled her belly-up in the curve of his arm. Slowly, the growling turned into purring. Ian peered at Phil. “She doesn't bite, ye know?”

Phil eyed the cat with his lips pressed into a thin line. “I'll take your word for it.”

As soon as Ian set her down, Kibble took off to the bedroom, probably to hide under the bed or the chest of drawers. Not a people person, just like her dad.

“Make yourself at home.” Ian pointed out the four rooms of the house. “Bathroom. Kitchen. Living room. Bedroom. I'm confident you won't get lost.”

Phil ventured into the small living room. “It's all so... tidy and clean.”

“Not what you expected from an old bachelor?”

“No, I just...” Phil's fingertips dragged along the top of the TV, then rubbed against one another, immaculate. “It wasn't very long ago that I couldn't even brush my teeth, let alone keep my living space in order.”

Ian crossed his arms, leaning against the door frame as one foot crossed over the other. “My ma died when I was fifteen and my da worked his arse off for ten hours a day... Had to learn to take care of myself.”

He'd had to pull through his most difficult years on his own, with a little help from Uncle Rory and his hands-on attitude. It'd been lonely, sometimes crushingly so, but, as Rory always said, 'what doesnae kill ye makes ye a pain in the arse' , and Ian was proudly living up to that philosophy .

Phil cracked him a smile. "But you can't cook."

"Imagine if I'd been that perfect."

"I'd rather not."

It lacked the customary humour of Phil's quips. There was no mischievous spark in his eyes either.

Those eyes... Those damn hazel eyes packed with grief and fatigue and a haunting beauty that Ian had never found in anyone else.

Every time he was with Phil, a strange euphoria and a heart-wrenching sadness took over him, waging a war that left Ian breathless and bleeding.

But there was a sweetness to it, an awareness that, however painful, that sentiment wasn't misplaced.

"Want to order something for dinner?" He asked, trying to breathe through the heaviness in his chest. "Best my fridge can offer is a piece and turkey."

"A what and turkey?"

"It's a sandwich."

"I'm not really hungry. Too much of Sandra's pie."



“Drink?”

“Whatever you have is fine.”

Ian left with a grunt of affirmation. He’d never really noticed how plain and tiny his kitchen was.

The whole flat, actually. All his drinking buddies down at the pub were working-class like him: no one had fancy cars, fancy clothes, or fancy homes.

Phil was one of those folk Ian would’ve frowned upon in the street, with the high-end vibes he oozed.

It would’ve been unthinkable that two people as socially different as they were could get along, let alone grow as close as they had, and yet here they were.

A smile tugged at Ian’s lips while he put together a sandwich for himself. He’d only had a protein shake after his workout to rush straight back to work and his stomach had been growling for hours, but he’d forgotten about it the very moment he’d set foot into the café.

Back to the living room with his plate and a couple of cans of Pepsi, he stopped dead in his tracks before the most puzzling sight: Phil was sitting on the couch, immobile, with Kibble making biscuits in his lap. The look he cast Ian was pleading for help.

“How ?” Ian chortled.

“I just sat down,” said Phil, “and she... she came out of nowhere and started sniffing me like a drug dog, and then...” He helplessly glanced down at his legs. “She doesn’t sound happy.”

“She’s purring ,” Ian informed him, setting the plates and the Pepsis down on the coffee table. “Trust me, she’s happy.”

“Oh?” Phil didn’t seem convinced.

Ian crouched down in front of Kibble to scratch her little head.

“You were hissing at him just minutes ago, you wee slag.” Kibble let out a trill, jutting her chin out so that Ian knew she wanted him to move his scratches there.

The purring intensified. Ian melted. He had never loved a human being the way he’d loved any of his animals.

“Watch this,” he told Phil. He sat down and the very moment his arse touched the couch Kibble perked up in Phil’s lap, stretched back and forward, then hopped over to Ian to settle down across his thighs.

Despite his former reservations, Phil looked outraged. “Is that so? Did I ever mean anything to you?” He even dared to run a knuckle between Kibble’s ears.

“Don’t take it personally. She’s Daddy’s girl through and through.”

“I’ll admit she’s cute now that I know she wasn’t plotting to maul me.”

“She’s a sweetheart,” said Ian, stroking Kibble’s back. “Unless she smells evil. I trust her judgement, she’s never been wrong about anyone.”

“Did she like Jamie?”

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:03 am*

Ian had to think about it. “She tolerated him. Would let him pet her and give her treats, but never... I don’t think he ever managed to hold her.”

“That’s a good girl,” Phil grinned as Kibble rubbed her nose into his hand .

The TV was on, the game about to start. Kibble moved back to Phil’s lap when Ian picked up his sandwich, offended that she couldn’t have his full attention. After a couple of adjustments, she curled on herself and laid down her chin on Phil’s forearm, much to Phil’s amazement.

Ian didn’t follow much of the match, mostly because he was more entertained by Phil getting acquainted with his cat.

As the minutes ticked by, Phil got accustomed to Kibble’s presence and grew bolder with her, petting and scratching as instructed by Kibble’s perfectly communicative body language.

The hesitant smile that had formed on his lips gradually took over his whole face.

When the game stopped for the halftime break Ian realised he couldn’t remember anything that had happened on the pitch and half of his sandwich was still on the plate.

The heaviness in his chest had gotten so crushing it physically hurt.

He was an idiot.

A foolish, masochistic idiot.

“Goin’ to have a shower,” he announced, standing up so abruptly Kibble got startled and peevishly ran away.

Phil glanced up at him, a little bewildered, and it took Ian every fibre of his willpower not to bend down and do the most reckless and stupid thing in human history.

“There’s more Pepsi in the fridge,” he said gruffly. “I’ll be right back.”

He had ten to fifteen minutes to get his shit together. Ten minutes to wrench the burning desire to kiss Phil Hanson out of his system and find a way to keep it out, if not for good, at least for the remainder of the night.

Phil was taken. Engaged to be married and deeply in love with his extraordinary fiancée. Ian had no business catching feelings for him. He had no business rejoicing every time he caught that splinter of silent longing in Phil’s eyes when they looked at each other. None of this should be happening .

Standing under the cold water, he struggled to calm the frantic pounding of his heart, sick with shame and guilt because of the reaction his body was having to the mere idea of kissing Phil.

The water needed to be colder — cold enough to make it hard to breathe.

He tried to redirect his thoughts to trivialities: going over the week’s schedule, the materials that needed restocking and the outdated ones he should get rid of.

The store he still hadn’t called back regarding pricing for a job.

Lunch with his father in two days. His granny’s birthday next month.

It worked.

Shivering, he turned the water to lukewarm and finally grabbed the shower gel, but no matter how hard he scrubbed his skin, he couldn't wash away how unclean he felt.

He was pulling up a pair of fresh joggers when he heard a noise of shattering glass.

He dropped the t-shirt and rushed out of the bathroom to check the living room, which he found empty, save for Kibble, who was loafed on top of the armchair backrest, slumbering.

A distressed sound came from the kitchen.

Ian poked his head in: Phil was leaning against the counter with both hands, panting hard. A glass was shattered at his feet.

“Handsome?”

“Sorry about... the glass,” Phil heaved without turning. His head was bent, knuckles white from how hard he was holding on to the counter. Getting closer, mindful of the sharp fragments scattered on the floor, Ian saw Phil was shaking.

“Fuck the glass. What's wrong?”

“Panic attack,” Phil gasped out after a couple of failed attempts.

Ian was at a loss: he had no familiarity with panic attacks, didn't want to accidentally make the situation worse by doing or saying the wrong thing, but at the same time he was desperate to help.

“What can I do?” he asked as softly as he could.

“I just need—”

“What? What do you need?”

“P-pressure.”

Pressure. What did pressure mean ?

Watching Phil’s trembling body, Ian instinctively did the only thing that seemed to make sense and provided pressure by wrapping his arms around him.

“Like this?”

Phil gasped, then stuttered: “Tighter.”

“Don’t want to hurt ye.”

“You won’t.”

So Ian squeezed tight , pulling Phil into his chest until he couldn’t tell anymore when he ended and Phil started. He was afraid Phil could feel his heart hammering against his back, but Phil was too busy hyperventilating to really be aware of anything.

“Still with me, old man?” he asked in Phil’s ear.

“Y-yeah.”

“Nice cologne.”

Phil spit out a choked laugh. “Dior Sauvage.”

“Fancy bastard.”

Phil laughed again. After a few deep inhales, his breath started evening out, and the shaking with it. It was a while before he was able to speak without quivering. Holding on to Ian’s bare forearms, he mumbled: “Please, tell me you’re not naked.”

“Would you not like that?” Ian snickered. “I’m wearing joggers, sorry to break your wee heart.”

Another laugh wheezed out of Phil, morphing the snicker on Ian’s lips into a genuine smile that spread down to his chest, rekindling that sense of sweet constriction.

You’re so screwed, mate .

He didn’t know how long they stood there, motionless and quiet, just waiting.

Ian’s iron grip loosened as the panic ebbed, allowing Phil deeper breaths without depriving him of the support.

When Phil’s hands lowered, Ian let go, stepping back to let him turn around, but Phil wasn’t stable on his legs and lost his footing, collapsing back into Ian’s arms.

“Easy, easy.” Ian guided him to rest back against the counter, cupping a hand around his neck to ground him. A few more deep breaths put some colour back into Phil’s cheeks. “You alright? ”

Phil looked up, a sorrowful pinch in his brow, and Ian forgot how his lungs worked altogether. It took a considerable effort to refrain from wiping away the wet streaks rolling down to his beard.

“Been better,” Phil croaked in a thin, brittle voice that felt like it was holding back

more words than it had spoken.

Ian's hand was still on his neck. Guided by a higher force, Ian tentatively moved his thumb, stroking the coarse beard along the jawline, and the raw emotion that that simple gesture ignited in Phil's eyes nearly broke him.

He couldn't make himself let go, couldn't stop staring at Phil's mouth, frozen agape on those unspoken words.

Nothing about this was right. Or fair.

There had to be a limit, a line somewhere that marked the border between what was acceptable and what wasn't.

Ian had never condoned people who meddled in established relationships, stealing someone else's partner, ruining others' happiness.

But he understood now. He still didn't condone it, it was despicable , but he got it: you couldn't find such a deep connection with someone and just carry on with your life.

No guilt or shame could erase it. But after what he'd been through with Jamie, there was one thing he was absolutely certain of: he would never be the other guy .

His hand fell to his side. The stab he felt in his heart when Phil whimpered at the loss was a shock he would never forget.

"Let's get you sat down," he murmured, taking Phil under his arm to steady his walk, fully aware that from now on not a single touch between them, not even the most casual, would ever be innocent again.



He helped Phil ease down to the couch, where he sank with a long sigh, eyes fluttering shut. The game had long since resumed, but no one was interested in it any more.

“I’m going to clean up and come back with some water,” said Ian, who needed to put as much distance as possible between himself and the instincts this man awakened in him.

He took longer than necessary to pick up the glass shards, collecting them one by one rather than sweeping them up simply because it granted him some time to regroup.

It was impossible to know whether the panic attack would’ve happened or not if Phil hadn’t come over, but Ian was glad he hadn’t been alone to deal with it.

It looked like nasty business, nothing anyone would want to confront on their own.

Phil knowing so precisely what he needed to curb it suggested he was used to it, or at least that he’d been through it enough times to figure out what worked and what didn’t.

Either way, it was just further proof of how tough the man was under his layers of self-deprecation and self-pity.

Ian stilled with one knee on the ground, observing the jagged fragments in his palm. An insane, irrational urge to clasp his hand around them seized him. He could do it. He could, and maybe the pain would take his mind off that clutter of feelings he shouldn’t even be having.

A shiver shook his spine, reminding him he was still shirtless and barefoot. After disposing of the glass, he filled up a new glass for Phil and took it to the living room.

“Let me know if—” He stopped on the threshold and nearly facepalmed himself right there: his guest was lying on his side on the couch, hands tucked against his chest, fast asleep.

Kibble had cuddled up to him, nestled in the crook between his belly and his legs, slow-blinking at Ian like someone who knew they’d done a great job.

Ian set the glass down on the table, where he sat with a heavy sigh.

Apparently the entire universe was conspiring against his sanity tonight.

Phil was slumbering peacefully, a thin lock of hair tickling his temple; Ian gently pushed it back and smoothed it down with a caress that was too tender and lingered too long, but somehow not nearly long enough.

This is such a shit move of you, Phil.

Something inside him started bleeding, warm and quiet and excruciating, swelling a sore lump in his throat. He retreated his hand to scrub it down his face, unable to look away from Phil’s tranquil expression. He might never get to see him like this again. So unguarded. So vulnerable .

He could have sat here all night, content to just watch a man with too many scars and too many struggles sleep with that peaceful expression that was filling Ian with a profound desire to lie down next to him and hold him through the night.

Kibble slow-blinked at him again, the feline version of a smile.

“You like him, eh?”

As a response, Kibble skimmed her nose against Phil’s elbows, over and over again,

typical behaviour of a cat claiming its territory.

Ian shook his head. “We can’t keep him, Kibbs.”

Kibble’s chest vibrated with a trill.

“Because he already has a home and a family.”

Another trill, this time accompanied by a whip of tail.

“I know, but there’s nothing we can do.”

Fed up with his objections, Kibble laid her head down, putting an end to the discussion.

There was nothing Ian could do at this point other than accept the situation.

He fetched a blanket from his room and draped it over Phil, then, knowing how cold his flat was at night, fetched another one for good measure.

After turning off the TV and pulling the blinds closed to shut out the lights of the street, there was only one thing left to do.

He went to the kitchen and closed the door behind himself, phone in hand.

The name sat at the very top of his contact list, as easy to find as it was hard to call. He didn’t have much of a choice.

The line rang a few times, then a delicate voice said: “Ian?”

“Hey. It’s about Phil.”

“What’s wrong?” As expected, Abigail sounded worried.

Ian immediately reassured her: “Nothin’ serious, I promise. He had a panic attack.”

“Oh god!”

“He’s alright. He got it under control.”

There was music and noise disturbing the other end of the line. Abigail told someone she’d be right back and seconds later the disturbance ceased, replaced by the muffled whoosh of a car speeding by .

“It hadn’t happened in a while,” she sighed. Ian imagined her running a hand through her dark hair, throwing her head back to stare at the sky. “I’m glad he was with you.”

“I wanted to drive him home,” Ian cut short, his dirty conscience far from comfortable with Abigail being grateful of him and Phil being together. “But, uh... He’s knocked out cold on the couch.”

Silence fell. Another car sped by Abigail.

“Would it be a problem,” she said, “if we just... let him sleep?” A brief hesitation. “I don’t want to inconvenience you, but he never falls asleep without his pills and—”

“No, I agree,” Ian interjected. “He looks so peaceful, it’d be a shame to disturb him.”

“Peaceful,” Abigail repeated.

“Like a baby.”

A shaky laugh ticked Ian’s ear, followed by a sniff. “Thank you, Ian.”

“For what?”

“Being there for him. I thought he needed a friend, but it wasn’t just any friend he needed.” Ian sensed a smile through the fleeting pause. “It was someone like you.”

Ian didn’t know what that was supposed to mean.

“I’m as much of a pain in the arse to him as he is to me,” he played it down, but Abigail wouldn’t have any of it.

“That’s why he likes you. You’re a good man.”

Somehow the compliment managed to make Ian feel even worse. He didn’t feel like a good man. He felt like a backstabber who coveted things that he shouldn’t have set his eye on in the first place. It’d been an accident, a miscalculation, like the very day he and Phil had met.

“I’ll deliver him at your doorstep first thing in the morning,” he said, then, before the conversation got any more awkward, he added: “Goodnight, Abigail.”

“Night, Ian. Thank you again for this.”

Ian felt like shit for so many reasons he doubted he’d ever find any self-respect again. Abigail thanking him for taking care of Phil was too much. Her reaction would’ve been very different if she’d known about Ian’s feelings for her boyfriend. Fiancé .

He needed a beer. He nursed it while sitting at the window, looking out at the street. A light rain was falling, dotting the pavement with dark spots that soon took over, painting the cement black.

He let his head fall back against the wall, eyes closing as his throat bobbed.

The lump was still there, thicker and sorer than before.

He missed the days when he'd thought breaking up with Jamie was the worst that could happen to him.

It was like life was laughing in his face right now.

Like it was sneering at him: 'You thought THAT hurt? That's cute. How about this, though?'

As if that had been fate's design all along: to preserve his heart to rip it out at the right time and throw it at the feet of the most unattainable guy on Earth.

PHIL

The texture under his cheek was wrong.

The scent around him, too.

And the light, the noises... all wrong.

He , on the other hand... He felt oddly alright. Relaxed. Well-rested. He must've dreamed it — the touch he'd been desperate to lean into, but his unresponsive body hadn't let him. And yet, whatever it had been, he could still feel it, warm and tender, a ghosting caress along his hairline.

Suddenly it all came back to him: Ian, the game, the panic attack.

He tried to blink the room into focus: spying the pale sunlight spilling into the room in thin blades through the curtains, he assumed it was early in the morning.

Ian's chubby cat was sitting on the coffee table beside him, licking a paw so ostentatiously Phil couldn't help but wonder if it had been that sound to wake him up.

There was a glass of water next to her. Phil grabbed it; he could feel the imprint left by the plastic beads of his bracelet in his cheek as he gulped down the water.

As he pushed himself up on an elbow, a couple of heavy blankets pooled down around his waist. They smelled like Ian.

Throwing them aside, Phil pushed up to his feet, finding himself barefoot.

His shoes were under the table, but he left them there.

His back wasn't particularly happy about the night spent on the couch; he stretched with a groan while massaging his right side, the one he must have slept on, feeling as stiff as a board.

He couldn't believe he felt so regenerated after sleeping in such uncomfortable conditions.

"Still in one piece?"

Phil's eyes flitted to the door: Ian was there, in a pair of grey sweatpants and a worn-out t-shirt of some obscure metal band, a tea towel and a mug in his hands.

"Could be worse, I guess." Another groan escaped Phil as he flexed his neck experimentally from side to side.

"A hot shower might help."

"Yeah, I think I need it." A beat passed. "Listen, uh... I'm sorry about last night. I'm so embarrassed..."

"Be embarrassed about what you just said."

"I'll pay you back for the glass."

"Don't make me fuckin' punch you, it's too early in the mornin' for this bullshit." Phil pressed his lips together to stifle a grin. He'd never been threatened so affectionately. "What'd you want for breakfast? I don't have much."



Phil was starving but didn't want Ian to feel bad: he'd already gone out of his way with his hospitality.

"Whatever you're having will do." Phil spotted his phone on the couch; he picked it up: no texts, no missed calls. There was no way Abby hadn't called to check on him, unless someone had called her first. "Did you—"

"Aye," said Ian promptly. "We agreed not to disturb you. You looked like you needed it."

"Your couch kinda killed my back, but I had a surprisingly regenerating sleep." Ian opened his mouth, but Phil anticipated the jibe: "Call me old and I'll fucking neuter you. "

"That'd get you quite a few enemies in town."

The innuendo painted a variety of extremely vivid pictures in Phil's mind that caused him to blush up to his ears and in places where the term blush acquired a whole different meaning.

The rush of blood made his jeans suddenly uncomfortable, a sensation that thrilled him as much as it astounded him.

He was getting hard . Right there, in the middle of the living room, with Ian just feet away, wearing that cheeky smirk that was nothing but fuel to Phil's discomfort .

"I'm gonna go get that shower if you don't mind," he said with a dry mouth, hoping — praying that his arousal wasn't as obvious as it felt. Fortunately, Ian didn't seem to notice.

"Knock yourself out. There's clean towels under the sink."

“Thanks.”

Phil was dying to lock himself in the bathroom and get some relief.

As soon as he closed the door, he stripped off his itching clothes and threw himself under the running water.

He had a full erection now. A throbbing, painful erection he gaped at in utter disbelief with his hands braced against the wall as the water dripped down his hair and shoulders, a dull rumble in his ringing ears.

A year. A full, humiliating year living with a dead libido that had convinced him he'd never be able to have sex again or even just want to.

He'd made peace with it, with the quiet resignation on Abby's face every time he'd shied away from her advances, until one day she'd simply given up trying.

And now he was here, harder than he'd ever been, because a man had made a suggestive joke about the people he'd slept with.

He winced when he finally dared to wrap a hand around himself, breath catching in his throat.

He was so sensitive that a hiss wheezed out through his teeth at the slightest friction.

Shutting his eyes, the memory of Ian holding him tightly flooded his senses — the musky scent, the rock-hard pecs pressing into his back, the hot breath and the scrape of the beard, and Ian's voice — that low, husky voice, murmuring soothingly into Phil's ear... The sense of safety, of belonging ...

All it took was a few strokes for his sight to blank out.

A jolt of blinding pleasure shot through his body, leaving him trembling and gasping for air.

Forced to brace himself with an arm against the wall to keep his balance, he bit into it to smother the moan that grazed up his throat, out of control.

It was a miracle his knees didn't give out.

He could feel it down to his toes, an overwhelming tide coming in waves that turned into shudders, then groans, then sighs, and then peaked again.

He had no memory of an orgasm ever leaving him so viscerally spent before.

As his sight came back, he let his forehead drop against his forearm, panting hard, and opened up his palm to the water, watching it wash away the source of the burning shame coiling at the pit of his stomach.

His eyes shut the same moment his hand balled back into a fist; he pounded into the tiles, again and again, sickened by what his own body was doing to him.

Except it wasn't just his body.

He may be a coward, but not enough to deny that the attraction he felt towards Ian had roots much deeper than looks and if his body was just starting to channel that attraction, his mind had been at it for weeks, perhaps from the very beginning, getting off on Ian's sagacious brains, chasing the addictive, rewarding feeling of their never-ending push-and-pull, whose borders had quickly blurred into flirtation.

Phil had known all along what he was doing. It was supposed to be a game — a harmless one. Feelings were never meant to come into play. But Ian wasn't just smart and hot: Ian was an awful lot of things Phil was hopelessly weak for, and his dazzling

looks were not even close to the top of the list.

Ian was kind. Compassionate. Caring.

He was a man , sure, but how was that relevant when everything about him was just so damn lovable ?

Phil had never put too much thought into his sexuality.

He'd only dated women, but had never been one of those guys who gagged at the idea of sleeping with another guy.

Perhaps it was because he barely cared about sex, but the prospect had never repulsed him.

Still, he had gone all his life identifying as a heterosexual simply because it was a default setting he'd never considered updating.

He wasn't adventurous: anything new and unknown distressed him, and men, or at least the ones he'd been around, had never appealed to him.

Too rough, too loud, too physical in all the wrong ways.

And yet here he was, dealing with a sexual and romantic awakening at the ripe old age of forty-five, all while somehow still being unyieldingly devoted to the woman of his life.

How did that even work?

The way Ian had held him the night before, how his hand had cupped Phil's neck...

For a fleeting, foolish moment Phil had genuinely believed there would be a kiss.

He'd craved it, so desperately that just losing Ian's touch had made him feel like the ground beneath his feet was giving in.

He should've known that Ian, ever the gentleman, would have never made a move on an engaged man.

But the yearning tension had been there, and Phil knew that.

Whatever it meant, he hadn't just imagined it, though he kind of wished he had.

This unhealthy fixation of his wouldn't be half as hard to keep at bay if there hadn't been that aching softness in Ian's eyes when he looked at Phil.

His fingers were wrinkled by the time he mustered the courage to crawl out of the bathroom, as clean on the outside as he felt filthy on the inside. Filthy and incredibly alive .

Fucking hypocrite.

He dragged himself to the kitchen, rehearsing excuses for taking so long, but they all dissolved the moment he walked in on Ian whistling quietly while working by the stove, hair pulled back into a half bun.

The familiar sight of that broad back gave Phil the same heartwarming sense of domesticity he got when Abby sang her silly songs in the shower.

Abby.

He felt like shit just thinking about her. The human heart was a fucked up machine.

Or maybe it was just his. Fickle and greedy and ungrateful.

“Took you long enough,” said Ian without turning back .

“The water took forever to warm up,” Phil readily lied.

“Ah, yeah, should’ve warned ye. Breakfast’s almost ready.”

Phil had lost his appetite, but he wasn’t going to let Ian down after all the trouble he’d gone through to put together a decent meal. There was milk and orange juice on the table, and a box of cereal. Ian carried a sizzling pan to the table, loaded with scrambled eggs and sausages.

“Help yourself.”

Phil took a bit of everything out of sheer gratitude and ate mechanically, bite after bite, his mind lost elsewhere, in a limbo between mortification and uncontainable joy .

“How long have you been dealin’ with that shite?”

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:03 am*

“Uh?” Phil tore his gaze off his plate, replaying the words in his head because they didn’t compute the first time.

“Ah. Forever, basically.” He fidgeted with a chunk of egg white, soaking it up with sausage gravy.

“It was more frequent in my late teens and early twenties, then it got sporadic... Until I started attending public events. Xanax kept it under control, but then I had to drop it to get on Seroxat, which isn’t half as effective on my anxiety.”

“Ye’ve been through some serious shite, eh?”

Phil shrugged.

“Does it hurt? A panic attack.”

“Yeah. It’s like... like my ribs are closing in on my lungs and someone’s pressing a pillow to my face.” Phil shuddered at the recollection. “Rationally, I know it’s all in my head, but physically it... it feels like dying.”

It was an honest answer, maybe even too honest, like it always was when it was Ian asking.

This man annihilated Phil’s pathological fear of appearing weak and pathetic.

It should have been the contrary, by logical comparison, but even now that Phil felt so pitiful and brittle, Ian was looking at him with nothing but respect.

“What if you’re alone when it happens?”

“I try to find something — an external stimulation to latch onto, like a repetitive sound, or holding something very hot or very cold, and grit my teeth until it passes. ”

Ian drank some milk, then started lowering the glass, but reconsidered and downed the rest of it. He seemed nervous.

“Did I do the right thing?” he asked, setting the glass down like it weighed a ton.

“Trying to get you to talk?”

“Yes,” Phil reassured him. If someone had told him Ian could look this timid, he would have never believed them.

“Yes, that actually helped. A lot . Your voice and the... the scrape of your beard...”

Phil swallowed, because he could still feel it, as vividly as if it’d been just seconds ago. “It was... very grounding.”

A sudden flash of blue irises cut right through him, and Phil couldn’t comprehend how a gaze could be so fierce and so tender at the same time.

“You scared the shit out of me.”

There was anger mixed with Ian’s worry. Maybe not real anger.

A sentiment close to it but tinged with blue rather than red.

Phil struggled to maintain eye contact. He couldn’t bear to look at him.

Every time he did, the something he felt for Ian grew larger and deeper and he didn’t know where to put all that feeling .



“I’m sorry,” he murmured. If he’d had a penny for every time he’d said that in the last two years, he could’ve paid for another bike.

Sorry .

All he could do was be sorry .

‘Sorry, I can’t get out of bed today.’

‘Sorry, I’ve lost all inspiration to write.’

‘Sorry, I don’t feel like eating.’

‘Sorry, leaving the house is overwhelming.’

‘Sorry, I can’t stand the sound of your voice today.’

He’d be bones and dust one day and that was all the world would remember of him:

‘Here lies P. J. Hanson. He was SORRY .’

“Don’t do that.” Now the blue emotion in Ian’s voice was flaring red. “Don’t apologise for being human. I just meant—”

“That you care ?” Phil broke into a small smile. “You think I didn’t know?”

“Can’t hurt to hear it, can it?”

Oh, it could .

It did .

Phil's bleeding heart was all hurt . Beautiful things could be hurtful, too.

He'd been empty for too long and now he was suddenly so full he was afraid he couldn't take it.

From feeling nothing to feeling too much, he hadn't had the time to adjust. Every time he thought he'd figured out what he was feeling, a new shade or a new flavour showed up, rearranging the picture, and he had to start over again.

Ian, the rude stranger.

Ian, the rude, charming stranger.

Ian, the charming, witty stranger.

Ian, the friend.

Ian, the guy who'd torn apart all of Phil's walls, ever so gently, and used the debris to build him a shelter.

A knot tied Phil's stomach. He glanced up at Ian, terrified that he was thinking too loud, but Ian was just checking texts on his phone, unaware of the turmoil he was causing. There was a deep crease between his thick eyebrows.

"Everything okay?"

"Aye. Just a minor job I can't put off any longer." Ian set the phone down and glanced at Phil's plate, still half full. "Don't finish that if you don't feel like it."

Phil wanted to finish it. Ian had made it for him and it was actually really good, but his stomach was closed and the food had run cold by now.

“Do you think...” He trailed off, unsure whether it was impolite to ask. “Think you could pack it for me?”

All concern melted out of Ian’s features, morphing into a complacent grin. “Sure thing.”

He didn’t pack just Phil’s leftovers. He filled a large tupperware with all that was left in the pan as well, then placed it into a flowery fabric bag.

“Sandra sewed it for me,” he said, thrusting the bundle into Phil’s hand. “I want it back.”

“I will protect this bag with my own life. ”

Ian’s grin ticked up on one side. “C’mon, I’ll drive you home.”

“No, I...” There were glimpses of sunlight outside. Phil could use soaking up some. “I’ll go by bike. I need some fresh air.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright.”

Ian turned on his heel and disappeared without another word, returning from his bedroom minutes later with a fancy-looking helmet and a beanie hat.

He handed the helmet to Phil. “Your brains are no good splattered on the road.” There were a couple of scratches on the black surface, but, other than that, it was brand new. “Keep it, I’ve barely used it.”

“Thank you.” Phil promised himself he’d return it as soon as he got his own. It looked expensive.

Then Ian handed him the beanie.

“What about that?”

“You want to go out there with damp hair? At your age? ”

Phil snapped a surly glower at him, but still snatched the beanie.

Backpack on his shoulders, helmet in place, he fetched his bike from Ian’s pick-up and thanked him one more time for the hospitality, then set Google Maps on his watch and headed home.

He made sure to make the most of the three miles between Govan and Fairlie Drive Park, keeping a leisurely speed to be able to take in and get acquainted with the surroundings.

Acts as mundane as stopping at a traffic light or yielding to let people pass gave him an odd sense of fulfilment, as if that simple collection of actions made him more credible as a person.

It’d been a while since he’d last willingly spent some time outdoors on his own just because .

Glasgow had some beautiful views and plenty of greenery, its moderate chaos not even comparable to the madness of the streets in Chicago.

It was indeed an anxiety-friendly environment, one that felt a lot more in tune with Phil’s soul than any other place he’d visited.

There was that famous song that went ‘You take the man out of the city, not the city out of the man’, but Phil was starting to believe that maybe he truly needed the city taken out of him .

He stopped at a bakery to buy something sweet he could share with Abby when she got home and came out with half a dozen brownies and a couple of free apple pie pockets just because ‘his accent was lovely and he was so nice and handsome’ .

He tied the bag to the handlebar and stilled while securing the knot.

He was doing it.

He was existing .

Out in the open, in the real world. Like a legit functioning adult.

The elation subsided when he remembered why he was so overflowing with life. He wasn’t so eager to surprise Abby with the brownies now. Had he bought them because he unconsciously knew he had to make up for something?

What was left of the elation crumbled away altogether. He couldn’t go home and just tell Abby ‘Hey, I feel awesome because Ian just does that to me! Oh, by the way, he gave me a boner!’

Abby always tried so damn hard to make things good and easier for Phil, even when his behaviour didn’t make sense to her.

She’d be thrilled, no doubt, to know he was doing so much better, whatever the reason.

Phil was positive that if he’d told her he found joy in torturing people, she’d be

willing to discuss options with him.

He didn't have the courage to tell her that the reason he was feeling so good and vigorous out of the blue was someone else's positive influence.

When he got home, his nerves were rattling.

He went for a run to try to blow off some steam, but it wasn't enough, so he tackled the mountain of boxes stacked in the garage that still awaited unpacking next, and put everything away, leaving out only the things he knew Abby would want to take care of herself.

Around 4 PM, when he started getting hungry, he conceded himself a break and warmed up the leftovers Ian had given him.

They didn't taste as good as they had in the morning, but he didn't care.

He was in the middle of tidying up the kitchen when he heard the front door unlock.

"Phil? "

His heart sank. It was later than he'd realised. He wasn't ready. He hadn't stitched back together his morning mask yet and couldn't look Abby straight in the eye without it. Especially today.

"Phil, are you home?"

"Kitchen!" he called out before Abby worried.

He had a handful of seconds, while she got rid of her shoes and coat, to gain some control over his hyperactivity spree. Standing still was difficult: it was like his bones

were seething.

“Hey!” Abby padded in, radiant in a pink taitleur that accentuated the rosy blush in her tan complexion. “You look well!” Normally, she would’ve gone in for a kiss, but Phil didn’t move, so she simply smiled at him. “How was your sleepover?”

“Good,” said Phil absently. An electric ripple down his body reminded him just how good it had been.

Ian’s kindness and care. His strong arms, his patience.

Phil’s gratitude abruptly turning into arousal.

The foreign feeling of his cock hard and sensitive in his hand.

The flustering desire. The pleasure. The pleasure ...

“Have you been cleaning?”

Phil released the breath he was holding, tuning back to the present.

“Yeah.” He didn’t want to discuss that, but Abby was already beaming proudly.

“Phil, that’s—”

“Abbs.” He stood back when she made to lift her hands to his chest, then cowardly stared at the ground. “I don’t really feel like talking right now.”.

“Oh.”

“Can we do this later?”

The mellowed down tone chipped away most of Abby's disappointment.

It didn't stop Phil from feeling awful. He had no right to be so testy — as if what was happening to him was her fault.

He sighed inwardly, acknowledging the effects of one of his many mood swings, and took Abby's face between his hands, stroking her cheeks apologetically.

The pink bracelet on his wrist mocked him one more time .

'U R my sunshine.'

Whatever the opposite of sunshine was, he felt like that.

A dark cloud.

Polluted rain.

"It's one of those days when I can't help being a dick for no reason. You don't deserve this." He hugged her, brushing a kiss to her forehead. "Please, stay away from me."

Abby nodded, her unconditional sympathy more gutting than any anger could be. "Just tell me if anything bad happened with Ian."

"No." Phil was sickened by his own blissful smile. "We had a really good time. He handled my panic attack like a champ. I just... need some alone time."

"Okay." Abby pliantly slipped out of his arms. "I'll be right here if you need me."

Before she could leave the room, Phil reached for the bakery bag he'd dropped in a



corner. “I got you brownies, by the way.”

Abby’s dark eyes filled with child-like greed. “You did? Virtual kiss!” She dipped into the bag, pulled a brownie out, and took a small bite. “Oh, this is to die for! It’ll be gone by the time I get upstairs.”

As she sauntered towards the door, Phil called her back one last time.

“Abbs? You know I love you, right?”

“I’ll doubt my own name before I doubt that,” said Abby over a mouthful of brownie, and in that very moment Phil knew with chilling certainty that whatever was going on with him right now was doomed to either seal the thin fracture in their bond or break them apart for good.

IAN

“Thank you so much, Ian! You saved my life!..”

Georgia Walsh, owner of the Shelfish bookstore, was ecstatic to have her windows properly lit again. They were getting less daylight every day and having curated shop windows was no use if passersby couldn't see what was on display.

“No problem,” Ian grumbled. “Sorry it took me so long to get back to you, it's been a... Ah, challenging week.”

Challenging being the understatement of the year.

He and Phil had gone for one of their runs earlier that morning and they'd acted like any other day, tacitly agreeing not to bring up the panic attack or what had happened next.

Ian wasn't even sure what had happened next.

A moment of weakness. A distraction. He'd let the emotional charge of the situation derail his integrity for a heartbeat, edging dangerously close to losing control.

It would've been unforgivable of him to take advantage of Phil's vulnerability.

Every fibre in his body had wanted to pull him to himself and hold him tight until he stopped shaking so helplessly.

Wipe his tears, kiss his temple. Kiss him . Tell him—

“How much do I owe you?”

Georgia’s voice tugged at Ian’s musings, but he was only half listening and half still caught up in judging himself. What kind of person thought about kissing a guy who’d just come out of a panic attack?

“Nonsense,” he said, trusting he’d processed the question correctly. “It was a ten-minute job and I live round the corner.”

Georgia made another couple of attempts to convince Ian to take a few quid, but he was unmovable.

“Take a book or two, at least!”

“Alright, alright!”

He looked around, meaning to select a random book out of the many within reach, when a bright white cover caught his eye.

It was simple and discreet, just like he liked them.

At the centre, shattered glass formed a sun-like shape dotted with blood drops, a captivating silvery title embossed on top of it: *Seventeen Seconds of Sun* .

He’d already picked it up when his heart leaped noticing the author’s name at the bottom.

P. J. Hanson .

“Oooh, that one’s brilliant!” Georgia clapped her hands excitedly. “Have you read Hanson before?”

A corner of Ian’s mouth ticked up fondly at the sound of the name he’d been lovingly twisting since the first time he’d heard it.

“Can’t say I have, no.” He couldn’t believe he’d never thought of looking up Phil’s books.

Georgia reverently trailed her fingers down the cover. “This is his debut novel — my favourite yet. Although Star Captor might be close second. You’ll love it if you’re into mystery and thriller. There’s also a very intriguing romantic subplot.”

Ian wasn’t one of those avid readers who devoured book after book after book, but he did enjoy a good novel and was more than a little curious about Phil’s work.

“You sure I can take it? ”

“All yours! Let me know what you think!”

“I will. Thanks, Georgia.”

\* \* \*

He hadn’t expected the story to have a female protagonist, nor that he would end up growing so fond of her so fast.

Alba Kendry, senior Sociology student at UCLA turned improvised detective, was a grumpy, foul-mouthed loner with an uncanny penchant for making people uncomfortable with inappropriate jokes about her prosthetic leg.

Ian had had no choice but to spiritually adopt her within the first fifteen pages.

He'd never come across a thriller that was also so amusing and full of heart.

He could see Phil through Alba's clever puns, quips, and jabs, in the vibrant descriptions of people and places, and more than once he found himself chuckling at a line, thinking 'That's so you, Phil' .

He tore through the pages even in those passages where Alba's beau made him want to throw the book out of the window.

It was almost midnight when he started the last chapter before the epilogue and couldn't resist texting Phil.

You

This Alba is a powerhouse

A reply came almost at once.

Handsome

Are you reading one of my books?

You

17 seconds of sun

Had a call out at a bookshop and it was right there

Handsome

So you like it ?

Ian could picture Phil's face looking at the screen, pleased and perhaps slightly nervous.

You

Depends Is Paul going to die soon?

Alba's aspiring boyfriend was a straight-up asshole — to put it mildly. Ian just wanted to see his toxic guts spilled on the ground, but the creep had already survived a beating and a stab wound and hope was withering.

You

If he lives I'm going to burn this fucking book

Handsome

It's the first in a trilogy, have some faith

You

So you're saying I'm going to have to burn the book?

Handsome

Or I can get you the other two and you can judge when you're done reading them all

You

I've got 20 pages left, better have them handy

Need to know what's in store for my new daughter

Handsome

You mean MY daughter

Ian tutted. Phil may have created Alba, but his parental care left a lot to be desired.

You

I'll fight you for custody, you put her through too much

Handsome

You and Alba would make a devastating duo

Yo u

In a good way

Handsome

In a "the world should be scared of our combined sass" kind of way

Ian smirked smugly. He was typing out his joint custody conditions when another text arrived:

Handsome

I've got a free trial at the gym you recommended tomorrow afternoon

I can drop the books off at yours along with the tupperware and your precious bag before I go home

The gym in question was in Ian's neighbourhood. It was a small business run by his old friend Najeer, the ideal place for someone with Phil's issues with crowds and strangers.

You

Gym huh?

Planning to outhandsome yourself?

Handsome

Shut up

Ian couldn't tell Phil there was no way he could get any more attractive than he already was.

It wasn't about looks or any specific physical traits: it was about the light that took over Phil's face when he smiled, broad and genuine, and the crow's feet at the corners of his eyes deepened, displaying a joy his forced smiles couldn't fake, the bright twinkle of intelligence of those eyes that almost turned green in the sunlight.

It was about the strength and the courage of a man who'd chosen to stand through the pain and limp on rather than give up.

A sculpted physique could never make him more charming than he already was, but



this wasn't Phil's goal: working out was a natural remedy for mental health issues and Phil deserved nothing but praise for wanting to get himself back on track.

You

Go do your thing

I'll be waiting for your old carcass to drop on my mat

If Ian had to live with a bleeding heart, he was glad it was for a man like Phil Hanson.

\* \* \*

The following day, like all Fridays, was hectic and tiring and left very little time to indulge in leisure activities like reading.

Ian went to the gym during his lunch break, but his favourite metal playlist blaring in his ears wasn't loud enough to distract him from his obsession with Alba's story and her fate.

He'd left her lying in a hospital bed with several cracked ribs and a crushed spleen after a shady car accident.

The book had ended in a cliffhanger, with a nurse bringing a flower delivery while Alba was being questioned about the accident by Detective Beauchamp, leaving Ian with an abundance of theories and zero answers.

When the doorbell finally rang around 6 PM, he had a whole day of pent up frustration to vent.

"I've got questions," he said as soon as the door opened to Phil, who arched his

brows, bike leaning against his side.

“Good evening to you, too.”

He was dishevelled, a light flush lingering in his cheeks, and Ian remembered about the gym. He stood aside, motioning for Phil to carry the bike into the flat.

“The wheels are wet.”

“It’ll be gone in minutes if you leave it outside.”

So the bike was brought in and propped to the wall. Ian ignored the muddy trails the tires left on the linoleum; he’d noticed the helmet hanging off the handlebar: the black paint had long silvery scratches along one side.

“Ah.” Phil eyed it apologetically. “Yeah, it was a pretty timely loan.”

“What happened?”

“Slipped in a puddle of soggy leaves.”

Ian ran a fingertip along the deepest scratch, where the paint was grazed so deeply it peeled off in minuscule curls. His jaw tightened. “This could’ve been your head.”

“Yeah,” Phil admitted sombrely. “I’ll buy you a new one.”

Ian couldn’t have cared less about the helmet. “I told you it’s yours. Give me those books and we’re even.”

“Oh, right.” Phil wrangled the duffel bag off his torso and rummaged into it until he extracted the flowery bag, which he handed to Ian, more full than when he’d

borrowed it. Inside it were the empty tupperware and two brand new books.

“Something’s missing,” said Ian, and looking up he realised that Phil had the something in question pulled down on his head.

“You didn’t say I had to return the beanie.” The innocent lilt didn’t match the mischief in Phil’s look. The only reason Ian let it slide was that he didn’t hate the idea of Phil wearing something his .

“Fancy a drink?” he asked instead, but a loud growl from Phil’s stomach made him rephrase: “Or something to eat?”

Phil blushed. “Didn’t think about bringing a post-workout snack and the vending machine only had processed crap.”

“Will crackers and cream cheese do?”

“I’d eat your cat right now.”

Ian cast him a murderous look before inviting him to the kitchen with a nod.

Phil was indeed ravenous. As soon as Ian set down the food in front of him, Phil tore the crackers box open, popped the cream cheese lid, and eagerly started working his way through them like a starved lion.

His relentless crunching and the way he’d occasionally lick some dip off his fingers, with a side of quite obscene throaty moans, were so mesmerising that Ian forgot about the books and all the questions that had been bugging him since the night before.

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Phil munching with gusto was a delight to behold, especially knowing how much he struggled with appetite. But the list of delightful things went on and on.

Phil going to the gym.

Phil getting a bike so he could explore the city.

Phil writing again.

Phil smiling more and more every day.

Ian's breath hitched.

Phil smiling.

His ultimate weakness.

One didn't get crow's feet by being a gloomy sourpuss all his life.

Phil's wrinkles said he liked smiling and being a part of his journey in reclaiming that part of himself was an honour Ian didn't take for granted.

And Phil was smiling now, rambling about how good the cream cheese was and how sore his muscles and joints were after just a couple of hours of embarrassingly basic weight lifting.

"It'll get better," Ian promised. "Consistency's the key."

“I know,” said Phil, popping a whole cracker into his mouth. “I’m trying,” he added, chomping all on one side. He suddenly stopped mid-chew, glancing down at the food, then up at Ian. “Sorry, did you want some?”

Ian shook his head reassuringly. He felt like all of him was melting into warm, gooey mush, and was all too aware of the besotted grin pulling at his cheeks. Thankfully, Phil was too preoccupied with filling his belly to notice.

Cracker. Dip. Mouth.

Cracker. Dip. Mouth.

Cracker. Dip. Mouth.

“You’re staring,” Phil grumbled in between chomps.

“You’re puttin’ on a show.” Cracker. Dip. Mouth. “Leave some room for dinner. What’s Abigail goin’ to say?”

Cracker. “Oh, she’s in Edinburgh, so…” Dip. Mouth. “Didn’t you have questions? ”

The questions, right. Ian had completely forgotten about those. They didn’t seem so important now. He would’ve been more than happy to just keep watching Phil wolf down crackers and cream cheese like they were the world’s greatest delicacy.

“So, in the epilogue,” he said, “Alba tells Beauchamp the sunflowers are from her boyfriend, but that’s because she doesn’t trust him. They aren’t actually from Paul, right?”

Cracker. Dip. “What makes you think that?” Mouth.

Ian made a face. “That prissy cunt buying sunflowers ? He would’ve bought the worst kind. Probably red roses.”

“Very observant.”

“It was her brother, wasn’t it?”

“Who knows?” Cracker. Smirk. “Read the books and you’ll find out.”

“And the hot doctor who laughed at Alba’s joke about her leg.... There was definitely something there.”

“Can’t exclude that.” Dip. Mouth.

Ian snorted. “How long do I have to suffer before they get together?”

“Who says they will?” The seraphic flutter of Phil’s eyelashes wouldn’t have been half as infuriating if it hadn’t also been so allusive.

“They had a whole three scenes together and in all of them their chemistry was through the roof. I can take a hint.”

“Can you?”

“Ye’re doin’ my nut in, old man.”

“Sorry, don’t speak Glaswegian.”

“Ach. After months here you still haven’t learned the basics...”

Phil smirked again. Cracker. Dip. “Just read the books, big boy.” Mouth.

Mouth.

Ian needed to stop staring at his mouth. He pulled the two books Phil had brought him to the centre of the table. “You going to sign these for me? ”

Phil sucked some cream cheese off his thumb and index finger. “Already have.”

Curious, Ian opened the book on top, Moon Lie , second in the series.

‘To the obnoxious guy who ran into me at the park. Suffer.’

“I will,” Ian lamented, “if Alba doesn’t dump that prick.” Then he opened Star Captor , the final volume of the trilogy, and this time the dedication prompted a smile out of him: ‘To my daughter’s other dad. You’re gonna like this one.’

“Is this a spoiler?”

“Maybe.” Cracker... No dip. Phil glanced down at the empty tub and Ian cackled at his disappointment.

“There’s more in the fridge.”

Phil licked his fingers again , looking at the devastation he’d left on the table: only cracker crumbs left in the box and barely a smudge of cream cheese at the bottom of the plastic tub.

“I’ll deplete your pantry if you enable me.”

“Still hungry?”

“Fucking starving.”

Ian bit the inside of his cheek. What he was considering was a bad idea.

Bad, bad idea. He and Phil, alone again...

It was thin ice to trample on so carelessly.

But despite claiming he was immune to it, Phil looked lonely and Ian was only human: he was learning every day that there was very little he wasn't willing to do for that kicked puppy look.

“Do you like thai ?”

\* \* \*

They could've had the food delivered, but Ian proposed a stroll to the restaurant. He needed to move and be somewhere his forbidden daydreams would stay put. Being home with Phil made him want things he couldn't have.

They walked side by side in the cool breeze of dusk, comfortable with their closeness, even when they swayed into each other .

“How was the gym?” Ian probed. Phil's uneven gait gave away how tired he was, but his hands were leaning slackly in the pockets of the White Sox jacket, back up straight and proud.

“Good. I mean, I'm wrecked , but...” A little self-conscious laugh. “Feels good. My shrink says post-workout dopamine can do wonders for depression, long term. If I manage to stick to a regular schedule, we're gonna try to taper the drugs and see how it goes.”

Ian halted in the middle of the pavement. Phil did too, with a couple of steps of delay,



and turned back around to check on him. Half of Ian's mouth was curved up while inside a cocktail of emotions made him lightheaded.

"That's great news."

"Isn't it? After two years of downs, we're finally seeing an up. It's not much, but it's something, right?"

"Not much my arse. What did we say about giving yourself flowers when they're due?"

"Alright, alright." Phil broke into a shy, touched grin. "I'll admit I'm kinda stoked."

"You better be." They resumed walking. "Did you tell Abigail?"

An invisible weight set on Phil's shoulders. "Not yet. Don't wanna get her hopes up in case I screw up. I've already got enough to atone for."

Ian scoffed. "Like what?"

A blue shadow darkened Phil's expression. "Never mind, I just..." His eyes shut as a clipped sigh grazed up his throat. "Everything's so fucked up these days."

"You just said you're doin' better."

"Yeah." Phil's puff of laughter was meek and spiritless. "The two things are related, funnily enough."

"I'm confused."

"Oh, me too, believe me. Never been so fucking confused in my life." Sad hazel eyes

locked into Ian's, knocking the air out of his lungs.

“Want to talk about it? ”

Phil inhaled sharply, like a snuffle, but angrier. “If we talk about it, shit gets real.”

A wary glance laden with guilt and a silent apology laid on Ian, who let his gaze fall to the ground with an understanding nod.

His heart was pumping faster against his ribs, deafening in his ears.

He thought he knew what this was about and Phil was right: if they talked about it, there was no way back.

They got spring rolls to go, which Phil insisted on paying for, and walked back to the flat under a powdery drizzle.

The atmosphere was still comfortable as they ate and chatted about the books, but something was off.

The easiness was dented, festering at the edges, spoiled by a sentiment that couldn't stay buried for much longer without blowing up in their faces.

“I think,” said Phil, leaning back in the chair with his hands contentedly splayed over his full belly, “these were the best spring rolls I've ever had.”

Ian arched an eyebrow. “You scoffed them down so fast I doubt you even tasted them.” He still had a roll in his dish and pushed it towards Phil, who eyed it hesitantly. Ian retreated his hand. “Take it. I'm full.”

“You're not full, you just want me to have it.”

“Ach. No foolin’ you, is there?”

Phil scowled at Ian’s devilish smirk, but, instead of arguing, he grabbed the roll and bit a huge chunk off it. “Fuck you,” he mumbled with a full mouth, then washed the morsel down with what was left of his Pepsi. “I’d kill for a beer right now.”

Ian didn’t need to be told twice. He reached back to the fridge and pulled out two cans, placing one in front of Phil and popping the other for himself.

“Non-alcoholic,” he clarified, then took a sip with a grimace. “Tastes like cold pish.”

Phil picked up his can, studied it, swiping a thumb over the ‘0.0’ indication. “Why did you even buy it?”

Good question. Ian had seen it at Sainsbury’s and had put a six-pack in the trolley without giving it much thought.

It had been only after putting it away in his fridge that he’d realised he could do more, so he’d gone down to the pub and told — told , not asked — Cal to stock up some zero-alcohol beer.

Cal had gawked at him like he thought he was kidding, but when Ian hadn’t budged he’d just waved him off, grumbling ‘Aye, aye, whatever!’

Slumped in his chair, Ian tilted his head. “For you,” he said in a condescending tone that implicitly added ‘you prick’ . “Why else would I buy this shite?”

“Son of a bitch,” Phil chuckled under his breath.

There they were, the charming crow’s feet that Ian was constantly looking out for, the telltale sign of the sincerity of Phil’s smiles.

Still transfixed on the beer, Phil bit his lip, charily gazing up at Ian through his eyelashes.

“You know, this would be so much easier for me if you quit being so annoyingly wholesome.”

“What would?”

“Pretending.”

In the silence that fell afterwards, the power of that declaration gashed into Ian’s chest like a claw, tearing through every layer of self-deception he’d so carefully built to restrain those feelings he knew could never see the light of day and which were now threatening to bleed out.

All Ian could do was stuff more denial into the gaping wound and pray it held.

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Unaware of the upheaval he'd caused, Phil snapped the can open and raised it to his lips, taking a large swig and granting himself a moment to savour it, then took another one, and another.

"Ah, that's good. Don't care what you think," he said before Ian could beg to differ. "I love it. Gimme ten more."

"At least I don't have to worry about you getting drunk," Ian tried to joke, but the comment obtained the opposite effect of a joke.

"I wish I could get drunk," said Phil, suddenly sombre.

"I could blame it on the alcohol. I could spew out all the things I'm holding back, get this crushing weight off my chest and just brush it off as drunken nonsense, conscience clear.

I could..." The can cracked in his hand. "I could kiss you and pretend I don't remember. "

The chair shrieked and tumbled to the ground as Ian bolted up to his feet. The noise was deafening, but not nearly as much as the lingering echo of Phil's words — words he'd dreamt to hear in some more cinematic variation, but he'd firmly believed would never be more than a delusional fantasy.

Phil licked his lips with a sniff, looking miserable and exhausted. His throat bobbed when his eyes lifted up on Ian, glassy and strained with emotion. "Do you feel it, too?" he asked in a trembling whisper that crumbled towards the end, losing all

colour. “Is it killing you, too?”

Ian couldn't breathe. There was a knot in his throat and the pain in his chest was sinking its talons deeper and deeper, tearing through all his defences.

From where he was standing, he could see the hope slowly draining out of the gleam in Phil's eyes, morphing into a grief Ian couldn't bear to see.

He turned his back to it, to everything it represented, with hands clenched into fists.

“We can't have this conversation, Phil.”

The dam was cracking. All the denial in the world couldn't stop the flood from breaking through now.

The creak of the chair pushing back told him Phil had stood up before he sensed him behind himself.

“Ian.” The sound of his name sounded like a prayer. “I know it's not just me.”

The blow came down without any mercy, forcing Ian to close his eyes to withstand it. He had to hang on tooth and nail to his honour to resist the urge to pull Phil into his arms and hold him until it hurt. Even though everything was already hurting.

When he found the strength to turn back around, he braced for the punch of Phil's pleading look, but nothing could have prepared him for that yearning agony riddled with guilt. It was like looking into a mirror of how he felt inside.

“This can't happen, Handsome,” he murmured.

Phil swallowed. “I know.”

“You have a fiancée — a lovely one.”

“I know .”

“Then stop lookin’ at me like that.”

“I wish I could.”

One thing Ian had never doubted, not even for a split second, was Phil’s devotion to Abigail. He still didn’t. And yet those beautiful, kind eyes he was such a goner for oozed love while scrutinising him so close up he could’ve counted the green specks in them one by one.

Phil took a bold step forward. Ian couldn’t move.

“Get out my face before I do something we’d both regret,” he warned, even though every inch in his body was burning to reach out and touch . He wanted it too much — just to hold him, to feel him. Just once.

Just once...

He tried to back away, but Phil shakily fisted his hoodie as if seeking support and drew him back to himself with a begging look.

“Please, just... just give me a minute.”

It wasn’t a sin. Hugs weren’t kisses. Hugs weren’t sex. They were allowed. They could have this. Just this. Just one innocent thing. It wouldn’t hurt anyone.

Following an ancestral instinct, Ian wrapped his arms around Phil, letting him rest his head on his shoulder until the tension melted from his body.

But even then, even after Phil went limp and exhaled a breath of immense relief, Ian didn't — couldn't let go.

This single minute might be all they'd ever get.

He cradled Phil's face into his palm, stroking the bristly beard, the affection thrumming fierce and violent in his ribcage.

Phil just closed his eyes and leaned into his touch, fingertips digging into Ian's pecs, quietly absorbing the comfort of the embrace.

'I love you,' Ian thought, drinking in the trusting abandonment of Phil's gesture.

In that blind trust he found the same desperate longing that was devouring him from the inside.

It would've been so easy to get used to this — Phil's breath upon his chest, their bodies moulded into one another, and the peace, the completion, the feeling of all the jumbled pieces Ian was made of finally clicking into place.

He couldn't fathom how something that felt so natural and simple could be so impossible.

He took a deep breath, chin pressing against the side of Phil's head and, tapping into his last vestige of self-control, he murmured: "You should go."

Phil sighed in surrender. "Yeah." He lingered a few more seconds, rubbing his cheek against Ian's hoodie one last time, then pliantly stepped back. He cleared his throat. "See you at the fountain at 6?"

"Aye."



An unspoken agreement was signed with that: they would never talk about this.

Ian escorted Phil to the door. Even Kibble crawled out of her hiding place to say goodnight, rubbing herself on Phil's shins until he crouched down to give her a proper scratch between the ears.

Duffel bag in place, beanie on his head, Phil took the bike and the helmet and jogged down the three steps leading down to the street. He stopped there, staring at the scratches on the helmet in his hands, and cast a mournful look back at the door.

"In another life—"

"We don't have another life, Phil."

Phil's lips tightened. "In another life," he said, "maybe I'd meet you first."

### PHIL

When Phil was little, he had been obsessed with stories where unattractive or scary characters met someone who could see through their appearance and love them for who they were.

Odd fascination for a child who'd always been good-looking, so much so that everyone had just assumed he had some sort of saviour complex that made him identify with the hero who rescued the monster.

In truth, the more he grew up, the more he felt like he had the opposite problem: people liked him for how he looked and more often than not ended up disliking his personality.

He'd learned at a very young age to be the person that strangers expected to find beneath his looks: confident, charismatic, easy to be around and talk to.

What people couldn't see was how hard it was for Phil to be that person.

It was like walking around with a one-hundred-pound weight around his neck: he was strong enough to do it, but after a few days the collapse was inevitable.

The longer he carried that weight, the longer it took to recover, and it was getting harder as he aged.

That was what had happened when he'd become a bestselling author practically overnight.

The jump from Mr Nobody to some kind of celebrity had knocked him off his chair at home, throwing him into a flurry of signing sessions, interviews, and public events, and Phil hadn't been the same since.

Meeting Abby had been providential: she'd sustained him in the most stressful periods, held his hand when he'd struggled with the speed and the franticness of his new life, and had showered him with all the unconditional love Phil had never received from his parents.

An angel, that was what Abby was, and Phil would be forever blessed to have her.

Sometimes, however, it was hard to keep up with her.

Abby felt and lived things in ways Phil wasn't capable of, even before the burnout and the medication.

They were like a bird and a fish: engineered differently, living in different worlds, swimming along the water surface to be together.

It didn't feel like that with Ian.

Ian was like Phil, an underwater creature, a solitary spirit thriving in the dark peace of deep waters, happy in his own company, free to be himself without justifying it to anyone.

Phil envied him. Freedom was a luxury not many people had.

Phil wasn't so hypocritical to consider himself a victim in society: he had wealth, a healthy body, a safe, cosy home to return to at the end of the day, a fiancée who loved him and accepted him for who he was.

He was lucky. He just had no idea it was possible to feel so physically and emotionally in tune with someone until he started flirting with a stranger he'd run into at the park.

Only that stranger wasn't a stranger any more, and Phil's initial confusion about the peculiar undertones of their friendship was fading, leaving him to deal with an uncomfortable certainty he had no hope to escape.

And yet, as they sat here, in Ian's tiny kitchen, eating greasy takeaway straight out of the box, life felt wonderfully simple .

"I think these were the best spring rolls I've ever had," he said, contentedly leaning back in his chair .

Ian arched an eyebrow at him. "You scoffed them down so fast I doubt you even tasted them." He pushed his dish towards Phil. There was still a roll in it. "Take it. I'm full."

Phil knew it was a lie. He knew how much Ian could eat and a portion of spring rolls was nothing but a snack to a mountain of a man like him.

He eyed the dish, then Ian. "You're not full. You just want me to have it."

The dimples appeared before the coarse sound of Ian's throaty laughter. "Ach. No foolin' you, is there?"

This was how they communicated: care disguised as jokes, fondness as good-natured mockery.

And because Phil knew what Ian was doing, he grabbed the roll and made a big show of sinking his teeth into it, like he was just doing Ian a favour.

“Fuck you,” he mumbled as he chewed, then hid his touched half grin under a sip of Pepsi. “I’d kill for a beer right now.”

Ian turned back to open the fridge that was right behind him. One second later there was a can of beer sitting in front of Phil and another in Ian’s hand.

“Non-alcoholic,” said Ian. He grimaced after one swig. “Tastes like cold pish.”

There was an unmistakable ‘0.0’ indication on the front, right below the brand name.

“Why did you even buy it?”

Ian licked his lips and a couple of droplets off his beard, head tilting to one side. “For you. Why else would I buy this shite?”

“Son of a bitch.” A touched chuckle threatened to break Phil’s phoney tough facade.

It was just a beer. A stupid can of non-alcoholic beer that would’ve never found its way into Ian’s house if Phil hadn’t entered it first. He felt that throbbing ache in his chest again, the one he’d felt when Ian had held him through the panic attack and which had been growing out of control since.

In this very moment, ignoring everything that existed outside of this room, Phil felt happy .

As he sat here, staring at the can of beer like it was the greatest gift one could aspire to receive, bubbles of bliss were popping under his sternum, a funny tickling sensation he couldn’t seem to get accustomed to.

He bit his lip, barely daring to peer up at Ian.

“You know,” he said with a nonchalance that didn’t match the sudden tightness in his chest, “this would be so much easier for me if you quit being so annoyingly wholesome.”

“What would?” asked Ian cluelessly.

“Pretending.”

Phil wanted to take it back the moment the word rolled out of his mouth, but it was too late. He couldn’t have held it in for much longer, anyway.

Ian said nothing, studying him instead, unreadable, the colour of his irises brought out by the bright blue of the hoodie he wore.

Phil could smell his shower gel from where he was.

He’d carried it on his own skin. It had infused in his clothes, in his hair.

Washing it away had been like losing a comfort he didn’t know he needed until it was gone.

A sudden thirst convinced him to finally open the can.

He took a few swigs, relishing the bitter taste.

Perhaps it’d been too long since he’d had a real beer, but he couldn’t find any difference.

“Ah, that’s good.” He pointed a warning finger at Ian.

“Don’t care what you think. I love it. Gimme ten more. ”

For a moment Ian looked like he was about to turn back and actually pull out ten more cans from the fridge. It wouldn't have been surprising if he had.

“At least I don't have to worry about you getting drunk.”

“I wish I could get drunk,” said Phil sourly.

“I could blame it on the alcohol. I could spew out all the things I'm holding back, get this crushing weight off my chest, and just brush it off as drunken nonsense, conscience clear.

I could...” The can cracked in his hand. “I could kiss you and pretend I don't remember. ”

He was startled by the deafening shriek of Ian's chair getting shoved back as Ian sprang up to his feet, chest swelling with a sharp inhale — a reaction that was hard to interpret for Phil, who didn't even know what his own feelings were doing.

He couldn't feel his heartbeat any more.

A wet patina was blurring his sight. All he had was the silence and the mounting fear of having just ruined everything for good.

At this point, it was go big or go home.

“Do you feel it, too?” he asked, his voice failing him mid sentence. Gazing up at Ian felt like pressing a blade against his own pulse, but he gulped, and said it anyway. “Is it killing you, too?”

Ian's darkening face hurt, but not nearly as much as him turning away with hands clenched into fists.

“We can’t have this conversation, Phil.”

Phil’s eyebrows knit up. It was like a door had just slammed shut, but with so much violence that it had bounced back, wide open.

He rose to his feet and walked up to the broad wall of Ian’s back. His palms were sweating.

“Ian,” he whispered, a timid supplication. “I know it’s not just me.”

He could see the tension creeping into Ian’s posture, could feel it in how slowly Ian turned around and raised his eyes on him. A bewildering blend of anger and sadness shone in them.

“This can’t happen, Handsome.”

As if Phil needed a reminder.

“I know.”

“You have a fiancée — a lovely one.”

“I know .”

The sadness in Ian’s eyes became unbearable. “Then stop lookin’ at me like that.”

Phil almost wanted to laugh. “I wish I could.” He took a bold step forward. Ian didn’t budge, like an injured animal who didn’t have the strength to run, and surveyed Phil with a grief-stricken expression.

“Get out my face before I do something we’d both regret.”



Do it , cried an anguished voice inside Phil. Do it before I do. Let me blame you. I'll tell myself I couldn't stop you. The guilt won't bite so hard.

Ian took a tentative step back, but Phil's body felt too heavy for his legs. He clung to Ian's hoodie, leaning into him for dear life. He just wanted to get lost in that soothing warmth again. Just that. Just for a moment.

"Please," he begged. "Just... just give me a minute."

Ian's gentle touch prepared him for rejection.

He squeezed his eyes, dizzy and desperate, but then the most wondrous thing happened and within a blink he was getting engulfed into strong arms that took his breath away and the shaking in his limbs with it.

Phil's muscles went slack, relief and a joy he couldn't describe shooting through his veins, healing a million little wounds Phil had lived with for years, thinking they were just an inherent part of himself.

He shattered completely when Ian's large hand came to cup his face in a caress so hauntingly tender that something warm spilled out of the corners of Phil's eyes, dampening the fabric beneath.

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*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:03 am*

He wanted to laugh at himself: a grown man basking in another man's embrace like a starving beggar hanging on to a scrap of food. Phil was no beggar. He had more than most human beings could dream of. He shouldn't feel so starved. He shouldn't feel so nourished by Ian's closeness.

They stayed like that for a long while, not a movement, not a sound uttered, both aware that they would never get anything more than this. Something stolen. Something they could never talk about.

But for those few minutes, it was good.

Then Ian's hot breath skimmed Phil's ear and his beard scratched his cheek, and Phil didn't need him to mutter 'You should go' to know it was over.

"Yeah." He wiped his wet cheek into Ian's hoodie before letting go. It was torture, but Phil made himself do it, dusting the melancholy off by doing his best to pretend the loss of Ian's arms around himself wasn't killing him a little. "See you at the fountain at 6?"

"Aye."

That was it. Case closed, back to normalcy. No questions. The stolen moment they'd shared would be a page ripped out of a journal, a piece no one would ever know was missing .

While Phil collected his stuff in the entryway, Kibble appeared out of nowhere and demanded goodnight pets, which Phil happily provided. He had the impression this

cat understood more about him than most of his acquaintances ever had.

He took the bike down the short flight of stairs, then slipped the helmet off the handlebar.

The scratches on the side were nasty. Without it, the fall would've scraped Phil's scalp down to the bone, maybe worse.

In that moment, when his head had hit the ground, his first thought had been that Ian was still taking care of him, even from afar, and that realisation had brought a smile to his lips.

He gazed back to the door: Ian was standing there with Kibble in his arms, her kneading paws partially hiding the dark stains Phil had left in the hoodie.

It was right there, the thing he was missing, the remedy to the void that was consuming him from the inside.

But Phil couldn't say what he wanted to say, so he shoved it back as a gust of cold wind spread goosebumps all over his skin.

"In another life—" he began, but Ian knowingly caught his eye.

"We don't have another life, Phil."

They didn't.

But dreaming cost nothing.

"In another life," Phil stated more firmly, despite the searing pain in his heart, "maybe I'd meet you first."

Walking away felt like fighting gravity, but then he heard Ian's door close, locking away the temptation luring him back, and Phil was finally able to mount on his bike and put some distance between himself and the cause of his inner torment.

Maybe I'd meet you first.

It rang in his ears all the way home, as he pedalled through the city and its lights, the cool wind blowing in his face, all sounds and noises around him cancelled by the loudness of the echo of that one thought.

Maybe I'd meet you first.

Maybe I'd meet you first.

Maybe I'd meet you first .

But he couldn't come up with a single scenario where he and Ian could've realistically met without a link to bridge the abyss between their separate existences.

Phil would've never left Chicago on his own volition, let alone the US.

Abby had crossed the pond to find him. He couldn't imagine anything bringing him to Scotland without her.

He wasn't big in Europe, not enough for his publisher to invest in flying him here for a promotional tour.

He never would've met Ian without Abby.

\* \* \*

One of his favourite aspects of the UK was that everything was smaller and less garish here: even one of the biggest malls in Glasgow seemed modest compared to the ones he was used to.

It would've bothered many Americans, but Phil was very much okay with the downsizing, especially when he and Abby went out for one of their massive grocery hauls.

To Abby, grocery shopping was as fun as shopping for clothes, but she didn't have much time for it and Phil wasn't overly fond on going on his own, so once a month they took the car and drove to Silverburn to stock up as much food and household necessities as they could, which unfortunately took hours.

The one good thing was that Abby always made sure to pencil it in on early Saturday mornings, meaning no crowds and no chaos.

They currently had two fully loaded carts and the list Phil had on his phone was entirely checked off, but, for a financial consultant, Abby had zero spending awareness.

She was every marketer's dream customer: an impulse buyer attracted to flashy, colourful things, quirky flavours, and any novelty in sight.

The exact opposite of Phil, who could've happily lived on the same five foods for the rest of his life.

They were in the juices aisle and Abby had stacked three bottles of dragon fruit juice into her cart before inspecting the shelves for inspiration.

Phil loved watching her: her face was always scrunched up in concentration, eyes sparkling with excitement, like a little girl in a candy store.

When the items were too high for her to reach, she tried jumping for them first, and then turned to Phil for assistance.

He was glad he could make good use of his height, especially because since meeting Ian he'd sort of become the short one.

While picking up a bottle from the top shelf for Abby, Phil caught a familiar picture a couple of shelves below and stopped for a second to stare at it longingly.

“God, I miss my grapefruit juice.”

He hadn't touched grapefruit or anything with grapefruit in it in years because some chemicals in it interfered with his medication.

As a former pink grapefruit juice addict, going cold turkey on it hadn't been easy: since college, most of his hydration and vitamins had come from it and sweeter alternatives like orange weren't as satisfying to drink.

Abby checked the carton in front of Phil, her pretty nose scrunching up at the '100% organic grapefruit' banner on the label. “What about this one?” She picked a different item on the left. “Grapefruit flavour . It's safe. This so-called juice has never seen a grapefruit in its sorry life.”

Phil took it from her, turned it around to take a better look at it, then his nose scrunched, too. “Can't believe you're encouraging me to drink a cocktail of chemicals and colourants.”

Abby sympathetically curled two fingers under his chin. “If you can't have the real deal, you might as well try the next best thing.”

Phil didn't want the next best thing . Didn't want an artificial concoction fabricated to

trick his taste buds to believe it was what he wanted. Perhaps it'd have worked if he hadn't had the real deal first, but if he couldn't have grapefruit, he'd rather have nothing at all.

"I'm not drinking this junk." He set the carton back on the shelf. "Are we done here?"

Harsh. Very unnecessarily so. It was the thing he hated most about his mood swings: he could tell he was overreacting and treating people unfairly, but he couldn't stop himself.

There was a selfish little voice in the back of his head constantly whispering to him: 'You're suffering. Let them suffer, too.'

That wasn't him. He'd never wanted anyone to suffer because of him — anyone being Abby, because she was the only one who had stuck around when even Phil had given up on himself, the one who never took his fits of rage personally and gave him space without demanding answers or apologies, even when many were due.

And Phil still had the nerve to sleep with her every night, and kiss her good morning, and sit by her as she drove them home from the mall, brimming with feelings for somebody else, and say nothing.

Because he was a coward.

Because being honest with Abby about what he felt for Ian would mean losing her, and he couldn't imagine living without her. Abby was his heart, his emotional compass, the one whose mere proximity helped him keep his functional adult disguise on and bear the weight of it.

He couldn't lose Abby.

But he couldn't keep such a cumbersome secret from her either.

They were unusually quiet while putting the groceries away. Phil was being extra meticulous, angling every item to face forward, evenly distanced from one another. He hadn't paid any attention to that kind of thing in a long while and Abby, of course, didn't miss it.

"Everything alright?"

"Sure."

He went on lining up the tomato sauce cans, then started with the beans and the chickpeas.

Abby put a hand on his arm. "Phil."

"What?" he snapped. Abby's eyes narrowed at him in reproach. As tiny as she was, she had a natural talent for looking imposing.

"You've been weird lately. You were doing so well, and now it's like you're regressing to—"

"I'm fine," Phil cut short. "Just... coping."

"With what?"

"Scotland."

Abby blinked. "Scotland."

"Yeah."



It didn't explain anything, but Abby understood he wasn't in the mood for talking.

"Okay." She kissed him on the cheek and left him alone in the pantry, just him and his demons and twenty-four cans of Pepsi to arrange.

He had an appointment with Ian in the afternoon to make up with the run they'd skipped in the morning.

In many ways, Ian was just like Abby: intuitive and responsive to the abrupt shifts in Phil's mood, always willing to roll with whatever Phil brought to the table on any given day.

If Phil was chatty, they chatted; if Phil was cranky, Ian would attempt a joke or two and then establish whether it was the right tactic or not according to Phil's reaction.

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:03 am*

Today was a grumpy day. They met at the fountain and greeted each other with very manly nods before diving straight into a warm-up jog.

Phil was very grateful to the autumnal temperature for forcing Ian to go from sleeveless tops to full hoodies.

It was much less distracting and more forgiving to Phil's sensitivity .

The last time Ian had stripped his t-shirt off to give himself a freshen up under the fountain, Phil had had to fake a cramp to sit down and hide the bulge in his shorts.

He didn't know why a shirtless man had this effect on him and his gorgeous naked girlfriend didn't.

If he had to be completely honest, with Abby he had never felt the ferocious drive he felt with Ian.

The first time he'd slept with her had been after an awful date where nothing had turned out right: the restaurant had lost their reservation, the rebound restaurant had sucked, and the fireworks they'd planned to watch on a blanket at the park had been cancelled because of a storm.

Back at Abby's place, they'd thrown their rain-drenched clothes into the drier, planning to have a drink to warm themselves up, but they'd ended up making love on top of the washing machine instead.

Thinking back of that night, Phil couldn't recall any heat pooling in his crotch,

clouding his sanity.

What he could remember was the overwhelming love he'd felt while kissing Abby and how natural it had felt to go all the way with her .

That was a sentiment he couldn't seem to retrieve, no matter how hard he tried.

The love was still there, bigger and stronger than ever, but it lacked that fiery intensity that took over him when he was around Ian.

Even something as innocent as a pat on the back could trigger an immediate response in Phil's body, which was thrilling, per se, but nonetheless confusing.

Back home, under the shower, he wondered what it'd feel like to have Ian touching him the way he craved to be touched, kissing his neck, his shoulders, his lips...

It must be funny to kiss someone who had a beard. Phil often imagined splaying his hands on Ian's chest and letting them explore the hefty pecs, stroking the unfamiliar texture of the dark hair, fondling every inch of muscles while Ian—

He stifled a moan, pressing his forehead against the glass. He couldn't go on like this.

His knees were still wobbly and his sight blurry when he sneaked out of the bathroom.

Abby was downstairs, but his guilty conscience was unforgiving, keeping him on his toes even if he had no reason to be.

After slipping on a pair of joggers and a sweatshirt, he joined Abby in the living room, where everything was ready for their typical Saturday night dinner: pizza and fries in front of a random trash movie on Netflix.

“Smells good in here,” he said, peering into the pizza box to check the toppings: grilled vegetables and mushrooms. A slice was already missing.

“I swear it was delivered like that!” Abby exclaimed.

Phil smirked. “Poor delivery guy must’ve been hungry.”

He sat down on the couch with the pizza box as Abby snuggled up at his side, pulling the top of the box to her lap in lieu of a tablecloth, and stole her second slice.

Phil didn’t catch the title of the movie, nor was he able to make out what it was about.

Despite his best efforts to be companionable, his mind was elsewhere.

That was, at least, until the two protagonists of the movie inevitably ended up in bed together.

He couldn’t see himself in the possessiveness of the man’s actions, in how rough and greedy he was in undressing and touching the woman everywhere.

But if it’d been a man?

No. Just any man wouldn’t have worked.

“Don’t you miss it?”

The words tumbled out of his mouth before he could stop them, but didn’t shock Abby as much as they shocked him. Without tearing her eyes off the screen, she stuffed a couple fries into her mouth and asked: “What?”

“Sex.”

Abby chewed calmly. “Not really. I can take care of myself just fine.”

Such an Abby response. Disarming frankness was one of her countless qualities — something else she and Ian had in common.

The same couldn’t be said about Phil, who, after four decades of people pleasing, still had a hard time choosing honesty over the other person’s comfort.

That was actually what had drawn him to Abby in the first place: he felt safe with her, he didn’t have to tear everything she said apart to decipher the hidden meanings.

If she said yes, it was yes; if she said no, it was no.

If she said she didn’t miss sex, she didn’t miss it.

“Not even a little bit?”

“I’m not sure where you’re going with this.”

Phil wasn’t sure, either. “So we’re gonna get married and just skip marital duties?”

“Why not? We don’t even want children. I don’t see the problem here.”

“You don’t see the problem.”

“I really don’t.”

Phil closed the empty pizza box and tossed it on the coffee table. “We haven’t slept together in ages and you don’t see the problem.”

Now he was making it sound like it was her fault. What a hypocrite.

Unimpressed, Abby rested her head back on the cushion. “Is that a problem for you ?”

“No, but I don’t count, do I?” Too harsh, again.

“If it’s not an issue to either of us, the case is closed.” Abby countered Phil’s sceptical look with an impatient one. “Some couples don’t watch movies or play sports together... We don’t have sex. What’s the difference?”

“Are you comparing sex to a hobby?”

“Absolutely. Not everyone has it, not everyone likes it or likes it the same way. It’s a recreational activity like any other.”

A crooked grin tugged at Phil’s lips. That right there was the woman he loved: confident and no-bullshit, practical to the bone.

How could he tell her he had feelings for someone else? Someone he was seeing on a daily basis and she thought was his good friend — which wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t the whole truth, either.

Abby put a hand on his knee and stroked it comfortingly. “What’s going on, Phil?”

He held his breath. He cherished that — the tender intimacy of a simple caress, the sweetness of Abby’s kisses and her soothing hugs. He didn’t want to lose any of it. But he couldn’t live with all those lies rotting in the dark.

“I’m getting hard again.”

He let it out like a sigh, a thorn ripped out of his side, as if it was the opposite of good news. It didn’t compute right away.

“Oh?” Abby sat up, blinking a couple of times before the penny finally dropped.

“Oh, Phil!” She pulled him into a bone-crushing hug that infused an unspeakable happiness into him.

“That’s amazing!” she muttered against his earshell, stroking the nape of his neck.

They stayed like that for a minute, savouring the embrace, then Abby pulled back to take his face between her hands, pressing her lips to his forehead.

“I knew coming here was the right decision. We’re never going back to all that fancy frenzy. ”

Phil faltered. “I thought you’d want—”

A big, luminous smile stabbed his heart. “I want you to be happy and healthy, and you were neither in Chicago. ”

There had been a time he’d thought life in Chicago was good — his little life , made of trivial things, unpretentious. But now that he was taking his first bumbling steps here in Glasgow he felt like, for the first time, he was in the right place at the right time.

He brushed Abby’s hair behind her ears and granted himself a minute to contemplate his luck.

This woman had done so much for him without ever expecting anything in return.

She took his highs and lows with a smile, put up with his bullshit even when all he deserved was a slap, gave him all the space and time he needed, no questions asked.

She was one of a kind and he still couldn't believe they had found each other in the whole wide world.

He kissed her, a light, soft brush upon her lips, which stretched out into a smile as she kissed him back, just as softly.

He'd missed this, this kind of spontaneous intimacy he'd denied them both out of fear it'd evolve into something he couldn't give.

But Abby would never force him and what she was offering him was exactly what he needed, nothing less, nothing more: just a kiss full of love and her priceless, soul-healing warmth.

Abby pulled back to run a hand through his hair, smoothing it back. "I'm sorry I was too self-absorbed to see that our old lifestyle was taking such a toll on you."

"It's not your fault. I should've done something when I realised I was struggling."

"Dwelling on the past is no use. We need to focus on the present, and you know what? Your news deserves a celebration." With one last peck, Abby left him on the couch and padded out of the room, returning shortly after with two cans in her hands. She placed one in front of Phil.

"A little bird told me you like it."

It was beer, the non-alcoholic one he'd had with Ian.

"A little two-hundred-eighty-pound bird?"

Abby opened her can and took a nonchalant sip. "Maybe."



“You and Ian are besties now?”

“We happen to be very fond of the same old fool. ”

Phil’s heart did a funny thing, a shy leap in which affection and guilt battled to take over.

“Should I worry?” he tried to joke. “I can’t compete with a hot Scottish hunk.”

“Nonsense.” Abby opened the other can and placed it into his hands. “No one’s hotter than you.”

“You’re biased.”

“One-hundred percent.” Abby cuddled up against his side. Phil put an arm around her and they went back to the movie, whose plot he had completely lost track of by now.

He'd missed talking to Abby this openly.

He'd tried to keep his struggles and fears to himself since moving to Scotland, wishing to take as much of a load off her shoulders as possible.

She had more than enough to deal with: new workplace and new colleagues, new responsibilities, old friendships to rekindle, the frequent trips to London and Edinburgh...

She didn't need any other burden. But there were things that needed to be addressed.

"Abbs, if..." he began, holding his breath. "If everything goes back to functioning normally in my body, would it be okay if we... if things between us stayed as they are?"

Abby glanced up at him. "You mean platonic?"

"Yeah."

"Sure." Abby comfortingly rubbed a hand over his abs. "Are we still okay with physical displays of affection? I can stop if—"

"God, no," Phil interrupted her with a relieved laugh. He may not always be in the mood for it, but he couldn't have lived without hugs and kisses. "Please, keep that coming."

"Okay." Abby was in the middle of settling back against him when she suddenly

perked up again. “Hey, if you think you’re asexual or anything like that, that’s totally fine.”

Phil had considered that many times, but that was before Ian and his enticing everything had come around.

Phil’s dick twitched if he so much as thought about Ian’s sharp comebacks, let alone if he went as far as recalling the scratchy depth of his voice and his massive chest pressed against his back .

He’d never slept with a man, kissed one, or even had a single homosexual thought before meeting Ian.

He had no clue what it was like to have sex with a guy, although one way or another he’d gathered enough basics to imagine , but the thing was: the arousal he experienced around Ian was unprecedented.

He’d never felt that for anyone else, women or men.

The chemicals in his body acted differently when Ian was close, when he spoke, when he laughed...

It was like Phil was going through a second puberty and had to discover himself all over again. At forty -fucking- five .

“Definitely not asexual,” he choked, suddenly parched. “Just... confused.”

Abby nuzzled into the crook of his shoulder. “You’ll figure it out,” she said, her voice taming away all the restlessness simmering inside him. “And if you don’t, we’ll just stick to what you’re comfortable with.”

“You sure?”

Abby grabbed Phil’s chin and urged him to look at her. “I don’t need sex to be happy with you, P. J. Hanson.” A feathery peck graced his cheek.

The sword of Damocles hanging above Phil by a thread rattled, reminding him that withheld truths were lies, too.

He couldn’t live like this — pretending with Abby, pretending with Ian.

If the price for honesty was losing them both, so be it.

\* \* \*

They chatted much more during their runs than they did in the beginning. A matter of improved lung capacity on Phil’s side, surely, but it’d become almost a necessity more recently, as if they were both afraid of what could slip out of their mouths if they let silence take over for too long.

Phil knew all too well what would slip out of his mouth. It’d been lingering there for quite a while now, barely restrained, a mess of feelings and instincts that could’ve been summarised in three stupid little words that made him feel like a cheater just for rolling them around in his mind.

“... she was tiny. Barely ten. If I’d got my hands on him, I’d be in jail and he’d be six feet under. I’m not cut out to deal with these cunts.”

Phil fumbled, trying to remember what they’d been talking about before he’d zoned out. Some game Ian had just been to. There had been a brawl? Triggered by what?

“I don’t think I could survive a stadium,” he said. “Was invited to a couple of football

games, but it was VIP suite seats. I kinda liked that.”

“I’d take you to an Old Firm if I wanted to kill ye,” Ian huffed, thinking of the Glasgow Derby, where his beloved Celtic played their oldest, most bitter rivals, Rangers. “The pub is decent most of the time.”

“I liked that too.”

A dimple appeared in Ian’s cheek. His gaze was fixed ahead, minuscule drops of perspiration dotting his forehead.

Phil loved when he tied his hair back, baring the strong neck with all its mesmerising tendons and veins.

As someone who’d always appreciated feminine beauty, he should probably be at least slightly fazed by being so attracted to someone so masculine.

He found it hilarious that he wasn’t, not one bit. It felt too natural to bother him.

He wiped his sweaty face into his shoulder, puffing out a couple of deep breaths while checking his watch: optimal heart rate, 80% of the track completed.

If he’d told last year’s Phil he’d be able to run ten miles in an hour and a half, old Phil wouldn’t have even laughed.

He would’ve just said: ‘You mean we’re still ALIVE in a year?’

Alive and very much kicking.

Despite the highs and lows.

Before he had a chance to boast about the excellent pace they'd been keeping, a searing pain stabbed his left calf, forcing him to stop and bend over.

Ian instantly skidded to a halt. "What's up? "

"Cramp." Not an excuse, this time. Phil hated cramps. He wasn't great at keeping himself hydrated, or keeping himself in good condition in general, and he knew — he knew he should be drinking extra water in preparation for a run, but he never did. "Fuck, fuck, fuck. "

There was a bench not too far ahead, but he was in too much pain to limp to it.

The wet ground was the only viable option, he couldn't possibly stand one second longer.

He was about to ease himself down when, without a warning, Ian swept an arm under his knees and one around his back and lifted him up in an obnoxiously effortless bridal carry that actually managed to get a snort out of Phil.

"Fucking idiot."

"And yet I don't hear you complainin'."

"I'm depressed, not stupid."

Ian's eyes locked into Phil's with a sparkle that lost most of its mischief the moment Phil's arms looped around his neck for support.

Talk about Hallmark movie moments.

Clearing his throat, Ian marched towards the bench, dropping several jaws as they

passed a group of mothers pushing their strollers.

“If my husband could do that to me, we’d have way more than two weans,” said one of them, and the rest of the group cackled loudly, heads turning to gawk at Ian’s back.

Phil couldn’t blame them. He wasn’t a small man: he was tall and still fairly muscular despite letting himself go. Two-hundred pounds were a lot to carry, but Ian made it look like it was a piece of cake, which would’ve been swoon-worthy even if he hadn’t looked like that .

“Show-off,” Phil grumbled as he was carefully set down on the bench.

“Peasant. ”

Without ceremony, Ian went down on one knee, propped Phil’s foot to his thigh and curled a hand around the calf, prodding experimentally. Phil hissed, gripping the edge of the bench.

“Sorry.” Ian kneaded more carefully, strong fingers moving over the tense muscle in expert moves from the ankle and up, then down and up again, all accompanied by faint grunts of concentration. The cramp was gone within seconds. “Better?”

“No.” Ian glanced up, confused, hand stilling behind Phil’s knee. Phil cracked a smirk. “You’re gonna give me a boner if you keep that up.”

The mischievous sparkle rekindled in Ian’s eyes. “You like me that much?”

“Hate to break it to you like this, but the little guy was on strike for a long while before we met you.”

Ian’s grip twitched around Phil’s calf. “You couldn’t—”

“Nope,” Phil affably confirmed. “But I can now , so tone the gallantry down a notch, if you don’t mind. Jesus fuck, wipe that smug look off your face!” But that just obtained the opposite effect.

“Ye good here?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Ian plopped down on the bench, spreading his arms out along the backrest with a satisfied sigh.

All Phil wanted was to lean back, too, use Ian’s meaty arm as a pillow and close his eyes, forget about the world, what was right or wrong, and just live without thinking about consequences.

He chose to lean forward instead, propping his elbows on his knees while pulling up the neckline of his t-shirt to wipe his face into it.

“Is it always gonna be like this for us?” he asked then, staring at the ground. “Playing flirty boyfriends like it’s a game until it’s so good it starts hurting?”

Ian scoffed. “When doesn’t it hurt?”

Head thrown back, eyes shut, the only sign of bitterness was in the dry sharpness of his tone.

The truth in his words punched Phil so hard he was glad he was already sitting.

There were good things and bad things in life, and you grew up with the naive belief that good was good and bad was bad and that everything was that simple, black or white, but that wasn’t always the case.



Sometimes good things felt bad because they weren't meant to happen and there was nothing to do about it.

Impossibility made good things unbearable.

"If I didn't have Abby..."

Ian's eyes snapped open. "Don't ." His neck craning to shoot Phil a pleading look. "Don't do that."

"I need to know."

Ian pulled himself up and propped his elbows on his knees, too. A deep sigh got smothered by a large hand rubbing down his face. "What happened to 'in another life' ?"

"You were right. We don't have another life."

"What difference would it make?"

"I can't keep lying to Abby."

"Nothing happened. There's nothing to lie about."

Phil frowned. "That's the problem, though, isn't it? I can control my actions, but not how I feel."

It was apparent Ian hadn't expected such a direct admission, because he almost smiled at it. Almost .

"Then what? You're going to leave her for me?"

The disillusioned abrasiveness didn't scare Phil. He felt the same way. Grieved the same way.

“Would you have me if I did?”

“You're not fuckin' serious.”

“Answer the question.”

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:03 am*

Ian turned the other way with a terse sniff. “I was going to say I’d go to bloody hell and back for you, but we’re already there.”

As forlorn as the remark was, it spilled a sprinkle of sunlight into Phil’s chest.

“That’s... oddly romantic,” he couldn’t help but grin. “Not what I expected, but...”

“What’d ye want to hear? That Abigail’s the only thing standing between us? ’Cause she is.” A grimace twisted Ian’s mouth. “I hate myself for all the times I’ve wished she didn’t exist. But she does, and you love each other, so why are we even talkin’ about this?”

“I don’t know,” Phil had to admit. He hadn’t felt so lost and so frighteningly helpless. “I wish... I don’t even know. That things were... different.”

“I’m not worth losing her.”

“So you’re encouraging me to lie? ”

“Fuck’s sake, Phil...”

“It’s not your decision to make, is it?”

Ian’s shoulders sank, shrouded by sadness. “You can’t throw away four happy years and a whole future with Abigail just because you met some hot guy on a trip to Scotland.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m jeopardising my relationship with my fiancée because you’re hot, I’m that shallow!” Phil spat, anger now mounting inside him. If Ian thought this whole ordeal was just a horny crush, Phil had bad news for him.

“So what’s your plan? Ruin everythin’ for you two just to risk it all with me?”

“I don’t know.”

“We might not even work out, so why—”

Phil saw red. “You know that’s bullshit!” He jumped to his feet, fuming. There were many things he was willing to let slide, but not this. “Look me in the eye and tell me you don’t think we’d make each other happy.” He towered over Ian, nostrils flaring. “C’mon, big man! Lie to my face!”

Ian shook his head, refusing to look up.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

A cold breeze blew on their clammy skin.

“You love her,” said Ian glumly.

“It’s because I love her that I can’t keep this from her.

You, of all people, should understand.” Phil bit the inside of his cheek, afraid he’d overstepped his boundaries, but it was too late to take it back.

It was true, after all: Ian had been in Abby’s place with Jamie.

He knew how harmful hiding things from your partner was.

“She has a right to know her fiancé’s in love with someone else. ”

Also in love with someone else?

Semantics.

An abrupt silence fell. Even the wind stopped blowing, leaving an unnatural stillness around them. Motionless trees and their dead leaves, no one in sight. Just the two of them and an uncomfortable truth that should’ve stayed buried for the sake of a friendship that had become nothing but a facade.

Ian glanced up at Phil with an anguished expression of shock and betrayal and then cowardly away again, a sorrowful crease in his brow.

“What? Thought I didn’t have the guts to say it?

” Phil snarled. “ I love you. ” He spit it out venomously, as if he didn’t know it was as painful for Ian to hear as it was for him to pronounce.

But the pain was soothing. It was familiar.

It was comforting. Still better than the nothing Phil had lived with all this time.

“I love you,” he repeated, spite and desperation merging in the quaver of his voice. “ Look at me, Ian, for fuck’s sake! ”

Ian obeyed, his posture slack with resignation. “Stop.” Blue eyes watered turning to the harsh grey light. “Please, don’t make this any—”

“No. I want you to hear this, if it’s the last thing I get to say to you.” Phil’s hands clenched into fists. He wasn’t going to keep quiet any more, whatever the

consequences. “You were like an earthquake under my feet. Since the day we ran into each other—”

“Ach, so it’s mutual responsibility now?”

Phil had to stop for a second to shake off an unwitting laugh and start again.

“Since the day we ran into each other, you’ve been altering my fucking brain chemistry — you and that insufferable smart mouth of yours.

And you know what? Being alive finally tastes like something again.

So forgive me — for-fucking-give me — for latching onto the very first feeling in forever that wasn’t utter misery !

I’m sorry it turned into this . But you dragged me out of a very dark place and you can’t make me regret how I feel about you! Can’t make me regret— ”

The words died in his mouth as Ian sprang to his feet and grabbed his face, thumbs pressing into Phil’s lips to seal them.

“Shut. The fuck. Up.” Ian pressed their foreheads together, breathing heavily, as his grip tightened to the point Phil couldn’t move his jaw.

“Shut your fucking mouth, Phil, I swear to god.”

“Make me.”

The taunt, devoid of any real provocation, managed to extort a soundless laugh out of Ian, but it was the most broken and most heartbreaking laugh Phil had ever heard.

“You’re a bloody asshole.” Ian’s iron grip melted into a reverent touch, his hands moulding around Phil’s face, ever so gently, like handling an extremely fragile piece of glass.

“Don’t do this,” he implored. “Don’t fuck up the best thing in your life for something that might not work. You’re smarter than that.”

Phil granted Ian and himself a few seconds of respite, just to savour that unexpected closeness and soak up as much of its intimacy as he could, as long as he could. It was just another stolen moment, but, as wretched and forbidden as it was, Phil couldn’t see anything wrong in it.

It shouldn’t be like this.

Love shouldn’t compromise love.

Love shouldn’t outrule more love.

“I’m not smart,” he heaved out, holding on to Ian’s wrists for dear life. “I’m a fucking moron. A greedy, selfish son of a bitch who has two best things in his life and doesn’t know how to live without either of them.”

A reluctant laugh pushed through Ian’s teeth. He inched back from Phil but didn’t let go of him, which Phil was thankful for because he felt dizzy and wasn’t sure he’d be able to stand on his own.

“We really fucked up, eh?”

Phil bobbed his head as he gulped. “Big time.”

It didn’t feel fucked up though.

And that was the problem.

How could they feel bad about something that felt so right ?

How could they ignore that they'd found each other across the world, against all odds, and it'd felt like coming home?

"You wouldn't actually leave Abigail," Ian muttered, and by the tone it was unclear whether it was a statement or a question.

"No," Phil grudgingly admitted. "I could never."

It seemed cruel to say it so straight-facedly, but the answer pacified Ian, who let go of Phil's face to give his shoulders a firm squeeze.

"Good."

"But maybe she'll be the one to get rid of me, who knows." Phil shrugged. "Do you take sloppy seconds?"

The squeeze turned into a shove. "You're full of shit." Ian waited for Phil to breathe the dizziness away. It took a few tries. "Ready?"

"I could use some water."

Ian nodded. They'd left the fountain behind them, but it wasn't distant.

"C'mon. We still have two miles to go."



IAN

O f all the countless ill-advised decisions he'd made, befriending a prickly American stranger had seemed one of the most harmless.

A stranger carrying life-long fatigue in the bags under his eyes and the most dazzling charm in his smirk. And then there was that peculiar brand of sharp humour that was so in tune with Ian's own wit that it almost felt like a direct prolongation of it. The same pace. The same wavelength.

And while he was busy having fun with Phil's jokes and jibes, Phil's brokenness had crept under his skin, worming its way through Ian's defences, quiet and unnoticed, and had made a home for itself in his heart.

It'd lived there for months now. December was around the corner and Ian was dragging himself from rainy day to rainy day looking forward to when he'd see or even just hear from Phil again.

He was constantly craving it — the intellectual arousal only Phil's brain could elicit in his brain and the ego-puffing reward from the rueful chuckles he could wrangle out of Phil. Like a bloody addiction.

He was ridiculous.

And pathetic.

Kibble headbutted him for attention. She was purring like a tractor, loafed upon his

chest like a fur angel guarding his aching heart. The football match on TV was a blur of sounds and colours in front of him, a distraction as ineffective as the bottle of beer he'd been nursing since kick-off.

'I love you.'

That was not something he'd expected to hear.

Ever.

Ian didn't have any higher education, had never crossed Great Britain's borders, and never had friends, let alone partners, as accomplished and sophisticated as Abigail...

Next to Phil, even on Phil's worst days, Ian had always felt like a yokel, albeit not in a bad way.

Phil appreciated him for who he was and there hadn't been a moment Ian had felt inferior to him in any way, but it was impossible to ignore how different their backgrounds were.

Even in his daydreams, he'd never gone that far. Being loved by Phil felt like a stretch.

'It's like loving the stars themselves: you don't expect a sunset to admire you back.'

Where had he heard that rubbish? Some cheesy TV show probably.

Those three simple words had simultaneously felt like the greatest gift and a death sentence.

He hadn't said it back, despite desperately wanting to. What use would it be? Make

everything harder than it already was?

Perhaps he was just a coward.

Kibble let out a whiny mewl and rubbed herself against his beard again, over and over, her cold wet nose skimming over the tip of his own.

“You’re a nasty piece of work, lady,” he chortled under his breath as his hands came up to stroke her back.

Now that she had what she wanted, Kibble finally settled, stretching out her neck to rest her chin on his shoulder.

A sad smile tugged at his lips when he remembered this was how he’d held Phil in the kitchen. Just as carefully. Just as fondly.

‘Do you feel it, too? Is it killing you, too?’

Killing didn’t even begin to describe it.

Something that killed you wasn’t supposed to make you feel so burningly alive .

He never talked to anyone. Never liked anyone. Never clicked with anyone. Why did the one person he’d talked to and liked and clicked with have to be an engaged guy from overseas? What were the odds?

Fate had a questionable sense of humour.

He remembered falling in love with Jamie, how fast it’d been.

So fast it had made Ian’s head spin. Jamie had been like a magnet: outgoing, cocky,

bratty, undeniably attractive in all the ways Ian liked, and the fuse between meeting him and loving him had been short.

They'd been happy together long enough for Ian to start imagining the future they could have together, the things they could do.

Go to Spain on holiday. Move in together.

Adopt another cat. Spend Christmas in the Highlands in Ian's grandmother's cottage.

It had all gone up in smoke as fast as it had ignited.

With Phil, love had come so quietly Ian hadn't had any chance to detect it until it was too late.

He'd seen Phil asleep on his couch and he'd known.

He'd known by the way his entire body had yearned to lie beside him and keep him safe and warm.

The closest to it he'd allowed himself to do was get Phil blankets and leave Kibble to guard him.

A caress was all he'd dared and he'd regretted it the moment his fingers had touched Phil's hair.

Unforgivably foolish of him to let himself borrow a taste of something he knew he couldn't have.

But then, the morning after, a very emotionally distressed Phil had begged him for an embrace, and Ian hadn't been able to deny him it, even if that embrace had killed him

inside.

He'd held Phil once and his arms had felt empty and purposeless ever since .

Groaning inwardly, he lifted the bottle to his lips and drained the remaining beer, then draped his arm over his eyes, groaning again, this time out loud.

He was too old to pine for love.

Twenty-something-year-old Ian had been convinced he'd be married by now.

He preferred girls back then, simply because they were more mature and more interesting to talk to than boys, but he'd never envisioned himself growing out of fancying both like everyone had always said he would, as if they knew him better than he knew himself.

'Just admit you're gay' and 'You only like guys ' cause it's trendy nowadays' sat on top of an extremely high pile of bullshit he'd had to put up with, growing up in Glasgow.

He didn't care much now: his skin had grown thick and so had his confidence, while his ability to get along with people had proportionately thinned.

He was a loner to the bone, happy to be by himself.

Unless the alternative was being with Phil.

"Daddy's in big trouble, Kibbsy," he sighed as his arm slid off his face, dropping the bottle to smooth Kibble's ears down her head. "He's goin' to have his stupid heart broken because of a bloody Yank. Can you believe it?"

Kibble blinked, offering a sympathetic trill and a headbutt that filled his nose with fur.

“Thanks, doll,” he sputtered, plucking fluff out of his mouth. “Knew you’d get it.” He kissed her nose and got a content purr in return.

At half-time he picked up his phone. The notification of a text from Abigail made his stomach churn.

You’d better not have done anything stupid, Handsome, he thought as he opened the text.

Abigail

Hey, big man

It’d been sent less than half an hour ago .

Ian was distracted by a second by her profile picture: dark red blazer, black glasses, arms crossed, subtle smile radiating confidence.

A perfect balance of pretty and professional.

One could have easily guessed her strong-willed character just by looking at that photo.

A lesser man than Phil would’ve found her intimidating, if not emasculating.

Then again, a woman like Abigail wouldn’t have given a lesser man the time of day. They were made for each other.

You

Hey

Everything alright?

Abigail

I was just wondering if you'd noticed any change in Phil's mood recently?

Ian's jaw clenched.

Abigail

He was doing well but he seems distant these days

I'm scared he's having a relapse... I don't know what to do, he won't talk to me

Sorry for messaging you. I'm just worried

This was the kind of partner anyone deserved: attentive without being intrusive, one who'd rather worry in silence than force the truth out of you, even to their own detriment.

You

Don't apologise

It's probably just a phase, let him be

Here's something that will make you feel better: he joined my gym, he's been going

in regularly

He'll kill me if he finds out I spilled the beans

He didn't want to tell you in case it didn't work out

Abigail

Pun intended?

"Ach, fuck it." Ian chuckled to himself, Kibble bouncing along with his chest. Clever and funny... It wasn't fair.

You

Just when I thought you couldn't be more perfect

Abigail

I can't believe he didn't tell me about the gym

You

He's terrified of letting you down

I told him it's bullshit but you know how he is

Just let him set his own pace, he'll be fine

Abigail



Thank you, Ian

I don't know what I'd do without you

Ian didn't have the guts to reply to that. Anything he might say would be hypocritical.

Except maybe one thing.

You

Phil is lucky to have you

He meant it, but most of it was mere projecting.

It was what he'd wished Iris or whatever her name was had told him instead of taking Jamie from him.

It seemed so trivial now — Jamie, their story, their breakup...

Now that he had Phil as a benchmark, none of that felt relevant.

He'd suffered, he'd moved on, wound closed over, full stop.

Moving on from Phil would be a whole different challenge.

After switching chats, he stared for a long while at the flickering line in the empty text box.

It'd be a long day tomorrow, but the more he stalled, the harder it'd be for everyone.

He understood why Phil was so conflicted, but one of them had to be the bigger man

and make the ugly decisions before someone got hurt .

You

We need to talk

A couple of minutes later there was already a reply.

Handsome

That sounds ominous

What did I do?

You

You exist

Handsome

Ah, yes

In my defense I was planning to amend that, but I'm too much of a wuss to even get rid of myself

You

Imagine your disappointment if you hadn't given yourself a chance to plague my life

Handsome

That's a very good point

It gave Ian chills to realise it could've happened.

If Phil had given in to his darkest thoughts instead of fighting back, Ian would have gone all his life never knowing Phil existed, never knowing he'd lost him, because he would have never had him to begin with, and that prospect was somehow worse than giving him up.

You

Tomorrow at Sandy's 6 pm?

Handsome

I'll be the glum nerd with the laptop

## Page 31

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:03 am*

You

I'll be the one turning heads

Handsome

You mean as usual ?

You

More than usual

Handsome

You gonna show up naked?

You

Better

Handsome

What's better than naked?

\* \* \*

He hated funerals as much as he hated churches and religious ceremonies, but he

wouldn't have denied Uncle Rory a last goodbye if it'd been his last day on earth.

Ian hadn't seen him in ten years, since he'd moved to Antwerp with his new Belgian wife, but distance hadn't made them any less fond of each other.

Despite not being Ian's uncle by blood, Rory had been a pillar in his childhood and even more so in his teenage years, when Ian had lost his mother and his father Thomas was having a hard time dealing with the grief and a son who was understandably angry at the world Rory had been the one to talk Ian out of dropping out of school to escape to London, the one to reassure him that there was nothing wrong with liking boys the same way he liked girls, so long as everyone involved was treated with the same kindness and respect.

And now, at just seventy-two, Rory was gone.

"I'm next," said Thomas as they trudged out of the cemetery, leaving behind the lament of the bagpipes and the cluster of people still gathered by the grave.

"Ach, wheesht!" Ian stuffed his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket, rolling his eyes. "You're sixty-one and don't have a heart condition."

"Ye never know, son. Ye never know. Life's bloody short."

A light rain was falling, thin, icy drops hitting Ian's bare calves like needles. Perfect day to say goodbye to a beloved one .

Or more than one.

"We're havin' a few drinks in Rory's memory." Thomas hinted to the pub down the road with his chin. "Ye joinin' us?"

“Nah. Got somewhere to be.”

“Ye ever goin’ to introduce her to me? Or him! ” Thomas defensively lifted up his palms before Ian could correct him. Slip as old as time.

“ Him . And it’s complicated.”

“It’s always complicated with you.”

Ian eyed his father fondly: he was just a couple of inches shorter than his son, but his hunched shoulders carried the weight of too many years of loneliness and sacrifices.

They’d never been rich, but Thomas had worked hard to make sure Ian never wanted for anything, especially after Sheilagh had died.

They’d never been good at this father-son thing, but, with Rory’s mediation, they’d managed to make it work, if awkwardly.

Two reserved grumps like them would’ve never made it on their own.

“You think ma would’ve approved of me liking men?”

Thomas huffed out a gruff laugh. “Yer ma would’ve approved of you bein’ a serial killer.” He lifted a watery gaze on Ian behind the rain-stained glasses. “So, what about this new wee fella of yours?”

“He’s no ‘wee fella’ . He’s got a few years on me.” He said it with a vivid picture of Phil’s expression lines and greying beard spreading a smile across his lips.

Thomas bobbed his head approvingly. “I’ve always reckoned ye’d be better off with someone older. Ye’ve always been mature for yer age.”

Ian kicked a pebble on the ground. “He’s engaged.”

“Ah.” Thomas’ pause was tangibly uneasy. “Now that ’s somethin’ Sheilagh wouldn’t have approved of.”

“It’s not like that. We’re just friends who ended up with more than we’d bargained for.” Ian couldn’t believe he was ashamed of something he hadn’t done. “Nothing happened between us.”

“Course not — I didn’t raise a homewrecker!” Thomas groused, visibly relieved .

No, you didn’t , Ian agreed grimly. He’d rather die than ruin someone else’s relationship.

A crisp pat hit his back. “You’re a good man. Yer ma would be proud.”

“Ach, rap that. I’ve cried enough today.

” Ian had to run a knuckle under his eye to prevent the wetness pooling along the waterline from spilling out.

Thankfully, they’d reached the pub. He could see through the windows that it was already crowded inside.

“Have one for me,” he told Thomas. “Rory won’t grudge me for sittin’ this one out. ”

Thomas squeezed his shoulder. “Good luck with this man of yours.”

Ian accepted the well-meaning words, but inside his heart sank.

No luck can fix this. It’d take a miracle.

They bumped fists, their surrogate of a hug, then Thomas went inside and Ian kept walking, headed to his pickup.

He arrived at the café a bit early, expecting to find Phil sitting at their usual table with his laptop and at least a couple of empty plates.

He found him by the tables outside instead, alone, leaning back against the wall with his thumbs hooked into the loops of the jeans, only a light pullover protecting him from the cold wind and the rain.

In his mind, Ian shrugged off his jacket to drape it on Phil's shoulders, enveloping him in his arms to warm him up.

In reality, all Ian could do was walk to him, tilt his head, and sketch a smirk.

“What’s a pretty boy like you doin’ here on your own?”

Phil hadn’t noticed his arrival. His head popped up with a surly scowl, ready to bark back, but his mouth froze agape. He gave Ian a thorough once-over, with a particular emphasis from the waist down, where the blue kilt flapped around his knees, tossed by the wind.

“Like what you see, old man?”

Phil licked his lips, gulped, then finally pried his eyes away from Ian’s bare calves to pin them into Ian’s .

“You know, when you said ‘ better than naked’ , I assumed you were messing with me, because what could possibly be better than Ian Galloway without clothes , but...” His gaze dropped again and very slowly climbed back up. “ Holy shit .”



Ian's smirk widened. He knew how good he looked in a kilt, but he couldn't have cared less about the other dozens appreciative looks he'd gathered today; all he cared about was Phil's attention greedily grazing all over him and that beautiful rush of colour in his face.

A chilly gust swept the street, scattering the ashes of a cigarette that was burning in the ashtray on the table in front of Phil.

"What're you doin' out here in the cold?"

Phil flickered a thumb at the remnants of the cigarette. "Having a smoke break."

"You don't smoke."

"Someone does." A listless shrug. "It was too noisy inside, I needed a breather. Why all dressed up?"

"I'm comin' from a funeral."

"Oh. Is it common practice to wear kilts at funerals here?"

"Not really. Rory was... eccentric."

"Were you close?"

"Old family friend."

"Wanna talk about it?"

Ian moved at Phil's side to lean back against the wall with him.

“His heart was a tickin’ time bomb.” It could’ve happened any moment in the last decade, so every day after the diagnosis had felt like a gift to Rory.

“Passed away peacefully in his sleep like he’d always wanted.

That’s about it.” Ian glanced up at the thick grey cloud smothering the sky and another sigh escaped him. “We’re not here to talk about that.”

Phil tutted. “Thought as much.”

Social skills weren’t among Ian’s talents, even less so when they involved the discussion of intricate human feelings. He was in no place to hand out advice, but when Abigail had said ‘I’m worried’ he’d felt her apprehension through the text and he’d seen too much of himself in it .

“Abigail’s scared you’re having a relapse.”

The whistle of the wind covered a scoff. Phil had the look of a Golden Retriever who’d broken a vase and knew there would be unpleasant consequences.

“I know. I can barely look at her these days.” He passed the back of his hand under his nose, sniffing sharply. “She should be used to this. Some days I’m a ray of fucking sunshine, some days I’m a jerk.... It’s just how it is.”

A subtle curl lifted a corner of Ian’s mouth as he eyed the pink bracelet peering out of the sleeve on Phil’s wrist. “Ray of fuckin’ sunshine indeed.”

“Still better than being the human embodiment of misery, right?”

“She says you’re not talking to her.”

“No shit.”

“Phil...”

“Don’t Phil me!” The bout of rage distorted Phil’s charming features into an unrecognisable mask as he pushed off the wall to stab a finger into Ian’s chest, again and again.

“You have no idea what it’s like, okay? You’ve only got yourself to answer to, you don’t have to go home every day to the woman you love and pretend you’re not thinking of somebody else!

You can stick your preaching up your ass! ”

Every word cut deeper into Ian, each blow adding weight to the guilt oppressing his conscience.

“This is all my fault.”

“Your fault. ” Phil snorted bitterly. “You slap a bandaid on a bleeding man’s wound and call it your fault when the bleeding stops... Okay.”

“Someone’s feeling dramatic.”

“I’m tired, Ian. So fucking tired...” Phil scrubbed a hand down his face, looking every bit as worn out as he claimed to be.

“I’m stuck in this goddamn situation and can’t even breathe without hurting someone.

If I lie to protect Abby, you say I’m concerning her.

If I wanna tell her how I feel about you, you say I'm ruining everything...

Tell me one thing — one fucking thing — that I can do without screwing it up for everyone! ”

Ian took a deep breath. He had the solution, one he knew Phil wouldn't like, because he didn't like it either, but there was no other viable option. Time would make up for it.

“We should stop seeing each other.”

All colour drained out of Phil's face, replaced by a visceral terror. “What?”

“It's the only way.”

“It's not the only way! It's your way!” A vibration tainted Phil's voice, panic mixed with anger. There was no other way and he knew it, unless he was ready to put his entire life on the line.

Ian crossed a foot over the other, the mud he'd collected at the cemetery melting away from the combat boots to form a dirty puddle on the pavement. He wished the rain could wash the soot out of his conscience, too.

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:03 am*

“I’d do anything for you, Phil,” he said, wearing his heart on his sleeve like a heavy chain.

“But I won’t cause any harm to Abigail.” He silenced Phil with a gloomy look before he could argue.

“She was here first. She’s been by your side all along, faced the worst with you...

She’s earned more love and respect than me. ”

He received a nod, but it was a painfully contemptuous one.

“So this is what we’re doing here? Piling everything on a fucking scale to see who went through more shit for Phil? Wow. Doesn’t make me feel like a burden at all.” Phil rabidly kicked a chair, startling an old lady and her dog who were just strolling by. Ian felt that kick in his guts.

“Don’t twist my words,” he pleaded, but that didn’t placate Phil’s rage.

“I know what you’re saying. You’re saying she’s earned me more than you.”

“She has.”

“What I want doesn’t count?” There was impatience in Phil’s tone, but deeper than that, forced back behind it, something else was lurking. Something fragile and vulnerable and conflicted .

“And what is it that you want?” asked Ian. “A foot in two camps?”

Phil winced. “No.” Contrition tinged his expression. “Just to be honest with Abby, come what may.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “She’ll decide what to do with me.”

Abigail abandoning Phil was a circumstance Ian just couldn’t conceive. He barely knew her, but could tell how much they had in common, starting from an unsinkable determination to do what was best for him, and right now the best Ian could do for him was let him go.

“I don’t want to be anyone’s basketball practice , Handsome.”

Thunder roared in the distance. A car sped by, splashing dirty water on the pavement. Phill stood there, pale as a ghost, watching Ian with flattened brows.

“I never asked you to be! I’d never do anything behind Abby’s back!”

And that’s why I love you.

Ian caught himself off guard with that thought.

He’d never said it back.

It was too late. Saying it now wouldn’t do anyone any favour.

In another life...

“You know we can’t go on like this.”

Phil stood in his face, the anger still there, but now submerged by petrifying dread.

He fisted the lapels of Ian's jacket. "Why do I feel like this is a goodbye speech?"

This was the memory Ian would have to live with: Phil's desperation and the grief in his beautiful eyes as their last goodbye shattered his heart.

Ian couldn't hug him, couldn't kiss him, couldn't tell him he loved him, but he couldn't not reach up to take his cheek into his hand one last time.

He caressed him fondly, soft skin and beard, the sharp cheekbone and the wrinkles fanning out of the corner of the eye.

That adorable crooked nose was going to haunt his dreams until his dying day.

"I've always known you're too shrewd for your own good. "

With tight lips, Phil nodded gravely, like he truly understood. "Maybe in another life fate was kinder to us."

"It was kind enough to put you on my path. I'm not complainin'."

"Can we at least... keep running together? Just running, no talking."

"Like it was always supposed to be?"

"Yes."

The hand Ian had on Phil's hip twitched. "Better not make the same mistake twice."

Surrender stripped the last vestige of hope out of Phil's look and the fight out of his body.

“Not seeing you,” he said meekly, “isn’t gonna change how I feel.”

Ian felt his chest go cold, tighten, and crack. “You’ll get over it,” he soothed, but deep down he knew it was a white lie — one he was trying to sell to himself.

“No, I won’t.” Phil swallowed, a watery shimmer gathering in his eyes.

He hastily wiped it away with the cuff of his pullover, then stopped to stare at the wet stains in the fabric like it was some wondrous phenomenon.

“Well, look at this.” A cynical chuckle heaved out of him. “Didn’t think I still had it in me.”

The sight of Phil’s tears inflamed Ian’s protective instinct. He wrangled it back into its cage, reminding himself that he was the cause of those tears. It was his cue to go before his willpower toppled and left him with no defences and no rational thinking to hold him back.

“Go back inside, you’re shakin’.”

Reddened hazel eyes lifted on him like weapons. “It’s not the cold.”

Not a single fibre in Ian’s mind, body, and soul wanted to leave, but it was now or never. He needed to believe that it was for the best, for all of them. Phil would move on. One broken heart was better than three .

“Take care of yourself, old man,” he said, taking a step back, away from Phil and the raw emotion strewn across his pale face, but before he could take another step Phil grabbed his wrist. For a moment Ian thought, almost hoped , that Phil would try to stop him, but Phil just pulled at the elastic bracelet on his own wrist and transferred it to Ian, pushing it past the large hand.



The gesture etched a harrowing sorrow in Ian's already crestfallen soul. He wanted to rip it off and give it back, because it burned like live embers on his skin, but Phil's supplicant look paralysed him.

"Just keep it. Please."

It fit a bit too snugly and looked comical buried in his dark hair, but if a pink plastic trinket was all he got to keep of Phil Hanson, then it'd be his most prized possession.

He accepted the gift without question, without even glancing up.

Phil stood there, frozen, and watched powerlessly as Ian brushed past him, hands jammed back into the jacket's pockets, and walked away in the rain, never looking back.

PHIL

‘Take care of yourself, old man.’

Ian’s last words to him had sounded like a broken caress.

A door closed gently and left ajar. No goodbye, no real closure.

It seemed appropriate.

Phil had almost retorted: ‘Take care of me yourself, you coward!’ , like he would have any other day. Ian would’ve snorted at it, but just to conceal his mirth, and then would’ve said something pungent but touching along the lines of ‘Believe me, I’m trying’, leaving Phil speechless.

Instead, Phil’s speechlessness had kicked in too early, and all he’d been able to do was grab Ian’s wrist and give him that stupid bracelet that had looked even more jarring on him than it had on Phil, as if that could in any way keep their bond alive.

Phil still had the helmet and the beanie, after all.

Ian had accepted it — a worthless string of plastic beads picked up from a filthy airport floor — without a word, without asking what it was, what it meant .

Not even Phil knew what it meant.

Even though it hadn’t brought any sunshine, that bracelet had marked the beginning

of Phil's new life in Scotland and he'd held on to it, waiting for the day he could feel the sunshine again.

Who could have imagined that sunshine would come in the form of a smart-mouthed Scottish hunk with kind blue eyes and the sexiest brain Phil had ever met?

"You'll get over it."

But, even as he'd said that, Ian had sounded like he knew it wasn't going to happen.

There was no such thing as getting over someone who rightfully owned a piece of your soul.

Phil would just have to learn to live with the gaping hole Ian had left in him and pray the numbness would eat the pain like it had eaten everything else.

It was going to be hell, but he couldn't find a single ounce of regret within himself, nor was he surprised by that fact.

Ian could remove himself from the picture, but he couldn't take the memories, couldn't erase the imprint he'd left behind.

Phil would be clinging to them for the rest of his life.

Head down, the broad back curved forward under the rain, Ian had walked away with Phil's sunshine in his pocket, never looking back. Probably the most anticlimactic goodbye in heartbreak history.

Phil didn't know how long he'd lingered outside the café, staring at the spot where Ian had disappeared from his sight, but by the time he dragged himself back inside his clothes were damp and his bones felt like ice.

Sandra shot him an alarmed look as he lurched past the counter, barely aware of his surroundings.

The noise, the movements, the sudden heat...

It was all relegated to the periphery of his perception, muffled and blurry, unimportant.

“Phil, is everything alright, dear?”

“Yeah,” he answered in a monotone voice he didn’t recognise. He gathered his stuff from the table where he’d left it, not really bothering to check if something was missing, shoved everything into the backpack and pulled his parka over his wet pullover. He was cold .

Picking up his phone last, he hesitated before putting it away.

Ian had had the final word, Phil could arrogate to himself the right to the final text.

You

I’m glad I got to see you in a kilt

He waited for the checkmarks to turn blue, to no avail. He took it as his cue to get going.

Heading outside, he slapped a twenty on the counter and made a very half-hearted attempt to smile. “Thank you, Sandy. Keep the change.”

Sandra said something he didn’t catch. He grabbed the bike from its usual corner and absently thanked the lady who kept the door open for him as he exited.

The helmet dangled from the handlebar. He slipped it off and held it between his hands, studying the scratches in the black paint for a second before slipping it into place, but then he remembered.

‘You want to go out there with damp hair? At your age?’

His hand rose to the lump in the pocket of the parka.

He pulled the beanie out and smoothed it out on his palm, his sight fogging as he sniffled.

In a way, he was glad Ian had made this decision for him.

He’d done what Phil would have never been strong enough to do: step back and draw a line. The honourable thing.

This was for the best, for all of them.

If Ian was delusional for believing Phil would get over him, Phil was equally delusional for thinking they could have kept seeing each other without any further damage. The remedy for sunburn couldn’t be more sun exposure.

He put on the beanie, the soft wool soaking up the raindrops in his hair, then secured the helmet on top of it, mounted the bike, and sped away.

He got home on autopilot, with no memory whatsoever of the journey. He left the bike at the entrance, discarded his helmet, beanie, and parka on the floor, shivering pathetically. He just wanted to go to bed and rot there in peace.

“Phil?” Abby poked her head into the entrance while he was pulling the hoodie and the t-shirt underneath over his head. He dropped those to the ground as well.

“Next purchase: raincoat,” he said, leaning against the wall to rip the socks off his frozen feet.

Abby came forward, watching him intently. She wasn’t buying any of it.

“Where’s your bracelet?”

Phil unfastened the belt, his hesitation imperceptible. “Gone.” The sound of the metal buckle hitting the floor was unbearable. Barefoot and shirtless, he collected his pile of wet clothes and tried to push past Abby, but a hand gently touched his arm.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

The sweet cautiousness in her voice hurt.

“I’m fine. Just fucking cold.”

“You don’t look fine.”

Phil yanked his arm away, but before he could sidle off Abby blocked him again, this time firmly.

“I need you to talk to me, Phil.”

“Not now, please.”

He writhed, but Abby snatched the wet clothes from his arms and tossed them in a corner, her dark eyes ablaze with determination.

“Yes, Phil, now . I’m done being accommodating. I’m worried sick about you, and you refuse to let me in! I’m sorry if expecting basic communication is asking too

much, but you're going to sit down and talk to me! Now !”

Phil had no choice but to nod submissively. She was right, after all. “Okay.” He was tired to the bone, but he couldn't run from this confrontation forever. “Guess there's no point in putting this off any longer. ”

The turn of phrase chipped away most of Abby's boldness, replacing it with bemusement. Her expression softened as she placed a hand over Phil's cheek, stroking it fondly.

“Let's get you warmed up first.”

\* \* \*

Abby drew him a hot bath and brought him clean clothes, commanding him not to get out until all the cold had drained out of him.

“I'll be downstairs making tea.”

The hot water burned on Phil's trembling body, but it did its job, gradually sucking the ice out of his bones and muscles. He wished there was a hot bath for how he felt inside, too.

The mirror was mercifully fogged when he finally stepped out of the tub, so he was spared the sorry spectacle he must be. He felt older and more tired than he ever had.

Downstairs, he followed the scent of cinnamon to the living room, where Abby was waiting for him with a whole pot of tea.

As soon as Phil touched the couch, he found himself with a steamy cup in his hands. He thanked Abby, blew on the tea a few times, then took a sip. Just how he liked it:

plenty of sugar and a sprinkle of milk.

A delicate touch rubbed his back. “Feeling better?”

It nearly broke him. The tenderness, the doting attention despite the tense situation... Tears welled up in his eyes again, but he pushed them back, washing down the swelling in his throat with another sip of tea.

“Yeah,” he said when he felt like he could trust himself to speak.

Abby let him drink, observing him out of the corner of her eye with a hand resting on his knee, rubbing lightly. “Want me to fetch some biscuits?”

“No,” Phil all but laughed. “I had two slices of carrot cake and a gigantic hot chocolate. ”

The comment spread a smile on Abby’s face.

Phil tried not to roll his eyes. Having people rejoice at him eating was oddly moving.

It reminded him how low he’d fallen and how much progress he’d made since getting here, mostly thanks to the amazing woman sitting next to him.

He put his hand on top of hers, squeezing apologetically.

“I’ve been such a dick to you lately, haven’t I?”

“You have,” Abby agreed, but her thumb leniently stroked the side of Phil’s hand.

“You get hurtful when you’re hurting.”

No one knew him like Abby did. No one had taken as much shit from him as her, and



yet she was still here, still willing to put up with his bad moods and understand .

After all she'd done for him, Phil was really about to show his gratitude by confessing he'd fallen for a guy he'd only known for a couple of months.

“Look.” Abby pried the empty cup out of his hands to hold them both into her own. “If you’re having second thoughts about the engagement—”

“It’s not that.”

“I’m just saying, it’s okay to change your mind. It’s okay if you don’t want to be with me any more.”

The lump in Phil’s throat swelled again. “No, no, Abbs, listen to me...” He kissed her knuckles. “I love you . I’d die without you. I just don’t think sex is part of how I want to manifest this love.”

“That’s not what’s troubling you, though, is it? We’ve already established we’re both okay with that. Phil, please.” Abby kissed his knuckles in return. “Something’s off between us. If you don’t tell me what it is, we can’t fix it.”

Love flooded Phil’s chest. If there was anyone in the world who could fix this mess, that was Abby. She always knew what to do. She could shoulder any stress, any crisis. She’d kept them afloat all this time... She’d find a way to mend this fracture.

“It’s Ian,” he blurted before panic kicked in and tied his tongue. “I’m... attracted to him.”

Abby’s eyebrows raised. “As in sexually attracted? ”

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Phil's fingers pressed into his eyes. "Sexually, emotionally, intellectually..." He sighed, burying his face into his hands. "You name it, it's there."

A heavy silence descended in the flat. He didn't dare to look up, ashamed of himself and devoured by guilt. This was how he thanked his saint of a girlfriend for looking after his hapless carcass for two whole years.

Then a frail whisper tore into the silence. "Did you sleep with him?"

"No," he said with a desolate shake of his head.

"Did you kiss him?"

"No."

"Are you in love with him?"

The lump in Phil's throat became a tight knot. The answer was as simple as the previous two, but not as easy to get out. Abby didn't need it, anyway. His silence was eloquent enough.

"Okay," she murmured with a voice so thin it was barely audible, eyes filling with tears as she swallowed. "Okay."

Phil's heart shattered when he heard the sob. Abby tried to smother it into her hands, but the tears were already streaking her face as small sniffles shook her shoulders.

“Abbs...” He pulled her into his arms, feeling like a monster. “Please, I’m sorry. I don’t—”

“I thought you were spiraling back to where we were one year ago,” Abby wept against his chest. “I thought... thought you were— Oh, god.”

Not without a mild shock, Phil realised those were hiccups of relief . All these weeks, Abby had been mulling in the fear that depression was getting the best of him again, while Phil had been out there playing no homo with Ian.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured against her hair.

“I’m so sorry, I’ve been so selfish to you.

..” She’d tried so many times to get him to open up and he’d always pushed her away like the self-centred moron he was.

“I should’ve told you sooner, but I couldn’t wrap my head around it. I don’t even know how it happened. ”

Abby pulled back and looked up at him with a wet but genuine smile. “You don’t know how you caught feelings for a lovely man?” She playfully swatted his chest. “Lovely and coincidentally smoking hot ...”

Phil faltered. Was Abby teasing him?

“I’ve always been straight...”

A forgiving caress brushed down his cheek. “So was your nose, until it had a close encounter with my elbow.”

“Jesus.” Phil spit out an unwitting laugh. Something funny was happening inside him: it was like the million little pieces he’d fought so hard to keep together all this time were spontaneously melting into a whole again. No more bleeding. No more ache.

“Hey.” Abby tilted his face up. She swept away the single tear that rolled down his cheek and placed a feathery kiss on his lips. “I’m glad you were honest with me. And with yourself.” A giggle escaped her as she drew back. “Oh my god, can you imagine your parents finding out their son is gay?”

“Not gay ,” said Phil, albeit very intrigued by the idea. Their only son being into men would’ve been a huge humiliation to his parents. He couldn’t wait to tell them. “Bi, I guess? I don’t know. I’m still to you... but not in the same way.”

“Not in the same way you feel attracted to Ian?”

“I’d never have known if I hadn’t met him, but I can feel there’s a difference.

” Phil didn’t know how to explain it, but Abby understood just fine.

She pulled a tissue out of her pocket and blew her nose, then took the cup and poured herself some tea.

After taking a couple of long swigs, she set the cup down and laid her hand back on Phil’s knee.

“You can be attracted to someone romantically but not sexually,” she informed him, pragmatic as ever. “It’s a thing, you know? Perfectly valid.”

It made sense. It resonated with Phil’s feelings. Most of the guilt waned with the realisation nothing about this whole predicament was a choice. It was how he was, who he was... Perhaps some of his anger and misery came from that neglected part

of himself demanding recognition and acceptance.

Phil's thumb skimmed over the diamond ring on Abby's hand. "So what happens to us now?"

"You realise we don't have to get married, right? We can be together without being husband and wife... Leave the door open."

"Leave the door open..." he echoed pensively. "I like the sound of it." As he said that, Abby pulled her hand away and made to remove the engagement ring from her finger, but Phil stopped her. "Don't be ridiculous, it's yours."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. It's not like it'd fit any of Ian's fingers, anyway."

They laughed at the mental picture the joke evoked. Even Phil's hands appeared small compared to Ian's. He pushed the ring back into place, then shyly glanced up. "You seriously aren't angry?"

"Of course not." Abby hugged him, rubbing soothing circles into his back. "I don't feel less loved because you also love him. That's not how love works."

Phil melted into her arms, nose buried in her hair, in her sweet, familiar scent. How many partners would have said that?

"So that's it?" he muttered, half laughing in disbelief. "I tell you I'm in love with a guy and you just... pat on the back, 'Congratulations, Phil'?"

Abby's grip tightened around him. "My job is to love you, respect you, and support you. I was terrified the depression was getting bad again..." She pulled away to take

his face into her hands, dark eyes sparkling. “But no, my silly goose was just moping ‘cause he fancies a boy!”

“Oh my god.”

“I’m just so relieved...”

“What do we do now?”

“Do you really love him?”

Phil would’ve loved Ian even if he’d been a character in a book, made of ink and paper, a soul without a body. His quips and taunts, the mischief and the kindness coexisting in his eyes, and those damn dimples at the edge of the beard...

He should’ve probably shown some semblance of doubt, but his response was swift and unflinching: “Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

“Does he love you?”

“Who the fuck knows? I think so?” Phil let out a little self-conscious laugh. He was positive Ian cared about him and was attracted to him, but he couldn’t fathom the real depth of it, although Ian’s looks and gestures had spoken those three words many, many times. “That man is weird.”

“Have you told him?”

“Yeah. But he was too preoccupied with not disrespecting you to pay attention, I guess.”

“Well, you should tell him again.”

Phil hung his head. “He doesn’t want to see me. Doesn’t want to be the other guy .”

“A real gentleman... No wonder you’re so smitten.” Abby ran a hand through his damp hair, smoothing it back in a slow, calming motion. “Everything’s going to be okay, you’ll see,” she promised. “We’re going to make this right.”

Phil felt like nothing would really be okay again.

Now that he’d come clean with her, he knew he and Abby would be fine as a couple, but he, as an individual, would always be limping from now on.

Without Ian, something would always be missing.

IAN

Sweat dripped into his eyes, the burn of the salt as grounding as the burn in his exerted muscles.

Back arched off the bench, he pushed the barbell up one last time, failure hitting just as the bar fell back into its hooks.

He thanked the random guy for spotting him, then picked up his towel and his bottle and took a moment to rest, barely hearing the music in his ears

It'd been a tough week.

A week without seeing or hearing from Phil.

A week without Phil's smart mouth sweetly driving him insane.

He knew he was still going to the gym and to the café because Najeer and Sandra had told him.

They had different schedules, Ian being an early bird and Phil a night owl, so the chances they'd run into each other were slim, but Ian always kept an eye out, just in case.

He wished he could say he did that to avoid Phil, but the truth was that he was desperate to just catch a glimpse of him, to see how he was doing .



To see if he was okay.

The bite of nostalgia forced him to shut his eyes to re-centre himself.

He drank, hoping the water would wash down the bitter taste in his mouth, but, predictably, it didn't do much.

After cleaning up the bench, he moved to a corner to stretch, then wrapped up the workout with a cool-down walk on the treadmill.

He skipped all the songs on the playlist until he found one he didn't hate, only to realise halfway through it, when he actually started listening, that, in fact, he hated it more than all the previous ones.

Till now, I always got by on my own, I never really cared until I me—

Skip.

Another poignant ballad came up, but at least it was in a language he couldn't understand. Good enough. Whoever had made this playlist must have gone through some pretty bad heartache. Not that he couldn't relate... It was just the last thing he wanted to think about.

Under the shower, the pink bracelet repeatedly snatched his attention.

It was easy to forget it existed when he could hide it under a sleeve, but it never lasted long.

Taking it off would have nipped the issue in the bud, but Phil had placed it there and Ian was determined to wear the bracelet to the grave, whatever the cost.

A girl had given him her number the other day, after asking him to spot her for squats.

They'd talked for a while outside the gym; she seemed fun and interesting, very level-headed for a twenty-six-year-old, and Ian was still debating whether to keep the number or delete it.

Perhaps a woman was what he needed after two failures in a row with men.

No one would've been the ideal solution, had he not been in such desperate need for distraction. Life had surprised him once — it wasn't impossible it'd surprise him again.

Unlikely, yes, but not impossible.

As he walked home, he scrolled through his contacts, trying to find the girl's number. He remembered her pretty honey eyes and the myriad of freckles, but not her name .

Terri? Thea?

Teresa.

She might be just the diversion he needed to forget : young, sporty, sunny, a pinch of endearing shyness...

You

Hey, it's Ian from the gym. Fancy a coffee one of th

A notification popped up at the top of the screen. His heart stopped.

Abigail.

He wasn't ready for this.

What had Phil told her? Did she know they weren't seeing each other any more? Did she know why ?

He opened the text with a sense of pending doom.

Abigail

We need to have a chat, big man

Ian halted.

You

About what?

Abigail replied with a photo. It was the selfie Phil had taken at the pub.

The sight of it crushed him.

You

I don't understand

Abigail

Don't play dumb, it doesn't suit you

Saturday 5 pm at La Dolce Vita

Ian's mouth took a wry curl sideways. She wasn't asking .

You

I'll be there

The screen blacked out. He pressed his forehead against the phone, groaning inwardly. It'd be three long days until Saturday.

At least he had the pictures now: something to torture himself with for the rest of his days along with the bracelet.

He scoffed to himself. He really wasn't good at this forgetting thing. If Abigail hated him, he couldn't blame her. He'd been in her shoes, except, unlike her, he'd been left behind. It wasn't the confrontation he was afraid of: he had nothing to hide. It was being seen as a back-stabber.

At home, he grabbed a beer and took it to the living room, where he sat alone staring into the void.

There were still a couple of non-alcoholic beers in the fridge.

He doubted he'd ever have the heart to drink them.

They could stay there forever, for all he cared.

Perhaps one day they'd come in handy again.

Someone would come back for them. Hope was free, after all.

A whiny meow preannounced Kibble's arrival. She came trotting through the door, the belly pouch flapping from side to side as she approached with a string of bubbly mrw mrw mrw that sounded like questions. With one final bossy mrw she jumped onto Ian's lap and arched up against him, demanding pets.

"Aye, aye," Ian tittered, obliging the request. "Spoiled wee shite. Thank fuck I've got you." It was like she understood, stretching up until her head poked against his chin. Beard scratches were her favourite.

Ian thought back to how she had cuddled up with Phil after his panic attack despite hissing at him at first sight.

He'd grown on her even faster than he'd grown on Ian, but then again, despite being a notorious hater of strangers, Kibble had a special sensitivity towards human emotions and the trusting way she'd acted around Phil had only reaffirmed Ian's impression of him .

Not that he hadn't always known Phil Hanson was a beautiful person, but being Kibble-certified was a status not many had achieved.

Ian himself had had to work for days to earn baby Kibble's trust, yet this random American dude had shown up and within minutes Kibble had been all over him, purring like there would be no tomorrow.

Not like . There really would be no tomorrow.

Ian sighed. His father was right: why couldn't he have something uncomplicated for once?

It wasn't much to ask.

Something good without catches, without sick twists.

Just once .

Just once...

\* \* \*

It was still raining. It hadn't stopped since the day he'd left Phil by the door of the café and Ian was starting to suspect the weather was just acting as a cruel reflection of his inner state.

If that was the case, this winter was going to be even worse than usual.

He didn't mind. He loved running in the rain.

Waiting at the red light, he watched La Dolce Vita from afar, its warm lights and cosy facade, and wondered if he'd ever be able to separate the place from the memories it held.

Meeting Abigail there seemed an appropriate way to come full circle, and maybe get some closure.

He wasn't expecting a jealous tirade — Abigail was too graceful for that —; it'd be a civil heart-to-heart.

He was ready to answer every question in all honesty, if not without shame, without fear.

If Phil had told Abigail the truth, so would he.

The light went green. Even from across the street Ian could tell the café was packed.

Tea time was a nightmare he'd had always steered away from, with few highly motivated exceptions.

Pushing through the door, he was enveloped by the hot, stifling air typical of overcrowded spaces.

Every cell in his body wanted to leave, go back outside to the fresh air, the peace, but Abigail was there, at the small table by the window that Ian had once considered he and Phil's table, and the duty he had towards her prevailed over the claustrophobia.

She was in casual clothes — jeans, a knitted jumper, trainers; she could have easily passed as a teenager if her bearing hadn't had that mature elegance to it.

Even dressed as a kid, even from across a crammed room, she exuded a confidence that most self-professed alpha males Ian had met couldn't have dreamt of.

As he approached, he felt an irresistible desire to hear her say she wasn't right for Phil, that she'd be stepping down and leaving Phil to Ian's care because that was the right thing to do and the best thing for Phil. Everything Ian had said and done, in reverse.

As if.

She glanced up from her phone the exact moment he stopped in front of her, deep brown eyes zeroing in on him, expressionless. "Thank you for coming."

Ian didn't reply. He shrugged off his jacket and tossed it on the back of the armchair, followed by his hoodie. He would've taken off the t-shirt, too, if he could have. The room was too stuffy for his liking.

“I knew he’d given it to you.” Ian noticed Abigail was staring at his wrist. “Please, have a seat.”

And, like a well-trained puppy, Ian sat. He didn’t know how he could be feeling so big and so small at the same time.

There was a cup of tea on the table, a slice of lemon floating in it. Abigail picked it up, peering at Ian from over the rim. “You’re not ordering anything?”

“Not in the mood.”

She nodded knowingly and took a sip. “So.” Another sip, then the cup was set back down. “It has come to my attention that you broke Phil’s heart.”

Ian had anticipated a variation of this line, but not the baffling business-like tone.

“He told you.”

“Of course he did. We tell each other everything. ”

It wasn’t so much the statement that stunned Ian as Abigail’s unblinking self-assurance. ‘We tell each other everything’ ... No resentment, no judgement. Only blind trust that didn’t fear betrayal.

“All I want,” said Abigail, “is to fix this situation as best as we can, as fast as we can. For Phil’s sake.”

For Phil’s sake.

That was all Ian cared about.



“What did he tell you, exactly?”

“Everything.” Abigail crossed one leg over the other, one arm comfortably lying across her lap. “He misses you. Terribly.”

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She didn't seem angry. Concerned, if anything. Ian couldn't figure out what the core of this conversation was. It sounded like Abigail was reprimanding him, not for seducing her fiancé, but for pushing him away.

"There was nothing I could do without hurting him to some extent," he said warily.

A crushing weight set on his shoulders, forcing him to lean his elbows on his knees.

He passed a hand over his face, something between a groan and a sigh heaving out of him.

"I'm not proud of it, but it was the right thing to do.

" He sought Abigail's eyes and found them already pinned on him, watchful and calculating.

"I know your guilt," she said, sorrow seeping into her expression. "I've hurt him, too."

" You ?"

"Phil's burnout was partially my fault."

"Don't be daft."

"It was." Abigail took a sip of her tea, then her lips pursed. "We met in the period when his popularity was taking off. I naively assumed it was the abrupt change in his

lifestyle to cause him all that stress... But it was also our relationship.”

“He says his life got better the day he met you.”

Abigail smiled. “That might be true, but... I’m sure you’ve noticed Phil has his own way of tackling life: he adapts to the environment around him to survive.

” Ian nodded, although he hadn’t witnessed much of that adaptation personally, as knowing Phil’s aversion for crowds and noise he’d always tried to keep him away from all of that.

Save for the pub, but he’d been ready to fight the noisy guys for him.

He’d never forget Phil’s relief when he’d silenced them.

“His world shifted significantly when we got together and I think he unconsciously gave up too much of himself to be the man he thought he should be for me.” Another sip.

Abigail looked sad. “The never-ending effort took a toll on him before I had a chance to realise what was really happening. And now here we are, trying to start over.” She swirled the tea around the cup.

“Two months in Glasgow with barely any improvement, then Phil meets you...” A pause punctuated by a sharp look. “And things magically change.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Ian objected. He still felt like he was under some sort of evaluating scrutiny, he just didn’t know what he was being evaluated for.

“You were a stranger,” said Abigail. “A clean slate. He didn’t owe you anything.” She held the cup between her hands, resting it on her lap. “He didn’t feel like he had

to adapt with you, so he was just... himself. A chameleon without any predator to hide from, if you will.”

“And you have no problem with that?”

“Are you asking if I’m jealous?” Abigail was a difficult woman to read through.

She spoke directly, no beating around the bush, with the relaxation of someone who was too confident to be afraid of confrontation.

Her eyes narrowed imperceptibly. “If Phil needed a kidney and I couldn’t give him one, how do you think I’d feel towards a compatible donor? ”

The question smacked the entirety of the story into a whole different perspective. Mental illness was still an illness, potentially terminal to many. If you loved someone enough, a cure, especially a life-saving one, was a blessing, no matter who it came from.

“You restored him, Ian.” Warmth. Gratitude. The most beautiful smile Ian had ever seen. “No wonder he fell in love with you. ”

All of Ian’s predictions about this meeting were crumbling down one by one and he could only watch and fumble, trying to predict Abigail’s next move, which was never what he was expecting.

“I never wanted to get in the way,” he said, like an apology — an unsolicited one, because nothing in Abigail’s behaviour indicated that she blamed him in any way. Ian wasn’t really sure what they were here for.

“Alright, just to be clear.” Abigail set the now empty cup down on its saucer. “I’m not here to berate you. You didn’t ‘get in the way’ . I appreciate you walking away

from Phil out of respect for me, but that's not going to work for any of us."

It took a moment to click.

"Any of us?"

"He wants us both and thinks he has to give up one of us in order to keep the other." Abigail's head tilted, dark hair cascading over her shoulder. "The question is: do we want to force him to pick?"

We.

Us both.

She was talking like Ian was part and parcel of the picture. He still couldn't put his finger on where this was headed, because if he was getting this right, it was just too good to be true.

"Are you sayin' what I think you're sayin'?"

Abigail simply asked: "Do you love him?"

"We wouldn't be here if you didn't think I did."

"I want a straight answer. Forgive the irony."

A warm wave rippled within Ian's chest. Brilliant sense of humour. Brilliant woman. His admiration for her couldn't possibly spike any higher than this.

"I do," he declared without hesitation. Guilt couldn't taint this sentiment. Feelings couldn't be accountable. Only the actions they spurred could be, and he was clean on

the front. “I love him.” How could I not love him?

That must be what Abigail wanted to hear. “And he loves you, ” she said, her all-business countenance waning into open friendliness. “ Keeping him away from you wouldn’t change how he feels and definitely wouldn’t do his mental health any favour.”

Ian wanted something to drink now. Something strong, like his usual caffè corretto , but without the coffee. He wanted Sandra’s whole grappa selection.

“You’re the one for him. I’m just—”

“Who says it has to be the one ?” Abigail interjected. “Why can’t it be the two ?”

Ian’s heart stopped. She was saying what he thought she was saying. In all nonchalance, as if it was just a dinner invitation, Abigail was putting an offer to the table that it was impossible to refuse.

“You’d do that for him?”

“Oh, Ian...” Abigail smiled affably. “I’d burn down the world and every person in it if that could make his life just a little easier. On second thought, it probably would .”

Ian chuckled at that, knowing how true that was. “You bring the petrol, I’ll bring the matches.”

“Glad to see we’re on the same page.” Abigail’s smile grew broader and brighter. She reached out to take his hands into her own, her touch warm and eager. “Phil needs us — both of us .” An emphatic squeeze. “I’d be happy to know he’s safe in your arms when I’m away.”

Ian didn't know what to say. All he wanted, all he could ever ask for, had just gone from an impossible dream to a possibility within reach, his to take.

The scene Abigail's words had painted could become reality: Phil, safe in his arms, without losing the woman he loved so much.

It hadn't even crossed Ian's mind that this could be an option.

"So..." Abigail tilted her head. "Do you think you and I could be co -partners?"

"You really are one of a kind," Ian commented, still not quite able to process what was happening.

"I'll take that as a yes. "

"If we do this — if he becomes our partner — what would that make us? You and me."

"Good friends, I hope."

Friends...

It sounded much less absurd than it should have.

Ian buried his face into his hands for a moment, trying to sort out the messy heap of thoughts and feelings buzzing in his head.

"What does Phil say about this?"

"He doesn't know yet, doesn't even know I'm here.

I was sick of all that pining.” Abigail rolled her eyes with a funny grimace.

“I told him you two needed to get your shit together, for better or for worse, but I had to clarify a few things with you first. What happens next, to all of us, is entirely your call. Tell him yourself.”

Ian didn’t need to think about it. “How’s this going to work?”

“How about we keep going as we always have?” Abigail proposed.

“Let things flow spontaneously. And perhaps, if you don’t mind, we could spend more time together, all three of us.

It’d mean the world to him.” She must’ve pondered this quite thoroughly: she had all the answers ready, not a hint of doubt. “What do you say?”

“Not many partners would’ve offered what you’re offering me,” Ian mused out loud, absently stroking the bracelet around his wrist.

Abigail beamed. “There’s nothing I can do about grapefruit, but I can let him have you.”

“What?”

“Never mind. So are you in? Think we could be a family?”

They could . It was crazy, but they could actually make this work. He could see it, could easily imagine it. He couldn’t wait to live it.

He chuckled to himself.



“Can’t wait to explain this one to my da.”

\* \* \*

He parked the pick-up in the first free spot he found along the street, walking the last bit under a light rain that grew heavier along the way. It was dark already, too late to bother Phil. It’d have to wait until tomorrow.

‘Tell him yourself,’ Abigail had said, and Ian had been burning with impatience since. Maybe Phil wouldn’t even be on board with Abigail’s solution, but they had a possibility now and that was more than Ian could’ve hoped for.

He turned the corner, fishing the keys out of his pocket. Looking up, he found a hooded figure sitting on his steps.

“Handsome?”

The figure’s head darted up and turned in his direction. Under the hood, Phil’s eyes were more tired than usual.

“You alright?”

Phil’s expression changed to fussy vexation. “No, I’m cold as fuck! Where the hell have you been?” He pushed to his feet to stare Ian down.

Ian put on his best poker face. “You’re the one obstructing my doorway, I should be the one asking questions.”

“Can we talk?”

“That’s another question.”

The jab drew a groan of exasperation out of Phil, who deliberately chose to bypass it.

“I told Abby.”

“Of course you did.” As if there had ever been another option. Phil’s honesty was one of the reasons Ian liked him so much, after all.

“She’s the one who said you and I needed to talk this out, so, unless you wanna be a jerk and deny a broken man some closure, we’re gonna talk.

” He released a big breath, like someone who’d just discarded a boulder off his chest, and scrutinised Ian expectantly with that puppy-dog look that had the power to annihilate all of Ian’s defences.

“Abby’s okay with my feelings for you. She understands it wasn’t a choice. But I still don’t know how you feel about me .”

“You do,” Ian argued. How could he not know ?

“No. I don’t.” A prickly frown darkened Phil’s face.

“I told you I loved you and you hit me back with a bunch of righteous rambling about not wanting to do anything behind Abby’s back and stuff like that.

Well, now the cat’s out of the bag, so, if you don’t feel the same, you either spell it out for me and let me move the fuck on, or we—”

“Jesus Christ, you’re such a drama queen.”

Phil gave Ian an irked shove, his frown deepening.

“I’m not leaving until I hear it.” A flash of terror glimmered in his eyes, immediately swept away by brittle but stubborn pride.

“Say it: ‘Phil, I don’t love you’ . Say it and I won’t bother you again.

I’ll walk out of your life and you’ll never have to—”

Ian clasped a hand over his mouth. “Fuckin’ hell, Phil,” he puffed out in a soft laugh. “ I love you . Stop whinin’.”

Time stilled. The display in Phil’s expression whispered ‘You do?’ , incredulous and emotional.

“Why—” His Adam’s apple bobbed. “Why couldn’t you just say it back when I told you?”

There were too many answers to that question.

Because you shouldn’t have said it in the first place.

Because it would’ve made everything harder for the both of us.

Because I couldn’t have walked away from you if I’d admitted that.

But none of them mattered any more.

A lopsided smirk tugged at Ian’s lips. “I didn’t have Abigail’s blessing back then.”

Phil paled, jaw hanging slack. The puppy-dog look became a bizarre blend of disbelief, excitement, and hope. Ian pinched his bristly chin between his fingers, grinning wide.

“Let’s go inside before you freeze, you daft bastard.”

PHIL

He couldn't imagine a more Scottish love confession.

Maybe if Ian had been wearing that beautiful kilt...

He was shivering and covered in goosebumps head to toe, but he couldn't have cared less.

He stood in Ian's entryway, waiting to be told what to do because his brain wasn't functioning at the moment.

Ian hung his jacket, toed off his boots, then took a good look at Phil, who was so drenched he was dripping all over the floor.

"I've got a tumble drier, if you want."

"Uh?"

"You look like a drowned rat."

Drowned rat might have been a compliment. Phil felt more like a corpse fished out of a lake after a few days. The wet fabric clinging to his skin was numbing his limbs, cold as ice.

"How long did you sit there?"

“I don’t know, half an hour?” Phil checked his watch. “Uh. More like an hour.”

Ian shot him a what the fuck look .

“I was out for a run and just... found myself at your doorstep.” A violent shiver coursed down his spine.

Ian narrowed his eyes at him. “Clothes off before you catch pneumonia.”

“If you wanted me naked, you just had to ask,” Phil grumbled while struggling with the hoodie’s zipper. A part of him wanted to ask Ian to turn around, but he was all too aware of how childish it would have sounded. “It’s not much of a spectacle, anyway.”

He avoided mirrors when he wasn’t clothed.

He knew he didn’t look bad , but anyone who had seen his physique before depression had ruined his discipline would’ve had to admit he’d let himself go.

He still had his muscles, but they’d lost all definition.

His abs, once taut, had gone soft. The only reason his muffin top was barely noticeable was that his appetite had plummeted, even more so after starting the medication.

Had it not been for Abby, he’d have starved himself to death.

Ian came forward, gently prying his hands away, and started to work on the jammed zipper. “What’s your idea of a spectacle?”

You , Phil thought, getting a meaningful eyeful of Ian’s figure. When his gaze lifted back up, it met a scolding frown.

The zipper went down. Ian helped him peel off the drenched hoodie, then the t-shirt underneath, dropping them both to the ground, then reached past him, grabbing a black hoodie from the rack by the door that he draped over Phil's bare shoulders.

It smelled like detergent and that familiar musky scent that translated to Ian to Phil's senses.

“Ask me what's a spectacle to me.”

Phil swallowed. He wanted to cry. Again . But this time it was for a completely different reason. He also may or may not be dying to kiss Ian.

“What's a spectacle to you?”

Ian's hands rubbed over Phil's arms, the friction producing a wonderful warmth.

“The strength of a man who's fighting battles that would crush me in a matter of days.

” He pulled the hoodie snug around Phil's trembling frame.

“And that shit-eating glint in his eyes when he outsmarts me. That one drives me insane.” Intent blue irises trailed down Phil's torso, then up again.

“It's really obnoxious of you to be as attractive as you look. ”

Phil was hot now. He was still shivering and still felt shards of ice puncturing him all over, but his face and his chest were on fire.

He really wanted to kiss Ian.

“Abby said something like that once. Back when we were dating.”

“Speaking of Abigail... I just had a life-changing conversation with her.”

Phil’s eyebrows rose. He didn’t know which part of that single sentence was more disconcerting. Ian and Abby had just had a life-changing conversation? To talk about what?

Actually, he knew what .

Him.

But to say what?

“Just as in... recently?”

“As in just now . Not goin’ to lie, for a moment there I thought she was out for blood. That woman knows how to intimidate a guy.”

“She does ,” Phil had to agree. He was proud of his pint-sized cherry bomb.

Ian gave the edges of the hoodie a perfunctory tug. “She accused me of breakin’ your heart.”

The heart in question, which had been very much broken until mere minutes ago, missed a few beats. Phil would have never put it like that, but...

“Yeah, well...” He ducked his head with a sniff. “You did .”

Ian splayed a hand on Phil’s naked chest. Beneath it, Phil’s heart throbbed in anticipation. He wanted more of that touch. More of that warmth. He wanted to tear



Ian's clothes apart and soak up the beautiful heat of his body wrapped up in his arms.

"My goal was to preserve your relationship," Ian stressed, his hand gliding up until it curled around the nape of Phil's neck. If it was a reproach, it didn't sound very reproachful. More like enamoured.

Kiss me , Phil whimpered inside. Please, just fucking kiss me .

"But you and your pearl-clutchin' morals had to go and spoil it all."

"My most sincere apologies for having a conscience." Phil shoved the feverish yearning under a mask of phoney indignation. "At least If I lose Abby it'll be because of the truth rather than a lie."

Ian scoffed out a muffled chortle, his expression mellowing. "That's not what's happenin'."

"What's happening then?" Phil's tetchy tone only seemed to amuse Ian further, bringing out those dreamy dimples Phil was so hopelessly weak for. Ian's thumb stroked the underside of his jawline, back and forth, so tenderly Phil's knees instantly turned to mush.

"If you want," he muttered, "you've got a free pass for a foot in both camps."

Phil's mouth fell open, but no sound came out. He replied what he'd heard in his head a few times to make sure he'd processed it correctly.

No mockery.

No sarcasm.

Only anticipation.

A foot in both camps.

Abby and Ian.

It was more than he could have dared to hope for.

It was everything .

He licked his lips, overcome with emotion. “Abby said that?”

“Yeah,” Ian all but laughed. “Pretty matter-of-factly, too. She also said...” His forehead creased. “I think the exact phrasin’ was: ‘There’s nothing I can do about grapefruit, but I can let him have you.’ Whatever that means.”

“I’ll explain later.” Phil frantically fisted Ian’s t-shirt to yank him down to his eye-level. “Can we fucking kiss now?”

A slow, devilish smirk formed across Ian’s lips. There was an emotional glint in the blue of his eyes.

“No objection. ”

“Great.”

Phil grabbed Ian by the neck and very ungently pulled him into a kiss so frantic and messy it felt like a matter of life or death, all pants and teeth, and lips relentlessly chasing lips despite the burn of the beard and the oxygen running out fast.

It was a funny feeling — the reverse height difference he wasn’t used to, expanse of

solid muscles filling his arms, unafraid of his strength, and the loving, passionate touch of Ian's lips upon his own, hungry and eager but carefully responsive to his most subtle cues, indulging every title of his head, every brief hesitation, every experimental shift.

Kissing a guy so much bigger and stronger than him made him feel so small and fragile...

Kissing a guy .

Phil laughed into the kiss.

Ian pulled back. "What?" His arms stayed around Phil, hands splayed on the bare skin of his back. The hoodie had fallen to the ground and no one was interested in picking it up.

"Nothing. Just... Ah." Phil dipped his head with another laugh, more than just a little breathless. "I'm like twenty years late with this sexual awakening shit."

"Didn't realise there were deadlines for that.

" Phil could feel the pressure of every single one of Ian's fingertips into the small of his back, hot and unflinching.

His lips burned from the friction with Ian's beard, but he could still feel the delicate swipe of Ian's tongue, too, and that burned in a whole different way.

Phil's arms relaxed, draping over Ian's shoulders as he took in the breath-taking sight of the man who'd been living rent-free in his head all this time.

"At my age you just kinda assume that that ship has sailed, you know? You've seen

the best of both worlds, stuck to one side all your life...

” His gaze dropped to Ian’s mouth and he had to bite the inside of his cheek to suppress a smug grin.

“Turns out the best of the other world was actually waiting for me in Scotland. ”

Ian kissed him, a light, lingering brush that made up for all the previous violence, and whispered upon his lips: “Thank you for dragging your arse all the way to me.”

The tenderness of it awakened two contrasting feelings within Phil: the need to cry and the yearning.

He latched onto the latter, not wanting to ruin the moment, but while he struggled to keep his eyes from welling up, something else happened — something that made him glance up at Ian apologetically, only to find him smiling.

“Happy to see me, Handsome?”

With a boldness that came out of nowhere, Phil pressed up closer to Ian. The flimsy running shorts did absolutely nothing to conceal his hard-on. His tongue swept at a corner of his parted lips as his eyes roamed across Ian’s body.

“I’m not seeing nearly enough of you.”

A greedy light ignited in Ian’s dilated pupils. Strong hands grabbed Phil’s hips. “Maybe a shower’ll help.”

There was a promise lurking behind the casualness of the proposal, a sweet one that made Phil’s mouth go dry with anticipation, but at the same time a visceral nervousness gripped his guts. He didn’t know what to expect from that promise —

didn't know what Ian expected of him.

"I've never—"

Ian shushed him with a gentle tug that brought Phil's erection flush against his thigh.

"Just let me take care of this . If you say stop, I'll stop."

The mere mental picture of that forced Phil to bite down on a pathetic moan.

"And if I say more ?" he asked breathlessly.

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Ian smirked and pulled him into the bathroom, where Phil watched him strip one garment at a time, leisurely, maybe because the damp fabric clung tightly to his skin, or maybe because he just loved driving Phil insane.

Phil waited for the familiar sting of self-consciousness, but it was wiped away by a single, lustful look before it could kick in.

Ian, who was built like a god and had surely seen plenty of people way hotter than Phil, looked at him as if he was the most attractive human to have ever blessed his sight.

The water ran in the shower, steam pouring out and fogging the mirror and the window. Ian stepped closer to Phil, only a pair of black trunks left on him, doing a very poor job in containing a showy half-mast.

“You sure about this? We don’t have to—”

“Fuck it. I want to touch you. I want you to touch me .”

“Your wish is my command,” Ian whispered before drawing him into a heated kiss that ended with Phil up against the cold tiles of the shower and Ian on top of him, their soaked underwear a frustrating barrier between them as they ground against one another, desperate for friction.

Ian’s size and assertive energy were a whole new sensorial experience.

Phil let go of all control and abandoned himself to him, trusting every gesture, every

caress, letting Ian lather him and rub him all over in between kisses that went from tender to hungry to tender and idle again.

It was blatant that Ian was used to leading the game, but it was just as obvious he was also used to being mindful of his partners' cues, because none of Phil's reactions, not even the most subtle, went unnoticed or ignored: if there was the barest trace of discomfort in the way he squirmed, Ian would readily redirect his attention to a different spot, recalibrate the pressure of his body, pause whatever he was doing to allow Phil to adjust to every new, overwhelming sensation.

His skin burned everywhere Ian kissed him, but that burn was only fueling the maddening arousal pulsing in his veins.

He was so hard by now he couldn't even think straight.

Everywhere he groped, plump, sturdy muscles filled his palms, pushing his heart rate higher with the increasing desire.

Having Ian's massive frame moulded all over him made his body crave things it'd never craved before, and Phil could only arch, grasp, moan, and beg, barely aware of his surroundings.

A whimper of protest grazed up his throat when Ian's mouth left one of his nipples to suck its way up to his ear to whisper: "Just say stop and I'll stop. "

Phil didn't understand at first. Most of his blood was pooled very far from his brain, leaving his mind foggy and unreceptive.

A spark of awareness hit him when Ian sank down to one knee and, locking eyes with him, carefully tugged his briefs down, then a sudden shock of pleasure blanked out his vision, and from there on everything became a delicious, mind-blowing agony.

\* \* \*

When his senses came back to him, he was in Ian's arms, wrapped up in a towel that felt unbearably coarse in spots he was still overwhelmingly sensitive.

He was floating on a cloud of bliss, ripples of the fading climax still washing through him.

He was eased down on a soft surface that it took him a moment to identify as Ian's bed, heaving like he'd run a fifty-mile marathon and just as boneless.

The mattress sank next to him. Squinting at the ceiling, drowsy and still vaguely disoriented, he could feel the heat of Ian's presence at his side, grounding and reassuring.

It would've been a lie to say he'd missed this — the touching and the physical pleasure and the sex in general —, but he felt good. Really good . Like the suffocating noose he'd been carrying around his neck for so long had loosened dramatically.

“Jesus fuck ,” he panted, his limbs so limp he could hardly move. “Where did you learn to do that ?”

The low rumble of Ian's chortle vibrated all around him. “A girl taught me.”

“Seriously?”

“Aye. The things she could do with that mouth...”

Phil turned his head towards him, laughing. “I gotta learn some tricks or the competition's gonna squash me. Although...” His laugh became a soft puff. “Not



gonna lie, being a pillow princess is kinda awesome. A guy could get used to it.”

Ian laughed, too, eyes twinkling with a bright emotion that looked very much like happiness. “Knew you were just a spoiled brat. ”

“Sue me.”

“Cocky prick.”

“A bit redundant, don’t you think?”

Phil didn’t leave any room for a retort.

Rolling to his side, he draped an arm across Ian’s torso and tucked himself against him.

In no time he was wrapped up in a solid, comforting embrace.

Ian’s pecs, so plump and hard, weren’t the most comfortable pillow to rest on, but he couldn’t have cared less. He would be happy to rot here for days.

Ian glanced down at him with a lifted eyebrow. “Of course you’re a little spoon.”

“Duh.” Phil sneaked a leg between Ian’s.

His body felt exhausted but he didn’t want to fall asleep and miss a single second of this.

His lips brushed against Ian’s pec as he settled more comfortably.

Ian rolled to his side, too, allowing Phil to sink his leg further between his and tangle

their ankles together.

He brought a hand up to Phil's neck and dropped a languid kiss to his lips, taking his time to savour and explore. That tongue knew what it was doing.

Phil splayed a hand on Ian's side, marvelling at how massive it was, and gingerly trailed up to the ribs, to the broad expanse of the back.

It was like touching a breathing sculpture, warm and soft and inviting.

Ian let Phil map his body inch by inch, all the while keeping his hand on Phil's neck and his eyes trained into Phil's, ready to register every emotion flashing into them.

But Phil was quite sure that whatever sentiment his features might display at the moment would be entirely swallowed up by the pure, unadulterated joy he was bursting with.

"You should see your dumb face right now," Ian smirked.

"I can feel my dumb face, thank you very much."

Fondness seeped into Ian's smirk, melting all the teasing away. Phil was familiar with that look: it was how Abby looked at him every day.

"You hungry?"

Ian's husky murmur spread goosebumps all over Phil's arms. He was indeed starving. He had no idea what time it was by now, but, according to the darkness of the sky outside, it was definitely way past dinner time.

"I can order us something," he said, lifting his wrist to eye-level to pull up the Uber

Eats app. There was a text notification.

Abby

I'm confident I won't be seeing either of you before tomorrow

Enjoy your night, lads

P.S. saucy pics welcome

He laughed under his breath, overflowing with gratitude and love.

"What?" Ian enquired. Phil showed him the texts. It led to a moment of silence. "Will this woman ever cease to amaze me?"

"Nah. You'll get used to it, though."

"Doubt it."

"Lend me your phone."

"What for?"

"She wants saucy pics."

Ian scoffed, but still blindly reached over to the nightstand behind him to retrieve his phone and give it to Phil.

"How do I unlock it?"

"It's not locked."

Phil swiped and the screen did, in fact, go straight to the homepage. “That’s a safety hazard.”

“No one would steal cheap shite like this. They want to leak my camera roll? Fine. The internet will love five thousand cat pics.”

“Five thousand cat pics and a thirst trap ,” Phil corrected, lifting up the phone above them. He wasn’t used to Android, but after a couple of failed attempts he successfully got the camera to open and turn to selfie mode.

“Want me to bare my ankles?” asked Ian.

“C’mere, jerk.” Phil adjusted the framing to make sure it showed a good view of Ian’s chest .

“My eyes are up here, ye know?”

“Saucy pics require saucy tits.”

“You’re recordin’ a video, ya daftie.”

“Ah, shit.”

Ian averted the phone towards himself and looked straight into the camera. “Let’s look at the bright side, Abigail: at least he’s pretty.”

“Fuck off!” Phil could curse all he wanted, but he couldn’t have deceived anyone: he was hopelessly smitten and it showed.

He opened WhatsApp and found out Abby’s texts had actually been sent to a chat group that involved herself, Phil, and Ian.

He sent the video to Abby, trusting she'd love it as much as he did, then noticed the chat's title: 'Whit's fur ye'll no go past ye' .

His Scottish wasn't great, but it didn't take a genius to get this one.

“What's meant for you won't pass you by .”

“No, shit.” A snort tickled his ear. “It'll run right into you at the park.”

A pleasant heat spilled into Phil's chest as he mirrored Ian's big, stupid grin. He was certain that had been precisely Abby's thought when she'd named the chat.

He was having a hard time processing what was happening.

He was in bed with a man, practically naked.

A man he loved.

A man who loved him .

With the blessing of the woman he loved.

It didn't seem fair, not when most people out there didn't have a fraction of what he had.

A reply popped up on the phone:

Abigail

Pretty and happy

That's all I wanted to see

Phil blushed to his toes. It was going to take some getting used to this. Ian snatched the phone to reply, forcing Phil to crane his neck to spy what he was typing.

You

Promise I'll get him home in time for his medication

Abigail

We've got a keeper here, Phil I'll be waiting for you both with a luscious breakfast

You both.

So Phil would get to spend the night with Ian, wake up with him on Sunday morning and go home to Abby with him, and all three of them would sit together in the kitchen and...

He wasn't sure what was going to happen.

Knowing Abby's curious nature and incorrigible brazenness, it wasn't unlikely she'd be expecting details, which Ian would most likely be happy to provide, for the mere pleasure of flustering Phil.

A family-like sort of dynamic, something Phil had daydreamed about, never truly believing it would ever be anything more than an unrealistic fantasy, because what were the odds?

"Where's the catch?" he wondered out loud.

“Be more specific.”

Phil sighed. “In all of this. I get to keep Abby, I get to have you... Isn’t it, like... too much ? It’s like winning the lottery twice.”

Ian pulled himself up to a sitting position. “No catch.” He patted Phil’s thigh way too energetically. “You’re just a lucky bastard.”

“Talk about an understatement.”

It still sounded too easy, but he guessed he would have to accept that, for once, the simplest answer was the correct one: he was a lucky bastard.

He didn’t know if there was a god to thank for this, or the stars, of destiny, or if it had truly been just a chain of random events with a very fortunate outcome.

All he knew was that it would’ve made him feel better to have a source to be thankful to, to know that all this luck had been intentionally bestowed on him rather than raining on him for no reason — that it was rightfully his and couldn’t be taken from him by a whim of chance.

“I can hear you overthinkin’,” Ian chided, glancing back at Phil.

“Yeah, sorry.” Phil sat up with a groan. “So, what do you want for dinner?”

“Just feed me, Handsome. I’m a simple guy.”

“Don’t complain when the food arrives.”

“Said the professional complainer.”

In the end, Phil ordered burritos from one of his and Abby's favourite restaurants.

"Estimated delivery time: half an hour," he conveyed. "Think you can lend me some clothes in the meantime?"

Ian tutted. "You're mental if you think I'm goin' to put clothes on you."

"Wouldn't want to be in your shoes when you have to tell Abby you let me die of hypothermia."

"Never said I wasn't going to keep you warm."

The deep, scratchy brogue spread a wave of hot tingles all over Phil's body.

That was admittedly very effective. Phil let Ian push him back into the mattress and pin his wrists at the sides of his head to capture his lips into an agonisingly delicate kiss.

His legs pliantly spread to welcome Ian's bulk, but as the kiss started deepening a weird impression convinced Phil to crack an eye open, realising there was a spectator in the room.

"Your cat's watching us."

"Let her," Ian mumbled, unbothered, but Phil kept feeling those huge amber eyes judging him from the doorway.

"Stop, for fuck's sake!" There was no way to inject any irritation into a single word. Phil laughed into the kiss until he mustered enough willpower to nudge Ian back. "We're not making out in front of her!"



Ian grudgingly rolled off him and off the bed to head straight to the wardrobe by the door. “Thanks for the cockblocking, Kibbs!” he grumbled to the cat, who responded with a sassy slow blink that effortlessly thawed Ian’s faux pique into sheer adoration .

“Jesus, she’s got you wrapped around her little paw.”

“Are you seriously jealous of a cat ?”

Before Phil could retort, a balled up t-shirt collided with face, followed by a hoodie and a pair of joggers. Ian moved to the chest of drawers in the corner and tossed him some underwear, too. Everything was at least two sizes too large, but it’d have to do.

He managed to pull up the briefs, but then got distracted by Ian getting dressed. This was... normal. Perfectly ordinary, unspecial, a random slice of life billions of people went through every day and probably took for granted.

But Phil didn’t.

Getting dressed. Showering. Having sex. Joking. Laughing. Feeling.

The man Abby had met and had fallen in love with was gone, but there was a new, stronger Phil crawling out of that man’s ashes, with a whole new story to write and two hands to hold as he learned to live again.

Lucky bastard indeed .

He clutched the mass of clothes to his bare chest, relishing the familiar, comforting scent of the fabric. If Ian thought he was going to get these clothes back, he was sorely wrong.

A hand curled under his chin to tip his head back, loving blue eyes staring right into

his soul.

“You alright?”

Phil dreamily smiled back at Ian. He couldn't remember when it had become second nature again.

“Never better.”

*Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 4:03 am*

The frozen grass crunched under his feet, the same crispy sound of gritting gravel, as he proceeded up the hill with his hands tucked in his pockets to protect them from the icy air, which carried a scent of snow. His climb was slowed by the backpack full of groceries he carried on his back.

The village was a gleaming Christmas postcard behind him, while, ahead, the moorland was quiet and deserted.

The sun already burrowed below the horizon, tingeing the cloudy sky in milky shades of pink and purple that would soon fade to dark grey.

At the top of the hill, a golden light beacons behind the old cottage windows, calling him home.

The pale smoke coiling out of the chimney promised warmth and maybe, given the time, even a cup of hot tea.

When he walked through the door, the laughter was the first thing that welcomed him in. The second was the comforting flare of the crackling fireplace on the other side of the room, not far from which a Christmas tree cast its colourful lights on the wooden floor.

He shrugged off the backpack, hung the coat, kicked off the dirty shoes, then followed the laughter to the kitchen, where he found the small woman and the large man at the stove, poring over a pot that was oozing an aroma of cinnamon all over the place.

The man stopped on the threshold to observe them.

He crossed his arms and leaned against the doorframe, allowing himself to absorb every detail of the scene: the delightful contrast between the deep rumble and the bubbly giggle, both of which filled him with a joy he would've never known the human heart could experience; the chubby cat sitting on the window sill, watching as thin snowflakes fluttered on the other side of the glass; the pile of wood stacked in a corner between the wall and a cast iron stove that hosted a tray of mouth-watering shortbread cookies.

He smiled despite a strange déjà vu blurring his sight for a second. A phantom feeling punched him out of nowhere, a sense of emptiness that disappeared as fast as it had come as soon as his eyes focused back on the two people in front of him.

His place.

His family.

His belonging.

Padding towards them, unnoticed, he walked straight into the space between them, a perfect fit, as if they'd been waiting for him to fill it all along.

For a split second he had the absurd, irrational fear that they might vanish right in front of him, but then his arms spread out to circle both of their waists, and they stayed as concrete and real as ever.

“Hey.” He placed a kiss on the woman’s temple and one on the man’s bearded cheek.  
“I’m home.”