



You Had Me At Happy Hour

Author: *Timothy Janovsky*

Category: LGBT+

Description: Could they be a perfect pairing?

Julien Boire can't wait to get out of his small town. Soon he'll be leaving to take an advanced wine course that will put him on track to become a master sommelier. He can't let anything distract him, especially the hot new hire at his aunt and uncle's restaurant.

It should be easy – Julien and TikTok mixologist Greg Harlow could not be more different. One thing they do have in common: neither wants a relationship. They agree to a no-strings sex pact. Nothing is off-limits. Except a future.

It's exactly how Julien wants it. Except for the little part of him that wonders if maybe he's about to lose the kind of happy that could last much longer than an hour...

Total Pages (Source): 28

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

JULIEN

Julien Boire's tongue has many talents.

It can decipher the tannin and acidity of a wine from a single sip. It can make his friends-with-benefits moan with a few intentional, well-timed licks. And, on occasion, it can also morph itself into the shape of a clover, a specialty of his since the first grade that won him some friends on the playground.

His tongue, however, also has its faults. Chief among them, its inability to be held when a patron at Martin's Place insists on ordering a red wine with the salmon entrée.

"While that's a choice," he begins, puffing out his chest to display his certified sommelier pin with immense pride, "a buttery, full-bodied chardonnay would pair much better with the mustard-glazed fish. We have an oaked 2018 chardonnay from Santa Barbara County for thirty-five a bottle or nine a glass. May I suggest that instead?"

The man at the table—salt-and-pepper hair, immaculate fingernails, expensive watch—doesn't even flinch or look up from his menu as he says, "No, you may not."

Julien, jarred by this, looks to this man's tablemate, a woman no older than fifty with blunt blond hair in a floral dress with a drooping neckline. She averts her eyes, a move that suggests the man has done this before.

Julien does what he's done before as well: juts out his chest a little more so that his sommelier pin—a coin-shaped pendant with a face in the center and a purple ring

around the edge—catches the light and the attention of the man with the severe dark eyes. This pin is his most prized possession. A marker of his success in his first intense study of wine and all its bold expressions. It also cost him a full weekend of attending lectures, many hours of intense memorizing, several personal breakdowns over the difficulty, and roughly thirteen hundred dollars. He has every right to show it off as a marker of his expertise.

“Sir, it’s only that a cabernet will completely overpower the flavor of the fish,” Julien says with such authority that he’s certain his point will come across. “If you’re positive you’d prefer a red, a pinot noir from Burgundy might do the trick.”

“I think what I asked for would do the trick since it’s what I asked for,” the man says, patience waning in his tone and volume.

Julien has been a server at Martin’s Place since he turned eighteen. Prior, he worked as a dishwasher, a busboy, a host, and a general right-hand man to his uncle who owns the joint alongside his wife. They raised Julien after his parents lost custody (as if they wanted it to begin with) in an ugly court proceeding he prefers not to think about.

Martin’s Place in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, is as much Julien’s home as his one-bedroom apartment in Allentown, and when a patron refuses his wine suggestion, it feels a bit like they’re coming over for a visit and refusing to take off their shoes at the door as requested. An affront. A blatant disrespect that kinks his shoulders and causes sweat to bead on his brow.

“The chef has crafted such an exquisite flavor combination with a more subtle sauce,” Julien says, this time appealing to the woman who is sipping from her water glass. “It would be a shame to cover it up with a wine that’s more robust.”

The man, having pulled his readers off his nose and set them beside his bread plate,

looks at Julien with a fiery displeasure. “It would be more of a shame for me to have to talk to your manager about your impertinence.”

The woman pipes up. Julien hopes it will be in his favor, but his face falls when she says, “What ever happened to the customer is always right?” Her tone is dripping with what do you mean you won’t accept my expired coupon energy.

It’s this voice that he can’t stand, even more than outside shoes on his freshly vacuumed carpet. “The customer is always right, but in this instance, you are both dead wrong,” he says with a growl that surprises even him, but it’s been a long day, week, month, and year, so he shouldn’t be. Though he does wish he could gather up those upset words like fireflies in a mason jar and hide them behind his back, but it’s too late. They’re free and blinking, reminding him of the short fuse he’s been trying (and failing) to rein in.

“Well, I never,” says the woman, pulling her napkin from her lap and slapping it down on the table. One end of the napkin lands in the garnished oil set out beside the breadbasket. Julien resists the urge to remove it immediately before the stain spreads and spreads and spreads...

“Are you even listening?” the man barks, pulling Julien from his spiral over the soiled napkin. “This is ridiculous. We try a new restaurant on date night, and this is the reception we get. I can’t believe this place even stays in business. We never see many people in here.”

The woman nods her head, blond bob swishing along with it. “Stella told me to skip this place, and we should’ve listened.” She’s standing now, grabbing her Birkin off her chair and holding it tight to her stomach as if he were a pickpocket who at any moment might use his hands and not his words to snap at her.

Frozen in place, he doesn’t even notice when Uncle Martin—a short, stout man with

unkempt eyebrows—steps in beside him. “What’s going on here?” Uncle Martin asks, surveying the situation.

Julien doesn’t have a moment to explain because the woman is saying, “This server refused to serve us the wine we asked for.”

Uncle Martin’s face-caterpillars shoot up into his receding hairline. “My sincerest apologies.”

“Apologies aren’t going to cut it,” the man says. “I hope you understand we’ll be writing a strongly negative online review about this experience. Never have I been so insulted in a dining establishment in my life.”

Julien wants to stand taller, point to his pin, and explain himself. Say to this couple, who clearly weren’t listening to him, that he was only trying to help. Ever since age six, when he started living with Uncle Martin and Aunt Augustine, he’s been in awe of the service industry in general and their restaurant in particular. Servers and chefs and hosts come together to give their patrons unique, flavorful experiences they couldn’t get at home.

From the moment this man opened his mouth, Julien could tell he ordered cabernet everywhere he went. Bought it from the grocery store. Drank it at home. Cracked open bottles at parties. Inherently, there’s nothing wrong with being a creature of habit. He understands it well. He cleans his apartment every Sunday morning from 8:00 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. and logs onto his one-and-only downloaded hookup app every Friday night after dinner in search of a reliable, stable buddy to relieve himself with.

But with wine, variety is the only way to go.

Besides, ever since Uncle Martin hired Chef Marco a few years ago and moved the menu toward more Italian-inspired dishes, Julien has made it his mission to ensure

that his performance elevates Chef Marco's work. If the patron leaves dissatisfied, that's one less regular to rely on, and as rents rise alongside running costs, the doors at Martin's Place could get locked for good, which is not a burden he's at present equipped to bear on top of studying for an exam he hopes might let him leave behind this pocket of Pennsylvania and the painful childhood memories that still plague him.

"I'm terribly sorry," Julien says finally, coming back to earth enough to try to salvage the situation.

"Didn't you hear me?" the man says.

"Yeah, didn't you hear him?" the woman crows.

He hadn't heard them. Frankly, he was fixated on the words stacking up behind his glued-shut lips. Thinking about how expensive getting his advanced sommelier certificate is going to be. Obsessing over whether his dream to leave Bethlehem and start working for an establishment that actually wants and values a sommelier would be another nail in the coffin at Martin's Place. And last but certainly not least, staring at that white napkin which is now soaked to an unsightly light yellow at one edge.

"Apologies aren't going to cut it," the man repeats with an emphasis on each word. "Darling, grab your sweater, and let's go."

The couple huffs once more before marching to the exit. Bells above the door sing out a bright, happy jingle that couldn't be more wrong for the moment.

"Julien, let's take a walk to my office," Uncle Martin says as Julien's boss and not his parental figure. It's a dreadful tone that makes his stomach bottom out.

Before nodding and following behind, Julien scoops the sullied napkin from the table and takes it with him. This napkin, unlike his mind and temperament, is a mess he

can handle.

Uncle Martin instructs him to sit in the chair in the corner of the small, cramped room. On a nearby metal shelf, Julien clears a space and unrolls the napkin before grabbing a tissue from the full box on Uncle Martin's desk. While still listening, he starts soaking up the excess oil, watching it bleed from the napkin onto the tissue.

"What's gotten into you?" Uncle Martin asks, slumped forward on his elbows, neck craned upward. "You haven't been acting like yourself."

"I know. I'm sorry," Julien says with a huff, standing and crossing the room to a cabinet. He pulls bicarbonate of soda from it and, using the container's tiny plastic spoon, sprinkles a little onto the napkin.

"I hate to be the broken record here and sound like that jerkoff," Uncle Martin says, using his favorite cussword, "but an apology won't cut it. You're losing me business."

Julien watches as the sodium bicarbonate clumps up, pulling the oil from the napkin. Truthfully, he relates to that oil stain, spread too thin in the wrong place.

For a while, he made peace with the fact that he'd probably inherit Martin's Place from his uncle when the time was right. A slow passing of the torch. Aunt Augustine and Uncle Martin tried for a long time to have a child with no luck. After the second IVF attempt, pre-Julien's arrival in their lives, Aunt Augustine decided they'd invest the money in a time-share in Florida they'd visit for biannual partying. Now Julien watches the restaurant every time they venture off—though there are older, more seasoned employees available to do so—and every time, Uncle Martin goes misty-eyed with visions of the future.

Julien dreads those two weeks every year.

“That’s not my intention. I’m sorry. I’ve been...distracted,” Julien says, which is at the very least not a lie. Last month, his landlord hiked his rent, severely throwing his precise and careful budgeting out the window. Because they’re blood and Julien owes Uncle Martin much of his success, he never asks for a raise regardless of how much extra work he takes on. So he skimps where he can: no new clothes, take-out coffee, or having a car of his own.

On top of that, Julien’s friend-with-benefits moved three months ago, and he hasn’t been able to find a suitable replacement since. Not that sex is transactional to him, but it is necessary, and he has specific standards that must be met before he can let go in a way that is both satisfying and helps clear his mind.

Uncle Martin leans back, and the chair beneath him creaks. “Maybe you should think about taking some time off.” It sounds more like a demand than a suggestion. Which is the wrong way to get Julien to listen.

“No. I’m fine,” Julien insists, taking an old toothbrush from the supply closet and starting to scrub at the stain. So fast and so furious, even Vin Diesel would be jealous. “I swear. I’m fine.” His cramping hand muscles protest.

“Says the man more worried about an oil stain than the fact that he lost out on a big tip,” Uncle Martin says, referencing the couple. What Uncle Martin has never understood in his many years of restaurant ownership is that the nicer the purse and the snootier the man, the less they tip. Julien’s not going to feel the loss of less than fifteen percent.

He would, however, feel the loss of a week’s wages. His savings account has taken a hit, and he needs to replenish it to take the advanced sommelier course next year. He completed the prerequisite course and exam a year to the day last Thursday, and it’s time to get moving on the next phase as speedily as possible. The quicker he’s advanced, the sooner he can become a master with all its exclusivity and luxury and

big paydays.

There's a world beyond Bethlehem that he's never seen. Never had access to. And here, well, there are too many reminders of his parents, of yelling that shook the walls and dirty glasses that piled up in the sink for weeks on end until they smelled or got thrown. Away or at the wall. Both happened frequently. He told as much, through tears, to the kindly caseworker with the sunflower necklace who promised him everything would be okay.

Julien stops scrubbing, ignoring his uncle's dig at what he knows full well is one of Julien's OCD triggers. You can explain mental health to a Boomer, but you can't make them absorb anything you say. "It's sleep. I haven't been sleeping well. I promise I'll do better."

Uncle Martin sighs and nods. "I'm really going to hold you to that, Julien. We aren't pulling in as much of a profit as we should be right now. If we don't make that Best of Lehigh Valley year-end list, I'm afraid... Well, first, I'm afraid we're going to have to get rid of the time-share in Orlando, which would crush Augustine. But second, I'm afraid that'll be curtains for us."

"Don't say that," Julien manages to reply while retrieving the stain-remover spray.

"That's all there is to say about this situation, which is why I have to tell you something," Uncle Martin says, switching from boss to uncle. Softer gaze, gentler voice. This can't be good. "We're going to be making some staff changes. Are you familiar with this guy?" Uncle Martin swivels his phone around to face Julien.

TikTok is pulled up. How did Uncle Martin even know what TikTok was? On the screen is a man with dark brown hair quaffed upward in front, a heart-shaped face with groomed scruff across his upper lip and jawline, and big ears that tip out slightly at the sides. He stands behind a kitchen island without a shirt on. Defined pecs are

bisected by a tuft of curly dark hair. Abs chase each other down the front of his torso into low-sitting, neon green joggers.

“What’s up, guys? It’s me, GoodWithHisHandsHarlow, your friendly TikTok mixologist back with another autumn-inspired cocktail.”

The rest of the video plays out at double-speed. Instruction bubbles pop up as he displays the different ingredients. Gin. Orange juice. Pomegranate juice. Honey. Thyme. The ingredients get poured, mixed, and sipped rapidly, yet there are no mistakes, no spills. Two large hands—knuckles lightly dusted with black hair—get their own close-up as precise measurements are taken.

“And that’s how you make a pomegranate gin cocktail,” GoodWithHisHandsHarlow says before “accidentally” spilling the cocktail. It dribbles past his chin and sluices down his bare torso as the music switches to something sexy. Then the video loops.

“I am not familiar with that guy,” Julien says, beating back the slight jolt of attraction he felt when the man capably poured the drink. He saves those thoughts for Friday nights. Or he did back when Colin still lived in his building and not several states away. Besides, any attraction was usurped by annoyance as soon as the cocktail made a river toward the man’s belly button.

Service is not about showmanship. It’s about knowledge and craft.

“Well, he’s huge,” Uncle Martin says, inadvertently causing Julien to imagine possibly huge, hidden parts of Mr. Harlow not appropriate for TikTok.

Julien gulps. “How so?”

“He’s got a massive following.” Uncle Martin must know what he’s saying, right? There’s no way these are accidental Freudian slips. “And of course, he’s not hard to

look at.”

Hard. Goddammit. “What does his attractiveness have to do with the restaurant?”

“That’s why I hired him.”

Julien scrunches up his brow, missing the implied meaning. “To...be hot?”

“Yes,” Uncle Martin says. “And also to bartend, come up with a creative cocktail menu that will drum up business.”

Julien’s brain is scrambled eggs. “What about my wine pairings?”

Uncle Martin scowls. “We’ll still have those, but for people who prefer hard alcohol, now we’ll have more options.”

Options. That dirty word shows its grimy face again. He’s not sure why it’s dirty. Often, he questions his own brain, still, even at twenty-six, uncertain of its various functions and foibles.

It’s not that he dislikes hard alcohol. He just has a complicated relationship with it thanks to his parents. And wine is far superior in every way.

“Over the last several months, it’s been slow. This might be the boost we need,” Uncle Martin says, growing sullen. “I’m getting up there in age, Julien. I want this place to still be in business when it’s time to pass off the keys, okay?”

Julien doesn’t even notice that he nods until he’s already finished doing it. He doesn’t have the heart (or the guts?) to tell his uncle that owning Martin’s Place is not his dream. It’s never been his dream.

But it will only hurt Uncle Martin's feelings. And he owes so much to Uncle Martin for taking him in and raising him like his own son.

All Julien says is, "Okay" and then he gets back to work.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

GREG

Greg Harlow lugs the last of his brown boxes up the steep flight of steps and sets them down with a huff. He's sweaty, his gray shirt stained both front and back. After he unpacks, he needs to take his first shower at his new place, otherwise he'll be stinking up his new room on day one—and it's already smelly enough thanks to the previous tenant, a pizza delivery guy who didn't bother to clean before he skipped town and left behind a few old, ripped work polos to rot in the closet.

Every room, even the bathroom, has the ghost of garlic floating on the air.

He finds lavender air freshener in a disorganized box and tries his best to spray the scent away.

Greg didn't expect to be moving into a tiny room in a house with a roommate at twenty-seven. When he was a teenager, imagining a life beyond Ohio, he often thought he'd be living in a luxurious city in one of those high-rise buildings with a doorman and a business suite and a gym. What he wouldn't give for a free gym right now.

And he had that. For a while. The financial security and the luxury, all thanks to ninety-second shirtless cocktail-making videos he started posting for fun on TikTok and ended up turning a profit on. But fifteen minutes of fame came and went, and while he still has a solid following, the endorsements and the invites and the checks have dried up relatively quickly.

Burning bright and fast was never in Greg Harlow's imaginings of his future.

Yet, here he is, twenty-seven and two months, moving into his cousin's guest room in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and taking a job at a (presumably) failing bar and restaurant.

He is lucky to have a cousin, Rufus, a couple years younger than him who is willing to rent him the spare room in his grandmother's old home on the cheap. He was also fortunate to get a message from Martin Shaw about the open bartender position. Frankly, there are times when he buzzes with excitement over the idea of having his own cocktail menu at an established restaurant. None of his friends could say the same.

Not that he has many friends. Not anymore. New York City runs on the rich. The prettier you are and the fatter your wallet, the more social you get to be. The rub is that the more social you get to be, the more money you have to spend. And the more money you have to spend, the more money you have to make. Which wouldn't have been a problem if the algorithm didn't hate him suddenly, and his engagement wasn't going down to the point that he was handing over potentially meaningless pieces of plastic for bottle service while crossing his fingers and toes that his card doesn't get declined.

The memories of his old life and his carelessness whip up an anxiety twister inside him, picking up traces of guilt and loneliness along the way, until they're spiraling together so fast that he starts sweating even more. He sits down from sudden dizziness.

He swipes his forehead with a paper towel from a roll near the closet, focuses on the breath in his lungs and the feel of his feet on the ground, and inspects the room. To combat the anxiety, he makes a mental list of what he sees. One window, small and facing the neighboring house. Just enough floor space for a full-size bed and a dresser. A corner where he can hang up his backdrop, roll over his roving kitchen cart, and set up his expensive studio lights.

At least there's that. He still gets to make videos, share his creations, and engage with the fans who have stuck around, liking and commenting.

It could be worse.

It could always be worse.

"Hey, cuz, need any help in here?" Rufus says, bounding into the room with all the energy of a golden retriever.

Rufus has a shaggy blond mane, boyish cheeks, and round eyes. When they were younger, during family barbecues, Rufus would follow the older cousins around asking a million questions and always trying to start up a game of soccer or Wiffle ball or capture the flag. Greg, the nearest in age, would usually leave the older kids who were drinking and shit-talking to play HORSE with Rufus at the basketball hoop in the driveway. He knew a thing or two about being an outsider, and he wouldn't wish those feelings on anyone.

"Jeez, dude, did you go stand in the shower?" Rufus asks. A droplet of sweat drips down Greg's nose.

"There was no AC in the moving truck, and it's hot as balls in here," Greg says, reaching for another paper towel. His mind has slowed, but his sweat glands haven't, leaving him uncomfortably damp. "What happened to the AC unit from the pictures you sent me?" It's unseasonably warm for mid-September. He was hoping the Lehigh Valley with its plentiful green spaces and lower population would mean cooler, crisper weather, but that's not what welcomed him.

Rufus steps over to the window. "Yeah, about that... My last roomie kind of jacked it. Took off in the middle of the night with the unit. Ripped it clear out of the window. Honestly, I don't know how I didn't hear it. Slept through it like a baby."

Greg tamps down any anger firing through his neurons. He takes a meditative breath. It's all going to work out. "Got it. Well, either I'll get into hot yoga or invest in a unit myself." He forces a smile, as he always does, when faced with a setback.

"I can float you some cash if you need it," Rufus offers, leaning into the window frame.

Greg resolutely shakes his head, masking with a sunshiny demeanor. If he projects it on the outside, maybe he'll feel it on the inside. "I won't hear of it. You're already doing me a solid with this place and the price."

Rufus nods with understanding, but Greg grows antsy. Wonders if his younger cousin knows he's holding back. Maybe Rufus, after growing up together, can read Greg's situation all over his sweat-sheened face.

Greg isn't withholding. He just doesn't want to be that guy. The anxious charity case. If he's not mistaken, Rufus has always considered him to be like an older brother. He doesn't want to shatter the illusion that he has his life together. He doesn't want the truth of his debt and his mental health to trickle out to other members of his family. Especially the ones he rarely speaks to these days.

The sunshiny mask slips, but only for a second. Luckily, Rufus doesn't catch it.

It's all fine. All smiles. Greg puts on a soft rock playlist, hands Rufus his extra box cutter, and starts unloading his belongings. They work for the next hour, chatting and reminiscing and deciding where to hang his pictures. Over the bed or by the door?

The last thing they do is set up "the studio." In New York, Greg didn't need to stage his content. When he did photo shoots for IG or videos for TikTok, he did them right out of his own state-of-the-art kitchen. Of course that meant keeping the kitchen impeccably clean, but he didn't mind. While cleaning wasn't his favorite activity, he

liked showing off his beautiful apartment. Liked knowing he'd earned something, despite what others had said about him starting at a very young age.

"If you ever need, like, a director or a lighting guy, I'm around," Rufus says as they strain to lug the rolling bar cart up the stairs. The entryway is narrow and stuffy, and Greg is sweating again. He really should've changed his shirt.

"That would be awesome. I do have a tripod and stuff to do it all myself, though, so I won't need to bother you," he says, mostly because above all else, he hates being a bother. His charm has always been one of his greatest gifts, but he's never used it for favors. Instead, he prefers to use it for making friends, meeting guys.

Objectively, he's attractive. He wouldn't have amassed such a following without a symmetrical face and a worked-out body, but he's always believed his looks were a superpower, and like Spider-Man, they came with great responsibility. That meant not being a douche about it.

"I don't mind. Sometimes during the day I need a break from staring at my computer screen," Rufus says as they enter the room with some trial and error.

"So you want to stare at my phone screen instead?" Greg asks.

"Good point," Rufus says with a laugh. "I'm just saying. My last roommate kind of kept to himself. We haven't seen each other in a few years, so I'd really like to hang out and stuff." Rufus says this so earnestly that Greg wants to go back and say something to his older cousins who ragged on Rufus for being annoying.

"I'd like that," Greg says right before they situate the bar cart in the corner in front of the green drop they hung earlier. "So what are our plans for tonight then?" He doesn't start at Martin's Place until Tuesday, so he's got the whole weekend to explore Allentown and the surrounding suburbs and get to know his new home for the time

being. Who knows? Maybe he'll fall in love with it and want to stay.

Rufus says, "Oh shit, sorry, cuz, I actually have plans tonight."

Greg hides his disappointment with that well-practiced smile again. It's been a decade since those family barbecue days, so he's not sure why he assumed Rufus was still the hyperactive loner he was back then. "Gotcha. No worries, man."

"I'm meeting my girlfriend to see the new Jordan Peele movie," Rufus says. "You should come! I bet Jessica would love to meet you."

He knows Rufus means the invitation genuinely, but he really doesn't want to be a third wheel on his first night at his new place. Even if being alone for hours in this strange house might ramp his anxiety back up again. "Ah, thanks, but you go and have fun. I should really finish and get situated here."

"You sure?" Rufus asks. "Maybe we can meet up for drinks or ice cream afterward?"

He has a feeling Rufus isn't going to quit until he accepts the offer. Thankfully (or not so thankfully) his phone lights up at that exact moment. The number on the screen sends a shiver down his spine, but he makes no show of that. Instead, he says, "You know what? I totally forgot a buddy of mine is in the area and suggested we grab dinner tonight. This is him right now." He waves his phone with confidence. "Can we rain check the ice cream?"

"Sure thing," Rufus says. "I'm heading out in a half hour, so I'll see you in the morning probably."

"Sounds good," says Greg. "Can you shut the door on your way out?"

When the door clicks back into place, instead of picking up, he guiltily declines the

call from his credit card company and continues setting up his room.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

JULIEN

On Tuesday, the LANTA bus bounces down West Broad Street as Julien tries to focus on the steady stream of Bach flowing through his wired headphones and not his annoyance over having to arrive to work early. Uncle Martin has called a staff meeting before they officially open for dinner service to introduce everyone to the new guy.

Greg.Julien found out his new coworker's first name by creating an anonymous TikTok profile and scrolling through a few of @GoodWithHisHandsHarlow's videos. He remains firm in the fact that this had nothing to do with Greg's long, fluttery eyelashes, his well-placed and appealing brown birthmarks, or his cocky but somehow goofy smile. (It tips more toward the right—like it's picked a favorite side of his face and stuck with it.)

He will not admit, no matter how long he spent staring at it on his phone with his heart rate spiking, that both sides of Greg's face are worthy of favoritism.

He especially won't admit that Greg's good at cocktails. Granted, Julien's relationship with hard alcohol is complicated, so perhaps he's not a voice of authority when it comes to vodka or gin or whiskey. He is, however, a voice of authority on professionalism in the service industry. It's a whole facet of his sommelier studies. And fake spills and no shirt and unwashed hands (no matter how large and supple-looking) are, for sure, red flags.

He tries not to think about all that, instead tuning in to the concerto that hugs his brain and squeezes it tight with familiar violins.

He doesn't remember exactly when he started listening to classical music to calm his mind before another hectic night at Martin's Place, but it helps. A lot. Ever since selling his used car and switching to public transit (which he explained was for the environment but was mostly for his bank account), he's come to rely on the quiet, passive ride as a sort of meditation. A clearing away of a busy morning studying before an even busier evening serving the masses.

Somedays, when he's particularly anxious about his shift, he gets so lost in the music—eyes closed, fingers waving—that he nearly misses his stop.

Today is one of those days.

Except worse.

Because he doesn't nearly miss his stop. He does miss his stop. And when he opens his eyes, he's on the South Side of Bethlehem, on the wrong side of the river.

Frantically, he yanks off his headphones, stands up, and exits the bus. Breaking into a jog down Third Street and across Fahy Bridge, he tries not to panic. He takes up his rhythmic breathing practice—the kind he learned for long, mind-clearing runs. Inhale for three steps, exhale for two.

If he maintains this pace, he'll arrive in twenty minutes. Twenty-five if he hits any flashing red hands at the plentiful crosswalks. Good thing the streets are never that crowded on a Tuesday, and thanks to his tall frame, he has a long stride.

It's sweltering for September, the sun just coming down off its peak. The breeze from the river does little to cool him thanks to the bomber jacket he wears over his T-shirt. His boots pound across the sidewalk as he passes the old YMCA, the Moravian Bookshop with its fun window displays, and a chocolate boutique he wishes he could afford on days like this. Dark chocolate and a bubble bath this evening sound divine.

By the time he arrives at Martin's Place, the meeting has already started. Chairs have been pulled away from tables and arranged over near the tiny stage where Frank Sinatra impersonators or indie acts sometimes perform. Now, @GoodWithHisHandsHarlow—Greg—stands before the staff looking perfect in a gray T-shirt that stretches over the gentle curvature of his pecs. The hint of his nipples can be seen through the thin fabric, and his ab muscles appear when he reaches for an ingredient and then stops at the sound of the bells over the door.

The whole room turns to see Julien standing there, sweaty, winded, and without escape.

Mortified, he hangs his head, mumbles a brisk apology, and finds a seat in the back to change into his nonslip sneakers.

Greg continues as if nothing has happened, which makes perfect sense. Guys like Greg don't get rattled by guys like Julien. Guys like Greg eat guys like him for breakfast alongside raw eggs and protein shakes.

It's not that he's embarrassed of his body. Normally. Today is the exception due to his overactive sweat glands and his lateness. But he was a bit of a late bloomer. When the other boys in the high school locker room sprouted pit hair and got shoulder muscles, Julien was shooting up, up, up but never out, out, out. He got tall, gangly. The other boys got broad, defined.

Julien suffers a similar self-consciousness now as he coaches his too-tight lungs into working properly, and watches Greg up onstage wearing a Gucci belt.

What a tool. Nobody in this part of Pennsylvania needs to be wearing a Gucci belt at a mid-priced bar.

“The Getting to Know You gin and tonic is meant to loosen you up and get that

awkward small-talk portion of meeting someone out of the way,” Greg says with such confidence that it makes Julien squirm. Until Greg sings completely off-key, “Getting to know you, getting to know all...”

The song is familiar from *The King and I*, one of Aunt Augustine’s favorite movies that they watched a lot together when he was a kid.

“This one includes gin and tonic, obviously.” Greg flashes a toothy, charming smile. What makes it so charming is that while the rest of Greg is impeccably put together, his teeth overlap just slightly in the front. A perfect imperfection. A weapon. “And hibiscus tea and lemon juice.”

At the first flex of Greg’s large biceps as he pours the gin into a short glass with a few ice cubes, Julien crosses his legs and sits forward in his chair, suddenly enraptured. His breath picks up impressive speed. He doesn’t even see Greg add the other ingredients because by the time he’s done ogling those biceps, Greg is placing the garnish—a swirled lemon rind affixed to the rim. The drink is a dark pink and utterly pleasing to the eye.

“Now, who wants a taste?” Greg asks, producing a large serving tray of tiny plastic cups. “Just a little bit for everybody. I assured Martin we wouldn’t get anyone drunk before their shift.” Greg’s laugh is warm and buttery, and Julien feels it in his toes.

Greg steps down off the stage, loose laces on his black, high-top sneakers clattering against the hardwood floor. Julien hurriedly tries to make himself look presentable—sweat blotted, hair brushed off his slick forehead.

Argh. Why am I doing this?

“Here you are,” Greg says, flaunting the near-empty platter in Julien’s face.

Just the light waft of alcohol singes Julien's nostrils and makes him grimace. "None for me." He waves a hand dismissively and doesn't look up. Eye contact is often too intense.

"It's just a little taste," says Greg, voice more chipper than before. "It's sweet. Try it, you'll like it."

"I won't," Julien says reflexively. He doesn't mean for it to come out as harsh as it does.

"I didn't poison it or anything."

When Julien musters the courage to look up, he swears he catches hurt lightning-bolting across Greg's handsome, chiseled features. But the moment he swears it, it's replaced by a right-favoring smile so electric he has to look away again. "Never said you did."

"Then give it a chance. I promise it's delicious." Greg says delicious like he's tasting the word itself, which sets Julien's hormones into a frenzy.

Unnerved by the number of eyes on him and generally uncomfortable with Greg's insistence, Julien stands abruptly. "No, really. None for me," he grumbles, not watching where he's walking. His erratic elbow hits the lip of Greg's tray, effectively flipping it up. Like in that first TikTok he watched, the cocktails go sliding down Greg's torso. Except this time, the whole front of Greg's shirt is soaked and stained, making his worked-out abs even more pronounced beneath the clinging, sopping fabric.

Perfect. Just perfect.

GREG

Earlier that day, Greg spends an hour trying to decipher what to wear for his first night as the bartender at Martin's Place.

It's important that he dress to impress. While he doesn't love it, he knows his appearance helps. How else would he have been responsible for hundreds of sales for a cocktail shaker company with faulty lids? In fairness, he didn't know the lids were faulty until after he'd signed the contract to promote their product on his socials through videos and sharing a promo code.

Fellow influencer Stryker Storm, his ex, had pushed him to do it. Said he could use the money. And since Greg couldn't argue with that logic, he shot the TikToks and Reels required, even though he had to do a million takes to get a good one where the cocktail didn't go flying all over the kitchen. He seriously needed a cleanup crew that day.

Great. Now he's nervous for his first day, unsure of what to wear, and nauseous with guilt over the past he wishes he could overwrite. He won't be that clout-hungry egotist any longer. He can show off without being a show-off.

To prove it, he settles on an unassuming heather-gray T-shirt that's on the baggier side, tucked into a pair of dark wash jeans. He must've lost a pound or two since the move—he meant to start bulking with his trainer before he left New York—because the waist on these is a little loose. In his closet, he finds the one belt he packed, and it's Gucci. The gaudy buckle makes him look a bit like a tool, but he can't serve drinks with his pants falling halfway to his ankles, so this will have to do.

The drive to work is a relatively quick one, but finding parking turns out to be harder than anticipated. He still arrives at the restaurant early-early to help Martin set up for his grand introduction. He wipes his palms, which are slick with nerves, on his jeans before entering.

“Glad you’re joining the Martin’s family, Greg,” Augustine says, sweeping her red hair back over her shoulder and offering him a handshake. “We’re excited to introduce you to our ragtag bunch.”

Augustine and Martin did his virtual interview, so he already knows they seem to be kind, funny people. The rest of the pack he can’t vouch for, but he’s optimistic he’ll meet some friends here.

The weekend, as predicted, was lonely. Back in Brooklyn, he was used to being around people, noise, nightlife. Without Rufus in the house, Greg mostly filmed content that underperformed, reheated food that didn’t taste quite right, and scrolled social media until his FOMO and anxiety overwhelmed him.

That’s why today he’s resolved himself to making one friend. One. What was it his mom said when he called her that first Friday after they dropped him off at the academy?

Chin up, Greg. Everything will be better once you make one good friend.

To this day, he still thinks what she said was a cop-out so she didn’t feel bad about abandoning her only child at a military boarding school he had no interest being at. But, still—for the most part, she was right. Nothing was ever good at the academy, but things did eventually get better once he learned how to project positivity.

If he can make one local buddy by the end of the night, then he’s going to be okay here. Someone he can go to the farmers market with, or the very least text. Someone who can recommend the best Chinese food places and maybe go with him to the local movie theater without feeling like a third wheel.

He uncorks his stock of optimism like it’s a bottle of Patrón.

Martin comes out from the back in a red shirt and black pants sporting a welcoming smile. “Greg, my boy, nice to see you.” Martin’s handshake is so strong and forceful it knocks Greg off his balance, and he lifts six times a week so that says something. “Thanks for being here early. I wanted to give the staff a little introduction to you before beginning your training so people weren’t starstruck.”

Greg straightens up at the embedded compliment. “I don’t think that’ll be a problem.”

“You never know, some of our younger staff members speak exclusively in trending TikTok sounds,” says Augustine, sipping a flavored seltzer from a plastic bottle.

Martin and Augustine show Greg around the place. The tour he got on FaceTime was nice, but in person the restaurant has a certain sophistication he didn’t pick up on through his phone screen. Mostly tables. A few booths. Hardwood floors. Black-and-white photographs of the old Bethlehem steel factory on the walls. Exposed beams on the ceiling. The gender-neutral restrooms are an affirming and promising touch.

As they bring him behind the bar, he takes in the view. This will be his stage for a while. His home base. He likes it instantly.

A little later, channeling all his energy, he puts on a big smile for the whole staff once they’ve filed in, and Martin introduces him up on the small stage.

“Hey, everybody. I’m Greg. Some of you may know me by my TikTok handle, but here it’s just Greg,” he says. There are a few polite smiles and nods from the group. “Martin thought it would be a fun idea for me to do a little cocktail demonstration for you all.” He motions to the table in front of him.

Up on the small stage, he isn’t nervous at all. He doesn’t get stage fright, probably because he’s done hundreds of live streams at this point. His voice is animated, and his smile never slips. No sweat.

That's until his flow gets broken by the door flying open. A dude, about five foot eleven with a lean build and chestnut brown hair flopping down in sweaty tendrils, stands in the doorway with a green backpack sagging off his shoulders. Even at a distance, Greg notices small silver hoops in the man's ears. There's a striking, lanky handsomeness to him.

But then the man moves with an uncomfortable-seeming gait to a nearby chair, and Greg calls the room back to attention with his voice. He doesn't want this lanky, handsome, earring-wearing man to be uncomfortable.

He scans the crowd as he speaks about gin and ice cube ratios, which he could practically do in his sleep. The makeup of Martin's staff is varied and diverse, but the latecomer looks to be about his age and has the same general awkwardness Rufus had when they were kids. Greg has always gravitated toward more introverted people. Maybe it's an opposites-attract instinct. Maybe he just likes bringing people out of their shells. Some unknown voice inside his head sings out that this man might be his best bet for a work friend.

"Now, who wants a taste?" Greg hears himself asking while producing his premade samples and handing them out. People sip and smile and chat about the flavor profile, and it's all going well until he stands before his hopeful new friend who won't even look at him as they talk.

Greg recognizes this man's avoidant eyes as a protection instinct because he's used it before himself. Whether it's out of shyness or something else entirely, Greg can't say, but he ramps up his charm to ensure this guy knows he's got an ally in him if he wants it.

Despite Greg's offhand poison joke and his affable insistence, the man refuses to even take the cup, which pokes a hole in Greg's confidence. Somehow, the guy's iciness feels more like a rejection of Greg than the drink itself. He's never met

someone so instantly immune to the TikTok-approved Harlow charm.

He doesn't get a moment to harp on the offense, though, because the man commits another, worse offense shortly after by standing abruptly.

The tray Greg is holding tips, and the last few cups of cocktail rain down the front of his shirt. He's soaked. Even through the thin fabric of his shirt, the ice cubes cut a chill across his skin.

The man, looking shocked, mutters a half-assed apology before fleeing. Greg has sincerely never seen someone move so quickly outside of an Olympic track-and-field event. A younger guy who watched the whole unfortunate scene go down rushes over with some bar napkins that do little to fix the situation.

"Clean up on aisle you," the younger guy says in a high-pitched voice. His hands are soft, and his fingernails are painted black. "I'm Braydon."

"Hi, Braydon, I'm soaked," Greg jokes with a jovial laugh to lighten the mood, despite his embarrassment.

"I see that," Braydon says, openly checking him out.

Greg doesn't usually mind such blatant admiration, but the longer he stands there in front of everyone covered in cocktail, the more uncomfortable he becomes. Like his skin is shrinking.

"Oh gosh," Augustine says, appearing at his side with even more napkins. "Why don't you head back to the lockers and get yourself cleaned up? I'm sure we can find you a dry shirt to wear for tonight."

Greg nods, heading past the bar, a little upset his grand introduction ended on such a

sour note. Even more upset that he somehow made a bad impression with Mr. Lanky Scowl. Was it something he said?

When he sees the man sitting on a bench by the employee lockers, he almost asks that question, but the man's head is hung in his hands, and he kind of wants to...hug the guy?

The bathroom is just beyond the bench. In three steps, Greg could be inside with the door closed, shucking off his shirt and wiping himself down so he doesn't feel so messy, but instead he stops and says, "Everything okay?" Because even at his lowest and stickiest, he'd rather put someone else's comfort over his own. He senses this man's hurt too acutely to not help if he can.

The man's head snaps up. His hair is even more unruly than Greg had originally noted. It has an untamable wave to it that's exacerbated by his sweatiness. Self-consciously, he brushes it down, but Greg weirdly wishes he wouldn't. He's struck to find he likes it like that. Wild. Natural.

"Good. Yeah. Okay," the man says, erasing every smidge of distress from his face with a swipe of his hand. Greg wishes he wouldn't do this, either. He doesn't like when people try to mask their emotions because he knows how draining that can be.

"Are you su—" he starts to ask before he remembers the withheld truths about why he came to the Lehigh Valley in the first place filling up his back pocket. Those plastic cards grow heavier by the day in his wallet. He shouldn't push for answers to questions he's not willing to answer. "Sorry," he mutters uncertainly while sliding by.

In the bathroom, he tries and fails to clean himself up. Sure, he could stop the drain, fill it up with water, and soak the shirt, but it's designer. The fabric is delicate, probably wouldn't work. Plus, he doesn't even have any detergent. Just a half-empty canister of hand soap. And he can't bartend shirtless. This isn't New York City or

Provincetown or DC. He can't have his body on full display in an eating establishment.

There's a gentle knock on the door behind him. "Just a second," he calls, though he's certain it'll take him more than a second to figure this one out. He should've brought a change of clothes. That would've been smart. But he's not the best at thinking ahead. That's partially why he's here.

Another knock. "It's me. From before."

Greg recognizes the gruff tone, unlocks the door, and cracks it an inch. He sees Mr. Lanky Scowl holding out a black button-down to him like an olive branch.

"I always keep a spare in my locker. I'm not sure it'll fit, but it's yours if it does."

Mr. Lanky Scowl doesn't smile when he says this, but Greg does as he takes it from him. "Thanks. A small shirt is better than no shirt," he says, swinging the door open a little more.

Greg notices the man noticing him. Tracks his eyes as they scan down and up quickly. Charts the course of the man's immediate blush. His jokes and drink didn't capture Mr. Lanky Scowl's interest before, but his body certainly has. He leans slightly, letting his width fill the doorframe, giving Mr. Lanky Scowl the full show.

As the obvious blush spreads, Greg chuckles a little, which makes his stomach muscles flex, which makes the man look down again before getting completely flustered and backing off.

Unlike with Braydon, he kind of enjoys Mr. Lanky Scowl's attention. It's...different. A sort of admiration without expectation.

“I can take your shirt and clean it,” Mr. Lanky Scowl says.

“You don’t need to do that,” says Greg.

“I made the mess. I’d like to clean it.”

Greg nods. “If you insist,” he says and hands him the shirt, wrung out but still damp.

“See you out there,” Mr. Lanky Scowl says, turning away.

“Wait,” Greg calls out. “I didn’t catch your name.”

Mr. Lanky Scowl pauses for a moment almost as if he’s trying to remember it, but then he says, “Julien Boire.”

Julien Boire. That’s the kind of name you could savor.

It’s got a classiness to it. A name that’s fun to say and tastes like a boulevardier—Campari, sweet vermouth, and bourbon. Tart with a sting. A perfect fall drink. Greg makes a mental note to add it to the specials menu.

“That’s a nice name,” Greg says finally.

For the first time, Mr. Lanky Scowl becomes Mr. Lanky Smile. Dazzling. His teeth are crisply white, and his lips reveal their true fullness by staying plump even as they spread wide.

Those lips could be savored, too.

“Greg here,” he says before smiling back, smooth flirtation bouncing off his every movement, but then he remembers his goal. A friend. The last thing he needs is to be

known as the staff playboy. He doesn't want anyone getting the wrong idea about him. So he dials it back and offers his hand for a shake. "Nice to meet you."

Their hands touch for a second—the swiftest of shakes—and then Julien is turning around and marching off.

Greg stays behind in the bathroom, outfitting himself in the too-small shirt which he can only button part of the way. With most of his furry chest exposed, he looks in the mirror and decides that maybe this will be an adventure after all.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

JULIEN

Julien counts out his tips at the end of the night, doing the mental math he's become so good at when it comes to budgeting.

It's hard to do math, though, when visions of your hot new coworker keep plaguing you every five seconds. Seeing Greg Harlow in his shirt was a sight he was wholly unprepared for. The way the fabric strained over Greg's shoulders and hugged his chest more than the soaked cotton T-shirt ever could made Julien's knees weak.

It was easy to write off his instant, heated attraction to the personable mixologist when it was only TikTok videos making his heart race and his pits sweat, but it was more difficult to deny when his new coworker was on full display for his eyes only back by the bathroom.

And what a display it was...

He shakes his head to himself, frustrated and having lost track of which piles of cash and coins he's counted and which he hasn't. He'll have to start over now. Fantastic. He pockets the bills and heads into the office where he laid Greg's T-shirt out to dry after blotting it with dish detergent and cold water.

When he stole a peek at the tag on Greg's T-shirt, he saw the name of some designer he'd never heard of in a lux script font. Julien owns a similar T-shirt which he bought for ten dollars at Target. Four of Greg's fancy T-shirts could probably pay Julien's way through his advanced sommelier course and exam.

He doesn't want to resent his new coworker for his excess, but it seems he already does.

As he folds the shirt up to return to Greg, Aunt Augustine comes into the office, sipping another bottle of sparkling seltzer. Her hair is up in a ponytail now, and a pair of patterned glasses rests atop her head. She's always the last to leave because she's a night owl and does her best accounting work when the restaurant is quiet.

"Assaulting our new hire on day one," she says, waltzing over to the desk. "Not your best move, hun."

"It was an accident," he says, running his fingers across the soft fabric of Greg's T-shirt. It feels lovely. Maybe there is something to be said for splurging on nicer materials.

"I know. I'm just yankin' your leg," she says. She plops down in the chair and blows a stray hair out of her eyes. "It was nice of you to lend him a shirt, though I think some of our customers were concerned we were planning on starting an all-male revue with how close those buttons were to popping off and poking someone's eye out."

He doesn't think too hard about that particular image. Nope. Uh-uh. "It was the least I could do."

Aunt Augustine looks up over the rim of the cheetah-print readers she's put on. "He's a good-looking guy."

"Sure," he says.

"Sure? All you have to say is sure?" she asks, spiritedly prodding.

He shrugs. “Sure.”

She lets out a frustrated groan and closes her file folder. “You know he’s gay, right? It says so on his TikTok profile. He’s done pride cocktails. And don’t you dare say sure.”

“Yes, I know he’s gay.” He deduced that in his little cyber hole, which he still feels guilty about falling into.

“You’ve been single for two years, Julien,” Aunt Augustine says with that matchmaker playfulness he’s become used to but still doesn’t like. The last guy Julien dated, Lance the vet tech, was a nice person and the sex was good, but he didn’t understand Julien’s single-minded pursuit of becoming a sommelier.

“You just want to get paid to be drunk all the time,” Lance said when he found out how much Julien was spending on his first course.

Julien firmly said, “That’s not true,” and then proceeded to break up with Lance. Because when Julien reads the alcohol content on a bottle of wine, his first thoughts are about astringency and proper storing methods, not how tipsy it will make the drinker. Tipsiness is a sensation he doesn’t need to experience. Alcohol is an ingredient, not a cure-all.

“You hired him to reinvigorate our bar, not my love life,” Julien says. “Should you really be encouraging your employees to date each other anyway?”

“Hey, there’s no rule against it, and I would know because I make the rules.” She sassily shakes her head.

“Whatever. I don’t have time for dating. Dating is just a time-consuming way to waste your money.”

Aunt Augustine gapes at that. “That might be the most cynical thing I’ve ever heard come out of your mouth, and I raised you!”

“I need to save my money for my advanced course, okay? On top of the tuition, I have to afford a flight to Texas and lodging. It’s a lot,” he says.

Listing it all aloud only magnifies how far he has to go before hitting his goal. He adjusts his mental math from earlier, shifting even more dollars into the Save column. He’d rather have a fluffy cushion than a deflated airbag should anything change in the immediate future. Frugality is the name of the game. A game he’s certain Greg Harlow doesn’t have to play based on his belt and his shirt and the way he carries himself like a runway model.

“Too bad it’s not in Orlando,” she says. “You could’ve used the time-share.”

“Yeah, too bad.”

Aunt Augustine goes over to Julien and places her hands on his shoulders. “While I’m endlessly proud of you for going after your dream, I want to be sure you’re not putting all your life eggs in one basket because if you drop that basket... Splat!” She shakes him up a little with a laugh.

He cracks a tentative smile. “I appreciate you saying that, but I’ve got it under control. I’m studying, saving, and doing everything right.”

She sighs, and he thinks it’s because she feels like she’s not getting through to him. Which, maybe she isn’t. He isn’t in the market for opinions that contradict his own currently. “Okay, but there is more to life than that. I would really like it if you would actively try making friends with Greg. He’s new in town, and I’m sure he could use someone to help make his transition a smooth one.”

He wants to protest that he's too busy, but because Aunt Augustine knows him better than anyone else, she knows that he spends most free hours studying and jogging and watching old episodes of Stanley Tucci: Searching for Italy. She probably knows, too, that since the breakup with Lance and the end of his friends-with-benefits situation with Colin he hasn't gone out with anyone. Hasn't gotten close to anyone. Hasn't gotten off with anyone... "I'll make an attempt."

"That's what I like to hear! You can start by giving him his shirt back before he leaves and not clutching it in my office like you're going to sneak it home and start a shrine to him," she says, glancing down at his fingers. He stops rubbing the delicate fabric which he didn't even notice he was still doing.

For a second, he imagines the feel of this soft shirt draped over Greg's hard muscle. An arousing duality.

Dating might not be on the menu, but if he saw Greg included in the buffet of men on his hookup app du jour, he certainly would not deny himself a helping of that Grade A beef, should it be available to him.

"Good night," he says quickly, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

"Night, hun."

He leaves the restaurant flushed with newfound possibility.

GREG

Greg looks for Julien before leaving to tell him he'll wash his shirt and return it tomorrow, but he finds Braydon, the guy with the bar napkins and the painted nails from earlier, instead.

“One night down, a million more to go,” he says, closing his locker and slinging a tote bag up his arm. “How’d it go?”

Throughout the shift, Greg could tell Braydon was using every excuse in the book to come over to the bar. Table two wants to know what cocktail you recommend. The couple in the corner asked which vodka they should have in their Moscow mules. Is it time for your break yet?

In Greg’s quest to make one friend tonight, he knows Braydon isn’t looking for the kind of friendship he is. It was open flirtation. Which is fine. It’s flattering. Braydon is an attractive dude.

But ever since Stryker, Greg’s sexual confidence has been in the tubes. His stomach twists at the thought of being intimate with a stranger at this weird stage in his life. He needs to get his bearings in this new town and job before he can rebuild his bravado.

“It went well, I think,” Greg says. “The customers were all really kind, and I made some good tips.” When he counted out his tips a little bit ago, he couldn’t help but spy Julien from across the dining area looking a little grim. The floor staff—the servers and bussers and hosts—all split tips, but since Greg worked the bar solo tonight, he’s netting it all.

Part of him wanted, and still sort of does want, to offer Julien a cut. As the night went on, a lot of the diners were asking Julien for wine recommendations, and he was fetching, pouring, and checking in on every one of them. At most other places Greg had worked before striking gold on TikTok, the bartender did both the liquor and the wine.

He’s not offended by the overstep. It made his night easier and less lonely.

By the third time Julien slithered behind the bar to fill a drink order without speaking to him, Greg started taking closer note of his coworker, tracking as the muscles in Julien's face relaxed and his posture righted. There was a suaveness to the way he found a bottle without needing to glance in the wine fridge, opened it without issue, and poured it with aplomb. Before he turned to go, tray in hand, Julien's chest would widen, and the hanging pendant lights over the bar would glint off a circular pin attached to his shirt.

Perhaps Julien's expertise had something to do with that shiny pin he wore like a badge of honor. Greg was wearing the man's shirt for God's sake but was too scared to ask a simple question about a tiny pin.

"Did you drive here, by any chance?" Braydon asks, hopefulness evident in his voice.

"I did," says Greg, jingling his key ring which dangles from his pointer finger.

"Listen, I know we just met, but my car is in the shop, and I'd really like to save the money for a Lyft. Any chance you can give me a ride? I'm just across the bridge," Braydon says.

That anxious stomach-twisting from before returns tenfold because when a cute guy asks him for a lift to a second location that usually means he's hoping for a hookup. It's only his first day. He doesn't want any awkwardness between him and Braydon. But, he supposes, he's damned no matter what. Either he gives Braydon the ride, overcomes the anxiety, and kindly turns him down, or he overcomes a different spice of anxiety, declines him the ride, and looks like a dick.

Ultimately, he leads Braydon to the lot where he parked his Toyota. "I'm just in a garage up the way."

They make idle chitchat through the walk, the elevator ride, and the downward drive

out of the parking deck. Greg puts on his favorite album—Carole King’s Tapestry. It reminds him of his mom whom he’s been thinking about a lot since his life in New York sputtered out. Carole’s croons of so far away dredge up why he hasn’t reached out, what he can’t say, so he turns his attention back to Braydon.

“How long have you been working at Martin’s?” Greg asks.

“Like a year and a half. I go to the local university. I’m a junior studying theater,” he says. “Didn’t want to get an on-campus job, so this was the next best thing. The people at Martin’s Place are chill.”

Right as he says that, Greg pulls up to a stoplight. Beyond the windshield, Julien stands in a pool of hazy streetlight beside a tall metal LANTA sign. He’s got headphones on, his eyes closed, and he sways a little to the melody of an unheard song. Greg imagines Julien listening to the same song he is. Carole wondering about staying in one place.

He doesn’t ask Braydon if it’s okay before he pulls over in front of Julien and rolls down the passenger-side window. Braydon looks confused, but Greg doesn’t care. “Hey,” he calls out the window.

Julien shakes back to life. “Hello?” he says, raising a hand against the streetlight. The little ridges that appear between Julien’s eyes as he squints draw Greg in. They are two commas of cuteness embedded in a near-permanent scowl.

“It’s Greg,” he says. He flicks on the overhead light to reveal him and his travel companion. “Need a ride?”

Julien looks as if he’s about to accept the offer until his eyes shift toward Braydon who is waving at him, revealing a history Greg can’t quite decode. “Oh. No. I’ll get the bus.” There’s that terseness again. The same tone from when he declined the

cocktail sample. He goes from hot to cold so quickly that Greg feels completely off-balance. The tools in his socialization arsenal are clearly useless on Julien, which makes his brain buzz with confusion.

“This is the westbound stop, though, right?” Greg asks as a last-ditch effort, putting on his hazards. Click-uh, click-uh, click. “I’m going to Allentown after I drop off Braydon. I can take you, no problem.”

Julien reaches into his bag and produces a neatly folded shirt. “I’m fine. But here’s this back. I got the stain out before it set. You should still wash it when you get home.”

Braydon takes the shirt and passes it to Greg. He’s heartened by the gesture. Julien may have caused the stain, but by no means did he need to go above and beyond to get rid of it. “Thanks. Appreciate it. A ride to repay you?”

As Greg jerks his thumb toward the back seat, he spots a bus cresting over the hill about to stop.

“You should probably go before the driver gets upset,” Julien says, iciness turned up a notch.

“All right. No sweat. Get home safe,” Greg says, trying not to make his slight disappointment noticeable.

“See ya,” says Braydon.

And they’re off again. Cruising away. “What’s his deal?” Greg asks, turning Carole down to a low simmer.

“Deal?”

“Yeah, why’s he so...”

“Grumpy?” Braydon supplies judgmentally.

A faint defensiveness rises inside Greg at the word. For some odd reason, he wants to protest it, but can’t argue with the fact that it fits Julien. At least the Julien he’s seen so far. Almost too well. “Okay, yeah. Grumpy.” Grumpy was his favorite dwarf in the Disney cartoon Snow White, so he says it with a nostalgic sense of endearment instead of Braydon’s sass.

Braydon does a dramatic shrug-and-sigh combo. “Beats me. I don’t know much about him other than that Martin and Augustine raised him because of some messy shit with his parents, he’s been working at the restaurant forever and a day, and we hooked up once over a year ago and he hasn’t brought it up since.”

Greg takes this trove of information and shakes out every small treasure. “Why haven’t you brought it up to him?”

“Because you’ve met him now and see how he is,” Braydon says with bountiful snark Greg could do without.

“Oh yeah? How is he?”

“Intense!” Braydon says. “Wasn’t that interaction back there intense? He couldn’t just take the ride. He’s always like that. He’s a certified sommelier, which you need a lot of discipline and patience for, but it’s a lot.”

Julien. Sommelier. Greg calls to mind Julien’s classical features. His fragile yet tough manner of speaking. The way he refused the sample cocktail but dedicated his life to wine. He’s an enigma, and Greg has always liked puzzles. Rubik’s Cubes. Sudoku. Crosswords. It’s no wonder he’s already dying to solve Julien Boire.

Braydon continues, “He basically made me jump through hoops before I was allowed in his bed. Shoes off at the door, shower in advance, no kissing, absolutely no cologne. And then, after all that, he didn’t even finish, which is...probably more than you asked to hear. Sorry. Everyone tells me I don’t have a filter. Oh, make a left here, and you can park anywhere on the street.” Braydon points up ahead. Once they’re idling, he adds, “You’re welcome to come up for a bit if you want. I’ve got some liquor and mixers. Maybe you could do one of those random ingredient challenges that you do on TikTok for me?”

Greg’s tongue goes numb, and his mouth goes dry for a minute.

He respects the level of confidence it takes to come on to a man you just met, but that’s the issue. They just met. Greg isn’t emotionally ready to divulge anything about the pills he takes or the performance issues they sometimes cause to random guys who just won’t get it.

To top it all off, he doesn’t particularly like the way Braydon spoke about Julien. To him, it sorta sounded like Julien might be some flavor of neurodiverse, and Braydon was a dick about it. Something Greg experienced firsthand with Stryker.

Though, maybe Greg was a different type of dick earlier when he tried to cajole Julien into taking his cocktail sample. In the moment, he hadn’t considered that he might’ve been putting Julien in an uncomfortable position.

This new information and matching remorse only reify his initial desire to get closer to Julien, despite his standoffishness, so he can apologize and maybe forge a connection.

“I’m pretty beat. Thanks for the offer, though,” Greg says when his senses return to normal.

Braydon nods, moderately unfazed. “Chill, chill. Well, if you ever change your mind...” he points up to a dark window on the second floor “...you know where to find me.”

“Roger that.”

Greg drives home singing along to “Beautiful” and crying along to “Will You Love Me Tomorrow?” and parks in the middle of “Home Again.” He stays in the car until the song ends, letting the soothing notes wash over him. Allowing himself to unwind after a bustling night of making drinks, taking orders, and being “on.”

Exhaustion weaves between his bones.

The older he gets and the more he learns about his unique brand of anxiety, the more time it takes him to recharge after hours of intense interaction. Carole King proves the perfect balm after a frenzied shift. He can’t wait to take his meds and go to sleep.

Inside, he finds Rufus on the couch, lounging in sweatpants playing a video game. He speaks into a large headset. “Get out quickly! Go, go, go!”

“Coming in on your left,” Greg says about the intruder gaining on Rufus’s character on the high-definition screen, but what he thinks is a helpful hint scares his cousin instead.

Rufus jumps up and pauses his game. “Shit! You almost gave me a heart attack... Yeah, Wayne, my cousin’s home. I’ll catch up with you soon. Sorry. Yeah, yeah. Bye.” He throws off the headset and brushes some Cheetos crumbs off his shirt.

“My bad,” Greg says apologetically. “I see you’re enjoying your night.”

“Yeah, special agent missions are a good way to de-stress,” Rufus says. “Why are

you...wearing that?"

Greg got so comfortable in Julien's shirt that until this moment he'd forgotten he was wearing it. Ridiculous, given how it could bust open at any moment. Straining. Pulling. He's used to wearing spandex to the gym, though, and this shirt had some give to it, so he didn't mind all that much.

"There was an accident involving spilled cocktails, so my coworker lent me this," Greg explains. He thinks again about how he'd like to turn said coworker into a friend. His phone, nestled in the front pocket of his bag, has been devoid of incoming texts from the so-called friends he had back in New York. For longer, it's been wiped clean of messages from his handful of academy buddies. And don't even get him started on his parents who only check in on birthdays and holidays, if they remember.

He knows he could reach out first, but that would require him admitting defeat, failure. They know him, his history. Julien—with his scowl and his intensity and his cute earrings—doesn't know him at all. From his attitude, maybe he thinks he does. But Greg is excited by the prospect of proving him wrong, of potentially forging a true connection with someone so unlike the people he ran with in his old life. Maybe even someone who shares a similar diagnosis.

So it didn't happen tonight like he thought it might, but soon. He'll work on it. Maybe ask him about his favorite wine regions or grapes or...

"Sorry to say, but you look kind of ridiculous," Rufus says, bursting out laughing.

Greg turns toward the mirror over a table in the entryway and realizes that he does look ridiculous. How anybody took him seriously tonight is beyond him. "You're absolutely right. I'm off to get changed and get to sleep."

"I'll be sure to keep the volume down," Rufus says, courteous.

Once upstairs in the swampy, slightly oppressive heat of his AC-less room, Greg strips off Julien's button-down and lays it on his bed, conjuring a picture in his mind of the mysterious, spilling sommelier who'd rather stand at the bus stop alone than take his ride.

He's suddenly struck by the urge to pick up the shirt and sniff it. Embedded in the fabric is his own familiar scent mixed with an unknown detergent—honeysuckle. It's delectable. He presses his nose farther into the shirt while his free hand wanders down his naked torso and stops against a bulge that strains the front of his jeans and presses into his zipper.

There's a vague grating voice in the back of his mind telling him he shouldn't remove his pants, lie down on the bed, or allow his hand to grab hold of his semierect dick while he huffs his new coworker's spare shirt, but he ignores that voice. He hasn't taken his medication yet tonight—the medication that balances his mind but reduces his desire for this kind of pleasure. The kind of pleasure that Stryker seemed to want and need more of than Greg could feasibly satisfy without sacrificing his mental health.

Instead of lingering on those unpleasant thoughts, he decides to reach into his dresser drawer, pull out the water-based lube he bought at the drugstore on a toiletries run, and slick his stiffening shaft with steady, tight pumps.

At first, he mines his usual spank bank—buff celebrities from action movies and past crushes—but his mind keeps pivoting.

Flashes of Julien's long, slender face and hooded eyes overtake him. Briefly, Greg manifests the heat of Julien's stare as it lingered over his skin in the yellowish bathroom light when he handed him this shirt. This shirt that is now draped over his face as he thrusts himself into his fist, sensing once more that delicious heat.

In the thick of it, unable to fight it, Greg fantasizes—with verve and great detail—that Julien was the one he gave a ride home to. That Julien invited him to his apartment for a nightcap, and Greg took him up on the offer.

Over conversation, before any clothes shed or kisses shared—if any at all—he'd let his walls down and open up about all the things he can't usually find words for. Because he has this formidable inkling that he and Julien were somehow meant to meet.

In his mind's eye, he's lying in a different bed in a different room smelling this honeysuckle sweetness from its source. He wishes he were not imagining a heat, but rather feeling it up front. Skin to skin. Mouth to mouth. Cock to...

He comes. Hard. And he muffles his moan with his left fist because otherwise he might wake his new neighbors. His body continues to shudder even as he falls off the high of it, even as he starts catching his breath.

He hasn't been that aroused in...a while. With the breakup and the move and the frequent dysfunction side effects, his mind has been pulled in every other direction but this one. Except tonight.

Tonight, something changed.

JULIEN

Change, in the restaurant industry, happens swiftly. Over the course of a single week, Julien's head hasn't stopped speeding with all the newness Greg has unleashed upon Martin's Place. It's impossible for him not to begrudge Greg for spectacularly disrupting his routine. He has a one-track mind, after all.

Blame it on the OCD. When his brain sticks on something, it's done with Gorilla Glue, not Elmer's. Which is why he's having such difficulty performing two new duties at once: upping his friendly tableside manner as per Uncle Martin's request (demand) and avoiding Greg Harlow at all costs.

These things seem mutually exclusive because he, as a server, is unable to avoid the bar. Patrons order drinks, and Greg makes the drinks, and Julien has to get the drinks to serve them. He is so wrapped up in the minutiae that he has spent no fewer than three restless nights thinking of ways to subtly convince Aunt Augustine to stagger their schedules so they're never working on the same nights, which would directly go against his promise to try to befriend Greg.

Those sleepless nights are to blame for the extra-dark bags under his already perpetually sleepy-looking eyes and the sluggishness of his mid-shift gait as he saunters over to his section, where a new couple has just been seated at the two-top by the window. He swears Braydon is purposefully putting all the walk-ins in his domain, making his night more hectic.

Julien grabs a full carafe of water from the server stand and tries not to think about that, but once again, his brain has latched on to something and refuses to set it free

like a hawk with a field mouse in its talons.

“Welcome to Martin’s Place. My name is Julien. I’ll be taking care of you this evening. Are we celebrating anything special?” Aunt Augustine advised this question to the entire staff to spark conversation and show interest in the customer. He frankly doesn’t care much for what brought them into Martin’s Place, only that they are there, which is good for all involved.

“It’s actually our first date,” the white man—bearded with longish black hair—says, reaching a hand across the table to his companion, a dark-skinned woman with a bright red manicure wrapped around her empty water glass. Julien tips the carafe he’s been carrying and fills it.

“Wonderful. Happy to have you!” He hopes he doesn’t sound as false as he feels spouting Aunt Augustine’s words and sporting a goofy service smile like Greg’s.

Greg. He needs to not think about Greg. Or Braydon. Or Greg and Braydon. And whether or not, like the couple in front of him, they’re forging something romantic together.

Because his rational brain knows it’s none of his business. But his rational brain is not the part of him responsible for the rambunctious conga line of jealousy snaking through his chest right now. Upon reflection, while standing at the bus stop on Greg’s first night, he replayed their interaction after the spill in his head. Often, he needs remove from a situation to fully assess his actions and emotions, so on that empty street at 11:30 p.m. while listening to Mozart, he did a rundown of his evening. Declining the cocktail was rude. Fleeing after making a mess was disrespectful. Not only did he owe Greg his clean shirt back, but he owed him a proper apology.

After his conversation with Aunt Augustine, he was more than ready to give one and the ride home seemed like the perfect place to do it...until he saw Braydon in the

passenger's seat of Greg's car and his mind turned to unimaginable static.

"We're happy to be here," the woman says, jolting Julien before he overfills the glass and floods the table. "We saw this place on TikTok and decided to stop in since it's so close and we didn't even know it was here."

Julien chooses to ignore the TikTok comment. "Would you like to hear our specials?"

When the couple nods, he reaches for the pad in the front pocket of his black apron and begins his recitation, which hampers his racing thoughts and cools down his body.

During the pre-shift meeting, he always writes down Chef Marco's specials, including every ingredient, no matter how small. For most of the staff, this transcription is to ensure no food allergy mishaps arise, but for Julien, it's also a test.

With everything he knows about wine, he considers the unique combination of flavors and spices in Chef Marco's dishes, then goes over the wine storage and sorts through the various vintages. Of course, he's not able to taste test all his pairings, but he has an expansive enough palate to make an educated guess that will satisfy even the most difficult customer.

Satisfying a customer is like hearing "Magnificat" performed live by the Bach Choir of Bethlehem at Christmastime—it puts him entirely at peace.

"While you think on your options, can I start you off with something from the bar?" he asks, already prepared to pop the cork on a beautiful bottle of sparkling white from Spain that will pair best with the fried calamari he suspects they're considering.

That's until he senses a pair of eyes on him. When he glances across the restaurant, Greg is behind the bar, looking at him. It's an arresting gaze that confuses and excites

him in equal measure.

“Did you want to write that down?” the man at the table asks Julien, whose pen is frozen above his pad. It’s as if the muscles in his fingers have turned off.

“Oh, yes. Sorry,” he says. “Would you mind repeating that?” He spares no second glance at Greg.

“Sure,” the man says. He speaks slower and louder this time for reasons beyond Julien. “I think we’re going to start with the calamari plate and two of the Getting to Know You gin and tonics.”

This is the fourth table tonight where the customers ignored the wine pairings Julien had Uncle Martin print on the menus and instead went for one of Greg’s flashy cocktails promoted in a shiny plastic stand in the center of the table.

“That is an excellent choice,” he says, withholding any contrary words. “I’ll be back to take your entrée selections shortly.”

Turning away quickly, he hides his scowl. He’s not looking forward to having to approach Greg who is in deep conversation with a gentleman, probably in his midforties with glasses and broad shoulders. Greg leans forward on his elbows, biceps on display, enraptured by whatever the man is saying. Something about moonshine, Julien catches on his way around.

It’s bad enough Julien is jealous of whatever Braydon got up to with Greg on his first night here. His wine pairings being overshadowed by Greg’s cocktails only adds insult to injury.

“Order up,” Julien says after clearing his throat, rudely interrupting Greg’s conversation with the stately-looking man. The bar may be mostly empty, but the

dining room is full, and Julien wants to leave this exchange as quickly as possible.

“Just a minute,” Greg says, writing down a list of ingredients for what Julien assumes is a cocktail recipe.

Julien doesn’t realize he’s tapping his foot impatiently until Greg’s gaze slips from the napkin in front of him down to the ground. Greg raises a discomfited eyebrow at him, and he stops.

“Why don’t you add your number while you’re at it?” the man asks Greg, barely acknowledging Julien’s presence, which irks him even more.

Greg, without missing a beat, flashes a smile, scribbles his phone number beneath the recipe, and slips it to the man he’s been chatting with.

Once again, Julien’s mind Gorilla Glues itself to something he’d rather not spend mental capital considering.

Too late. Already, he’s replaying the scene outside the staff bathroom from last week, the one where Greg caught his eyes wandering down his worked-out torso. Julien has been in a bit of a sex drought since Colin moved away, and Greg was standing there half naked with the confidence of an early 2000s Abercrombie model. It’s a perfect storm.

As of late, his sexual routine has been stymied, and the apps have been moot. Basically, he’s a bottle of young tannic red, desperate for air, and Greg is the shiny new aerator on the market. It’s natural that he wants to play with it. He’s used to wanting things he can’t have. He wanted parents who got along with each other and spent their paychecks on food instead of booze so he wasn’t hungry all the time. He wanted broader shoulders and bigger arms so he could stick up for himself when the kids at school bullied him for not having “real parents” when Uncle Martin

chaperoned one of their class trips. He wanted to win the lottery so he could untie his dream for a bigger life from his sommelier studies and just enjoy them again. But he is disciplined enough to realize when a want is unrealistic.

And wanting Greg Harlow is about as unrealistic as it gets.

Because Greg Harlow is a luxury. He is the car and the clothes and the coffees Julien doesn't allow himself to get. The indulgences that don't fit neatly into his precise budgeting, which means he needs to scribble them out of his mental math and move on.

When Julien spies Braydon out of the corner of his eye, unable to catch his breath under a barrage of intrusive thoughts, he slaps the drink order down in Braydon's hand and says, "Pass this to your new friend Greg. I need some air."

Flustered and frustrated, cheeks hot and heart rate elevated, Julien makes his way to the alley behind the restaurant, does some deep breathing, and seriously considers a cigarette even though he doesn't have one on him nor has he smoked. Not once. Not ever.

GREG

Toward the middle of Greg's shift, a broad-shouldered man in a pair of fetching glasses sits down at the bar and immediately hits Greg with the eyes. A flirtatious look is a welcome reprieve from worrying about where Julien is at every nanosecond.

Greg wouldn't say he's been avoiding Julien tonight.

Not exactly.

Yet every time he catches sight of the sommelier, the memory of that solo orgasm

that felt like jumping out of an airplane rockets back to him, and that makes his new job more complicated than he'd like it to be. Until he untethers the guilt he carries about using his coworker's shirt as fuel for his heaving fantasy, it's better he keeps to himself.

When he didn't want to engage with someone in New York City, all he had to do was send a noncommittal text and stay away from certain cafés and clubs. Easy-peesy.

Martin's Place? It's not exactly the island of Manhattan. It's probably only a couple thousand square feet in total, and from his perch behind the bar, Greg has an eagle-eye view of the entire establishment. Which means he's bombarded with glimpses of Julien's face—crinkled a bit, but cute—as he takes an order, and Julien's backside—surprisingly round for how slender he is—as he carries a tray to a table.

When Julien stands at a high-top table near the window in front of two people who appear to be on a first date, Julien's expression fluctuates wildly from attentive to glazed and far-off. Greg wonders what's on Julien's mind. What kinds of thoughts could've carved those twin divots in the middle of his brow?

But then Julien looks up and catches his gaze. A locked-and-loaded moment goes by where Greg attempts to read Julien's thoughts, despite his countenance being impenetrable. Impossible. Greg exhales loudly and gets back to work.

He starts making the handsome, patient man at the bar a Manhattan (oh the irony), and he's reminded of a darker time in his life. Upon closer inspection, the man has a solid, wide build, a buzzed head, a sharp jaw, and deep-set eyes. Similar to some of the teachers he had as a cadet. Men with gruff demeanors who, starting in grade seven, cared little for niceties and emotion.

Perhaps that's why he is so taken with Julien.

He stops that thought dead in its tracks and reengages the man at the bar as he serves him his drink. “What are we drinking to tonight?” Greg asks, grabbing a rag and wiping down the nearby counter.

“I’m a pilot. Landed in Allentown today. Back on the Orlando route early tomorrow morning. Decided to treat myself to a cocktail,” the man says with a charming smile. “And some friendly chat, but it seems like that’s not in the cards.”

Greg follows the man’s gaze down the empty bar. Martin’s Place has more of a reputation as a restaurant than a bar, so despite his drinks being a popular order for the diners, he’s been solitary behind this slab of wood, backed by fifty-some-odd bottles of liquor and wine. Though he still doesn’t really touch the wine. He suspects if he tried, Julien would bite his hand off.

But, once again, he’s not supposed to be thinking about Julien, so he says, “I’ve been told I’m a sterling conversationalist.” Greg leans onto the bar, a move he knows shows off his biceps in his black T-shirt with the tight sleeve cuffs. He flashes a cheeky smirk instead of a smile.

“I’m Jeff.”

“Greg.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“You as well,” Greg says, flicking on the charisma. “I’ve never met a pilot before. What’s it like?”

As Jeff discusses the ins and outs of operating an aircraft, Greg works very hard not to be distracted by Julien across the way. He’s not positive, but Julien is potentially wearing the button-down he borrowed last week, the one he sumptuously pleased

himself to the scent of.

Curiously, right now he's not focused on that particular indiscretion. Instead, he's fixated on how Julien moves around the tables and bustling diners with directness, turns at right angles and never flags in pace. His gaze is sharp, and his speech is matter-of-fact. If Greg is small-talk incarnate, Julien is a precise soliloquy.

"Why bartending?" Jeff asks.

Greg nods as if he's still processing all that Jeff just said, when really he wasn't listening in the slightest. "I kind of fell into bartending. After high school..." Greg never refers to the academy as anything other than high school to avoid the probing questions "...I cut ties with a lot of people and moved to New York City like a lot of dreamers do."

"Bartending was your dream?" Pilot Jeff asks, almost patronizingly, but Greg wants a good tip, so he doesn't pay it any mind.

Greg shrugs. "I think the dream was just to become someone in a new city."

"Someone or someone?"

It's the kind of question only a man your senior could ask you. Greg wants to believe that he moved to New York to be someone who was independent, starting fresh, forgetting the past and the pain. He adopted a sunny demeanor, got into therapy, and tried to make a living as best he could. But would he have started his TikTok account or dated Stryker or gotten himself into debt if he didn't want to be someone, too?

"I'm still figuring that out," Greg says good-naturedly. "But I like mixed drinks, and I like talking to people and making people happy, so this is kind of the perfect storm for me, career-wise."

“I used to make moonshine back in the day. What’s your favorite drink you’ve ever created?” Pilot Jeff asks.

Greg doesn’t have to think too hard about this one. He immediately lists the ingredients for a limoncello cosmopolitan—he always dreamed of going to the Amalfi Coast where his mother’s family is from and wandering the lemon groves along the shoreline. The cocktail has to be strained into a chilled glass and garnished just so. There’s real artistry to it. Pilot Jeff asks him to write that down so he can make it for himself sometime.

Julien appears suddenly at his side. “Order up.”

Jeez.Greg loses track of Julien for one second, and now he’s invading his space with brusqueness and the intoxicating scent of honeysuckle. “Just a minute.”

A tapping from the floor draws his attention away from the napkin he’s writing on. Is Julien really trying to speed him up with that old trick?

“Why don’t you add your number while you’re at it?” asks Pilot Jeff.

Harmless.Giving out his number is harmless. It’s like giving out a flier for a Broadway show in Times Square. Nine times out of ten it ends up in a trash can or left in a pants pocket and run through the wash. This kind of interaction is surely why he was hired in the first place. So he writes it down.

Pilot Jeff waggles the napkin like it’s a treasure map. “I’ll leave you to it. Keep the change.” He drops a fat wad of cash on the counter and leaves.

Greg turns to finally address Julien and his supreme impatience, only to find Braydon standing in his place, looking confused. “Julien is apparently incapable of giving this to you, so here. It’s for table twelve.”

Greg takes the handwritten order from Braydon who's sauntering away before he can even say a word. Two GTKYGTs—Getting to Know You gin and tonics. He doesn't need an advanced degree to decode that acronym, but what gives? All he did was ask for a minute.

He worries now that he may have a new, non-shirt-related reason to avoid Julien: Julien doesn't like me.

Greg can't stomach that if true. He worked too hard in the academy and in New York to be bright and agreeable with everyone he meets. Besides, Julien is the one who spilled all over Greg and declined his generous ride, so if anyone is going to dislike someone, it should be Greg disliking Julien.

Too bad Greg doesn't have that ability. Not really.

Which is why his anxious thoughts run off like a provoked herd of cattle, and his chest becomes a vice around his heart. The air in the room is suddenly thick and difficult to breathe. It's been a while since he's suffered an attack like this.

He reaches into his back pocket for the baggie he always keeps there. It's his in-case-of-emergency beta blocker. That little orange pill, once swallowed with a glass of ice water, quiets his fritzing neurons, allowing his heart rate to slow and his breathing to mellow out. The thoughts still race, but his body doesn't respond as sharply to them.

Shortly after, a group of middle-aged women take seats at the far end of the bar, flicking glances his way and whispering to each other.

Well, fine. If he can't win over the scowling sommelier, then he'll set his sights on easier targets. He rolls out his neck and slings back his shoulders, dropping out of his head and back into his body.

Happy for the distraction, he slides over to the gaggle of chatty women, dons a protective megawatt smile, and makes their evening with craft cocktails and more harmless flirtation.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

GREG

A text comes in from Martin reading, Can you come in thirty minutes early tonight? I'd like to have a meeting with you. Greg doesn't know what to make of this, so the first thing he does is show it to Rufus.

"Cuz, you're probably getting a raise." They sit at the small square table in the kitchen passing Greg's phone back and forth.

"Really?" It's only been two and a half weeks. A raise wasn't his first thought when he read this text. His immediate association was boarding school, disciplinary action, and anxiety attacks over letting people down.

"Rufus says you've been killing it over there," Jessica, Rufus's girlfriend, says as she finishes off the last of her Chipotle bowl. She worked her shift over there earlier and brought over a late free lunch. Greg was incredibly thankful for the free part.

"Yeah," Rufus says reassuringly. "You come in every night with great stories and a wallet full of tips. You're making connections with the customers."

How much connection is too much connection, though? Pilot Jeff has texted him a few times since their initial meeting. At first it was about cocktail recipes, but eventually it trailed into more personal territory that made Greg a little uncomfortable with the secretive undertones and the sexual questions.

The middle-aged women from the night he met Pilot Jeff told their friends about Martin's and came in again with their entire book club, announcing to Braydon at the

host stand, “That guy’s got the best cocktails in all of Bethlehem!” It was clear they had just come from a paint-and-sip class at an art studio down the road and were looking to continue their night out. Greg rolled with the punches.

“That’s true. It’s just the tone... Isn’t it a little harsh?” Greg asks, nervous. He’s particularly sensitive to tone, a skill he picked up from a young age when his father’s nightly mood could be deciphered by how clipped or how quiet his statements were when he walked through the front door. “If it were a raise, I feel like he would’ve put an emoji or something.”

“Do you know any men in their forties who use emojis?” Jessica asks. “My dad just stopped using the ellipsis as punctuation for every statement.”

“When we started dating and I first met her parents, I thought he was being super passive-aggressive with me,” Rufus reminisces, and Jessica laughs. “I always felt like he had more to say, or I was missing something.”

Rufus and Jessica are offering Greg a hand over the line to the bright side, so he takes it because, as his therapist would say, There’s no use worrying over a situation you don’t have all the information for yet. He takes a calming breath. “You’re right. I’m overthinking it.”

“How are you liking the work so far?” Jessica asks. She’s younger than Rufus by a year. She has brown skin, a heart-shaped face, and silky black hair that goes all the way down to her hips.

“I’m liking it a lot.”

“Except Julien,” Rufus adds with a nudge of the elbow.

“I don’t dislike Julien,” Greg corrects, feeling his face go red. Because it’s far more

complicated than that, which is irksome.

“Come on, you talk about him after every single shift,” Rufus says. “Julien did this or Julien messed up that or Julien always looks like he’s got the world’s worst migraine.”

Greg had not consciously realized he’d made a habit of complaining about Julien aloud. He tries not to complain at all, but he’s really comfortable with Rufus. And he’s really perplexed by Julien.

When Julien spilled an entire tray of drinks for the second time, Greg was closest to the mop and couldn’t watch Julien struggle with the broken glasses alone. When Greg got an order horribly wrong because he couldn’t decode Julien’s acronyms, which were hastily scribbled and then passed off to Braydon—somehow becoming the cherubic messenger from a Greek tale between them—Julien had to speak to Greg face-to-face about the blunder. Though, he wouldn’t meet Greg’s eyes.

There’s a piercing need ticking inside his chest urging him to get to the bottom of this friction between them. Frustration hangs over every shift now. But he’s worried he’ll only make it worse if he attempts a peace treaty because he still can’t stop thinking about the night with the shirt in his bed and how real his fantasy felt. No, not even a fantasy. More like a premonition.

Or so he thought at the time. Now it’s more like a bad omen.

What wires are crossed in his brain that make him attracted to someone so scowly and brusque and so set on icing him out?

“Everybody has a work nemesis,” Rufus continues. “Mine is an admin assistant for one of the firms I work for. His name is Kyle, and whenever he calls, he barks orders at me like I’m an AI set to appease his boss’s every whim.”

Jessica nods while rubbing Rufus's shoulder. "He's right. My work nemesis is a shift manager named Nadine. She's like fifty-two, has purple hair, is constantly breathing down my neck, and tells me I'm slicing the chicken wrong or not leaving the tortilla in the press long enough for a burrito when I'm doing it exactly as I was trained."

"Julien is yours," Rufus says plainly.

Greg ponders this on his drive to Martin's Place, not liking the idea of having a nemesis—work or otherwise. Moving to the Lehigh Valley was about leaving negativity in New York. He doesn't want to be sullen or reserved or resentful like he was as a student at the academy where he was forced into uniforms and routines that both chafed.

At least, as he parks his car and walks into Martin's Place, he's here early to have a nice conversation with Martin about a juicy raise before he must face the grumpy guy he's keeping his distance from.

Only when he steps through the ajar office door, a second head snaps in his direction. Messy hair. Long face. Dark eyes. Hoop earrings. The grumpy guy of his R-rated fantasies is sitting in a chair facing Martin's desk.

The vibe in the room is...less than stellar.

"Greg, thanks for coming in early," Martin says flatly. He's wearing a black polo, a pair of round glasses, and a rankled expression. "Take a seat."

JULIEN

What's he doing here?

Julien shifts uncomfortably in his chair, angling his body away from the chiseled

mixologist who has intruded on his meeting. Well, maybe intruded isn't entirely true because it seems like Uncle Martin was expecting Greg when he thanks him and tells him to take a seat.

Julien had to admit when he saw the text from his uncle asking him to come in early, he audibly groaned...but then reconsidered. The last time they had a one-on-one meeting, Uncle Martin dropped the bomb that he was hiring Greg. Maybe this time he's going to drop a second bomb about letting Greg go.

It makes a certain sense. Greg has been messing up orders, monopolizing the tips at the bar, and as far as Julien can tell, his TikToks are lagging when it comes to view counts and comments. Not that he's still regularly checking them from his burner account: jb2041xy7.

Okay, maybe he is. But not nearly as much because every small peek through the filtered window of Greg Harlow's life leads him to throw more and more pity parties. Greg has access, money, designer clothes, hot exes, charisma, and to top it all off, he's well traveled. He has had the life Julien dreams about, and being reminded of that during every shift has worn him down to disgruntled dust. He would very much like to go back to his safety zone—to studying wine, Stanley Tucci, calming runs, and App Guys, but that seems highly unlikely unless this meeting is about Greg's imminent departure.

Uncle Martin hands each of them a packet of printed papers stapled in the top right corner. It takes Julien a moment to realize what he's looking at. They're online reviews. Recent ones. All from the last few weeks.

“Let me know when you're finished reading them,” Uncle Martin says with an exhausted, displeased air.

Julien starts at the top. An anonymous poster has written:

Came here on a first date. Our server blanked out while taking our order, made us repeat ourselves, and then ghosted us for the rest of the meal. The calamari was cold by the time he brought it to us. He forgot to take our entrée order. Only good thing: the cocktails.

2/5 stars.

Recalling the couple from more than a week ago, Julien bites his lip nervously, heart thudding. He reads the next.

Outrageous! Greg the bartender here has no sense of decorum or morals. My husband stopped here on a work trip to decompress and when I found a bar napkin that read MARTIN'S PLACE with Greg's number on it in his pants pocket while doing wash, I knew I needed to write a review because my husband is too polite to. He says the bartender was overly flirtatious and nearly demanded my husband take his number!!! Not only is this wildly unprofessional, but did the bartender not notice the wedding band he was wearing?! BEWARE THIS PLACE!

0/5 Stars.

The reviews go on like that for pages. People complaining about Julien's tableside manner and spacey serving. Others detailing Greg's overly flirty nature, which seems to be causing rifts in more than one relationship. Julien swallows a thick wad of spit lodged in his throat as he skims and then reads the final review.

Our server dropped an entire tray of our drinks next to our table. Accidents happen. We can forgive that. What we really can't forgive is that when the drinks finally got to us, they were the completely wrong drinks. Then they were corrected, and they were DISGUSTING! Too sweet. Not enough alcohol. I will not be returning.

1/5 stars.

“I think you both know what I’m about to say, so I’ll spare you the lecture.” Martin’s tone is unnervingly serious, and his eyes a new level of tired. “Martin’s Place is vying for a spot on the Best of Lehigh Valley list. If we miss it again this year like we have the last few... I don’t even know what’s going to happen to this place, but it probably won’t be good, so I’ve come up with a plan to turn this around.” Uncle Martin slides off his glasses and steeples his hands on the desk. “I’ll need your complete cooperation.”

Greg nods before Julien even fully registers what his uncle is saying, which leads him to contemplate for the first time that maybe Greg needs this job. It was easiest to assume that Greg was an opportunist who saw a chance to score a decent gig and some cash before moving on to his next place, some sort of sexy modern-day drifter. But on closer examination, why would a guy with a gorgeous New York City apartment and legions of followers on TikTok move to modest Pennsylvania without cause?

Perhaps it wasn’t a move. It was an escape.

Maybe, too, the designer clothes he wears aren’t signals of wealth, but vestiges of a life he no longer has.

Julien is turning this over when he realizes that Uncle Martin has been staring at him, expectation etched across his face. “Well?”

“Can you, uh...” Julien’s face heats up “...repeat what you just said?”

Martin slouches back in his chair. “We’re revamping our approach to happy hour. On Wednesdays and Thursdays between five and seven, we’ll host Wine Down Wednesdays and Thirsty Thursdays. Mixers for young professionals. On top of the drink specials and small plates, there will be music, demonstrations, the works. We’re going for something a little more European than our competitors to help us stand

out.”

“Okay,” Julien says, still processing. “What does this have to do with us?”

Uncle Martin never fully clicked with Julien’s neurodivergence, which is why he shows his frustration by rubbing a hand down his face exaggeratedly. “You two are to host them, working together, making them happen.”

Julien looks at Greg with panic swarming in his sternum. Him, team up with the playboy new guy for mixers? He does not mix. He does not mingle. He does not want to. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Uncle Martin purses his lips before saying, “It’s not a good idea to let both of you go, either, so this is the compromise Augustine and I have come up with. Wednesdays and Thursdays are notoriously our slowest nights, so if this fails, we won’t crash and burn right away. Julien, you get upset when your wine expertise is overshadowed, and Greg, you are new at the bartending game around here and are having difficulty navigating the boundaries. This way, we play to each of your skill sets and offer something different that will hopefully appeal to a new demographic.”

Julien sighs audibly.

Finally, Greg shows up in the conversation, sitting forward and pleading his own case. “All due respect, Julien may know about wine, but he doesn’t know about cocktails.”

Julien’s fingers twitch. If he set his mind to it, he could master hard liquor, but the overflowing recycling bin of empties from childhood reminds him why he doesn’t go near the stuff.

“That’s why you’ll be working together and teaching each other.” Uncle Martin’s

arms are folded across his chest. Julien knows this means there is no swaying him on the matter. It's happening.

But that doesn't stop Julien's tongue from slipping one last time. "There aren't enough hours in the day for me to get him up to speed with all I know about wine."

Uncle Martin's brow creases deeper. "Julien, enough. The two of you have too much potential, and currently it's being squandered by your inexperience and your lack of attention. I'm hoping the two of you can help balance each other out and not make a bigger mess of things than you already have. This meeting is a warning. This project is your probation. If you refuse or fail, we'll have to take other appropriate action."

Uncle Martin's boss-voice signals he means business, and it makes Julien's stomach free-fall.

If he doesn't shape up, he could lose his job. Uncle Martin has never played the nepotism card, and he already suggested Julien take time off before Greg arrived. The last thing he needs is a forced break. His bank account would riot.

"I won't hear any more about this. The two of you will report to Augustine regarding supplies you'll need—special orders, decorations, theme-appropriate items."

"There have to be themes?" Julien asks with barely hidden disdain.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

GREG

The next day, Greg finds himself back at the kitchen table with Rufus and Jessica, eating more free Chipotle burrito bowls and discussing the evolving Julien situation.

“Whoa, workplace nemeses have to team up. This is getting good. I’m not even mad I had to cancel my Netflix subscription when real life has this much drama,” Jessica says eagerly before scooping up a heaping dollop of guacamole with a chip. “I don’t know what I’d do if I had to do a catering gig with Nadine. Probably quit, honestly. Did you say no?”

“Of course not,” Greg says, pushing his food around. His appetite is a no-show thanks to his increased anxiety. He needs this job and the money it brings in. He can’t afford to get fired or for the restaurant to close. He can only ignore the debt collectors for so long. Yeah, Rufus would probably let him slide a month or two on rent or utilities if he explained the situation, but that’s just it. He doesn’t want to explain the situation. This move was all about rebuilding his finances and, honestly, his life. Backsliding isn’t an option. Except: “Julien seemed less than thrilled about it.”

“Oh, so it’s a two-way nemesis situation. You didn’t say that before.” Rufus says this like Greg has been withholding top secret information on a special spy mission. It isn’t that deep.

“I don’t think work nemeses are as common as you two think they are.” Greg gives up the act and sets down his fork. He’ll save this for a late snack when he gets back tonight. “I have no idea how to get in his good graces enough to make this work.”

Jessica and Rufus both wear intense thinking faces before a bright idea seems to spark for Rufus. “Swing the pendulum in the other direction. If you were avoiding him before and that wasn’t working, actively do the opposite.”

“Stalking,” Greg says, alarmed. “You’re describing stalking.”

“No!” Jessica clarifies for Rufus. It’s sweet that they know each other that well. “What my lovely boyfriend is trying to get at is that you should befriend him. Invite him on a non-work-related outing and offer to pay.”

“A date,” Greg says, even more alarmed. “You’re describing a date!”

Rufus takes the lead this time. “It’s a low-pressure hang. Don’t make it into a big thing. Just wave the white flag and show him the friendly, fun guy you are with us. Maybe he just needs to see you in a different context to get to know the real you. Maybe then he won’t hate you.”

“You think he hates me?” Greg can deal with ambivalence—he’s done as much with his distant parents. He could even grow to live with dislike if he had to. But hate would be a step too far for him to handle. Hate in his comments section is ignorable, but IRL hate is not. Especially from someone he works so closely with, who seems as passionate about bar service as he is. The squeeze of being unwanted presses him from all sides until he feels ready to burst.

“No, nobody thinks he hates you. He just doesn’t want a ticket to board the Greg train quite yet.” Jessica’s correction does not make the situation better. “We’re all human. We’re all judgy. Let’s give him the chance to judge you in a different setting. Maybe a setting where he’s more comfortable and less stressed.”

Greg mulls this over. His current plan of awkward avoidance has been immature, and the results lackluster. A change of tactic sounds doable if anxiety-inducing. “Fine,”

he relents. “But how do we start?”

“The way all good nemeses-to-friends relationships start—light internet stalking.”

“I called it! I knew there would be stalking.”

Before Greg knows it, Jessica has his phone and is launching a search for Julien Boire. The blood rushes furiously to Greg’s cheeks when Jessica and Rufus comment how Julien is already in his recent searches. “Seems like someone doth protest for no good reason,” Rufus jokes.

Jessica cackles, then adds, “We’re sending a follow and a friend request. You should do the honors!”

Greg tentatively reaches out to take his phone back, fingers shaky. “At the same time? Won’t that be weird? Won’t he think I was, like, weirdly thinking of him?”

“Aren’t you thinking of him?” Jessica asks.

Greg rolls his eyes, bested, and scrolls through Julien’s Facebook wall. There’s not much there. The most recent update is that he’s marked going to a paint-and-sip event at Studio Artiste, which is close to the restaurant. His new gaggle of older women friends who joke about his cocktails go there. “What do you both think of this?”

Rufus and Jessica lean in to read the screen. “That’s perfect!”

“I agree. If he’s already going, there’s no way he can turn down your offer. It literally says right there, no refunds. He’d be out the money.” Jessica is beaming.

“He might not care,” Rufus says, which hits Greg in a sore spot. If only he had the luxury of not caring about money. Though, he lived in that space for a time, and it

wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Life had its other problems money couldn't cure.

"Maybe I could just sign up, and I'll bump into him there as if it were a total accident."

Jessica and Rufus smack Greg with matching looks of shock. "Now you're the one that's describing stalking!" Jessica jabs.

Greg hangs his head with a chuckle to himself. "I know it sounds egotistical, but... I'm just not used to people not liking me, okay?"

Greg has spent most of his life ensuring he never felt the way he did when he lived with his parents or when he didn't excel at the academy. He ran fast and far away from those feelings after graduating, working tirelessly to carve out his own life. He's worried that even after all that—all those years of toughening himself up—his skin still isn't thick enough to protect against lanky, scowly men who don't even know him.

Rufus's voice is serious when he speaks again. "Aw, Greg, man, we're just kidding around with you. We know you didn't do anything wrong. This Julien guy just needs to warm up to you. Maybe bring up the event to him at work tonight and say you were thinking about going, saw he was attending, and wanted to know if he's been before. It'll pull some of the pressure away."

"Wait," Jessica says suddenly. "That's what you did to me with trivia night at Ted's! You asked me if it was worth checking out, I told you I loved it, and then you mentioned you didn't have a team... Sneaky."

"If it works, it works!"

Jessica laughs to herself. "We'll see with Greg if it really works or if it's just your

charm and good looks that worked on me.” She leans over and kisses her boyfriend sweetly.

A pang hits Greg in the chest. He misses that kind of intimacy, but he has no time for that right now. He needs to quickly befriend Julien, who is practically his boss’s child, so they can run successful events together and help Martin’s Place thrive.

And he can keep his job.

And he can get out of debt.

These three thoughts braid together into an unbreakable strand of anxiety that pulses low in his gut.

Nervously, he hits the friend request button and hopes for the best.

JULIEN

Julien is in the middle of pleading with Aunt Augustine when his phone lights up with a notification. He doesn’t see it right away because he’s mid-monologue. “This is completely out of the blue. We’re going to stress out the staff.”

“Stress out the staff or stress out you specifically?” she asks, grabbing a sparkling seltzer bottle from the fridge below the bar and taking a sip. “Hun, I know you hate change, but we wouldn’t have brought in Greg if we didn’t think this is where we were headed. We’re courting the college kids and the young professionals. Those are the people who watch Greg on TikTok.”

“So this is all about Greg?” Julien asks, wishing after the fact that he didn’t sound so petulant.

“It’s also about you, hun.” She looks him right in the eyes. “I’m not going to lie to you. Martin only cared about the cocktail night, but I know how much your sommelier studies mean to you, so Wine Down Wednesdays are a way for you to shine and flex your social skills. You light up when you talk about wine. Let’s let people see you in that mode, maybe it’ll help you shake off your shell a bit.”

Julien doesn’t want to molt or whatever. He is perfectly comfortable inside his shell. Or he was. Before Colin’s move and Greg’s arrival.

“Frankly,” she continues, “it will also help us sell some of those expensive vintages you convinced us to stock.”

He replies leadenly, “Fair. Okay. I’ll give it a shot.”

“That’s the spirit!” She winces. “Well, almost the spirit! We’ll work on it.”

As Julien walks away into the back, bag still slung on his shoulder weighed down with his notebook and his course book, he pulls out his phone. On the screen are two notifications: Greg Harlow has followed you on Instagram. Greg Harlow has sent you a friend request on Facebook.

Facebook? Who still uses Facebook?

Admittedly, he does, but only to occasionally linger in special-interest sommelier groups and to get event invitations when the art studio a few blocks down hosts paint-and-sip nights. They work with a local winery he really loves, and for the price he gets to try new wines and paint a piece he can hang on the wall in his living room. He finds painting almost meditative. There is one later this week that he’s looking forward to attending on his night off.

With Aunt Augustine’s words trailing him, he accepts both notifications. A small

letting of Greg Harlow into his life. Not that he posts much. His Instagram is artsy shots of wine bottles, and his Facebook wall is chock-full of people he barely knows wishing him a happy birthday dating back at least five years. Greg won't glean much about him from those.

Only, he finds out he's wrong rather quickly.

Before they open for the night, Greg wanders over to him while he's reading and asks if he can have a seat. Julien slides his bag off the bench to make room for the muscular mixologist. "How are you feeling about this whole happy hour business?"

Julien is surprised by this question. After their meeting with Uncle Martin, they spent the rest of their shift like they were repellant magnets. Suddenly, Greg is singing a different tune. "It is what it is. We should make the best of it."

In the hour since he spoke with Aunt Augustine, he's made peace with the knowledge that if these nights go well, his tips will be good, and his savings for the advanced sommelier course will accrue quicker. One step closer to Texas. One step closer to Master status. One step closer to getting out of the Lehigh Valley, a place that easily feels like a memory pit for him to get lost in forever.

Greg seems to be good at racking up tips when he's not upsetting long-term couples. Maybe this won't be all bad.

"I agree," Greg says, chipper. "I passed Studio Artiste on my walk in today and noticed they had a sign in their window about a paint-and-sip. I was thinking that might be a good place to tell people about our Wine Down Wednesdays. Could just be fun. Have you, uh, ever been?"

For a split second, Julien considers lying, telling Greg that he's never been and has no interest, but he can't bring himself to say the words. There's an earnestness in the set

of Greg's brows that's new or at the very least new to Julien. He's used to seeing one eyebrow cocked, loaded, flirty. Directed at a customer or a coworker.

"I have," Julien says. "It's nice. I like it." He keeps his statements brief, even if his mouth wants to go on about the instructor and the calming wave of a brush across canvas.

"Any chance you're going this week? I saw there were a few spots still left."

Once again, Julien contemplates lying, ditching the class, and eating the price of admission because he finally wrestled himself out of the Greg/Braydon mind trap he was stuck in. This outing might be fodder for a grislier snare. But he's been looking forward to this class since the last one. Plus, he's in no position to be wasting money like that. What does it matter if Greg is there, too? They can choose easels next to one another, but that doesn't mean they have to talk. It's purely for happy hour visibility.

Julien nods, chest loosening. "I'm going."

"Great!" Greg says with a tad too much enthusiasm for Julien's taste. Though a small part of him does find it endearing. A small part of him. "I'll register online right now." Greg pulls out his phone.

When he unlocks the screen, Julien can't help but notice that Greg has the event page for the paint-and-sip open. Julien's attendance is marked. Clear as day.

He knows there's no malicious intent here. Instead, he's rather tickled that Greg would go through the trouble of playing pretend, giving Julien the illusion of spontaneity. It's a lie, but it's a white lie, and Julien can tell by the blush slowly spreading on Greg's cheeks that he needed to tell it for one reason or another, so he lets Greg off without comment.

“All set,” Greg says, hurriedly putting his phone away. “Looking forward to it.”

As Julien gets ready for his shift, he thinks, Maybe I am, too?

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

JULIEN

When Julien arrives at Studio Artiste, he takes in the colorful walls, the craft supplies for sale in the front right corner, and the smooth jazz lilting out of the speakers. Margaret, the white, very pale class instructor with gray hair pulled back in a ponytail and glasses resting on a chain around her neck, readies the easels and distributes the paint.

He always arrives early to help for two reasons. The first is that he likes Margaret. He's been coming here for almost two years now, and from his first class he's sensed that Margaret is a kindred spirit. Meticulously organized. Impassioned about her craft. Diligent and timely and sometimes gruff with her feedback but never cruel, and once she warms up to you, she's a loyalist.

"Class won't start for another twenty minutes," Margaret says, not looking up as she unpacks some new canvases from their plastic casings. She's wearing a clean, teal-colored smock.

"Oh, it's just me," Julien says. He shimmies his way into the far corner, reserving his favorite easel where he can be most alone in the crowd. Then, he remembers Greg is coming, so he sets his bag on the stool next to his.

"Ah, Julien, I should've known," she says before cocking an eyebrow at Julien's NPR tote on a second stool. "The lone wolf brings along a member of the pack?"

He becomes bashful as he claims a smock of his own and a paint palette. "Oh. Yeah. Coworker."

“Is this the wavy brown-haired fella with the big arms who came in here earlier in the week?” she asks.

“Greg. Probably. Yes.”

“He’s a chatty one.”

“Yeah.”

“Unlike you.”

“Yeah.”

“Is this a date?”

“Ye—” Julien flushes, then stammers. “No!” Though his ego inflates for a second that someone like Margaret thinks he could get with someone like Greg.

Margaret laughs lightly to herself. “Almost got you there, didn’t I?” She makes her way to the front of the room, instructing him to grab some paint bottles from storage.

“Greg and I, we’re just... Well, I don’t know what we’re doing here, but we’re working together to retool happy hour at Martin’s Place, and we figured this was a nice, neutral place to meet and plan.” He refrains from adding that he spruced up his apartment anyway on the off chance that their outing is to spill past the class’s end time. Not that he’s expecting Greg to want to spend his entire evening off with him, but still, if the possibility exists, he likes to be ready.

He promised Aunt Augustine he’d give this a try, so he’s putting his best foot forward.

“Happy hour, huh? Sounds fun.”

“If anyone shows...”

“You’re skeptical?”

“I’m skeptical.”

But Julien’s skepticism is swept into a dustpan when the class attendees begin filing in and Greg is there looking handsome in another solid-colored T-shirt—this one hunter green—and another pair of jeans that hug his muscular legs in all the right places.

“Hey, Julien.”

How does he do that? How does he make Julien’s name sound like the greatest word ever invented in any language? It’s exasperating.

“Saved you a seat.” Julien moves his bag, doesn’t make direct eye contact. He’s afraid if he does that Greg will somehow know he vacuumed for him.

“Thanks. I’m excited.” It sounds as if Greg genuinely means it.

Margaret is setting up the sample painting at the front of the class. It’s a nighttime cityscape. Julien senses Greg tense beside him, the way he did in Uncle Martin’s office two days ago, and wonders what exactly is triggering Greg. Part of him wants to ask. Another, more vexing part of him wants to place his hands on Greg’s prominent shoulders and rub until the muscles relax.

“Full disclosure, I’ve never painted before, so this is going to be a fun new challenge for me,” Greg says, borderline sheepishly. “Unless you count elementary school art

classes.”

“I don’t,” Margaret says, appearing suddenly behind them, handing out the brushes.

“But don’t worry, even mistakes can be art.” Her deadpan makes Julien laugh.

“Not exactly a vote of confidence,” Greg says. Making Julien laugh a second time.

“That’s just Margaret.” Julien shrugs. “You get used to it. I mean, you have to have a sense of humor when half your business is keeping women from getting so absurdly drunk they start an all-out paint war in your shop.”

“Has that happened before?”

“More than once,” Margaret says, deadpan once again, on her way to the front of the room.

Greg leans in and whispers, “How does she do that?”

Julien doesn’t allow himself a moment to relish the nearness of Greg’s lips or the heat of his breath this close to his ear. “Like I said,” Julien whispers, straining for breath. Just beneath his skin, a soft, pleasant rumbling starts. “That’s just Margaret.”

After lowering the music and clapping her hands, Margaret introduces herself and welcomes everyone to Studio Artiste. She does a safety rundown and describes the evening’s piece and wine pairing. It’s a barrel reserve chambourcin which is poured liberally for each guest.

From his bag, Julien pulls out a small stainless steel spittoon. Usually, he wouldn’t be so secretive about this. The people at these classes are more interested in their friends and the drinks than his habits. Sometimes his whole row of easels is empty. But with Greg right beside him, he can’t see a possible way to avoid the questioning.

Margaret leads the class in painting the purple-blue background. Julien picks up his brush, tunes into the smooth jazz, and follows the instructions to a T.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spies Greg using one hand to sip his wine and the other to cause chaos across his canvas. Artistic license is certainly one way to describe the route Greg is taking in this class. He's using a different style of brush and a different color combination. It doesn't look bad, but Julien could never be so bold.

Instead of harping on that, Julien swirls the wine in his plastic wineglass (they used to be glass pre-paint war) before bringing it up to his nose for a deep inhale. Notes of berries, perhaps blackberries, grace his nostrils. Following that, he swishes the robust red around in his mouth. He tastes something smoky like tobacco. The chewing type would be another use for his swill—though he'd never touch the stuff despite his strange, uncharacteristic craving for a cigarette that night in the restaurant when he was obsessing over Braydon and Greg together.

What was that about anyway?

Release, probably. He's been sorely needing release for a while now. Something—or someone—to untie him like a bow atop a present.

Once he's satisfied that he's gotten all the flavors he can from his sip of wine, he spits it out.

As assumed, Greg's curiosity comes blurting out immediately. "What is that?"

"A spittoon," Julien says, wiping his mouth with a napkin.

"What's it for?"

“I don’t drink the wine, so I need somewhere for it to go,” he says quietly.

“You’re a sommelier who doesn’t drink wine?” Greg’s confusion is grooved across his forehead and on the sides of his pouty mouth. Stark interest blazes in his chocolate-brown eyes.

“I know it’s oxymoronic or whatever, but I don’t drink alcohol at all, actually,” Julien clarifies, hushing up with enough time to hear Margaret’s next instruction. He switches out his brush for a thinner one and goes for the black paint.

“How does that work exactly?” Greg asks.

“I swill. You don’t need to swallow the wine to taste it.” Julien hopes this explanation is enough, but he knows it won’t be. Greg is inquisitive. And for a change, maybe Julien enjoys that.

Greg sets his brush down and looks at Julien with such an intense gaze that Julien does the same. “Is that why you declined my cocktail sample?”

Julien nods. “I’m sorry about the whole shirt debacle.”

“It’s no sweat,” he says, effortlessly forgiving. What an admirable trait. “I’m sorry I tried to push the sample on you. Can I ask...why you don’t drink?”

It’s not a judgmental question by any means, but it still chokes him up. Knocks him back for a second. Should he give the easy answer or the real one? Greg’s deep eyes, filled to the brim with a startling sincerity, make the decision for him.

“My parents were both alcoholics. When I was young, my mom got a DUI with me in the car. CPS opened an investigation afterward. That’s how I ended up being raised by Martin and Augustine and why I don’t drink,” Julien says, voice barely audible,

even to himself.

It's wounding that his parents loved alcohol more than they loved him. He knows intellectually that alcoholism is a disease, and like cancer, it's not easy to overcome. And he wouldn't trade his childhood for anything. It was under Uncle Martin and Aunt Augustine's care that he came into his own, came into his sexuality, and learned about his love of service and wine.

Greg doesn't speak right away. Then: "I'm sorry you had to go through that."

"Thanks. It's okay." Julien erases the upset from his expression. Turns back to his easel. "I was six when it all happened, and there's a no-contact order, so yeah. It all worked out for the best." He couldn't understand that fully at the time, but he knows it deep in his heart now that born of a terrible situation came a better, more secure life. The wounds of his childhood have largely healed, but the scars remain, and if he presses them hard enough, they still hurt. If he scratches the wrong way, they still bleed.

Greg has mostly abandoned his painting. Other students are chatting. Julien faintly hears the sound of smooth jazz in the background and the beating of his own heart rising inside his chest. Greg's unwavering gaze has this bizarre effect on him.

"Can I ask you another question?"

Julien swills, spits, steels himself because he's not used to anyone taking this much of an interest in him, and then finally nods.

"Why do you want to be a sommelier then?"

Julien goes blank, having never been asked that before by someone outside of his sommelier courses. He's not sure how vulnerable he wants to be with this mixologist

he barely knows because in most cases people can't wrap their head around his rigmarole logic. His brain doesn't work like everyone else's, so he's largely stopped expecting understanding from others.

But once more those deep brown eyes, crinkled lightly at the edges, override his filter.

"Because I like being an expert on it. It makes me feel powerful. I get to be in control of the thing that my parents had no control over." A tension somewhere south of his heart unfurls a little. Confidence over how far he's come bolsters his posture and his mood.

Greg nods slowly, clearly taking this in. Then he smiles, a small, strong smile, and says, "That's kind of incredible."

Kind of incredible. Incredible.

The word vibrates through Julien's whole body.

In the back of Studio Artiste with Margaret talking and smooth jazz playing, Julien's spirits lift exponentially. Greg the sunshiny mixologist should not be able to make Julien glow like this. Like he's complimentary moonlight.

"Sorry. That was, uh, kind of dark." Julien might be buoyed by Greg's praise, but he still feels exposed, self-conscious.

"Can't have the light without the dark now, can we?" Greg's expression shifts, growing wistful. "I guess I'm sort of oxymoronic, too. I bartend for a living, but I have to be careful how much I drink."

Julien's rib cage laces up tight with fear. The red-faced ghosts of his past swoop

down around him and slur hideous remarks into his ears. They thrust him into the back seat of that car with a broken taillight, the memory of him straining to hear the radio over the drunken shouting match happening in the front seat.

Bang.

The sound is only in his head, yet it still causes him to startle and drop his paintbrush.

Is Greg admitting his own issues with alcohol? While he wouldn't hold that against Greg, Julien's life has been touched by it too harshly. Maybe his initial instinct for distance between them was the right one. Self-preservation has always been Julien's number one priority. His feet instinctively angle away as if prepared to run.

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?" Julien asks, concern making his throat thick.

Greg's eyebrows shoot up. "Nonononononono. Sorry. That was cryptic. No. I take a medication for my mental health that doesn't play well with alcohol. That's all."

"Oh, got it." Relief sweeps through Julien's shoulders.

"Yeah. Sorry."

"No." Julien shakes his head, a sign of acceptance. He would ask more about the medication, but he doesn't want to overstep. Especially because, for the first time, he sees a direct connection between him and Greg. Neurodiverse minds gotta stick together in this world. "Like you said, the light with the dark. It's my fault for assuming." He turns his attention back to his painting and realizes he's fallen behind. He swills, spits, and picks up his brush again to dab yellow into the windowpanes. Small pools of light emanating into the nighttime.

That's kind of what Greg's aura is like: bright yellow in the middle of a mostly purple-blue existence.

While reaching for a sip of water, that contagious aura spills into Julien's body when he accidentally brushes Greg's arm. That glow fuels him for the rest of the class.

After their bout of honesty and the loaded arm-brush, they sit in mostly companionable silence and paint side by side, occasionally sneaking glances at one another or throwing out a suggestion or two for various happy hour themes.

At the end, Julien signs his name in the bottom right corner, sets his canvas on a rack to dry, and gathers his belongings. Outside, Julien and Greg linger on the sidewalk once all the other students have trickled out—to restaurants or parking lots. Julien decides to speak first. "Thanks for, uh, listening to me back there and for sharing. I'm sure that wasn't easy."

"Easier than packing up my life in New York and moving out here."

"Talk about a culture shock."

"A necessary one."

Julien glances in the direction of the bus stop as Greg swirls his key ring around his pointer finger. Round and round. A light clatter fills the air. Julien doesn't want to be obvious about it, but he is rather hoping Greg will offer him a ride again, even if he was curt about it the last time. He deeply regrets that.

Julien looks at his watch. "It's getting late."

"Yeah, should probably get going."

The key circling stops. Greg holds the fob in his fist. Julien registers, in person and not on his phone screen, how large Greg's fists are. How soft the backs of his hands, lightly dusted with hair, look. What might one of those knuckles feel like wrapped around his...

"This was fun," Greg says, rocking on his feet. "Should we trade numbers so we can continue spitballing ideas for happy hour?"

Julien agrees, and they swap phones, but it's when they swap back that his heart glitches. Greg pulls Julien in for a tight hug.

Julien is shocked at first but settles in. There's instant comfort to be found inside those arms, like Greg's aura is now an external armor of light surrounding them.

"I'm glad we did this," Greg says, still holding on.

"Yeah, uh, me too." Julien is being slightly crushed by Greg's strong arms. He likes it. He likes it a lot. Almost too much. Because when Greg pulls away, he finds himself wishing him near again. Wishing him close.

"Text me when you get home so I know you got back safely," Greg says, backing toward his car. "Good night, Julien."

When he boards the bus, Julien doesn't even need to put his headphones on because his heart is already loudly beating the tune of Vivaldi's "Summer" (even though it's fall) for everyone to hear.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

GREG

Their first happy hour ends up being more like indifferent hour.

The crowds are slimmer than ever, and Greg knows next to nothing about wine. He's leaning on Julien's expertise to make it through the evening, even if there are barely any people to impress.

Julien stands at the glass front door, looking forlorn as passersby peer in and then carry on their way.

Greg stifles a small laugh.

"What's so funny?" Julien asks, growing even more sullen.

Greg shakes his head, not wanting to get into it, but his laughter won't subside. This whole endeavor is quite comical when he thinks too hard about it.

Over the past week, Greg has kept up an increasingly friendly text thread with Julien, which took some time to ease into. Most of it was about the happy hours—how they should arrange the tables, if streamers were too tacky, which discount appetizers they should pair—but once 9:00 p.m. rolled around, they'd usually move away from iMessage and onto a different app.

There's a surprising intimacy in long talks across platforms, to notifications rolling in from the same person but different usernames. Each ding of his phone signaled an increased heart rate and a serotonin boost.

Julien sent Greg an Instagram review of a Riesling, to which Greg replied with a recipe for a fruity mocktail. A few days later, Julien upped the ante by sending a video of a dapper-looking Stanley Tucci mixing a negroni. Greg was never much for admiring older men, yet the obvious thirst in Julien's message over the actor had him reconsidering. His confidence with the cocktail shaker and his bespoke, round glasses gave him an intellectual air not all that unlike Julien's own, which Greg really admired.

Sensing the shift, Greg sent back a meme about unlikely animal friends—he thought it appropriate given their drastically different natures.

Despite their near-constant communication, he wasn't ready to give up his special secret knowledge just yet. He had his TikTok linked to his phone contacts. Apparently, so did Julien. Only he assumed Julien didn't know that because jb2041xy7's profile was devoid of any characterizing features, which only makes it funnier when Greg receives yet another notification that Julien checked out his profile.

For now, he's sitting on that information and standing behind the bar with flight paddles laid out before him, each with different samplings of wine. Only a few people have shown up so far, and he has a sneaking suspicion that Julien's foreboding presence at the doorway is scaring people away more than it's luring them in.

"I think maybe if you weren't skulking right there and if you, I don't know, smiled, more people might come in?" Greg says.

Julien presses his hands to his waist. "Sorry I'm not a goldendoodle or whatever that dog breed is you're always sending me videos of."

Greg chuckles to himself because, through their texts, he's gleaned that Julien's more of a surly rescue cat that claws at you when you get close before trusting you enough

to make biscuits and curl up in your lap. Damn, does Greg want Julien to curl up in his lap.

“I’m not saying wag your tail and drop a tennis ball at their feet. Just loosen up a bit. Again, the smile is a good place to start.” This is selfish. He just wants to see Julien’s smile. Even if tonight’s happy hour is a loss, Julien’s smile will be a win.

Julien forces his lips apart. Seriously, it’s like the video he sent of an unwilling goldendoodle getting his teeth brushed. So much grimacing.

“If that’s how you’re going to smile, let’s stick with the scowl.”

Julien rolls his eyes, but there’s a playful knowingness behind it. “It’s not like people aren’t going out tonight. I see them. They’re passing us. It’s infuriating!” Greg withholds his laugh once more because Julien’s intense passion has waned into endearing territory. “I told my uncle and my aunt this wasn’t a good idea. Here I am, being proven right.”

It’s impossible for Greg not to take slight offense, to bristle. While both of them are responsible for the poor reviews that brought about this new happy hour arrangement, Greg is, as he’s always done, taking on the emotional brunt of it. Because at the end of the day Martin and Augustine won’t fire their nephew, but Greg’s neck could be on the chopping block at any point if this doesn’t succeed.

But he decides not to stress about that in this moment. He’s enjoying bantering with Julien too much. Their in-person connection is almost as whip-fast as their online chats.

“If you were being proven right, wouldn’t you be a little more excited and a little less antsy?” Greg asks, poking. It’s not like he’s unaware that Julien wanted him ousted the moment he stepped foot in Martin’s Place, and he feels vindicated that he’s slid

into Julien's trust.

He forecasts Julien's reaction to his words. Julien's scowl is going to turn into an ultra-scowl—an unnervingly adorable combination of forehead wrinkles and eye crinkles and sagging lips and droopy eyes. He likes this expression almost as much as he likes Julien's hard-earned smile.

Oh no. Maybe he likes Julien's...everything.

"I was hoping for the tips." Julien's crossed the room, passing the bored waiters and line cooks who have already set up for dinner, which starts in less than an hour, and shakes the tip jar on the counter.

"Saving for something?" Greg asks before remembering his own stalled savings. He hopes Julien doesn't turn the question around on him. He's not ready to unveil his mountain of debt, the treacherous slope he's only begun to scale. He shudders, but thankfully Julien doesn't notice.

"My advanced sommelier course." Julien's voice dips lower as he says it, eyes flicking toward Martin's office.

"How much does something like that set you back?" he asks, glad to have a topic that's not his crushing financial miscalculations.

"Including the pretest, airfare, and lodging? Two grand, maybe more."

Greg puffs out a shocked exhale. "Damn. That's a serious investment." He inspects the pin Julien always wears in the restaurant. It's impressive and shiny, a symbol of commitment. Does Julien take relationships as seriously as he takes his wine studies? If they were to explore something—which they definitely won't, since Greg is being protective with his heart and other parts—would Julien need that kind of firm

promise, monogamy and all that?

“I think it’ll be worth it in the long run. If I reach Master status, I could be making over six figures a year.”

“Holy—wow.”

“Right? But it’s incredibly hard to get there. There are fewer than three hundred Master Sommeliers in the world.” Julien walks around to the back of the bar, getting nearer. A newfound Julien sensor has turned on inside Greg; it beeps every time Julien is nearby like his car does whenever he’s veering too close to the yellow line on a highway.

“It must be a difficult field,” Greg says over the Julien-induced beeping only he can hear.

“We’ll see if I have what it takes.” Julien leans on the bar, fiddling with the wine sample.

Greg averts his eyes from the hint of underwear waistband that peeks out from between the hem of Julien’s casual sweater and his work chinos.

“I just need the money first,” Julien says with a sigh.

Greg sincerely wishes he could help. Back when his TikToks were raking in the views and the dough, he probably wouldn’t have thought twice about floating his new friend—we are friends, aren’t we?—a couple hundred toward his dream. But right now, with credit cards maxed out and debt collectors calling with increasing frequency, he’s in no position to do more than he’s about to which is: “Switch places with me.”

Jovially, Greg steps outside and plants himself on the sidewalk like a carnival barker with a dishrag slung over his right shoulder. The first group that approaches him is tentative yet intrigued. They shrug to one another after hearing what's going on inside and enter. Greg follows them in, winking at Julien behind their backs like he's tricked them into a presentation for time-shares.

Greg can tell Julien pretends not to see, but the blush creeping up his neck gives him away. It lingers even as he begins somewhat shakily detailing the wine samplings and passing the complimentary flights across the bar to the two couples.

He's awed at how, the longer Julien speaks, the more confident and friendly he grows—from his posture to his clear tone. Grumpy isn't Julien's stagnant personality or resting state. It's a defense for when the world isn't willing to listen.

With renewed purpose, Greg steps back outside, determined to get some more stragglers. Now that he knows Julien needs the money, too, he's hell-bent on helping him get it.

By the time the event is winding down, Greg has successfully convinced (without flirting) at least five more people to wander in. Some stay and chat, ordering full glasses and bruschetta to share. Others sip and then exit promptly. Most, thankfully, leave tips.

As Julien and Greg clean up and prep for dinner service, Julien asks, "How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Turn on the charm."

Greg closes his locker and thinks on this before saying, "Practice." It's true. His

sunshiny demeanor was less a conscious trait and more of a necessity born of the academy.

“High school golden boy?” Julien asks, slipping out of the maroon sweater he was wearing for the tasting and into his button-down. Greg makes a point of looking anywhere but at Julien, whose exposed smooth, slim frame is too much for him even in his fantasies, let alone in person.

“I went to military school for grades eight through twelve. It was a family tradition. I was not very popular there.” Greg avoids trips down memory lane like this one, but with Julien he doesn’t mind so much. Julien trusted him with the truth about his parents, after all.

When he’s safe in the knowledge that Julien is clothed again and other employees have started filtering into the back, Greg catches Julien’s stare. Those pale blue eyes are intense, eager to engage.

“I can’t imagine you not being popular.”

Greg has to laugh. It’s not what he was expecting. Not the usual reaction he gets when he talks about his experience in the academy, which he does so rarely anyway, so this isn’t that much of an outlier. But still. “Why do you say that?”

“Because you’re overly friendly.”

“Overly friendly?”

“Intensely gregarious?”

“Is that supposed to be better?”

“No.” Julien doesn’t even crack a smile. “I just thought you didn’t understand me.”

“Oh no. I was being playful.”

“Sorry, I didn’t catch that. Sometimes my mind sticks on something.” Julien shakes his head, settles his features on more intense contemplation. “Again, I just can’t picture a scenario where you’re not in...” Greg lifts his shirt up over his head “...everyone’s business.”

“Julien!” Greg cries.

“That was a slipup!”

“I figured.” Greg is too amused by how flustered and flushed Julien is. Admittedly, he did hope to get a rise out of Julien. The same way he did on that first day when he opened the bathroom door shirtless. While he doesn’t always appreciate being ogled, he’s been desperate for another go at Julien’s eyes wandering over him. That admiration without expectation is still refreshing in so many inexplicable ways.

But it’s treacherous. This toeing of the line. One step forward, three back. Play it cool. He doesn’t want to scare Julien off when they’ve just begun to gel.

“I meant in with everyone.” Julien turns back to his locker and mutters what he must think is inaudible, “Though everyone’s business works, too.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Greg refuses to put his shirt on until he gets an answer, aware he’s pushing the boundaries between the professional and the playful.

Julien flails. “Only...only that I saw—the other day—that you knew I was going to the paint-and-sip class. You pretended not to, which is fine, I don’t care, but you stalked my Facebook...”

Stalked. Greg shouldn't have listened to Rufus and Jessica. "Oh shit, I didn't mean to cause a thing by it. I'm sorry."

"No, it's not deep like that. We all do it."

Greg teasingly shows his well-hidden hand. "I know you certainly do."

Julien bracingly folds his arms across his chest. "Are you accusing me of something?"

"Maybe." Greg uses an ultra-flirty tone. "jb2041xy7."

Julien goes pale. Well, paler than he usually is. "I..."

"I guess you didn't realize you'd linked your contacts to your TikTok when you set up your account. Since I'm a sponsored content creator, I have the business features on which allow me to see who views my profile at any time." The moment full realization washes over Julien's face is scrumptious. "It's not that deep. We all do it."

A big, beaming smile overtakes Julien's face. It lights up the relatively dim room and warms Greg's heart. Then Julien lets out a giggle. Greg didn't think Mr. Lanky Scowl would be capable of such a sound, but in this moment, it's all too fitting and adorable.

"Never mind," Julien says, swallowing the childish sound.

"Never mind, what?" Greg asks after he's stored a sound bite of Julien's giggle into a memory folder somewhere in the recesses of his mind for him to access later. When he needs a good anxiety depressor.

"I can imagine you not being popular."

They both burst out laughing. Greg doesn't think he's laughed this hard since he left New York City. It feels good.

"Hey, yo," Augustine singsongs into the back. "You two going to gab all night, or are you going to do the jobs we pay you for?"

"Be right there," Julien calls over his shoulder.

"You're brutal, Julien Boire." Greg's eyes haven't left Julien's face.

"You're pretty brutal yourself, Greg Harlow."

Oof. His full name hits him in the chest with a tingle that overwhelms him in the best possible way.

The sound of footfalls echoes behind them. They're almost certainly Augustine's black heeled boots. "We'll be right—"

"I know. I know. Right there." She's shoving a pittance of cash at him. "Emptied the tip jar, so we can start fresh now that the full staff is here. Split it among yourselves." She's gone before they can say anything else.

It's nearly next to nothing, so Greg doesn't feel weird at all saying, "Here. You take it."

"Come on, you got half the people in the door. I just spouted useless wine facts at them."

"They're not useless if you care about them," Greg says firmly, recalling the poised Julien behind the bar—Greg's bar—from twenty-minutes ago. Would Julien be poised, too, in Greg's room? Greg's bed? "Put it toward your course. What am I

going to do with this anyway?” Every little bit helps when it comes to expunging debt, but Julien’s need is more pressing. The course is coming up. Greg’s credit score isn’t going to drastically improve if he pays four extra dollars on top of his minimum payment.

Julien smiles at him. “Okay. Thanks. We’ll do better tomorrow.”

Greg latches on to that hope.

JULIEN

Julien feels silly for saying they'd do better tomorrow.

They didn't. Fewer people showed up on Thursday than on Wednesday. There are too many other, hipper happy hours in town edging them out. The people who did show on Thursday, however, did spend more money since the cocktails were more expensive, so that was good. But you can't really hold a happy hour mixer when there are only three people to mix with and they all came together.

This is how Julien finds himself, on a Saturday evening, wandering the aisles of Weis Markets with a red plastic basket, wondering what to bring to Greg's place. Wine and liquor would be pointless. Flowers would be too date-like. He spends several minutes puzzling over a fruit platter before a rude lady hip checks him so she can get to the cantaloupe.

He'll find something. It's not like he's in a rush. He takes his time with important matters. For some reason, not showing up empty-handed to Greg's place is an important matter.

In his amble, he stops at an endcap showcasing Hostess snacks—Twinkies, Ding Dongs, and HoHos. These sound more like the queer “tribes” that hookup apps make you select for your profile rather than the names of junk foods, but just the same, the blue-and-red boxes remind him of childhood afternoons with Aunt Augustine, and suddenly he's craving SnoBalls, so he picks up a pack and brings them to the self-checkout.

It's not until he arrives at the row house and Greg opens the door that Julien senses he missed something in the initial invitation. Greg's text had mentioned brainstorming and creating promotional materials for happy hour—so why is he impeccably put together, wearing a dark blue button-down and a suit jacket? And why is Julien in a pair of joggers holding a box of pink coconut, chocolate, and marshmallow mass-produced pastries?

“H-hi,” Julien stammers, unable to get past the heart-rate-raising sight of Greg in this business-chic attire. “Why are you wearing those?”

“Clothes?” Greg asks.

“Fancy clothes,” Julien says, not playing into his flirtation. If that's even what you can call this.

“I figured I should dress the part of cocktail connoisseur for our promotional videos.” Greg does that cool-guy thing where he flaps the sides of his suit jacket, effortless.

“Videos?” Julien was too wrapped up in the invitation to go over to Greg's place that he hadn't even considered they'd be doing videos. “I guess we won't need the markers I brought then.” They loudly roll around in the bottom of his tote.

“We're not making missing-dog fliers,” Greg jokes with a laugh. “We're the faces of the happy hour. We should make some TikToks to show our faces. They're good faces.”

Julien doesn't let the compliment simmer. Instead, he asks, “Where's your bathroom?” And before darting quickly to avoid his flushed cheeks being seen, he shoves the box of snacks at Greg. “I brought SnoBalls.”

“I see that.”

“Throw them away if you want.”

“Why would I do that?”

Julien shuts and locks the door before responding. He needs a minute. Julien prides himself on being prepared, and somehow he’d misread this situation, which mortifies him. Rationally, he knows it’s not a big deal. Mentally, he’s unwound. OCD can trick you into thinking the worst of any scenario—if the stain on the napkin sets, the restaurant will close; if you don’t keep the TV on an even volume, someone you love will die.

If you bring SnoBalls to your coworker’s house looking like a slob, you’ll inevitably incite the apocalypse.

Like his therapist taught him, Julien envisions a stop sign—red, octagonal, blinking. It causes his intrusive thoughts to pump their brakes, until they’re nothing but a stalled-out car at an intersection. He splashes some cold water on his face, looks himself in the mirror, and breathes.

There’s a knock. “Are you okay in there?”

“Yes, I’ll be right out.”

Julien banks a couple more breaths before pretending to flush the toilet, wash his hands, and step out. Greg is standing in the kitchen over the sink looking flustered and concerned. The box of SnoBalls is open, and a cloud of pink coconut flurries down Greg’s chin. “Hi.” He says this with his mouth full. It’s ridiculously charming.

“Hi. Sorry about that.”

“No.” Greg wipes his mouth with a paper towel from a nearby roll. “I’m sorry. I

should've been clearer when I messaged you. I have some shirts upstairs you can borrow. I'll only be shooting us from the waist up, so it's okay if anything is a little big. I have safety pins around here somewhere."

"Okay." Julien's still righting himself.

Greg smiles weakly. "Want my other SnoBall?"

Julien nods, so Greg tosses it to him. The sound of the crinkly wrapper landing in his palms is satisfying.

"Shall we?"

Upstairs, Greg leads Julien into his room. Julien is surprised to see, diagonally across from a twin bed, a rolling cart turned into a makeshift bar sitting in front of a green screen. From Greg's TikToks, he assumed the second, equally glamorous kitchen was real. How easy it is to deceive your audience on social media.

"This is where the magic happens." Greg twirls.

This setup—this house—seems like the opposite of magic. Not that it's a bad place to live. Far from it. Still, it's a pretty steep step down from the place Greg flaunted in his New York City era.

Julien must stare too long at the ring light tripod where Greg's phone sits because Greg says, "Let me guess, you thought I was actually in a kitchen."

Julien shrugs. "Sort of. Yeah." He pictured Greg shacking up in those new, fancy, state-of-the-art high-rises downtown near the PPL Center and the ArtsWalk.

"My cousin is a genius with stuff like that." Greg waves his hand at the setup. "This

is his house, actually. Well, it's his grandma's house. Not the grandma we share. But, yeah, he pays rent and hooked me up with this room."

"Oh, cool." Julien ventures farther into the room, finding a trash can near the tiny desk and throwing his SnoBall wrapper in it.

"Disappointed?" Greg asks.

Julien stops, wondering if he's ever heard Greg sound self-conscious like this before. He shakes his head. "Impressed, actually." He says it because he knows it's what Greg needs to hear, but also because it's true.

On that first day, Julien wanted to write Greg with his Gucci belt off as a pretty boy here to steal space and begrudgingly cash in on a content stunt. But the strange thing is, Greg doesn't seem unhappy or out of place at Martin's. Greg actually seems more comfortable than he ever did in those old TikToks Julien can now freely admit to having watched. He's impressed that he's turning this situation—whether negative or positive for Greg, it's not Julien's place to decide—into something productive.

"I don't know what there is to be impressed about."

Julien's struggling to find the words. "If I had to uproot my life for a job at a semi-struggling bar and restaurant, I think I'd be a lot more shaken. You seem...calm?" Julien's never been able to roll with the punches. He's in awe that Greg has become a part of the staff and the area so quickly.

"Learned that in the academy," Greg says quickly. "Calm under pressure. Positive in the face of negativity. Call it survival. Call it a coping mechanism."

Julien's ears ring at the words. Coping mechanism. Was Greg in therapy, too?

Greg steps over to the closet and opens the door. “Let’s see what we’ve got in here. This might work.” He passes Julien a teal button-down that complements the dark blue one he’s wearing. As Julien accepts the hanger, he can tell he’s going to be swimming in the garment, but that doesn’t stop him from turning away, shucking his T-shirt, and sliding into it.

“It’s like I’m wearing a parachute. I could probably go skydiving in this thing and still land safely,” Julien jokes, flapping his arms so the shirt billows. He’s hit with a waft of Greg’s spicy-clean scent that lingers in the fabric even though it’s clearly been washed. It’s heavenly.

Greg laughs, rummaging through a drawer and producing a few safety pins. He holds one up. “May I?”

Julien nods, and then tenses as soon as he feels Greg’s large, strong hands gather the fabric in the back. The cotton stretches until it’s hugging him the way Greg hugged him outside Studio Artiste. He’d be lying if he said he wouldn’t love to feel those arms sealed around him again.

“How’s that?” Greg asks, breaking Julien from whatever reverie he was about to drift away on.

“That’s great.”

Julien focuses on his breathing as Greg expertly pins the back of the shirt. Every movement of Greg’s fingers fills Julien with a surging sense of anticipation that is completely wrong for this moment.

Ever since Colin moved, Julien has missed the feeling of a man’s fingers near his skin. The heat of proximity. The allure of bodies pressed together. But he knows that’s not what this is. Greg is helping him put clothes on, not take them off. Greg

isn't even interested in him. He's interested in guys like Braydon and the pilot. Confident guys. Guys with more game than Julien could ever have.

Julien severely needs to find his chill.

Greg comes around the front and fixes Julien's collar. "There. Just don't turn around, and we'll be all good."

"Thanks." Julien grabs back any errant lust that might still be floating around in the air.

"I wrote up some ideas for us. Let me text them to you."

Julien's phone lights up with a message. "These are all great." Clearly Greg has put a lot of effort into this, and he admires that. He knows nothing about going viral or setting trends or whatever else happens on these apps.

"Cool. Thanks. So we'll just start with the first one and see how it goes?"

It takes a while for Julien to warm up. He's nervous, obviously. It's not like they've gone live or anything, but he still wants these to be good. That pressure makes his hands shake while pouring wine, causing little spills and retakes.

Greg, however, is patient with him. Never pushing. Never looking for perfection. "People like the little slipups. Makes this highly produced content feel off-the-cuff, ya know?"

Julien did know. He had fallen for Greg's content previously. He had imagined the real kitchen and the haphazard camera placement and the little jokes he thought Greg came up with on the spot. Turns out, it was all fabricated for optimal views. It was genius.

Greg was a genius.

From the way he adjusted the camera to enhance the angle and downloaded a teleprompter app on his tablet for Julien to read off of when he couldn't remember his lines, it was all so professional and straightforward. Greg's creative competence sparked off his every move.

And over the next hour, Greg gives Julien a crash course in charisma. Julien seriously thinks he should be paying for this level of expertise. It's like he takes each tip and applies it through sheer will, and perhaps osmosis?

Just as Julien is about to finish a perfect line delivery, his phone chimes with a notification that ruins the take and the congenial vibe they were finally starting to settle into.

GREG

Greg happens to be closer to the bed when Julien's phone goes off. It lights up on the floral patchwork quilt Rufus dug out of a mostly disused linen closet the day Greg arrived. Weirdly, he's grown to like it even if it's ratty.

Greg didn't think twice before reaching for the device. He isn't concerned about the TikTok. They'll just refilm. He is, however, concerned about how embarrassed Julien looks when he says, "Grindr, huh?"

He didn't mean for the question to come out judgmentally. Just because he doesn't use that particular app, doesn't mean he holds some moral high ground.

Julien angles away to swipe at the notification. "Surprised you even knew what that was." He's back to being prickly.

Crap. Greg was really starting to settle into their easy interactions as they filmed the videos—playful and comfortable. But, of course, he had to go and open his big mouth.

"What kind of rock would I have to live under not to know what Grindr is?" Greg tries to defuse the newfound tension in his room by deploying a joking tone, but Julien's shoulders only ride up farther.

"I mean, you're you. You don't need the apps like the rest of us plebs."

Greg doesn't play dumb. He knows Julien's referring to his looks, and not in a very

nice way. “I don’t see how me being conventionally attractive excludes me from using a hookup app...”

Julien goes silent for a second. Maybe he wasn’t expecting Greg to call it out for what it was so simply. Greg finds that whenever somebody boils his essence down to himbo it is better to address the matter than let it slide.

“It doesn’t,” Julien rebuffs. “I’m just saying you have no trouble picking up guys at work.”

Greg is completely taken aback by this, becoming too hot under the lights. “I haven’t picked up any guys at work.”

Julien puts his phone away and shoots Greg a quizzical look. “I saw you driving Braydon home that first night, and that Yelp review was about you slipping that pilot your number.”

Greg has been questioning how connected is too connected with the patrons at Martin’s Place. He’s not an idiot. He had somewhat of a playboy reputation in New York. How could he not? He was dating fellow underwear-shot-posting influencer Stryker Storm.

But he’s been lonely since moving out here, and with his anxiety disorder it’s often hard to tell if someone is looking for friendship or something more. With the pilot, Greg saw the wedding ring. He thought he was safe from advances, from jealous spouses, from Julien’s accusations. But maybe his instructors at the academy were right: he is too gullible and trusting, too willing to see the good in all people he crosses paths with.

“I didn’t hook up with either of them, nor did I have any intention to.” Greg ensures his voice doesn’t waver, so Julien knows for certain he’s telling the truth.

“Oh.” That’s all Julien says. Oh.

The word—is it even a word exactly?—cuts Greg to the bone. He doesn’t know what he was expecting, but he wanted more than that, and now they’re standing in awkward silence.

“You don’t believe me.” Greg folds his arms across his chest, a preservation instinct. He doesn’t want to be cross with Julien, but Julien is digging a deeper and deeper hole here.

“No, it’s not that...”

“Then what is it?” Greg tries to remain open, keep his listening ears tuned.

Julien crosses the room and sits on the rolling chair Greg had found on the side of the road with a piece of printer paper taped to it that read FREE. He’d cleaned it well enough for it to be usable, but it still sags whenever anyone sits on it. Julien lets out a little gasp as he sinks, and then he settles. “I did the thing where I’m an ass for assuming.”

Greg chuckles at Julien’s moment of self-awareness. In an instant of clarity, he can see how from the outside his interactions were perceived differently. “Content creation is all about charisma, harmless flirting, letting people in. I’m still negotiating that behind the bar here. I’m not getting with any of these people or looking to cause drama.”

“There’s a learning curve in the service industry,” Julien offers.

“Exactly.” Greg drops his arms and softens his voice. “I know it’s highly unprofessional to be hitting on our patrons. That pilot was not my type anyway. Braydon’s... I know not to mix business and pleasure. He’s a coworker.”

“There’s nothing concretely wrong about getting with a coworker,” Julien is quick to say. Almost too quick. Greg notices the pink coloring that creeps up onto his cheeks. “I mean, rules-wise. It’s not a boss-subordinate situation. Whatever. You said it didn’t happen, and I believe you, so it doesn’t matter.”

“Good to know,” Greg says, storing that tidbit away in his mind for safekeeping.

Julien swivels in the chair a bit as he adds, “And I partially said the Grindr thing because I’ve never seen you on the grid before.”

Greg puzzles over which way to respond to this. He could circumvent the issue at heart—say something vague about not loving one-nighters or whatever—but that wouldn’t be the truth. Not the whole of it anyway. And Julien trusted him with the truth about his parents’ battles with alcoholism. He could stand to offer a smidge of vulnerability in return. It’s not like he’s sharing the ins-and-outs of his debt.

“Do you remember when I told you I have to be careful with how much I drink because of a medication I’m on?” Greg asks. He knows this is going to sound random, but he swears he has a segue.

“Yeah.”

“It’s an SSRI.”

“Oh.”

Greg smiles. “You really like that word. Oh.” He shoves away thoughts of Julien crying oh under very different circumstances.

“It’s what I say when I’m still processing something so the other person doesn’t think I stopped listening.”

Greg swears he can see the cogs whirring behind Julien's stark gaze.

"I take it for my anxiety disorder. It helps a lot, but it also comes with its costs. I have to curb my drinking, which is why you don't see me trying the cocktail at the end of every one of my TikToks."

Recognition dawns across Julien's expression, a gradual relaxation of the musculature in his forehead.

"I'm also not always able to perform at my peak. In the bedroom. I mean, yeah. Does that make sense?"

"I get it." It seems Julien registers his desire to not have to spell it out further.

"So I don't make a habit of hooking up outside of relationships because I might be in the mood, but I might not always be able to get it up or keep it up or... Shit, see? This is so hard to explain. Imagine trying to do it to a complete stranger you've only shared dick pics with?" Greg rakes a hand through his hair, but it doesn't make him feel better.

While in New York, racking up views and credit card debt in equal measure, Greg switched medications because his old one at its low dosage had plateaued. He felt his mental health slipping, and he grew scared over the sudden lack of control. After hearing about his worsening symptoms, his psychiatrist recommended a different medication at a higher dosage. He'd been seeing her for some time and knew he could trust her professional opinion. She counseled him kindly about the potential side effects. It's my belief that the pros will outweigh the cons. And they did. For a while.

"You can take your time. If you want to tell me, that is." Julien has his hands folded in his lap, sincerely attentive.

Greg appreciates that. He wishes Stryker had given him more of a chance to explain. “I was in a committed relationship when I started this SSRI.”

“Stryker?” Julien asks.

“Yeah, Stryker.” If Julien was the kind of name you could savor, Stryker was the kind of name you could choke on. “How did you know?”

“He appeared in some of your older TikToks.”

Greg thought he had wiped his page clean of Stryker, but perhaps he missed a video or two. Who knows? He made so many. “When the sexual side effects kicked in, he started getting frustrated with me. My sex drive was slowing down and my ability to stay hard was getting, well, harder.” Julien’s laugh at Greg’s dumb joke propels him to continue. He appreciates a man who can laugh even at a heavy topic. “He was annoyed that I wasn’t satisfying him enough, and he kept saying, ‘It must be me. You must not be attracted to me anymore.’ But it was never that. I tried to explain, but he claimed it was excuses. All excuses. Ever since we broke up, it’s just been me and my hand.”

Julien nods. “I’m sorry you had to deal with that, but thank you for trusting me enough to tell me. I’ve been going through a similar dry spell.”

“Oh.” Greg borrows Julien’s phrase as he processes, and a small smirk tugs on Julien’s pale pink lips.

His perfect pale pink lips. The perfect pale pink lips Greg would like to feel against his own. Feel everywhere and anywhere on his body if Julien would be so kind.

JULIEN

Julien can't believe he's going to share any of this with Greg Harlow, but Greg is looking at him in a strange way and the words are rushing out before he can vet them.

"I go on and off of Grindr like most people, but I don't use Grindr like most people. I'm not much for relationships, but I do like a friends-with-benefits situation. Actually, I need a friends-with-benefits situation if I'm going to enjoy myself, and my most recent friend-with-benefits moved away a few months ago, so I logged back into Grindr in the hopes to find someone new since there are crap few ways to find other queer men in this area, but I've been striking out left and right."

Greg furrows his eyebrows. "Surely you're not at a loss for options."

Julien can't handle that compliment right now because he's bad at accepting them in any context, so he bypasses it completely. "I have very specific standards."

"You have a type?"

"No, I mean standards for boundaries and cleanliness and what I like and don't like to do." Julien swivels nervously in Greg's desk chair, certain Greg won't judge him over this disclosure but nervous all the same. No matter how many times you say it out loud, it doesn't often get easier. "I have OCD, which means anything from a scent to a wrong touch can trigger me to lose interest. Most guys don't want to deal with all that just to get off."

Greg sits on the edge of his bed, clearly taking this in. "Guys can be really impatient."

"I don't blame them. People aren't downloading Grindr looking to receive a novel-length list of dos and don'ts just to touch a guy. I get it." Often, he wishes his mind wouldn't make him so high maintenance, but he's on a rocky road toward acceptance.

“I don’t.” Greg’s statement is firm, and it swipes over Julien once again as if he’s passed into a force field. Like now he’s sitting inside Greg’s protective aura. They had been keeping one another at arm’s length before, but here in Greg’s room, their commonalities create an impenetrable bubble of connection around them.

“Everybody wants quick,” Julien notes, trying not to sound so downtrodden about it. “That’s why they choose the shot or the cocktail over the wine. They want a fast buzz, an immediate good time. On the Grindr grid, I’m the merlot you have to decant for forty minutes before serving, not the tequila shot. I know that. I get it.”

“Again, I don’t.” Greg’s words are harder this time. “Before we lost touch, my grandma used to tell me that good things take time. Those people that aren’t willing to invest their time don’t know a good thing when it’s staring right at them from their phone screen.”

Julien has no choice but to register this compliment. He can’t brush by it because it arrests him. It shakes him. It forces him to look at Greg—really look—and consider that his sunny demeanor is a coping mechanism (as he’s mentioned before), and that the heated flirtation he felt near the bathroom on that first day might have been true after all. The ride-giving and number-slipping might’ve been part of his TikTok act. What he feels with Greg currently might be real.

“I could say the same about Stryker,” Julien says.

There they sit, two good things finally seeing eye to eye.

“I think I’ve been so wound up and snippy because I lost my sexual outlet. I like being touched.” In his mind, Julien catalogues all the ways he likes to be touched. Sensually. Hurriedly. Nails scratching. Kneading. Has the room gotten hotter?

“I do, too.” Greg’s admission turns the small space into an inferno.

Julien, nearly in a full sweat, pounces on an idea that can maybe give them both the outlet they've been missing. "So what if we were to..."

Greg interjects, eyes slipping in the opposite direction. "I'm not sure."

"Oh, of course," Julien says with disappointment washing over his skin.

"No, it's not you. It's me."

"Sure." As if he hasn't heard that one before.

"I'm being serious."

"It's all right to admit you're not attracted to me. I'm a big boy. I can take it." He realizes only after the fact that his words have an unintentional double meaning.

"I am attracted to you!" Greg purses his lips almost as if he didn't mean to say it so swiftly and with such enthusiasm. Like he's afraid he'll blurt out even more if he gives his mouth the chance.

"Well," Julien says, a newfound confidence blossoming inside him. "In that case, we could just try." He hears the pleading in his own voice. He needs this.

"Trying is the problem with me. Trying does not equal doing, and then my partner ends up unsatisfied." Greg's arms are folded again.

Julien wants those arms to fold him—in half, in a pretzel, however Greg wants him. "There are plenty of ways to enjoy yourself and be satisfied without being hard."

"I don't bottom." Greg sounds wary, uncertain. "And not because I'm one of those douches who thinks it's unmanly or whatever. My anxiety doesn't allow me to relax

enough to enjoy it. It's uncomfortable for me."

"That's fine. I prefer to bottom anyway," Julien says in earnest, feeling his vulnerability bobbing up to the surface. "I was talking more about toys."

"Toys?" Greg asks, eyes snapping back, curiosity piqued again.

"Toys," Julien purrs. "I...have a lot of them."

"How many is a lot?" Greg asks, sounding interested yet his knitted brows display hesitancy.

Julien treads lightly. "I'll show you. If we do this, that is." His cock stirs as he thinks of all the showing he wants to do with Greg Harlow. Then he remembers that they have more housekeeping to attend to. "If we do this, I have some hard boundaries regarding your hygiene."

"I'm very clean," Greg is quick to offer, hand floating up to his chest.

Julien's in the habit of inspecting people's fingernails. It's a thing he's done ever since he was little. Nail cleanliness says a lot about how well a person prioritizes their overall self-care. Greg's, even now, are trimmed and pristine. "I don't doubt that, but my mind can run away from me if given the chance. To reduce that, I'd need you to shower before. At my place. Shower there before we—"

"I get it." Greg gives that right-sided smirk. "I'll shower wherever, whenever."

"Okay, Shakira." Julien lets out a light laugh before sobering. "Oh, and this one is a biggie. No kissing."

"No kissing?" Greg's voice pitches up half an octave.

“I know it’s not ideal but...”

“No,” Greg says sharply. Julien sags, thinking his whole sexy plot is being shot down again, but then Greg adds, “Not ‘no’ as in I don’t want to. ‘No’ as in I respect that and can do without it. You don’t have to explain yourself.”

Relief spreads through Julien. Nobody has ever said that to him before and meant it. But the force behind Greg’s words assures him that he does. That he’s different. “Thanks. I’d also prefer if this were an exclusive sexual arrangement. I can be amenable. We can work out an STI testing plan that puts us both at ease if that would work better for you.”

“Exclusive works just fine for me.” As he says this, Greg’s smile, for once, takes up both sides of his face.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

GREG

Asex pact.

That's what Julien had called it when he asked Greg if he trusted him (he did) and if Greg had plans the following weekend (he didn't).

So after another week of middling happy hours and late shifts, Greg arrives at Julien's apartment with a box of SnoBalls, which Julien brings into the kitchen and leaves there on the counter unopened. The only snack he's interested in, clearly, is Greg. "Can I get you anything to drink?"

"Water would be great," Greg says, his throat suddenly dry with nerves.

Julien is wearing this silken maroon robe with white diamonds patterned across it, no shoes, and there's a milky V of exposed chest where the panels of the robe don't overlap. His hair is pushed off his face yet damp at the ends from having just showered.

Greg is undeniably excited, but he's learned the hard way that words are cheap. Just because Julien says he won't be disappointed if Greg can't perform, that doesn't mean he won't be.

He looks around to get the lay of the land. Julien's place is tidily put together—lots of clean lines and muted colors. One wall is dedicated to his paint-and-sip creations. The place smells like cleaning agents, so Julien must've spruced up before Greg arrived.

Julien gets both of them glasses of water before leading Greg down the hall to the bedroom, which has all the same aesthetic hallmarks. Tan walls. Cream carpet. Matching bedspread.

On top of a dresser, a plethora of colorful toys is laid out by size on an unrolled towel. Greg is not a prude by any stretch of the imagination, but he's not well-versed when it comes to sex toys. Some might even call him vanilla. But he's likely only vanilla because he's never had the opportunity to try many other flavors.

Julien steps between Greg and the dresser, holding out a different towel for him to take. "You're still okay with this?" The sound of running water creeps in from the bathroom just off to the side.

"Absolutely," Greg says, accepting the towel.

"Use any of the products in there that you like."

The bathroom mirror is already fogged. The steam envelops Greg and stirs his arousal. There's something about humidity that has always awoken a horniness inside him, the shower being the foremost place he's had the privacy to pleasure himself. He strips and tests the water before stepping into the stream, washing away the day and the grime, pumping himself up for the main event.

He and Julien had discussed this at length—that one of Julien's needs was that his partner had to shower at his place. Greg understands requiring mental comfort to unwind fully. He's more than happy to provide proof of his personal hygiene and use only scentless products if that's what it takes to bed Julien Boire.

Ever since the shirt-sharing, he has wanted this, which is why he isn't surprised when his cock comes awake as he lathers it with moisturizing bodywash. Just feet from where Greg is standing, Julien is preparing an arsenal of pleasure devices for them to

explore with. It's no wonder he's growing hard. He was chubbing up on the drive over, too.

After a twelve-minute deep scrub, he towels off, moisturizes his face, and steps back into his underwear. He wants there to be some sense of intrigue, something to unwrap, even if his semierect dick is pointing up toward the waistband, threatening to expose itself before its time. He picked out a tiny, risqué pair before he left. Unselfconsciously, he steps back into the bedroom.

Julien is standing by the window near the dresser sipping from his water glass, looking radiant in the light of the streetlamp that filters in from outside and the electric tea lights he's placed throughout the room.

"All clean," Greg announces.

Julien turns back and casts a wicked smile his way. It's clear he likes the view. Both from his face and from the tentpole threatening to part the flaps of his robe. "Care to take a look?"

Greg doesn't know why his legs have become Jell-O shots. It's not like dildos can hurt him. "This is quite the impressive collection."

"What's so impressive about it?" Julien asks.

"It's vastness, I guess." The assortment spreads from edge to edge, no square of towel uncovered. "I don't think I've ever owned a sex toy."

"Never?" Julien sounds surprised.

Greg shrugs. "Just hasn't crossed my mind."

Julien nods. “Okay, we’ll ease into it.” He taps his phone, and soothing acoustic indie music pipes from a Bluetooth speaker. “Lie down on the bed.” Julien has stripped it down to his sheets, probably stowed the comforter and extra pillows away in the closet as not to make a mess of them.

Greg splays out as instructed, adjusts the pillow.

“You can, uh, take those off if you want to.” Julien is eyeing Greg’s gray Louis Vuitton briefs, which remind Greg of his old life. He doesn’t hesitate to wriggle out of them, disentangle himself from those memories while here with Julien. “I’ll take them.”

Julien folds the briefs and sets them on a chair in the corner. When he turns back, his eyes are alight with interest. Even though Greg has gone flaccid due to nerves, Julien seems to be relishing the view of his naked package. Greg’s confidence builds up and out again.

“Don’t be afraid to close your eyes,” Julien says, but Greg wouldn’t dream of it because Julien is finally untying his robe, hanging it up, and then standing there in unclothed, perfect glory. Greg could moan merely at the sight of him. “This is unscented oil. Is it okay if I use it on you?”

Greg’s elated words are caught up in the ball of excitement filling his throat, so he nods enthusiastically to convey his consent.

Rippling the bedsheets, Julien climbs up so that his thighs are bracketing Greg’s legs. Carefully, he pours out some oil, and even more carefully, he begins massaging Greg’s feet, then calves, working his way up and up and up until Greg is melting into the mattress.

Not that he’s hard. Not completely. But by the time Julien gets to his groin and

then...God WHY...bypasses it, he's wishing for some slick, tight attention between his legs.

Instead, Julien, seemingly in no hurry at all, presses his palms into the meaty muscle of Greg's chest. Greg can feel Julien's erection grazing his stomach, low hanging balls hovering just below. The warmth of Julien's palms spirals down into Greg's bones, liquefying them until he's a puddle of relaxation and arousal.

Arousal.It's in that relaxation that Greg senses the irregular stiffening down south, from pool noodle to telephone pole.

Overjoyed, Greg inches his head off the pillow toward Julien's, but Julien's hand presses into the center of his chest, knocking him lightly back into place. "Remember our rule..."

Oh, right.Julien is meeting Greg where he's at, so he needs to do the same for Julien, despite how desperate he is to kiss him, feel their mouths unite. Boundaries are boundaries for a reason. Maybe it's a germs thing. Maybe it's an intimacy thing. It doesn't matter. Julien has the right to enjoy this experience however he chooses.

"Sorry. Wasn't thinking."

Julien's expression grows alluringly bashful. "But I do enjoy using my mouth in other ways."

Before Greg can utter a single syllable, Julien swallows him down to the base. He bobs and teases and uses his tongue with such impressive efficiency Greg would half expect him to be part sex machine—made up of some of those toys on top of the dresser that Greg keeps eyeing.

Greg grows harder inside the warm wetness of Julien's expert mouth. At this point,

he doesn't care if it lasts, if it flags, he's not in his head about it. He's here, memorizing the ceiling, exhaling into the ether. He's in heaven.

"This is the best head I've ever had," Greg moans.

Julien removes his mouth and stands.

Greg worries suddenly he's said the wrong thing, but then Julien returns to the bed with a strip of studded leather.

"What's that?"

"A cock ring. Have you ever used one before?"

"No." Greg wishes his inexperience didn't come across like naïveté.

"Would you want to try it?"

"Ye-yeah. How does it work?" His breath hiccups.

Julien smiles. "I clasp this around the base of your cock or around your balls and cock. It traps the blood flow, and for some, it even helps you keep the erection harder and longer."

"That sounds ideal." Greg's penis is already dipping the longer they talk. What if it doesn't work?

"It's not a cure-all, okay?" Julien says kindly as if he can read Greg's mind. His eyes are reassuring in their softness. "It could help. It might not. Doesn't matter either way."

Greg is relieved by Julien's words. A burden flutters out of his chest and explodes in midair. Again, words are cheap—you're going to grow stronger here or I love you no matter what—but Julien's actions are mirroring his words. That's enough proof for Greg to know that Julien won't turn his back on him.

They start with just the shaft, adjusting it to Greg's thickness. Even half-hard, Greg feels the difference. As soon as Julien begins sucking him again, he notices a heightened sensation, new nerve endings coming out to play.

He watches as Julien strokes his own dick between his slim thighs, hard tugs as he works Greg deeper down his throat, and Greg experiences a physical hunger that needs immediate satiating.

JULIEN

Julien is surprised when Greg practically growls, "Can I have a turn?"

The only possible answer spinning in Julien's mind is "yes."

So they switch places. Just Greg's bulkier, more muscular body hovering over Julien's causes his dick to pulse. Greg smells clean yet earthy. His body glides easily over Julien's thanks to the oil, which has matted down Greg's chest hair in a way that is wildly sexy.

The minute Greg licks the tip of his dick, Julien lets out an otherworldly yelp. It's been a while, his head is sensitive, and he's not even the one wearing the cock ring.

Julien's amazed that the cock ring he bought for this occasion looks stunning on Greg. Though he wouldn't be surprised if a trash bag with holes in it would look stunning on Greg.

Julien won't tell Greg he bought the cock ring just for tonight. While his arsenal of sex toys includes some silicone ones he's used on himself, he figured the new adjustable ring would be more sanitary and more suited for a beginner. And suit Greg it does.

Greg lies on his side, angling Julien's penis between his lips, giving Julien the full display.

"Would you mind going...lower?" Julien asks. While he enjoys getting blowjobs, he much prefers a man's tongue at his other entrance.

Greg's eyes suddenly possess a new fire. "Not at all."

Julien might've been experiencing a sex drought, but his routine still came like second nature. Before Greg arrived, he cleaned, preened, and even got to use the subtle fruity-flavored scrub he'd bought right before Colin moved out of town. Julien finds pleasure in his preparedness.

He finds even more pleasure when Greg pulls away and groans, "Fuck, you taste good."

Julien's head lolls back as he continues hoisting his legs up by the knees, happy that he remembered to stretch before this. For minutes, Greg's tongue swirls at his spot before he presses the pad of his thumb to Julien's hole eliciting a gasp so sharp and loud Greg laughs to himself before entering him with his thick finger.

Julien doesn't understand how anyone could have qualms about Greg's inability to "perform" when he's so adept with his fingers. Greg finds Julien's p-spot with no effort at all, grazing it with a come-hither motion and applying pressure to it that makes his mind twist in two different directions.

“Bigger,” Julien croaks, lost in the lavender haze of this. “I want something bigger.”

When Julien opens his eyes, he immediately notices Greg’s apprehension. Between his legs, the cock ring has only preserved part of Greg’s erection. “I don’t think I’m up for that right this moment.”

“That’s okay,” Julien says, trying to convey reassurance and need in equal measure. “Grab the medium-sized purple plug and the lube for me, will you?”

Julien watches Greg’s apprehension splinter off. He returns to the bed with the toy and ready-to-learn eagerness. Greg slicks Julien’s hole with more than spit and slowly, ever so slowly, inserts the plug until it pops into place and Julien yells with vigor, “Fuck!”

With the plug repeatedly caressing the spot Greg already stimulated with his finger, Julien moves to his knees, grabs the oil, and coats his right hand before grabbing Greg by the cock and tugging. He does so with intention. He does so with care. He does so with absolutely no expectations.

He wants Greg to know that, even if he won’t speak it. He wants Greg to understand, just through his touch, that it doesn’t matter if he’s hard or if he comes. All Julien cares about in this moment is making Greg feel good and confident. Nothing else matters.

As Julien strokes Greg, Greg takes it upon himself to reach around, brush the pads of his fingers across Julien’s ass cheeks, around the hole, and then he fiddles with the base of the plug. Each micromovement of Greg’s fingers serves to heighten the experience for Julien until he feels like he’s standing atop the world’s tallest mountain, light-headed and ready to fly.

“That feels nice, Julien.” Greg’s voice is barely more than a whisper.

Julien likes how Greg's body responds to him. The way his strokes seem to dictate Greg's breathing pattern. He feels Greg's cock getting harder under his touch. The more he toys with the underside of Greg's circumcised head, the more little jumps it makes.

Julien isn't worried about how long this will take or if his arm will cramp. He's enjoying the intense, focused, madly sexy squished looks on Greg's handsome face too much to consider anything but this very moment.

Greg lets out a grr. "I want to fuck you."

"I have condoms laid out over there." Julien tries hard to temper his voice; he doesn't want to come across too desperate for it. Even if he is and it's probably already obvious.

Greg exhales hard, pulls his cock away from Julien's grip. As he goes to get the condom box, Julien notices him stop as his eyes land on a transparent eight-incher with buttons on the bottom. "What does this do?"

"Vibrate."

Greg smiles to himself. "I don't think this is up for it right now." He waggles his dick. "Would this do?"

"It would do. It would do very nicely." The phantom stretch of it already has Julien in a state of utter bliss.

Julien lies back once more, pulls up his legs, maximum exposure achieved. Absence floods his body when the plug is removed, but ecstasy takes its place when Greg works him over with the dildo, transitioning between speeds and depths. Julien couldn't be more far gone if he tried. "I think I'm gonna..." He doesn't finish his

sentence before he's spilling across his torso.

It takes Julien several moments before he can find clarity again. Once he regains his sight, Greg sits there, smiling faintly, holding the cock ring. "Can I help you now?" Julien asks.

Greg shakes his head, resolute and winded. "I think I want to stop there if that's okay."

"Of course. As long as you're not just saying that because you think I'm tapped out now." Julien doesn't want to be one of those guys who comes and then rolls over and falls asleep. He may be grumpy and standoffish sometimes, but he doesn't ever want to be selfish.

"I'm not," Greg says quickly. "I'm just tired and satisfied. That was intense. I enjoyed myself. A lot, actually." He goes quiet for several seconds, then adds, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For letting me decant you."

Julien cracks up at this callback to their conversation last week. Julien does sort of feel like a merlot spilled all over his sheets, which reminds him: he needs to clean up. "My pleasure. Now, I need to shower. Don't go anywhere, though. It'll only be ten minutes or so."

Then Julien surprises himself by kissing Greg on the cheek. Not the lips. Even his unconscious impulses know that would be too far for two friends who are just helping each other out with a common need.

Julien brushes his teeth, takes a quick but thorough shower—scrubbing himself free of come and lube and oil—and then slips back into his robe. When he returns to the bedroom, he’s surprised to see that Greg has redressed and also stripped the bed; he is holding the soiled sheets in a ball while checking his phone.

“If you can point me toward the washing machine, I can get these started for you.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” Julien says, though he appreciates the kindness. He does have a hard time transporting his sex sheets. He usually does that before he showers, but he was so rocked by the intensity of his orgasm that his mind got his practiced order jumbled.

“I want to.” Greg smiles winsomely.

Julien refills their water glasses as Greg starts the laundry. And instead of saying good-night right then and there, Greg showers again before coming to sit with Julien in the living room where they discuss at length next steps for making happy hour...well, happy. For them and the patrons.

The slosh of the washing machine muffled by the slatted closet doors underscores the start of something very new for them.

GREG

Greg Harlow stands behind the bar, a couple weeks later, stirring a cocktail with joie de vivre.

He doesn't even know why that's the first term that comes to mind as the ice and alcohol swirl around inside the rocks glass to the beat of a tune only he can hear. Maybe it's because Julien's last name is Boire, which is French as fuck, and French kissing has been on his mind as of late.

In terms of their sex pact, they haven't quite made it as far as kissing. They may never make it that far. He is okay with that. If he gets to keep witnessing Julien's beautiful mouth dropping open and his toes curling in ecstatic orgasm, then he can't complain about the way things are going.

He especially can't complain because happy hour is packed. "Butter Me Up bourbon old-fashioned for the gentleman." Greg pours out his special concoction—one he's been mastering for a full week. This new recipe included roasting cubed butternut squash and then infusing his bourbon with it over time. Once it was strained and bottled, all he needed to add was some maple flavoring and the bitters. Delicious.

Julien was the first to try it. No, he didn't drink it. Greg didn't expect him to, but Julien sipped, tasted, and spit. He commented on the flavor profile. They even made notes together.

This is unusual for Greg. He's never let anyone in on his cocktail creation process, but their collaboration in the bedroom yields such spectacular results that he couldn't

resist seeing what else they could shake up together. Greg caught all of this on camera, of course. At night, before bed, he'll replay those joint TikToks on a loop, getting goose bumps over their banter and how incisive Julien's critiques are.

"I saw you and the wine guy making this one on my TikTok For You page and knew I had to come in and get one right away," the bald Black man in the denim jacket says to Greg before taking a sip. Greg takes immense pleasure in the way the man's eyes light up with pleasure at a single taste. "Damn, that's good."

"Thank you," Greg says.

"Let me try," says his partner, a white woman no taller than five foot zero who has one knee up on the barstool. When she sips, she gets the same look in her eyes. "Worth the hour-long drive for sure."

"You drove an hour to be here?" Greg asks, incredulous, leaning in closer to hear better. Not to pat himself on the back, but this place is crowded for a Thursday night.

Over the last three weeks, he's watched attendance along with his TikTok views soar. Now he never posts without Julien, and he's noticed the comments section has grown chattier.

Who's the tall guy? What's his @?

This is TOOOOOOOOO CUUUUUUUUUUTE!

Their chemistry is goals

It's giving shaken NOT stirred ;)

Indecipherable emojis

Decipherable emojis *Mostly eggplants*

Everybody knows...everybody knows...he fucks you, wrote another, referencing an old viral TikTok sound. Greg didn't bother deleting it because it was completely true. He was fucking Julien with regularity. Maybe not with his penis exactly, but he is opening his eyes to all the different ways two people can have sex—no erection necessary.

“We did,” says the Black man, who introduces himself as Andre. “We consider ourselves cocktail connoisseurs.”

The woman—Magda—punches him lightly in the arm. “He’s exaggerating. This is part of our job.”

Greg grows nervous, pretends to blot his forehead with a rag. “Jeez. Didn’t know I was about to be graded.”

“We’re very easy to impress,” Andre says before a hearty laugh.

“Speak for yourself,” Magda says. “He is. I’m a stickler. I like my cocktails more traditional, but this? This is something I can get behind. That maple flavor. Mmm-hmm. It’s like Thanksgiving in a glass. Heaven. Get me one of my own, please.”

“Coming right up.” Greg gets to work. “What do you two do?”

“We’ve already said too much,” Andre says, a speckling of humor with a dash of mystery. “But seriously, compliments to the creator.”

When Greg is finished, Andre and Magda cheers and drink.

“I can’t take all the credit,” Greg says, grabbing Julien as he comes out from the back

with more infused bourbon. “My coworker Julien came up with the idea for the maple. Really brought the whole thing together.”

Julien smiles. “You forgot the candied orange peels.” He reaches under the counter for a mason jar and fastens the garnish to the customers’ glasses.

“You two think of everything,” Magda says with a telling smile. “This place was not even on our radar until last week. Clearly, we’re late to the party.” She swivels around. People are chatting and drinking while music plays.

Across the way, Rufus has a DJ booth set up. “It’s a hobby of mine,” Rufus said to Greg one night as he was texting Julien about ways to improve happy hour while waiting his turn for the Xbox. He’s so techy that this made sense. “I’d do it for free. I just want the experience. I have all the equipment.”

Greg and Julien agreed, which turned out to be a good move. Rufus is solid at this. He’s playing the right mix of upbeat pop tracks to keep everyone bopping along while they drink.

“How’s the food here?” Andre asks.

“Delicious,” Julien says. “Chef Marco is very talented.”

“If the food is anywhere near as good as these drinks, you’re going to need to roll me out of here,” Magda says, shimmying her shoulders with excitement. “I’ve decided. We’re staying for dinner.”

“Will we need a reservation?”

Greg is about to say no, when Julien swoops in with the much cooler “I think we’ll be able to squeeze you in.”

Greg isn't even aware that he does it because it comes second nature to him, but he places a hand on Julien's lower back. Instead of shifting away, Julien presses into it, tilts his head, and smiles at him. Greg wants to paint that smile as a mural on his bedroom ceiling.

As the happy hour portion of the evening winds down, drinks are still flowing freely and liberally. So much so that people are leaving behind nice chunks of change as tips, which will leave them with a solid split at the end of happy hour.

Greg is relieved. He's finally going to be able to start paying down his credit card bills. Getting back on his feet. He might even be able to set some of this aside to purchase one of the hollow strap-ons he's been eyeing on the sex toy websites Julien sent him.

It's not that he isn't enjoying the anal play they've already been having. The cock ring is helping him get and maintain an erection that's more sensitive than before, but he still hasn't found his full confidence. He fears if he rolls on the condom and enters Julien (something Julien would never say he wants so as not to put pressure on him), his boner will be DOA, which will frustrate him. Kill the mood.

Online, he found an eight-inch toy in a body-safe silicone that comes with a jockstrap harness. All Greg would need to do is slide his cock (no matter how hard) in the hollow end of the toy and he'd be equipped to peg Julien, fuck him with his whole body the way he's wanted to since that first night.

At the very least, using the strap-on will remind him of the sensation, the hip thrusts, and it might even inspire him to slip off the dildo, on a condom, and inside Julien without the fear that he's going to lose his erection or his fresh sexual assurance.

Greg is starting to feel like his old self again except with a twist. And like the twist of the orange rinds he's affixed to the cocktails he's been serving, it's all thanks to

Julien.

JULIEN

Greg is the one to thank for the thick roll of singles Julien is taking home tonight, and he can think of over a dozen ways he'd like to repay him—both in and out of the bedroom. With clothes and without.

Julien is so happy with how well the last several weeks have gone that he could kiss Greg. He won't. That would be way too intimate for their sex pact arrangement and would likely only complicate their working agreement, but that doesn't stop him from fantasizing about it until Aunt Augustine nudges him aside to get to her office.

“Whoa there, Mr. Moneybags, look at you.” She breezes past him, voice full of gibes. “That DJ kid was good tonight. He played lots of Whitney Houston. Just the way I like it.” She hums a snippet of “I Wanna Dance with Somebody.”

“That's Rufus. He's Greg's cousin. I met him when I was over there last week.”

Aunt Augustine doesn't look like she even attempts to mask her smirk. “Over there last week, were you?”

He is not about to air his dirty laundry to his aunt, so he says, “We were filming TikToks. You know the ones that keep getting us these bigger and bigger crowds?” He's saddling his sassy high horse and riding it off into the sunset.

Aunt Augustine is unimpressed. “Never thought I'd see you so jazzed about TikToks. Are you sure there isn't anything else going on?” She winks a knowing wink that winds him up. They've always been open about his love life, but this, what he has with Greg, is different. He's safeguarding it. Even from the most caring people in his life.

“I think I would know better than you,” he says, sounding defensive.

She holds up her hands, backing off. “Okay. All right. Don’t tell your dear aunt who dropped everything to raise you and provide for you. It’s fine.”

“You know guilt trips don’t work on me.” He raises a shrewd eyebrow.

“It was worth a try. Thought Greg might be softening you up.”

“The only thing Greg...” he trips slightly over Greg’s name since he’s most used it while lying on his back, body quaking “...is doing is securing me the bag for my advanced sommelier course.” He happily paws at his wad of bills. “This is exactly what I needed to pay for my SKA.”

She offers him a maternal smile. “That’s wonderful, Julien. Remind me what the SKA is again?”

Julien’s never annoyed when Aunt Augustine has to ask for clarification around sommelier jargon. Unlike Uncle Martin, she listens the first time he mentions something and simply gets bogged down in restaurant business, losing the information in a jumble. Uncle Martin doesn’t listen, period. But no parent figures can ever be perfect.

“It’s the Sommelier Knowledge Assessment. It decides whether my application will move forward for one of the two hundred seats in the class,” he says. For a moment, he realizes how wrapped up he’s been in his sex-tracurricular activities with Greg and how he hasn’t been dedicating as much time to studying. He needs to get back to that.

“Two hundred isn’t many,” she says unhelpfully. “I was already so proud of you for becoming certified. Are you sure you wouldn’t want to take more time before you move up?”

He shakes his head. “No, it’s now or never. I have momentum. I need to keep it.” There are cogs in his chest that turn at various speeds. The one dedicated solely to his sommelier training is never not at a full sprint. Winding and winding. He’s not going to crap out on this. Becoming a sommelier is his ticket away from the memories, toward seeing the world. Visiting all the places he’s only read about in books or seen in photos on Instagram. The higher his status, the more desirable a hire he’ll be at a luxury tropical resort, or an urban Michelin-starred restaurant. Places that are inaccessible to him from where he currently stands.

“I understand, but slowing down for a second is okay. You’re young,” she says, sitting.

“But I’m an adult.”

“Yes, but even adults need breaks. I just mean I’m worried you’ll burn yourself out between work and studying and other things.” She seems about to mention Greg again, to insinuate something Julien wishes she wouldn’t.

It’s sex! It’s great sex! But it’s not a relationship or marriage or a mortgage or whatever else. His primary love is wine, and his major passion is becoming a sommelier. He’s not letting her opinion or the restaurant or a guy stand in the way of the eventual one-hundred-and-twenty-grand-a-year salary he could have once he becomes a master. And he will become a master. He doesn’t care that the odds are not exactly in his favor.

As if Greg also knew Aunt Augustine had intentions to say his name, he appears in the doorway, knocking. “Hey. Sorry to interrupt. Julien, did you, uh, still want that ride home?”

Julien feels the blush come on immediately. “Yeah. Thanks.”

Greg nods, keys jangling in his fist. “Okay. No rush. I’ll be outside whenever you’re ready.”

Julien waits until Greg’s footfalls dwindle to look at Aunt Augustine again. She’s grinning, but not saying anything. He’s not sure how he feels about that. “I’m fine,” he says finally. “Thank you for caring and for looking out for me, but I promise. I’ve juggled more plates than this before, and I haven’t dropped one yet.”

“Okay. All’s I’m saying is, it wouldn’t hurt if you swap a few of those fine pieces of china out for paper plates,” she says. “Lighten your load.”

He bobbles his head noncommittally. “I’ll think about it. Hope you have a good night.”

“I’d say the same to you,” Aunt Augustine calls after him. “But I’m more than certain you will!”

GREG

Greg expected Julien would be uber competitive, yet he's still tickled by the way Julien lines up his petite putter behind the lime-green ball, one eye closed and tongue sticking out just a tad from the left corner of his mouth. Deadly serious. Julien clearly has no idea he's holding up the entire staff of Martin's Place, who shift around behind them impatiently waiting for their turns at glow-in-the-dark indoor mini golf.

Greg has noticed that Julien will disappear into a task or sensation with such tunnel vision that it's not until he appears out the other end of it that he realizes he's been gone from the plane of existence other human beings live on.

Greg loves it. Secretly. He loves the way Julien can tune into something so ardently. He has even come to love the nights where—after sex—Julien will completely ignore him at the kitchen table of his apartment, enraptured by his studies for the SKA, which Greg is almost certain he aced last week, though Julien is tight-lipped and modest about it.

Now, Greg admires Julien's ass in his fitted gray chinos as he lightly swings back. The ball goes sailing down the green, over a hill, under a windmill, and misses the hole by a small margin before coming to a stop.

"Impressive," Greg says.

"More like endless," Braydon says with an extra helping of his usual sass. "Out of the way slowpokes, mama is going to show you how it's done."

Mama does not, in fact, show anyone anything other than sheer overconfidence. His red ball lands in the sand trap.

Greg doesn't understand why Martin and Augustine insisted they come here—"staff bonding" was their official statement—or why they're all playing in one large group. It takes ages for everyone to take their turns. The parents of the family of four behind them in the course are trying desperately to entertain their children who seem set on climbing on every fixture with a DO NOT CLIMB sign. They either can't read yet, or they genuinely don't care.

On Julien's second turn, he knocks the ball in, scoring two points for the round. He's winning to no one's surprise and everyone's chagrin. Everyone except Greg, that is.

"I didn't know you were some sort of mini golf savant."

Julien laughs at that. "We did a lot of outings like this when Aunt Augustine and Uncle Martin got custody of me. I think it was their way of distracting me from all the life changes. I didn't make friends easily, so this was a good way to pass the time. Sometimes they didn't even play. I'd putt against myself."

"That's incredibly cute," Greg says before realizing how that sounds and who all is standing around them. This has been happening often over the past few weeks. He will slip up—say something un-fuck-buddy-esque—and Julien will blush, and they will both pretend that whatever is happening between them is still firmly about sex.

And it is. For the most part. It's been two months, and Julien still hasn't even kissed him. Not even the night when Greg strip-quizzed Julien for his SKA. Every right answer meant Greg took off a single article of clothing. Let's just say Julien had never performed so well before in a study session.

"What about you? What did young Greg get up to?" Julien asks as the rest of the staff

finish their turns at hole number seventeen. They've been at this awhile.

"I went off to boarding school at around thirteen. Everything was structured and STEM-based, which I disliked. My brain isn't wired for that," Greg says. "I didn't fit in with my classmates, but luckily we had clubs. The first club I found my footing in was an outreach club where we went to local senior living facilities and got paired up with buddies. My buddy's name was Chet, and he had served, but he wasn't one of those fanatics or anything. He was down-to-earth and honest and taught me to play backgammon. He's the first out gay person I really connected with. He inspired me to join the not-very-well attended GSA at my academy."

"Surprised they even had one there," Julien says, not judgmentally.

"I know. Me, too. But I guess they were trying to keep up with the times or something." Greg pauses momentarily as a kid holding a hot dog in one hand and a bun in the other runs between them, his mother rushing after, shouting nonsense. "Gosh, I really don't usually talk about the academy with anyone."

"Why's that?"

"People either don't understand or don't care."

"I care," Julien says plainly, which makes Greg's heart balloon inside his chest. "So you didn't stick with it?"

Greg shakes his head. "That was never my plan. My dad wasn't happy. My mom took on my dad's emotions without question. I graduated, cut them off, and started fresh." He still thinks about his parents from time to time, wonders what they say about him when they're asked if they have children.

He calls his mom once a year on her birthday. She usually sends a card on his. His

dad never reaches out. He's mostly made peace with that arrangement. He wishes, against all logic, that families were like cocktails, always made of complementary ingredients. His family felt more like a whatever-is-around kind of concoction that leaves a sour, filmy taste in your mouth. Impossible to swallow.

"That must've been difficult," Julien says. Their stories might not be the same, but their wounds probably feel similar. To have parents who can't play their roles in your life.

"It was, but it gave me the motivation to make something of myself." Being a TikToker isn't exactly making something of himself in Greg's mind, but it netted him money, a following, and this new position at Martin's Place. "I moved to New York and didn't look back."

Though, if Greg is being honest, which he mostly is, life in the Lehigh Valley has slowed down his pace quite a bit—his video output, his social life. He's been reflecting more. In quiet moments, he wonders about the other paths his life could've taken, the other relationships he possibly could've had.

"Why did you leave New York aside from Martin's offer?" Julien asks, and Greg hears it, but conveniently, the staff finishes hole seventeen, and everyone gets their game faces on for their final swings.

By the time they're all convening in the small party room Martin and Augustine booked them for lunch, Julien has forgotten all about his question, which is a major relief. Greg is willing to share about his sex life, his anxiety, his time at the academy, but something about telling Julien about his debt makes him itchy all over.

Credit card debt isn't like student debt. He didn't learn anything for the burden. Instead, he bought bottle service and booked five-star hotel rooms and acted like a total ass who didn't think to save a cent. With Julien, Greg wants to be seen as calmer

and more settled.

Which is why after the pizza slices are passed around and paper cups are filled inexplicably with champagne, Greg's mood rises ever more steadily.

"I know we've been skipping the staff outings in December for the past few years because money has been tight," Augustine says, standing at the front of the small room with dark walls and funky carpeting. "But we wanted to treat you all because we've gotten some exceptional news."

"That's right," Martin adds. "Last week, I got a call from an editor over at a prominent Lehigh Valley publication letting us know that Martin's Place has not only secured a spot on the year-end best restaurants list..." cheers ring out in the room "...but we've also landed the number one spot in another category. Julien, Greg, would you mind coming up here?"

Greg walks behind Julien to the front of the room. When Julien turns to face forward, their eyes meet. They both crack smiles. They know what's coming, and they're a pair of kids on their way to Disney World for the first time.

"After only a couple months, thanks to these two fine gentlemen," Augustine announces, "Martin's Place is the number one happy hour spot in the Lehigh Valley!"

Greg barely hears the uproar. He's too busy soaking this in. Number one happy hour spot means financial security for Martin's Place. It also means job security for him. He looks around at all the kind faces—his coworkers who have become friends, his bosses who have become like mentors, and the man standing next to him who has opened his eyes and body to so much.

Finally. This means I can make a home here.

JULIEN

Thank God. This is my ticket out of here.

Julien knows how greedy that sounds, but it's not like he's saying it out loud.

Martin's Place securing these small victories means an influx of patrons in Q1 of the following year. At the end of Q1—SKA results pending—he'll be flying out to Texas to take his advanced sommelier course. The following year, he'll sit the advanced sommelier exam. It's only a matter of time before a master must spread his wings and go out on his own.

Some of the guilt Julien has been harboring over wanting to leave the Lehigh Valley swirls down the drain. He doesn't need to feel dirty for wanting more than this. Wanting away from the place where his upbringing took a major detour. If business security comes of his work now, he can be free to leave later with very little resistance.

Snapping back to the moment, he soaks in the applause of his coworkers. Even Braydon is standing and clapping for them, and he's wholly unimpressed by everything.

Julien hugs his aunt and uncle, and then, very publicly, he hugs Greg.

Greg doesn't half-ass a hug. Every hug Greg gives is like that one outside Studio Artiste. It's fierce, warm, strong. Everything a good hug should be. Everything Julien has never had.

But he refuses to harp on that. Or the fact that their sex is mind-blowing or that their conversations are more revealing than their sex. He never really understood "pillow talk" until Greg. Now he could stay up until three in the morning, waiting for the

sheets in the dryer, sitting robed with Greg, talking about new cocktail recipes or the best wine regions of the world or movies they want to nostalgia-watch together.

“We did it,” Greg says, pulling away, bringing Julien back to earth. “No more worrying.”

“I know.” Julien sighs, relieved.

Greg’s right. No more worrying. He doesn’t need to worry about Martin’s Place. He doesn’t need to worry about his SKA, which he thinks he did well on but doesn’t want to jinx the results. And he definitely doesn’t need to worry about whatever is transpiring between him and Greg because they agreed to the terms of the pact. Nobody gets their feelings hurt when a contract is up, right? This is like that.

“So,” Uncle Martin says, clapping his hands together. “Let’s do a toast.”

Uncle Martin gives a speech that goes on too long (classic) and then lets the staff loose to either continue eating and drinking or play another round on them.

The rest of the staff turns their attention back to their pizza, but Greg must be too amped to eat. He chugs back his champagne, grabs Julien by the elbow, and says, “I want a rematch.”

“Are you a glutton for getting your ass handed to you or something?” Julien asks.

“Sounding mighty confident there, Julien Boire,” Greg says, so close their chests almost touch. “Sure you aren’t scared I’ll make a comeback?”

“Fine,” Julien relents. “But I’m bringing my pizza with me.”

They sneak away with smiles on their faces and playfulness in their hearts.

JULIEN

Martin's Place closes for the Christmas holidays, but Uncle Martin opens his home to anyone on staff who doesn't have a place to go or people to see.

Braydon goes back to New Jersey on his school's winter break. Chef Marco makes the trek to Maryland. Some of the bussers get a Christmas Eve poker game together every year, which they used to do in Uncle Martin's basement until one year they got too loud, a neighbor called the cops, and Uncle Martin decided it was probably best that his employees didn't gamble at his home, despite him being able to wipe the floor with them in a single round.

This left Greg.

Julien had gotten the text two nights earlier while he continued to refresh his email, waiting for his SKA results. He memorized which percentile he needed to be in to secure his spot, so the text was a welcome distraction from the mental turmoil of not knowing.

Would it be weird if I took Martin and Augustine up on their Christmas Eve offer?Greg asked.

Julien ate a SnoBall and thought this over. In any normal circumstance, it would be odd to have your friend-with-benefits crash your family Christmas, but Greg isn't Julien's friend-with-benefits to Aunt Augustine and Uncle Martin. He's their employee, their family friend, Julien's happy hour coconspirator.

Not at all, Julien replied. The more the merrier.

And it does, indeed, turn out to be quite merry.

A light snowfall begins right as Greg arrives. Flakes cling to his tan coat as he steps inside. He's brought with him the ingredients for Merry Little Christmas cosmopolitans—the extras are cranberry juice and clove. To die for. But the surprise of it is that Greg brought alcohol-free spirits.

“Yuck. What kind of Christmas guest are you?” Aunt Augustine says, eyebrows downcast. “Good thing we have some hard stuff of our own.”

“A, be nice to the poor guy! He knows Julien doesn't drink.” Uncle Martin shoots a comical glare at his excitable wife.

“Just because Julien doesn't drink doesn't mean we don't,” Aunt Augustine says, flipping up her hands. “What are we, chopped liver?”

“That's what we're going to have for dinner if you don't quit it with the kid,” Uncle Martin says. “Thank you for bringing these. We're happy to have them and you!” When Aunt Augustine has dipped into the garage in search of her own vodka, Uncle Martin adds, “Probably for the best. When that one gets wasted, she subjects us all to Christmas caroling. She honest-to-God thinks she can hit whistle notes like Mariah.”

“We had a cat named Olly who would go into hiding every Christmas Eve and not emerge until December 26 when he knew it was safe,” Julien says, remembering those first Christmases without his parents. Missing them while simultaneously being happy that there would be no volatile outbursts, no strangers showing up at the front door at weird hours. He could focus on gifts and cookies and heartwarming movies.

“He was a smart cat,” Uncle Martin says, going to check on the turkey in the oven.

Julien gives Greg a quick tour—dining room, living room, and he’s already seen the kitchen.

“Thank you,” Julien says when they’re safely away from his aunt and uncle. “For bringing the nonalcoholic stuff. That was really thoughtful.” He feels a blaze inside his chest. He writes it off as yuletide cheer.

“Oh, it was nothing,” Greg says. “It was for me, too, you know.”

Julien spots a wrapped present still tucked up underneath Greg’s wide, muscular arm. “Is that for them? I’ll stick it under the tree.”

Greg stumbles back. “It’s not. It’s for you.” His cheeks flame crimson.

“Oh.” That blaze in Julien’s chest has crept up onto his own face. Once he calms himself, he tells Greg he can still put it under the tree.

“I wish you wouldn’t,” Greg pleads. “It’s, uh, NSFW.”

Julien swallows his “oh.” He says, “We’re not at work.”

“Okay, then it’s NSFF. Not safe for family.”

Julien can’t help it. He bites his lip. “I have a similar sort of gift for you in my bag.”

When Julien had gotten Greg’s text, he figured it would be silly not to get him a little something. They had been working together and sleeping together for almost three months now. Julien had given his therapist a gift—a Target gift card and a glittery bath bomb. The least he could do was run to the sex shop and pick out something for Greg, which would ultimately be something for him, too, when he thought about where Greg would be using it.

“Hmm. I’m looking forward to unwrapping it tonight,” Greg says, slowly, decadently.

“I am...” Julien adopts Greg’s tone “...also looking forward to unwrapping something tonight, but it’s not this.” He waggles the present in the air—all crinkly paper and shiny tag—before turning to stuff it in his bag.

GREG

After the mocktails and the turkey and Augustine caroling her head off to Ms. Carey’s greatest hits, Martin parts the curtains. The streets are filled with snow. When they turn on the weather channel, the meteorologist is suggesting that residents of the Lehigh Valley stay home and enjoy their white Christmas at least until the roads can be cleared in the morning.

“Stay the night,” Martin says jovially, offering up the first-floor guest bedroom, which used to be Julien’s bedroom.

“I couldn’t impose like that.”

“It’s Christmas. Imposing isn’t a possibility,” Martin says.

“Ex-ha-hackly,” Augustine says, on the fun side of tipsy. She’ll be fine after some water and some sleep. Martin begins taking her up to bed.

“Are you sure?” Greg asks, looking more at Julien than anyone else.

Julien nods. “I’ll take the couch. It’s not a problem.”

“There. It’s all settled.” Martin reaches the stairs. “You two don’t stay up too late or Santa won’t come.”

Greg waits until Martin and Augustine are safely on the second floor of the house with their door shut before he laughs, low and rumbly. “You,” Greg says, “are the only man I’m concerned about coming tonight.”

“I got you something that I think might help with that.”

“Me, too.”

Julien brings his bag over to the couch. Under the glow of the rainbow Christmas tree lights, they exchange NSFF gifts. Julien insists that Greg goes first.

From the weight and shape in his hands, Greg has a pretty good guess what this is. When he opens it, he finds a flesh-colored hollow dildo. The exact same size and model as...

“Wait, open yours.”

Julien gasps when he sees that they accidentally bought each other the same thing.

Greg laughs quietly so as not to alert anyone upstairs. “But no harness...”

“Gah,” Julien cries softly. “After we talked last, I had this thought that you were going to get yourself a harness for the dildos we’ve already been using, so I figured this would be a good alternative.”

“And here I was thinking you might get me a harness?” Greg cringes. “I know that’s presumptuous, but I went to Cupid’s Arrow, and Paulie there said he’d seen ‘the wine guy’ the day before looking at the harnesses. Given your preference for bottoming, I just assumed. We really Gift of the Magi’ed this, huh?”

Julien shakes his head, disbelieving. “Not exactly how the story goes, but sure, yeah,

kinda.”

They sober, falling off their fitful laughter. Greg feels that familiar tug drawing him in toward Julien. “I was really hoping I was going to get to try this out tonight.” He wishes he didn’t sound so horny and so disappointed. “But we probably shouldn’t fool around in your uncle and aunt’s slash our bosses’ place.”

“The guest room—my old room—is down here. An entire floor in between. They won’t hear a thing.”

“Still.” Greg heaves a sigh. “No harness.”

Julien’s head bobbles, but then his eyebrows shoot up. “Hold on. I think I have an idea. Come with me.”

In the guest bedroom, Julien fishes a pair of high-cut briefs from his bag. He holds them up to Greg and sticks two of his fingers through the fly. “They’re going to be pretty tight on you given your waist size, but that’s what we need to hold it in place, right?”

Greg’s excitement mounts, getting fully on board with this half-formed plan. “Right.”

“Bathroom’s through there,” Julien says, pointing to a door beside the closet.

In the shower, Greg washes quickly but thoroughly, eager to return to the bedroom where he finds Julien wearing nothing but the bow from the top of his wrapped gift. It sits between Julien’s pale pink nipples in a show that is far goofier than Greg has come to expect, but he loves it. He loves it so damn much.

Right now, he realizes that his feelings for Julien didn’t come with a gift receipt. Would he want to send them back anyway?

At the foot of the bed, Greg finds the briefs, the unboxed dildo, and the wrapper from a sex toy cleaning wipe. He takes the pair of bright red briefs—very fitting for the holiday—and wiggles his way into them. Julien was right, it's a squeeze, but they hug him enough that it's not uncomfortable.

"They're old," Julien says. "You can rip the fly a little."

Greg, growing erect at the sight of Julien's beautiful, lean, naked body, tugs the fly down and rips a bit of the stitching before hauling out his thick cock, but he's not in any rush. No, he wants to savor this.

At Julien's right foot, Greg begins a trail of kisses that roves up his leg, across his groin, over his stomach, and all the way to his chest. He uses his teeth to remove the bow from this gift that keeps on giving—giving him comfort, laughs, orgasms. He feasts on Julien's neck as if he were a vampire out for blood, not caring if he leaves behind hickeys even if they are supposedly too old and too mature for them, but stops at his sharp jawline.

Greg is about to head back down when Julien surprises him by grabbing his chin. "Kiss me."

Greg tilts his head like a dog, certain he's misunderstood. "Where?" he asks.

"Here." Julien uses his free hand to trace his plump lower lip, which shines slightly, alluring in the lamplight.

"Are you sure?" Once they cross this boundary, there's no going back. The hollow dildo is one thing. The buildup to potential sex without it is another. But kissing teeters toward the intimate, toward feelings and sweet sentiments and dates and maybe more.

Greg would go there. He wants to go there. But Julien doesn't, right?

Julien nods. "I'm sure."

And it's a goddamn Christmas miracle as far as Greg is concerned. He dives in, letting their lips touch for the first time. A tender, beautiful kiss passes between them, so passionate and dizzying Greg is afraid he might faint from all the blood pumping away from his brain and down toward his dick. His erection grows stronger as Julien presses up and into his mouth with fervent desire that sizzles and crackles around them.

"Fuck me." Julien moans this quietly, so Greg tongues his hole hungrily to prepare him.

"Fuck me." Julien repeats it, so Greg slicks a finger with the nearby water-based lube and gently pries Julien open.

"Fuck...me." It's not a request this time but a demand, and Greg is thrilled to comply. He slides his dick inside the hollow dildo, adjusting the base of it so the fabric hole of the briefs is snug around it. There's wiggle, but it probably won't pop off. The final step is to roll the condom on.

"Are you ready, Julien?" Greg asks, knowing full well that using Julien's name during sex sends a visible shudder through him.

"So, so, so ready."

Adjusting for the position, Greg lines his extended, silicone shaft up to Julien's entrance, and ever so slowly, he sinks inside with ease. Even with two layers separating him from Julien, the pleasure that starbursts off Julien's expression is enough to make Greg feel like they have merged into a singular being. One heartbeat.

One rhythm. One incredible night ahead.

Carefully, he bends at the waist while plowing Julien, certain not to ruin the angle, and crashes their lips together once more. Julien tastes like nonalcoholic spirits and unfiltered paradise. Each kiss is more robust than the last.

Empowerment courses through Greg's veins. It's not the sense of dominance he missed about topping—he doesn't define the act as manly or masculine or any other such bullshit. Rather, he loves the blood-pumping, heart-racing, pleasure-inducing rock that takes him out of his head, into his body, and turns him into a sweaty heaving mess.

Damn, does he become a sweaty heaving mess. When Julien flips over so his face is buried in the towel they've laid out, Greg climbs on top and maneuvers his way back inside with a little more lube and a tad more patience. But once he's in, he's in.

Julien insists that Greg lie down, too.

"I'll crush you," Greg protests.

"You won't," Julien insists. "I'll like it. I want it. I promise. I promise."

It's right after that second promise that Greg relents, allows his bulkier, muscular body to sandwich Julien between his torso and the mattress.

"Yehh. Fughh." That's all Greg can make out because Julien's biting the edge of the towel, eyebrows converged in pleasure.

He's never felt more connected to Julien. This skin-to-skin sharing of weight sizzles like no other position has. It's thrilling. The roll of Greg's hips spurs grunt after grunt from Julien.

Gently, Greg wraps his strong arm around Julien's shoulders and embraces him as he sinks the dildo deeper and deeper.

"Do you like that?" Greg whispers into Julien's ear.

"Mherm."

Greg kisses that same ear. Then uses his tongue to wander over the shell of it. Julien convulses. It must tickle. But Greg can tell that he loves it because the mherms morph into open, bold ohs.

This isn't the "oh" of midconversation Julien where he's processing what the other person has said. Greg believes that this is the "oh" of a split-open Julien. A Julien so enraptured with sexual hunger—hunger for Greg, for this cock extension, for their closeness—that Greg wants to mold himself around him. He presses his weight down firmly as he kisses his ear again.

Julien turns his face in Greg's direction so they're eye to eye. Greg is struck by the desire overflowing from Julien's expression.

"You fuck me so good, Greg." Julien, who is usually pretty tight-lipped during sex aside from voicing his direct wants or limits, becomes a foulmouthed, lust-addled tyrant under Greg's weight—demanding deeper, harder, faster.

Greg follows orders until Julien croaks, "I can't take it anymore. I need to fucking come."

And as soon as he rolls over, he does spectacularly.

Greg watches in amazement as he unsheathes his own cock, pumps into his own fist, and adds his come to Julien's already impressive collection.

To Greg's surprise, Julien doesn't bolt up immediately. He doesn't register the mess splattered across his torso and run to the bathroom. Not that Greg has ever been offended by this. He knows Julien's mind by now.

"All good?" Greg asks, checking in.

"I..." Julien clears his throat "...feel like pudding."

"I fucked you that good, huh?" Greg asks, weirdly noticing pride tapping inside his chest.

Julien nods languidly. "But I really...really...really need to shower."

There it is. The urgency. Greg grabs the nearest towel and begins to wipe Julien up. "Let's start here," he says in a tone that he hopes conveys both gentleness and understanding. "And then...hup!" Without much effort at all, Greg hoists Julien off the bed, cradles him in his arms, and takes him into the bathroom where he deposits Julien in the shower, far enough away from the head so he isn't assaulted by the cold water that sputters out first.

Greg stands on the other side of the tub lip, admiring Julien's naked body. When his eyes land on Julien's face, he swears he sees gratitude, admiration, and...something he can't quite put his finger on. "You're a good guy, Greg Harlow," Julien says, one hand extended under the spray to check the temperature.

"Thank you." Greg surveys the shower situation as Julien begins to lather himself with the curtain still drawn back. The basin is lengthy. "Room for one more?" Greg asks, wanting to be clean again, too.

Julien surprises him again by nodding.

But the surprises don't end there because once Greg helps Julien change the sheets in the guest room, Julien admits something. "The couch out there is actually really uncomfortable."

"Got it. I can take it," Greg offers. "I can fall asleep just about anywhere."

Julien shakes his head. "Nobody should be subjected to that. Especially not on Christmas."

It dawns on Greg what Julien is hinting at. "Do you want to share this bed?" Greg asks. It's a full, so it'll be tight. Julien's body is slender enough that they'll fit, though.

"Are you sure you don't mind?" Julien responds. Greg knows it's a genuine question, but he also saw the way Julien perked up when he asked it. It was adorable. How could he possibly say no?

"Do you have a preference of side?"

It's not until they're both settled under the sheets—Julien on the right and Greg on the left—with the lights turned out that Julien speaks again. "Christmases have always been kind of hard for me."

"Without your parents, you mean?"

Julien is presumably nodding in the dark, judging by the rustling of his cotton pillowcase. "They'd send me a card every Christmas. Martin and Augustine would open it and read it to me. I'm sure they thought it was nice, but instead it always reminded me that they were out there existing without me. For most of the year, except at school when kids would sometimes tease me for not having 'real parents,' I'd kind of forget that Augustine wasn't my mom and Martin wasn't my dad."

“That makes sense.”

“But it’s always at this time of the year that I wonder how different my life would’ve been had they gotten clean and raised me.”

While Greg relates to growing up with absent parents, his parents were only emotionally absent. There’s a big difference. “Tell me what you wonder about.”

Julien stirs before saying, “I wonder if I’d be close with Martin and Augustine at all. I wonder if I’d have found my way to wine training and being a sommelier, which also just opens up a whole bottle of worry.”

“Worry...about?”

“About if I’d have ended up like them,” Julien confesses. “I worry that I’m genetically predisposed to addiction. That I’d have lost control of my life the same way they lost control of theirs. I’ve been so disciplined because I can’t bear the thought of spending all these years away from them and somehow turning into them anyway. You know that old theory that no matter how hard we try, we always turn into our parents?”

“I don’t believe that bullshit,” Greg says, though it comes out too harshly. “Sorry, what I mean is, if that were true, I think I’d be stationed in a uniform somewhere living a regimented life. I’d be brushing my mental health under the rug for the sake of other people’s feelings and expectations. Did you know anxiety is a disqualifying condition for the military? I was having these mental health issues nobody was taking seriously because they diverted from the path laid out for me. As if I asked for an anxiety disorder. This time of year was always hard for me, too, because...” Greg swipes a hand across his face only to realize his eyes are rimming with tears.

“You okay?” Julien asks.

Greg hadn't realized he stopped speaking. "Yeah, um, are there any tissues over there?" There was a time when his tears were jeered at and his emotions were chalked up to dramatics.

Julien passes Greg a box in the darkness, then he scoots closer and places a comforting hand on Greg's upper arm over the sheets and blankets.

"Thanks." Then Greg does what Julien does, allows himself to wonder for a second. Wonder what his home life might have been like had he not been sent to the academy. But he was, and for that matter he's not sure he could even claim the word home in home life if he tried to.

"I spent most of my year at the academy," Greg continues when Julien stays silent but lets on that he's still actively listening by stroking the outside of Greg's arm gingerly. "I always felt out of place there. Then for the holidays, I'd go back to my house, but I felt out of place there, too. I tried. I did. I really, really tried to make both work, but I couldn't, which meant my holidays were tense and awkward and full of silent meals unless we were with our extended family."

Julien scoots closer once more, enough so that Greg senses the heat of his body, feels the brush of his foot against his calf. "I'm sorry you went through that." The sincerity of Julien's apology for something he wasn't even a part of makes Greg's tears flow anew. He grabs another tissue from the box.

"That's all right. I'm thankful I was able to break away from it all and get the help I needed," Greg says between sniffles. He's not ashamed he's crying. It doesn't make him less of a man or cowardly. It makes him tapped in, connected to himself. He's being honest, vulnerable. Perhaps more vulnerable than he should be with a man he just fucked silly with a strap-on, but hey, Julien doesn't seem put off in the least. "Tonight was the first Christmas Eve in a while where I felt fully myself and...wanted for that."

Wanted in more ways than one, Greg decides, sinking into the mattress where he connected with Julien on such a deep, carnal level he could get hard just thinking about it again if he weren't so stuck in his feels.

“What about in New York?” Julien asks.

Greg's gut seizes at the question. He convinced himself that he fit in there, that things were different, but his hindsight has sharpened significantly since being at Martin's Place. His time in New York was clouded by clicks, view counts, followers, and people whose care was largely conditional. Was it really all that different than what he'd gone through previously?

“New York was...” Greg stops himself. Nobody here knows the real reason he fled the island of Manhattan, and he questions whether they'll ever need to. He's been paying down his debt, albeit slowly. But that's still a vast improvement over accruing more and more like he was.

Yet patient, understanding Julien, above all people, deserves to know the truth.

“It was a fever dream,” Greg admits. “The only way I know any of it was real is because I'm still paying for it.”

“Emotionally?” Julien asks, concern wispings between them.

“Literally.” Greg sighs heavily. “There was a time where I was spending money faster than it was coming in, and I haven't financially recovered from that quite yet. The move here was largely because I couldn't afford my old life anymore.”

Julien strokes his arm with such care, then lets out a yawn. Greg feels that in his bones, the weight of sleep creeping up on him now that he's confessed such a crucial part of his present.

“Well, thank you for sharing that with me,” Julien says at the tail end of a second yawn. “And I’m more than glad I could help you have a good holiday for a change.”

“Me, too,” Greg says, letting the words hang in the air like clouds of magical dust. He nestles back down into the blankets, adjusts his head on the pillow, and focuses on his breathing which has slowed to a comfortable rise and fall. “I think I’d like to get some sleep.”

No answer ever comes because Julien has drifted off while Greg smiled to himself and got situated. He reaches for his phone on the bedside table and notices it’s past midnight.

“Merry Christmas, Julien Boire,” Greg whispers so as not to wake him before turning off his alarm and slipping into dreamland.

JULIEN

Uncle Martin decides that the number one happy hour spot in the Lehigh Valley should host its own New Year's Eve party: Pop Off for the New Year. Julien cringes at the name, but Uncle Martin seems proud that he's up-to-date with the TikTok lingo, so Julien doesn't dare question it.

Besides, they're sold out. All seventy tickets went quickly. Eighty dollars (pretax and tip) gets entrants all-you-can drink party punch and house wine. Mixing not encouraged for the sanctity and cleanliness of their toilets.

Mixing, however, is exactly what Rufus is doing, back behind the DJ booth once again as he spins records, playing some sort of Mariah Carey cover/remix of "Auld Lang Syne" that Aunt Augustine requested.

Julien has escaped the crowd for a moment, grabbing a glass of water on the quiet side of the bar. Only one person is sitting down here—a brown-skinned woman wearing a dress that makes her look like a chic disco ball. She looks up from her phone, and they lock eyes. Her expression says she knows him, but Julien swears he's never seen this woman before.

"You must be the mysterious Julien," she says with the air of a femme fatale in a film noir.

Julien sips his water. "I'm guessing you've seen the TikToks?" He's getting better at this social interaction thing. The more time he spends around Greg, the easier small talk gets. He had to work tooth-and-nail to pass the service portion of his first

sommelier exam. Tableside manner doesn't come naturally to him, the same way bedside manner doesn't come naturally to most doctors. Not that wine is anything like open-heart surgery, but in another life, he might've been deft enough to study medicine.

"I've done one better. I've seen the location where you've filmed the TikToks," the woman says.

"Oh."

"The green screen, I mean. I'm Jessica. Rufus is my boyfriend."

Julien understands at once and meets her extended hand. "Oh. Hi. I've heard a lot about you."

"Like. Wise." Why does she break up the word like that? He can't imagine it's for any good reason. "Greg barely shuts up about you." Her brown eyes flick toward where Greg is refilling the party punch and chatting up a college girl wearing a red flannel and light-wash jeans.

"All good things, I hope." Julien hadn't known Greg was talking him up at home. Since Christmas when Aunt Augustine pointedly noted that nobody had slept on the couch the night before, Julien has barely brought up Greg around Aunt Augustine and Uncle Martin for fear they might get the wrong idea. The wrong idea that might be the right idea if Julien were a different person at a different point in his life.

That's all his brain's confusing way of phrasing that he's beginning to develop meaningful feelings for Greg, but that seems unwise. Their sex is good, their conversation is better, but friendship-land is where their relationship should remain.

When Julien's SKA scores came in, they were competitive enough to obtain a spot in

the advanced course coming up in March in Texas, which means in a little over a year's time, he could be sitting the advanced examination. With that under his belt and that new pin on his lapel, he'll be hireable in a whole different echelon of establishments that could take him someplace new. Someplace far from the foreboding memories.

Someplace Greg won't be.

And that's all far away, and a million and one things could change over the course of a year. But as it stands, Julien has been wise to steer clear of romantic entanglements so that if the right opportunity arises, he can leave at a moment's notice. Aunt Augustine and Uncle Martin wouldn't be thrilled by that, but they love him too much to hold it against him.

Would Greg hold it against him?

Jessica calls Julien back to the moment. "Excellent things. He's really impressed by you. Some might even say enamored."

He can tell that Jessica has dipped into the wine significantly. An empty glass sits in front of her. Perhaps she's saying more than she should be. "I don't think that's quite true."

"It's more than quite true. It's honest-to-God true." She smiles warmly at Julien. "I'm in school part-time getting my master's in psychology, and that guy is the textbook definition of crushing hard."

"I hope you're not paying too much for those textbooks. Think they might need some updating." Julien's surprised he can even make a joke right now. A confirmation of Greg's feelings from an outside party is both elating and alarming, causing his heart to thud.

“I guarantee he’s going to ask to kiss you at midnight.”

This is starting to sound very high school. Not that he really knows what high school romance is like because he self-selected out of it at every turn. Too many unknowns. Too many trappings for someone to uncover his OCD when they already hounded him about not having traditional parents. Whatever that was even supposed to mean.

Despite the childishness of it all, a flock of butterflies flaps inside Julien’s stomach. He’s never been kissed in a crowded room by a handsome man on New Year’s Eve before. Everyone else will be kissing, too. It’s not like anyone will be looking.

And ever since Christmas Eve, he’s been kissing Greg. Usually horizontally and one time completely upside down, Spider-Man-style—but a vertical, right-side-up kiss could be in the cards tonight. It didn’t need to be intrinsically complicated.

“Are you studying to be a psychologist or a psychic?” Julien asks, discovering that he likes Jessica. He doesn’t like many people right off the bat, but he likes her, and their easy banter reminds him that friendship doesn’t always have to be so laborious.

“I’m multifaceted,” she says, flipping her long hair over her right shoulder. “By day I sling burritos, and by night I memorize the functions of the brain. Nowhere in my textbooks does it say being psychic isn’t possible.”

“Seriously, where is your school getting these books?”

“It’s a liberal arts college!”

They share a good laugh just as Greg materializes beside them. “What are you two cackling about?”

Greg looks exceptionally good tonight. He’s wearing this midnight blue button-down

with the top couple buttons undone, giving a free peek at his well-groomed chest hair. He smells fresh and clean, but Julien notices he isn't wearing any of the signature aftershave he's seen on Greg's bathroom counter. He has mentioned that some scents trigger his OCD; that's probably why Greg has stopped using it, which may just be a piece of evidence in Jessica's case.

"You had to be there," Jessica says. "The countdown is coming up soon. As the DJ's number one groupie, it's time to take my place up there beside him. See you guys later." She dips into the crowd that's partying the night away beneath dim lights.

Julien's heart grows louder than the music.

GREG

Greg's hands are slick with nerves.

Kissing Julien while they fuck is one thing. Kissing Julien in their place of employment is another. Julien said there were no rules in Martin's Place about employees dating other employees. He can at least rest easy that he's not going to be fired for entertaining such a fantasy, but still.

He accepts the glass of chilled water Julien hands him, and it nearly slips right out of his grasp. Thankfully, he catches it before it hits the floor, only spilling slightly, which he cleans up right away, so nobody falls.

"Everything okay?" Julien asks. There's an unnatural note to Julien's question, a crack Greg has never heard before. Is this what Julien sounds like when he's nervous? Why would he be nervous? Maybe Jessica said something. She's not the best with secrets, which raises a major red flag when it comes to her patient confidentiality once she becomes a psychologist.

“Of course. Everything is fantastic.” Greg busies his mouth by sipping his water, glancing out at the crowd. He hates that he’s lying. Well, not lying, but stretching the truth. Nothing is fantastic right now, but it will be if he gets the midnight kiss he’s been craving, going on about.

Poor Rufus probably wasn’t expecting such a lovesick roommate. In truth, Greg wasn’t expecting this himself. The burns Stryker left behind still stung when he arrived in Allentown. Falling for the curmudgeonly king of wine wasn’t on Greg’s agenda, and yet...

And yet he has. And yet Julien isn’t so curmudgeonly after all. And yet Julien is standing in front of him, wearing a formfitting turtleneck, holding an empty water glass, waiting for Greg to say something, only Greg has completely missed the question.

“I’m sorry. Did you say something?” A light line of sweat arises on the nape of Greg’s neck. The restaurant is swarmed with bodies, and the heat is on. Good thing he thought to wear an undershirt beneath this thin stretchy button-down, otherwise he’d be stain-central.

Julien furrows his brow. “Really, what’s going on with you?”

“Would you like to dance?” Greg asks, deflecting. If he can just get Julien out on the dance floor, if he can get his body moving and out of his head, maybe he can make this happen for them both.

Julien scratches his neck. “I don’t really dance.”

“Don’t or won’t?” Greg asks because he needs this. Desperately. He needs a moment of movement, of release, to shed the worry rising inside his gut over whether to go through with this, even though he wants to. He so, so wants to.

“Can’t,” Julien corrects himself. “I don’t have an ear for this kind of music or a body that responds very well.”

“Counter—your body is quite responsive,” Greg says, overriding his nerves with sultry jokes.

Julien flushes. Even in the half light, it’s obvious. “Different context.”

“Guess I’ve never asked,” Greg says. “What kind of music do you like?”

“Classical, mostly.”

“Who’s your favorite composer?”

Julien’s thinking face is beyond adorable—eyes shifted up and to the left, mouth a tight pull. “Tchaikovsky.”

Greg soaks that in, nodding with approval even though he wouldn’t know Tchaikovsky from Mozart from Stravinsky. “Okay. Be right back.”

“Where are you going?”

“I know the DJ, remember?” Greg doesn’t wait for Julien to protest. He beelines for Rufus.

Jessica bops her head behind him, eyes closed, mouthing the lyrics to a Cardi B song. Rufus releases one ear from the padded prisons of his overly large headphones when Greg taps him on the shoulder.

“This is incredible!” Rufus cheers. He’s all shimmery from the glittery makeup Jessica put on him so he matched her dress. It looked great in the photos they took

earlier. It looks even better in person. “Thanks for this! I’m having a blast.”

“So is everyone else!” Greg shouts over the tunes, gesturing at the crowd that is awash with smiles. “Hey, listen, do you have anything classical on there? Tchaikovsky, maybe?” He knows it’s a long shot, but for Julien he’d walk across hot coals. For a perfect moment, he’d step barefoot on broken glass.

It’s funny, this feeling he’s experiencing. It’s like he’s drunk but he’s not. He knows he’s not. He’s been hawking drinks all night, of course, but he’s not been drinking the drinks. It’s so different from New York. Back there, on New Year’s Eve of all nights, he’d be boozy, sweating his ass off, spending more than he could possibly ever earn while trying to impress people. Here, he’s enjoying providing the experience—a safe and fun one—to this community of people rather than swiping himself into oblivion.

“I’ve got one track that might work, though I’m not sure it’s what you’re looking for.” Rufus fiddles with the trackpad on his laptop while shrugging a bit.

“Is it Tchaikovsky?”

“It is.” Rufus taps a few keys.

“Then it’s what I’m looking for!” Greg declares. “Thank you. A million times, thank you.” He departs right as the songs begin to transition.

Greg has just enough time to sweep Julien out from behind the bar and onto the makeshift dance floor. He has no frame of reference for this long-dead composer who sounds like a fancy, secret-menu coffee drink, but he’s certain the mood has shifted when the requested track comes on.

Julien, not yet moving beyond a very tepid step touch, scrunches up his face. “Is this a dubstep remix of... ‘Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy’?” The scrunching morphs into a

stupefied smile. The twinkling notes mix with a surging, industrial whirr that grates.

“Maybe?” Greg says with his palms up to the ceiling.

Then the beat drops, and the techno kicks in, and the crowd is jumping, and the lights are going haywire. Greg’s heart is going haywire, too.

“This is an abomination of music,” Julien insists. His stuck-smile belies what he’s saying.

“But you’ll dance to it?” Greg asks, flashing a grin that has never once lost him his way.

Julien bites his lip.

God, Greg wishes his lip was the one between those pretty teeth.

Julien eventually nods. “I’ll dance to it.”

After asking if it’s all right, Greg places his hands on Julien’s waist, using his palm to twist his slender frame side to side. Julien’s hands find their way onto Greg’s shoulders, so warm they sear through the fabric of both of his shirts.

He likes the way Julien’s body possesses a fire other people can’t see. The nights they’ve spent together—not just the ones where they’ve had sex, but the ones where they’ve had sleepovers since Christmas—Greg loved waking up in the middle of the night to a radiator beneath his sheets. Julien is a mostly motionless and soundless sleeper, so those lapping waves of heat were a sweet reminder that he wasn’t sleeping alone. That Julien was beside him, creating a second (hopefully permanent) indent in his mattress.

Together, they bounce and dip as this ridiculous holiday remix blares through the restaurant. Their eye contact never breaks, not even as their foreheads touch. As their chests press together. As the countdown begins.

“Okay, everybody, it’s almost that time. Grab a glass of something bubbly and grab your special someone,” Rufus declares into a microphone.

But Greg is already grabbing onto his someone special. And even though he’s too scared to say it with his voice, he says as much with his mouth. Right as the countdown ends, he kisses Julien in the middle of Martin’s Place, surrounded by friends, buoyed by cheers, and Julien kisses him back. Julien presses up and into him, and he swears he’s never felt a better sensation in his life.

For once, Greg’s resolutions couldn’t be clearer: make a home in the Lehigh Valley and make Julien Boire his.

JULIEN

A month later, Greg is the first person Julien tells that he was accepted into the advanced sommelier course. By the lockers, Greg wraps Julien in a hug that lifts him right off the ground. They spin around. How would Greg react if he told him he won the lottery? He grins at the thought of Greg's unabashed enthusiasm—how different it is from his own reactions, but how welcome.

On Valentine's Day, though Julien is firm in his conviction that this is not a date, Julien and Greg go back to Studio Artiste for another paint-and-sip (or swill, in his case) class. Greg does not do a better job of following the instructions when painting his flower arrangement. This time, Julien marvels at the free-spirited care Greg exudes, the artistic abandon he possesses that allows him to create a piece all his own when everyone else is following the instructions to a T.

When they pick up their paintings a few days later, Julien surprises himself and suggests they swap. A deep part of him wants to keep Greg's. It's more a memory of the special day than his own standard one. He likes the way Greg signed his name in hot pink in the bottom right-hand corner. Scribbly but so sweet.

"You sure?" Greg asks, inspecting his canvas which is giving hazy Monet more than lifelike Hopper.

"Only if you want to," Julien says, bashful.

It's not until he's hanging Greg's painting in his living room with a nail, on the wall where he hangs all his paint-and-sip creations, that he registers the full scope of his

feelings for Greg and wonders if all this quality time—the takeout and the painting and the fucking each other silly—is all a recipe for an expensive, explosive disaster. Like that time Chef Marco tried to add chicken liver (a Tuscan delicacy) to the menu.

The Thirsty Thursday before St. Patrick's Day comes complete with Midori cocktails that are so electric green they could practically be mistaken for oversize glow sticks in their tall slim glasses. Julien squints for a second and pretends they are a smattering of late summer fireflies speckling the night, but this is only a momentary distraction from the fact that on Sunday he'll be boarding a plane to Texas.

By Monday, he'll be ensconced in the wide world of wine and stewarding, brushing elbows with his fellow certified sommeliers, swilling some incredible wines and soaking in knowledge. It's not the airplane that has him on edge or the fear that he's not up for the challenge. Instead, he's coming to terms with the worry that this will be his first time away from Greg since he arrived at Martin's Place.

Julien prides himself on not being reliant on others. Too reliant, he means. Even as a child when he first came to live with Uncle Martin and Aunt Augustine, he tried to be as self-sufficient as possible by figuring out how to work the washer and dryer so his clothes weren't getting mixed in with theirs and how to fix his own lunches, so nobody else's hands were touching his food. Some of this was an effect of his undiagnosed OCD, but most of it was rooted in his fear that these parental figures were seconds away from splitting like his last.

Those feelings resurfaced when, post-orgasm wooziness still strong, Colin told Julien that he was moving to South Carolina to be closer to his parents and their friends-with-benefits arrangement would be ending.

"How soon are you going?" Julien had asked.

"Two weeks."

“That’s sudden.”

“It was inevitably going to happen.”

Those words ping-ponged around inside Julien’s head. What Colin said rang true in more ways than one. Colin’s parents retiring and moving south was inevitable, him following was inevitable, and so was Julien getting hurt after becoming too reliant on someone with a nice smile, a respect for his boundaries, and wondrous hands.

Julien is brought back to the bar when he narrowly misses the glass Greg is sliding over to him. “Bring this over to Augustine. She’s been begging for one all night.”

Julien doesn’t spare Greg a look as he fulfills the request on autopilot.

Aunt Augustine is not one to let a wandering glance go uncommented on. “Where are you right now, Julien?”

“Uh, here?” Julien gestures at the floor between their feet.

“Yeah, no duh. I meant where are you in here?” She gives his forehead a little nudge with the heel of her palm before sipping Greg’s cocktail. “Damn, he’s good. That’s fuckin’ tasty.” Seltzer, lemon juice, cherry, and... Julien can’t recall the other ingredients. He was too busy pining away over the veins that braided themselves along Greg’s forearms as he used a wooden spoon to stir. “Ah, I know that face.” Aunt Augustine has been emboldened by a single sip of Greg’s cocktail; Julien can tell. “You’re thinking about a guy, and that guy is Greg.”

“Actually, I’m thinking about how I get you less interested in my love life,” Julien says with mostly playful snark.

“Oh, it’s a love life now, is it?” Aunt Augustine sips, her eyes fixed on him over the

rim.

It's obvious she's reading too far into his word choice, except Julien's whole body flushes hot. It's been, what, six months since Greg arrived in the Lehigh Valley? Aside from those first few weeks of discomfort and avoidance, they've basically been inseparable. People have fallen in love in less time.

But also, love feels messy. Like a melted chocolate bar you forgot about in the glove compartment during the sizzle of July. He doesn't want love all over his hands. There aren't enough wet wipes in the world to rid him of that sticky, goopy stuff.

"I take it things have heated up since New Year's?" Aunt Augustine asks.

He resolutely does not love hearing his aunt use the phrase heated up unless it's about the food they serve here. "Things have been a normal temperature."

She exaggerates her frown. "You're so sparing with your feelings, Julien. You definitely don't take after me."

He prickles at this because he's observant. Hypervigilant, some might even say. Which means he's always been uniquely keyed into the differences between him and Aunt Augustine and Uncle Martin, constantly wondering which traits were embedded in his DNA and which he developed as he grew. Did his unusual circumstances make him the man he is today?

"It's not like we've made anything official. We're not together-together."

"Because...?"

"Because..." Julien can't come up with an answer. Over the last month or two, Greg may have been seeking to initiate that conversation, but every time he did, Julien

initiated sex instead, choosing to use his mouth for blowjobs instead of the exchange of feelings.

It is easier to make Greg come than to make Greg his boyfriend. Recently, Greg talked to his psychiatrist about his ED, which led to a supplementary prescription meant to combat that side effect, and with limited data, it seems to be working. Not that this was ever a problem to be fixed—their sex without it was equally fantastic—but Julien enjoys that Greg took this step, broached the difficult topic partially because of him. Partially, Julien chooses to believe, because his feelings are so all-consuming and intense that he wants to display them by being inside Julien without a barrier.

They've discussed it—the PrEP, the STI testing—and each time they do, this sexual boundary of Julien's is only deconstructing itself because he trusts Greg so effusively. Maybe that level of trust does mean that he is falling for Greg in a way that could lead to honest, real love.

"If you can't come up with an answer, I think it's because you're standing in your own way." Aunt Augustine has always been blunt with her advice. "Do you care about him? Do you see a future with him?"

It scares Julien, but he still says, "Yes, I do."

"Then go for it, Julien. You two are a dream team."

Julien remembers all the dreams he had as a puberty-stricken teen, how he sketched out his ideal relationship. The man in his imaginings was Mr. Potato Head—ed out of various traits and parts of guys he knew from school, and Greg magically fits that bill perfectly.

"You should tell him how you feel," Aunt Augustine suggests in a kind, quiet voice

when he is silent too long.

After a moment, he finds himself agreeing. But then he remembers his upcoming travels. “After my trip and my course.”

She raises a condescending eyebrow. “Are you sure that’s not just a convenient excuse to push it off?”

He shakes his head. “No, I just think if we’re going to start a relationship, we shouldn’t do it when I’m about to leave town. I need to have a clear head so I can focus on my studies. I sank a lot of money into this.”

“Fair enough. I raised a good student after all.” Julien beams under Augustine’s statement. “And besides, I know the old cliché to be true—absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

The two of them let that settle, and then Greg is calling the room to attention from behind the bar. He’s brought his iPhone tripod from home and has begun directing a TikTok. Julien can’t suppress his laugh as Greg teaches the crowd a dance to a song that’s a trending sound on the app.

Aunt Augustine chugs the rest of her drink. “Ain’t no way I’m missing out on this. Come on.”

Before Julien knows it, he’s up front with Greg waving his hands, popping his chest, and swaying his hips. Last year, he could never have imagined being this goofy and free with his coworkers and strangers, yet here he is. There’s an unadulterated pleasure in dancing beside Greg, with Greg, close to Greg. It’s like their sex—fluid, evolving, fun. He doesn’t want to dance ever again if he’s not dancing with Greg Harlow.

Eventually, Greg tells everyone they are camera ready. He sets the timer, stands in front, and they dance their little hearts out to an effervescent pop song.

GREG

Greg wakes up to hundreds of thousands of notifications from TikTok.

Three days ago, he posted the dancing video from their early St. Patrick's Day shindig—colorful bubbles bursting up with the ingredients for his Midori Shamrock Punch as the group pointed along—but like everything else he's posted since arriving in the Lehigh Valley, he assumed it would perform just okay. Maybe moderately okay if he was lucky.

Right now, his thumbs can hardly keep up with the speed at which new notifications are flooding the screen of his phone. At the peak of his "fame," he had his notifications turned off; he didn't like the relentless chiming in his pocket. But since leaving that and the city behind, he hasn't had reason to silence his phone. Now, he's elated to find he may need to again. (Of course, he'd set up special alerts for Julien and Martin. The latter, for work-related reasons. The former, for personal ones.)

The comments on TikTok roll in:

Where is this place?

This is soooooo cute. I wanna go!

Granted, there are some less kind comments and some sexually forward ones he chooses to ignore, but overall it seems like the reactions are largely positive, which lifts his already optimistic spirits. He sends the link in a text to Julien.

Julien: Oh God. I don't want me dancing to be the first thing I see in the morning.

Greg: You dancing is the ONLY thing I want to see in the morning.

The typing bubble pops on and off the screen for a few seconds. He wonders if Julien is blushing as hard as he hopes he is, fingers too flustered to type back.

Julien: I can't believe we have that many views.

Greg smiles at his phone and types, Me neither but it's incredible!!! We should celebrate before you leave.

He has been thinking a lot about Julien leaving the valley for a few days at the beginning of next week. Okay, maybe dreading is more like it. It's not that he doesn't want Julien to go and follow his passion, learn everything there is to know about wine and all the ways he can make people happy with it, it's just...

He wants Julien to be here...

Making him happy.

Which is beyond selfish, but he can't help it. He's melded to Julien in a way he didn't entirely expect, and he hasn't gotten the opportunity to talk to Julien about his New Year's resolution. The one about making Julien his—in a nonpossessive, sweet, respectful sort of way.

He knows it's been months and there have been moments, but they never felt like the right moment, and with Julien, Greg wants to do things right.

Greg's heart has begun doing the TikTok dance inside his chest; it's giddy with the thought of finally talking to Julien about what their future might look like. What their

present might look like, even.

Ever since the holidays, he has been confused about how to refer to Julien when he's talking to Rufus and Jessica. Of course, Rufus and Jessica refer to Julien as his lover, which never ceases to make him cringe. It's both old-timey and untrue. Julien is way more than someone he has sex with. Though the "love" part might be true.

Greg: Want to get dinner tonight? My treat

He finally has a little something extra in his checking account after making his credit card payments this month.

Julien: Can't. I'm on the schedule tonight.

Greg deflates a bit at that. Tries again.

Greg: How about lunch?

There's this cute brunch spot on Main Street he's been dying to try. Their IG feed is filled with mouthwatering pictures, and he has the urge to devour a chicken and waffle right now.

Julien: How about an afternoon delight instead?

Julien: And by afternoon, I do mean now.

Julien: Right now.

Pushy. Greg chuckles to himself at Julien's sauciness. He could devour Julien instead.

Over the last few weeks, Julien has been keen to fuck around whenever the conversation turns more intimate, but that's to be expected when you're still sort of, kind of in a sex pact. It's not like Julien's a mind reader.

Greg has also been chickenshit about bringing up his feelings, worrying that by wanting more with Julien he's doomed to repeat the mistakes of his past. Isn't that what happened in New York? He wanted more and only ended up with more debt and loneliness. He can't go back to that place, not when his negative balances are so close to evening out.

When he hits the bottom of the stairs, shoving on his shoes, Rufus appears from around the corner eating a banana, headphones on, head bobbing to an unheard beat. "Where are you off to this early?"

"I'm heading over to Julien's," Greg says, noticing his facial muscles curving up on their own. Whenever he says Julien's name, it's impossible not to smile.

"To film more TikToks?" Rufus pauses his music.

"Not...exactly." Greg isn't one for lies.

Rufus's right eyebrow pitches upward. "You two seriously need to get together already."

"I don't even know if he wants that," Greg says, bending down to fix his laces. They're mostly fine, but he needs a reason to dodge Rufus's eye contact. He's pretty sure Rufus would see him start to sweat with worry.

"Cuz, you two are obsessed with one another. Why wouldn't he want that?"

Because maybe Julien sees this as temporary. As only sex. As a means to an end. As

frivolous and fleeting. But Greg can't say any of those things, so he shrugs and then shrugs again, bigger this time for effect.

"You like him, right?" Rufus asks, sounding a bit like they're schoolboys out on the blacktop at recess.

Greg does feel juvenile. Not that these feelings aren't weighty or meaningful or thought through, but they remind him of first crushes and butterflies in your stomach, and God, he's got it bad.

"I do, but that doesn't mean we'd be good in a relationship." He liked Stryker once, too, and their relationship was a Tilt-A-Whirl, constantly throwing him off his balance, and by the end he couldn't stop throwing up. Literally. Before he packed up his car to hightail it out of New York City, he was sick no fewer than three times. Big life changes always made him queasy, kicked up his anxiety disorder.

"I worried about that with Jessica, too. I was afraid a label would ruin the spark of us having fun. But I learned that labels could make everything clearer and more comfortable. You know what you're gonna get."

Greg contemplates spirit bottles and how their labels show their brand name, their alcohol content, class, type, and designation. All that information is useful as a mixologist when coming up with a new cocktail. Without labels, he'd have to taste test everything; he'd be constantly drunk. What a nightmare that would be. Labels help him understand, utilize a spirit to its full effect. Maybe a label between him and Julien—even if it's just "dating"—would clarify their places in each other's lives.

"That makes sense," Greg says, mostly to himself. "I'll talk to Julien."

"Today?" Rufus asks. Greg doesn't fully understand why Rufus is pushing, but he likes having someone in his life that cares enough to be invested. "Jessica is dying for

a double date with you two.”

“Maybe one day,” Greg says. “Someday soon.” He holds up his crossed fingers.

They stand in silence while Rufus finishes off his banana. As Rufus moves to throw out the empty peel, he says, “Don’t you have a man waiting for you right now?”

“Oh, shit. Yeah. See ya. Have a good day!”

Greg bolts out the door, gets in the car, and sings along to his playlist the whole ride to Julien’s place, renewed in his mission to be open with Julien about these emotions he’s harboring.

He’s mid-belt of a Billy Joel song when his phone chimes with a notification. At first, he assumes it’s TikTok again, but when he pulls into the parking lot for Julien’s place, he notices it’s an email from an address he hasn’t seen in a while.

The message is an interview offer from one of the bougie bars he used to frequent with his Manhattan friends—the kind with velvet-roped VIP sections and celebrity DJs on rotation. The club cites his recent TikToks as the main reason they’re contacting him.

Last year, Greg would’ve done a bell kick if he got this news. What a perfect way to extend his brand, his reach, his influence. Now, he’s conflicted.

He’s sitting in his idling car outside of his friends-with-benefits-maybe-soon-boyfriend’s apartment in Pennsylvania, a place and a state he’s grown accustomed to.

In the back of his mind, a small voice pipes up and whispers how pricey that bar was, how much the clientele tipped on a busy night. He might be moving toward even ground with his debt, but he’s barely making the kind of money he wants to be. He

probably can't make that kind of money at Martin's Place ever, sadly.

He shuts up that small voice by reminding himself that insightful, diligent Julien is inside. Who better to ask about this than him? Maybe it'll be a good segue into sharing his feelings. Listing his wants for a relationship with Julien as a con for leaving, a strike against taking the interview.

Ignoring his head and leading with his heart (and a member farther south), Greg shuts off the car and heads inside.

When he arrives at Julien's door, he knocks but there's no answer. He tries the knob, and it's unlocked. He lets himself in, takes off his shoes, and follows the sound of running water to the bathroom.

Julien must still be showering, which is odd because Julien is usually sparklingly clean by the time he arrives. Then, he hears Julien's voice, "Come in."

Adjusting to the humidity and peering through the steam, he finds Julien naked and wet in the glass-walled shower.

"Join me," Julien demands.

Greg strips as fast as possible. Opening the door, he's greeted by the sight of Julien facing away, palms splayed on the white tile, a stream of water sluicing down the arch of Julien's back and disappearing between his two perky ass cheeks.

Greg has never been more aroused.

Greg has never been this hard.

Seriously. He looks down and he could hang a damp towel over this thing, and it

wouldn't dip a bit. The new medication he's been taking must be working a unique kind of magic. He's enchanted.

Questions, big conversations, and potential interviews fly out of Greg's head. His sole focus is on Julien's eager, pliable, accommodating body as he steps into the spray. Every cell inside him is vibrating on high. Gently, he runs his fingers along Julien's entrance, eliciting a light gasp.

Greg can tell he's already open, already lubed. Julien prepared and is ready for him. Greg feels the same.

They had the discussions. They both went and got tested recently, they are both taking PrEP, and neither of them are sleeping with other people. Their safety is assured, but Greg asks anyway in a throaty, needy whisper, "Do you want me inside you bare?"

He steps closer to Julien so his upward curved cock brushes the cleft of his ass. Julien shudders at this. Gulps loudly. Nods.

"I need to hear you say it." The verbal confirmation will help Greg relax and enjoy this the way he knows they both want to. Screw his jumbled feelings for now. Lust is writhing back into his lap, and he's grabbing it by the hips.

"Yes," Julien says, breathy. "Fuck me bare."

Greg could explode from the amount of desire ticking away inside him right now. After a brief exploration with his fingers and a trail of kisses up Julien's neck, stopping briefly at his earlobe to nibble the way Julien likes, Greg lines his erection up and very slowly enters Julien for the first time. Without a dildo. Without a barrier.

Overexcited, Greg stops once Julien has taken him to the base. Julien must know—of

course he does, Julien knows Greg so well—what Greg needs because he doesn't move an inch. He just holds there. And they breathe together. Chest to back. Greg's hands on Julien's pecs.

"Is it everything you imagined?" Julien asks, even though he must know the answer. He has to.

"Everything," Greg replies, sinking almost imperceptibly deeper into Julien. This is such a gift. Getting to do this with him. He wants to do this time and time again. "Absolutely..." Greg rolls his hips back "...everything."

And then—head empty, body alight—he bucks back inside.

JULIEN

It's Sunday, and Julien's panic packing.

Last month, he told himself he'd want to work Friday and Saturday night shifts before the trip, so he didn't get too much in his head about it like he normally does when it comes to the solid weight of his studies and how much this career field means to him. But that also meant making a list of things he needed to pack and then not having a moment to pack them.

Between laundry and trips to the store and fucking Greg (or more accurately, Greg fucking him), he'd left his rolling suitcase open at the foot of the bed but never actually put anything in it. He could blame work stress or the cloudy fog of feelings he's found himself navigating since the shower sex that made his knees give out in the most earth-shattering way possible.

This trip was already loaded enough without needing to be worried about what's on the other side of it. However, Julien promised Aunt Augustine (and himself, let's be honest) that he'd open up to Greg about his feelings when he returned. So now he's throwing pairs of slacks into his bag knowing they're going to be wrinkled as hell when he arrives and hoping the hotel has an iron, or at the very least a steamer.

Greg is going to be here to pick him up in less than twenty minutes, and Julien's barely touched his toiletries. He would text Greg and ask him to come sooner and help, but he is very particular about what stays and what comes with him. And he can't ask him to come later, because he's already texted Greg twice pushing back his arrival.

The Allentown airport is small and easy to navigate, but Julien still wants to be there two hours early. He'll need to buy hand sanitizer, wipes, and spearmint gum from the terminal before he boards. Not to mention he's in desperate need of a coffee. He would make his own before he goes, but the thought of dirtying a mug and leaving it in the sink for three days gives him hives.

Greg: On my way!

Never once has one of Greg's OMW texts spurred a negative reaction until now. Julien is flying through the apartment with cheetah-like speed making sure no box on his list goes unchecked.

With barely a second to spare, he stands on the sidewalk, overheated and panting in his airport sweats, as Greg pulls up. Treating Greg like an Uber driver, he rushes to the back and pops the trunk. Out of the corner of his eye, he spies Greg beginning to step out to help.

"I'm good! No time. Thank you, though." Julien is a fray of nerves.

That is until he's nestled in the passenger seat, seat belt snug against his chest, Greg's familiar, soft rock music filling the air, and his comforting, clean scent filling the cabin. Now that they're on course to their destination he can breathe again. Greg is like an inhaler. One hit of him, and Julien's able to respire without so much exertion.

"Anything I can do for you?" Greg asks.

Julien loves that Greg knows to ask this and frequently does. It's so much better than "are you okay?" Julien never knows how to answer that. "Anything I can do for you?" is concrete. Yes or no. Very accessible even if his mind is swimming in unsteady waters.

“Could you turn the air down a bit?” Julien asks, noticing the AC has sent a chill through him.

“Of course.”

They ride without speaking for a moment. Julien recognizes the singer coming through the speakers as Carly Simon. He’s just tuning into the music when Greg turns the volume down like he turned down the fan.

“Listen, I was hoping we could talk about something before you leave.”

Julien’s heart rate spikes. He glances at the GPS on the dashboard. They’re only fifteen minutes away. Is Greg about to spring the Define the Relationship talk on him right now while he’s trapped in a car and coming down off a spiral?

Julien imagines that blaring red stop sign in his head. Lets the panic pass.

He knows how he feels about Greg. He’s known for a while. Making it official now or in three days isn’t going to make a world of difference. Sure, Julien had been hoping for the absence-makes-fonder rule to take effect so he could be an untethered man at his course, his sole focus on the wine, but he knows himself. He knows that a part of his heart is going to chip off and stay in this car after he departs. Why not reach in, tear out the whole thing, and give it to Greg now?

“Okay,” Julien says, calming down enough to listen.

“I...” Julien braces for the sweet impact of Greg’s confession “...I got a job interview.”

Julien hears a record scratching inside his head. “Huh?”

“A different bar reached out to me about interviewing for an open position.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah...” Greg is kind enough to give Julien the minutes he needs to process, but not kind enough, clearly, to have brought this up when they weren’t imminently approaching the busy departure lane at the airport where Julien will need to get out quickly so he can get through security and Greg won’t get a ticket.

“It makes sense,” Julien says, throat suddenly very dry. “I mean, with the TikToks and the Best Of list. Does my uncle know?”

“Not yet.”

“Is it a competing place?” Julien can think of at least two spots within a thirty-minute drive with owners who aren’t above poaching staff to get ahead.

“No, not really.” Greg’s voice cracks a bit, which upticks Julien’s worry.

“Is it more of a club then?” Julien could imagine Greg being good in a proper party setting. His smile glowing in the black lights. Obviously he doesn’t want him leaving Martin’s Place, but some professional distance wouldn’t be all bad. Besides, he’s about to leave to take a course that’s supposed to help him get out of here. Who is he to play roadblock in Greg’s upward trajectory to success?

“It’s still a bar-and-restaurant sort of place,” Greg says. “It looks like they’re starting at a better rate, though, which would be good for me.”

“Got it.”

“And the location would mean I’d probably get better tips...”

“Where is it?”

After a beat: “New York.”

Julien has never said a more loaded “oh” in his life.

He could probably handle Greg living where he lives now while working a few towns over, but moving back to New York is out of the question. He thought Greg didn’t even like it there. Maybe he misunderstood.

“It’s just an interview,” Greg is quick to clarify. “I could not even get the job.”

“So you’re taking the interview?” Julien registers how defensive he sounds.

Greg stammers for a second. “I wanted to talk to you about it first, but these past few days, the moment never really seemed right, and they asked for an answer by this morning. I knew you were swamped, and I didn’t want to do this over the phone.”

“Do what?” Julien asks sharply. Where is this edge in his voice coming from? He’s not even trying to fight it off.

Greg looks over sheepishly. “Ask you if I should take it.” Julien remains silent, and Greg adds, “Again, it’s just a general interview. I might not even get it.”

“You’ll get it,” Julien says, right as he spots the signage for the airport turnoff and a plane goes soaring overhead with a whooz.

Earlier today, he was battling with himself over a strange disinterest in going to Texas. Part of him wanted to stay here in the comfortable sex cocoon he’s built with Greg, afraid it might dematerialize in the time that he’s gone; he’d return to only the cracked remnants of a previously airtight chrysalis.

Maybe that's what he's been missing. Greg was undergoing a metamorphosis here, taking his time to respawn so he could return to New York City with stronger, more colorful wings. That makes sense. Even if it hurts in unimaginable ways.

"You don't know that for sure," Greg says somberly as he pulls up to the departure lane by Julien's terminal.

This is like Colin all over again. Everybody but Julien has a lot in life that allows them to go, be, chase elsewhere.

Julien is here. Always here. Always left behind.

He was caught off guard when Colin announced he was moving. He might as well get the brunt of the hurt out of the way now. Accept that Greg is going, and that's that. Pain now means less pain later.

Julien's hand is on the door handle, but Greg still has it locked. "You're good at what you do, Greg. They wouldn't have reached out to you if they didn't want you. The interview is almost definitely a formality." There goes his tongue, refusing to be held. "And besides, why wouldn't you want to go? We made the Best Of list. Business has picked up exponentially. It's not like we really need you anymore."

Greg nods slowly, sits back in his seat, unlocks the door. "Right, yeah. That's true."

"Like you said, better pay, better tips. You only came out here to get out of debt, which this will help you do. That's great. I'm glad you're going." Julien hates how the lie feels, and to avoid sitting with that, he gets out and grabs his bag from the back. Through the open window, he calls forlornly, "Thanks for the ride. Good luck with your interview. I'll, uh, see you when I'm back."

It takes everything in Julien not to glance back over his shoulder, watch Greg drive

off for maybe the last time, and start crying. Too bad that when he's paying for his hand sanitizer and gum at the tiny market, he ends up crying anyway, much to the checkout girl's visible discomfort.

GREG

It's not like we really need you anymore.

That's what Julien said, but what Greg heard was: It's not like I really need you anymore.

On the drive to Manhattan, cruising down 78 at a sensible sixty-seven, Greg couldn't even bring himself to put on his playlist. All he could do was replay that conversation over again in his head. A TikTok stuck on perpetual loop, no scrolling away possible.

It sucks knowing that Julien's feelings have not advanced past the sex pact. He thought the holidays, the paint-and-sips, and the bareback sex solidified something substantial between them beyond shared orgasms and happy hours, but he had been wrong. Again. He had thought his connection with Stryker was substantial, too. ED and maxed-out credit cards had blown that to smithereens.

Hours later, when the New York City skyline appears as he's approaching the busy Lincoln Tunnel, he tries to hack back into that optimism he saved in a special folder in his mind when he arrived in the Lehigh Valley, the kind that he slowly started putting in the trash can the more he got to know Julien.

Not that Julien had made him pessimistic or grumpy, but Julien, among other things, showed Greg that feeling his hard feelings wasn't going to plunge his life into total darkness. Being chipper all the time and the life of the party had already done that.

But luckily, there's still some leftover, ready to be downloaded like Greg's favorite

songs on Spotify. Inspired, he uses voice commands to queue up an upbeat playlist and cruises into Manhattan, determined to leave his heartbreak on the New Jersey side of the tunnel.

He mostly succeeds because he's too busy trying to reorient himself to the grid work and the noise of New York City. It hasn't even been that long and he didn't even move that far, but somehow it feels like he's traveled to a foreign country. He half expects the person selling hot dogs on the street corner to be speaking Italian.

The sounds are different—more grating—and the smells are more pungent, but he doesn't let that put a damper on things. He loved this city once, and he could learn to love it again.

He treats himself to coffee from a French café in midtown he used to rave over. He walks through a park, which is more asphalt than grass but still has its charms. He feeds his leftover croissant to a group of stalking pigeons who need it more than him. Laughing to himself, he takes a photo of them and uploads it to his TikTok story with the caption, That's just how the croissant crumbles.

He does not think about Julien.

At the interview, Greg steps through the front door of Bar Deco, a favorite haunt of his old friends, and does not think of all the differences between this establishment and his current place of employ. He ignores the fact that this place is always awash in purple, blue, and pink lights, even when there's no dancing happening. He barely bats an eye at the fact that there are twelve disco balls hanging from the ceiling at varying heights. And he most certainly does not take note of the wall with the gold-and-black geometric patterns and the light-up Bar Deco sign that is one hundred percent an IG photo spot for free publicity.

It doesn't matter if there's no hominess here. It's a job. A place to work. What is it

Julien said? Better pay, better tips. You only came out here to get out of debt, which this will help you do. That's great. I'm glad you're going.

He still can't wrap his head around the fact that Julien was glad about that. Was Julien growing bored of him? Was their sex becoming monotonous?

Gah. No. He is not thinking about Julien.

"Greg Harlow, happy to see you back in these parts," says Alaina Sosa, a tall tan brunette woman with legs for days who can't be much older than thirty-five. She appears in the empty bar as if by magic. "Come on back. Let's chat."

At a high-top table, Alaina pops out her phone and pulls up Greg's TikTok feed. She holds it low enough that he can see the screen as well, and he marks the transition from his old life to his new life in the slow scroll. Well, maybe his new-old life, depending on how this conversation goes and how badly he wants to get back to New York City after Julien's dismissal.

"I'm really impressed with what you've done here," she says, stopping on one of the videos of Greg and Julien in front of the green screen. It's a silly one. He remembers exactly the date and the time, what Julien smelled like standing beside him—clean linen and honeysuckle.

"Thanks," he says, rubbing a hand along his stubbly jaw. Forgetting to shave is expected when you're still disoriented over the way you left things with your crush.

"I'll give it to you straight, the job is yours if you want it." She smiles at him, tight-lipped but welcoming. Sort of. "If you can work this magic." She points at her phone. "And this magic." She gestures to his face. "For us here, you're going to be swimming in money, my friend."

My friend. It's been eons since he has considered anyone in New York City his friend. None of his old crowd even checked up on him when he moved to the Lehigh Valley. Not that he told anyone he was going. Basically, he packed up and fled, which now that he considers it is kind of cowardly and not at all consistent with the sense of confidence he's cultivated at Martin's Place.

The thought of Martin's Place makes his heart take on an unusual beat. In a private chamber somewhere, he holds Martin, Augustine, Chef Marco, and even Braydon. Jessica and Rufus have their own tangential one. These people he's grown to care for over the last six months, besides Julien, could be confused or hurt or resentful over his departure. He doesn't want that.

But he does want money.

If he can't have Julien, he can at least expunge his debt as quickly as possible.

"I sent you the starting pay, but here's a ballpark for what our more talented and handsome bartenders make in tips. The yearly picture." Alaina slips him a bar napkin with a figure scribbled on it.

Greg feels his eyes bulge when he takes in the number. "Really?"

"Really."

"Damn."

"I know." She takes the napkin back. "Does that mean you'll think about it?"

Greg doesn't realize at first that he's nodding.

"That's what I was hoping for. Take a few days with it. The position just opened up. I

remembered you applied for us way back when, but you know how it is with these coveted spots. Nobody wants to give them up.”

“Can’t believe you even held on to my application this long,” he says with a laugh.

“We always hold on to the ones we like,” she says. “Then a couple months later, you were coming in here with that group of big spenders, and then—poof—you vanished. Until the other day, when I saw this on my For You page and wondered, ‘What’s a guy like Greg Harlow doing in Pennsylvania?’ So, I figured I’d give it a shot. See if the email was still working, and here you are.”

“Here I am,” he says, and it doesn’t feel wrong. He doesn’t exactly like the way Alaina denigrates Pennsylvania, but he can look past that. Ever since the academy, he’s used to starting over, reinventing himself. There’s an opportunity to look at this through the rose-colored glasses of a new beginning instead of an ending.

He can’t predict the future. He and Julien might’ve been a disaster, over and done within a month. Just because they had good sex and Greg helped Julien study wine and Julien helped Greg come up with cocktail recipes and they always wanted the same kind of takeout didn’t mean they were meant for each other.

The universe doesn’t work like that.

But the universe does test you. Why else would he have been shipped off to the academy? Whenever he’s faced with these kinds of decisions, he always takes a beat and chooses the option that is hopefully going to bring him the most joy. In this moment, sitting in this cushy chair in this expensive bar that’s less glitzy during the daytime, he can’t quite pinpoint which way he’s leaning.

“Can I expect to hear from you by Wednesday?” Alaina asks.

Greg nods again without thinking. “For sure.”

On his way back to the parking garage, each step spurring a new thought—start over again or stick it out?—Greg receives a message notification on TikTok. Usually, he doesn’t see those unless it’s from someone he follows and that person follows him back.

When he looks more closely, it’s from Stryker. Strange that he’d forgotten to unfollow Stryker, but when he moved, he rarely found himself scrolling through content absentmindedly like he did when he lived here. He’s been too busy.

Curiosity wins out.

Stryker: Are you in Manhattan? We should meet up!

Suddenly, he doesn’t know how to feel or what to do. He’s only paid for a few hours of parking in the pricey garage. He doesn’t want to go out of his way for a man who unceremoniously dumped him. That would be a major step backward.

But we should meet up? That’s not like the Stryker from six months ago. Stryker Storm never put out an invitation. Stryker Storm waited for the party and the people to come to him. Sitting in a VIP booth alone with buckets of ice and numerous bottles as a power move. Not planning anything for his birthday so somebody inevitably threw him a surprise shindig. Refusing a brand partnership on IG for months until the company caved and sent him a bunch of free merchandise he didn’t need and never used.

Greg’s changed. He feels it. Has Stryker?

It’s that question and the intense interest that comes with it that causes him to type back: Sure. Where at?

JULIEN

Flopping down on a plush hotel bed in Dallas, Texas, is exactly what Julien needs after a long first day. His mind is overstuffed with knowledge, much like his notebook filled with scribbled grape varieties, vintages, and countries of origin.

He can't stop replaying his performance in the selling portion of the course, which worked his ability to orally describe the characteristics and style of a wine in a skit-like setting, someone else in the class playing a patron. Julien's tableside manner, despite the last few months of being really "on" during happy hour, is still one of his weak spots.

His other weak spot, which throbs like an infection in the center of his chest, is his cracked heart. It's not broken. That would be too dramatic for this sort of ending. Even if it was of one of the best sexual relationships he has ever had.

The heels of his hands press into his tired eyes. Thankfully, he did his room check when he arrived yesterday. He stripped the bed of its linens and placed his own clean ones over the king-size mattress, laid out his own pillows, disinfected all the surfaces.

Before he flopped down, he tugged off his street clothes, showered, and slipped into his favorite robe, which he thankfully remembered to pack in the frantic flurry that ensued before Greg showed up.

He pushes all the thoughts of Greg—Greg's toothy smile and perfect cock and buttery laugh—out of his head and sinks deeper into the mattress while focusing on his breathing.

His drowsiness gradually gives way to a slight sparkle of joy. He's here, mid advanced sommelier course.

As of today, there are only one hundred and sixty-eight professionals in the Americas with Master Sommelier status. Julien dreams about being the one hundred and sixty-ninth as he reaches for the room service menu and considers ordering a really greasy cheeseburger. If his heart can't be full, at least his stomach can be. He deserves a reward for the achievement of doing the damn thing.

He grabs his sanitizing wipes from his bag to clean the hotel phone but is interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Coming," he calls, trying to remember if he set the DO NOT DISTURB knocker on the door. When he checked in, he informed the friendly clerk behind the counter that he would not be needing or wanting housekeeping during his stay. He had found the nearest market and stocked up on his own cleaning supplies.

Outside the door stands one of Julien's course mates, Carlos—a gentleman somewhere in his early forties with a full head of thick hair graying at the temples in a sexy way. His attire screams wealth—shined-to-perfection shoes, large statement watch—but his smile is salt-of-the-earth, and Julien wishes it didn't, but his body responds to that.

Today, Carlos's sales pitch on a bottle of chardonnay was impressive. Succinct, catchy, and suave all at once. Even though Julien doesn't drink wine for pleasure, he would've bought the bottle without a single sip.

"Hope I'm not catching you at a bad time," Carlos says, looking down at Julien's robe.

Julien pulls the flaps closer together, tightens the belt. "Not at all."

“Do you have dinner plans?”

The greasy cheeseburger flickers through Julien’s mind, but there’s a handsome man standing at his door asking him if he has dinner plans. Screw the cheeseburger that will probably be more like a hockey puck anyway. “No. I hadn’t thought about it.”

“I didn’t get a chance to catch you after the course let out today. A bunch of us have decided to go to a tapas restaurant, and I wanted to extend the invitation.”

Julien shifts his weight from foot to foot. Socializing is not one of his predominant methods of relaxation, but he’s in Dallas, his heart is cracked, and his stomach is gurgling. The happy hours have chipped away at his shell. Tonight might be a good night to exercise those new skills outside of the Lehigh Valley. If sommelier-ing is his ticket to a bigger, brighter life, there needs to be a bigger, brighter Julien as well.

“That sounds great. What time is everyone meeting?” Julien asks.

Carlos falters a bit for the first time since Julien opened the door. “Admittedly, within the next ten minutes. Some are waiting down in the lobby already.”

Julien is easily able to read between the lines. Some of the people in the course are people he met in his introduction courses. He remembers sitting in the lobby one night in the Vermont hotel, surveying his notes and transcribing them to a second, neater notebook so they were easier to read, when a group of his course mates walked through the lobby talking loudly.

Not that he counted or anything, but at least two of them noticed him there and none of them came over to invite him wherever they were going, not even as they waited out in the cold for their Ubers to arrive.

Julien doesn’t exude get-to-know-me energy, which is why he was so shocked when

Greg took to him. Which is why he's thankful now that Carlos has come to extend the invitation.

"We've called the rideshares already, so I need to get back down there, but I can give the name of the restaurant..."

Julien shakes away Greg and the past. He's not going to let people's preconceived ideas about him or another man's decision to leave him ruin his night. "Ten minutes is more than enough time. Let me just change. I'll be right down."

After throwing off his robe and slipping on the most presentable clothes he has, Julien makes it with just enough time to squeeze into the back seat of a modest-size SUV beside Carlos and a bohemian woman who reminds him of Carole King on the cover of one of the albums Greg likes to play. Julien blocks out that inconvenient image.

The restaurant is the antithesis of Martin's Place. Where Martin's Place has black-and-white photographs on the wall, this place has pop art portraits of culture icons. Where Martin's Place has an industrial hominess, this place has lowlight chic.

Their group is seated beneath a pink, green, and yellow picture of Elvis. Half of them squeeze into the booth side. Julien chooses a chair near the end. Included, but separate from the central conversation so if he needs to disappear for a couple seconds—into the bathroom or into his mind—he won't disrupt anyone.

Their server is a bouncy woman with her auburn hair in a ponytail. She passes around drink menus. He won't order anything, but to avoid being the lone person staring into the center of the table where the condiments are, he pretends to be very interested.

"What's everyone thinking of drinking?" a white man with sparkling eyes asks from across the table.

Carlos is the first to speak. “I’m thinking something dry. Maybe a white.”

The others pipe up, adding comments about some of the wines they tasted today, making jibes about the paltry wine offerings here. “Who chose this place?” Carole King’s twin asks.

Julien barely hears when Carlos asks, “What about you, Julien?”

“Oh, nothing for me.” He fiddles nervously with the napkin in his lap.

“Come on, we’re out. We’re celebrating,” Sparkling Smile—Kane?—says. “We don’t start until ten tomorrow. Plenty of time to sleep off any unwanted effects.”

“Unwanted?” Carole King—Brenda??—retorts. “Speak for yourself. This course is already hard as anything. Do you know what it’s like to be a woman trying to break into this field? I need a drink and then five more, pronto.”

“Your taste’s too refined for this spot?” This question comes from Alec, a thirtysomething guy in an ornate designer blazer and perfectly coiffed hair. In class today, Julien could tell that Alec felt threatened by his command of the subject.

Back in school, Julien was never a know-it-all. Science and math and English didn’t appeal to him much. Of course, he was a good student. Uncle Martin and Aunt Augustine demanded that of him. He never wanted to let them down, so he did the work he had to do to make good marks and get out, unscathed but prepared.

But here, Julien feels like a classic nerd. All he needs is a pocket protector to complete the look.

“Clear head for class tomorrow,” Carlos says. “I think it’s smart.” He offers Julien a reassuring smile.

Julien appreciates the gesture but doesn't feel like tiptoeing around his truth. Sharing it with Greg made it more normal. A small piece of the puzzle that makes up Julien. "Outside of swilling, I just don't drink."

The confusion ripples through the table. It doesn't ruffle Julien. Much.

"Interesting," Maybe-Kane says.

"Very," Maybe-Brenda says.

Carlos's smile broadens. "You're quite the study, Julien." There's a flirty undertone that Julien likes but doesn't love.

Love. A little word that has been taking up a big amount of space inside his head. He supposes, now that Greg is retreating to the mean streets of New York City once more, that he can let that word out of his grasp, allow it to float off like a carnival balloon.

Only, as soon as the thought crosses his mind, he feels the vicelike knuckles in his head grip tighter to the silky string.

"A sommelier who doesn't drink," Julien says, trying to get the easygoing conversation back by deploying some of the charm Greg has taught him over the last few months. "What can I say? I'm an oxymoron."

This gets everyone laughing, even Alec. The server arriving again gives them all a solid distraction.

For some reason, his eyes are drawn back to the menu, down to the swirly pink writing on the right-hand side. After spending so much time with Greg, making TikToks and various concoctions, he's curious to check out the twists on classic

offerings.

One specific menu item catches his attention: a grapefruit rosé sangria with tequila.

Without questioning it, Julien takes out his phone, snaps a picture, and adds it to his text chain with Greg with the accompanying text: We should do a sangria happy hour.

It's silly, really, that they hadn't thought to do one earlier.

Wine and liquor. Julien and Greg.

But then he remembers: there might not still be an and to hope for.

Instead of stoking the embers of a fire set on burning out, he deletes the photo, erases the message, and joins in the conversation properly, even if his heart can't quite come to the table.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

GREG

How did Greg let his ex talk him into going out in SoHo?

There's a chance it was the way Stryker paid for Greg's cappuccino earlier without so much as a comment. Or the way Stryker actually listened when Greg told him about the happy hours he's been hosting and detailed the various cocktails he's created over the last few months.

"You made all those by yourself?" Stryker asked, sounding almost...impressed.

"I can't take all the credit," Greg says, even if he's trying to shove Julien through a trapdoor in his mind.

There has been no word from Julien since he got out of Greg's car yesterday. No I landed safely text. No I got to the hotel text. No I miss you text.

Which leads Greg to believe that Julien had meant what he said, and Greg needs to find peace with that.

After tonight, that is.

Because he's in no state to get back to midtown and behind the wheel of his car. Not that that's the top thing on his mind right now. His mind, which is bathing in drink thanks to Stryker's prepurchased bottles and heavy pours, is zeroed in on the club's music, which shakes the floor. Greg moves his body luxuriously under the strobing lights.

Anika, a budding stylist and friend from his past life, dances across from him. She's wearing a cropped and ribbed tank top, high-waisted black jeans. Her cat's-eye makeup is bold, daring any man who isn't her boyfriend, Josh, to approach with caution. The brown skin of her arms is dabbed with glitter that sparkles hypnotically each time the light hits at the right angle.

Josh dances behind her, both hands hooked onto her waistline. He's tall, white, and has curly golden hair that he's slicked back. A gold chain bounces around his neck as the two of them let the beat take over. Josh is a fledgling actor—kind of a family business, his dad was a sitcom star in the eighties—and he's got a couple popular jobs on his résumé, but nobody here bothers him.

That is one thing Greg misses about New York City life. The anonymity. How he can be in the loudest, most crowded room and be able to dance like a freak without anyone caring. Least of all Anika and Josh, who are now making out with an unmatched vigor. Even with the TikTok fame, Greg never had to contend with attention he didn't want—except from grabby guys at LGBTQ clubs who thought that just because Greg flaunted his body online and in person, he was a piece of meat open for manhandling.

While he could do without the Handsy Hanks, Greg concedes that his life thus far in the Lehigh Valley has been lived under a microscope. Not a closely observed one, per se, but in a smaller environment, he senses his place on the petri dish more acutely. The staff at Martin's Place is small. His social circle is small. In some ways, this makes the blows, especially emotional ones, much bigger.

Over at the booth, Stryker is pretending not to bop his head too rigorously to the music because that would be gauche. That much, at least, hasn't changed. Stryker doesn't dance. Not in the way Julien "doesn't" dance. It's not a lack of confidence or rhythm. It's a lack of desire, a reservation of energy. Stryker manspreads in his booth, above the crowd, sipping and smoldering and not engaging with anyone on the other

side of the velvet rope.

Greg forgot how good it felt to be on that side of said velvet rope. The confidence floods your body until you're tingling all over. Though, once again, that could be the drink.

Greg hasn't taken his antidepressant. One, because he didn't think he'd be in New York City this late (and it is late), so he didn't bring it with him. Two, because he decided an hour or so ago that he would get absolutely shit-faced. He will be telling his therapist about neither of these decisions.

He contemplates how hurt he was when his relationship with Stryker ended, but he wasn't devastated. Somehow, Julien's silence since the airport has Greg hovering slightly north of that emotion, an emotion he desperately doesn't want to feel.

Jeez. Devastation and desperation? That's a wicked combination he hasn't felt since he arrived at the academy, and even then, their rigorous schedule and studies didn't allow him time to wallow in either.

He bets Julien is thriving out in Texas, learning and laughing it up with his classmates. There's no reason for Greg to be here marinating. Their pact was not a promise of more. He knew that. Just like he knows he can have more nights out like this one—sweaty and free and forgetful—if he takes the new position. He'll have the money to do it and people like Anika, Josh, and Stryker to do it with.

When the song ends, Josh excuses himself to go to the bathroom. Anika takes Greg's hand and snakes back to Stryker's booth. On the way, Anika pushes up onto her tiptoes and whisper-shouts, "Happy homecoming, Greg! I've missed you!"

"I've missed you, too!" he whisper-shouts back.

“Please tell me you’ve returned for good! Life has been a snooze since you left.” Her posh British accent is extra pronounced on the word snooze. Anika was born in the UK, moved to the States for college, and then never left. Greg met her at a photo shoot he was doing for some online magazine. She was there styling influencers for the corresponding pictures. Greg found her instantly likable and glamorous. She’s the one who introduced him to Stryker.

“I’m not sure yet,” Greg says, legs wobbly, voice wobblier. “I’m considering a job offer here, but...” He trails off. It’s not like Anika has kept in contact over the last six months. Aside from the occasional TikTok or IG comment, she’s mostly been MIA from his inbox.

“Take it,” she says almost too quickly. “Come back to civilization. Come back to your friends.” Anika’s top talent is persuasion. She convinced him to wear a tiny tank top and a silky, patterned kerchief in that first photo shoot. Nothing about Greg said silky patterned kerchief, but she maintained that it would pull together the simplistic yet classic look, and when Greg saw the final proofs, he had to admit that she’d been right. Is she right again now?

“I just moved away,” he says. She leans in closer to him, clearly having a hard time hearing him over the music. “I don’t know if I should come back so quickly. I’d have to find a new place overnight. You know how the rental market is out here.”

“Oh, right. You’re a renter,” she says. It’s snarky, but it’s not meant to be mean. Greg knows her well enough to realize that, even if he wishes he were lucky enough to have inherited wealth and a grandparent who left him real estate in their will. “I’m sure Josh and I can help you find something quick. Anything is better than living in your cousin’s guest room, right?”

Greg isn’t so sure he can answer in the affirmative. He really likes Rufus. He likes having a roommate. He likes when Jessica comes over with free food and they talk

for hours. He even enjoys learning about video games and DJ equipment and fun facts about the blood-brain barrier.

Quickly, Greg recalls the downside of New York City's anonymity: the loneliness. There was always a coldness to living alone in his one bedroom, they-all-look-alike-in-the-building apartment. While his room in Rufus's house is small, the paint is chipping, and the floors are creaky, the place never feels empty.

Though maybe that's because Julien is often there, filling up his bedroom with stories and passion and the smell of sex. If he returns and Julien ends their arrangement, aces his advanced sommelier exam, and leaves for greener pastures in a year, that loneliness is only going to befriend Greg again in a new place.

Fuck. What if he's not meant to have a home in any physical sense? Maybe he'll be a transient, and if that's the case, it won't matter if he packs up his life once again. It'll be good practice.

"I guess that's true," Greg finally concedes to Anika. Moving back to a bustling epicenter will undoubtedly reintroduce him to a faster pace. Perhaps he needs that.

"Of course, it's true." Anika's eyes wander over to Stryker. "It's not just me. He missed you, too."

"He could've called and said so."

"Stryker doesn't even call his parents."

"Hell, he could've texted and said so."

Anika gives Greg the most disapproving look ever. "Stryker is a knob when it comes to his emotions. You were with him for months. You know this about him. If he's a

dick, it's because he's hurting, and when you left, he was on dick mode three thousand. Basically impossible to be around."

"You're not painting a great picture here," Greg says as she tugs them toward a quieter corner of the club. He feels Stryker's eyes on the back of his head.

"I lived through it. I'm painting an accurate picture." Anika shakes her head. "I've known Stryker since he was a freshman in college. I've never seen him that broken up. Honestly, since you've been gone, he's been...different?"

"Different, how?" Greg asks, even though he's suspecting he saw some of these differences earlier today at the café.

"Like he went slowly from dick mode three thousand to kind mode one hundred." Anika stops him before he can comment. "I know one hundred is not great, but for him? That's trying."

Opposites-attract is a true feature of Greg's universe. There's no other way to explain his immediate attraction to Julien—the hard edge, the challenge of it all. The difference, though, is that underneath Julien's grumpiness is a soft man who hardened against the world. Could he say the same for Stryker?

There's a possibility that the time Greg spent away from New York, the time he used to woo Julien and establish a thriving happy hour, was needed for him to return and draw back Stryker's shiny, previously impenetrable armor. Wouldn't that be nice? That the bordering-on-devastation he feels right now over being textless could be part of a larger growth arc he needs to find happiness with someone else. Someone he already knew.

"You're right," Greg says.

“Of course I’m right. Now let’s get back.” Anika has him by the hand again.

“Nobody dances like you, Greg Harlow.” Stryker runs his tongue across the front of his perfect white teeth when they return.

Greg’s eyes flick down to Stryker’s full mouth. Stryker always reminded him of an actor in a luxury car commercial. Someone both rehearsed and handsome beyond compare. He’s got slightly wavy hair that’s always tamed, wide eyes that somehow never betray him, and a dimple in his left cheek that Greg used to enjoy running his finger along when they kissed.

Even drunk, Greg knows he shouldn’t be thinking about what kissing Stryker was like. But his mind is already an unwilling passenger on a rocket to outer space.

In the beginning, kissing Stryker was like lighting a match and allowing it to burn until it touched your fingertips. Dangerous. Exciting. Toward the middle of their relationship, kissing Stryker was like throwing that match into a pile of kindling and sitting beside it on a cold winter’s night. By the end, kissing Stryker was like being the match itself. Greg had to set himself on fire just to get Stryker’s attention.

Greg was lucky he hadn’t turned to ash before the relationship ended. Out of that luck was born resilience. Resilience that allowed him to move across state lines, accept a post at a place he’d never heard of, and rebuild his finances and his confidence.

It’s not like Stryker killed somebody. He’d been mean. Everyone is mean sometimes. Hell, Julien was mean frequently.

No, that’s not quite true. Julien was guarded, blunt, not mean. Often reacting to a world not built for him and his beautifully neurodiverse mind. There’s a difference. But that’s not the point.

The point is: people can change. Nobody is just one thing, one trait.

Julien showed him that.

Greg decides to take Stryker's compliment and, in turn, take the seat next to him in the booth.

"Thank you," Greg says, slapping on a smile. "I still have some moves left."

"Saving them for something?" Stryker asks.

"Someone."

"Who?"

"You, maybe?" Greg's hopefulness tumbles out in the question.

Stryker raises an eyebrow, pours Greg another drink. "Hmm. Smooth words there. I might be able to be swayed."

Anika guffaws. "Was that a pun, Stryker Storm?"

Stryker blushes. Greg doesn't think he's ever seen Stryker properly blush. Maybe because he's always wearing a lot of makeup, but still. It's sweet. Greg slugs back his drink, smiles to himself.

Maybe Frank Sinatra had been speaking for him when he sang, I want to be a part of it.

New York, New York is looking more and more like Greg's address once again.

JULIEN

Airplanes are complicated beasts for Julien, which is why he wiggles now in his window seat. He already wiped down the headrest and armrests with the sanitizing towelettes provided by the cute flight attendant with the good hair. Even so, he stares out at the tarmac, feeling his antianxiety medication work itself through his system, and can't help but wrestle with his flight-based unease.

For starters, he doesn't travel much. Time and funds don't allow it. Plus, he doesn't enjoy the lack of control over his space. Crammed arm-to-arm with someone else on a seat he knows has been cleaned—but probably not thoroughly—with recycled dry air spitting out from vents.

On the other hand, he does his best thinking in transit.

With his noise-canceling headphones on, classical music turned up, he can close his eyes, decompress, and settle with his thoughts. Not the intrusive ones but the inconvenient ones involving feelings and life and other such nuisances that don't feel so annoying when they're about Greg.

Julien succeeded (mostly) in blocking out Greg for the last four days, giving himself over to the rigorous focus the course demanded of him. His brain and body are tired now. Wiped out from the rush of adrenaline and the flood of knowledge that crashed over him every day. The only reprieves in his intensive were the dinners with his course mates that went until the late evening, where most of them would get pretty tipsy and end up spending more than Julien had budgeted for. But in the end, he slapped down his card when it came time to split the bill, knowing that, thanks to the

happy hours, he had a savings cushion, and the togetherness was worth the cost of someone else's too-good time.

Grabbing his phone from his bag, he selects a Bach playlist he has downloaded. The wheels and mechanisms in his mind immediately slow down to the twinkling notes of the Goldberg Variations. He's about to let go completely when there's a tap on his shoulder.

At first, he assumes it's the flight attendant since there's so much backlight from the open window behind him, but then the person ducks down and Julien makes out the features. It's Carlos, from his class.

"Fancy meeting you here," he says, sliding into the seat beside Julien.

That's some sort of kismet. If only Julien were in any mental place for a second meet-cute. At least, he thinks Carlos is queer. Not that they broached the topic.

Julien inches a little closer to the window to give Carlos space to settle. "Didn't you say you were from New York?" He realizes after he's asked that he skipped hello, something he's been trying to be better about.

"I am," Carlos says, wiping down his tray table. "Cheaper to fly to Allentown and take the shuttle to Newark than fly direct. These sommelier courses don't come cheap. I have to be economical where I can."

Julien doesn't mean to be so obvious about sizing Carlos up. He's wearing a blazer. On a plane. Surely he has the money to fly direct.

Carlos, clearly catching Julien's confusion, says, "My father always taught me to dress the part I want. I allocate the money I need to look like a Master Sommelier so that one day when I am one, I'm comfortable."

“Smart,” Julien says, meaning it. It makes sense. Julien was dismissive of Greg’s wardrobe when he arrived at Martin’s Place—namely his ridiculous Gucci belt—but Julien, for the first time, contemplates the world Greg dropped in from. Something like a Gucci belt was probably part of the uniform for a Manhattan-based influencer. It wasn’t flashy or out-of-place. It was what Greg had. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to come across as judgmental.”

That’s another thing Julien has become hypervigilant about since meeting Greg. He doesn’t want to have his walls up too high, his resting-bitch-face showcased too often. Just like he wants people to not prejudge him, he needs to do the same for others.

“It’s okay. You thought what I wanted you to think.” Carlos toys with the end of his seat belt which he’s just fastened. “I know that sounds manipulative, but I only mean the way we present ourselves to others factors a lot into how others treat us both professionally and personally.”

Julien chews on this tiny nugget of wisdom like a piece of sugar-free gum. “I guess I get so wrapped up in the learning part of being a sommelier that I neglect some of the other parts.”

“That’s the American school system for you. It rewards children being quiet, passive absorbers of knowledge but not so much active, vocal sharers. Heck, being vocal sharers probably got you in trouble.”

Julien never fit in with the outspoken kids in his elementary school classes. But thinking about what Carlos just said, he reconsiders. Maybe he was projecting otherness, which made the kids not approach, not include. Self-isolation.

“I didn’t do trouble,” Julien confesses. “I like to keep things safe.” He doesn’t know why he’s telling Carlos so much about his personal life other than the fact that they

share a passion, are currently sharing an armrest, and Carlos's expression is so open.

"Safe can be good sometimes." Carlos nods to the cute flight attendant eight rows ahead of them instructing them on drop-down air mask etiquette. "But not always."

Greg flickers through Julien's mind, and he's forced to consider anew why he jumped down Greg's throat the moment he brought up the job offer. The only conclusion he can reasonably come to is that he chose to self-isolate over being vulnerable. Over telling Greg that he'd like him to stay. Or at the very least telling Greg that his feelings for him extend beyond the bedroom.

"Speaking of not playing it safe." Carlos clears his throat as the plane begins to taxi. "Do you ever find yourself in New York?"

"Not often." Aunt Augustine and Uncle Martin took him there as a kid to see the Rockefeller Center tree (which he loved) and to eat hot dogs from vendor carts (which he did not), and it all felt overstimulating and fairy-tale faraway.

Is that part of the reason he reacted so poorly to Greg's news? There's perhaps a part of him that believes New York, despite being a bus ride away, is of another land entirely. A land that sees Julien as nothing more than a tourist crying over drippy mustard and not knowing why.

Carlos produces a business card. "If you do, I would love to get together."

Julien relishes the feel of the matte piece of paper with Carlos Domingo, Certified Sommelier etched across it. Right below are his email and his phone number. It's been ages since someone Julien hadn't met on an app deigned to ask him out. He warms at the prospect, but it's sunshine filtered through a dense fog.

Greg, however? Greg was—is?—a bright, clear day.

Julien barely registers that Carlos is trying to give him something else. The plane's nose has tipped up, and they're ascending. "For your ears." It's a stick of gum. Julien takes it and thanks him. "You can get rid of it if you'd like. I won't be offended."

"Oh. No. Thanks." Julien's already unwrapping it, the pressure in the cabin changing rapidly.

"I meant the card." Carlos dips his head, almost bashful. Julien doesn't think he's ever made a man bashful before.

"Oh." Julien toys with it some more. "I'm flattered, really."

"But there's someone else?" Carlos fills in for him kindly.

Julien's nod knocks a fantasy loose: Greg standing in the airport arrivals area holding one of those big pieces of card stock with Julien's name written across it. It's something he saw in a movie...or many movies? He can't even remember now, but he's certain it was a rom-com Aunt Augustine had put on and blown through boxes of tissues and chocolates while watching.

"I had a feeling." Carlos offers a small smile. "I don't make a habit of looking over people's shoulders, but I saw you typing out a message to someone at dinner on that first night."

There's that photo of the cocktail menu sitting in Julien's camera roll, unsent. The fear of that message going unanswered—being unwanted—stopped him from sending it. "It's a complicated situation," Julien explains.

"What makes it so complicated?"

Carlos's question uncorks Julien. Suddenly, he's pouring himself out into a glass,

serving his emotions up for Carlos to dissect. For the next several hours, Carlos spits back advice like he's noting the hints of baking spices and red plums.

"This field of study we've chosen," Carlos says, sometime after the midflight drinks and Biscoff cookies have been served, "is a marathon, not a sprint. Don't anticipate your successes or big moves until you're staring at them head-on. It'll save you a lot of disappointment."

By the time they touch down in Allentown, Julien is certain he needs to come clean about his feelings to Greg. They'll kiss. Julien might cry. They'll have amazing sex. He can see it all in his mind's eye. His muscles relax. His heart grows full again.

Back on the ground, standing near the gate, Julien gives Carlos a hug. "Thank you. Sorry I unloaded all of that on you."

"Don't be sorry. I asked." Carlos chuckles good-naturedly. "I hope everything goes well with your gentleman. And, well, if it doesn't, you have my business card. Take care."

With that, he takes off toward his shuttle, leaving Julien infinitely lighter than when he boarded.

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

GREG

Greg's stomach protests when he tells Rufus and Jessica he's moving back to New York.

"Thank you again for your generosity. I've had such a great time here. I'll come back and visit often."

"But..." Rufus begins.

"You can't," Jessica finishes for him.

Greg says he has to.

By the time he makes it to Martin's Place, early for his shift that night, Greg's stomach is hosting a whole damn rally, picket signs and megaphones and everything. He's ignoring it as best he can. Focusing on the positive.

Augustine and Martin look at him from across the desk with twin expressions of confusion and disappointment. Like he'd just slapped each of them across the face with one of the uncooked fish filets from the kitchen.

"Is it something we did?" Augustine asks. It sounds eerily like a breakup that's not going well.

In a way, it kind of is.

Never in a million years did Greg expect his New York homecoming to go so well. Anika and Josh greeted him with open arms, and Stryker even opened his home to him. When they were dating, Greg and Stryker floated the idea of living together, but ultimately Stryker decided he needed his space. (The first nail in the coffin of their relationship, though Greg was blissfully unaware they were about to be buried.)

Greg's ignorance and Stryker's decision didn't stop them from having sleepovers. Plenty of them. They'd roll into bed together after wild nights of partying and making content.

They reprised this situation over the weekend except with one key difference: Greg took the guest bedroom instead of the other half of Stryker's California king. It felt foreign but comforting, sleeping off his bad drinking-based decisions in a luxury high-rise miles above the noise and the problems.

When he woke up, Stryker had breakfast waiting for them. He hadn't made it, naturally. He ordered it and had it delivered, but he got Greg's favorite: a Swiss omelet with rye toast and a maple latte. Greg was touched.

It was the gesture that tipped the scale. Greg was taking the job and moving back.

Of course, he consulted his bank account first, toyed with some numbers, paid some bills, and made a mental checklist of how he could make it work. And in the end, he decided he could and would make it work. That's why he's here, putting in his two-week notice.

"No. You both have been wonderful. I love Martin's Place. It's just..." don't say it, don't say it, don't say it "...you don't really need me anymore."

Truly, Greg doesn't believe it. Martin's Place could fall apart as easily as it came together when he arrived, but that's not his problem. This, like the sex pact with

Julien, was always meant to be temporary.

He looks down at the gold watch taking up residence on his wrist. Stryker gave it back to him. Greg had left it, before the great flee from New York, on the nightstand in Stryker's bedroom. A casualty of not telling anyone where he was going. He packed and dipped as quickly and cleanly as possible, which meant leaving things behind.

Over breakfast, Stryker apologized (A man! Apologizing! A miracle!) for what went down between them before Greg left, saying he understood why Greg wouldn't tell him where he was going next. That was when he set the watch down on the table. Greg recognized it immediately. A gift for his birthday the year before. He rarely left his apartment without it. When he first got to Allentown, he missed it, sure, but he missed a lot of things. That watch like his Gucci belt wouldn't make sense here, so it didn't matter too much.

Wearing it to his shift tonight, it felt like the last phase of a transformation he had to go through.

"Hang on a second, says who?" Martin is staunch, evidently denying this.

Greg shakes his head. He won't say Julien's name. It's bad enough he says it in his dreams where he can conjure Julien at will, every detail of him. Naked or clothed. "I only mean that happy hour is on the map. I'm not the reason people are coming anymore. Maybe at the beginning, but now it's this place and the community they've built here."

Taking a quick inhalation, Greg tries not to wallow over his own community, the one he's leaving behind by making this decision. He banishes Rufus and Jessica's upset into a shadowy corner of his mind. He's making the right choice. Right for him. Right for right now.

“Who’s going to come up with all those crafty cocktails, huh?” Augustine asks. Martin seems a tad too bereft to even speak again. “It’s your special skill. You’re our ace in the hole. Our secret weapon. We’d really like you to stay.”

This is music to Greg’s ears—Stevie Nicks crooning after a hectic day kind of music—because it’s not often that people ask him to stay. People are often pushing him out, away. His parents. Stryker.

“What are they paying you? We’ll match it.” Martin’s gotten his voice back. It’s gruff, stern.

“We’ll double it!” Augustine chimes in.

Greg tells them.

“On second thought, we’ll bow out gracefully,” Martin says before sighing and sinking back into his chair.

Greg doesn’t enjoy delivering bad news, especially not to two people who took a chance on him when he was at his lowest. “Seriously, thank you for giving me this opportunity and for looking out for me. I really needed it.”

They nod somberly. Like someone’s died. Greg hates it.

“And if you ever need special cocktails for events or holidays, I can always slip some recipes to you via...” He stops himself before he says Julien. He won’t say Julien! “Text. Or email. Whatever works.”

Augustine says, “Thanks, Greg. You’re a good guy.” Greg’s throat grows thick as he recalls how Julien said those exact words to him in the shower on Christmas Eve. Back when a future together still felt possible. “We’re going to miss you,” Augustine

adds.

Is Martin...tearing up? “We really are.”

“Oh, shut off the waterworks, you big softie. He’s moving two hours away. Not to another continent.” She laughs while getting her husband up from his seat so they can start getting ready for dinner. “He can come back for Christmas Eve again. You gotta come back for the holidays. I promise I will get marginally less drunk and sing marginally more on key.”

Greg laughs, attempting to mask the heat spreading across his cheeks from the rooted memory of that fated night, of the sweetest gift he’s ever received and the hottest sex he’s ever had. “I’ll try my best,” he says, making no concrete promises.

Maybe this year will be different. Maybe by Christmas, he’ll be formally back together and living with Stryker, enjoying take-out breakfasts every morning and bartending at Bar Deco every night. This time, he’ll get it right. This time, he’ll plant roots that won’t (and he repeats, won’t) get ripped up and thrown in his face.

Martin’s Place and the prickly sommelier who works there will be nothing more than a blip in his memory bank, slowly disintegrating into sand, poured through a sieve, and blown away on a spring wind.

“Thanks for letting us know.” Augustine and Martin leave Greg behind in the office.

After a deep breath, he pulls out his phone and shoots off a text to Stryker, Anika, and Josh: It’s official. I’m coming home.

JULIEN

“You’re home,” Aunt Augustine greets Julien as he enters for his first shift back.

There's something off about her. The way she pats his back. The way she's not sipping a seltzer. "How was the...the classes? How were the classes?"

"Great. Really informative, and I met some really nice people." He's been meaning to send a text to Carlos after their affirming conversation.

"You? Meeting people? Color me surprised." Her joke takes an off-kilter tone.

Julien decides not to harp on the oddities. "I'm turning over a new leaf. Have you seen Greg?" He's got just enough time before the dinner rush to get Greg alone, confess his feelings, and maybe, possibly have Greg scoop him up into his arms and kiss him a little bit. A lotta bit, if he's lucky.

She worries her lip. "Let's take a walk to the host stand for a minute."

He doesn't have a minute. They can catch up later. "It's kind of important, what I have to tell Greg." Never in his twenty-six years of existence has he felt this confident in his feelings for someone. It's emboldening, and it can't wait any longer.

"What I have to tell you is kind of important as well."

He has stopped listening because Greg appears behind the bar. Characteristically handsome. Uncharacteristically rumpled. He carries a tray of clean glasses to stack beneath the counter, causing his biceps to bulge in the fancy gold polo he's wearing.

Julien's heart picks up speed. "I'll meet you there in a bit, okay?" Without waiting for a response, he's off toward Greg who is donning a somewhat revamped wardrobe, pieces Julien hasn't seen before. Most notably, a striking gold watch that could blind someone with its huge, ornate face. If Julien were to assign Greg a color, it would be gold. A shiny and hopeful shade.

Though the look on Greg's face when he turns and nearly runs into him doesn't inspire hope. It appears wounded.

"Hey."

"Hi."

"I'm back."

"I see that."

Julien almost loses his nerve. "Can we talk?" The shakiness is evident, but he tries to hide it with a smile.

Greg nods and follows him out back because Braydon is holding court by the lockers, talking about his impending spring break plans to go to Mexico. Outside, the air is crisp with a slight chill, a marked difference from Dallas. Julien wishes he'd worn a light jacket.

"Did Augustine...?" Greg's hanging question lingers in the air as they stand in the alleyway, a poor setting for a romantic conversation.

Julien tilts his head. "Did she what?"

"Never mind." Greg weirdly grabs back his words. Things between them have never been this stilted. Not even after Julien spilled all those cocktail samples on him when they met. "Then I have something to tell you."

"Everyone has something to tell someone it seems." Julien came here with a mission, and now his head is all cluttered. "Do you, uh, want to go first?" He's trying to be polite, unable to properly read the vibe.

“Sure.” Greg’s eyebrows knit together. “I took the job in New York.”

Julien is stunned but refuses to show it. He trains his face into a neutral mask, even though there’s an ambush raging inside his brain, a holdup inside his heart.

“The pay was too good to pass up. I even got to connect with some of my old friends while I was there.” Greg shifts from foot to foot.

Julien’s eyes dart to the watch. Of course. He was so hell-bent on making his lovelorn confession that he hadn’t considered who gave Greg that watch. It had to be the very same one Greg once mentioned that Stryker had gifted him.

Did they kiss? Did they sleep together?

Julien’s mind is a vat of Gorilla Glue.

Great, just great. “That’s great!” Julien says, hoping Greg doesn’t hear the crack in his voice. “I’m sure you’re happy to be going back.”

“I am.” Julien can’t quite tell if Greg’s lying. “What was it you wanted to tell me?”

Mouth agape, Julien fumbles for something plausible to say, something not pathetic. “Sangria.”

“What?”

Julien shakes his head to try to organize his thoughts. “While I was away, I saw a menu with a wide selection of sangrias. Made me wonder why we hadn’t done any of our own yet for happy hour. I...wanted to get your take.” It’s weak, and he’s only barely selling it.

Greg rubs a hand across his chin. “Uh, yeah, sure. Sangria.” God, Julien curses the word sangria. “That’s really it? That’s why you made us come out here?” Greg outstretches his arms.

Julien’s eyes dip down to the asphalt, unable to take in the expansiveness of Greg. Desperately wanting to walk into those outstretched arms and have them curl back in around him. Damn Greg for seeing him too clearly, for knowing too well that he is flying by the seat of his pants.

This conversation could end one of two ways: Julien could come clean, or he could lie again. “I...” His mind might be a mess, but it supplies him with Carlos’s face and reminds him of the overly familiar hug outside the gate. “Met someone. At the class. While I was away.” It’s mostly truth.

“Oh,” Greg says, expression rewinding back to confusion.

“Oh is my thing,” Julien tries to joke, but it comes out more like an accusation.

Greg frowns.

“We didn’t do anything! Me and the guy. The one I met. Just so you know.” Julien’s tongue continues to disobey him, churning out more unnecessary words. “It’s okay if you did...stuff. With Stryker. You and I, we were just... It was just sex.”

Julien suppresses a sad, uncomfortable laugh. He had asked Greg to come out here because he realized in the last four days that it wasn’t just sex. That he wanted it to be more. This day has taken a hard right turn and is barreling toward Julien’s personal hell.

“We didn’t.” Greg’s voice is soft.

“That’s fine,” Julien says quickly. “But it would also be fine if you did.”

Greg looks the same way he looked when Julien accused him of sleeping with Braydon and the pilot and not needing Grindr. He isn’t trying to hurt Greg’s feelings. He is only trying to keep from crying in front of this man that he still, despite this terrible moment, wants to kiss and care for and cook dinner with.

“I just said we didn’t.” Greg folds his arms across his chest, punctuating his statement. “You and I made a pact. I wouldn’t go back on that without telling you first.”

“Okay.” Julien shrinks himself. Somebody should bag him up and drop him in the dumpster. He feels like trash.

Greg responds to that in kind, loosening a bit, probably trying to look less menacing. “I told Martin and Augustine earlier, about me leaving. I put in my two weeks.”

Two weeks. Lord, help him. Julien can’t survive two more weeks of work with the guy he’s fallen for who is choosing to leave him. He might like to be dominated in the bedroom, but he’s not this sadistic.

“Let’s do sangria for our last happy hour,” Greg says, almost as if he’s waving a white flag of truce with those words.

“Sounds good.” Julien can barely croak.

Greg starts back for the door. “You coming?”

“Be there in a minute,” he says, knowing full well there aren’t enough minutes in the world to make this situation better.

GREG

After a tense, upsetting week at Martin's Place, Greg goes back to Manhattan to apartment hunt. The whole time, he feels like Goldilocks in the early parts of her story. One place is too big and expensive, one place is too small and seemingly infested with roaches, and even after scouring apartments with Anika and Josh all day, nothing just right materializes.

When he meets Stryker for dinner at a fusion restaurant that serves foam and caviar and foie gras, Greg wrestles with a pit in his stomach. A pit that only grows deeper and wider whenever he thinks about his room in Rufus's house, the coziness of the space, the comfort of hearing Rufus smashing the buttons on his Xbox controller downstairs.

Is this...homesickness?

No, it can't be. Allentown wasn't home. Home is where you're wanted and needed. Julien made it clear Greg wasn't needed.

The opposite is true here where, earlier in the week, Stryker sent via text: I need you to come with me to this restaurant opening in Tribeca. Free meal. All I have to do is post.

Need.See? Emotionally reserved Stryker Storm could say it. Why couldn't Julien Boire?

"So, basically, I've been arguing with them in my DMs about my rate," Stryker says,

leaned back in his chair on the other side of the table, one leg crossed over the other. His suede purple loafer dangles off his heel, nearly tripping an oncoming maître d'. Greg is distracted by this, sensitive to these things now that he's worked in a restaurant. He knows the trappings of the trade, and Stryker seems blissfully oblivious to the potential chaos he could cause. "If I'm going to do that many videos promoting flavored butt scrub, then I need to be paid above scale. It's nonnegotiable."

"Mmm-hmm." Greg nods, snapping back to the conversation. And not just because he's pretty sure he saw the same brand of butt scrub in Julien's bathroom, which leads to unwelcome thoughts of places Greg's tongue has been and will never go again. "That makes total sense."

"See? Thank you." Stryker flashes his teeth. "This is why I missed you. Anika and Josh told me I was being overly ambitious, but I've got a brand going. I can't just start peddling something new that goes entirely against that brand. You know how it is."

"Sure, yeah," Greg says, recalling a time when conversations like this with Stryker excited him. He felt a bit like a Jedi in a Star Wars film, deciding the fate of an entirely new empire he'd have a hand in building from the ground up. Now, he just feels vacuous.

"Speaking of which, we have to get you back to posting daily so you can pick back up some of those brand partnerships. I'll be sure to include you in my post for this place." Stryker's got his imaginary business hat on. Greg can hear it in his voice. The way he can code switch from intimate to professional within an inch of a single syllable. "The agency I'm with might be looking to take on a few new clients. Let me send a text while I'm thinking about it."

"Oh, you don't really need to do that." Greg doesn't like owing anyone anything.

Stryker glances up from the screen of his brick-like gold iPhone as the bustle of the restaurant blurs around them. “It’s already done. It was no trouble.”

“Oh.” Greg once again finds himself borrowing Julien’s buffer word. “I meant more that I’m going to be working at Bar Deco and readjusting to city life. I’m not sure I’ll have the time. I don’t even have a place to live yet.”

“Of course you do.” Stryker sets down his menu with a flourish, traps Greg with his penetrating gaze. “With me.”

There was a time when Greg would’ve fawned over this declaration. His whole life would’ve felt like it was leading to this moment when a man he cared for deeply invited him to live together, to make a home together, but they’ve barely been at this table ten minutes, and Stryker is already monopolizing the conversation, steering Greg’s life in a certain direction.

Maybe it’s the direction it’s supposed to go in. Maybe I need to smile and say thank you.

“Do you mean that?” Greg asks, unable to be sure.

In their previous relationship, Stryker was resistant to moving in together. Maybe it was too official, too serious. Greg never quite understood and was too afraid to ask. Now, he’s less afraid to ask difficult questions when he has to because of how vulnerable he was able to be with Julien.

“Absolutely, I mean that. I know I let a good thing go once. Storms don’t make mistakes twice.”

Greg lets that sink in while confusion wraps around his heart. He’s half elated, half uncomfortable. Storm isn’t even Stryker’s real last name. It’s Hogdorf. Hogdorf

doesn't have the same social media savvy ring to it as Storm does, though.

Is that really what matters in this moment? Stryker is offering him a fresh start and space in his apartment to call home.

Greg is about to exclaim his thanks for everyone in the restaurant to hear when they are politely interrupted by a middle-aged white woman with medium-length straight brown hair, pointy glasses, and a thin-lipped smile. On the lapel of her crimson blazer, Greg spies a circular pin that he knows all too well, except this one has a red rim and a gold interior. The words etched onto it are different, too. Where Julien's said Certified, hers says Master. Greg's heart squishes with uncertainty.

"Good evening, gentlemen. My name is Angelina Kovaski, the house Master Sommelier. Can I interest you in tonight's selections?"

Stryker is quick to say yes.

As Angelina begins her rundown of the highlights, Greg picks out words he helped Julien study in those late-night strip sessions that were equal parts sexy and serious. His heart wobbles as he wonders if being here tonight is a betrayal of all the growth he's made since settling in Allentown.

Without fully thinking about what he's saying, Greg orders one of Julien's favorites for himself—Lambrusco, a sparkling red wine from Italy. It's one they had at a paint-and-sip at Studio Artiste. Why he's so set on hurting himself through his taste buds is beyond him. The matter is only made worse when Stryker insists they get a bottle instead.

Over heavy pours of memories in a glass, Greg remains as present as possible. Through four courses, two bottles, and several photos taken for branded content, Greg nods and agrees and chimes in when it feels appropriate in the small gaps

Stryker leaves in his near continuous monologue about new clubs, old friends, and the many pitfalls of Ubering in NYC.

It's not until they're back at Stryker's cavernous apartment, which could be Greg's apartment soon should he play his cards right, that he comes to terms with two things: one, he never answered, either way, about moving in with Stryker even though their meal lasted just under two and a half hours; two, he's far more drunk than he intended to get.

It's a hazard of his medication. There's a woozy sleepiness that fills his body as he settles on Stryker's black leather couch that probably costs more than Rufus's grandmother's house.

"Nightcap?" Stryker asks after he's slipped into something more comfortable, which turns out to be the tiniest shorts imaginable that show off his thighs, a barely there tank top, and a kimono that scarcely clears his ass.

In his present state, with eye candy temptingly dangled in front of him, Greg figures why not?

The more alcohol he has in his system, the less Julien is on his mind. The less Julien is on his mind, the more Greg can, despite his double vision, imagine what his life might look like in this apartment. Waking up in the morning and making Nespresso. Filming TikToks in a real, enviable, picturesque kitchen. Having sex in a California king bed.

A California king bed which Greg, another glass of wine later, finds himself in, nestled against million-thread-count sheets and pressed against Stryker Storm.

Their kisses can't quite be classified—scorching, burning? Greg is too busy cataloging the differences between kissing Julien, a right he earned, and kissing

Stryker, something Stryker seemed to expect from him when he suggested they relocate to the bedroom.

Greg, not wanting Julien to interfere with this, lets his hands ground him in the moment. His head may be bobbly and his heart may be hiccupy, but his palms roam with a desperate want. This isn't exactly a want for Stryker. No, perhaps, it's more of a desperate want to be satisfied with his decision. To belong. To know stability for once in his life. To not use positivity as a mask for what's uncomfortable but to manifest it through his everyday with ease.

Despite his best efforts, with Stryker grinding on top of him, pressing onto him with equal weight, Greg can't seem to get it up.

Stryker is, without a doubt, a prime specimen of human. Worked out in ways rarely seen outside of superhero movies. Hair so full and luscious it could have its own shampoo campaign. Yet no matter where Greg's hands land—the two perfect, smooth globes of Stryker's ass or his perky, pink erect nipples—Greg can't overcome the voices in his head asking him if this is the right move.

Tackling it almost as a challenge, Stryker moves to take Greg in his mouth. Ten minutes, maybe more. Stryker licks and sucks and fondles. Greg likes the sensation. He does. But it doesn't matter if he closes his eyes or watches, relaxes or tenses. Nothing he does makes his boner appear.

Dread covers Greg like a wet blanket when Stryker starts easing up and shifting away. His jaw is probably tired. Greg notices Stryker's dick is flaccid now, too.

“Sorry,” Greg mutters, swiping his hands across his hot cheeks. “It's the wine and my GAD and the medication.”

Stryker nods, not looking at him. “I figured. I guess I just assumed you'd stopped

taking it. You seem so...”

Greg sits up. “So what?”

Stryker edges off the bed, lifts his broad shoulders in a noncommittal shrug. “Happy, I guess.”

A freight train crashes into Greg’s sternum. Happy? When he and Stryker reconnected, Greg was reeling from Julien’s words in the airport drop-off lane which, now that he’s had more time and distance from the conversation to process, he can admit were probably partially to do with his own bad timing. Regardless, how could Stryker have mistaken him for plainly happy? Isn’t that a feeling reserved for those uncomplicatedly in love?

Love.

In a way, Greg loves Julien. It is probably too true to ignore now. But too late, all the same.

“Just because I seem happy doesn’t mean I stop having a mental illness,” Greg says.

Stryker is slipping back into his shorts and kimono. “Yeah.”

The sentiment clearly didn’t land the way Greg intended it to. Despite that, he still wants to reassure Stryker. Greg has quit his job. Greg has given up his room in Rufus’s house. Greg has to make his second chance at life in New York City work.

“It’s not you.” Though, Greg will have to wrestle with the validity of that statement later, because maybe it is a little bit Stryker.

The comfort Julien provided him inside the bedroom was part of what mitigated the

pressure to perform, which made the experience more pleasurable and helped his erection come to the party. Sure, the second medication helped, too. And it definitely didn't hurt that Julien was so delicately beautiful in an unbreakable way, but still.

Everything about this scene from the luxury mattress to the silky sheets should give him comfort, but the steely gaze of misunderstanding from the man on the other side of the room negates all other sensations.

"I'm sorry," Greg says, even though he doesn't want to be.

"It's fine," Stryker says. It's such a sharp contrast to Julien's open acceptance of Greg's ED struggles. "I'm going to shower."

When Stryker shuts the door to the massive, all white en suite, Greg finds his underwear at the foot of the bed and slips them back on. He curls into a ball and closes his eyes, sinking into the memory foam pillow and wishing he could go back in time, delete the email from Bar Deco, and live the life he wanted before he ruined it all.

JULIEN

Sangria night morphs into a surprise going away party for Greg. Julien stands on a ladder, hanging up a sparkly banner announcing the departure of the first guy he's fallen for in ages. It's depressingly poetic.

Aunt Augustine and Uncle Martin have gone all out. They covertly passed around a card to the staff the night before so they could all sign their well wishes. They even wrote Greg a little going-away bonus check and stuffed it inside the envelope before they sealed it.

Julien hasn't said a word about Greg leaving to anyone for fear they might read into it, hear his heartbreak acutely. The last thing he wants is sympathy. He knew Greg for, what, six months?

But he supposes his face is too expressive for its own good because as soon as they tie the knots to the beams above them and fold up the ladders, Aunt Augustine corners him and asks the question he knows she's been itching to ask. "Did you ever tell Greg about your feelings for him?"

He flounders, unable to lie to his mother figure. "Not exactly."

"So, that's a no." She narrows her eyes.

"The timing was wrong." Julien sighs. "He'd made his choice."

"What happened to what we talked about before you left?" Her confusion is evident

by her closed-off stance.

He shrugs, nonplussed. “Greg drove me to the airport and sprang his interview on me. He kept saying how it was better pay and a good opportunity.”

“What did you say?” There’s an urgency embedded in her question that cuts through to Julien’s core.

“I said we hit the list and that we didn’t need him anymore.” He hates having to relay all of this. As if his mind weren’t supplying it intrusively every night after he shuts off the light. Sometimes, even before darkness takes hold of his empty bedroom.

Aunt Augustine’s eyes bug out, though she remains silent for seconds longer than Julien can be comfortable with.

“What?”

“Say that again.”

“Say what again?”

“What you said to me that you said to him.”

Julien squints but rolls the tape back once more, enduring the pain for the sake of this torturous but probably necessary conversation. “That we hit the list and we didn’t necessarily need him anymore.”

“So that’s where he got it!” She is nodding to herself, not letting Julien in on her private thoughts. She shifts her weight, appearing incredulous.

“I feel like we’re having two totally different conversations.” Julien props the ladder

up against the wall, wipes the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. The quicker they can set this up, the quicker it will be over, and the quicker Greg will be gone. Just like Colin before him, Julien will spend several weeks dissecting his leave-ability and then ultimately hop back on the apps to start the process all over again.

Though there is a bothersome vibrating in his chest that tells him this time isn't like the others. This time, the hurt is going to stick around for a while like gum in the grooves of the soles on his favorite shoes.

“When Greg put in his notice, he said we didn't really need him anymore,” Aunt Augustine says. “You get to know a guy for half a year, and you start to predict what he would and wouldn't say. That's not something the Greg Harlow who came here in September would say unless he heard it somewhere, and I knew it wasn't from your uncle or me.”

This statement creates a lump in the back of Julien's throat. “Are you...” he tries to get his words out around the stubborn lump, but it's difficult “...suggesting this is my fault?”

“No, Julien, of course not, but can't you see how that might've come across as hurtful?”

They've had conversations like this one a lot. In childhood, because of Julien's mostly undiagnosed mental health problems, he spent many social interactions sucked deep into his own mind. Which sometimes meant he responded rudely, and it wasn't until reflection that he was able to see more clearly where he'd gone astray.

Julien seriously hasn't considered that he'd been rude, but realizing it now still doesn't quite color in the situation the way Aunt Augustine seems to think it does. “He waited until the last minute to tell me about the interview, he'd already accepted it, and he was going off about how good the pay was going to be. He wanted my

permission to leave, so I gave it to him.”

Aunt Augustine puckers her lips before saying, “Or, hear me out on this, maybe he wanted you to give him a concrete reason to stay.”

Stay?No. In Julien’s experience, people don’t stay. Not his parents. Not Colin. When Uncle Martin and Aunt Augustine hit retirement age, they’ll pass the restaurant on to Julien and head south to Florida for good. Leave him here.

Leave him.

Leave.

Patterns don’t break just because you want them to.

Julien shakes his head fast. The quicker he does it, the quicker his brain will click back into place. “That’s not it at all. He accepted the interview before even talking to me. On top of that, he met up with his ex while he was in Manhattan. That’s who he’s been with all weekend. I saw the photos of them at some restaurant in Tribeca on Instagram.”

He can’t get those photos or that gaudy watch out of his head. He could never, in his present post and financial situation, compete with a man who can give Greg gifts like that and take him to restaurants with four dollar signs on Yelp. Julien can’t be part of Greg’s old world. It’s clear now that Greg was only pretending to be part of Julien’s current one.

Maybe if Julien were a master already, things would be different, but he’s not, so they aren’t, and that’s that.

“That sounds an awful lot like an excuse not to be vulnerable. I know trust doesn’t

come easy for you, but you trust me, right?”

Julien takes stock of Aunt Augustine’s kind blue eyes, her fiery red hair, and the bright orange pointed acrylics glued to her fingernails. Above anyone, he trusts her, so he nods.

“Wouldn’t you say I earned that? After everything you went through, all the ugliness with your parents, it was clear you couldn’t just let your uncle and me into your life, no questions asked. We knew that. Do you remember that period, right at the beginning, when you were scared to get in the car with me?”

“Vaguely.” All of Julien’s memories from that time are a little fuzzy. His therapist says that’s expected when children go through severe trauma.

Julien can tell these words are painful for Aunt Augustine to say. “When you came to live with us, we couldn’t get you in a car. It made sense. You were in the back seat when your mom got into that drunk-driving accident. Luckily, she’d had enough clarity of mind to buckle you into your car seat before taking off. Thank God those airbags worked. When we got to the hospital, she was in a neck brace, and the doctors told us all you got were some bruises from the seat belt yanking you back, but I knew that wasn’t true. Well, physically it was true, but mentally, I wasn’t convinced. Especially not with everything that came after.”

Julien is burdened anew by those tenuous years of hearings and caseworkers and fights on the front lawn for the neighbors to see. He’d close his eyes and squeeze his muscles and wish against all might that he could make himself small enough to disappear.

Augustine continues, “We got you on the LANTA bus and the school bus no problem, though, which made us realize that it was us, not the car itself, you didn’t trust. So under the guidance of your therapist at the time, we started small. Quick

trips to the Wawa around the corner to get SnoBalls and blue raspberry Icees. We'd sit in the parking lot drinking them until we got brain freeze, then we'd stick our thumbs up to the roofs of our mouths to make the numbness subside."

"I remember that part." A smile creeps up onto Julien's face, the phantom taste tickling over his tongue.

"It was a four-minute drive, maybe five if we hit a red light, but it was quick. Then the next time, I asked, 'Do you want to go to Wawa?' and you got all excited, except this time I drove in the opposite direction. I purposefully went to the Wawa in the town over. You were so perceptive, even then, and when I glanced in the rearview mirror, I saw panic on your face. I nearly turned right back around, but instead I said, 'Heard the Icee machine at ours is broken.' And you made it. There were no tears. Just Icees and brain freezes and a sugar high on the drive back. You caught on to my plot eventually, going to farther and farther Wawas, but by the time we hit the Wawa by the New Jersey border, it didn't matter. You trusted me. You knew I was not going to make the same mistakes your mom did. That I was going to keep you safe. That I was going to adhere to the speed limit and be cautious and always double-check your seat belt. You never, not once, cried on any of those trips, but I did, when we got home. God, I was practically inconsolable."

"Why?" he asks.

"Because you'd been through so much, and I wanted you to feel safe with us, that we weren't some fractured, replacement family. We were your family for the long haul. That we would be different."

"You were," Julien is quick to say, reassuring her even though he suspects she's trying to reassure him. Of what? He's not quite certain yet.

"I know. And I know, also, that the situations aren't completely comparable, but

hasn't Greg earned your trust as well? Wouldn't you trust him to drive you to Wawa for a blue raspberry Iced and remind you what to do when you inevitably get brain freeze?"

Julien does, and he would. He would sit in a parking lot for hours with Greg and never get bored, never grow tired of listening to his laugh and his stories about the academy or bartending school, or of looking at that ridiculously handsome face.

But Greg accepted the other job, and after overhearing him talk with some of the bussers, Julien knew he went apartment hunting last weekend. "It's too late, though."

Aunt Augustine takes Julien by the shoulders. "No, it's not. There's no such thing as too late. I thought, after all those failed IVF attempts and adoption attempts, that it was too late for me to be a mom and then the universe brought me you." There are tears in her eyes now.

Julien dabs at his own before throwing himself into a big, sloppy hug. "Thank you. I love you."

"I love you, too," she says into his hair, holding him tightly.

This is one element about his family Julien knew the kids who teased him would never have when it came to their families: a choice. He doesn't mean in blood relation or address or where his meals came from; he means in how free he could be with his heart.

From birth, there is a social obligation to adore your parents. But he learned an important lesson at a very young age: parents are people, too. Flawed people. People who make mistakes and can be careless. Sometimes, people who just aren't meant to be or don't want to be parents.

At first, Julien only knew Martin and Augustine tangentially from Christmas cards and—when his parents had it together enough to recognize the day and didn't have to work—the occasional Thanksgiving dinner. So when he landed on their doorstep, there was no built-in expectation, no greeting-card industrial complex to feed with clichéd affection.

Martin and Augustine could've easily deferred their rights, sent Julien to Florida to stay with the grandparents he'd never even met, and if they wouldn't take him, he could've just as easily been swallowed into the foster system. But Martin and Augustine chose Julien, and after many car rides and SnoBalls and blue raspberry Icees, Julien chose them.

This is how Julien has always handled his heart.

They earned his trust, so he gave his love.

There's no denying that Greg earned his trust over the last six months. One withheld interview can't change that. Julien couldn't have told Greg about his parents, taken Greg to his sacred paint-and-sip, and let Greg fuck him without a condom if he hadn't.

So he should let Greg know that he has a choice. Julien will choose Greg if Greg wants to choose him back. Even if that also means choosing to overcome misunderstandings, lifestyle differences, and the new state line between them.

Because Julien knows in his heart that Greg is worth it.

After all of this, he just hopes Greg feels the same.

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 6:09 am

GREG

“Surprise!” the entire staff shouts when Greg enters Martin’s Place. A metallic banner reading Happy Going-Away, Greg! hangs over their heads.

Weird phrasing. Weird feelings. Greg wants to rip down the banner and run away.

Or rather, run back.

He doesn’t want to leave. Even if that still means he can’t be with Julien.

Ever since he dipped out of Stryker’s apartment on Sunday morning while Stryker was still sleeping, Greg’s been stuck wondering how he can take it all back, even if his bartending gig is up on Indeed and his room in Rufus’s house is up on Zillow.

Greg thought it was odd when he got the text from Augustine telling him to come in an hour later than usual, but he didn’t want to make a big deal out of it since he is leaving them in a lurch. As far as he could tell over the past week, they weren’t being inundated with applicants to replace him, and the few they did get weren’t qualified enough. Greg swears he wasn’t eavesdropping, but it’s not a big restaurant.

Julien stands behind the bar, two acrylic drink dispensers filled with liquid and fruit before him. Greg’s heart aches. But with no job and no place to live in Allentown, what’s he supposed to do?

“Aw, thanks, everyone,” Greg says to muffle the shouting in his head. Retreat! Retreat! Because that’s not how he works.

When the academy spat him out after graduation, he booked a one-way ticket to New York City. Go! Go! When he got the offer to work at Martin's Place after credit card debt and Stryker's rejection ran him out of New York City, he packed up his life once again. Go! Go!

For once, he'd like the merry-go-round of his life to stop. He wants to get off his horse, plop down in one of those rocking benches (preferably next to Julien), and hash this out. This is wishful thinking, but maybe looking on the bright side doesn't always have to be a coping mechanism. Maybe sometimes it can be a strength.

Augustine steps forward, extends an ecru-colored envelope out to Greg. "We wanted to give you a proper send-off. A thank-you from us to you for all the amazing work you did here with us. We're gonna miss you, Harlow."

The card might as well be a brick. It weighs him down. He wants to tie it to his ankle so they can't drag him out of there at the end of the night. Of course, he's got one more shift tomorrow, but it's a quick one, and Fridays are too busy for all this.

The crowd steps aside, and Rufus and Jessica stand there. On their heads are pointy paper party hats. In their hands are noisemakers that unroll and whizz.

Greg wants to, but won't, cry.

Everyone lines up for a glass of sangria, conversations break off, and Greg gets a ton of pats on the back, lots of voicings of "good luck." He'll miss these people, especially because the smells and faces and everyday gossip have become commonplace and comforting. Will he find that at his new job?

Bar Deco has already begun advertising his start. COME GET SERVED BY GOODWITHHISHANDSHARLOW. When his new boss texted him the picture, he couldn't help but roll his eyes. In Allentown, he got to be Greg, and that photo

illustrated that once he returned to New York, he'd be reduced to his handle once again. A personality. A body. A means to an end.

Martin comes around. "Let's get a little sangria in you before we send you on your way."

Greg had purposefully been avoiding the line. Everyone was limited to one glass, but he overdid it over the weekend. He needed to be sober, even if that would make the whole evening harder to endure. Plus, he didn't want to have to be served by Julien. If they could say goodbye from afar, it would be easier. Less painful.

"Eh, I—"

"I insist."

By the time Greg reaches the front of the line, Martin has disappeared and so has a good amount of the sangria. Nervously, Greg meets Julien's eyes. Arresting him to the spot. "You made the sangria without me..."

"I did," Julien confesses. "I came in early. I wanted you to be able to enjoy your celebration."

"I've been so busy packing that I forgot to even send over inspiration for the mix." Greg scratches the back of his neck so he has something to do with his fidgety hands. "Sorry."

"Don't be. I figured it out." Julien has the ingredient cards on their shiny metal sticks facing backward. He gives Greg the tiniest, sweetest smile. "Can I offer you some white?"

On the signage, above the list of wine, liquor, and fruits, Greg reads I'm Sorry for

What I Said White Sangria. It's unmistakably Julien's handwriting.

"I'm sorry, Greg." Julien has his hands clasped in front of his chest, as if nearly begging.

Once again, A man! Apologizing! Groundbreaking! Twice in only a matter of days. This time means more, though.

"When I said we didn't need you anymore, I was saying it from a place of surprise and hurt. I don't say that as an excuse. I rationalized it by assuming you were looking for permission to leave and were giving me polite notice on the end of our sex pact, but the truth is..." Julien flips around the sign beside the receptacle of red. It reads I Want to Make It Right Red Sangria. "Can we take a walk?"

Greg wavers, cheeks still burning hot from Julien's sweet signs. His hesitant heart reminds him that the walk could end in an epic goodbye, one last conversation before letting go. The thoughtful gesture doesn't mean reconciliation.

Not yet, but still hopeful, Greg agrees.

JULIEN

While nodding to Uncle Martin and Aunt Augustine who hold each other out on the makeshift dance floor, swaying to a slow song Rufus is playing, Julien leads the way outside. He tries not to entertain thoughts that he could have what they have, with Greg.

This impending conversation could chart several different courses, and despite his preparation and what he feels in his heart, his head has to be practical, quickly unfolding a safety net below the tightrope of emotions he's walking.

The spring air has a slight, pleasant chill to it that cools Julien enough to speak again after a deep, audible breath. “The truth is, Greg, that this has been more than a sex pact for me for a while now. I’ve grown to trust you and really look forward to the time we spend together, both around and outside of work.”

Afraid that he might read too much into Greg’s expressions, Julien fixes his gaze ahead on the stone facade of the old YMCA as they saunter down Main Street, keeping step despite their stride differences. Around the corner, Julien spies the large glass library with its Japanese zen garden to the right. It’s all rocks and flowing fountains and cherry blossom trees that have finally reached peak bloom. If he’s going to get his heart broken, he wants to do it surrounded by beautiful pink flowers.

The nearest stone bench is spotlighted by the dipping orange sun, so Julien takes that as a sign to sit there, gesturing for Greg to join him before producing a crumpled-up card from his coat pocket. “This is what I was originally going to put for the red sangria.”

The card that reads I Really Like You Red Sangria is dwarfed in Greg’s large hand. “I appreciate the alliterations,” Greg says with a growing smirk.

“I thought you would.” Julien’s cheeks heat up again as he launches into his explanation. “Honestly, a similar thing happened with Colin before you came to town. I was starting to entertain feelings for him beyond our hookups, but I was too scared to say anything, then all of a sudden, he was moving away. I didn’t want to make that same mistake again. Not with you. Especially because...because my feelings for you are bigger, scarier. Boy, sorry, if this is a weird awful word vomit.”

“Julien.” Greg places his hand on top of Julien’s, which rests on the space of stone bench between them. Julien never wants to be without that warm, reassuring touch. “I’m listening. It’s not weird or awful. Truthfully, it’s wonderful.”

Julien dons a smile that puffs out his cheeks, totally unselfconscious. “Does that mean...?”

“That I like you, too? Yeah, yeah it does. I was going to tell you before you left for Texas.” Greg shifts away, a display of something akin to guilt.

“I was going to tell you when I got home...”

A laugh launches out of Greg that infects Julien, too. “A storm of bad timing, I guess.”

“A storm that’s only continued. Here I am, finally telling you that I like you in the middle of your going-away party.” Julien’s eyes land on a willow across the way, which mirrors his posture in this moment, all hunched over. Instead of feeding into his shrinking instincts, he straightens up. He knows how he feels and whatever the blowback, he can handle it. “But,” he says, voice more assertive now, “I had to tell you. I know you’re leaving and that Stryker is back in your life.”

“He’s not,” Greg interrupts. “That was a lapse in judgment to say the least. I fell back into a comfortable habit. Yeah. That’s what he was to me, a habit. But I’ve kicked it. And if I could, I’d kick New York. Straight to the curb.” He digs his shoe into the rocks in a show of frustration.

“You don’t want the job?” Julien senses his heart reinflating slowly.

Greg shakes his head. “I don’t want the job or the city or the too-small-too-noisy apartment. I don’t want to pack my stuff into brown boxes and wait hours for subway cars that aren’t coming. I don’t want to leave Martin’s Place, and I don’t want to leave you.”

Hot salty tears rim Julien’s eyes instantly. It’s everything he’s ever longed to hear,

packaged in a way he never imagined hearing it, from a man he couldn't have ever expected to be real. He snuffles, blinks back what he can before saying, "I don't want you to leave, either."

Greg leans forward and wraps Julien in one of those only-Greg-could-give-them hugs. "I'm sorry I sprang the interview on you. Since I'm working my way out of the debt hole I'm in, I was scared that their shiny hourly rate might be my only chance at doing it in the near future, but I think you've shown me that sometimes there are even better options beyond the obvious."

If Greg weren't holding him so tightly there in the zen garden, Julien fears he might float away like one of the pink petals on the spring breeze from how light he feels. "How so?"

"I mean, since you came into my life, I've taken up painting, gotten on a new medication. I've tried different kinds of wines and even more different kinds of sex toys." Greg leans back so Julien can see his full expression. The way his words brighten his features—cheeks lifting, eyes lightening. "I had this wrong perception of New York City. That it's the place where you go to make it, to prove your parents wrong about you. When you tell people you live there or post about living there, you get treated like you're top-shelf when really, right now, you're well liquor. Call liquor at best. And my journey to premium doesn't need to look the way I thought it would when I was eighteen. I have a whole new vision." Greg takes both of Julien's hands in his.

"What does that vision include?" Julien asks, hoping to hear that it includes them together.

"Making social media content to help the restaurant, but not for monetization. Doing it because I love it and not because it's easy cash flow," Greg says to start. "Maybe using my mixology know-how to write a recipe book. Finally put down all those

TikTok concoctions on paper so they can reach more people in a more tangible way.”

“That would be amazing.” Julien squeezes Greg’s hand.

“It would be,” he says, nearly wistful. “The last piece is planting roots in a place where people get me. Allentown and Martin’s Place have really started to feel like home but...”

Julien scoots in closer, undeterred by Greg’s hesitancy. “I think the boss would be thrilled by your change of heart, and if he isn’t, I’ll remind him that I might own this place one day, so I should get a say in who works here.”

This idea doesn’t scare him as much as it used to because, as Carlos reminded him, being a sommelier is like making wine, it’s a process—from picking to fermenting to bottling. You can’t rush the steps just to get it to market. The best wines, like the best careers and relationships, take time.

“But Rufus has already listed my room for rent. He’s got people interested.”

Julien reaches deep within and chooses to make a leap of faith. “I think I know a guy who can offer a reasonable rent payment and wouldn’t mind sharing his bed with you.” OCD be damned. For Greg Harlow, he will, for the first time, learn to cohabitate. He knows it will be chaos—that boxes will be everywhere for a while. That, over several weeks, he and Greg will need to sift through every item Greg owns and see which can stay and which can be donated. There’s no reason to have two colanders or two plungers. But Julien’s got his medication and a great therapist. A little disorganization for a little while will not plummet his life into anarchy.

Greg’s smile crests across his face like an unclouded sunrise. “I would love to live with you, Julien.”

For the first time, Julien hears his name like a classical song. Like Greg's voice is an entire string section, and he's instantaneously composed the world's most beautiful music out of three simple syllables. "Does that mean you'll stay?"

"I'll stay," Greg whispers. "I'll always stay."

Julien kisses Greg in the fading sunlight right as a wind whips through and pink petals fall off the tree and float around them in lovely, heart-stopping swirls.

When the kiss disconnects, Julien stands, holds out his hand to Greg, and says, "Let's go tell everyone your going-away party is now a welcome home party."

Greg rises, grabs Julien around the waist, and lifts him clear off the ground, prompting another kiss that catapults them into a new chapter of their relationship.

GREG

One week later, Greg, Rufus, and Jessica pull into the parking lot outside of Julien's apartment complex that will now also be Greg's apartment complex. Turns out, the timing couldn't have been better.

Jessica's semester was coming to an end at the same time as her lease. She and Rufus had been discussing the idea of moving in together, so they were all too thrilled when Greg told them he was staying but that he was moving in with Julien. Without the need for a third roommate, they were discussing how they should turn the second bedroom into an office slash home gym on the ride over.

"Mom and Dad," Greg joked from the middle of the weathered bench seat in the moving van, "you haven't even dropped me off yet."

Now, here they are.

Julien stands on the sidewalk, waving, in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt with a rolling dolly and a stack of old comforters so none of Greg's stuff gets scuffed in transit from the truck to the apartment on the third floor.

"This is niiiice," Jessica says upon entering the apartment for the first time.

Julien beams. "Thanks."

Greg agrees. This place is nice. Julien works hard to make it so. Greg can't wait to add to that niceness. He doesn't care if that means a chore chart or throwing out old

bedside lamps that don't match the aesthetic. He has never been a stickler for those sorts of things. He's just immeasurably happy to be here in a place that makes him feel safe, wanted, and needed.

"Definitely an upgrade," Jessica says, patting Greg on the shoulder as he hauls in a black chest.

"Hey," Rufus said, setting down a box of Greg's clothes in the living room. "Don't knock Nan's place."

"Never, babe," Jessica says, placating, distracting Rufus with a kiss before going for a cup of coffee in the kitchen.

It takes about two hours, but finally, the last piece is unloaded from the truck while Jessica is out. She returns sometime later with taco salads for all of them. They sit in Julien's kitchen eating and chatting.

"How did they take it at Bar Deco when you told them you weren't taking the job after all?" Jessica asks.

"Let's just say the response was giving 'you'll never work in this town again.'" Greg puts on the transatlantic accent of a 1940s film star. Julien laughs at him, which mitigates any guilt Greg may feel about the late notice. "Whatever. I don't foresee that being a problem." He reaches out for Julien's hand. The light gesture is his way of letting Julien know that he's here for both a good time and a long time. No shiny job or doubts are going to lure him away.

Jessica finishes chewing on a chip with guac. "At least you won't have to worry about a new work nemesis."

Rufus nudges his girlfriend, giving her a wide-eyed look.

“What?” Her eyes land on Julien. “Ah. Oops.”

Julien’s eyebrows converge. “What’s a work nemesis?”

“It’s nothing,” Greg is quick to say, growing more flushed and anxious by the second.

Jessica says, “There’s no use lying. Julien was there, too.”

“Where, too? What’s going on?”

Greg shakes his head, sighing. “When I started at Martin’s Place last year, I sort of thought you hated me, so Jessica told me that you were my work nemesis. That we were doomed to be at odds with each other because of our differences—wine versus cocktails, extroverted versus introverted. It’s nonsense.”

“It’s valid,” Julien surprises everyone by saying and then laughing. Greg’s heart nearly stops. “Not the hating you part. I never hated you. I was intimidated by your confidence and afraid you were going to change Martin’s Place too much, and clearly I was wildly attracted to you, which was inconvenient and confusing, as you already know.”

“See?” Jessica says, playing innocent.

“I never hated you, either,” Greg says, as reassuringly as humanly possible. “Just so you know.”

“I know,” Julien says, rubbing the back of his hand.

“But I was also wildly attracted to you.”

“I know that, too.”

Heart skipping a beat, Greg leans over and kisses Julien.

“Ew,” Rufus says, throwing a balled-up napkin their way. “Get a room!”

Breaking off the kiss, Julien says, “We have one. We share it now. It’s just down the hall.”

Greg smiles brightly because he is home. Finally.

JULIEN

Later, after they finish eating and Rufus and Jessica go home, Julien perks up and says, “I have a small surprise for you.”

“Oh, yeah?”

Julien leads Greg by the hand to their shared bedroom and opens the closet to one side.

“You cleaned out a side for me,” Greg says, looking heartened. “Thanks.”

Julien laughs a little confusedly. “Yeah, I did that. Of course. But that’s not what I meant. Come closer.” He zeroes in on Greg’s reaction when he leans down and turns on the light. He reaches for a new stack of organizer cubes. In each drawer, he’s greeted with harnesses, cock rings, dildos, and other such debaucheries, all carefully arranged.

“These are new,” Greg says, holding up a pair of nipple clamps with a chain holding one to the other. “And these.” He’s got a pair of handcuffs.

“They’re not the only new thing you’ll find in there,” Julien says.

In the final drawer, Greg finds what Julien was hoping would draw his attention. It's a cream-colored, realistic dildo—grooved with veins and a sloping head—that's attached to a silicone cock ring.

Julien's heart thrums in his rib cage, imagining that toy plunging inside him. "It's a double penetration dildo. One is this one." He reaches out and strokes the exterior of the toy in a way he hopes is deeply sensual and not awkward. "The other one is..." He looks up to meet Greg's eyes, hunger emanating out of every pore.

"Me," Greg says followed by a low growl.

Julien's nod is heavy, and the next thing he knows they're in the scalding shower, scrubbing away moving-day sweat and sharing teasing kisses that distract them from the task at hand. Even with suds dripping down their noses, their kisses keep on with ferociousness.

Tonight is the first night banked toward a hopeful forever.

If that thought scares him, so what? Julien's heart rate is already up. His mouth is already drawn down in a gasp, elicited by Greg's fingers skating up the cleft of his ass. Adrenaline, lust, and fear all have similar effects, and right now, Julien enjoys being a tangled, live-wire disarray of emotions.

Using soap and his pointer finger, Greg works Julien's hole open. It's efficient, awe-inducing. Greg's TikTok handle clicks with new meaning. He certainly is good with his hands. Julien wants Greg to take him to bed, turn him into a cocktail shaker, and mix up his insides.

As if reading his mind, Greg shuts off the spray, throws a towel toward Julien, and remarkably without slipping, they race to the bedroom, erections bobbing in front of them like homing signals.

Greg vaults onto the mattress first, landing on his back, undulating his fingers for Julien to join him. But Julien doesn't. Not right away. He stands at the foot of the bed, hopelessly trying to contain his smile.

Greg fits there. It's as simple as that.

Everything in the room, from the bed to the bookshelves to the dresser to the arsenal of sex toys, relabels itself from Julien's to theirs.

"Hold on," Julien says, walking over to his neatly folded pants and producing his phone from the front pocket. He opens the camera app.

"What are you doing?" Greg asks, legs spread across the duvet, one arm up behind his head, armpit hair exposed.

"Capturing the moment. Your first night." Julien adjusts the lighting a tad, hoping one picture can encapsulate the massive feelings stacking up inside him. "This will just be for me. For us. Is that okay?"

Greg settles in on the bed a little farther, allows his smile to dip more naturally. Julien takes the photo, knowing full well he will treasure this image forever.

"How do I look?" Greg asks when Julien stands there too long, bouncing his eyes between the screen and the gorgeous man awaiting him on the bed. How has he gotten this lucky?

"Good enough to taste." Julien locks his phone and gives Greg a cheeky smirk before crawling between his live-in boyfriend's legs and swallowing him whole. He suctions his mouth onto him, relishing the taste of clean skin and pre-come.

Keeping his lips locked around Greg's expanded head, Julien wraps his right hand around the thick shaft and massages Greg's hair-dusted balls with his left. Greg's

whole body trembles, cock growing harder and longer, stretching toward the back of Julien's throat.

Julien senses Greg's balls tightening under his touch.

"Julien, hold up," Greg says, panting between the words.

Julien lets up but only slightly. "It's okay, Greg. I want you to let go for me." Julien's normally traitorous, unholdable tongue dances around Greg's head, laps inside Greg's slit. Julien is hungry, and he knows it doesn't take Greg long to reload. Besides, it'll be easier to get the double fucker (that's what the toy packaging called it) around Greg if he's flaccid.

Julien wants to ride that to orgasm tonight. Maybe more than once. At least until the break of dawn. Until they break the bed. Until they break the universe with their love.

Love, love, love. Julien hears the word chanted from every cell in his body.

"If you're sure," Greg says, flopping back again, raking his hands through his thick dark hair in apparent ecstasy. "You're getting me so close."

"Come for me," Julien says, and then swallows Greg's load. Every delicious, salty, wonderful drop of it.

Breathing heavily, they both take a beat. Greg looks at Julien with orb-like eyes, making Julien feel like he's made of starlight, like he's glowing brighter than he ever has before.

Still horny, Julien grabs the toy and the corresponding bottle of lube. Carefully, he slicks the inside of the ring and, gently so as not to torture Greg's sensitive, post-orgasm penis, Julien slips the silicone around Greg's balls and shaft.

The dildo flops forward, calling to Julien. And Julien can tell Greg won't be tapped out for long because right underneath, the dildo flexes as Greg's cock comes alive again. To incentivize Greg even more, Julien turns away, parts his knees, and gives Greg an unobstructed show of where he wants him.

Reaching back, he slicks himself. Ever since his trip to the sex shop after the going-away-turned-welcome-home party, Julien has been prepping for this on his own, and Greg has unwittingly been helping on nights they weren't consumed with repacking all of Greg's belongings.

It took fingers, several increasing sizes of silicone and glass butt plugs, and Julien's more girthy dildos to get him to the point where he knew, against all decency, that the alluring, nearly eviscerating stretch of Greg's cock plus one would be exactly what he craved. An unmatched fullness.

Now, he displays his hard work for Greg with pride, unperturbed by how unwound he might look after a long, tiresome day. There's not an ounce of fatigue in his body. His energy surges from the head of his dick out through the rest of his body.

Suddenly, Julien senses a second slickness at his hole—one cool and one inferno-hot. Opening his eyes, he's greeted by the tops of Greg's large bare feet. He's bracketing Greg's bulky thighs, and the double-headed hydra of his dreams is pressed up against his spot.

"Yes," Julien moans as he sits back, accepting both tips at once, little by little. He has to focus on his breathing. No amount of prep could live up to the real thing. And the real thing is...whoa.

A head rush overtakes Julien as he flips onto his feet and squats down. Stretching and extending himself past the limits he previously believed possible.

"You're doing great, Julien," Greg says.

Julien never had much of a praise kink, but from Greg, he'd accept the affirmations gladly. They inspire him to drop lower, until he's entirely speared. Breathless. Overcome.

They hold there. Greg strokes Julien's back reassuringly, while obviously trying not to move his cock too much. Julien can barely handle this spectacular sensation. Any newness entered into the mix could kill the moment.

But the only thing Julien kills is his inhibitions, rising and grinding onto the dueling dragons emerging from Greg's pelvis.

He goes on like that for minutes. Fucking himself. Cursing. Listening for cues from Greg as to what's working for him because for Julien, all of this is working for him. He sees a long, healthy sex life rolled out before him where exploration and discovery are paramount with this person he's grown so comfortable with. His person.

"Julien?" Greg asks, pulling Julien from visions of their future selves trying everything under the sun in controlled spaces.

"Yeah?"

"Can you turn around so I can see your face?" Greg asks. "I might be close again."

Julien obliges, taking his time easing himself off, before turning around.

There Greg lies, flushed, a little sweaty, a smattering of dark hairs clinging to his forehead. He removes his hands from behind his head as Julien repositions himself and places them on Julien's slender hips.

Julien does not begrudge his slight frame in this moment. It doesn't matter that Greg's body is broader, wider. He's not comparing. Julien feels more capacious than

ever, more in control of his pleasure, his life, his mental health, and his relationships.

Which is why, after he engorges himself on the double fucker again from this new angle, Julien decides his tongue's inability to be held is no longer a fault. It's a superpower. A superpower that allows him to declare in full voice despite the millions of sparkling, shouting nerve endings inside him, "I love you, Greg Harlow."

It's not sex babble. It's not just the high of moving in together. It's the unvarnished truth.

When Julien looks down and takes in Greg's expression, he's surprised to see tears rimming the edges of Greg's intense dark brown eyes. Julien can't help but revel in how sexy a man tuned in to his emotions is.

"I love you, too, Julien Boire," Greg says without missing a beat.

It takes some maneuvering, but Julien pitches forward and kisses him.

Without a single drop of alcohol, they remain sweat-drenched and blissfully drunk on one another until the sun comes up.