

FOR
THE OTHER
TEAM

FOR
THE OTHER
TEAM

Elijah Noxley

Disclaimer:

This is a work of fiction.

Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the express permission of the publisher.

Amazon, the Amazon logo are trademarks of Amazon.com, Inc., or its affiliates.

For The Other Team by Elijah Noxley

Paperback ISBN: 9798243852463

Published by Elijah Noxley

Copyright © 2026 by Elijah Noxley

Cover design by Elijah Noxley

All rights reserved.

Content Warning

This novel explores themes and situations that may not be suitable for all readers.

Please be aware that the following elements appear throughout the story:

- Exploration of sexuality and identity, including questioning and coming-out experiences
- Same-sex romance and non-explicit intimate scenes
- Strong language
- Emotional distress, including anxiety, fear of rejection, and internalised pressure
- Toxic sports culture, secrecy, and fear of being outed
- Conflict involving relationships, family, and self-acceptance

Reader discretion is advised.

Dear Reader,

Thank you for embarking on this journey with me through the pages of this book. Your support means the world to me, and I hope the story resonates with you.

If you enjoy reading this book, I would be incredibly grateful if you could take a moment to **leave a review.**

Your feedback not only helps other readers discover this story, but it also encourages me as a writer and fuels my passion for writing.

Every review, no matter how brief, makes a significant difference. Thank you for being a part of my literary adventure and for your invaluable support.

Dedication to the Alphabet

From A to Z, your letters sing,
with every word, a world you bring.

You build each story, line by line,
crafting worlds, both real and divine.

From silent nights to busy days,
in countless forms, you find your ways.

You help me dream, imagine, write,
no matter the time, the day or night.

For all you give me, this book I send,
To you, *the alphabet*,
A life-long friend.

CONTENTS

BRAEBURN	17
FRESHER'S	29
REFUEL	47
ELEVEN AND SIX	69
THE SPARK THAT IGNITES THE FLAME	91
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS	107
SNOWLIGHT	117
AMBER HOURS	137
THE NEW BOY	151
SOMETHING LIKE BREATHING	167
IN THE SECRET MOMENTS WE SHARE	181
THE SOCK ON THE HANDLE	209
EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE COURSE	231
SOME KIND OF BRAVERY	249

ALL THE WAYS TO WIN ME BACK	259
BRAND NEW... TERMS	277
HE CAN'T TAKE HIS EYES OFF ME	299
WHAT'S UP WITH COACH KRABBY?	321
THE MATCH OF OUR LIVES	343
A DREAM OR LOVE	369
A DOG COMES INTO OUR LIFE FOR A REASON	391

B R A E B U R N

Technically... I should be buzzing right now.

Braeburn University—the place I’ve pinned all my hopes on. I step out of the cab and stretch, feeling a medley of excitement and nervousness, as if I truly deserve to be here.

Getting here wasn’t easy. But now? Well, here I am, standing in the shadow of this beige titanic building, thinking of all the cup league legends who trained here before me. Legends whose names will forever live rent-free within these sandstone walls and in my racing heart.

I grab my duffel bag from the taxi’s boot, everything I own shoved into fabric and zippers. The thought that this place is going to change everything surges through my tunnel-visioned mind.

But first, I need to go straight to registration.

The reception area is a hubbub of freshers, parents, and staff shouting directions. I grab my bag, join the queue, and scan the room, hoping to spot someone I know or find a familiar face amid the buzz.

‘Name?’ asks the woman sitting behind the desk, her face like a bulldog chewing a wasp.

‘Christopher Daley.’ I reply in my best telephone

voice... never fully understood why I use this when speaking with a “professional person”. It has always just been automatic—like breathing or mentally judging someone, but never actually telling them what you were thinking.

A few thunderous taps on her battered keyboard. I take a glance at her name badge.

Patricia Pale
Administration Assistant
Braeburn University

She slides the welcome pack across the dark wood of the desk between us without really looking at me. This place, this campus, everything about it feels like a step onto a pitch that truly matters. I’ve finally made it to the field where I can redefine myself, where every choice is a chance to be someone new.

‘Campus map, student ID, room key, and a sheet of rules. But I’m guessing the latter won’t be any help to you, Mr Daley,’ she says quickly.

I skim the contents of the pack on the desk for all of two seconds before my eyes swing back to her. Short black hair. Light complexion. An attitude that very clearly says don’t fuck about with me. I kind of like that about her...

‘Your room number is 6728, North Hall,’ she continues. ‘Once you’ve dropped your things, check in

with your SR. Then head over there for your induction session,' she jabs a chubby finger towards the entrance to a large hall. 'Or don't. I really couldn't care either way.' I offer a thin-lipped smile, more out of habit than warmth. 'Sure thing,' I reply, matching her indifference with a flat tone of my own. The words hang in the air, each syllable draped in the subtle tension of my unspoken irritation.

'Senior Resident,' she states, lifting her eyebrows as if she can't believe she has to explain this. 'The student in charge of your block. You'll find them somewhere in North Hall.' She fixes me with a look sharp enough to slice through concrete. 'Honestly, it's really not that deep. Now move along. This queue's long enough without you holding it up with your dumb-ass questions.' She leans her head to the side to see past me. 'Next!'

I nod, gripping the key in soft frustration at her attitude, and head towards the hall she pointed to.

The induction session drags on, listing rules, policies, and meal credits in a monotone that makes my eyelids heavy. Many of us fiddle with pens or check our phones, keen to escape this endless info dump, just as we skip those long terms and conditions when downloading an app. I shift in my seat, already fantasising about my room and the pitch.

North Hall is older than I expected; solid sandstone, worn edges, but sturdy. As I step inside, I'm struck by the faint echo of boots clicking against the stone floor, a

sound that feels oddly ceremonial. It's accompanied by the pungent scent of varnish mingling with fresh paint, an aromatic contrast to the dusty streets back home. This combination evokes a sense of new beginnings that intrigues me because I was sure this experience wouldn't differ much from my normal day-to-day life.

I find 6728, slot the key into the lock, push the door open with a screech, and I'm finally standing in my new home—at least for this year.

It's small and basic, and it definitely doesn't smell like the fresh paint in the hallways. More like the weak leftovers of someone's sweaty socks. Still, it's got the essentials: a bed, a desk, a wardrobe, and a window overlooking the sun-splashed pitch where studs will carve fresh lines into the grass. Most people would want a sea view, but honestly, I couldn't imagine a better one.

And then there's the empty bed across the room.

A reminder, I've got a roommate.

Someone's gonna walk in, dump their bags, disrupt my routine. Don't know them from Adam, and I'm just expected to share, suppose that's the Uni life for you. But honestly? I hope they never show up. I exhale, drop my bags. Exhausted, but still buzzing. The trip here was brutal. I had to get a cab, then a plane, to eventually stay in a grim hotel where the sheets exuded the smell of disappointment, an early rise with a half night's sleep and then another cab. Doesn't matter now, I suppose, the main thing is I'm here.

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

I flop onto the bed, head against the pillow. I take just a minute, a second to breathe...

Then—bang! I jolt awake.

Must've dozed off, cause suddenly he's here.

The dreaded roommate.

First impressions list is already growing; he's loud, entirely obnoxious, basically a walking wrecking ball. Suitcases hit the floor like they've been dropped directly from his plane. Zippers yank open. Clothes get chucked into drawers without a care in the world for my presence. A dented kettle rolls out, a quirky object among the chaos. It catches my eye—a hint that he might not just be a human wrecking ball. I clench my jaw, feeling the tension rise.

So much for a couple of seconds' peace. Not dealing with this. I shut my eyes, try to block it out. I've got the whole year to talk to this guy, no need to rush it.

Afternoon rolls around, and I'm pretty sure I've slept through most of the morning—not that I care. Wreck-It-Ralph finally stopped throwing luggage around. I crack my eyes open and scan the room from my lying down position. Looks empty. I sit up, focus on the door in front of me and stretch, ready to escape—and then I see him. Flat on his back, spread across his bed, like a deflated goalie sprawling to block a non-existent shot, not a stitch of clothing on him. My damn peripheral vision failed me. Not that it matters. Football locker rooms had desensitised me years ago. Whatever. Slowly

and carefully, I slide out of bed, grabbing my welcome sheet. Can't disturb the naked man beside me—not exactly what I pictured when I imagined meeting people here. I reach for the door handle, and I'm almost free when...

‘Alright?’

I clench my teeth. Shit... Almost made the great escape. Almost avoided the interaction. I turn around sheepishly. ‘Hey... buddy, sorry.’ I start slowly, ‘thought you were sleeping, just heading out to check out the freshers fair.’

‘Aye... sure. What’s yer name?’

Oh, fuck-my-life he’s Scottish... this is gonna take some focus work for me even to understand the guy! ‘Christopher... Christopher Daley.’ I reply slowly, hoping he gets the hint to slow his own speech.

He stands, still completely unclothed, zero shame.

Then he extends his right hand, but I don’t move. Briefly glance down, trying to make him realise.

‘Any chance you could... uhm...?’ Somewhere between the words “could” and “uhm”, he seemed to realise, though didn’t seem entirely bothered.

‘Oh, aye, shit, sorry.’ He grabs some black underwear that are covered in green leaves, fires them on with zero urgency, then he holds out his hand again. ‘Adam Yves,’ he says.

‘Wait, seriously?’ I ask.

I let out a laugh ‘Yeah, mate. Adam Eve. Like the

Universe ran out of ideas and just went with the obvious.’

Adam rolls his eyes and groans. ‘It’s French! Sort of, a think, never quite listened tae ma da. It’s pronounced Yves, Eee-Viii-Yiiih. Not Eve, like the chick fae the Garden of Eden.’

I nudge him with my elbow. ‘Tell that to literally everyone you’ve ever met. I bet even God would argue with you.’ I laugh.

Adam shoots me a look, but there’s a smile dawning. ‘This is literally what I have to live with. It’s French or some shit.’

His hand remained extended, so I shook it entirely out of obligation. ‘Nice to meet you... Adam N’ Eve.’ I crack a grin and flip the subject. ‘Anyway, do you, uh, always sleep like that?’

‘Aye. Would’ve warned ye, but ye were out cold when I got here. I literally canny sleep wae clothes on. Feels like am suffocating. The trip was murder, just wanted a kip yeno?’ He shrugs like this is the most reasonable thing in the world. As he speaks, I catch a faint earthy aroma wafting through the air, like crushed sage. It clings to him subtly, trailing his movements and revealing interests he hasn’t yet voiced. ‘Is it a problem?’

I glance at him with a confident and unbothered look on my face before I shrug my shoulders. Shake my head. ‘Used to it at this point, really, with the changing rooms and all at football.’

‘Aww, brill, am studying herbalism, well it’s actually

called “Clinical Herbalism,” if ye want the fancy name.’ he replies with a crooked smile.

Didn’t take me long to see this guy was definitely into herbalism, just not the kind he was probably studying... I’m sure... ‘Well... I’ll, uh, just be off then. But... uhm, see you around?’

‘Aye...sure, no’ like we won’t.’ he finishes with a small snort as he rubs his nose and heads back toward the bed.

I open the door, step into the hallway, after the most awkward wake-up interaction of my life. University is gonna be something else, I think, as I make my way down the hallway of North Hall.

A sudden frenzy of unease washes over me, sinking my stomach like a missed penalty shot in the final moments of a game. My pulse quickens as I become hyper-aware of the hallway bustling with students. Only then do I notice they’re not just scrolling on their phones anymore; they’re staring, not at their screens but at me. I feel a pang of self-consciousness, wondering if there’s something on my face. I stop, ‘What are you all looking at?’ I ask.

‘You’re on the Burnblog, mate. Level Two Burn.’

‘Burnblog?’ I query in confusion.

He flips his phone screen toward me. Oh! Gossip blog. Another waste of my time, I think, before I notice the photo... There I am. A picture of me walking onto campus this morning, fresh-faced, looking fucking clueless.

Level Two Burn 🔥 x2

“Braeburn’s newest footballer or newest poorballer? – xcx BB”

My stomach twists, a familiar sensation that only reminds me of my bigger fear: failing to prove I belong here. Ever since I received the acceptance letter to Braeburn, all I’ve wanted is to make it and to prove those who doubted me wrong. ‘What the hell is this? Some joke?’

‘Nah.’ The guy’s voice is casual, like this is just another part of the day-to-day here at Braeburn. ‘Burnblog determines your life here at Braeburn. Get a Level Ten Burn, and your career could be dead before it even starts, buddy.’ He turns to leave.

‘Wait—what’s your name?’

He glances back. ‘Tristan.’

‘Nice to meet you, Tristan, I’m—’

‘—Christopher Daley. Yeah, I know.’ He shakes his phone at me, smirking. ‘We all know.’

I stand there for a minute, realising that if I keep walking, I will be under constant scrutiny from everyone who’s seen that stupid blog post—something I really don’t have the mental capacity to deal with today. The fluorescent lights buzz overhead, casting a cold and unforgiving glare on the gleaming linoleum floor. The faint scent of floor cleaner mingles with the musty odour of the old, damp building in the air, while the muted

shuffle of feet echoes around me. Every sound seems amplified, each whisper and cough slicing through my thoughts like a hot knife through butter.

I clench my jaw, weighing my options. Heading back to the room feels like the lesser evil, better than walking through a sea of goggling eyes. It isn't the first time I've retreated to the safety of my own space, and it certainly won't be the last. At least back there, I can unpack, get the room sorted, and not have to do it later. As I make my way down the hallway, I feel eyes flick up from screens, each glance pressing against me, silent but no less intrusive.

I have no idea who controls this blog. No clue what its purpose is. All I know is I have to do everything possible to avoid being on it. At least for anything outside football. That? I can't control. I push open the door to the room, relieved to find Adam finally fully clothed. Good. At least I won't have to avert my gaze every time I look at him.

'You're back fast!' He raises an eyebrow.

'Yeah... left, and apparently, I was put on something called The Burnblog? Anyway, couldn't deal with the whole campus staring, so I came back here.'

'Burnblog?' His expression shifts as he grabs his phone and rapidly taps the screen. 'Oh aye! There ye are... Ha! Oh, it's only a level two. Nae biggie. As ma Granny would say, "It's no' worth a tinkle in the burn."'

I frown. 'What even is this fucking blog?' I'm hoping

for a better answer than the vague nonsense Tristan fed me earlier.

‘It’s basically a gossip column fur the University,’ Adam says, scrolling. ‘Anybody kin submit shit, and they post it way a Burn Ratin’. Bigger burns like an eight tae ten send a notification tae yer mobile—so if ye get hit way a bad burn, ye’ll ken about it before ye even step outside.’ He chuckles. ‘Ye should check out the site,’ he adds. ‘That way ye ken wits goin’ on and who’s sayin’ wit about who. Nae nasty surprises when ye leave the room like ye did there.’

I fold my arms, slightly pissed off now. ‘Who runs it?’

‘Naebody actually kens,’ Adam says, grinning. ‘Apparently, it gets passed down in secret. Ave heard they even dae ceremonies fur the next “heir” of the blog—it’s been goin’ fur donkeys now since before even ma’ da was goin’ tae this Uni.’ For a fleeting moment, his grin falters, just slightly, as if there’s something more he isn’t saying, but the smile returns quickly enough to almost miss it.

I don’t like the sound of this blog keeping tabs on everything I do. ‘Fair enough if they’re posting about me on the pitch,’ I mutter, ‘but I barely even got here before they decided I’m poor. They don’t even know me.’ The reality of being labelled without context stings; it’s as if my entire identity is being reduced to gossip and assumptions. Part of me relishes the spotlight as a footballer, the thrill of recognition, yet the other part

yearns for the privacy to define myself on my terms. I exhale sharply, the weight of it settling in.

‘They will ken so much about ye just cause yer one of the football lads. Just ignore it,’ Adam says, waving a hand. ‘Gee, it an hour, mate. Somethin’ juicier’ll pop up—probably about the next new hot stud footballer aht’s bound tae show up. One thing a have noticed, the football guys are on it all the time.’

I roll my eyes. ‘Yeah, well, suppose a better get used to it then, eh?’ I sigh, shoving clothes into drawers. At some point, I unconsciously started unpacking. ‘I need to go to my SA after I do this, fancy coming with?’ I ask.

‘Dae ye mean SR?’

‘Oh fuck, yeah, SR, “Senior Resident” as Patty from the front desk kindly informed me earlier, she has an attitude that one.’

He laughs. ‘Aye, she is a bit fiery, A need tae go there anyway tae check in, so we kin go together if ye want.’

F R E S H E R ' S

Adam had not stopped going on about this fresher's party that is happening tonight.

I've said repeatedly that I'm not going, it really isn't my thing, but somehow, he's managed to talk me into it.

I've been at this Uni for three days now, our class lessons don't start until next Monday because they give you the first week to settle in. How very nice of them, eh?

First class on Monday morning is Sports Science & Physiology, which covers the basics of human response to exercise. I'm really looking forward to it because it's a step toward understanding how to improve my performance. When I was younger, I used to wonder about those elite athletes and how they could push themselves to such limits. This class feels like a doorway to those secrets, a way to bridge the gap and maybe even set some personal records.

It's going to be interesting, because the best 'education' I got at school regarding exercise was Physical Education. Often, that just focused on us all

running about like headless chickens, playing dodgeball, or completing timed laps of the ash field—fun! But I always craved understanding why things happened, like why our hearts raced during those sprints and not just how fast we could run. This new course feels like it's finally going to answer those questions and explain the science behind what I've been curious about for so long.

But not quite what I wanted to learn, especially as I moved into the seventh and eighth years. The best bit about those last two years at school was the amount of free study time we got, to be honest.

Anyway, that lesson is followed up with Practical Sports Training, which I'm quite thrilled about. I feel it has been a while since I've been able to kick a ball around properly.

I'd spent most of yesterday afternoon out in the grassy area by myself, just knocking the ball about. The faint smell of cut grass lingered in the air, and each thud of the ball against my foot felt like a steady heartbeat, calming and familiar. I focused on my touch, stepovers, drag backs, little flicks that I've done a hundred times before. Those subtle sensations of the ball against my foot drew me back, grounding me in a reset moment, away from everything else.

It sounds daft, maybe, but it felt like a reset. That's the thing with football: it presents a constant challenge and a chance to grow, pushing me to discover new levels of my game. I don't just aim to avoid slipping; I train to

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

improve and refine my skills, to elevate my performance. I want to be a solid teammate who contributes to the team's success. It's about chasing that sense of progress, knowing that each practice session brings me closer to understanding and mastering the game I love.

It's more than muscle memory, though. It's quiet out there, just me and the ball, and for a while, I don't have to think about anything else—not about where I fit in, or what I'm even doing here. Sometimes, a fleeting thought crosses my mind, like Will I find my people here? But then it's silenced by the game's rhythm. The constant movement lets me focus entirely on what I'm doing, and that brings a quiet sense of relief. In those moments, everything else fades away, and I can find peace in the simplicity of playing.

Football just always made sense to me. It's the one part of my life I've always had control over, and that makes me feel warm and cosy inside.

So yeah, maybe I do take it seriously.

But when everything else feels like a bit of a blur, I guess this is the one thing that still feels as clear as the white seams streaking across the green. That sharpness, that clarity, it cuts through the chaos, leaving me with a sense of balance.

I had been checking out the Burnblog, some of the posts on there are brutal, but often it was just trivial shit like:

Level Five Burn 🔥 x5

“Heather Mattel seems to have upped the fashion standards for this term, although it’s a shame, she’s still five dress sizes too big. - xcx BB”

Not a clue who this Heather chick is. Body shaming, classy... definitely has to be a girl running this blog.

Level Four Burn 🔥 x4

“Aubray Stenton aiming for that acapella championships this year, hopefully it’s not another autotuned disaster with her and The Braebirds, eh? - xcx BB”

But there had been an update posted as a level one burn, probably cause this one had no real gossip in the post.

Level One Burn 🔥 x1

“Looks like we will all have some fun tonight, hey, don’t say I’m not nice! Have some fun on me and all your dirty washing shall remain in the basket, well... for tonight anyway... So, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do - xcx BB”

The glow of my phone screen flickered in the dim room, casting shadows that groped at the walls like whispers of unsaid words. A notification clicked through, breaking the fragile silence, and my chest

tightened with an inexplicable sense of dread. The fact that they even sign off these posts with a personalised signature is just sinister. The thought that they weren't going to be posting anything that happens at the fresher's party tonight brought me some comfort, maybe that is why I have agreed to go, who knows? Although I could guarantee this was a double play, "I won't post it tonight." Yeah, no chance you ain't posting the gossip tomorrow, though.

I have only ever had a beer a few times in my life. I don't drink, do drugs or smoke... what use is it for me to go to a party full of horny, pissed-up students? But there's a part of me that remembers a promise I made to myself at the end of summer. It was a fleeting moment, watching the sunset over the fields back home, vowing to embrace new experiences after missing out on so much during high school. This really is my fresh start, a chance for me to live a little, to not have regrets later. It's probably the reason I'm going, but I still can't see myself staying long.

I pull out a nice shirt and jeans from my drawers and place them on the bed, Adams on his phone, oblivious that I am even in the room. Well, that was until I started getting the clothes ready.

'Anything, whatever you want, truthfully. Nobody actually gives a shit,' he says. 'Your clothes are only gonna end up on the floor anyway.'

On the floor? I raise an eyebrow, "Time, is it?" I ask.

‘Half six. Party starts at seven.’

‘Shouldn’t we be getting ready to go?’

‘Chris... who shows up tae a party on time, mate?’

‘Well, I wouldn’t know cause as I said to you yesterday... this really isn’t my thing.’ I say as I grab the jeans and fire them back into the drawer, ‘You said anything goes, so how about this?’ I pull out a comfy cream cotton tracksuit, definitely more my style than jeans and a shirt.

‘Aye, ahts’ actually quite smart tae be honest. Don’t overthink it, mate, one half don’t care and the other half will be too out their faces tae even notice. Why dae ye think the Burnblog admin is taking the night off?’ He laughs.

‘Wait... they will be at the party?’

‘Course they will... everyone will. Honestly...’ he stands up in front of me, shakes his head with a lazy sort of amusement, and puts his hands on my shoulders, god knows why and continued, ‘Chris, mate... ye spend too much time thinkin’ about things that barely matter. Uni’s just a big experiment, half of us will make mistakes, the other half will be too out their faces to notice or care. And everyone’s convinced they’re runnin’ the show when really? We’re all just tryin’ tae survive the madness.’ He shifts lazily, stretching his arms up and out like he’s got nowhere to be. ‘Ye need to loosen up. Try it once. Maybe it’ll be shite, maybe it won’t. But if ye spend all yer time avoiding shit just because yer worried about how

it'll go... ye'll look back one day and realise ye never actually lived any of it.' As his words hang in the air, I can't help but feel a gnawing doubt. Sure, the idea of living uninhibited sounds freeing, but there's something about recklessness that seems perilous, like losing control of a car on a winding road. My thoughts tug at me, reminding me of the promise I made to myself, to embrace new experiences, but with caution, like treading carefully on a tightrope stretched over a canyon.

I pause for a second, flicking my gaze to the welcome packet still shoved to the side on my desk. Maybe he's got a point. Maybe this is why I am even going.

'This will be good fur ye... teach ye some normal life shit.' He laughs again as he walks by me to his wardrobe. 'Honestly, mate, it's like ye've been hidin' in a cupboard yer whole life.'

I still don't know if this guy is an actual stoner, but he does seem to have a way of sounding wise and calm all the time; he's like my very own Yoda! 'Fine, train your Padawan.' I joke.

He turns and looks at me... 'Star Wars... am startin' tae like you more and more, young Jedi!'

I sink back onto my bed as Adam picks out his clothes. He buzzes back and forth, picking out various Hawaiian and tie-dyed-style shirts. His style is really... a choice, I think. But it suits him, the long blond combed-back hair and the goatee on his thin face give off hippie vibes. As I watch him, I notice the room's lighting seems

to change; the dimness softens into a warmer glow, bouncing off the walls like a silent symphony, making the room feel more welcoming. Clutter that looked chaotic a moment ago now feels like part of the environment's charm—a lived-in space filled with potential stories. I'm growing to like this guy, and the shifting room somehow echoes that transition, reminding me how fortunate I am to be sharing a room with him. I know there will be people in other rooms sharing with someone they can't stand the sight of by now.

Time moves on, and it's now after seven. Adam had picked out his clothes and chilled back on the bed for about twenty or so minutes. 'Right, we gettin' dressed?' he asks.

'Time to go... now?'

'Aye,' he says, standing up and stripping without a second thought.

I turn my back and start getting changed, too. It should feel exactly like the locker rooms at training—lads getting dressed, nothing to think about—and for the most part it does. He's been wandering around half-naked since the day he moved in, and I've pretty much stopped registering it.

Except... my gaze lingers longer than expected, the sudden quickening of my pulse betraying the calm demeanor I'm wearing like a mask. The air feels thicker, and I find myself taking in a sharp breath. It's a brief, involuntary escape of truth that intrudes on my thoughts.

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

Even as I falsify its significance, my fingers hasten on pulling on fresh socks and underwear, willing normalcy to return. Tracksuit next. Cream-colored, the one I picked out earlier. Something normal to think about.

I look in the mirror on the wardrobe door and fix my medium blondish brown hair so that my fringe is sweeping over my small forehead and check the chiselled jaw to ensure I didn't miss anything when I shaved this morning, I walk over to the bedside table and pick up my scent, One Million by Paco Rabanne, literally the only smell any guy should wear.

Spray it all over, and the fragrance hits fast. Bold, sharp, like it knows exactly what its purpose is. There's citrus up front, something fresh and confident, grapefruit, maybe blood orange, cutting through like that first rush of adrenaline before a game. Then it deepens. Warmer. Cinnamon and spice sneaking in, a little reckless, a little unapologetic. Finally, woods, amber, and patchouli to finish it off. Strong, but not loud. Just lingers in the air, never fading.

's'aht One Million?' Adam asks.

'Yeah.'

'Can a get a skoosh?'

'Sure... sharing's caring, eh?' I say sarcastically.

Not like it doesn't cost a fortune, a fucking bottle or anything, I begrudgingly hand the gold bar-shaped bottle to him, and he goes in ham, I grab his hand quickly, 'Right, that's about enough of that.' I say with a laugh.

‘Shit costs a hundred quid a bottle.’

We head out of the room and down toward the main entrance. I’ve no idea where we’re actually going—just that it’s somewhere outside on campus. Typical. I’m mostly just hoping the weather behaves. September in the UK is chaos; sun one minute, sideways rain the next. My mum always said it was four seasons in a day, and she wasn’t wrong. A bit of rain didn’t bother me, though, I’m used to it—half my life I’ve spent drenched in wet mud.

As we continue down the grassy area of Braeburn’s grounds, I feel it more than I hear it, vibrating in my chest, sinking into my ribs. The bass of the music, right then, a knot develops in my stomach, the thought of all the students who’d be there. I barely know anyone—I don’t know anyone!

I picture a wall of bodies, faces I don’t know, laughter I’m not part of. A hundred conversations I won’t belong to. What if no one even notices me in this sea of people? What if everything I say is awkward or meaningless? My mind spirals further: What if I never find my place here? Adam is strangely my anchor for the night; I would have to rely on him to break the ice with others, at least until I built up the courage to venture out on my own, if I didn’t decide to head back to the room first.

Adam takes me down a small alleyway. The music is louder now, and I can feel the bass thumping against my heart. It leads us into what I can only describe as a secluded area in a forest of some kind.

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

It was like our very own secret passage. However, it wasn't just us using it; this is when I got my first glimpses of other people heading into the party. It really did seem like Adam was telling me the truth when he said everyone would be there, people older than me, and lots of freshers just like me. I think the one thing I'm struggling with is separating Uni life from how people would act in high school. This seems like a more grown-up environment already, and I have just stepped into the edges of the party zone.

'Adam!' I hear a voice call to him from a distance.

Adam waves and grabs my arm, 'This way, meet ma crew!'

Adam wasn't a fresher at this Uni; he had been here the previous year too, so this was all normal for him. He had already established his friend group and found his click, so to speak. I, on the other hand, hadn't even had a chance to meet my "people" yet. As I considered this, a memory flickered in my mind, back to the camaraderie I shared with my high school team. The easy banter, the support, the sense of belonging in the locker room after matches. It struck me how much I missed that. I thought that wouldn't really happen until I got to my first football practice because, realistically, the football crew would be my ideal people... maybe? Just because that's what I'm studying, does that mean that's who my mates need to be? The uncertainty gnawed at me, intensifying the moment with the risk of never finding such a group

again.

‘Alright, how ye all doin?’ Adam starts as we approach the three other people, ‘This is Christopher, the one I told ye all about.’

‘Oh, so you’re the roommate...’ The guy with the longish, black-dyed hair says. I give him an awkward smile, unsure where he’s going with that, before he continues, ‘I’m Blake. This is Sherry,’ he gestures to a smaller woman standing in the middle with a brown bob styled haircut and bright pink bangs spread over her forehead. He moves his hand along to the woman on the end dressed in business casual clothing, ‘And... this is Gwen,’ he raises his hand to his mouth as if to share a secret, ‘or Gwyneth if you really wanna piss her off,’ He laughs as he lowers his hand from his mouth and extends it.

I shake it. ‘Christopher, nice to meet you all.’

‘Listen, any mate of Adams is a mate of ours. Anything you need, give me a shout, bud!’ Blake finished.

This left me feeling a little warmer inside, they all seemed welcoming and friendly, definitely a lighter contrast to what I had in my mind. I felt as though Adam was dragging me over to the wolves when he grabbed my arm earlier, but I feel like I’m settling now. I take a moment to survey my surroundings, then lift my plastic cup slightly in a silent toast to the promise of the night. It’s as if this small gesture holds the key to the new adventures I’m willing to embrace. Let’s see where the

night takes me, I think to myself.

'I'm gonna get myself a drink.' As soon as the words leave my mouth, my brain kicks off. Should I have offered to get them one, too? Is that what normal people do?

Probably.

Brilliant. Now I look selfish. Or rude. Or both. Shit! Too late to fix it, if I go back and ask now it'll look weird, like I'm apologising for something they didn't even notice.

Just walk—walk away, Chris.

Act normal—everything's cool.

'Christopher, they're over by the DJ,' Sherry calls as I head in the wrong direction—because of course I would. I turn back to face the group and point toward the DJ. 'Right, course they are,' I let out a nervous laugh and make my way over to the drinks station. The music was loud from where I was before, but as I got closer to the speakers, I could feel it in my ears. The bass vibrations are travelling into my ear canal and rattling the thin drums inside my head.

There's a table filled with boxes of ice that have too many beers to count, a bottle of spirits and all kinds of soda with the classic red plastic cups you see way too often in those cliché University movies.

I take a beer, not knowing whether I'd even drink it or not, but having it in my hand at least made it look like I was participating, as far as I could see, at this Uni

perception was everything; look like you're having a good time, people will believe you're having a good time.

I crack open the metal lid with the beer bottle opener that has been conveniently attached to a large tree trunk; it's rusted, telling me it's been on that tree for a lot longer than just tonight. I turn and begin to make my way back towards Adam and the group, and my eyes land on someone making their way into the party. He has dark brown hair and is wearing a similar tracksuit to my own, only his is baby blue. His face sends a warm sensation over me... I try to look away, but I need to have another glance, he has a girl in his arm, I wonder to myself who this guy is... Why am I so interested?

We get closer as I continue to make my way toward my new mates, and he makes his way further into the party. As we pass one another our eyes briefly, I can't help noticing they are a pale piercing blue, like ice, before he gives me a quick smile with his shiny white gnashers.

I reciprocate. In the moment, it feels like everything is moving in slow motion, much like the way it feels just before I shoot for a winning goal on the pitch. My nostrils are enveloped with the scent of his aftershave as we brush by one another. His aftershave is my favourite, One Million. I exhale and take a quick glance back before making my way back to the group.

'Who's that?' I ask, nodding my head towards him.

The group takes an indiscreet look; good job his back is to us. 'That's Laker Luxton, apparently the new

football Team Captain for the Uni this year.' Gwen says, raising her eyebrows.

'How do you always know this shit, Gwen?' Adam asks.

'I pay attention to the bulletin boards... unlike the rest of you, literally can't miss it, his photos on it, surprised BB hasn't posted about him yet!' she replies.

'Wait? Team Captain? I thought they only picked that after they saw the team play together for the first time, that way the coach can pick the best player, at least that's how it's worked with my past teams...'

'Don't know how it works here, bud, as you can tell by looking at me, football, in fact sports in general, is the last thing on earth you'd catch me doing,' he cracks a smile, 'is it possible he's come with some high recommendation or something?' Blake questions.

'Yeah, maybe, seems a bit odd though, anyway looks like I'll be seeing him again on Monday.' I say out loud; really, it was meant to be more of an internal thought, but I kinda shared it involuntarily. I still have my beer in my hand, but haven't even taken a sip yet.

'Oooh... someone's got a crush?' Sherry teases.

I must've been smiling without realising, because the words hit me like a slap.

'No!' I blurt out, way too fast. 'I don't... I don't swing that way.'

The second it's out of my mouth, I feel stupid. Defensive. Like I've just shouted something in a silent

room.

Sherry lifts her hands in a soft, calming gesture. ‘Hey, hey... relax. I wouldn’t care if you did. I was only joking.’

Her tone is gentle, but my chest is tight anyway.

Why did I react like that? Why did it matter so much? Why did she even think—No. No. Don’t go there. I force a laugh, hoping it sounds normal. ‘Sorry, didn’t mean for that to sound so defensive. Look, it’s been lovely meeting you all, but this really isn’t my thing. I’m gonna head back to the room.’

My words grab Adams attention mid-conversation with Gwen. ‘Don’t go, wit happened tae living in the moment?’

‘Maybe another night, yeah?’ I look into his hazel-brown eyes; there’s something like disappointment sitting there. ‘Least stay till ye finish yer beer,’ he says. ‘Ye only just got it.’

‘Fine. Yeah. Fuck it.’ Inside, I’m clawing at the walls, desperate to escape this slowly overcrowding space, but another thought pushes through. A year is a long time to shut myself off completely. Football’s my focus, sure, but for the next few days, I can’t move forward anyway. Maybe it wouldn’t kill me to... exist. To be around people. To let myself have something that isn’t training or pressure. Maybe that’s what Adam sees in me, someone who’s forgotten how to live outside a pitch. Does anyone else see it? The question hangs, lingering like smoke, as I glance around the room, feeling its

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

weight tug at me.

REFUEL

There was a moment of surprise when I got dragged in for some “training” right after my interview. A mix of nervousness and excitement churned in my stomach, my mind racing with the possibilities of what lay ahead. Time’s been flying by. I did what Laker suggested and went to the coffee shop. Adam didn’t come with me, but I was glad of that, considering how hectic the day turned out. I’d been there for about four hours by the time the day ended, feeling a sense of relief washing over me as the initial chaos settled. It was Saturday before I had the chance to go, and I thought for sure I’d have missed out on getting the job to someone else who had a bit freer time than me. But Kaylan, the manager, said the job offer didn’t seem to spark much interest, which I found baffling, since most Uni students would be as broke, if not more broke, than me.

Life was starting to become routine by this point; I had worked out amazing shift schedules with Kaylan that benefited my Uni schedule. Meaning she had to hire another person, but she didn’t seem fussed about that. I was surprised by how busy Refuel could get at times, but then I always forget that there are so many different

people studying different courses at this Uni. It has four massive blocks, North, South, East and West, just for accommodation, and that's not even taking into consideration the people who choose to travel daily, but it's a bit of a mission to do so if you ask me, but there have to be houses close by somewhere... It's not like we were in the middle of the Sahara.

The Amazon rainforest may be... with the amount of trees surrounding us. The air here is heavy with the smell of damp earth and the sound of birds echoing through the branches, making it feel as if I am truly in the depths of a lush jungle.

Definitely not the Sahara with this weather.

Three and a half weeks into October now, and the rhythm of Uni, training, and everything in between is starting to set. Mondays hit hard with Sports Science, drills, and football training until my legs ache and remind me why recovery exists. Skipping recovery isn't just about sore muscles; it's flirting with the risk of injury. That looming threat of being sidelined keeps each session feeling urgent, and it's a stark reminder that I need to pace myself if I want to keep going strong.

Tuesdays are a messy mix of coaching theory and inclusive Physical Ed, followed by study sessions where I attempt some level of productivity. By midweek, biomechanics wrecks my brain before Sports Leadership reminds me exactly why I'm here.

Thursdays lean into sport psychology, which is a little

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

too real sometimes; then it's back onto the pitch. The chill of the evening air wraps around us as we step onto the field, and the crisp sound of studs scraping against the turf jolts me awake, sharpening my focus. It's moments like these when the physicality of the game merges with the mental strategies we've just discussed, creating an intense yet perfect harmony. Fridays slow down with match analysis, coursework review, and whatever's left of my energy.

In between all of this, I have my shifts at Refuel, just enough time to fit in some studying or training... and maybe a phone call to my siblings back home. Every time I hear their voices, a bittersweet mix of joy and guilt washes over me. It's comforting to know they're just a call away, yet a sharp reminder of how little time I have for family. I often tell myself it's just temporary, but each call feels like a breath of fresh air in my otherwise packed schedule.

Barely spoken to them since I got here, really gotta try and squeeze a call in. The weekend always felt like a blur. I worked long shifts then to make up my hours. Uni doesn't come cheap, and I have stuff to pay and need money to live on, but it's all worth it. I'm often reminding myself that it's for the dream of becoming a professional footballer or even a coach, and one day being on the biggest stages. I imagine myself donning the jersey of a top team, perhaps Manchester United or Barcelona, the roar of the stadium echoing around me as I step onto the

lush, green pitch. Each match would be a chance to showcase skills honed through years of training, feeling the adrenaline rush with every pass and goal. On the other hand, coaching would allow me to shape the next generation of players and share the wisdom and passion of the sport. I see myself creating strategic plays, mentoring young athletes, and being respected on the fields. Keeping this vision in mind makes all the sacrifices feel like steps in the right direction.

I've also had more interactions with the team; Tommy keeps calling me 'wee lad,' which baffles me since I'm at least six inches taller. Jarred's accent grates on me, his rolling R's echoing like a winding road, but he's a nice guy all the same. Euan is just a write-off of a boy. He's got this habit of always having his boots untied, like he barely makes it out of the changing room on time. Still trying to figure out how he even got an acceptance letter. Last week, we had a light moment during training when Euan tripped over his own laces and tumbled straight into Jarred, who was carrying a water tray. Water went everywhere, soaking a few others standing nearby. They both ended up looking like they just took a dip in the pool. The entire team burst into laughter, and even the coach couldn't help but chuckle as he told Euan to finally tie those boots properly. Moments like these really help ease the tension and bring us closer as a team.

But then there's Laker. He keeps giving me those up-and-down stares but never actually tells me what they're

for. Anytime I ask, he just shrugs it off as if I'm imagining it. But I'm definitely not. His silent judgment leaves me feeling on edge, almost like I'm under a microscope. It takes me back to high school, where I always felt like I had to prove my worth, and the pressure was relentless. Perhaps that's why his scrutiny unsettles me so much now. It would just be nice to know what I've done wrong, if anything.

He keeps saying I'm good out on the pitch and that he doesn't have a problem with me...

Maybe it is really just a me thing?

Oh, the wise words of Adam, my Jedi Master, come flowing back into my ears: Chris, mate... ye spend too much time thinkin' about things that barely matter.

I spent some time out in the field kicking the ball around before my shift. As I walk down the long, winding road out of the Uni grounds toward work, each step crunches on the loose gravel, a rhythmic grinding sound that punctuates the calm of my thoughts. The chill wind cuts across my sweat-damp skin, leaving a trail of goosebumps in its wake and making the journey feel as if it stretches on and on. It's Saturday. I'm in here from nine in the morning till late. I say late, cause we're supposed to close at six, but the rule is: if it's busy, keep it open.

Guaranteed people will be down here with their laptops and books writing up essays till gone on ten o'clock tonight, not a bad thing for me, Kaylan is a

decent manager, she allows time for me to study and write up anything I need to on down times so it works in my favour really cause I get paid to do Uni work which is a bonus. She's going to be on shift with me today, well, at least until about five. She has become more of a friend to me than a manager, and it's good to have someone outside the Uni to talk to. At least I know anything I say to her won't get back to that fucking Burnblog.

That's been going ham lately on the acapella group... not been any posts regarding me, thank god, however, there was a post about Laker and his new potential girlfriend... can't say he didn't ask me to come with him to meet someone. I'm glad now that I turned that offer down, feck knows how I would manage a relationship with the limited time I have... for myself!

I push the door to Refuel inwards, one of those "Push", don't "Pull" fuckers that always leaves me looking like a twat trying to pull it open. Go straight through to the back kitchen and begin to take my jacket and T-shirt off and replace them with my work T-shirt that is a bright pink colour with the word:

REFUEL

Plastered across the back; on top, I throw over the black apron with two large pockets on the front that I

barely—if ever—use.

I can hear Kaylan out front serving a customer. ‘So, that’s a large Caramel Frappe, two Cappuccinos and a Latte. Anything else for you?’ She says.

‘No, that’s all thanks.’ I hear the muffled reply of the man.

‘Great, I’ll bring that over to you as soon as it’s ready.’ She finishes so enthusiastically. I have honestly never met someone in my life who loves coffee as much as this girl does.

‘Hey, Chick-a-dee,’ I say as I walk out the front of house. I had called her this one day a few weeks back, and it’s kind of just stuck.

‘Hey Heartbreaker, how you been?’

She started calling me that after one too many customers left their numbers on receipts.

Kaylan leans in and hugs me. Our friendship has grown quite fast, but I think that’s simply due to the amount of time we’ve spent together, and honestly, working in a high-pressure environment really does develop those tight bonds.

‘Yeah, alright, a bit shattered today to be honest, been a tough week with training.’

‘Awwh, I feel ya, listen, I’m gonna nip out for a quick break, you alright to get this order and take it over to them as I said I would.’ She bats her eyelids at me.

I pause for a moment, ‘Eh... no, do it yourself, you lazy sod!’ I laugh, and she joins in, ‘Sure... yeah, that’s

fine.’

‘Thaaaanks, you’re a superstar!’ She says as she makes her way through the back of house.

I grab the receipt and scan the order as I move toward the counter. Large Caramel Frappe, two Cappuccinos, one Latte.

Simple enough.

The espresso machine vibrates beneath my fingertips as I start pulling shots, the comforting motions settling into muscle memory—milk foaming, caramel drizzling like golden threads over a tapestry of freshly baked bread, lids snapping into place. The mingling scents of vanilla and warm nutmeg catch me off guard, swirling around my thoughts like misplaced emotions that refuse to settle.

Kaylan’s mouth-full-of-food voice drifts in from the back. ‘Christopher, make sure you’ve blended that frappe properly—I don’t want another complaint about separation or giant ice cubes.’

She says this like I’m personally trying to sabotage her business. I roll my eyes, giving the drink a deliberately exaggerated pulsing motion with the blender, more to annoy her than anything.

Just as I set the tray down to take everything over, I catch a glimpse through the café window—a blur of movement, a familiar figure. The kind of silhouette my brain recognises before my eyes even process it... Laker? I pause, just for a millisecond.

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

I exhale, grab the tray and begin weaving my way through the café, dodging a chair someone hasn't tucked in properly. The air smells of roasted beans and sweetness, conversation layering over the quiet hiss of the espresso machine and the occasional clatter of a spoon against porcelain.

I stop at the table, setting the tray down with practised ease. 'Alright, I've got a Cappuccino?'

The girl with blonde hair lifts a hand. 'That's me.'

I slide it towards her. 'And another?'

'Here,' says the guy with brown hair, shifting his phone to the side as I place the cup in front of him.

I reach for the Caramel Frappe next, condensation cool against my fingers. The girl with dark hair grabs it before I've fully let go, like she's been waiting for it.

'Someone was ready for that,' I say, and she laughs, taking a sip immediately.

Finally, the Latte. I glance at the last girl and nod as I set it down. 'You, yeah? Solid choice—Refuels Lattes hit just right. The kick from the beans is next level.'

A round of smiles.

A small moment, nothing huge, just the ease of routine and the casual rhythm of service. I lightly tap the tray against my hip. 'Extra sugars and stirrers are over there.' I point to the condiment station by the door. 'And if you need anything else—well, I'm here till close.'

On my way back to the counter, I scoop up empty cups and plates, stack them on the tray, then slip through

to the back. The industrial dishwasher blasts them clean in seconds.

Kaylan is still there, picking at a croissant. A choice, but not one I'd go for.

'So, what you been up to?' she asks, brushing crumbs off her apron. 'Haven't seen you much the last couple of days—met anyone yet?' She asks with half the croissant wedged in her gob.

I pause, leaning against the counter. 'No... well... kinda. Ugh, I don't know. There's someone I can't stop looking at. It's... It's really distracting.'

'Ohhh... do tell, do tell.'

I let out a shaky breath, shaking my head. 'That's just it... There isn't much to tell. I don't even know what it is. But they stick in my mind a lot.' My fingers drum absently against the counter. I can feel a knot forming in my stomach, a tension that refuses to unwind. My heart gives an erratic jump at the mere thought of them, cheeks flushing against my will. 'When I'm not thinking about them, I want to. And when I am thinking about them, I don't want to be.' I sigh deeply as if trying to release the storm of confusion swirling inside my chest. 'It's all rather confusing.'

The bell on the counter goes, 'I—I better go get that.' I make my way back out to the front of house, and Laker is standing at the counter waiting to be served; my heart thuds slightly. I take a breath, 'Hey... Laker, what can I get you?'

He starts with a smile, ‘Ehm... just a Cappuccino to go, if that’s alright?’

‘Sure, any syrups?’

‘Nah,’ He taps his belly, ‘watching the figure...’

I huff a small laugh, shake my head, and turn to make the coffee. My hands move automatically, but my mind is nowhere near the espresso machine.

This isn’t right.

I’m not into men. At least... I don’t think I am. I’ve never really had a serious girlfriend, but there was Lacey back in high school. We went to prom together, danced, kissed under the starlit sky... it felt like the right thing at the time. But still, something was missing, this spark that never quite ignited. So—maybe this interest in Laker is something more, something I’ve never let myself consider? No. That’s ridiculous. I’ve been with girls. Always been with girls. I am not attracted to Laker. I can’t be. If not, what’s causing this ‘attraction’ or ‘obsession’ I seem to have for him?

Why can’t I break away from the magnetic force that keeps my eyes fixed on him? My thoughts flooded with him.

The steam hisses, louder than usual. I grip the portafilter tighter, pressing it into place with more force than necessary. I focus on the weight in my hand, the rhythmic movements—the grind, the tamp, the button press. It’s all routine. But even as I force myself into muscle memory, my brain keeps circling back. Still stuck

fighting something I don't even understand.

As I pour the milk into the cup and finish off his Cappuccino, I can feel his eyes lingering over me from behind. I place the lid onto the cup with a click, take one last breath, turn around to face him again, and immediately we lock eyes.

'One plain Cappuccino.' I slide it slowly over the counter.

Laker's gaze lingers for a fraction longer than it should, then he reaches for his wallet. 'Much is that?'

'Three pounds.'

He hands three-pound coins into my hand, brushing his fingers over my palm as he moves it away to pick up his coffee, 'See you later, eh?' he smiles.

'Yeah, later...'

I stroll back through to the rear. Kaylan looks at me with those eyes, you know, the look a friend gives you when they are concerned. 'That seemed a little tense, everything alright?'

I wave a hand through the air, 'yeah, yeah, just the football team captain...' I lean against the counter again, 'I had a great laugh with Adam last night, we watched Return of the Jedi, it was a pretty good night.'

'Fantastic movie...' she shovels crisps into her mouth, 'you were saying about him before, how you never thought he was the type you would be friends with,' she tilts her head.

'Yeah, he's such a wise guy, though, like he honestly

gives me some great advice. I started to call him my Jedi Master when we first met, funny thing is, he went with it and now calls me a Padawan...' I laugh.

'Good that you got someone up there that you can relate with on that level though, but y'know I'm always here if you need to talk or just blow off some steam, yeah?'

'Yeah, I know, just love how the guy doesn't take life seriously, y'know?'

'Typical Uni lad for you right there,' she stands and brushes off the crumbs from her apron. 'Anyway, we have a coffee shop to run.'



After closing the shop last night, it was pitch-black. Kaylan never finished until six, as the place was packed with students, overhearing some of them talk about a theatre show. I gathered that some, if not most, of them were here to run lines. I enjoyed the long walk back to North Hall last night. It gave me some time to breathe; there was just something so calming about that, dark, damp air that you can only get at this time of the year.

My head kept circling on one particular interaction from my day, the very first customer I had served. Did he know I was working? Maybe he followed me to Refuel and waited just enough time to come in and get served, so it didn't look odd? The possibility was there... I had seen him out the window not long before. Was he only

buying a coffee just so he could come and see me? Who am I kidding? I didn't even know if his subtle gazes or smirks were anything more than friendly.

I'd started to convince myself that this "attraction" to him was a different kind of attraction I would have for a woman. I couldn't like Laker in that way. But the worst part was I knew that I did. How do I explain these feelings? Maybe I don't, maybe that's just how it is? I'm falling for a man named Laker Luxton, and it could be the breaking point that destroys my career... who wants a gay footballer?

I've not gotten out of bed yet, just staring at the ceiling, contemplating the thoughts I was having last night. I decided it's best for me to try and ignore the thoughts about Laker, just push it all down, it's probably some kind of phase anyway, as I have never liked guys, not that I have ever given it a go, not that I ever would, and if I was to... it could never be with my team's captain. No, that would cause too many issues, not only for my personal progression and career, but also.

Who knows, maybe it is just all the excitement and buzz from being in a new place; over time, I'm sure it will fade into routine and become less of a big deal. I'll stop being so magnetised by his presence and be able to get on with the day-to-day stuff without him taking over my thoughts. Just need to keep my head down and focus on my studies and the football team.

I get up, not even acknowledging Adam in the bed

next to mine. Our tradition has grown stale now. After weeks of this, there's no surprise to what I may find when I wake up in the morning. Though coming to think of it, I take a double look... he must have been wasted last night, he wasn't in the room when I got back and hadn't returned by the time I fell asleep, but that wasn't the alarming part... he is fully clothed—jeans, checkered shirt, trainers—looks like he never even got time to get in the room before he had thrown himself on the bed and passed out. On his desk, a stack of unopened mail sits next to a half-eaten pizza box from last week, a glaring testament to his chaotic yet strangely carefree lifestyle.

If that's what a Saturday night leaves you like on the Sunday morning, the words he muttered to me when I first met him in this room come flooding back, 'A literally canny sleep wae clothes on. Feels like am suffocating.' Well, buddy, it looks like if you get to that level of out-of-your-face, you can! I think I will continue to pass on any "outings" he invites me to.

After how I woke up feeling after that fresher's party, I can assure you I felt anything but fresh... ugh. I can still feel the headache behind my eyes. I puked about five times, and my chest still twinges from the muscle contractions.

I don't know what came over me that night. One beer turned into five, then suddenly I was squeezing lemons in my eyes and snorting salt before finishing it off with

tequila. I was in some state, yet I still never managed to utter a single word to Laker.

Yeah, nah. Nights like that aren't for me.

I quietly grab some clothes and make my way out of the room and down the corridors of North Hall, out into the crisp morning air, take in a few deep breaths and check my phone, wondering if Burnblog has posted anything lately...

Level Six Burn 🔥 x6

"Science-y Simon caused an explosion in the lab today...of the chemical kind, as far as we hear, the classroom had to be evacuated. Maybe he should be renamed to "Methane Marshall"? - xcx BB"

Shit, poor guy, probably they dodgy sandwiches in the canteen... well perhaps best to skip on the egg mayo ones then, eh?

Level Six Burn 🔥 x6

"Aubrey once again leaves an underwhelming performance, the Braeburn Birdy's were left in terror after performing on campus grounds yesterday... some student started to mock them for the bad performance, but not before long one of their newest performers had flashed her boobs in 'protest' at them... bit of an odd reaction if you ask me, but then again, what is it they say... 'if you wanna be

famous make a sex tape?’ maybe that’s next on the cards for Wild Wendy of the Braeburn Birdy’s? – xcx BB”

I’ve noticed I get bored rather quickly with the Burnblog posts. As long as there is nothing about me on there, I’m fine. Maybe I should use this rare quiet moment to give my sister a call? I get the number up on the screen and hover my thumb over the call button. Family has always been complicated for me. Beneath the surface, there’s a distance that gnaws at my conscience.

I press it.

The ringing tone goes off in my ear for what feels like an eternity, each shrill note echoing in my skull. A low hum of tension resonates through my fingertips. I shift my grip, feeling the slickness of my clammy palm on the phone’s smooth surface. Just as a prickle of sweat tracks down my spine, I hear, ‘Hello Chrissy.’

‘Hey Cammi, how’s things?’

‘Yeah, not too bad here actually, surprised we haven’t heard from you before now.’

‘Well, it’s been kinda hectic here, got myself a job so that’s taking up most of the free time,’ but then again, it doesn’t seem like either of you made the effort. I think to myself.

I sigh and begin pacing, each step leaving a small thud on the ground. My legs move with a mechanical rhythm, while my thoughts churn in a whirlwind of frustration. I

stop briefly, clutching the phone tighter until my knuckles whiten. My pent-up anger toward both her and my brother swells, an unspoken tension threading through my posture. Ever since we lost our mother, things have never been quite the same with us. But in the back of my head, I hear a small voice, 'family always sticks together.' Mum's voice, a small reminder of why I continue to make at least minimal effort.

'Sorry, been busy here too, yano, with your brother, work and my own life, not that I have much of one.' Cammi replies. 'You should really give him a call, y'know, he'd like to hear from you.'

'I would but knowing him he won't be up until gon' four this afternoon,' by which time I'll be working. 'At the very least, let him know I called and that I was asking after him, yeah?' I stop pacing, 'Anyway, what you been up to? Surely there is more? It's been over a month since we last spoke!'

'Yeah, really not much to be honest, as I said, work, your brother... so on so forth, same shit different day Chrissy, you know how it goes. Actually, I did have a little drama at the store last week. You wouldn't believe it, but a stray cat wandered in and refused to leave. Took us all afternoon to coax it out. What about you? I'm sure you have some interesting stories to tell! Met a nice girl yet?'

The thought of her last words made my heart jump. I had met someone nice... but I wasn't going to tell her that, not when I didn't know what was going on there

and certainly not over the phone. ‘Nah, just classes, learning some interesting shit though, I have a roommate, Adam, his name is, Scottish lad, but he’s been good with me. The team’s coming along well, with some good players to be honest with you, hard to stick out of the crowd. Oh, and there’s Kaylan, my manager at the coffee shop,’ I caught myself talking too much, but it was mostly filler to dodge her last question.

‘—Sorry Chrissy, need to go, customers just came in, I’ll give you a call back soon, right? Everything sounds great, and I’m glad you’re having a great time. Byeee, Love You.’

‘Alright...’ The end call beep hit before I had the chance to finish ‘Bye...love-you-to-I-suppose!’ Frustration flashed through me with a searing intensity. Why does it feel like an empty void every time I try to connect? I thought bitterly, whacking my phone off my thick thigh.

See, it’s this type of shit that annoys me the most, I make all the effort, and then it’s like, yeah fuck you, I’m busy... I get it, people have lives, but why am I the one left holding the tiny pieces of this family together? Why is it my responsibility? Sure, I left, I fucked off to University and left them, but that was always my plan, and they knew that! Back when I was a kid, it seemed like I was always the peacemaker, coordinating our rare family dinners and helping settle disputes between my siblings. Maybe that’s why I feel this weight so heavily

now.

I can't very well put my life on pause, just to accommodate the needs of others. I'm not a very selfish person, but I also have to think about my life, my future. Sometimes it seems like I'm just being self-obsessed and contained, not giving a thought to others—when in actual fact, I do, even when it might not seem like it. Maybe I'll just wait and see if I get that returned phone call, because going off the past, I'm still waiting on about fifty. Though, I wonder, what is it that's keeping them from reaching out? Is there something I'm not seeing, something I haven't understood? Perhaps their silence speaks of their own struggle with grief, one I haven't grasped yet.

Cammi and Cedric have never quite dealt with Mum's passing the way I have. I knew she was sick, I knew she wasn't going to be here forever; it's been five years now. I have only done what she wished me to do, live my life; she never wanted to hold any of us back. The thing that made Mum happiest was seeing her kids prosper and be happy. If only she could see me now, she would be ever so proud! Don't get me wrong, I miss the hell out of her every single day, but eventually we all have to move on and keep living our own lives, right?

I swallow the last words that I thought, perhaps acknowledging that Cammi and Cedric have chosen their own way of moving on. But then, a lingering question surfaces, one that circles back to the heart of my struggle:

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

Will we ever truly find a way to stick together as a family?

E L E V E N A N D S I X

Waking up, the first thought that barges in, uninvited, is the creeping doubt about today's upcoming football training. The nagging question haunts me: am I ready? As the first slivers of dawn filter through the thin curtains, I can already feel the slightly scratchy but oddly comforting Uni-issued bedsheets against my skin. The room is filled with the familiar scent of dampness mixed with the lingering trace of Adam's cologne from last night. My eyes open to the soft creaking of the ancient pipes behind the walls, a constant reminder of our room's age. The day finally arrives, it's Monday, and my alarm is going off. As I turn to slap the alarm, I'm greeted once again by a very stark Adam and his proud morning situation standing on high.

If it's not his arse, it's this. It's like a constant test of my patience. The guy's gifted in that department, and while I'd never tell him that—his ego is already big enough—I realise letting this bother me might mean something deeper.

I throw my head back down onto the pillow and stare at the strangely stained ceiling, don't even want to imagine what some of those marks are... It was a warm

one last night, and I had struggled to sleep; maybe it was a bit of nerves knowing this was going to be my first day back into proper training.

Last week, while walking back from practice, I paused by the pitch's sidelines. The floodlights were off, and the field was empty. I stood there, tracing the faded goal line with my shoe, remembering all those matches that had been both victories and personal battles. As I pressed my boot into the grass, I suddenly felt a pang of dread. What if I'm not as good at this as I thought? My boot hesitated on the line, leaving a scuff that lingered, a stubborn mark that wouldn't quite brush away, echoing my deepest worry. I'm not one to have an ego—I know everyone with an ego says that—but if I had to admit to having an ego about anything, it's definitely my skills on the grass.

I close my eyes and take a breath, its only 7:30 in the morning, I have some time before I need to hit the shower and get ready for Sports Science & Physiology, I have pre-prepared my rucksack with pens and jotters knowing that most of my classes won't be physical learning a lot of it will be practical, and I'm going to need to pay some attention if I have any hope in passing my exams next year.

After a while of lying in bed, the alarm goes off again, but this time it's not mine, it's his. He jumps up and smacks it hard. I'm guessing he's a little rough as he never got back in the room till gone on one this morning.

'Aht's eight o'clock, a need tae get up and showered.'

Adam complains.

‘Yeah, me too, first lecture starts at nine.’ I sit up on my bed, the frame making a creaking noise under my movements, and take a huge stretch, honestly one of my favourite things about waking up on a morning.

I flip the covers off me and get out of bed, making it back up after me. I walk over to the wardrobe and take out a fresh bathing towel. We collect these weekly; each person gets a week’s worth of towels —quite handy, though I wouldn’t mind using the same one for a few days. I grab a towel for myself, and since I’m ever so kind, I grab one for Adam out of his wardrobe too.

I throw him the towel. ‘Hitting the showers?’

The showers for the guys are just down the hall from us, a communal space buzzing with life like a hive, water cascading with an incessant rhythm. It’s the kind of place where steam clings to your skin and echoes bounce off the tiles, amplifying every footstep and laugh. In this echoing chamber, I feel the mix of anticipation and anxiety swirling within me, my thoughts as foggy as the mirrors. The room is barely big enough as it is, never mind cramming in all that too.

‘Aye, let’s hit the showers.’ Adam replies as he rubs his face.

I take off my underwear—it’s all I ever wear to bed anyway. The first time I tried bringing clothes to the showers, they were soaked through by the time I got out. Rookie mistake. Adam told me all the lads just wear flip-

flops and walk down the hall with a towel around their waists. So, that's what I do now.

I reach the shower room, hang my towel on the hooks beside everyone else's, and head for a cubicle, bare as the day I was born. I twist the tap and let the water run for a minute while I stand outside, waiting for it to heat up. When I step in, the water hits my head and runs down my pale skin to my toes. I let out a breath and sink into the simple, sweet relief of it. Each morning, I face the same clatter and chaos, mirroring the relentless churn of my nerves about the day ahead. But today, amidst the noise, I decide to pause and centre myself amidst the sensory chaos. I take a moment to close my eyes and focus on the rhythm of my breaths. Slowly inhaling through my nose, feeling the steam fill my lungs, and then exhaling out my mouth, releasing the tension bit by bit. Three deep breaths, a simple ritual borrowed from athletes who master their performance routines. It briefly transforms the clamour into a chance for mental rehearsal. I visualise the pitch, the steady beat of the game, calming my racing thoughts and readying myself for the day.

After getting back to the room, I pick out some athletic clothing. I haven't been given my football strip yet, so this will have to do for now. I'm certain the strip will be given to us today at training, which is a double lecture starting at 1:30. As I sit on the edge of my bed, I take a moment to mentally gear up. I close my eyes and

visualise the feeling of the ball meeting my foot just right, the steady rhythm of my breathing syncing with my movements on the pitch. It's championship thinking. I'm looking forward to it all. I'm hoping it'll be a full three hours of playing footie, but I've a feeling we might have some practical work in there too... if it's all team-building exercises, I'd be cool with that!

Adam has already left; he said he was going to meet up with Blake as they're in the same lecture this morning or something like that. I was just glad of the ten minutes of silence to get my head together before starting what seemed like a hectic day. After having so much time off education, I had a feeling that after today, I was gonna be knackered. I can already feel the headache coming on, and I'm only starting the day. I grab my rucksack filled with all the essentials and head off to Sports Science & Physiology.

As I approach the classroom door, I glance inside at the other students who are in here, most of who will all be studying the same course as me, most of who are probably hoping for that big football career... probably, that could just be me... always been one for the unrealistic.

I walk in, take a seat toward the back of the room, throw my bag under the table, unzip it, and throw it over the back of my chair. Reading the lecturer's name on the whiteboard as I sit.

DR. STRACZYNSKI

From the get-go, I know that one is gonna trip me up a bit. I wonder if I could just get away with calling him Dr S?

Before I knew it the class had filled and Dr. S has come into the room, he is a large man with balding grey hair and a relatively decent dress sense, these doctor types tend to always have a quirk to their dress sense, but he has a tweed blazer, blue shirt and dressy trousers on, not something I'd wear but he was presentable.

Dr S. clears his throat, the kind of cough that sounds like he's about to deliver a sermon or fall apart—bit of a gamble, honestly. Then he says, 'Okay. We begin now, yes? This is Sports Science and Physiology. We look today at how the body responds to stress—exercise, fatigue, recovery, injury... all this.' He clicks the PowerPoint, and the word homeostasis flashes up in bold, like it's meant to mean something profound. 'Maintaining balance,' he says, tapping the board with the pointer like he's having an argument with it. It's like having a goalie in your body, always on high alert to block anything that tries to disrupt the harmony. Just as a goalie keeps the score in check, homeostasis keeps your body in its optimal state, ready for whatever challenge comes its way on the pitch.

In body, every system has set point. Temperature, oxygen, fluids. You train; you stress system—yes? But

must not break it. Athletes must push but also return to balance.'

I nod like I'm in complete understanding, though I'm mostly just watching the sweat patches grow on the back of the guy's T-shirt in front of me. Dr S. rolls on, throwing out terms—core temperature, blood flow... I scribble some of it down anyway, even though it feels like a different language.

Twenty minutes in and I'm already wondering if I've missed something big. Then he pulls up a jagged graph of a heart mid-sprint.

'This—look here. You see how heart rate climbs, plateaus, spikes again? This is what we study. Not just what happens when you run—but what happens after. How body says, "I'm tired now. I must recover." '

For a second, I imagine what my heart would look like on that screen. Probably a wonky mess. Probably saying, "Get this lad out before he combusts." I raise my hand before I can talk myself out of it. Feels stupid the second I do it, but it's already up there now, floating like some beacon of mild regret.

Dr S. glances over. 'Yes?'

'Uh... Dr Struh... Strah-zin... sky?'

A few heads turn. Someone near the front snorts. Great. I knew this fucking name would get me!

He gives a tight-lipped smile. 'Straczynski. But Dr S. fine, yes?'

'Right—yeah. Dr S. is much easier. Cheers.'

He nods, waiting.

I shift a little in my chair. I can't help but wonder, maybe he is going to say it's impossible. Or perhaps there's a slim chance I've got it right, and overtraining really can push a heart to its brink? That would certainly grab some attention, and yet—am I embarrassing myself here? But the curiosity gnaws at me. 'I just... You said before, about the heart rate graph, and pushing the body past its threshold... can your heart actually combust from overtraining? Like—not explode, obviously. But y'know... like, properly shut down from too much stress or overuse?'

He raises an eyebrow, clearly fighting off a grin.

A few chuckles float around the room again.

'Ah. No, Mr...?'

'Daley, but Chris is fine, Mr. is my father.' I say quickly, as if that might protect me.

'Mr Daley—your heart, it does not combust. It is not petrol engine. But... it can fail, if pushed too hard, too fast, with not enough recovery. Overtraining syndrome, yes? It affects cardiac rhythm, hormone levels, immunity... very real risk if body is not respected.'

'Right,' I say, nodding slowly. 'So... maybe don't sprint up Braeburn Hill five days in a row if I'm still sore from Monday.'

'Exactly this!' He points at me, smiling now. 'Listen to body. If it screams, maybe do not shout back.'

More laughter.

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

I sink a little lower in my chair, but I'm oddly glad I asked. At least now I know what not to do if I want to survive the semester.

By the time the lecture wraps up, my brain feels like it's been wrung out and hung up to dry. Half of what Dr S. talked about. I'm not entirely sure I absorbed. But I took notes, nodded in all the right places, and didn't combust, so we'll call that a win.

Turns out, it wasn't just slides and jargon. Some of it actually made sense. Like when he said training's not just about pushing yourself but knowing when to back off—respect the body, as he kept saying, in that clipped Polish accent that made everything sound like both a warning and a dare. Something about that stuck. I've never really been good at slowing down.

As I leave, there's a low murmur of chatter—people comparing notes, trying to sound like they already know what they're doing. I keep my head down; rucksack slung back over one shoulder.

Next up: Practical Sports Training. No desk, no projector, just me and whatever I've got left in the tank. I'm nervous, yeah, but it's the kind that makes your fingers twitch, and your legs itch to move. This one's supposed to be physical.

Double Football Training finally rolls around; I've already made it through the Practical Sports session, which was exactly as sweaty and chaotic as it sounded and wolfed down a chicken wrap that probably wasn't

cooked all the way through. Can't complain though. Lunch is lunch, and I needed something to calm my nerves.

Practical had us doing all sorts, jump tests, balance drills, getting our movements filmed so some postgrad could analyse our "form." I mostly just tried not to trip over my own feet. Still, it was good to move. Shook the rest of the morning out of my system. But this... this is the one I've been waiting for.

Double Football Training.

The proper stuff. The bit that feels like home, if I let myself think that way. Three full hours on the pitch with proper coaching, proper kit—hopefully—maybe even a chance to prove I'm not just some hopeful first-year clinging to the past. I tell myself I'm calm. That I'm ready, but the truth is, I've been waiting for this session since the acceptance letter dropped through my letterbox.

So, when I get there, feeling like I've just sprinted across campus, I realise I'm the first one to arrive. Classic eager-beaver Daley, changing rooms to himself. I pop my head into the office marked:

MR L. KLARKE

I assume this would be our coach. 'Hey, sorry, where do we have to go for football training?' I ask the round man sitting at the desk, and he slowly raises his eyes from

the desk to meet mine. His face looks grumpy, but I say nothing more, waiting for his response.

‘And who’re you?’ he asks quickly.

‘Christopher...’

‘Christopher?’ He asks with a wiry raised brow.

‘Daley... sorry, Christopher Daley.’ I reply quickly.

‘Right, take a seat in the changing rooms, I’ll be with you once the rest of your team gets here.’ He says with a grunt.

‘Am... am I the first one?’

‘You’re very keen to get started, eh?’ He suggests with his face now pointed back down at the paperwork on his desk.

‘Right—uhm... see you in there then... I guess.’

He lets out a grunt as I head toward the changing rooms, which are helpfully signed. I take a seat, check my phone for the time, twenty-five past one, shit, I wasn’t half early!

Not before time, the other players started showing up in ones, twos and fours, but it was a bit awkward when the first guy came in, though, the full team was almost here, I had been waiting to see one person walk through the door as I was expecting to see him show up.

Laker Luxton eventually walks through the door with a minute to spare. As he crosses the threshold, everything seems to still slightly, like everyone is subconsciously holding their breath for just a moment. It’s the second time I’ve felt this odd sensation, an

E L I J A H N O X L E Y

unscheduled pause when I see him, leaving me quietly curious.

I glance at him, noticing the way his eyes scan the room with ease—dark brown hair never sitting quite flat, a round face not soft, and a stature that quietly commands respect. His eyes are a piercing ice-blue, but not cold, more like they're searching for something deeper than what they skim over. As our eyes meet, I catch him quickly swallowing, his Adam's apple bobbing slightly. There's a quick, involuntary brush of his thumb against his laces, and I see his eyes flicker over me, making me wonder if he just checked me out.

Time resumes as he drops onto the bench, waiting for Coach Klarke. I look away, trying to shake off the moment, still puzzled by the unspoken connection. It happened at the party, too; these brief encounters were like tiny electric shocks. It's mad; we haven't even exchanged words yet.

Just as the noise starts building—boots scraping tile as they get them from their bags, I had already taken mine out, black with three white stripes, lads bantering over who's the best player—the door swings open with a bang that makes a few of us flinch. In walks Coach Klarke like he's charging into a sitcom.

Coach folds his arms and scans the room like he's about to announce a firing line. 'Right, listen up. I've got two names. Out there on the grass, I'm Coach. That clear? Just "Coach." Not sir, not boss, not big man,

definitely not whatever your group chat's undoubtedly going to be callin' me behind my back. Coach it is. Simple. Wadiya call me?'

'Coach!' We reply as a team.

'Good! Now, if you ever find yourself unlucky enough to be in one of my sports lectures? That's Mr Klarke to you. Because the moment I step in front of that whiteboard, I'm no longer responsible for your cardio—I'm responsible for your future. And I grade harshly, boys. So, if you don't remember the name, remember the tone.'

He flashes a grin, like he knows exactly how much he enjoys keeping us off balance. 'Alright now!' he claps once, loud and deliberate. 'Y'all sittin' there like it's brunch service. Up! Line up as you did in Primary School.'

There's a sudden shuffle. Everyone straightens up just a little. Coach's kit is all black and faded yellow; he looks like a sports-themed bumblebee, a sports-themed bumblebee that's been through a few generations of washing machines. Tracksuit pants tight around the calves, whistle swinging from his neck like he was born with it. He's stocky, mid-forties, with an expression that doesn't give away whether he's about to praise you or send you home crying.

'Name, grab your kit and move. You stall; I assume you don't need a kit and send you straight out in your underwear.'

That gets a few laughs, but the line starts moving.

‘Daley!’ he snaps. Not angry exactly—just like he already has me on a hit list in his head. ‘Don’t just sit there blinkin’. Come get your kit, not like the rest of these fast lads gonna trample you.’

Heart pounding, I step forward. He tosses me a bundle with all the grace of someone throwing leftovers to a dog. Black shorts. Gold stripe down the leg. Matching socks, sports shirt folded tight with the number eleven taped on like it’s waiting to see if I deserve it. As I turn back, I feel someone move behind me—shoulder brushing mine. It’s Laker, already on his feet now, quiet as anything.

I sit back down and start peeling the kit open like it’s something sacred. Across from me, Laker drops onto the bench and starts stripping. I glance up, just for a second. He catches it, and I start to feel it again. Like we’re both pretending not to notice something. He pulls on his shirt, I notice it has the number six on it, and he says, low enough for just me to hear, ‘Try not to make that number look bad, yeah?’

I smirk, throwing the tension back with, ‘Watch me turn eleven into legend.’

I let out a half-laugh. ‘Only if you’re on the same pitch to make me look good, captain!’

His eyes flicker. The corners of his mouth lift just slightly. Then he looks away, and that’s it.

Coach scans the room again, then lifts his clipboard

like he's about to name the next Prime Minister.

'Also—before we start playin' dress up with these kits—one quick note for you all. Every squad needs someone to hold the line. Someone to bark louder than me when I'm not in earshot. Someone who bleeds black and gold.' He thumps his chest lightly. 'Our last Captain finished up with us last season... Good lad, he was, your new captain for this season? That'll be Mr Laker Luxton.'

A couple of lads nod.

One lets out a 'figures' under his breath.

Coach doesn't miss a beat. 'Don't let the cheekbones fool you—he's earned it. So, if he tells you to run, you run. If he tells you you're slacking, you're slacking! And if you've got a problem with it, you bring it to me—preferably after training when I've had the chance to have my Oreo's and milk and in a better mood.'

Laker doesn't even blink. Just lifts his chin a little, eyes scanning the room.

'Ten minutes to warm-up!' Coach shouts.

That gets everyone moving. Pulling shirts over their heads. Football boots dropped on the floor like grenades. It's chaos in motion. I pull on my new top; the number sticking a little to my palm, and try not to glance across the bench again. Doesn't really work, though; it's like he's a magnet for my eyes, and I can't help but look.

We got out to the pitch and into the game after warm-ups. This was it. I could finally let go of everything, my thoughts, my worries, my cares. My pulse quickened,

syncing with the rhythm of the play, the thud of my heart like a steady drum in my chest. Life is simple when my head's in the game: run, tackle, manoeuvre, and score. The burn in my calves reminded me of the work put in, each step bursting with energy and anticipation. As my studs gripped the earth, I could feel the cool blades of grass beneath my feet, grounding me in the moment. The distant hum of the crowd buzzed at the edges of my consciousness, a comforting murmur that quieted the last whispers of anxiety.

Coach split us into seven-a-side teams since there are fourteen on our team. This made complete sense to me. Normally, you would have players on the bench, but as this was just team building and essentially practice, it made sense to have everyone involved. And there is no doubt in my mind that Coach Klarke was looking out for his best players... and I intended to be at least in his top five. The new captain is showing us up, though, can't lie. The guy has moves. Tidy touches, sharp footwork, eyes scanning ahead before the ball even reaches him. Just about, if not more, focused on the game than I am.

There's me, left wing, the ball rushing toward me, the captain running behind it with feet like silk. I have two choices: tackle him or let him by, let him score. They are already two goals ahead of us.

I have a reputation to uphold, too. Surely, just because we shared a glance and he's my captain, I can't just let him off the hook? Nah. Gotta play fair. I pick up my

speed, running toward him. The goal? Divert the ball, regain possession, and drive it back up field.

I don't know what happened, but for a second, we both lost focus. Step. He turned his head quickly, maybe checking his passing option. Grass. Then, before I knew it, pain spread over some parts of my body. Impact. We collided hard, and he landed on top of me, crushing me against the turf. Sky. For half a breath, our bodies were entangled, shirts scraping, studs pressed into the pitch. Then he rolled off to my side, lying flat on his back. Our hands brushed just for a second, a fleeting touch before I lifted mine to grip my shoulder.

No time to process it—suddenly, the team is on top of us. Shouts overlap, boots pounding the ground as Coach Klarke pushes his way through the crowd, cutting through the noise.

'You boys, okay?'

'Just a bump, Coach... think I'll be fine.' Laker sits up, rolling his shoulder like it's nothing. 'Not sure about soft lad over here though.' He looks at me with a smirk.

I groan. 'Ugh, I'm fine... I think. Definitely had worse. Where were we at? Two' pointing to myself 'four,' pointing to Laker. 'Yeah?'

'You both sure? Not wanna take a rest on the benches?' Klarke asks.

'Nahh, I've waited long enough to get here and play a game... now let's go!' I say as I stand.

Laker lifts his brows, eyes flicking to mine like he

didn't expect me to get up so fast.

'Sure... what he says,' clapping his hands together.
'Let's go, team!'

The rest of the game went over smoothly, the captain's team won, and my team lost by one fucking goal! I'd say that was still fair game; it is possible Laker had the stronger players... who knows, I'm still getting to know these guys. Anyway, I'm back in the changing room showers. Funny enough, the other boys were in and out of the showers rather quickly, but I had blood to clean up, which is never fun. So, I waited till most of them were done. Sharing a communal shower room when you have blood swimming through the water is a bit disgusting for the others, in my opinion, and it's not something I'd particularly be quiet about if it were someone else.

Maybe that's just me... germaphobe.

I turn off the water, which is a little cooler than the showers back at North Hall, but it's a bit better for the muscles anyway. I grab my towel and wrap it around my waist one and a half times cause they're huge. The daily showering towels are about half the size of these. I walk out of the shower room into the changing rooms, which are interconnected with an archway. And I see him sitting there as though he waited behind for me to finish up.

'I thought everyone had gone.'

'Nah, I had to quickly go get some plasters for my knee,' he lifts his trouser leg and shows it to me, keeping

his eyes toward the floor.

‘Oh, right, think I might need to get one for my elbow too. Bastard’n thing won’t stop bleeding.’

He raises his head to me, and I just see those icy blue eyes again. ‘Uhhh...’ he stutters and takes a pause as I catch his eyes moving up and down at me again. ‘Sorry... did... ugh, never mind.’

‘No, go on...’ he says.

‘Sorry, I just... I thought I saw you look me up and down there... is there a problem?’

‘I didn’t...I—I must’ve just lost my train of thought.’ He replies quickly with a hint of defensiveness in his voice.

‘Oh, alright... well I’m gonna get changed, dying for a lay down.’ I go to walk over to my part of the bench where my clothes are, and he quickly but lightly grabs my arm.

‘Wait.’

‘Yeah?’ I turn my head to his magnetic eyes.

‘I just, eh, wanted to apologise for the collision on the field...’ He lets go of my arm and stands; he is slightly taller than I, so I have to tilt my head slightly.

‘No, biggie, it happens.’

He pats my right shoulder, as if he remembered it was my left that was hurt in the collision. ‘You played well, looking forward to seeing you again... seeing you play again...’ He pauses for a moment, then adds with a grin, ‘Let’s raise the tempo together next time. We’ll make the

team unstoppable.’

‘Yeah... me too.’

He makes his way out of the changing room before playfully popping his head back in, ‘Hey, maybe we should look to getting you a girlfriend? I can help with that if you want?’ he grins.

‘Nah, thanks, but I just wanna focus on this course, not really interested at the moment, plus I need to find myself a job.’

‘There’s a position opened at Refuel, y’know, the coffee shop just down the road... might be worth checking it out, it’s one of the closest businesses for miles.’

‘Cheers... might ask my roommate Adam to take a walk with me.’ I smile before dismissing the conversation to get changed. I glance back quickly to see if he is still there, but he’s gone.

I check my phone just before I put it into my pocket, and there is a post alert from Burnblog:

Level Four Burn 🔥 x4

“Seems the Poorballer is actually quite a good shot... if the goal of the game was to collide into other players rather than kick balls into the goal posts, the chance that the Braeburn Boys could strike lucky in their next match is looking pretty slim... - xcx BB”

‘How the fuck did *they* know about that?’ I shake my

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

head, throwing my phone back into my pocket as I move for the door.

THE SPARK THAT IGNITES THE FLAME

'Jack Frost's definitely biting my fingers now,' I say to Adam, 'These rooms really do get cold in the winter, eh?' I pull the duvet higher to my chin in the off chance it will allow me to retain more heat. The chill isn't just in the air, it's in my bones, a restlessness rattling around inside my head. It's a familiar companion, echoing the uncertainty gnawing at me lately, like the frost gnawing at my fingertips. The cold mirrors the doubts that swirl every time I face another day, another class, another moment that forces me to step out of this warm cocoon and into the world.

'Yeah mate, not too bad though. You should try living in Scotland, much colder than this in October, never mind November.'

'Still cold though, you have pyjamas on, that's saying something...'

Adam looks to me; he's sitting in bed doing a wordsearch of all things. 'Only cause am no goin' to sleep,' he sniggered and focused back on his booklet.

‘Fair enough.’ I glanced up to the alarm on my side table, 7:50am. The faint hum of the radiator filled the room as I wrapped my fingers around my warm coffee mug, savoring its heat, a fleeting comfort before the inevitable routine. I hesitated, feeling the weight of the day ahead pressing in. ‘Well, s’pose I better get up and get ready for the day ahead. You not got a lecture at nine?’ I ask.

‘Nah, next one is at ten, so am gonna kick back and chill for a bit before I need to get ready.’

I pull the duvet in tighter, not wanting to let it go, knowing the air in the room is freezing. It’s Thursday, the first class of the morning will be Psychology of Sport & Exercise. I already know what today’s going to be—something about motivation, maybe burnout. The irony isn’t lost on me. I’m lying here negotiating with myself over whether five more minutes in bed is worth the sprint to lecture. But this class... it gets under my skin. Makes me think too hard about things I’d rather leave on the pitch or buried under routine. Still, part of me wants to know what makes people push past this exact kind of moment—the internal standoff between comfort and discipline.

Remembering that I’ll get to see Laker in this class brightens up the thought of getting out of this bed and making my way there, so I spring up, do the morning routine, and before I know it, it’s 9:01am, and I’m sitting in my chair at the back of the lecture room. Laker is just

a few rows in front of me, and all I can see is the back of his head. The distance between our chairs feels like miles, yet the mere sight of him is enough to stir something inside me, a quiet longing I try hard to ignore. The more I focus, the more I notice—the way his shoulders move slightly when he writes, the rhythmic tapping of his pen—and for a moment, everything else fades away.

I still don't know what this is between us, but the connection definitely feels stronger. I've thought about the prospect that I could really like this guy, and it scares the hell out of me. That's probably why I haven't tried to make any moves yet. The last thing I need is to come onto him, only to find out he's just being friendly or something else entirely. I don't want to become the centre of attention in the worst way possible, especially on something like the Burnblog.

In the locker room, I overheard a couple of guys joking about how a 'real player' ought to be. 'I mean, who would want a softie?' they laughed, casually tossing around words that might as well have been stones. The thought of anyone finding out about my feelings for Laker is terrifying. Who would even want to take on a gay player? A thought that just won't leave my head, my future career hangs on this. I decided to bide my time; it isn't worth the risk. Anyway, he has a girlfriend now, so that kind of answers my question. But then I even thought about trying to find a girlfriend just to help distract me from thoughts about him. Maybe that's what

he's done?

It's so strange, I've never noticed a guy like this before. It makes me wonder if I've overlooked other interests in my life. I remember back when I was younger, every day was about training. There was this singular focus on football—it consumed me completely. Back then, each afternoon was a blur of drills and practice matches, the echoes of the coach's whistle ringing in my ears. Those sessions were my sanctuary, no room for anything else, no distractions. And yet, here I am now, confronting unexpected feelings that don't fit into the neat lines of my past. Could it be that this intense focus on one thing kept me from seeing other parts of myself? Surely, after all the teams and competitions, I would've realized if there was something more to me. But perhaps it's only now, through this unexpected attraction, that I'm discovering what's been quietly waiting to emerge.

Before I knew it the lecture was over and I had only picked up bits and bobs here and there, my focus was completely screwed in this lesson this morning, I could only hope it would pick up for the day ahead as things were about to get a lot more physical, Practical Sports Training, followed by lunch, then independent study, which I've found myself in Refuel with my laptop and the scribbled gobbledygook I wrote down in this morning's class... gonna need a degree in epigraphy to decipher these bad boys.

‘That’s all for you, Heartbreaker?’ Kaylan asks.

‘Yeah Chick-a-dee, I will get a chat in a bit, I really need to get some Uni work done.’

‘Fine, I’ll keep em’ coming, shall I?’

‘Please... please do,’ I say, picking up my coffee. One of the perks of working at Refuel is free drinks, whether you’re on shift or not. Thank God for that. I need every drop today.

I take my usual seat by the window in the front corner of the café. I’ve grown fond of this spot—it’s almost always free, like it’s waiting for me. And the views? Unreal. Straight ahead, the mountain, with grey clouds draped over it, seem to linger just like the uncertainty hovering over my thoughts lately, making me question who I am and where my path will lead. Off to the left, the forest—if the timing’s right and it’s quiet enough, you might even catch a glimpse of deer weaving through the trees. Total distraction zone, obviously. But when your mind’s already floating in a thought bubble, it’s the kind of distraction that feels worth every minute of my time.

I open and turn on my laptop, open a fresh blank page in my word processor, and begin to decipher the notes I left for myself, thinking I’d done myself a favour, when in fact, if I had just paid attention in the class... I’d probably have a better idea of what they were all about.

The screen glows back at me like it has all the answers, but all I’ve got is a line of chicken scratch and a vague

recollection of my lecturer, Mr Joseph Hisenberg, saying something about motivation and routine. He mentioned ‘rain-proof motivation,’ a phrase that echoes in my mind as I try to muster the discipline for a rainy-day routine. It’s about what gets people to lace up their trainers in the first place and what keeps them going when the novelty wears off, and it’s raining sideways outside.

I squint at one particular note... I must’ve written it mid-daydream:

*Intention vs. Adherence = affective
forecasting??*

Right. Whatever that means...

I take a sip of coffee, half hoping caffeine might double as a translation tool. No such luck. Still, there’s something weirdly comforting in trying to piece it together—like a mental Rubik’s cube I scrambled myself. Maybe if I stare at it long enough, something will click.

I ogle at the blinking cursor, willing it to start the sentence for me. All I’ve got are scribbled half-thoughts and a vague thread about motivation and behaviour change. I type out:

WHY DO PEOPLE STICK WITH EXERCISE?

It looks like the kind of question a five-year-old might ask, but maybe that’s the point, start off by stripping it

back, start simple. But what if I can't answer it? What if I never get past this blank page, this blinking cursor? The fear is like a shadow creeping over me—what if I can't find the motivation to make sense of all these thoughts? I take a deep breath, needing to know this journey is for something, that unravelling these questions will finally make the rest make sense.

I take another sip of coffee. Outside, the sky's getting moodier, clouds pressing down like they're trying to eavesdrop on my internal crisis. I catch myself watching the tree line again, half hoping a deer will wander through, just to break up the noise in my head.

Then, behind me—footsteps. The kind that slows down a little near your table. I don't turn right away. Could be Kaylan. Could be anyone. Then another cup of coffee is placed on the table. I run my hands through my thick hair under stress.

'Sup with you?' Kaylan asks.

I sigh and then look up to her with a face that was clearly screaming, "Help me." 'I got distracted this morning, and now I have a bunch of scribbles that make no fucking sense to me, trying to decipher them so I can actually know what I was supposed to be learning this morning.'

I catch Kaylan looking around, then she takes the seat in front of me, setting her tray down on the table. 'How's about you do the clever thing?'

'I am... trying to work out my notes so that I don't

have to go back and say, “hey, by the way, I wasn’t listening, wanna tell me what we learned this morning?”

‘No, twat—ask someone who actually listened.’ She smiled in a way that said to me, “Been there, done that.”

‘Great idea! Now I can get on with the actual studying I was supposed to be doing before I head off for Football, Coach Klarke said he wants to have a meeting with us all before practice, this should be fun, honestly... the guy just sends shivers down my spine.’

Kaylan snorts. ‘He’s the one who comes in here and always looks like he drinks black coffee just to feel something, right?’

I nod, sipping mine like it’s a shield. ‘Yeah, that one. The stare could curdle milk. I swear, even the captain goes quiet when he walks in.’ I laugh.

She leans back, smug. ‘Rather you than me.’

I glance back at my laptop, still blinking, still waiting. Maybe I should take her advice and message someone from class. But then there’s a moment of hesitation, a fear of unveiling my disorganised thoughts to anyone else. Maybe this chaos is part of the process, the messy first draft that’s essential for discovering something substantial in the next pass. Perhaps I should embrace the confusion sitting in front of me. Insert fearlessness here. Just maybe not him.

Independent study ended faster than I wanted it to, and I walked up the long, wavy road toward the University. The air is cold and damp and I think it’s going

to rain soon, not to worry football won't be cancelled due to a little rain, probably a good thing for us, the extra weight from our soaked strips helps us work a little harder, makes us run a little faster and the wet on the grass, well that's just phenomenal for a slide tackle.

I get into the changing rooms and throw my bag on the ground, careful enough that I don't smash my laptop into a thousand pieces and get changed into my strip, finishing up with the football boots. Laker has just arrived and takes his position on the bench beside me, and the room starts to slow down. Not again, I think to myself. I notice what is happening; he's removing his shirt as he changes into his strip. My eyes can't seem to look away. His head pops through the hole in his shirt, and I'm drawn to the defined line of muscle across his torso, the way a small scar decorates his ribcage. My gaze lingers, and he catches me watching him. Shit... he saw me, and I quickly turn away, facing the ground before he asks, 'You alright?'

'I-I, me, yeah, I'm fine, just wondering what Coach wants a meeting for...' I look back up at his face. His team shirt is now on, but he's begun to remove the bottom half to put his shorts on. I stay focused on his face.

'I'm sure it's nothing to be worried about, probably just one of his usual rants.' He smiles at me and then sits to put his boots on.

'Yeah, probably—how's... what's her name? sorry...'

'Beatrice... my girl?' he replies.

The name makes my heart skip a single beat, 'yeah, her, seemed like it happened so quick.'

'Yeah...' he looks down at the ground before looking back up into my eyes and pausing for a moment. 'Y'know... she's a girl, I'm a guy... It's going alright, I think.' His eyes immediately darted to the ground again. I wasn't sure, but it seemed like maybe he wasn't happy.

'Well, that's good, glad you're happy.' I say.

'Yeah, happy. What about you? Have you found anyone?'

'Nah, well, there is someone... but far too busy mate, honestly, work, Uni, sleep. That's my life at the moment. I can't wait for the break to come around in December, what you doing for it?'

'Uhm...' he pauses for a brief moment as if thinking about what he wants to actually do, briefly he lifts the corners of his mouth showing his fantastic teeth, 'figured I'd go home for a bit. Y'know... Catch up, do nothing. My mum's probably already planning three roast dinners, knowing her.' He laughs.

I feel a slight coldness of jealousy flowing through my veins. If there is one thing I still struggle with when it comes to other people, it is that they still have their parents. I swallow it down and just as I'm about to reply, the changing room door slams open with a bang and in walks Coach Klarke in all his might as if he has just entered right of stage to the best award-winning theatre show on planet earth.

‘Right, you lot!’ he begins.

I don’t move. Neither does Laker. We’re still perched on the bench, boots half-laced, like statues caught mid-thought.

Klarke doesn’t seem to care. He plants himself at the front of the room. ‘Weak tackles. Soft kicks. No heart.’ His words hit like a quick jab, and then he continues, ‘Before you run yourselves ragged out there, we need to talk about discipline. We’re giving away too much ground. Too much hesitation, too many excuses.’

My eyes flick sideways—Lakers already looking at me. Not intensely. Just a glance. Like he’s checking if I heard what he heard, or maybe if I’m still stuck on what we didn’t say.

‘Coach, what’s this important meeting all about?’ Laker asks. As captain, it is his job to speak for us... technically.

‘So, you all know, we have a big game coming up in May.’ Klarke says.

‘But coach... It’s November...’ Laker replies.

The coach frowns with his bushy eyebrows. I don’t have a clue what’s going through his head at this moment, but I know it ain’t good. ‘Yeah, and that’s the kind of attitude that’s going to cost us the win, Mr Luxton.’

‘Sure... go on, coach, sorry.’ Laker says.

‘Now, we have a game, a match we need to win against Canbrey University, I need you all to be on your

top performance, and from what I'm seeing... from what I am getting from all you pansies running around that pitch is absolute rubbish... weak tackles, soft kicks and I'm not even going to mention the teamwork..' He sighs as he pinches the bridge of his thick nose. 'No, not happy at all for where this team is headed this year... not a win in sight for years, and I really want... no, I demand we win this one, Braeburn needs this!'

He stops for a minute and looks around the room, hands on his hips like he's judging us all from the inside out. 'What a bunch of weaklings I have on this team. I let you play and play and play until I couldn't bear it anymore.'

The coach's voice went on and on, but I tuned out. My heart began to race, and suddenly, a spark seemed to ignite in the pit of my palm as I felt my hand tingle as if it were asleep. I had rested it on the bench beside me, beside him. I glanced down at my hand and saw Laker's hand resting beside mine, his skin touching mine ever so slightly. My mind drifted even further away from the coach's voice. I started thinking about how it would feel to hold his hand, our hands intertwined in a moment of madness, how nice it would be to feel his palm fully against mine.

I think about moving my hand closer, see if he will react, after all, it was him who placed his hand right beside mine. My heart is pounding at the thought of it. I glance up to his face and see he's not bothered, focusing

on the coach as his dulcet tone went on and on...

I went for it, I made my move, slowly I moved my hand closer to his, what if someone sees us... I didn't care, there was something within me that wanted this, I inch my hand closer, so our hands are touching firmly.

He didn't react; he didn't pull away... has he noticed?

I leave my hand there and focus back on the coach.

'And that is the only way we are going to win this match, it is the biggest match in years, against the hardest team we could go up against bu—'

I could feel his hand moving. Is he going to pull away? Slowly, he lifts his hand and places it back down again, this time it was right on top of mine... am I dreaming, is this confirmation? Is this really happening to me? To us?

I move my fingers slowly, as if it is alright for his hand to be there, and he pushes his hand down on mine a little harder, allowing for our fingers to intertwine for a brief second. It feels amazing, I loved it... It feels just as I thought it would, it feels right!

'Boy's!' I jumped out of my skin, and apparently so did Laker. 'Are you god damn listening?'

'Yes, Coach!' we say in unison.

'Good. So, as I was saying, hardest team, yada yada yada, I need more fight out there, train as you have never trained before, and just a heads up, something to maybe motivate you all... There will be poachers... someone could get lucky and leave Uni to join the higher leagues!'

Coach Klarke stormed off in his usual thunderous

fashion. I glanced at Laker quickly before I stood up...’right then... let’s train captain!’

I run out of the changing rooms and straight out of the back doors that lead me onto the pitch, just as I suspected the rain was now pouring down, didn’t take long before I was soaked, it felt good though, the cold rain on my skin, it was like having a cold shower after an intense workout, except this wasn’t calming down my muscle ache, it was bringing me back to reality.

I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I ran to the middle of the pitch as far away from the doors as I could, just so I could stand and watch the team join me. Just so I can think for a moment, before I have to see him walking toward me.

How could this be? I like girls, I am almost certain of it... or at least I was. The feeling of his fingers sliding in between mine was so electrifying. My mind started to wander, what if it was just us, no audience... what would have happened then? Would we have acknowledged our hand-holding to one another? Will we ever speak of this to one another? What if I’m not who I thought? What if everything I’ve assumed about myself isn’t true anymore, and I’m just now starting to realise that something significant is changing within me?

This would happen on the day that the coach said he wants us focused, wouldn’t it? I don’t know how the hell I am getting through this game without keeping my eyes off him, without letting my mind wander...

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

I take a look around, and everyone has sorted teams... I missed the call on who I was with... ‘Captain,’ I call, ‘What side am I on?’

‘Their team...’ he points to the other side of the pitch.

Shit, so now I’m facing off against him, both of us are doing left wing... this is gonna be near impossible.

Rain continues to pour for the full ninety, drenching the pitch, turning every step into a risk and every tackle into a slide. I’m drowned and muddy ten minutes in, but I stay sharp and grit myself into the game. A clean tackle, a half-chance on goal, a cross that almost finds the mark. My boots are caked in mud, thighs burning, but I keep pushing. Because he’s watching. He has to be.

Midway through the second half, I take possession just past the halfway line. There’s a second—maybe less—before pressure closes in, and I feel him coming. Laker. Boots thudding wet against turf, coming straight for me.

I pivot, shielding the ball. Look up.

He’s there, closer than I expect. Eyes lock to mine. No smirk, no stare-down. Just that impossible stillness between us, like the match fell mute for a heartbeat.

He doesn’t lunge. Doesn’t press.

I pass to Zaid on my right. The moment between us dissolves back into the rain, and just like that, he’s gone again, back into motion, and the storm resumes. By the final whistle, we’re all gasping. Shirts clinging, lungs aching.

E L I J A H N O X L E Y

Coach claps his hands once. ‘That,’ he says, pacing in front of us, ‘was better.’

I bend over, hands on knees, and then I feel it—a warm thud on my back.

‘Good game, Chrissy boy,’ Laker says beside me, breathless, and for a moment I let myself believe he means more than just the football and, just maybe, something else...

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

After football training—the last thing on my timetable today—I’ve got a tiny two-hour gap before I need to start my shift at Refuel.

Normally, I’d head back to the room and lounge about, but I need answers.

Real ones.

So here I am in the library, hovering in front of a shelf of books on homosexuality.

There’s actually a decent range, which surprises me. What doesn’t surprise me is the fact that I can’t bring myself to pick one up.

I can’t risk being seen with it. Imagine if the Burnblog poster were in here. They could be anywhere. The risk just isn’t worth it. My shoulders tense up, and a heat rushes to my cheeks at the mere thought. The weight of potential exposure sits heavily in my chest, making it hard to breathe for a moment.

I pace up and down the aisle, trying to figure out how to get one of these books out of the library without anyone seeing me even looking at them.

That's when something catches my eye—a bright rainbow poster pinned to the wall:

CAMPUS COUNSELLOR

NEED SUPPORT?

WE'RE HERE TILL SIX!

There's a little map underneath showing the office location.

Couldn't hurt to talk to someone... could it? Surely everything they discuss is private. And surely, they're not the Burnblog posters. Right?

I clutch the strap of my rucksack and head for the door.

The hallways feel longer than usual as I walk, checking my phone every few minutes. Forty-five minutes till they close—plenty of time. I skip down the old staircase into the reception.

'Patricia,' I ask, spotting her sitting at her desk with her ever-steaming mug, the clatter echoing down the hallway as she types away at her keyboard with focused ease. 'You know where the counsellor's office is?'

'Yeah, just down that corridor and to your left.

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

Everything alright? Her eyes flick up, and she gives me this half-smile, like I've caught her in the middle of a secret.

'Yeah, nothing to worry about. Just a few questions I wanna ask.'

'Oh, well, anything I can—'

'—Nah, Patricia, you're all good!' I call back, already heading in the direction she pointed.

The hallway down here is bright, almost blinding, with posters and art displays lining the walls. They all scream You're not alone. Among them, I notice an old Pride-week flyer, its edges curling and its colors fading with time, yet its message remains powerful. It reminds me that there have always been others, like Daisy, who once questioned and sought answers just as I do now. If only you could be in my head right now, Daisy... whoever you were. Probably graduated years ago.

I reach the door:

COUNSELLOR'S OFFICE

Same sign as every other room. I hesitate, then knock three times. The sound echoes in the quiet hallway, seeming louder than it has any right to be. As I wait, a faint screech of the rubber beneath my feet and the whisper of a distant fan fill the silence. My stomach drops. Fight or flight kicks in hard. Do I stay? Do I bolt?

I choose bolt. I turn and start walking away fast—too fast—when a voice calls out behind me.

‘Can I help?’

I turn. An older woman stands in the doorway, bulky fringe, greying blonde hair. I freeze, picking at my nails—a habit inherited from my mum.

‘Can I help you?’ she repeats gently.

‘I—I... never mind,’ I mumble, already turning to leave.

‘Wait. How about a nice cuppa tea?’

Tea. Oh, I do love a good cuppa. I hover in the hallway a second longer than I should. ‘Yeah... sure. Tea sounds wonderful.’

She disappears into the little kitchenette at the back of the office, leaving me perched on the edge of a soft armchair. The fabric is worn, the armrest frayed, like it’s absorbed countless stories over the years. While the kettle rumbles to life, steam curling up and disappearing, I let my eyes wander around the room.

It’s warmer than I expected—not temperature-wise, just... softer. There are plants everywhere, the kind that look like they’ve been alive for decades because someone actually cares for them. A stack of well-thumbed books sits on a low table, titles about grief, identity, stress, all the things people pretend they’re fine about until they’re not.

On the wall behind her desk hangs a framed print that says You’re allowed to take your time. I stare at it longer

than I mean to. There's a knitted blanket draped over the back of her chair, the kind only someone's gran would make, and a bowl of wrapped sweets sits beside a box of tissues. It's all so... human. Nothing like the cold, clinical room I'd imagined.

The kettle clicks off. I straighten up, suddenly aware of how tightly I'm still gripping the strap of my rucksack.

She hands me a mug of tea and settles into the chair opposite mine. 'Let's start properly,' she says with a warm smile. 'I'm Margaret Rowan. One of the campus counsellors.'

I clear my throat. 'Chris. Christopher Daley.'

'Nice to meet you, Christopher.'

'Chris is fine,' I say quickly.

'Alright then, Chris,' she says. 'What brings you in today?'

I stare into my tea. 'Just... had a few questions.'

'Okay. Questions about what?'

My throat tightens. I pick at the skin around my thumb. 'H—Homo...sexuality. I have some questions about homosexuality.'

She nods, calm as anything. 'Alright. What kind of questions?'

'I just...' I swallow. 'How do you know? Like... how would someone know if they're... that?'

Margaret doesn't flinch. 'There isn't one answer. Some people know from a young age. Some realize later. Who you are can unfold over time. It's different for

everyone.'

I nod, pretending that it helps.

'Are you asking for yourself?' she asks gently.

My heart slams into my ribs. 'No. No, no, no. Not me. Definitely not me.' I laugh—too loud, my voice cracks slightly, and I feel my knuckles whitening as I grip my mug. 'I'm asking for a friend. Actually... my roommate. Adam. I think he could be. And I just wanna know how to tell and what I can do to support him.'

Margaret's eyes soften. She doesn't call me out. 'Alright. Let's talk about your friend.'

I exhale.

'First thing,' she says, 'you can't know someone's sexuality unless they tell you. There's no checklist. No signs that guarantee anything.'

'Right. Yeah. Makes sense.'

'But you can make it clear you're a safe place. That you care. That nothing he says will change how you see him.'

I nod slowly. 'Yeah. I just... don't want him to feel alone.'

Margaret watches me for a moment. Not judging—just seeing.

'Chris,' she says softly, 'you talk about loneliness like it's something you know well.'

The words hang in the air. Silence envelops us, and for a moment, time seems to slow down. The muffled hum of voices from the hallway drifts in faintly, filling

the space between us. The quiet is weighty, pressing against my chest with the challenge of acknowledging the truth I'm not ready to face, as if the stillness itself understands and mirrors the loneliness inside me.

'Has something happened recently? Something that's made things feel heavier for you?'

I swallow hard. My throat burns. 'My mum. She... passed. A while ago.'

Margaret's expression softens even further. 'I'm very sorry.'

I nod, jaw tight. 'It's fine. I'm fine. People lose parents all the time.'

'That doesn't make it hurt any less,' she says. 'And sometimes grief makes everything else feel louder. Confusion, fear, questions about who we are... they all get tangled up.'

I blink fast, trying not to let anything spill out. 'I just... I don't want to...' I pause 'Adam, to feel like that. Like he's carrying something all on his own.'

'Because you know what that feels like, right?' she says gently.

My breath catches. I don't answer—I do know this, better than she knows, better than anyone knows. I've spent my whole life relying on myself, carrying everything quietly, surrounded by love and people and noise, yet never truly feeling like I had anyone. There's always been this strange distance between me and the rest of the world, like I'm present but not quite

connected, close enough to feel the warmth of others but never close enough to believe any of it belongs to me.

I've always felt alone, even in the middle of a room full of people, lost in a world that keeps shifting too fast for me to keep up with, more so recently. It's not that people didn't care—they did, and I'm sure they still do—but caring isn't the same as seeing. And I don't think anyone has ever really seen me, not properly. If I'm honest, I'm not sure I've ever fully seen myself either.

It's been building for years, this quiet ache, this sense of being slightly out of step with everyone else. Like a slow leak, I didn't notice until everything felt hollow. I used to tell myself it was just a phase, something I'd grow out of once I figured out who I was supposed to be. But now I'm not sure it ever goes away. I'm not sure it's something you outgrow at all. It just settles deeper; it becomes part of the way you move through the world.

'Chris,' she continues, 'losing a parent at your age is a profound thing. It changes how you move through the world. It can make you more protective of others. More afraid of losing people. More afraid of being honest with yourself.'

I stare at the floor. 'I'm not afraid.'

'No,' she says kindly. 'You're careful. There's a difference.'

I don't know what to say to that.

She lets the silence sit for a moment, warm rather than awkward.

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

‘If Adam ever comes out to you,’ she says eventually, ‘the best thing you can do is listen. And if you ever need to talk about him, about your mum, about anything. You’re more than welcome here.’

I nod, gripping my mug like it’s the only thing keeping me upright.

I stand and slowly edge for the door. ‘Thanks,’ I say quietly. ‘Really.’

I leave before she can say anything else. It was just a chat. Just questions. “For Adam,” I tell myself that over and over, trying to force the world back into the shape it had this morning. But something’s shifted. I can feel it in the way my breath won’t settle, in the way her words echo long after I’ve stepped into the corridor. I shake my head, insisting it was all about Adam.

Only... I’m not sure I believe myself anymore...

S N O W L I G H T

Wind rattles the windows of an abandoned room a few doors down, the chill seeping through the cracks. The rest of November and part of December pass by in an instant, before I know it, the time has come, everyone is heading home, which means he is also going to be gone too. The break starts like a quiet unravelling. Campus empties, corridors still echo with voices that left days ago. I don't mind the silence—not at first. I fill my time with shifts, solo training, and the odd attempt at coursework. Refuel feels hollow without Kaylan around to sling comments like espresso shots. I pretend I like the peace. I lie to myself very well.

And in the quiet, my brain does what it always does: spirals. After my chat with Margaret, the counsellor, something changed inside me. I can't quite figure it out yet. Nights stretch long and unending. I scroll through forums, articles I wouldn't normally read. Sexuality. Labels. "Questioning." All that jazz. I close the tabs quickly, certain someone else will see. But sometimes, I linger. It helps, gives me words for feelings I pretend don't exist. Makes me realize my obsession with Laker might not be random. I don't know what any of it means

yet. But I don't feel completely broken anymore. Just confused. And maybe that's its own kind of progress.

I will not admit this to his face, but it has been weird not waking up in the morning to my Jedi Master lying in the next bed. Adam left a few days ago, and honestly, the peace and quiet have been nice, but his missing presence is more than extremely noticeable. He hugged me before he left, something we had never shared before, but over the months, he has become more and more like a brother to me than anything else.

I'm looking forward to his return and, seriously, I don't know what I'm going to do without his words of wisdom. But as he said to me, 'I'm only a phone call or a text away, you need me, just phone.' To me... that would only happen in dire circumstances. It's the Christmas holidays—a time for family, not a time for your roommate to call with my minuscule issues of confusion.

I see the Lakers' name on my phone more times than I should. I don't message. He said he was going home. He's probably halfway through his second roast dinner by now, sitting somewhere warm and full of noise. I picture it more than I mean to.

A few more days in, I'm behind the counter at Refuel, halfway through wiping down a tray of mugs, when I hear the door chime. I don't look up at first. I can hear the footsteps getting closer and closer to the counter before I hear the guy's voice.

'Is this where the good coffee is hiding, then?'

I look up because the voice sounds like warm melted butter to my ears; it's Laker. Standing there like he never left. Hood up, covered in snow, his cheeks a ruby red with the cold, smile sideways. My stomach does something stupid. 'Didn't think you were sticking around,' I say, aiming for casual while my pulse does parkour. Then, before I can convince myself otherwise, I let the words tumble out: 'Did you stay for the quiet or... maybe for someone?'

He shrugs, stepping forward. 'Changed my mind, didn't I?'

'Oh yeah?'

'Thought I'd see what a quiet Christmas felt like.'

I don't know what to do with that sentence. I nod instead. 'You want to hang out after I finish here?'

He doesn't hesitate. 'Yeah. I'd like that.'

I smile, probably a bit too eagerly. 'Awesome, awesome, brilliant.' My nerves show as I wipe a perfectly clean cup again, trying to steady myself. It's like my brain short-circuits, and I struggle to regain composure. 'Great, erm, yeah.' I pause, shake my head, feeling the static in the air. 'Erm, what can I get you?'

'Just a plain Cappuccino.'

'Coming right up, is it to go?'

He nods, 'When do you get off?' He leans in on the counter, a slight smile growing on his face as if he's amused by something.

I get off by looking at you... I shake that thought straight

outta my head. ‘Six, well, depending on how busy it stays, could be earlier.’

‘Well, it’s two now, so how about... I come back and meet up with you here?’

I get a knot in my stomach, and part of me is so glad I have my back to him, the knot in my stomach is screaming to me that this is wrong and I shouldn’t want this, but the smile on my face is so wide I’m surprised it didn’t tear my cheeks in two. ‘Uhm, sure, y’know what, how about I text you when I know I’m locking up and then you don’t have to hang around?’ I clip the lid onto his coffee cup and turn around, sliding it across the counter.

‘Can I see your hand for a second?’ he asks.

I lift it up and present it to him. His clasp is like ice, absolutely frozen, and it sends a shiver up my spine. There is a moment of silence, the room’s warmth creating a stark contrast with his cold touch. It’s the kind of quiet that seems to exhale around the edges of something unspoken. The clinking of mugs from the back and the hum of the under-counter fridge underline the charged connection hanging between us. He laughs at me as I jerk my hand back quickly. ‘Fucking hell, you’re frozen!’

‘Yeah, probably for the best you let me know, cause it’s pretty cold out there.’

‘Fine... I’ll text you.’

He smiles, and at that moment the chime of the door

goes again, this time a small group appear behind Laker, 'Thanks for the coffee and uhm... see you later yeah?'

'Yeah, see you.'

I watch him go, body buzzing with something that wasn't there before. Focus gone. I'm just standing there, watching him walk past the window, like a teen in a romcom before *Foghorn Franny* speaks up, pulling me out of my daze.

'You gonna take our order or what?'

I blink. Snap my eyes to her face. It definitely matched the voice—like a melted cheese toastie that'd overstayed its welcome under the grill. 'Well, that's what I'm standing here for...' I snap, 'What can I get you all?'

The rest of my shift dragged by, it was just like the night you were sent to bed but couldn't sleep because you knew Santa was coming... in my case, he actually was. Leaning against the counter, I absentmindedly spun a clean coffee mug in my hands, feeling its weight as I wondered what we were actually going to do? There isn't a lot going on around campus at this time of year for obvious reasons. I thought about mentioning Star Wars. See if it aroused his interest. Based on how cold his hands were, as I watched the white ceramic spin, I doubted a nice stroll or a game of footie in the dark was a good idea, but then again, who knows?

Refuel was busier than I'd expected it to be, considering half if not more of the campus had gone home, but I couldn't blame them, our rooms didn't

E L I J A H N O X L E Y

exactly give of Christmas vibes since none of us were allowed any decorations—fire hazard apparently, not that the rooms couldn't do with it cause they are freezing most of the time. That explains why most students were retreating to do their coursework here, heating and a nice Christmas-y feel. It helped that Refuel looks like a cabin in the woods; it was all a nice stained brown colour with windows and views for days, one of my favourite places to be. It was going on five, and the café was emptying slowly. I knew I would be staying till six cause the business needs money, and it's my job to ensure it makes it... at least that's what Kaylan had drummed into my noggin.

I whipped out my phone and quickly texted Laker.

I will be finished for 6, place is quieter now.
16:57✓✓

I waited for the two ticks to appear and shoved my phone back into my pocket. For the last hour, I'm going to focus on some of my own coursework, as I brought my laptop with me. I pull it out of my bag and put it on the counter, the glow of the screen hitting my eyes as my phone dings.

I will be finished for 6, place is quieter now.
16:57✓✓

Ok, see you soon then.
17:01✓✓

I get a small twinge in my stomach, do I reply? Leave

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

him hanging...

I will be finished for 6, place is quieter now.

16:57✓✓

Ok, see you soon then.

17:01✓✓

Sure, see you at 6.

17:10✓

Now I'm worrying I sounded too eager... I shove my phone back in my pocket and leave it, hoping he still shows up when I close this place down. I pull up the barstool, and for the next hour, I serve two customers and focus on my coursework. It's amazing how being under pressure can really help you focus. I got so much done in such a short time... until I heard the chime of the door. I was hesitant to look up, dreading it being another customer five minutes before closing. I was hoping it was him, but too scared in case it wasn't.

'So... we getting outa this place or what?' the voice asks in a whisper tone over the counter.

I still have my face buried in my laptop screen.

'Yeah,' I say casually as I close the lid and finally meet his gaze. He has wrapped up in more appropriate clothes.

'What you want to get up to?' he asks.

In my mind, there was a million and one things that I had thought about, some that were rather questionable to me... but I went with the easy option. 'What were you thinking?'

'A walk? Get to know each other a bit better?'

'I originally thought a movie, but a walk in the snow

sounds... cold.'

'c'mon, live a little, you play football in this... surely a walk not gonna kill you!' he smirks.

'A walk it is.' I wasn't going to allow him to think me a weakling, I'm Christopher Daley, Padawan of Adam, my Jedi Master... and besides, I could only hear the Scottish accent flowing through my brain telling me, 'Ye need to loosen up. Try it once. Maybe it'll be shite, maybe it won't. But if ye spend all yer time avoiding shit just because yer worried about how it'll go... ye'll look back one day and realise ye never actually lived any of it.' Such wise words, they really have stuck with me all term.

I grab the keys, put my laptop back in my rucksack and toss it over my right shoulder, turn off the lights, locking the front door behind us.

We step out into a quiet world dressed in white. The snow crunches beneath our feet with every step, and the streetlamps cast halos on the path ahead, soft and golden like an old film. It's not snowing now, but it's fresh—like the world exhaled just for us.

We don't speak much at first. Just walk.

His shoulder brushes mine once, and neither of us reacts. I don't know if it was an accident, but I know it lingers. He's wrapped in about three layers, coat zipped to his chin, hood up, cheeks red from the cold. I'm freezing too, but for once, it doesn't bother me.

'Feels weird,' he says finally, 'being one of the only ones still here.'

'Yeah,' I nod. 'Whole campus feels like it's asleep.'

'Feels like a perfect place to walk off the freezing fear of deadlines, you know?' I add with a half-joking tone, trying to keep the mood light while a hint of deeper worries creeps into my voice.

There is a soft silence between us before he fills it.

'But kinda peaceful, too,' he adds. 'Don't have to think so loud.'

I glance at him. 'You think loud?'

He grins sideways. 'You have no idea.'

I laugh, a real one. The steam from my breath fills the air around us. 'So, were we walking to?' I ask.

'Well, since you've been working all day, I thought it might be nice if you got in?'

Holding my breath, realising that the night will end with him leaving, as it always would have. But I thought maybe we would have longer. This sounds to me like he's walking me home. We reach the door, and I pull a fake shiver to try to convince myself it's what I want. I laugh.

I fumble with the doorknob, and it sticks, a classic old dorm feature. I jiggle it a bit, giving me an excuse to prolong this moment of indecision. As I finally force it open, the lights flicker for a split second, casting an uncertain glow across both of us.

'Sure, would be nice to get in,' I continue, trying to mask the hesitation, 'get a shower and hop under the freezing covers.' I laugh again.

'Honestly, the only thing I can think of is body heat

when I'm in there... having my roommate Adam back would be brilliant, guys like a walking, talking radiator.' I say.

He looks at me, and I can just about see an eyebrow raise... 'You share then?'

'Share?' I question.

'A bed, with your roommate.'

I laugh so loud it echoes through the surrounding trees. 'No... course not. I just meant his body heat actually heats the room.'

'Oh... that's good.' He pauses.

'Good?'

'I—I just mean, good, as in an extra source of heat in the room.'

Nice comeback, I think. 'Yeah, he's a good guy too, grew on me, became like a brother in a way, I suppose.'

We reach North Hall too fast. I stall outside the door. He stops beside me, breath fogging the space between us.

'Well...' I say, suddenly uncertain what to do with my hands. 'If that's our walk... we've had it. Thanks, Laker. It was nice.'

'Yeah. Anytime.'

He looks at me a second longer than necessary, eyes flicking once to my mouth—maybe. Maybe not. I might've just imagined it.

'Well... night, Chris.'

'Night.'

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

And just like that, he's gone. Hands in pockets. Back into the snow. I watch until I can't see him anymore. I don't know where he's going, as I have never asked where he was housed, could be any one of these blocks, but I know for certain it isn't mine.

I get in, strip and wander down to the communal showers. Nice to have a warm shower in peace. I get back to the room, put on a movie and jump under the covers, debating on whether I should text him... I pick up my phone, and there is a message waiting from him. I get a small twinge in my stomach, do I reply? Leave him hanging...

I will be finished for 6, place is quieter now.

16:57✓✓

Ok, see you soon then.

17:01✓✓

Sure, see you at 6.

17:10✓✓

Walk was nice, we should hang out again, campus is pretty lonely when there's no-one around.

19:17✓✓

I'd like that, was nice getting to know you a bit better, don't know why we haven't done this before.

19:21✓

I put the phone down on the side table and rest my head on the pillow. The sheets are cold against my skin, but the quiet is nice. I close my eyes, and I'm walking again.

Back outside. Snow underfoot. I recognise the trees, the path back from Refuel. Lakers just ahead of me,

hands stuffed in his coat pockets, but he keeps glancing back like he's waiting for me to catch up. His hood's fallen, hair mussed by the wind. He's smiling.

We reach the football pitch, somehow.

There's no crowd, no noise—just the clean white of snow-covered grass and two goalposts that glow like something out of a memory. He kicks a ball toward me, and I catch it on the inside of my foot, like muscle memory. We're laughing. I say something stupid, and it makes him laugh harder. He walks toward me, the kind of walk people do when they're not thinking about their feet.

He stops too close and says, 'You think about me when I'm not here?'

I want to say no. I say, 'Always.'

He reaches out and tugs my sleeve.

Then I flinch, and I'm staring at the ceiling.

The light through the blinds is too sharp now, too real. My pillow's twisted under my neck, and my throat feels dry. No Laker. Just blankets and quiet.

I sit up slowly, scrub my hand over my face. Grab my phone quickly and check for any reply. The first thing I'm met with is the Burnblog notification.

Level One Burn 🔥 x1

"Campus has been pretty quiet over the last few days, and I expect it will be until you all come back... looking forward to all that holiday goss! - xcx BB"

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

I swipe it left as it's the least of my worries or cares; I just want to see if he replied...

— Yesterday —

Walk was nice, we should hang out again, campus
is pretty lonely when there's no-one around.

19:17✓✓

I'd like that, was nice getting to know you a bit
better, don't know why we haven't done this
before.

19:21✓

There was nothing, The next few days blur. Laker hasn't been around on campus, and he still hasn't read my messages.

— Saturday —

Walk was nice, we should hang out again, campus
is pretty lonely when there's no-one around.

19:17✓✓

I'd like that, was nice getting to know you a bit
better, don't know why we haven't done this
before.

19:21✓

— Monday —

Hey, just checking in, you alright?

12:31✓

— Wednesday —

Hey, kinda worried now, did I do something
wrong?

20:16✓

— Friday —

Okay, I'll take this as you don't wanna speak
with me, that's fine,
thought maybe we could have been friends

E L I J A H N O X L E Y

but if you're not
gonna talk with me and I don't know what's
wrong I can't fix it.
19:21✓

Sunday rolls around without a breath from my supposed to be new mate... I go to the football pitch in the hope that I'd meet him there, without knowing what has happened or why he's just vanished from the face of campus, there isn't much in the way of me being able to "fix" it. So, taking to the pitch and using the ball to release my frustration sounded like a good idea, especially before my shift at Refuel.

I get to Refuel, and Kylan is still here. I knew I needed to talk, and she was probably the best person for this. She never asked too many questions and always knew when she was digging too deeply. I get in, slam my bag down on the counter in the back of house with not a care for its contents.

'Sup with you, Heartbreaker?' Kaylan asks.

'Nothing, I'm fine,' I snap. 'Just wanna get on with work. What's to be done?'

'Cup collection and dishwasher have been a bit quieter today.'

'Good, something to keep me busy.' I say as I make my way out the back of house onto the main floor, I grab a tray and start knitting in and out of the tables and chairs, collecting cups at speed and go back to the industrial dishwasher, I pile on the cups with harsh clinks

and bangs before Kaylan comes over.

She places her hand on my wrist, 'Hey, those cups cost a fortune, and I'd like them to stay intact. What's going on with you? You're not acting like yourself at all?'

'Y'know the person I mentioned.'

'The one you were interested in, yeah?'

'Well, they're ghosting me, we had a nice long chat and well... after it I haven't heard a word!'

'You're not used to having someone like that around, are you?'

I deny, 'I don't need anyone, Kaylan, I'm fine on my own!'

'I think of you not just as staff, but more like my best friend. You don't have to say anything. You don't have to tell me who this mysterious "person" is... but if you need someone to help... I'm here... always, without judgment or any of that bullshit... I just want you to be happy, and whatever this is... it ain't that.'

I cave... she always knows just what to say... and I've been holding this in for so long it feels like my ribs might crack from the pressure. All the questioning, the fear, the pretending—it all rushes up at once, and before I can stop myself, I fold into her arms.

'Kaylan, I think I might be gay.'

She doesn't say anything. She just wraps her arms around me, tight, steady, like she's been standing there for months waiting for me to finally fall. And the second she does, everything inside me breaks. My chest caves,

my throat closes, and suddenly I'm sobbing—not quiet tears, but the kind that rip out of you, the kind you can't swallow down no matter how hard you try.

'It's gonna ruin everything,' I gasp, words tripping over themselves, barely making it out between breaths. 'Kaylan, I'm gay... I'm actually—' My voice shatters. I clutch at her shirt like I'm drowning. 'Football... God, football's my whole life. Who's gonna want me on their team? Oh...the changing rooms? What if they think I'm—' I can't even finish. The thought alone knocks the air out of me.

'I've worked so hard,' I choke, tears streaming, my whole body shaking. 'Everything I've ever wanted, everything I've built... and now I've ruined it. I've ruined everything.'

She holds me tighter, grounding me, her hand on the back of my head like she's keeping me from falling apart completely. And I cling to her, sobbing into her shoulder, because for the first time in my life I'm saying the words out loud—and it feels like both the end of the world and the start of something I'm terrified to even look at.

Everything's warm and quiet. The hum of the fridge in the background. The low tick of the wall clock. Her hand on my back, steady, not moving, not rushing me. My face is still damp, my breathing uneven, but the panic has eased enough that I can actually feel the room again.

Something's shifted. Not gone, not fixed—but lighter. Like I've cracked a window somewhere inside my

soul, and all that pressure finally has somewhere to escape. For the first time in... God, I don't even know how long, I can breathe without it hurting. The steady hum of the fridge fills the room, a gentle reminder of normalcy, as if the world itself is exhaling alongside me, sharing in this newfound relief.

I said it. Out loud.

I'm gay.

The words don't feel so horrifying now. They just feel factual. And it's okay. Even if *he* doesn't feel the same. Even if nothing ever happens. Even if everything is still messy and confusing and terrifying.

I still said it. And saying it, really saying it... feels like the first thing I've done right in such a long time

Kaylan pulls back a little, gives me one of those looks—soft eyes, no pity. 'So,' she says, like we're already mid-conversation, 'this person... It's a guy, yeah?'

I nod, swiping at my face with my sleeve. 'Yeah.'

She hands me a proper paper towel from behind the counter. 'Someone I know?'

'You've met him,' I say, clearing my throat. 'Laker. Football captain. He's come in once or twice.'

Kaylan blinks, then breaks into the tiniest smirk. 'Laker? Ohh... yeah, no, I get it. He's bloody handsome.'

That makes me laugh. Like, full-body laugh. It slips out without me meaning it to, and she laughs with me, and suddenly it's easier to stand up straight again.

She pulls me in for another quick hug. No words. Just

enough to seal the moment. We stay like that for a bit. Long enough that the café feels still again. Like the place paused for us, and now it's letting time roll forward again.

Eventually, she lets go, brushing her hands off like she's sealing a deal. 'You alright to finish up?'

'Yeah,' I say, quieter. 'Think so.'

She watches me for a second, then grabs her coat. At the door, she turns. 'Tell *lover boy* he owes me a loyalty stamp if he shows up.'

I groan. 'Get out.'

She disappears through the arch, and just like that, it's quiet again. I wash my face in the back sink. Dry it on a crumpled bit of towel. Try not to overthink how my chest feels like it's been cracked open, and somehow that's *better*. I put on my big boy pants and get on with the rest of my shift.

Six o'clock comes round faster than I thought it would. The café's almost empty now, just the hum of the fridges and a few crumpled napkins the customers left behind. The last twenty minutes pass in small movements: chairs up, lights dimmed, a couple of mugs stacked in the dishwasher. There is a calming atmosphere in the air, just the way I like it at closing. I'm wiping down the counter when the door chime goes. I don't turn right away. Just stand there, cloth in hand, waiting for the world to spin again. Waiting for someone to say, 'Can I get a coffee?' Inside, I'm screaming fuck my life, but I eventually turn around.

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

And there *he* is.

Laker. Standing in the doorway, hair damp, cheeks red, like he never left, like he never ignored me and yet somehow, it's been days.

We stare at each other, neither of us saying a word.

Then he finally steps forward. His voice is quiet. Unsteady. As if he knows he did the wrong thing.

'Can *we* talk?'

AMBER HOURS

‘So now you want to talk?’ I stride behind him, snip the door locked and flip the sign. After a week of silence, no messages, no calls, I thought you were dead. Take your coat off. Want a coffee? Never mind; you’re getting one. Grab a seat, we’re going to be here for a while.

I head over to the machine that I had yet to turn off and quickly whip up two Cappuccinos, his plain just to show him I know him or at least know him well enough to remember his order.

He sits in silence until I take my seat by the window. I couldn’t help noticing how the snow pelts down outside, casting a gloomy yet magical glow in the sky. The gentle hiss of the coffee machine lingers in the background, a comforting sound, while the rich aroma of freshly ground beans and a subtle cinnamon scent waft through the air, wrapping around us like a warm embrace.

I take a sip of my coffee and stare right into his icy irises, waiting for him to mutter something to me. The silence is deafening, but I can see he’s racked with emotions, *racked with guilt for ghosting me, maybe?* Or has something else happened, something *more* serious?

I dial back my attitude a little just in case and break the ice with him again. ‘Why haven’t you messaged back, even just to let me know you were alright?’ I ask.

I took another sip of my coffee cause I needed to be doing something with my hands, and I’d already wiped the same spot on the table three times. He still hasn’t touched his. Just sat there with both palms wrapped around the cup like it was going to anchor him through the next ten minutes.

Then he finally managed to build up some courage from somewhere. I could almost hear the tension in the room, like waiting for the whistle before kickoff, and he says it.

‘I, uh... I broke up with Beatrice.’

And I just stared at him for a second, because what was that supposed to mean? Like, was that the explanation for vanishing into thin air? Was this supposed to be a confession or just a statement of fact? Because I didn’t really know what to do with it, and to be honest, I really didn’t care if he broke up with her or not... *where was the answer to the question I had asked?*

‘Right,’ I said, carefully. Tried not to sound flat, but in my usual style, I fail a little. ‘So... that’s why you’ve ignored me for nearly a week, then? You’ve been busy breaking up with your girlfriend?’

He looked like he’d swallowed something bitter. Shook his head. ‘No, I mean... It’s not just that.’

Of course it’s not. It never is.

He leaned forward slightly, elbows on the table now, eyes still on the cup, and I could tell he wasn't ready to meet mine yet. 'It was just after we talked, actually. That night. I went back to my room after having a long walk alone in the snow, and I couldn't... I don't know. I couldn't stop thinking about stuff. Everything felt louder than it should've. My heart was pounding so hard it felt like a drum in my chest, and my palms were sweating. And I didn't want to hurt her, but I didn't want to lie to her either.'

I didn't say anything. Mostly cause my brain was doing that ping-pong thing between *did he break up with her because of me* and *why is he telling me this now, like it explains everything*, and neither thought feels very solid.

'I thought it was because things weren't working,' he went on, like he'd already started the speech and couldn't stop now. 'But looking back, I think I told myself that because it was easier than—'

He stops, for a minute, I thought it was for dramatic effect, but then it was like he couldn't bring himself to say anymore, so I nudge him. I wondered briefly, Is this about me or his fear? before asking, 'Easier than? Having a friend to support you with the breakup? Having someone to talk with... it was easier to hide away and not speak to me for what reason exactly?'

'It was easier than admitting it was something else. Or someone else.' he stood up and began to pace, 'Is *that* what you wanted to hear?' He shouted, although still not

looking at me.

I clear my throat. Loud, because honestly, I'm a bit sick of feeling like a ghost in this conversation. 'You know I asked why you didn't message, right? Not for a full breakdown of your relationship history. Just because I care, you had me a bit worried.'

His eyes finally met mine, and it hit me a little that look. He isn't annoyed. He looks like someone who'd just run a long way just to say *this* out loud.

'I didn't know how to talk to you,' he says. 'After everything. After that night. I didn't even know what I wanted to say. But I knew whatever it was... it wasn't about her.'

The moment goes quiet again. Like it's trying to reset.

He's just staring at me, all wide-eyed and caught, like he didn't mean to say any of it out loud. Like the truth snuck out before he gave it permission.

'So,' I say, carefully, 'you were thinking about me? When you were with her?'

He winces. Doesn't deny it.

And I should've left it there—should've let him sit with that without trying to peel more away—but I couldn't help it. I was still riding the weightlessness from earlier. The relief of saying it out loud to Kaylan. I thought maybe this could be that for him, too. 'You don't have to be scared, y'know,' I say, quietly. 'I was too. For a long time. It took me ages to even say it out loud to someone. I didn't think I'd ever—'

'I'm not a homo!' He cries, like he's trying to rewind time. The word slips out, sharp and jagged, a reflex born out of countless locker-room jabs and headlines that screamed scandal. It's a word he learned to fear even before he understood why—echoing taunts from teammates and whispered jokes on bus rides home. This wasn't just a denial; it was a plea to make panic vanish in an instant, to erase the fear of being seen through a lens he never wanted.

I flinch. The words hit me in the chest, not because they surprise me, but because of the way he says them. It's almost like a warning.

'I didn't say you were,' I reply, but it's already too late. The mood shifts, warping around us like dark clouds.

'I just... I liked hanging out with you, alright? It got confusing. That doesn't mean I'm—' he breaks off, pacing again, hands gripping his hair. 'I'm not like *that*.' His tone is shifting.

'Like what?' I ask. My voice isn't angry. Just smaller than before.

He doesn't answer. Just keeps pacing. Like if he moves enough, maybe he won't have to feel it.

'I shouldn't have said anything,' he mutters. 'This was a mistake, I should go.'

And now I'm standing too, because my chest is tight and I hate how familiar this feeling is—the scrambling, the denial, the way shame takes up all the oxygen in the room before it sucks it from your lungs.

‘You’re allowed to feel things, Laker,’ I say, trying to be steady. ‘You’re allowed to figure stuff out. No one’s asking you to slap any kind of label on your forehead—’

‘Yeah, well maybe I don’t *want* to figure it out!’ His voice hitched with a mix of frustration and fear, like the weight of an unspoken truth was pressing down on him. What if trying to figure it out means losing the one thing that kept him anchored—the spot on the team he fought so hard for? Or what if his father found out? That thought alone felt like a cliff too steep to consider climbing. The thought of confronting those realities made figuring it out seem like a risky venture that could turn his world upside down.

That lands like a door slamming between us.

He won’t look at me again. Not properly. And I don’t know how to fix it—not without doing exactly what Kaylan didn’t do to me—pushing.

So, for once in my life, I stop talking. And just let the silence sit there, cold and growing, between two Cappuccinos neither of us is going to finish. I give him a moment to breathe, knowing that if I push any harder... I will push him out that door, and it really could be the last time I ever see him.

I slowly approach and put my mind into football mode; *how would he approach a situation like this?* If it were one of his teammates having a breakdown, how would *he* deal with that?

I remember a chilly afternoon during practice when

Reece, usually a steady player and keeper, missed an easy save. The entire team was silent, the weight of the moment suspended in the air like the fog from our breath. Laker had approached him, not saying anything at first. He just sat beside him on the field. Then he began speaking, quietly, about the last time when he'd made a great save, reminding him of the countless times he'd been the team's saving grace. By the end of it, Reece was nodding, a bit of light restored to his eyes, and practice resumed. Laker hadn't lectured. He didn't try to name it for him.

So, I try that.

I take a slow step forward. Then another. No sudden moves. Just me, soft-footed on the café floor like I'm approaching a skittish teammate mid-match—someone who's one bad pass away from walking off the pitch for good. I perch on the edge of the seat across from him. Let my knees bump the table slightly. Let the quiet settle.

'I'm not gonna push anymore,' I say softly. 'If you wanna sit in silence the rest of the night, I can do that. You don't have to explain anything else.'

He doesn't move. Still staring at a crack on the floor like it's safer than looking at me.

I fold my arms across my chest, not defensive—just holding myself together. 'Just for the record, though... it did mean something. That night. To me.'

His jaw shifts, clenched like he's biting down on words that might wreck him.

‘I’m not here to scare you,’ I add. ‘I just—don’t want you thinking you’re alone in this—because you’re not. Even if all you’ve got right now is a half-cold coffee and me trying not to say the wrong thing.’

His breath catches then. So, I shut up again. I sit there and do nothing. Just *be* there. Let the next move be his.

He finally slows his pacing. Stops beside the counter, eyes darting to the window like he’s just now noticing the time.

‘Is your manager gonna be bothered we’re still in here?’ he asks, voice a little hoarse.

I glance up at him, tilt my head, and give him a small, tired smile. ‘Leave Kaylan to me.’

He doesn’t answer that, but there’s something in the way his shoulders ease—just slightly—that tells me he’s grateful. Or at least, less scared of the room swallowing him whole.

So, I stay where I am, close but not crowding, and let the quiet stretch again. The snow outside has turned to sleet now. It taps at the windows like it’s trying to remind us we’re not the only two people left in the world.

But right now, it kind of feels like we are.

He makes his way back to our original seats and sits back down. I did it, I managed to calm him. ‘Can I join you?’

He keeps his eyes stuck to the floor, ‘Can I have a minute? Could you just fuck off through the back or something?’

‘Sure, just,’ I pause halfway to the archway to the back of house. ‘Laker, please don’t run off..’

He says nothing, just stares at the floor, and I make my way into the back.

So, I keep myself busy.

Which, in this case, means pretending the dishwasher needs more attention than it really does. Cups are already rinsed, saucers already stacked, but I go through the motions anyway. Like there’s some ritual in it that might settle the buzz in my chest.

I’m not good with silence—not when it’s this loaded. And especially not when the person I have come to care about most... *apparently*, is sitting out there not saying anything after everything he just said. Or didn’t say. Or almost said and then shut down completely.

I try not to glance at the arch again. Third time in as many seconds. I open the dishwasher, and the warm air hits my face.

The cups are hot. Too hot. I grip one anyway. Let the sting keep me present.

He said he needed a minute. Fine. A minute I can do. But how long before a minute turns into, *he’s already gone*, and I’m left standing here with steam in my face and nothing to show for any of it?

I could just peek, make sure he hasn’t bolted. But then he’ll know I didn’t trust him to stay, and if there’s anything I’m trying to do right here, it’s that. Even if mine are screaming in the background, pacing the inside

of my ribs.

I rest a hand on the countertop. Just for a second. Just to stop moving.

He asked for space. I gave him space. That's supposed to be the right thing, isn't it?

Only—why does it feel so much like waiting for bad news?

I glance at the clock. Three minutes, maybe four, since I left him out there. Not long in the grand scheme of things, but enough time for someone to change their mind. Enough time to stand up, grab their coat, and decide the whole thing was a bad idea. I press my palm a little harder against the counter, like that's going to keep me rooted. Like standing still might hold the moment in place.

I hear what I think is the chime of the door; it was faint... in my mind, I know he's gone, left without a word.

I start putting away the plates one by one. Slower than necessary. Trying not to imagine the chime of the door I thought I heard, trying not to think about the possibility that when I walk back out there, the chair will be empty and all I'll have left is the faint warmth of where he used to sit.

He said he needed a minute.

I want to trust him to mean it.

But I understand what it's like when anxiety takes the wheel, driving you in directions you didn't plan for. Sometimes, it feels like everyone is on their own boat,

struggling against their own swells and currents. I close the dishwasher. Slide the last cup onto the shelf. Take one more breath that doesn't quite go deep enough. And then, finally, I head for the archway—hands slightly damp, heart beating ridiculous.

I don't let myself hesitate at the beads, even though part of me wants to. Wants to just wait another minute. Another breath. But I've already done the giving space part. Now I just need to know if there's still someone to give it to.

The beads rattle in the thin air as I push them aside.

He's still there. Same seat. Same coffee. Same Laker, except... maybe not *exactly* the same. His shoulders aren't so tight. His eyes aren't glued to the floor anymore. They flick up when I enter—just briefly—but it's enough.

He didn't leave.

I wipe my palms down my apron without meaning to, then cross the room like I haven't rehearsed this a thousand different ways in my head.

'Hey,' I say softly, as I reach the booth. My throat's drier than I expected. 'Mind if I...'

He nods. Just once.

I sit down, careful. Like the air might crack if I move too fast.

And for a few seconds we just... *exist*.

I should say something. Or maybe I shouldn't. Maybe the fact that he's still here is the only answer I need right now.

I just sit for a moment, staring out the window, and the snow has gotten heavy again. I work up the courage to ask, ‘I—I thought I heard the door chime when I was in the back.’

He looks at me, his eyes are now bloodshot, and I think he’s been crying. ‘Yeah...uhm.’ His voice breaks suddenly, ‘That... eh, that was me... I was going to go... just... just for a moment. Its... it’s all so heavy y’know... I—I just thought for a moment that I was better back in my room... I’m not your problem, Chris; you don’t have to *fix* me.’

I just look at him and smile, ‘I don’t have to *fix* you, Laker, you’re right, cause y’know what... you’re not broken... you’re just, uncertain, unsure on what’s going on, but y’know what, I’m here for you, just as friends, someone to talk to...’

‘You can’t tell anyone about this, Chris... no one, you got that?’

‘Hey—hey, calm it, I will never breathe a word of anything you say to me to anyone, just between you and me, yeah?’

‘You promise?’ He asks.

‘I promise... now, can you stand up?’

‘Why?’

‘Just stand up for me.’

I join him in standing and without warning, I wrap my arms around him like Kaylan did for me, he hesitates, his arms held out stiff before he slowly embraces it, the hug

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

was more than just me wanting to hug him, it was a safety net, I was showing him that he has somewhere to come, somewhere to fall and he slowly grips me tighter before the tears started to flow again. I knew this wasn't easy for him. It wasn't for me, you see, for people like Laker and me, there is an expectation set on us. We need to be manly... all about the game, and if something like *this* even crosses our minds.

Let's just say, just like a pair of cleats pressing into slush under the floodlights, trying to find grip on a slick field, it's a heavy weight to deal with.

.

THE NEW BOY

As the winter break drew to a close, one thought kept sneaking into my mind—I longed for a deeper connection with Laker, something beyond just friendship. I've only spoken with Laker a few times since the night we spent together in Refuel. I walked him back to his block, which I found out was West Hall, so the mystery was no more. However, I didn't actually go in; I left him where he left me, at the door, and I headed back to North. He's kept his distance since, but I want to give him space. If I smother him, he'll only just pull away from me more, and that is not something I want.

Even if it means we can only be friends, I'm okay with that. I just want him to know I'm here, whenever he decides he needs someone to talk to. I know I'm going to be seeing a lot more of him now that classes have resumed, we share a lot of lectures partly because we are trying to complete the same course. I am going to see him today, Monday, football practice later in the day but I also have the other class where I tend to just stare at the back of his head. But if I keep up this silent yearning from afar, will it actually bring us closer, or am I risking the fragile connection we have, keeping things awkward

and distant? This uncertainty nags at me, making every interaction charged with possibility yet fraught with the fear of losing what little I have with him.

As I lay staring at the stained ceiling of my room, I almost forgot Adam was back. Yesterday's late arrival shattered my quiet routine. I had my gruelling reminder when I turned to silence the alarm and there he was in all his glory, just like old times. He had only come back last night as classes start back up today.

I lay here for another thirty minutes before I get up and head to the showers, leaving Adam asleep, as I have become so used to this new routine while he has been gone for the break. I forgot how busy the communal shower room gets when the students are *actually* here. The space that felt like my own personal retreat during the winter break has transformed into a bustling hive. As I stand there, the steam curls up and clings to the mirrors like an overheard whisper, as if the room itself is sharing secrets among the crowd. It's a reminder of how many people have returned, each distorting the once-clear glass and adding a layer to the cacophony of University life. It's no longer my private space; it's an overwhelming collection of presence that feels strangely intimate.

I take off my towel and jump into the first available cubicle. The water running over my body is warmer than it has been in a while, must be because the ground isn't so frozen anymore. I take a moment to just stand and enjoy the comfort it brings as the wet flows over my

head, running through my hair and past my eyes. I always found it weird that by the time the water reaches the length of my body, it is cooler when it runs over my calves and onto my feet—that reminds me, I need to trim these toenails.

Back in the room, I get my clothes on for the day and finish by zipping up my blue cotton zipper. Adam is still sleeping, so I give my Jedi Master a shake.

‘Time, is it?’ His Scottish seems stronger than it was before he left; it was like he hadn’t left Glasgow at all.

Stretching out on the bed, Adam lets out a considerable yawn. ‘Shit, s’pose a better git ready then eh?’

I slouch down on my bed and grab my phone; the first notification is from Burnblog. Roll my eyes, what a surprise, and there I was having such fun without these fucking updates over break.

Level One Burn 🔥 x1

“Welcome Back Students... let’s see what goss’ y’all have for me eh? How exciting! -xcx BB”

That undoubtedly will be followed up later with something embarrassing someone has done over the holidays. Won’t be me—hopefully—all I did was work and study... kind of. I check my messages and there is nothing from *him*.

E L I J A H N O X L E Y

— Friday —

What you up to?

19:05✓✓

**Not long finished work, chilling with a movie
and popcorn, wanna come sit?**

19:21✓✓

Nah, think I'm just gonna sleep!

19:23✓✓

**Okay well... just gimme a message if you
change your mind, yeah?**

19:25✓

Yup, definitely nothing since last Friday. He hasn't even bothered to read my last message. The silence was deafening, like a sudden gust of wind, underscoring the tension building within me. If he was deliberately avoiding me, he was sure gonna find it hard now.

The day goes by as a blur; Monday mornings are never usually fun, but on this occasion, it was hell. On the first day back to learning, the risk of a headache is high. I've already swallowed back two paracetamols. I head to Refuel, where the soft hum of the espresso machine and the clatter of cups create a comforting soundtrack against my apprehension. The smell of freshly ground coffee, rich and bitter, mixes with the warm scent of baking bread, easing some of the tension from the morning. I've caught Laker eyeing me, and all I've received so far is an underwhelming 'Hi' in passing, but eventually, lunch rolls around. A coffee and a ham and cheese toastie seem like the perfect companions for getting some coursework done, especially since working at Refuel gives me unlimited free coffee. It's the most reasonable place to

go.

‘Hey Chick-a-dee, how’s it going, busy?’

‘Oh, y’know, has been... guess everyone’s having the Monday morning drag.’

‘I don’t envy you, anyway, not here to work! Can I have a Caramel Cappuccino, and I’ll be taking it at that table in the corner.’ I point to my usual perch.

‘Sure, I’ll just get the *new* boy to do it for you.’

I swallow hard in my throat, ‘n—new boy?’

Kaylan is cleaning the counters like a woman possessed, ‘yeah, you knew I was still looking for someone, he’s through the back if you wanna go say hi?’

I do wanna go say hi. The guy better not think he can rule the place. I head through the back, trying to look casual.

I smile. ‘Uh-huh... gimmie just two ticks and I’ll be back.’

I walk through the back with all the authority of a properly trained barista, and I can see Kaylan has him filling in some documents, so all I get is a view of the back of his head, which is a common theme this. ‘Hey, so you’re the new guy?’ I ask.

He turns around, and I have to do a double-take, because—of all people—I didn’t expect to find him working at Refuel. But no doubt about it, it’s definitely him.

‘Yeah, I am...’ he says.

He’s hotter than I remembered, if I’m honest—which

feels mildly unfair. Then again, my entire perspective on men has done a complete one-eighty since my first day here, so maybe that's on me.

'Oh, it's you, Tristan, that's nice... no introductions needed then, well, I wish you the best of luck, hard job, so stay focused, and I'm sure we will be on shift soon enough.' I grin, 'Kaylan wants you by the way, to make my coffee,' and I leave, really wanting to get onto this coursework, and my coffee would be nice too.

'What do you think?' Kaylan asks as I pass by the counter.

'Yeah, already know him, he's cool.' I say. 'Anyway, will you bring my coffee over once it's ready? I've got a shit ton of work to get on with.'

'Yeah, Heartbreaker, that's fine.' She smirks.

The coffee's come and gone, and I've barely typed a single useful sentence. My coursework's just sitting there in front of me, open, judging me silently while I pretend like watching the new guy fumble with the milk wand is all part of my creative process.

Tristan stands behind the counter, squinting hard like he's trying to decipher hieroglyphics from the intricate buttons on the machine. He gives the milk jug a cautious tilt, and a spray of milk shoots out, narrowly missing his apron. There's a clatter as he juggles the wand, his fingers slipping awkwardly. The hiss and sputter from the machine rise in a crescendo as he nearly loses control of the foam, bobbing the jug up and down. Suddenly, the

milk overflows, splattering onto the counter. He retrieves a cloth, flinging it across the puddle with extravagant flair. I stifle a laugh, watching his determined dance with the appliance.

It's weird watching him, honestly. It's like seeing a poorly edited highlight of myself on my first shift. I remember walking in like I was born to steam milk, like I was one hot shot away from running the entire place. Confidence to spare and absolutely no idea what I was doing. I probably looked just like him, awkwardly brave, too loud with the cups, getting milk all over the counter and insisting it was part of "my process." At the time, I genuinely thought I was amazing. Now, with some perspective... yeah, okay, maybe I was a bit of a disaster too.

I give him a nod when he catches me watching. He looks panicked enough without thinking I'm judging him, and then I try to turn back to my laptop. Except it's not working. The words won't come, the silence is too loud and honestly, even the cursor's looking a bit smug.

So, I let my eyes drift out the window instead, across the half-busy courtyard and up toward the hills in the distance. The mountains look colder today, harsher somehow, like the sky's been holding its breath. There's still snow clinging to the peaks. I watch for longer than I mean to. It's the kind of view that makes everything else feel a bit... background. Like maybe none of the deadlines or unanswered messages matter all that much

in the grander scheme of things. I could sit here forever just gazing at them.

And then Tristan drops a spoon, loud enough to bring me back down to earth with a jolt. Kaylan rolls her eyes and mutters something I can't make out.

Right. Coursework. Focus.

Definitely not thinking about a boy or a Cappuccino or whether or not I'll survive football practice later without embarrassing myself.

Definitely not.



I drop my bag onto the bench and start pulling out my kit. Black and gold, still number eleven. Same as always. My boots hit the tiled floor with a heavy clank that echoes way too loudly for how quiet the changing room feels. Everyone's here already. Everyone except Coach Klarke, who'll probably burst in shouting like we've all shat in his coffee.

I gave Laker a small 'hi' on the way in. I wanted him to say something first, to start something, but he didn't, so I stayed quiet. Instead of meeting my eyes, his gaze dropped, and he fidgeted with the strap of his bag. His hands were steady, but they tightened subtly around the worn leather, his knuckles whitening just a fraction. Safer that way. Less pressure. *For him*, I mean.

I change over, hoodie swapped for kit, jeans chucked into my bag. Sit down on the bench and—yeah—he's in

my line of sight. Could've chosen a different spot, but I didn't. Our eyes meet for the briefest second, and it does something to me. It flips a switch behind my ribs. He hasn't looked at me like that in a while. Not like it means something.

I look away first. Pretend I'm laser-focused on my boots, like the laces are delicate instruments and not just knots I've done over a thousand times.

Then Tommy—of course it's Tommy—pipes up. 'Hey, Laker, heard you and that girl of yours broke up?'

The whole room shifts. Laker gives Tommy a look that says shut up, but not loud enough. And then he grins like it's all some big joke. 'Yeah,' he says, leaning back like he doesn't care. 'Couldn't deal with being locked down, y'know? A man's gotta leave his options open.'

And those words make my stomach twist, not just a little pang but a full-on knot. Laker's bravado fills the room, and I can almost hear the echo of his voice cracking and see his eyes glassy from before. This isn't him though; it's like a character, a facade he puts on to fit in. I glance at him, and he catches it. His face remains composed, but his eyes have that crinkled edge that quietly says don't, not here. I keep my silence, holding his gaze without a word.

But then he says, 'Actually, I'm interested in someone else now anyway. Beatrice is long gone in my mind.'

And he glances at me. Just enough that I feel it. Like the whole room tilts a little. I don't know what that

means. I don't know what I'm supposed to do with it...

So, I look back down at my boots. Double-knot the left one like it's more complicated than usual and force the thoughts out of my head. Focus on the ground. On the pitch. On *anything* else.

And then Coach Klarke comes thundering in, loud as ever, shouting for us to get moving. I get up and begin to head for the grass, feeling the chill air bite at my skin and the scent of the earth strong and fresh around me. As I pass Laker, he gives me a light pat on my back and whispers in my ear, 'Really nice to see you again, Chrissy.' His words hit me like a cold gust, settling into my bones. My brain goes haywire, and I feel like telling Coach Klarke just to send me off to the hospital to get me treated for whiplash cause honestly... I don't know whether I'm coming or fucking going with this guy!

I'm still blinking like he's short-circuited half my nervous system by the time I step outside. The cold intensifies on my face, mingling with the sharp scent of the grass, which feels more overwhelming than usual. The piercing whistle cuts through the air, echoing my inner confusion, but honestly? Not even that could snap me out of it. My brain's in meltdown mode. *Really nice to see you again, Chrissy*. Who says that? Who says that, like it doesn't mean anything?

He's already halfway across the pitch, barking something to Matty and stretching like we're all just teammates again and everything's chill and perfectly

reasonable, and I'm here silently begging the grass to swallow me whole before I embarrass myself by tripping over a cone or something equally poetic.

The game was fine. I think.

We won, technically, three—one, a couple of clean passes, Matty scored off a rebound that looked accidental, but he'll never admit it wasn't planned. I played alright, nothing fancy. Got the ball where it needed to go, didn't trip over my own feet, which felt like an achievement considering my brain was still repeating, *really nice to see you again, Chrissy* like it was on a scratched CD.

Laker kept it professional, mostly. Shouted directions like normal, slapped backs, and gave high fives. But every now and then, I caught him glancing across the pitch in those quiet seconds when drills shifted and silence hung in the air. His eyes would flicker in my direction, not long enough to draw attention, but just enough to tie my thoughts in knots. In the pause, unspoken words lingered, breathless and heavy, filling the space between us.

By the time it was over, I was wrecked. Physically, emotionally, just... cooked. As I headed to Refuel for my shift, the thought of cornering him tomorrow lingered in my mind, like an unfinished conversation itching for closure. Of course, my day wasn't done there.

The place was quiet for a Monday when I got there, probably everyone feeling just as fried as I was. The

coffee machines were winding down, and the music had dipped into that indie playlist Kaylan always puts on when she's got two hours of work brain left and no patience for trap remixes.

Tristan was behind the counter, trying to juggle a stack of takeaway cups and looking very not stressed about it, which almost made me proud of him.

Kaylan waved me in and gestured toward the back. 'Come see me when you're sorted,' she says, in that tone that means she's not escaping without a chat from her bestie.

So, I dump my bag, change my T-shirt, tie my apron, and duck through the beaded blind into the back of the house, leaving Tristan to work out how to stack the cups without them falling over on his own. *I mean, why not?* I had to do it.

'Hey,' I say.

'Wait... no Chick-a-dee... damn, sup with you?' she asks.

'Oh, nothing, I'm fried, and Laker did something that has completely thrown me for six.'

'What?'

'He's been acting distant, as you know from our talk we had in here weeks ago, but then someone brought up him breaking up with his girl in the changing rooms, and he turned into a complete twat.' I slouch down onto the chair opposite. 'Making it out, he only done it cause he basically wants a free man's lifestyle... when I know that's

not right...' I say.

'Damn... he seems like a nice guy too.'

'Oh no... it gets better, Kaylan, so he basically avoids me all day, the odd look or whatever and even ignored me when I said hi, but then as we were heading out onto the pitch, he pats me on the back and says, 'Really nice to see you again, Chrissy.' Like what a mind fuck that was...'

'What's that all about then?'

'Not a clue... the guy's mind fucked, and he won't talk to me, so I can't really help...'

Kaylan pauses as if she is coming up with some master plan, 'What if...' she starts, 'What if I were to talk to him?'

I begin to pace, a flustered flap of footsteps echoing throughout the café. A loud clatter from the counter catches my attention briefly—a cup slipping from someone's hands, shattering into pieces and sending a ripple of murmurs across the space, mirroring the disarray in my mind. I spin back towards Kaylan, more resolved. 'No... no, no, no, no,' I say, waving my hands emphatically. 'Not a word, Kaylan. He finds out you know about any of this, it might be enough to just push him over the edge!'

'Right, right, okay... damn, just a thought, I helped you, didn't I...'

'Yeah, that's because I chose—'

'—Sorry to interrupt... where does the puck bin waste

go?’ Tristan ever so kindly interrupts at the perfect time for this conversation to end.

‘I’ll show you,’ I begin to walk toward the beaded curtain before turning, ‘Not a word, Kaylan. Promise me.’

She sighs, hands raised, as I’ve just threatened her with exile. ‘Fine... not a word, Heartbreaker. Promise.’

After Kaylan and Tristan finish their shifts, I’m left with the slow fade of shop noise and the low whir of the machines behind me, as if they are in protest of their overuse for the day.

I wipe down the counter for the third time, not because it needs it but because I can’t sit still. With each swipe, a lingering thought of Laker tugs at my mind. First pass—does his glance mean what I think it does? Second pass—why won’t he just talk to me? Third sweep—I wonder if I’m overthinking this whole thing. The same song’s been looping from the playlist, something lo-fi and just sad enough to sound thoughtful, and I let it fill the silence while I clear the remaining mugs and stack chairs like I’m solving some bigger puzzle.

I keep thinking about practice. About Laker glancing at me like there’s a message hidden in plain sight, and me not knowing how to read it. And even now, even here in the safety of laminate floors and leftover toastie crumbs, it still turns in my chest like it wants an answer.

By the time the clock ticks six, the sky outside’s dipped into that kind of indigo that looks like the inside

of a bruise. I flick off the lights, lock up behind me, and pocket the keys. My hoodie smells faintly of syrup and burnt Espresso. It's not unpleasant, and I could definitely smell worse. Surprisingly, I don't have body odour since I never got the chance to shower after practice.

The walk back to North is a quick, cold, mostly uneventful blur. My phone doesn't buzz. No new messages. Just the crunch of gravel and the thought of maybe, finally letting myself *not* think for a while.

When I get in, Adams is already watching *Empire Strikes Back*.

He nods toward the bed opposite. 'Yer just on time. Vader's just about to start wrecking shit.'

'Good. I need some emotional stability,' I mutter, kicking off my shoes and flopping onto the mattress.

He tosses me a bag of crisps, one of the decent ones. 'Ye look wrecked, mate.'

'Thanks. Just the look I was going for.'

We settle into the kind of silence only a Padawan and his Jedi Master can accomplish, no pressure to talk, just commentary when it's earned. We laugh at the weird Yoda scenes, debate lightsaber physics like it actually matters, and eat our way through half a packet before I realise, I haven't thought about Laker in nearly thirty minutes.

That's something, at least. This is the reason why I need someone, why everyone should have someone like

E L I J A H N O X L E Y

Adam in their lives. I've never said it out loud, and probably never would, but something tells me he already knows.

SOMETHING LIKE BREATHING

As the afternoon light filtered through the window, a knot of unease settled in my chest, a reminder of how long it's been. I take my phone out and call my sister. I don't know why now, really. Just felt like I should. Haven't spoken to her or Cedric for a while. Last time was Christmas Day, and even then, it was mostly noise in the background.

Part of me hopes she won't pick up. My head's already overloaded, and I don't really have space for another conversation I don't know how to have.

It rings and rings and just as I'm about to hang up—
'Hey, Chrissy.'

Shit.

'Hey,' I say, dragging the word out longer than I mean to. 'Is now a bad time?'

'No, actually, you caught me at a good time. What's up? Everything okay?'

I start walking, slowly, through the woods behind campus. As I move further in, the earthy scent of damp moss rises around me, mingling with the crisp, cold air. A dry twig snaps underfoot, echoing the crack in my

resolve. 'Yeah. All good. Just busy, y'know—since we started back. It's full-on.'

'We've not been up to much either,' she says. 'Just work and same old routines. You know how it goes. How's practice?'

'It's been good. Still breathing football like it's oxygen. We've got a game coming up in May, it's a big one. You could all come up and see me play, if you want to, that is. I'll text the deets.'

There's a pause. I already know what's coming before she says it.

'I'd love to... but it's a bit far. Hotels and whatnot. Let me speak to Cedric and Dave, see what we can do, yeah? Still send me the info though.'

And there it is. That sting in the gut I pretended wouldn't come. It's not like I expected a full marching band or a commitment to front-row seats, but I thought—I don't know—I thought there'd be more enthusiasm. More *something*. And Dave... really, she *has* to bring that no-good boyfriend of hers too, no surprises there. Then again, I remind myself of the times Cammi opened up about how Dave had been there for her in tough moments. Maybe he isn't all bad. It's a fleeting thought, gone as quickly as it came, but enough to complicate my feelings just a bit. 'Yeah, that's fine,' I lie, even though it's not. 'I'll send it over.'

I don't want to talk anymore. Don't trust myself not to let it leak into my voice. So, I lie again.

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

‘Anyway,’ I say, ‘I need to head into my shift, but I’m glad I caught you.’

‘Alright, son. Speak soon, yeah?’

‘Yeah. Love you.’

‘Love you too.’

I end the call faster than I probably should, thumb heavy on the screen.

Glad I’m already out here in the trees, where no one can see my face. I need to walk this off. Needed to walk it off the second she said the word “hotels” like distance was some insurmountable thing. Not just another excuse. Should’ve known better, really. Should’ve just not bothered saying anything.

I walk so far into the woods my phone signal vanishes, and I sit for a while just allowing nature to cure my stress, really something I should do more often. I must’ve been gone for an hour or so before I make my way back to civilisation. Once my phone signal returns, I get an instant notification from Burnblog. How lovely, I wonder who this one’s about...

Level Eight Burn 🔥 x8

“Laker Luxton, you *naughty* boy, word on campus is that you were sharing a bed with another behind your ex’s back... tut tut, you can do better than *THAT* gurr! - xcx BB”

Shit! Oh no, this is the last thing he needs on his plate right now, I just hope he sees the update before he leaves

the room... fuck! Worst part about it is, he wasn't actually seeing anyone... if he was, surely, he would have said something to me about it when he told me they had broken up, but then again... the way he's been acting lately, it wouldn't surprise me.

I make my way into the Uni, walking through the corridors. The place seems to be on high alert, maybe they are looking out for Laker. I have an extended free period today; my plan is to go and kick some balls around and burn off some energy. I head out the back of the Uni and onto the empty pitch. It's late enough that the place is quiet. The wind whispers across the field, and the sound of my trainers dragging against the gravel feels like static buzzing in my head. The flood-lights above hum softly, their glow a lonely beacon in the emptiness. As I walk to the pitch, I pop a piece of peppermint gum and the fresh scent fills the air, soothing my nerves slightly. There are always a few balls lying around, tucked behind the goalposts or left along the sideline like forgotten promises. I grab one and step onto the turf. The cold bites at my cheeks, mirroring the chill of isolation that wraps itself around me, but not enough to make me turn back.

I don't bother warming up. Just start moving—light touches, passing the ball from foot to foot, letting it tap the inside of my arches like it knows exactly what I need.

Then I start hitting it. Proper strikes. Not wild, not flailing, just clean, precise shots toward the net, over and

over. Power when I want it, curl when I don't. My foot finds the angle on instinct; my eyes scan the far post before my brain even registers that I'm aiming. Every movement is muscle memory now, hours and hours of repetition stitched into my bones. But today, something feels off, just beneath the surface—a pressure building that my body can sense even if my mind refuses to name it. I push it aside, continuing the motions I know by heart, until an unexpected mis-kick, a stumble, shatters the rhythm. The ball skews wildly to the right, a sudden fracture in what should have been seamless. For a moment, I stand there, caught off guard by the slip, the perfect control cracking under the emotional weight I've been carrying.

The ball rolls back from the fence, and I trap it with a lazy flick of my heel, send it spinning into the air, catch it on my thigh, bounce it up again—knee, chest, foot, flick—keep it off the ground for as long as I feel like. My thoughts go quiet when I'm in that rhythm. As nothing exists except me, the ball, and gravity, I agree not to get in the way.

I turn on a dime and drive into an invisible back line, cutting sharply left, then right, dodging ghost defenders only I can see. I push the ball ahead, chip it across an empty box—no one's there, obviously—but I run onto it anyway, volley it off the side netting from a ridiculous angle just to prove to myself I still can.

This is the only place where *everything* makes sense.

Where there's no subtext, no second-guessing, no Laker whispering the Da Vinci code in my ear, no family backing out with a maybe.

After an hour, I'm sweating through my hoodie, and my thighs are burning—but the knot in my chest feels looser. I grab a towel—the big ones, the ones that wrap around me twice—and step through the arch back into the changing room, still drying off my hair when I hear footsteps.

Laker storms in, wild-eyed, breathing hard. I hadn't even had a chance to brace myself for his entrance. Just yesterday, he'd been cornered by his coach, who had given him an ultimatum: get a grip on your personal life or risk losing your captaincy. Before I can even say anything, he shoves me back, not violently, but firm enough and clear enough to suggest he's angry, that my bare shoulders hit the wall with a thud. 'Hey! What the fuck is this all about?'

I freeze. My heart's pounding from more than just the hot water now. 'What?'

'You told that stupid fucking Burnblog we were seeing each other?' His voice cracks, unable to hide a tremor. His eyes briefly shift to the ground before meeting mine again. 'What the hell, Chris? Are you fucking mental?' His voice trails off, leaving a silence that hangs heavy between us. It's like he's searching for something unsaid, some explanation he can't bring himself to voice. 'Have you actually lost your mind?'

‘Hey...hey, I said nothing to no one, Laker! Not my fault, you’ve been boasting about being the big “I am” telling people you broke up because you wanted to... what was it... “explore your options” or some shit!’

He came toward me and grabbed my shoulders, ‘How else would they have found out I was seeing anyone over the break then, huh?’

I shove his hands off me. ‘You seriously think I’d tell *anyone* about us? When you won’t even admit there is a fucking *us*?’

He doesn’t answer. His jaw clenches tight, his breath coming in heavy bursts as if he’s run miles to get here. I notice his hands at his sides, fingers twitching like they’re itching to grab something—or someone. His eyes won’t stop searching mine, desperate and intent, like he’s looking for a lie I haven’t told or maybe trying to take something back that he already said.

My heart’s thudding in my throat. I can feel the heat rising in my chest, not from the shower, not from embarrassment. From *him*. From all of this. ‘Laker,’ I say, quieter this time, you’re the one who asked me to promise not to say anything... and I have kept that promise, I swear.’

He grabs my face, his fingers rough, breath shallow, and his lips crash into mine. Like he’s trying to shut himself up and say everything at once. I go still for half a second, heart stopping altogether—and then I’m kissing him back, full of all the fear, want and anger I’ve

swallowed since he started avoiding me like the plague.

It's messy, desperate and electric, and it feels like something's breaking open. Like we've spent months tiptoeing around a fire, and now we're suddenly engulfed by it.

When he pulls away, it's sharp and fast, like he didn't mean to do it. Like he can't believe he just *let* himself.

We just stare at each other. Breathing hard. So much in my chest I can't name.

He begins to pace back and forth... 'I'm sorry... I—I, I shouldn't have done that, Chris... I'm sorry,'

I walk over to him, 'Shut up and kiss me, you twat!' and we go again.

We didn't say much after that second kiss. Didn't need to. One second, he was pulling me closer; the next, we were all hands and heavy breathing, with no sense of time. As we finally parted and collected ourselves, I could hear the soft patter of rain against the window and the thrum of footsteps in the hallway, slowly fading as students made their way to class. These sounds marked the world's still presence before we stumbled out into the open air.

Somewhere between then and now, we found our way out of the changing rooms, my clothes hastily put back on in the solitude of the aftermath. The chill breeze met us as we emerged, hinting at the approaching evening as we walked half a mile into the woods, where classes felt forgotten, as if the rest of the day didn't exist.

We walk side by side, not touching, not running from each other either. For once, it's not about tension. It's about space. As we move, the rustle of leaves underfoot and the chatter of distant students make our solitude more pronounced, the intrusion of the world grounding us in reality, reminding us of the life we temporarily step away from. We end up at the same spot I found earlier in the day, tucked just far enough into the woods that the Uni feels like another world.

'I didn't plan for any of this,' he says eventually, voice low, like saying it too loud might spook the moment and send it running.

'I know... me either.' I pause, picking at a bit of bark flaking off the branch beside me. 'Can I ask you something?'

'Sure.'

'When... when did you know?'

'Know what?'

His eyes are on me now, those stupid blue eyes that used to magnetise me but now do something far worse. 'That... y'know, you were into me,' my voice sounds smaller than I mean it to be. But deep down, what I really want to ask is, When did you decide hiding was easier than choosing me?

He huffs a laugh, like he's caught off guard, then shakes his head. 'Oh. That. First day. The very first day I saw you.'

I blink. 'Seriously?'

He nods. I went back to my room that night and couldn't get it on with some girl at that party. Kept getting flashes of you in my head. It wasn't exactly my finest hour. Had to kick her out. Surprised it never ended up on Burnblog, honestly.'

I stare at him. Laugh, because what else can I do? Because, of course, that's how it started—with confusion and chaos and him pushing away exactly what he wanted. And the mad part is—I get it. I *actually* get it. Because it was the same night I fell for him.

'What about you? When did you know,' he asks.

'Would you believe me if I told you it was before you even saw me at the very same party?'

'Nope... it was definitely when you saw me with my shirt off in the changing room...'

'Ha... I wish, nah really, the moment you walked in from that stupid hidden alleyway... that girl on your arm in your baby blue tracksuit... I knew something had changed inside me.'

He smiles shyly and turns his head away as if he is embarrassed that I'd remember such a detail.

'Can't believe you remember what I was wearing...damn, really was instant for you, wasn't it?'

'Mad thing is... can't even remember what I was wearing, Laker.' I let out a laugh.

'An identical tracksuit to mine, only in cream, and you smelled like one million.' He let slip fast...

I freeze, not in a dramatic way, just... something about

the way he says it. My laugh fades a bit, caught somewhere in the back of my throat. *He remembers.* Down to the colour of my tracksuit. Down to the scent.

‘You remember that?’ I ask, voice a bit quieter, like I’m not sure what to do with the weight of it.

He gives me this look—sheepish, soft, like he hadn’t meant to say it out loud.

‘Yeah. Weird the things that stick, innit?’

We both go quiet again, but for a change it’s not awkward. I think we’re both silently filing that moment away, adding it to the ever-growing pile of things neither of us said out loud when we should’ve.

I glance at him, and the way he’s looking at the trees instead of me says he might be thinking about kissing me again. Or running for the hills.

‘You smell like peppermint now, by the way,’ he adds, half a smirk playing at his lips.

I grin, shake my head. ‘Cheap gum and nerves.’

We sit back, watching the branches sway above us. For once, not trying to fix anything. Just... letting ourselves exist in the middle of it. He takes my hand and then turns to face me; he looks like he wants to say something, but instead leans in and kisses me again.

‘I have wanted to do that for so long, Chrissy.’

‘Damn, me too, and it feels so good... like...’

‘Like scoring the perfect goal in the last ten seconds of a game...’ he says.

‘Yeah... but Lake... where do we go from here?’

He pulls his hand away, folding his arms around his knees like he's trying to hold himself together.

'I don't know,' he says quietly. 'But no one can know, Chris. This can't get out. It has to stay our thing... just ours.'

He swallows, eyes fixed on the floor.

'Because if it doesn't... if people find out... then it has to end.' He shakes his head, jaw tightening. Silence hangs heavily between us, each second amplifying what's not being said. In that quiet, I can feel his fear and the gravity of his conditions. Then, breaking the stillness, he whispers, 'I don't think I can go back to staying away from you again.'

'Wait... a secret, how are we going to keep that under wraps, what if someone in the team notices a difference with us or something?' I say in a panic.

'Then... we just need to be careful... at least until we finish this year... only a couple of months.' He says.

'But what about next year, what about when we actually move up into the big leagues if we ever get there?'

'Then we deal with that when it comes... otherwise, it's a no-go, this could ruin us both, Chris... our dreams just poof! Gone... because we chose this!'

I look at him, all folded up and braced like I'm about to throw it back in his face. And I could. Part of me wants to. But the bigger part—unfortunately—is the one that already knows I'll agree.

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

Because I want him. Stupidly. Selfishly. Enough to share this and still call it mine.

So, I say, 'Alright. Just till summer.'

And he doesn't look at me like I've saved him. He looks at me like I've let us both down. Like he was expecting me to do the opposite and end it so he wouldn't have to... but there is no chance of that... I have never felt this for anyone or anything other than football... I can't just give up on it.

IN THE SECRET MOMENTS WE SHARE

MONDAY

‘—So yeah, I’m down for late-night training.’

The air is thick with the smell of sweat and old leather, the benches still warm from practice. Laker walks into the changing room, interrupting just as I finished.

‘Chris, Coach Klarke, and I wanna have a chat... that alright?’

I blink. ‘S—Sure.’ I trail after him automatically, until I realise, he’s not heading toward the coach’s office. He opens the wrong door. ‘Where? —’

He yanks me into the equipment cupboard and slaps a hand over my mouth. ‘Shhh...’ he says, laughing. So, I do the same to him. I put my hand over his mouth, both of us grinning like idiots. When we finally lower our hands, I whisper, ‘What’s this all about?’

He just looks at me, like it should’ve been obvious this whole time—then kisses me. Fast. Full. Tongues tangled before my brain could catch up.

‘I—I just couldn’t wait,’ he says, breathless. ‘Couldn’t stop staring at you during practice...’

I reach for him. ‘Well, come on then. We don’t have much time.’ I kiss him again, deeper this time. His hands are already at my hoodie, mine at his waistband. But I pull back. ‘We can’t. Not here. Too risky.’ The words hang in the air, laden with more weight than I care to admit. It’s not just about getting caught. It’s the fear of being seen, of exposing a part of myself I’ve kept in the shadows. Despite the rush, the desire, there’s always that whisper of doubt, asking if it’s really worth the risk of letting the world in.

He mouths along my jaw, hot and maddening. I lose the thread of what I was saying—almost let him keep going—until I manage, ‘Do you wanna get caught, Laker?’

He stops. Steps back. ‘No... you’re right.’ For a moment, his voice wavers, as if he’s about to say more, but then he just rubs the back of his neck. ‘Later. At the woods, yeah?’

Laker slips out first, tugging the door open just enough to peek through before vanishing down the corridor like it never happened. And I’m left in the cupboard. Alone. Fitting, really. Tucked away. Hidden. Just like whatever *this* is.

TUESDAY

I spot him before he sees me, coming out of the gym with two of the lads, laughing like nothing ever happened. He's still in his kit, hair damp, the faint smell of chlorine wafting off him, grin stupid and perfect. The slap of his trainers echoes on the wet pavement, and my feet start moving before I can talk myself out of it. But by the time I get close, the moments already gone.

He doesn't even look at me. Doesn't blink, doesn't nod, just walks past like we're nothing more than teammates. Like yesterday in the cupboard and later that night in the woods didn't happen. Like he hadn't wanted me, like he was starving, and I was the only *thing* left on earth. My stomach drops. Heat flashes through my chest, then settles as something colder. A self-doubt creeps in, whispering maybe I dreamed it all. I turn on my heel, pretending I was going somewhere else.

Anywhere else.

Later, I'm sat at Refuel, behind the counter with a rag in one hand and my phone in the other. I've wiped the same patch of countertop five times. There's a message thread still open, empty, but I'm waiting for something that probably won't come. The soft clatter of dishes and the hiss of the coffee machine fill the air, unintended reminders of time ticking onward, punctuating my restless stillness.

Every time the door chimes, I look up. But it's never

him. I tell myself not to care. Maybe he just needs some *more* space. That maybe he's sorting his head out... *again*. But the thing is, if all of it was just a mistake, I wish he'd at least have the guts to say so. The silence is hurting me more than any rejection would. The humming of the café fridge fills the emptiness, a constant reminder of what isn't being said. It lingers, louder than words, with each unattended latte on the counter going cold.

WEDNESDAY

I should've left ages ago, but I don't. I'm sitting on the bench in an empty locker room, the sharp tang of disinfectant hanging in the air as it mixes with the faint, metallic echo of a distant door creaking open and shut. I'm lacing and unlacing my boots for no reason except that it gives my hands something to do while the rest of me buzzes like I'm waiting for a match that's already been lost.

The door opens. My heart stumbles. I don't have to look to know it's him.

Laker steps inside like he's walking into a memory we haven't agreed to share. His eyes flick across the room and land on me. His jaw tenses. For a second, he looks like he might turn and leave. Instead, he closes the door behind him and walks in slowly, like he's trying not to wake something dangerous. Above him, a bulb flickers sporadically, casting erratic shadows that dance across

the walls like ghosts we can't quite see. A cracked trophy catches the light, tilting precariously on a shelf, as if it's about to topple over with the slightest provocation.

He stops a few feet away. Doesn't sit. Doesn't speak, just lets a silence stretch between us, heavy with something unsaid.

A beat hangs in the air, thick with words neither of us is willing to step into. Finally, I broke it. 'You ignoring me again or...?' But the words falter, hanging between us like a question we're both afraid to answer.

His mouth twitches. 'I tried.'

That throws me. I blink up at him.

'Tried to stay away,' he says. 'Didn't work.'

I swallow hard, my heart pounding in my throat as the weight of his words presses against something fragile inside me. 'You're not the only one,' I say, voice low. 'I keep telling myself to forget it, to just switch it off.' My hands clench into fists, nails biting into my palms as I fight against it. 'But then I see you across the pitch or hear your laugh down the corridor and it's like...' I trail off, shake my head. 'Doesn't matter. I'm useless at staying away too... apparently.'

'You freaked me out,' he admits. 'When you said we could get caught. I've never... had something like all of this to lose before. You... football, it's messing with my head.'

I nod, slowly. 'Yeah. Me too. But Laker, you ghosting me after we... y'know? That messed with mine.'

E L I J A H N O X L E Y

His eyes flick to mine, apologetic.

‘Maybe we stop pretending this is just a phase or some impulse,’ I say. ‘It’s already more than that.’ The space between us crackles. He steps closer, and my skin’s already remembering what he felt like two nights ago. His weight. The heat. The way he kissed me like it might break him. I haven’t stopped thinking about it. About *him*.

He finally drops onto the bench beside me, close enough that our thighs brush. My breath catches. ‘I can’t stop thinking about you,’ he says, voice low and raw. ‘I keep replaying it. The woods. That look on your face.’

I don’t trust myself to speak, so I don’t. I just lift my head to him, slow and deliberate, and search his face for any hint that he’s messing with me. There’s none. Just Laker, wide-eyed and off balance, looking like he wants to run for the hills and kiss me at the same time.

So, I kiss him first.

It’s not tentative this time. It’s not sweet. It’s *hungry*, *raw like the edge of a biting wind*. *My hand catches his hoodie, pulling him closer as my back presses against the cold metal of the locker behind me, a jarring contrast to the heat between us*. *His fingers curl into the hem of my shirt, their gentle grip countered by the sharp tang of sweat-salted air around us*. He leans into me like he’s been holding himself back for too long.

I press my forehead to his when we finally break apart. Our breaths tangle between us, warm and shaky.

‘I missed you,’ I murmur, eyes still closed.

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

He nods. 'I know... I—' he shakes his head and stops himself from finishing.

We sit here for an age. Not talking, not really breathing right either. Our shoulders pressed together on this stupid, cold bench, and I keep thinking how close he is. Like, if I moved even a little, our hands would touch properly. I don't, though. Neither of us does. The locker room hums in that eerie way it only does when it's empty. The creaking of the old copper pipes on the walls. Overhead lights are blinking, accompanied by an ominous buzz every so often.

His knee bumps mine. He doesn't move it. Neither do I. And it should feel peaceful, but it doesn't. Not completely. It feels *tense*. Like the second I relax, someone's gonna come in and see everything we've been trying so hard to keep tucked away.

A door slams somewhere down the corridor, and we both flinch, muscles tightening like we've been caught. But nothing follows. Just echoes. My heart's a mess. And still, I don't shift. Because even with all the risk, I'd rather sit here in the static hum of almost-getting-caught than be anywhere else at this precise moment in time

THURSDAY

The woods feel different tonight. The cold air bites at my lungs as I step into the clearing, sharper and more insistent than the first time we came. Like they know

we're not here for whatever magic they offered before. Adam was questioning me as I left the room, wondering where I have been dipping off to lately. Suppose for him it is odd that I'd be going out at random intervals or this late at night when Refuels closed and there really isn't a good reason for me to be heading out. I've convinced him—I think—that I have taken up running to try and improve my breathing for the game coming up in May, whether he believed me or not, well, that's a him problem, not a me problem.

Lakers already waiting, hood up, elbows on knees, eyes fixed on something he won't say out loud. He doesn't look up when I approach, just shifts a little, as if my presence rearranges the air. I sit beside him, a gap between us wide enough to pretend it means nothing. Although we both know it does.

We don't speak for a bit. I watch his breath cloud in the air, and count how many seconds pass before mine starts to sync with his. My thoughts wander, caught between the chill in the air and the weight of unsaid words. An unsteady rhythm in my chest reminds me to breathe, to hold onto this sliver of silence before it shatters.

Then he says it. 'We can't let *anyone* find out about us, Chris.' Not a whisper. Just straight to it, sharp like he's cutting the moment off before it can turn into something warm.

I swallow it down. 'Yeah, you said...' trying to keep

my voice even. ‘God forbid anyone finds out you like me and not just my right foot.’ The words hang in the air, a shard of humour masking something heavier. For a moment, I let it be, let the silence creep in, fill the space between us like fog. There’s a flicker in my smile, a slight falter, before I pull it back together, wearing it like a shield.

That gets a twitch at the corner of his mouth. He turns to look at me like he’s checking for damage, but I don’t give him that. I nod. Shrug. Pretend I’m unbothered while the words sink in like a weight.

‘We’re already pushing it,’ he says.

I snort. ‘Yeah, well, you’re the one who keeps showing up with that face and zero self-control. Not really my fault, is it?’

He huffs a laugh through his nose.

I let our knees touch after that, casual like I don’t care, but deliberate enough that he knows I do. There’s a warmth spreading from that point of contact, a slight tremor that betrays the calm facade. The sensation lingers, a reminder of the push-pull between us, both wanting and holding back. He doesn’t move away. Doesn’t lean in either.

I could ask *why*. Why is he so scared? Why does all this have to stay zipped up and hidden in tree shadows and changing rooms? But the answer’s probably everything I already know—his dad, the team, futures we’re supposed to be building with straight lines and no complications.

E L I J A H N O X L E Y

So instead, I say, 'Just send me the full rulebook when you're done writing it. I'll commit it to memory.'

He laughs quietly. Sad, almost.

We sit like that, shoulders nearly brushing, heads turned away. He went toward the trail. I walk toward the trees. Touching, but not *facing*. Together, but only halfway. I guess that's what we have become now—something you can feel but not let your eyes linger on too long.

FRIDAY

There's no one else on shift tonight. Just me, the steam of the coffee machine, and the weight of everything I haven't said to him yet. I should be closing up. Stocking the pastry fridge. Doing something useful. But I keep glancing toward the door like it's going to swing open and fix the knot that's been sitting in my chest since Thursday night.

Surprisingly, it does.

Laker walks in like he doesn't mean anything by it, with his hood up and hands shoved deep into his jacket. He hesitates for a moment by the door, eyes scanning the room slowly, as if he's taking in every detail. There's a pause, a beat where neither of us move or speak, and the air thickens with everything unsaid, everything we've been circling around in our heads all day. Then he leans casually against the counter, but there's nothing casual

about the way he looks at me when we're alone.

'You're here by yourself?' he asks, breaking the silence, his voice low.

I nod once. 'Yep.'

He doesn't say anything else. Doesn't need to. The tension's already crawling up my spine like it's been waiting for the air to clear. I tap the side of the machine, wipe my hands, and slip through the back. The smell of rich coffee grounds mingles in the air, sweetened by the faint tang of bleach and stale sugar clinging to the shelves. Each breath mixes with the longing and uncertainty threading between us. Don't invite him. Don't look over my shoulder. He follows anyway.

The storeroom cupboard is dim, half-lit by the glow of the exit sign and a yellowish bulb above the stock shelf. I barely get the door closed before he grabs the front of my shirt. Or maybe I grab his. Doesn't matter. We crash together somewhere in the middle.

It's messy. Breathless. His jacket falls halfway off his shoulder, and one of the syrup crates tips sideways and rattles to the floor. He swears under his breath and then laughs, mouth still against mine. 'You're reckless,' he mumbles.

'Says the guy who walked in here like he doesn't care who sees.'

I don't know who kisses who next, but it's faster. Deeper. Less about romance and more about proving something—to him, to me, to the space between us that

keeps trying to pull us apart. My mind briefly flares with a warning: If someone walks in... The thought evaporates as quickly as it appears, swallowed by the urgency between us, making the next surge feel both reckless and right.

And then we stop.

Just like that. Like we both hit the same wall.

He leans his head back against the shelf and exhales. I rest my hand on his torso, push my fingers through the hair on his chest, feel the way his heart's still catching up.

'You scare the shit out of me,' he says, eyes closed.

I don't know whether to kiss him again or step away. I don't know if it's a compliment or a warning. But I know I'm still standing here. Still wanting him. Totally aware that the cost could be everything—losing my job, whispers turning into full-blown rumors, or even a heartbreak I'm not ready to face. 'You know this corner's right under the security camera, yeah?'

He jerks back as I've burned him. Stiffens. Eyes wide. 'Shit! You're fucking joking.'

I keep a deadpan for all of three seconds. Then I grin. 'Gotcha. There are no cameras at all in here.'

He laughs, but it's shakier than before, like he's gulping down nerves. 'You almost gave me a heart attack,' he says, with a soft curse that seems to betray just how high the stakes still are between us.

He stares at me, jaw dropped—then smacks my chest, not hard, laughing under his breath as he pulls me right

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

back in. ‘You’re a twat,’ he says, lips brushing mine.

‘Still want me though,’ I whisper, already pushing him into the shelves again.

‘What are the chances of you getting off work Saturday and Sunday?’ he asks.

‘Uhhmm...’ I bite my lip, ‘I could ask Kaylan to get Tristan to cover...’

‘Okay... let me know, I have a *surprise* if you can!’

My reply is a kiss I feel in the backs of my knees.

And then we’re back in it—fast, urgent, fingers twisting into fabric, breath shared like it’s the only thing worth stealing. One of us knocks over a stack of lids. Tough, neither of us cares. We kiss like we’re trying to carve out a corner of the world where nothing else matters. And maybe, for a little while, it’s working cause the clothes start to cover the floor.

WEEKEND

After I left Refuel on Friday night I messaged Kaylan to ask if she could get me cover, I have never asked for a single day off since I started working in there, she messaged me back and said she would let me know as soon as possible, turned out Tristan was wanting more money so he agreed and now I’m setting out on a worldwide adventure for two days with Laker... a guy who brings camping gear to his University... who knew. I told Adam and Kaylan my family were coming up to a

hotel nearby and I was going to visit them, since y'know... I needed some kind of excuse to justify the urgent need for time off.

Laker, on the other hand, had told his mates he was going fishing, which was believable...

He drives a silver Dacia Duster — not that I knew that before today, but it's handy, considering we're technically in the back arse of nowhere. Laker said there was a spot he wanted to visit. Apparently, he'd already scouted the whole area on Google Maps before he even got to the Uni. That alone told me he's the outdoorsy, camping-for-fun type... which, honestly, I kinda like.

I've never been camping in my life. This is my first time. Another thing to tick off the ever-growing list of firsts he's dragging me into.

As we crawl up the dirt-track roads, my stomach buzzes—not in the sick way, more that fluttery pre-match feeling you get when something's about to matter but no one's said it out loud yet. He's quiet at the wheel. Focused. One hand on the gearstick, the other resting loose on the steering like he's driven this route a hundred times. He hasn't. But he carries himself as he has. That's his thing. Making everything look easy—unless it's me—even when it isn't.

I steal glances when I think he won't catch them. The sharp curve of his jaw in the light. The way he squints at the track ahead like he's solving something. And I'm sat there thinking this is real. We're really doing this. The

two of us. No hallways. No cupboards. No rules. For a moment, a flicker of doubt chills me—what if all this slips away? What if he decides this was all just a temporary escape? But I push it aside, ignoring the tiny voice whispering worries. We could almost pass as just... *normal*.

Well, normal with a boot full of instant noodles, half a fishing rod, and a tent that definitely hasn't seen daylight since last summer.

He rolls the window down a little, and the scent of pine and wet mud seeps in. 'You sure you've never camped before?' he asks without looking.

'Nope,' I say. 'Never even owned a sleeping bag.'

He laughs—properly this time. It rumbles low in his chest, and he taps the steering wheel once like I've surprised him. 'You'll be fine,' he says, grinning. 'Worst case, you get eaten by midges, and I have to explain to your boss that you died tragically while roasting marshmallows.'

'Best alibi ever,' I mutter. 'Tell Kaylan I fought bravely.' And for a second, it's just light. Just us. Two lads disappearing into nowhere on a made-up excuse and a zipped-up tent bag.

We park up where the road ends, if you can even call it that. It's more of a gravel shrug with grass growing through it. Laker kills the engine and climbs out like he's done this a million times, like this whole weekend wasn't just an impulsive escape wrapped up in a fishing excuse.

He swings his rucksack over one shoulder and throws mine at me with zero warning.

‘Didn’t pack your own toothbrush, did you?’ he asks.

‘I packed the essentials,’ I say. ‘Deodorant, hoodie, emotional baggage.’

‘Perfect,’ he grins. ‘I brought a portable stove and one rather big questionable sausage.’

I just stop and stare at him in wonder... ‘Yeah, right... big head.’

‘Wait—’ he raises both hands like he’s innocent, which he is anything but— ‘I meant the smoked sausage in my bag!’

‘Sure...’

Not a clue where we are going but I’m already walking. He’s already chasing me, laughter echoing off the trees. We walk. And we walk. The forest around us seems alive, a mixture of inviting and daunting. The thick trees create a canopy that casts shifting shadows over us, branches snapping underfoot with a sound that echoes like a whispered warning. Occasionally, the sudden hush of birds adds an eerie stillness, as if even the forest pauses to listen. Branches slap my hoodie and judgmental squirrels watch us like we’re intruding. It’s as if the forest itself mirrors my uncertainty. He says we’re nearly there at least five times before we’re actually...finally, here! But honestly? It’s beautiful.

The lake is quiet, still, dark in that way that reflects the sky back at you. Trees close in on one side, and there’s

this soft slope of mossy grass leading right down to the water's edge. It's like a postcard that got folded into someone's back pocket.

'This'll do,' he says, like it's no big deal. But the way he looks at it? He's proud. He tosses the tent bag down and starts unrolling it without waiting for me, like he doesn't need help, but also like he knows I'll fall over it if left unsupervised.

Ten minutes later, we're both sweating, swearing, and arguing about what "that corner bit" means. The tent looks vaguely alive. Maybe even aggressive.

'Honestly,' I mutter, ducking under the wonky canvas. 'If we get eaten by wolves tonight, I'm blaming your big fucking ego.'

Laker zips the flap closed and flops down beside me, stretching out like he owns the outdoors. 'You're just mad because I brought the gear and the biceps.'

'Wow. Romantic and modest.'

He laughs, rolls onto his side to look at me properly. 'Don't need to be romantic. Already got *you* in a tent.'

I throw a pinecone at him.

But then we lay here, still, with nothing but the rustle of the trees and the ripple of water and his knee bumping mine every so often like he's not quite ready to say anything more but doesn't want to leave the silence empty either.

We haven't touched our phones all day. I don't think it's on purpose. This feels like something that would

disappear if we looked away for too long. And the weird part? We're together. But something in me still aches, like I'm holding my breath for something I'm not allowed to ask for. Maybe that's what this is. Romance draped in sleep-deprived camping and slightly burnt food. Love that doesn't know its own name yet. And God help me, but I'd camp again in a heartbeat if it meant I got to hear him laugh like that. Like no one's listening. Like no one's watching. Not a care in the whole wide world.

We finish setting up camp, which takes us probably an hour, maybe longer, who cares. It's started to rain. Or maybe it hasn't. Hard to tell through the trees. The air is thick—heavy in that way that makes your clothes cling, and your thoughts louder than they should be.

We sit by the lake, backs against the log, fire crackling somewhere behind us. Neither of us talks. We don't need to, apparently. But the silence isn't easy. It's the kind that hums. The kind that fills your head with all the things you haven't asked yet.

Laker chucks a stone into the water and watches the ripples fan out. He hasn't looked at me in ten minutes. And I'm still waiting for him to say something I won't have to decode. I run a hand through my hair, damp at the edges. 'Romantic, isn't it?'

Laker snorts. 'You know I almost brought a guitar?'

I raise an eyebrow. 'You *play*?'

'No. That's why I didn't.'

It makes me laugh. But only for a second.

Later, when the sky's turned the colour of bruised peaches, and the air feels damp enough to cling, we sit by the fire. There's a blanket on the floor and one draped around both our shoulders, but it's mostly falling off mine. The air's cool against my back, all raised goosebumps and raw skin. His leg pressed against mine like an anchor, not a choice. Our clothes are somewhere behind us—crumpled in the tent, forgotten. My skin is still flushed in places. I don't look at him. Not directly. It's quiet in that strange, stretched way—like something's settled but not soothed.

He stirs the fire with a stick, ember sparks catching in the breeze, and says, 'Scouts are coming in May. Liverpool, Leeds definitely. Maybe Bristol, according to Coach.'

I hum. Try to ignore the shift in his voice—the sudden return of the version of him everyone else gets. Sure, steady, facing forward. But I know the one I just had. The one who kissed like a confession. Who whispered my name like it meant something. Who held on like maybe he didn't want to let go. That version's gone quiet now. He talks about schedules, training, and expectations. Like maybe if he keeps listing things, he'll remember where the lines are. And a thought hits me, sharp and unsettling: What if he never lets this version of us exist in daylight?

Then I ask it.

'What happens after?'

E L I J A H N O X L E Y

His jaw tightens just slightly. Still watching the fire.
'After what?'

'After this,' I say. 'The season. Uni. All of it.'

He stills. Just for a second before, 'Don't do this now, Chris.'

I nod; pretend it doesn't crack something in me.

Eventually, he gets up, disappears into the tent without another word, and leaves the flap open just enough to make it feel like less of a goodbye. I stay by the fire until it burns low. Until the night fully swallows me. Until even the lake stops trying to reflect the sky back. I don't check my phone. I just sit there, aching in that particular way you only do when you've had too much of someone and not enough at the same time.



Our bags are packed. The car's parked somewhere beyond the trees. We've got a while left before we have to start walking out of the quiet.

The morning feels different. Softer. Like the world's holding its breath.

I woke up before him—or maybe I just never really slept. Hard to tell when you've spent the whole night half-aware of someone else's warmth pressed along your side. Our sleeping bags had somehow unzipped and merged into one, and at some point, his leg brushed mine, skin to skin. Comfortable in a way that made my chest feel too full. The tension was still there, humming

under everything, but it didn't feel dangerous. It felt like something we were both pretending not to notice.

And then the sunrise happened.

The nicest one I've ever seen, streaks of gold and pink bleeding over the treeline, lighting up the frost on the grass like it had been dusted with sugar. I watched it while he slept, his breathing slow and steady beside me. For a moment, I let myself imagine this was normal. Us. Waking up like this. No secrets. No fear.

He hasn't spoken much since we started packing. Not really. Just half-jokes and throwaway commentary—Did you see that frog? You're rubbish at rolling tents, y'know. Nothing that touches it. Nothing that acknowledges the night we just shared.

'I don't really think about the after,' he says suddenly, like it's been gnawing at him and just now slipped free.

I look up. He's still watching the lake, but there's a knot in his jaw. He keeps shifting his fingers like he's trying to ground himself.

'What do you mean?' I ask, though I already feel the shape of the answer forming.

'I mean... everything's about now. This. This season. Staying sharp. Keeping clean.' He swallows. 'Because if I stop and think what happens after... it feels like juggling knives in the dark. One misstep and everything could come crashing down.'

He doesn't say exactly what *it* is. I turn to him. Carefully. 'Is that because you don't want it,' I ask, 'or

because you're scared you won't be allowed to keep it?'

He doesn't answer straight away. Just exhales through his nose and picks at the edge of his sleeve like it might help him think. Then, he laughs. Barely. The sort of laugh people make when they're cornered and want to sound casual but don't manage it.

'I don't know,' he says. 'Both? Neither? Depends what day you ask.'

I watch his jaw twitch. The way his leg bounces once, then stops. How he won't look at me.

'I'm scared to even say it,' he adds. Quieter now. 'That I'm—'

He trails off. Cuts himself short so sharply I can almost hear it.

Not even "gay." Just the suggestion of it. Like, even the syllable is too loud out here, too heavy with meaning. 'You know,' I say softly, 'sometimes saying it makes it less terrifying. Like inviting a storm to sit and have tea.' I pause, feeling the weight of the silence between us. 'Gay. It's just a word, Laker, but it feels big, I get it.' I offer it gently, hoping he might find courage in my voice. Like saying it aloud could transform it from an enemy into a familiar presence. Like a warm echo in the cold.

'I just... I've spent so long avoiding *that* word,' Laker says, voice barely above the wind. 'Pretending I wasn't thinking about it. Laughing it off before anyone else could say it. Now I'm here, and I want to say it, and I—I can't.'

I nod, slowly.

‘I get it,’ I say. ‘I was the same. Before Kaylan, I hadn’t said it to anyone. Not even to myself, really. And the second I did... it felt like I’d kicked a wall down and didn’t know how to rebuild it. But it also felt... lighter. Afterwards.’

He finally glances over. Just for a second. ‘Kaylan took it well?’

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘She kind of just looked at me and then hugged me as if nothing had happened. It was... *exactly* what I needed.’

He smiles at that. Only slightly.

‘I’m not saying it fixed everything,’ I add. ‘Just that it helped me stop splitting myself in half every time I walked into a room.’

Laker breathes out slowly. His fingers twist the hem of his hoodie like he’s trying to wring the nerves out of it.

‘You’ll get there,’ I tell him. ‘When you’re ready.’

I don’t ask him to say it. Don’t press. Just let him sit in the space I’ve already lived through—open, but not alone in it anymore.

He shakes his head and hunches forward, elbows on knees. ‘It’s stupid. I know. Loads of people—’ He cuts himself off again. ‘I just... I’ve spent so long avoiding *that* word, or making jokes before someone else can, or pretending it didn’t apply to me... and now that I’m sat here with you, wanting to say it, I—I can’t. I can’t get it

out.'

His voice cracks a little on "can't." Not enough to break, but enough to make me bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from filling the silence for him.

'You don't have to say it,' I tell him. 'Not now. Not for me. But if you want this, you're going to have to start saying it for yourself. At some point. Once you admit it to yourself... your perspective somehow changes. Stuff just feels a bit more possible, I suppose...'

That lands. I see it hit him.

He nods once. Swallows hard. Still doesn't look over. 'I just thought maybe if I kept it quiet, kept it casual, then maybe I wouldn't have to actually deal with it. The label. The expectations. The way people change how they see you once they *know*. Even when they say they're fine with it.'

'I won't change how I see you,' I say. 'I already see you.' I smirk. 'Quite literally all of you.'

He blinks at that. Presses his lips together. Then he says, so softly I nearly miss it, 'But I haven't seen all of me yet.'

This brings a tear to my eye, but I try to swallow it back. Cause that's the thing, isn't it? He's still figuring himself out. Still pulling the word "gay" out of the murk, shaking it off as it might bite.

'I'm not asking for a label,' I say gently. 'I'm only asking if I exist outside this. Outside tents and woods and rooms no one else walks into. Because I'm starting

to lose the parts of me, I've already figured out, and I don't want to go back to hiding that just because you still have to.'

Laker winces. Like that was too honest. But he doesn't run.

I want to want what you want,' he says. 'I really do. Chris... I...' he pauses again. 'I just... I don't know how to live it yet. And I'm scared that if I try too soon, I'll screw it all up. Or scare you off. Or worse—scare myself off.'

I look at him with my stinging eyes, 'Lake... I'm gonna be one hundred per cent honest here, and this is scary for me... but... I... I love you, Lake, like really have fallen for you, and it would break my heart if we can't get past this.' As I say it, he instinctively reaches out, brushing a speck of dirt from my collar, his fingers lingering there for a fraction longer than they need to, betraying what he's struggling to express. But then, the words seem to stall in his throat.

He goes stiff. Like I've just set something down between us that's alive and blinking. The fire cracks behind him, unnoticed. He doesn't look away. Doesn't laugh it off. Doesn't run away like he did the night before.

'Shit,' he breathes, not like he's shocked—more like he's been booted in the balls. He rubs his thumb along his jaw. Swallows once. I see the way his throat moves, like the words are trying to come up but keep getting caught halfway.

‘I...’ He starts, then falters. But this time he tries again... ‘I don’t think anyone’s ever said that to me. Not—like that.’

Another breath.

‘I don’t know if I can say it back yet, Chris. Not because I don’t feel it. I—fuck, I *do*. I just don’t know how to say it the way it deserves... the way *you* deserve it to be said. And that’s *fully* on me.’ His voice is scratchy. Almost raw.

He shifts closer, touches my knee, just for a second before I take his hand. ‘I’m scared,’ he says. ‘But I don’t want to lose you. Not over this. I want to try. I swear I do. Just... be patient with me. And I’ll do the same. For you. For this.’

I nod, once, steady, even though my heart’s doing somersaults. ‘Okay,’ I say. ‘I can do that. I can be patient. But you need to know—this thing between us, it’s not small. Not for me.’

He looks like he’s going to speak, but I shake my head gently, ‘I don’t expect perfection. Or certainly Laker. But I need honesty. Even the hard kind. Especially the hard kind.’ Then I squeeze his hand. ‘I’m here,’ I say. ‘Fully. Not halfway. And I’m not asking you to match me stride for stride—I just need to know you’re walking too. Even if it’s slow. Even if you stop for a breath sometimes.’

We sit in the quiet that follows. The air feels colder than before, but I don’t move.

Eventually, he stands. Brushes grass off his hands.

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

‘We should head back before the light goes.’

I nod and let him walk ahead.

Just a few steps.

THE SOCK ON THE HANDLE

Friday soon hits, and the winter air of February is slowly disappearing. Laker and I have continued to sneak around, just like *he* requested. I can't stop thinking about the nights we've had; the ones no one else knows about, the ones that still sit warm in my chest hours after they're over. The cold nights when our breaths lingered like small clouds in the air, dissipating slowly, yet the warmth between us kept me grounded. The way he touches me stays with me: the slow drag of his mouth along my neck, the way his breath ghosts over my skin before his lips follow. Or how his fingers trace lazy patterns over my stomach like he's learning me by heart, each pass sending a shiver that settles low and warm and impossible to ignore. It's these small moments that secretly echo back in quiet, unexpected times throughout the day, always bringing me back to him.

But it's not just the heat. It's the lingering scent of his cologne that clings to my clothes, the faint pulse of his touch still skimming my skin. It's everything after it. The way he pulls me in without thinking, like holding me is instinct. The way his heartbeat slows under my ear,

steady and calm, like he only breathes properly when I'm there. Sometimes he'll tuck his chin on top of my head, or hook a leg over mine, or run his thumb absentmindedly over the back of my hand—tiny things, stupid things, but they undo me more than anything else.

And when we kiss... God. It's like colour floods the world. Like something bright and electric wraps around us, pulling everything else away. For those moments, nothing exists except the press of his mouth on mine — no noise, no fear, no pretending. Just him. Just us. And the way he makes me feel like I'm finally allowed to want something this badly.

Sometimes, after everything, he'll look at me with a soft, unguarded gaze that he probably doesn't even realize he has. His eyes, wide and earnest, catch the light and seem to hold all the unspoken words between us. His pupils dilate ever so slightly, a gentle reaction that quickens something inside me. There's a slight parting of his lips as if he's about to speak, but the silence stretches, full of meaning. It's as if he's really seeing me, not just with his eyes but with something deeper, and he doesn't seem to want to look away. And that's the part that gets me. That's the part I can't shake.

Because it's not just desire. It's not just the rush. It's the way he makes me feel in those moments, like I matter. Like I'm wanted. Like I'm his and his alone. Yet, sometimes, in quieter moments when I'm alone, a sliver of doubt creeps in. I remember a time when I felt utterly

invisible, unworthy of this kind of affection—an echo from the past that still lingers. It's those moments of uncertainty that make feeling wanted now so powerfully intense, like a tide washing away the last remnants of self-doubt.

I lay here once again staring at the stained ceiling and now begin to wish that one of those marks had been created by Laker and me. A persistent drip in the corner of the room echoes my growing resentment, each drop a reminder of the cracks in our secrecy. The smell of mildew clings to my clothes, a sour reminder of the cost of our hidden moments. I think that is one of the things that is irritating me the most, not being able to share a bed, it's always us, lying on the solid, cold, often damp ground, in a dark and dingy cupboard somewhere or stealing a kiss in the fleeting moments unseen by others.

I know what I signed up for. It's just... The constant washing of clothes after we've been rolling around in the mud, the sneaking around without ever being out in the open, it all starts to weigh on me. Sometimes, it feels like I'm just another one he's checking off.

In my mind, I imagine a conversation with Laker. 'Do you really want this?' I want to ask him.

He'd probably give me that deep look of his and reply, 'Of course I do. But you know I need more time.'

'I just don't want to feel like I'm something temporary,' I'd confess, almost in a whisper.

He'd reach out, maybe touch my hand lightly, and say,

‘You’re not. I promise.’

I shake away the imagined exchange and focus on what’s real. Otherwise, I’d be fine with it all. I mean, why wouldn’t I be? Laker is almost perfect in every way. There’s not a blemish on him that I’d want to fix. I really don’t think he’s doing this to hurt me; he’s guarded, his walls are high, and I believe that when they start to come down, everything will change. I want to believe he wants this too, and I don’t think he would deliberately do anything to break my twinging heart.

I agreed to be patient, and I’m trying, but it’s hard cause I need to pretend to Kaylan that we’re still not a *we* and I can’t trust myself to hold it in. At some point, I’m going to accidentally talk about *us* and what that will do to Laker... well, I have no idea, but I can see meltdown number fifty on its way.

I’m beginning my day with *Tactical Analysis & Game Theory*. A class that will take my mind both off him and the thoughts of doubt I have been smothered with lately. Then, a little later in the day, I have free study, I agreed with Kaylan to go in for my shift at Refuel early, so technically, no study time, just work till six tonight.

My alarm starts to sing again, and I get up, swing my arm round and give it a good whack to shut it up. I pull the covers off me and rotate my thick calves off the edge of the bed, and just sit, waiting to gain some motivation to get up and get ready. To my surprise, Adam had already gotten up, I assume to go to the showers without

me. Something that over the course of my time here had rarely—if ever—happened.

I rub my hands over my face before I hear the door click, and in walks the Jedi Master himself.

‘Mornin’ mucker, how ye feelin’?’ He asks.

‘What’s gave you a spring in your step?’

‘Ah, nothin’... nothin’ much, well...’ he pauses as he finishes drying himself off before putting his Bob-Marley-tribute boxers on.

I couldn’t help but think, not if he finds out about me being gay, but when... *would things between us change?* How would he react? We are talking about a guy who sleeps in the same room as me, completely naked. Would that stop, or, worse, would he lose all trust in me and ask for a room change for the rest of this term? A sudden chill washes over me at the thought, a reflexive shiver running down my spine. I like him, don’t want to lose him, and I suppose in this moment, I get a glimpse of the fear Laker *must* be feeling.

‘Got a party, well... I call it a party, more like a small get-together, like a date... with a girl... maybe,’ he says, giving a quick wink. I can’t help but feel a pang of irony in his words, the idea of secrets and privacy hanging between us like an unspoken agreement. A reminder of my own situation with Laker that no one, especially Adam, knows about.

‘Oh! Nice one, when?’ I ask, trying to keep my tone light and unaffected.

‘Later today, after classes, a won’t be back till late, maybe not back at all tonight if things go ma way, so, mate, enjoy the peace n’ quiet.’ He says as he fastens the last few buttons on his shirt.

‘Explains the spring in your step then...’

‘Oh... am gonna make sure a have a bigger spring in ma step in the mornin’, trust me!’ he says.

I smile, shake off the meaning or thought of that cause just... no, and I begin to get ready.



Half the day had passed, with my focus totally on the classes—for a change. I was becoming more and more aware that exams were coming up, and I wanted to make sure that I hadn’t just wasted my full time here daydreaming about a guy, now that seemed slightly like a waste of time, regardless of how I actually feel about him. I came here to chase the dream, and I’ve realised it’s more than once I’ve had to remind myself of that.

It’s lunchtime, and I’ve wandered into the University canteen. It’s the same as always—loud, bright, and a little too warm, the kind of place where trays clatter, and conversations overlap until it all blends into one constant buzz.

The smell of chips and the cheap coffee hangs in the air, and the students weave between tables like they’re navigating traffic.

It’s quick, it’s easy, and it means I can grab something

and get out. As I make my way outside, the cafeteria's cacophony lingers for a moment, a backdrop of laughter and clattering trays that gradually fades behind me. I head for one of the quieter corners of the grounds, somewhere tucked away where no one really pays attention.

The spot looks a bit forgotten, hidden behind a row of overgrown hedges and half-shielded by a leaning oak that blocks most of the view from the main path. The noise of campus fades into a soft hum back here, like someone turned the volume down on the world. There's a certain solace in the way this spot mirrors my own moments of feeling overlooked, like when I lose myself in studies or wonder if my efforts are truly leading me down the right path. The leaning oak represents those times I felt myself bending under the weight of doubt, yet, like it, I remain standing, rooted to my dreams despite the overgrown doubts surrounding me.

I drop onto the dry grass. It's cold beneath my hands, slightly damp and a little scratchy, the kind that rustles when you shift and leaves faint impressions on your palms. The coolness is a relief from the warmth of the sun and echoes a sense of calm resolve. When I sift my fingers through it, I feel the cool soil underneath, the tiny twigs, and brittle leaves catching against my skin. A breeze moves through the hedges, carrying the smell of damp earth and cut greenery, and for a moment it feels like I'm miles away instead of just a few steps off the main walkway.

E L I J A H N O X L E Y

Hidden, but not trapped. Alone, but not lonely.

I stretch my legs out and pull out my phone.

— Yesterday —

Tonight was great x

23:57✓✓

Glad I could be of service ;) x

23:59✓✓

— Today —

If you wanna pop by and talk.

I'm behind the hedges next to the

leaning oak tree x

12:47✓

I messaged him, knowing he has more chance of replying these days. The cling-film crinkle of the chicken and sweetcorn mayo sandwich echoed in the crisp February air, grounding me in the bench-side moment. I just put my phone back in my pocket and dug into my lunch.

I'm not sure how long I sit here—ten minutes, maybe longer—before I finally hear something.

'Hey.' The voice says from behind me.

I turn, smile on my face at the sight of his, 'Hey,'

'Uhm, can't stay long, the boys are getting a bit sus at where I'm ducking off to all the time.' He laughs before leaning in and giving me a quick and almost pointless peck on the lips. But underneath his casual tone, there's a flicker of something deeper. I feel a knot tighten in my stomach, a reminder of the risk we both carry juggling secrecy with desire. His laughter can't quite extinguish the worry that one day those curious eyes might see too

much, say too much.

‘Chicken Mayo, yeah?’ he asks.

I nod, ‘Yeah.’

‘Great minds,’ he says as he swishes his finger between us.

‘What? You had...’

‘Yeah, actually one of my *favourite* wraps from the canteen.’

I try to keep myself and my thoughts on track. But the *‘can’t stay long, the boys are getting a bit sus at where I’m ducking off to all the time.’* Really got under my skin. And then I remember. I look up at him, wide-eyed as if this were the best news I could give him all day. ‘Come to my room later, after my shift at Refuel, I finish at six... or you could come get me if you want, Adams is gonna be away all night... a bed, warmth and no sneaking about. What d’you say?’

He grabs my cheeks lightly and looks into my eyes. ‘You’re amazing, I will be there.’ He looks around before he kisses me one last time and then walks off.

Great, a night in, a real night in, one with a mattress and a bed and floors... *this is gonna be good*, I think, as a big, closed smile spreads over my face.

Lunch ends, and I drag myself toward *Coursework Review*, which is less “class” per se and more “formal academic performance intervention with light refreshments.” No joke, the whole thing feels like a parent-teacher meeting but worse—because I’m both

the parent *and* the disappointing child in this metaphor.

The room smells like printer toner and quiet judgment. Everyone's sitting in that uncomfortable silence you get when nobody wants to be the first to admit they haven't opened Moodle in three weeks. My tutor, Mr Selfridge—who somehow always manages to look like he's been disappointed since birth—pulls out a clipboard and calls my name like he's about to deliver my last rites.

'Christopher Daley.'

Brilliant. That's me. The condemned.

I drag myself over and sit. He folds his hands like he's preparing to break bad news gently.

'So, Christopher... how do you feel about your progress so far?'

I consider saying emotionally compromised but still showing up, but instead I mumble, 'Uh... yeah, I'm just... balancing commitments. Work shifts... creative focus. All that.'

He nods slowly, like he's translating my nonsense into something academically acceptable. 'Mm. I see.'

He reviews my submissions with the same expression most people reserve for overcooked fish. I nod along, pretending to take notes in a blank notebook.

'You might want to revisit the fundamental concepts of tactical shape and adaptive formations,' he says, tapping the page like it personally offended him.

'Right. Yeah. Definitely.' (Translation: I will

absolutely *not* be doing that.)

He sighs—a long, weary exhale that suggests he’s been waiting his whole career for me to get my act together. ‘You’re not failing,’ he says finally, ‘but you are drifting, not excelling in any way, shape or form, which is rather sad to see, Mr Daley. Looking at the beginning of your time here at Braeburn, you seemed to be excelling a lot more, and then it seems to just take a nose-dive. Is there anything we can do to help?’

Academically soggy. Lovely.

‘Right. I’m drifting through. Got it. I’ll, uh... anchor myself. Try to fit in more time for study.’

He gives me a look that says he doesn’t think it’s very likely.

I thank him, stand up, and shuffle off with all the energy of a man who knows full well he’ll be googling *what tactical game theory in football is and how it relates to heartbreak* before the night is out.

Anyway. Only three more months until exams. Who needs sleep when you’ve got repressed feelings and tactical diagrams? Not me, apparently. As soon as this “lesson” ends, I’m out the door faster than Sonic the Hedgehog can say chilli dog and straight down to Refuel for my shift. Tristan apparently needed time off, and Kaylan has a hospital appointment, *or so she says...* one of the most casually overused excuses for “I just can’t be arsed working.”

I get in, go straight through to the back of house,

throw down my backpack and pull out my bright pink T-shirt and apron, wrap the tier around my waist two and a half times, barely have a word with Kaylan as she “apparently” needed to leave right then and there. Which, honestly, was fine. I just wanted to get on with it; the faster I could get this shift over with, the faster I could be wrapped around Laker under the covers in *my* bed.

I spent most of my shift making coffee, as I should be in the first place, but the other three quarters of it I spent looking at the blinking cursor on my laptop screen, while thinking about Laker.

I do find it crazy how much headspace he actually occupies in my mind, he lives in here rent free, it’s hard to walk around campus cause most secretive locations that you could find... we have done at least something there together, I can’t even walk through the back storeroom without remembering the night we had made such a mess with the syrups and lids.

I just couldn’t help but think about how long it was going to take him before he could, at the very least, say to me he was gay. I really feel like once he gets over *that* hurdle, everything will change for him. Maybe not immediately, but eventually. At the moment, I just feel like I’m the team captain’s dirty little sex toy, and it’s really not a nice feeling to have, but on the other hand, I can see why it needs to be this way; it’s like I can’t have one without the other and if I push against it. I know for

sure I will push him away; he already proved that. Yet, there's a small voice inside, a flicker of rebellion, reminding me I deserve more than secrets and half-baked assurances. It's weak, often drowned out by fear and uncertainty, but it's there, waiting for the right moment to speak louder.

It's maybe half five, and I'm behind the bar pretending the espresso machine doesn't sound like it's actively plotting my death. I've made about twenty-three coffees and one existential decision to never fall in love with a closeted footballer again. Progress.

A guy comes up to the counter—blond fringe, weirdly pristine scarf, looks like the kind of person who drinks oat milk and corrects people's Latin pronunciation in seminars.

'Hi, can I get an Iced Caramel Macchiato, like, *light ice*, half sweet, if possible? And do you guys do those little cinnamon...? You know, the spirally things?'

I blink.

Smile.

'Sure,' I say. 'One emotionally unavailable coffee, coming right up.'

He blinks back.

I cough. 'I mean—Iced Caramel Macchiato, yes. With light ice.' *What the fuck is light ice?* I think, 'And yes, we've got cinnamon swirls. Sorry. Really, *really* long day.'

He gives a half-laugh like maybe he's not sure if I'm joking or just mentally unstable.

‘Yes, I am.’ I say.

‘You are what—sorry?’

‘Mentally and physically unstable.’ I laugh, sort his order. Hand it off. He walks away, still looking slightly alarmed, which feels on-brand for me lately.

I turn back to the machine, stare at the frothing wand like it personally offended me, and sigh. Still hours to go. Then I get *my guy* in a bed for once. A mattress. A door that closes. Maybe even eight hours without hiding. I just have to make it through this queue of people with caffeine withdrawals and uncomplicated lives.

The shift winds down in that painfully slow way time goes by when you’re watching. We’re past the dinner rush, most of the students have slinked back to their rooms or off to the pub, and the playlist looped back to that weird lo-fi remix of “Take On Me” for the third time.

I close the till, flip the sign to closed, and let out a sigh that could’ve blown the shop down.

In the back, I peel off my pink Refuel t-shirt and hang it up. My spine clicks as I stretch. My feet ache. My brain’s fried. But the thought of climbing into my own bed *with him*. That pulls me through.

When I step back into the main café, he’s already there. Standing just inside the door like he’s not sure if he’s supposed to be. Hair a bit flat like he’s been wearing a hood, eyes flicking across the empty tables until they land on me.

And then soften.

He gives me this barely—there smile—like he's trying to hide the fact that he's nervous, even though he said he'd come. And for a moment, it hits me how rare this is.

'Hey, you,' he says.

My whole body unclenches. Didn't even realise it was tense.

'Hey,' I reply. I nod toward the door. 'Let's go before the espresso machine starts asking me for emotional labour again.'

That makes him laugh. He pulls up his hood before he heads out the door.

We walk side by side into the night air. It's cold, but not brutal, and there's this quiet between us that isn't awkward.

His hand brushes mine once. Then again. And then, on the third time, he holds on. Not for long. Not all the way to the door. But long enough that I know: tonight, I won't have to sleep folded into the corner of someone's shadow.

We come to a stop a bit away from the entrance to North Hall. 'What's your room number?' he asks.

I pause, bite the inside of my lip, knowing he is gonna make this a roundabout way of getting into my room. I sigh. 'Can you not just follow me?'

'Well... I thought it would look a bit, *sms*... y'know, if anyone sees us going into your room together... least if

I'm on my own, I can make sure no one sees me.' He says.

'Fine, room 6728, guess, I'll see you up there, I'll leave the door unlocked.'

I head off without him. Looking back as he fades off into the darkness of the last night in February. I walk up the stairs and head along the third-floor corridor, which is eerily empty, amplifying every slight noise. Somewhere in the distance, a door slams shut, sending a mild tremor through the hallway, reminding me that despite the quiet, the risk is never far. I unlock my door, the sound of the key echoing against the stillness, and I am relieved to see when I open it that the room is empty; no Adam. Everything's going to plan, though the faint undercurrent of uncertainty hums in the background.

I take off my hoodie, quickly change into shorts, decide not to put a t-shirt on, jump onto my bed, and wait...

It doesn't take long before I hear a small chap at the door, and then it opens and closes, and for the first time ever, I have him in *my* room, soon to be lying in my bed. 'Nice to see you again.' I say.

'I wasn't long.' He defends.

'Not saying that. Now what do you want to do?'

'Movie? Relax?'

'Sounds... great. Empire Strikes Back, alright with you?'

Laker raises an eyebrow as he walks toward me,

shrugging off his jacket like he's auditioning for the role of man specifically designed to ruin my ability to think.

'Oh, have I got a big geek on my hands, then?' He asks.

'They are *brilliant* movies,' I say, crossing my arms because someone has to defend my honour.

'Mm. If you say so. Part of the... what is it... *Wars Trek* universe?'

I blink at him. 'You did not just say that.'

He smirks, absolutely delighted with himself. 'What?'

'Star Trek or Star Wars—those are two completely different things. "War Trek" isn't even—'

'—Sure, it is,' he interrupts, waving a hand. 'They've got the laser swords and the little green bloke and the guy with the eyebrows and the ears—'

'That's Spock, Laker. That's Star Trek.'

'Star Trek, Star Wars... apples, oranges... same fruit bowl.'

'It is not the same thing. And they are Light Sabres—not laser swords...'

He laughs—that low, smug, 'I know exactly how to wind you up and I'm enjoying every second of it,' he laughs again and nudges my shoulder as he passes. 'Relax, Daley. I'm only teasing.'

'You nearly gave me a fucking stroke.'

'Well... keeps you on your toes.' he removes his belt and takes off his jeans. 'I really can't say anything about them, never seen either.'

Laker makes his way over to the door and opens it slightly, then closes it behind him. ‘Sock, code for do not enter at Uni.’

‘I know what it means.’ I start to feel slightly nervous; we have done this lots of times before, but this feels different, this feels almost perfect, no twigs sticking in all the wrong places. I jump up before he gets to me, and I rummage through the DVDs.

‘DVD’s, old school, love it.’ He says.

‘Physical doesn’t *fail* when the internet goes down, Lake... It’s common sense.’

I grab *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*, since he has never seen any of them. What better place to start than at the very beginning? I wave the DVD at him, ‘let’s start you off nice and easy, eh?’ By the time I turned to face him, he was lying in the single bed with nothing but his boxers on.

I put the DVD in and move onto the bed—into his arms, the lamp lighting the room with a nice warm glow, matching the way his arm cradles my chest feels.

‘What’s with the big yellow speal?’ he asks.

I turn my head just enough to catch his expression—genuinely confused, zero sarcasm. Bless him. ‘You mean the *opening crawl*?’ I say. ‘That’s, like, sacred text. Space gospel. It’s how you know you’ve entered the galaxy—properly.’

He squints at the screen. ‘Feels a bit dramatic.’

I grin. ‘Exactly. It *is* dramatic. Big yellow floating

exposition that screams, “Here’s the war, here’s the stakes, now strap in.” No subtlety, no title cards. Just boom—Rebels. Empire. Secret plans. Leia is on the run. It’s like being handed a cheat sheet before the exam, only the exam involves lightsabers and unresolved parental trauma.’

He hums like he’s still not sold.

‘Also,’ I add, shifting back into his chest a little more, ‘it’s a nod to those old sci-fi serials from the 1930s—Flash Gordon and all that. Lucas was going for myth, not realism. That text? It’s not just backstory. It’s ritual. It *sets the tone*. You read it, and you’re in.’

‘I mean, I came to watch a movie, not read a book, but anyways...’ He kisses the top of my head. ‘Such a geek.’ He smiles softly.

‘Deeply,’ I mumble. ‘But I make it look good.’ I take a breath and then lean my head back, ‘Y’know, it’s really nice.’

‘What?’

‘You getting to see this side of me... the only other person that has is Adam, really,’ I gaze over to his empty bed.

‘I think it’s... cute.’ He leans in and kisses me on the lips.

I shut up and focus on the movie, hoping he will fall in love with the series as much as I have. I slowly feel his hand moving south, and I allow it, but don’t acknowledge it. My plan is to let everything come

naturally. We lie here and cuddle as he slowly tickles my lower belly, the sensation fills me up inside, joy, anxiety, lust, it all swarms in my body as he continues to touch me.

I move my right arm as it has gone *dead* with the sensation of pins and needles. As I turn on my side slightly, I can feel his breath on my neck, then he kisses me with his soft, dry lips, slowly running them up my neck.

I feel him trying to lower my shorts, so I give him a helping hand, and before I know it, both of what remained of our clothing was lying on the floor. As Star Wars raged in the background, I was now on top of him as our tongues ran against one another, my hand was down toward his hips as my other held me up slightly.

He grabbed my head and started to go in deeper with his kiss, then I heard a click. I knew this wasn't good... I pounced off him, and just as the door began to swing open, I threw the covers over Lakers' head, leaving myself fully exposed as Adam walked in.

'Get the fuck out, man! Didn't you see the sock on the door?' I shout, my body shaking and my voice layered in panic as if my parents had just walked in on us.

'Shit! Sorry mate, sorry!' Adam said with his hands raised. He left the room immediately.

I knew this was it: one step too close to Laker being outed. The perfect night in my head was now ruined; there was no way this was going to continue as planned.

I tried to steady myself before Laker could speak to me, but it wasn't working.

He pounced up and started throwing his clothes back on manically, 'What did he see?'

'I... I don't,'

'What the fuck did he see!' Laker asks.

'I don't fucking know!' I breathe, but it turns into more of a pant, the way a dog would act after you played a good game of fetch. 'What does it matter anyway? Adams is a good guy... won't say anything.'

'Good guy... yeah, only he now holds the only fucking secret I don't want anyone to know, you fucking idiot!'

'Don't talk to me like that! We don't even know if he saw anything but me sitting there.'

He starts to pace briefly, I take notice of his missing sock, the silence between us is deafening, this could be it... the end of us.

He goes to speak but then pauses again, kneels and holds my head, 'Look, I'm sorry.' He rests his forehead on mine, 'I'm gonna go, but *please* find out what he knows...'

I go to speak, but stop myself and just nod at his request. The anger inside me has grown exponentially; he had no care for me in this moment, no consideration for how this could make me feel... I had just been caught in bed with someone, and it could get me out of the rest of the Uni too.

Besides that, sitting in the nude with a stoater as your

E L I J A H N O X L E Y

roommate walks in... yeah, like that's not gonna leave things a *little* awkward.

He opens the door slightly, must have seen the hallway was clear and left without even a glance back at me. And that's when I could feel the warm liquid running down my cheeks and the sting in my eyes; it had *finally* become too much.

Something inside me snapped like a twig I'd stepped on during one of our secret forest get-togethers. The pain that wanting him causes me, but the pain of not having him hurts me so deeply... I curl up on my bed and pull the covers over, and I cry until I no longer remember anything.

EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE COURSE

The sunlight beams through the window like it's got something to prove, an unrelenting reminder of everything that's slipping away. I open my eyes reluctantly, feeling the sting as reality unfolds. In that moment, I recall him leaving, not sparing a glance back, and my chest tightens with the fear of what I've already lost and might never regain. How could I have been so naive to think this could work? With every ray of sunlight, the ache spreads higher, climbing up my spine, whispering the cold truth of the morning: I might have pushed him too far.

And then there was Adam... who I had to talk to; I couldn't help thinking this was going to be one of the most awkward conversations I would ever have, for such a chill guy. I can't help but imagine judgment and dread! I lay on the bed for about half an hour before opening my puffy eyes again.

I glance over and see him sitting up on the bed. I wasn't ready for this, not at this time in the morning. *How*

could I get out of it? He was right there, he was bound to bring it up as soon as I was awake... There was no escape; my heart started rattling in my chest as if I had just pinged a rubber band off it. Think... *get up casually, and if he brings anything up, dismiss it?* No! cause thanks to Laker I need information from him too... ugh! I swish my eyes back and forth in my skull.

Got it! I'm bursting for a pee, grab my towel and go for a shower... then, hopefully, I'm awake enough to finally talk to him. I pounce up and carry out my plan. I get to the door and turn the handle, he doesn't breathe a word, not even a 'morning.' I find this odd, but I continue on with my plan anyway.

I get back to the room and stand on the outside of the door, towel wrapped around my waist, soaked boxers in hand, thanks to the showers, and take a deep breath before I enter. *Three. Two. One* and I open the door; he's still sitting in the same place he was when I left thirty or so minutes ago. I brave it. 'Morning, Adam.'

'Mornin' tae you,' his strong accent hits my ears like a kilt wrapped brick thudding off a base drum.

I clear my throat, glance down, play it cool. 'So, uhm, think we need to talk.'

'It's fine mate, honestly, just so ye ken though, there was no sock!'

'There was, I put it there...' even though I didn't, just need to make my point because I saw Laker put it there.

'There wasn't! I'm sure I'd have noticed it when I

turned the handle, you twat!

‘It was on the handle!’ I say sternly.

‘Chris, mate! It fucking wasn’t.’

‘Ugh! Fine... enough about the sock, doesn’t matter, what’s done is done, more to the point though, besides me... did you see... anything else?’ I ask, my heart skipping a beat whilst I wait for his reply.

He scratched his goatee, ‘Erm, just... yeno, you... and you were—’

I stop him there ‘Yeah, I was there for that bit... did you see who I was with?’

‘It was just you... having a—’

‘—Want not to go there.’ I finish his sentence. ‘So, you just saw me?’

‘Aye, bit embarrassing really, am sorry mate.’ He says.

At this point, I’m surprised that he hasn’t even realised that I was practically telling him there was someone else in the bed with me; suppose that’s a win for Laker... ‘Never mind, not like we haven’t seen each other... y’know.’ I laugh.

‘Aye...’

‘No awkwardness?’

‘No, we’re good!’ he lets a thin smile grow on his face, not enough that I could see his teeth, but enough to let me know we truly were good.

‘Great, don’t know what I would do without my Jedi Master.’ I joke.

‘There ye go again, overthinking... when ye gonna

stop that?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Chris, I saw you having a—’

‘—Thank.... you very much, and I’ll stop you there.’ I squirm at the thought of the end of his words.

‘No, listen tae me, it’s no a big deal mate, we all dae it...’ He laughs.

‘Wait... d’you... nah, I don’t even want to know.’ I pause for a second. ‘Wait, you came back here last night, guessing that means the date didn’t go well?’

‘Don’t want-y talk bout’ it mate, was an utter disaster.’ He sighs.

‘Oh, right, well if you need to talk, or want to... You know where I am, but I’m off now, have a shift to get to.’ I’m up and out the door. I couldn’t help but feel a small sense of relief. It went better than expected, and *maybe there is still hope for Laker and me after he finds this out?*

The Uni is quieter than usual, like even the architecture knows it’s a Saturday. The air smells faintly of the rain that fell last night, and the chippy van that somehow haunts every corner of campus, depending on wind direction.

I pass the east side of North Hall, where the ivy’s tried and failed to look distinguished and now just clings on in sad post-winter tatters. There’s a statue near the library of some war poet whose name I forget—he’s mid-gesture, like he’s about to drop a pint of beer.

A girl in a navy hoodie with the word *PRIDE*

plastered on the back in all its rainbow glory whizzes past me on her skateboard with a Refuel coffee in one hand and zero fear in her bones. I try not to overthink what it must feel like to just... be like that. Open. Unbothered. So certain of yourself.

I keep my head down and veer across the grass where the shortcut path's been trodden into the mud. My shoes suck at the earth with every step, like the ground's trying to hold me in place. But it doesn't.

So, I keep walking.

Refuels woodwork is all shades of brown, some panels still damp, others drying in the sun that's trying to break free from the clouds. I pull the door open and head straight in. Kaylan's out front, so I head to the back, dump my jacket and put on my T-shirt and apron.

'Hey Heartbreaker.'

'Chick-a-dee.' I reply shortly.

'What's up?'

'Nothing, I'm alright.'

'Y'know, you really haven't been yourself lately, ever since y'know, you told me...'

'I have... what you talking about?'

'You *really* haven't, what's going on?'

I feel it coming up my throat, uncontrollable, uncontainable, before I knew it, I'm word vomiting like that scene from the exorcist. 'I've been—okay, right, so—I've been sleeping with Laker, right, and then Adam just—he just walked in on us last night, like actually

walked in, and I thought he knew, I was sure he knew, but he didn't, he didn't know anything, not a thing, which means I haven't ruined it, I haven't blown his secret because Laker doesn't want—he really doesn't want anyone knowing he's—' I choke on the last word, breath stuttering. 'Gay... oh, for—shit...'

'Wait... what?' Kaylan arches her thick brows, her face looking like a jigsaw puzzle that hasn't been completed yet. 'How long's that been going on?'

'Since... just before I took the weekend off...'

'To see your family, yeah?'

'Well... not quite, I went with him on a two-day camping trip...' I screw up my face waiting for her to shout at me... but she doesn't.

'Right... okay, uhm, and Adam did what?'

'I had Laker in my room last night, and he walked in on us, Laker freaked thinking he saw us, but it turns out he didn't see him, just me, so... we can return to the cupboard and resume where we left off...'

'And you're happy about that?'

'About?'

'Staying in the closet?'

'Well... not exactly, but I love him, Kaylan, and to be with him... it needs to be this way.'

'No, honey, it doesn't. If he loves you enough, he'll come out for you. I suggest you really think this one through before you see him again. You have to do what's right for you. Otherwise, I won't be calling you

Heartbreaker anymore... it'll be *Heartbroken*.'

I swallow the lump forming in my throat. She clearly knew the words hit me before I did. 'He is... he is going to come out. He said—well, he says he will. Eventually. It's just—it's not that simple, it's never that simple, and he's just... he's not ready. Not yet. I mean... yeah. Not yet.'

I'm wrapped in her arms again as she squeezes the last remaining breath from my lungs.

'Yeah, you need to think of yourself. His "yet" may never come, Chris.'

Her words smack straight into my chest. I cave, letting myself sink into the hug that's holding me up physically while I search for the strength to hold myself up mentally.

'Hey guys...' a voice says from behind me.

'Oh yeah, you're on with Tristan tonight...' Kaylan muffles from my chest.

I stiffen slightly in her arms, not ready to be perceived—especially not mid-hug, mid-emotional-moment, mid-heart-unravelling. Kaylan pats my back like she's trying to burp me into composure.

I turn, barely.

'Alright, mate,' I say, voice rougher than intended.

Tristan lifts an eyebrow, but he doesn't comment. He's holding this swamp-coloured smoothie that looks like it's judging all of us. He glances between Kaylan and me—I'm blotchy and hanging onto her like I'm about to

float off—and I can feel him deciding to tiptoe around whatever disaster he’s walked into. ‘Everything good back here?’ he asks, inching backwards toward the till.

‘Peachy,’ I say, stepping away and trying to flatten the emotional wrinkles off my apron.

Kaylan clears her throat. ‘Just some customer service training... uhm, the Emotional Resilience Course.’

‘Cool, cool. I’ll just go... prep the cookie jars then.’

He disappears like someone who’s walked into the wrong scene of a play and knows it.

I glance over at Kaylan. Her eyes are still gentle, but firm.

‘Think it through,’ she repeats quietly.

I nod, biting the inside of my cheek.

My shift got off to a good start. Tristan was ever so helpful, taking on most of the duties like he knew I was upset about something. This allowed me to spend most of my time in the back running the cleaning operation, which wasn’t hard: fill a tray, slide it into the dishwasher and pull down the hood for two seconds and bam, clean cups and saucers.

It was gone on two before the shop must have gone quiet enough for Tristan to join me. He said a few words, but nothing significant enough for me to fully register. I just nodded in all the right places, my head consumed with what Kaylan had said earlier, knowing I would undoubtedly be seeing Laker at some point tonight.

Three o’clock came around, and it was time for

Tristan's break. He said he's going to head up to campus to get his laptop so he can work on some coursework in the latter part of the shift, which I said was fine and could be done in half an hour on my own.

The bell goes not even a few minutes after Tristan left, and in walks Laker, like he has been on a stakeout, watching to see when the place was empty enough for him to talk to me. He just stands with those hypnotising eyes, looking at me.

'Sorry bout last night. Can we talk?' he asks.

I gesture for him to come through the back, and I lean against the worktop as he walks in, 'You... you didn't need to leave.'

He walks over to me, wraps his arms around my waist, and kisses me gently on the lips. 'I needed to go...'

I kiss him back, but the feeling I had with Kaylan earlier is rising in my throat. I push it down, kiss him again, and again. We eventually end up in the stock room cupboard with the door closed, and he begins to take off his jacket.

'I haven't been able to get you off my mind all day,' he says as he rubs his lips over mine.

And that was it, the final straw, Kaylan's advice swirling around my head like it was caught in a whirlpool and my pushed down word vomit fighting against me, before I could stop it. 'Are you sure it was *me*? And not just so you could find out what Adam knows about *you*!?' I push him off me and pull my apron back around my

waist.

‘I already told you! This has to stay between us.’ He replies with a shade of blackness in his tone.

I frown, ‘Well,’ pushing the cupboard door open, ‘if all we are is your fucking dirty little secret, then,’ I place my fingers to the bridge of my nose, breath before I could say the words. ‘We’re done; I don’t want to be hiding in fucking cupboards anymore, Laker.’

‘But...’ he stops, ‘*You* said you would be patient!’

‘And god knows I have been, but you... You just don’t seem to get it, do you?’

‘What?’

‘See... doesn’t matter, maybe if you figure it out, come back and then we’ll talk!’

He makes for the archway and pauses just as he gets to the beads, ‘Does he—’

‘— Adam knows nothing, he just thought I was jacking myself off, now on that note, seriously, fuck off!’ I lean against the worktop, breathing and trying to calm myself. By the time I look up, he’s gone, but Tristan has just walked back in.

‘What’s up?’ he asks.

‘Nothing... just had a really bad phone call with my sister.’ I lie and walk out into the front of Refuel as a customer rings the bell. ‘What can I get for you?’

‘Just a Latte, please.’ She says.

I whiz around and make the latte. Everything is second nature to me by this point, and I hand it over to

her; she pays by card and takes a seat.

‘Chris, c’mere.’ Tristan says as he drags me into the back room. ‘You can talk to me, y’know.’

I find myself staring into his eyes, they are a nice warm brown with a tinge of gold. His lips looked soft and buttery, as if he had just licked them. I unconsciously go in for a kiss... he pulls back slightly, then kisses me back... *what about Laker?* A small voice questions me inside my head. *What about him?* I reply.

Before I know it, we’re suddenly tangled up in each other, and I’m fumbling with his apron. I get it over his head, and I’m reaching for his clothes when he pushes me back. He pauses, looks at me for a second, then grabs his stuff and runs out the door.

‘Well... that was unexpected. Shit.’

I stare at the staff door like it’s going to give me answers. Like maybe if I look long enough, I’ll understand what just happened.

I’m still half-buttoned, apron slung over a stool, lips tasting like regret and raspberry smoothie. My chest feels like it’s caving in at weird angles, my ribs resembling bent goalposts left out in the rain or broken coffee stirrers scattered across a chaotic café counter. Each breath feels tight, like there’s too much emotion and not enough air.

Tristan’s kiss still lingers. Soft. Surprising. But the way he looked at me before he bolted—wide-eyed and unsure—that’s what burns. That’s what sticks. And somewhere behind that panic is the voice again. What

about Laker?

‘What about fucking Laker Luxton!’ I shout, grabbing the nearest glass cup. It’s cold in my hand, slick with condensation, heavier than I expect. My grip slips for a second, then I hurl it at the floor. The crack is sharp, violent, glass exploding across the tiles, skittering in every direction. A shard bounces off my shoe; another spins in a tight circle before settling. The smell of coffee and the faint tang of dust hit my nose as the mess spread out at my feet.

I stare at my hand, fingers trembling like they’re still holding the impact.

I let out a breath I hadn’t meant to hold. Drag myself over to the sink, splash cold water on my face like it might rinse out the shame, the confusion, the everything. Because I didn’t plan that. I didn’t go looking for it. But when he looked at me like he saw *me*—not a secret, not a mistake, not a cost—I just... wanted it. I needed it.

And now?

Now, I’ve got another person to disappoint. Another thread to untangle. Another knot in a week already twisted tight with silence and things unsaid.

Kaylan’s voice echoes in my head: ‘*You have to do what’s right for you.*’ Fuck, I don’t even know what that is anymore. But I know I need air.

I peel off the apron, grab my hoodie, and step out the back door. The bins are rank. The air’s damp. But it’s quiet. And for thirty whole seconds, I let myself lean

against the cold brick wall and just *be*. Not the guy in the cupboard. Not the mistake in the stockroom.

Just Christopher.



A few weeks went by, and the only time I caught even a whiff of *him* was at practice or in classes that we shared. We didn't converse and barely glanced in the general direction of one another—well apart from on the pitch cause that couldn't be helped.

He seemed like he had gone cold, and to be honest, I knew I had. My primary focus turned back straight into the game, straight into the ball, the one thing I knew, the one thing I could depend upon. If I had to say it, my one true and honest love.

Things at Refuel had become a little weird. Tristan had called in and quit after our interaction... yet another relationship I need to mend, the kiss with him meant nothing to me, but it could have meant more to him, enough that it led to him quitting... I put it to the back of my head because, well, for once, I was focused on *me* again.

I cried because, of course, I did. Adam tried to comfort me in the wise way he does, although his trying to help without me giving him any information made me laugh a little within my dying soul. Over the last week, I have slowly regained my strength and my identity. I had the valuable conversation with Adam, eventually telling

him I'm gay, and he shrugged it off... basically told me that he wasn't all that straight himself, which, funny enough, as I thought about it, would be believable.

He assured me, though, that I wasn't his type, I was fit and all, but he really did see me as a younger brother or as he said it, 'wee bro.' I agreed with him on this, so much so that I think we ended up slam-dunking each other into the friend zone. It was nice, him knowing. I found myself spending even more time with him and his mates, most of them outcasts like me. Sherry... turns out she's a big lesbian, I should have guessed with those bangs and Gwenyth, bisexual... although, I was surprised at that one.

All this lead me to realise that at University, no one really gives a shit about you, not really, well unless you're the person that runs the Burnblog, and let's be honest, I can't say I don't react to stuff when its shared on there, but the burn levels... load of bullshit cause after a week, everyone goes back to forgetting you even exist.

I just wish Laker could have been here to see how these reactions to my own coming out were. Maybe... just maybe it would have given him a feeling of safety... or even freedom. I can only imagine how much further he's crawled back into the closet since I called it off... but that's his choice, and I think I made the right one for me.

I walk into the changing rooms and don't even glance in his direction. My only focus is on the game. I get changed into my strip with my back to him, I don't even

want to give him the privilege anymore. It's been nearly three weeks, and I'm sure he's over himself by now. Maybe even realised what a big mistake it was allowing me to end it; fuck knows what's going on behind those icy eyes.

I sit, and at that moment the phone goes, not just mine... everyone's in the changing room, it was like a ding in an echo chamber.

Level Three Burn 🔥 x3

"Apparently the Braeburn Boys are feeling the tension... or is there more that goes on in those locker rooms that we don't know about? YET! - xcx BB"

My eyes dart up to Laker, and I shake my head, signalling it wasn't me. He frowns, muttering something I can't make out. Jarred jumps in suddenly, his voice sharp without needing the harsh Scouse accent for effect. 'What's going on with you two? Acting shady lately. First, this Burnblog stuff kicks off. As far as I can tell, we're all good.' He gestures to the team. 'But you two? Something's off. Spill.'

I slowly glance back to Laker before connecting my eyes with Jarred again, 'Nothing's up with us, why are you talking garbage?'

'Yeah,' Laker jumps in, as if defending my honour when all he's doing is defending his chamber of secrets. 'Barely even talk outside of practice... dunno what you

mean?’

I give him some side eye, hoping he knows that even though things never quite worked with us, I don’t hate him, and his *secret* is safe with me.

‘Right then, what’s that Burnblog chattering on about, eh?’ Jarred asks, disbelief and curiosity strong in his voice. ‘People stirring things up... something’s going around, and it’s got your names all over it, lads.’

‘Could be any one of us in this room...’ I add.

‘Look, Jarred mate, let’s just drop it, eh?’ Laker says.

‘We’ve got way too much ridin’ on this match, la, so if any of yous’ve got beef brewin’, get it sorted, dead quick.’ He karate chops the edge of his hand with the palm of the other. ‘Heads in the game or just jog on, yeah? I’m not riskin’ a loss ‘cause any o’you can’t keep it together. I’m not takin’ failure for your shite, sound?’ In that moment, Jarred took a deep breath, the rhythm steadying him as he repeated his inner mantra: ‘Focus. Lead. Win.’ It was like a switch flipped inside, propelling him into the role of a true team captain, more so than Laker had been in a long time... he’s been otherwise distracted.

‘Fair words mate, and I agree, any your personal shit, leave it at the door, eh?’ Laker chimes in, like he really isn’t the one causing the issues Jarred had just raised... my insides crawl deeper into themselves, and the distance between us grows.

Coach Klarke barges in the door as if he’d been

outside listening, his presence silencing the room in an instant. The metallic chill of the locker seeped into the air, wrapping around us like a cold embrace. There was a pause so profound it felt like the world had stopped breathing, the only sound an almost imperceptible whistle of air escaping. Klarke's deep, dangerous stare sliced through the room before he spoke, 'Laker, you're no longer our team Captain, because what I heard from Jarred right there... that's the determination and spirit I need for this team. Wish you had shown it sooner.' As he patted Jarred on the shoulder, I caught sight of the small scuff on Laker's boot, a detail that seemed to encapsulate his silent devastation.

The look on Laker's face was just the same, if not worse than the day I broke it off; he looked devastated... I watched as he slouched down onto the bench and stared at the ground. I wanted to comfort him, but I couldn't...

'Pitch now!' Klarke shouted, and the guys started teaming out of the room, their boots clacking against the tiles, cutting through the silence. The sound echoed like a heartbeat, keeping time with the tension thrumming in the air. The smell of damp turf hit me as I stepped out, a sharp reminder of the urgency on the field. Laker is a few moments behind.

'If I hear even a whisper of drama on that pitch, I'll personally sub you for a traffic cone,' Coach Klarke shouts. The words hang heavy in the air, not just because

of the humour in his threat, but because we all know what's at stake. A loss today could mean more than just bruised egos—it could mean relegation from the league, lost scholarships, and letting down the entire community that's counting on us. The stakes make Klarke's humour resonate with a stark reality that hits home for everyone.

SOME KIND OF BRAVERY

The words fell like a lead weight, heavy and unyielding. 'Laker, you're no longer our team Captain,' Coach Klarke announced, his voice reverberating against the sterile walls. My heart skipped a beat, suspended in disbelief, as if teetering on the edge of a precipice. I sat there, vulnerable and exposed, feeling as if my aspirations had been abruptly discarded like rubbish. The stark strip lighting above flickered, casting jittery shadows, as Klarke didn't bother to pull me aside or offer any forewarning. Anger bubbled up at being caught off guard. Maybe I had missed the signals, my mind too preoccupied elsewhere to notice. Yet, it was too late now.

I wait on the bench long after the changing room empties. The small breeze that flows through the room runs over my skin. I couldn't get the strip off fast enough; it's just lying there, discarded on the floor, unworthy of being on my body. Even the smell of sweat and turf can't cover the shame clinging to me. Beneath the shame, a deep sense of grief settles in. It's like a heavy stone lodged in my chest, making each breath feel shallow and labored.

Silence envelops the room, pressing in from all sides. It's a moment suspended in time, where the weight of everything that's happened bears down on me.

I really never meant to hurt him, and to be honest, now that I've lost my captaincy, maybe this is how it felt for *him*—giving me up, watching something he cared about walk away while pretending he wasn't breaking.

Thinking back now, I really let him down. The way he makes me feel when I'm close to him is that I feel superior, like a king. It's like he looks up to me, as if I was a god sitting right there in front of him, back in the early days after I first saw him at the party my mind went skew-whiff, I couldn't get him out my thoughts, I slept with my girlfriend and I'd be imagining him right there... right in her place, I never knew why. It is like instant magnification; we're like two magnets pulling toward each other. It was magic, what we had. And I had to go ruin it all for my own selfish reasons, my own fear. Christopher Daley deserves better than me, someone who is *proud* to have him by his side.

I just can't add one more thing to the list of failures... first, letting him down; second, letting my team down; and well... third, I don't even want to go there. There's no way in hell that I can do it. I'm going to be suffocated by the dusty clothes in this closet forever, never free and always scared to be who I *think* I really am. The air feels stale and thick, like I'm breathing in ash. My skin itches with the rough fabric pressing against me, and the smell

of old mothballs invades my senses, leaving a bitter taste in my mouth.

Suddenly, the memory flashes, sharp as a knife's edge. I remember walking into the locker room one afternoon; the thud of gear being tossed into lockers setting the rhythm. A teammate laughed too loudly, his voice laced with derision, 'They're just a bunch of weirdo's, aren't they?' In that moment, I caught the sideways glances, the subtle nods of agreement, all of it pinning me to the spot, invisible chains wrapping tighter around my chest.

I just wish I could be more like him. He walked out of the closet like it was just another door. I still treat mine like it's locked from the outside and I'm bound in chains, doomed to never break free. I have watched him from afar become his truest self, hanging around with those... misfits he calls friends, the only one I think I know is his roommate Adam.

The fear that night instilled in me still lingers in my bones now. I remember every detail, every moment stretching like an elastic band ready to snap. As I closed the door behind me, the soft click echoed louder in the silence of the hallway. Each step felt like a weighty decision, my feet moving almost automatically across the cold, hard floor that sent chills up my spine. The night air hit me when I stepped outside, sharp and biting, as if trying to strip me bare of all pretence. What did he see? Who would he tell? The questions coiled in my mind, venomous and unrelenting. I left out of fear, turning my

back on Chris like he was nothing more than another fleeting moment in a series of many. But he wasn't just another face in the crowd. What he doesn't know is that I left crying, heartbroken, with something irrevocably shifting inside me. It was right then, as I walked away without looking back, that I knew I loved him.

I never really meant to hurt him. I suppose my selfishness took over, and I was too focused on keeping *us* a secret to truly think about him or how he felt. I regret not considering what he wanted, as long as we remained hidden. But from this, I've learned a hard lesson about the courage it takes to be open and authentic. Seeing how fear can ruin something precious, I've realised that honesty and vulnerability are the only paths to genuine connection. I now understand the importance of facing my fears rather than letting them dictate my actions. Even if I let a good thing come and go, I've grown more aware and determined to change.

I just never want to let anyone down, and I let him down. But on the flip side, if I did let us go public, I'd be letting my team, my dad, and my whole family down, and they'd probably disown me. I'm scared; it feels like having him would mean so much more to lose.

'Come on, Laker, focus on the team,' Coach's voice chimes in my head, stern and unyielding. His words are like a mantra that's been drilled into me since the first day. 'You've got to be the leader on and off the field.' Then I hear Christopher, his voice soft yet piercing,

‘Don’t hide who you are, Laker. I need to know that I’m important to you, too.’ The two voices collide in my mind, each pulling me in a different direction—Coach calling for commitment to something bigger, Christopher pleading for authenticity and love.

But I love him, even if I won’t tell him that. Now it seems like I have lost any chance of being with him because I chose fear over love.

The image of losing Chris feels like watching a vibrant painting being drained of colour, leaving only the stark outlines of what once was. The air seems to thicken, charged with an electric tension, as if a storm is gathering in the distance, its rumble echoing faintly like the low murmur of voices filtering through the locker room walls. I catch the scent of damp jerseys, mingling with metal and the sharp tang of sweat, each sensation anchoring me in the suffocating reality of my turmoil. But the thought of facing my family’s wrath and the team’s rejection looms large, threatening to uproot everything stable in my life. This contrast sharpens the internal battle, pushing me to the edge of choosing what truly defines who I am.

The changing room feels too small, too bright, too loud, even in its silence. I shove myself up off the wooden bench, the legs scraping against the tiles with a sharp screech that makes me flinch. I start pacing between the lockers, my bare soles sticking slightly to the floor, the smell of sweat and damp kit clinging to the air.

My hands won't stay still. Dragging them through my thick short hair, gripping the back of my neck, curling into fists. A sudden, involuntary twitch jerks my shoulders upward, a physical manifestation of the panic lurking just beneath the surface. It's a small quake, but it intensifies the chaotic energy, underscoring the anxiety spiralling within.

I am terrified of being out, even more so of being *outed*. My life is simpler when everyone thinks I'm normal, thinks I'm straight. The thought of people calling me names—the real ones, the ones I can't even bring myself to say, it makes my whole body go rigid. The stuff they throw around like it's nothing. Weirdo, Gay Boy, Queer, Faggot, Fairy-boy—whatever other creative garbage they come up with these days.

How could I possibly stay here? At Braeburn? How could I ever look the team in the eyes again? I can feel the disapproval already, crawling up my legs and worming its way into my chest. In the distance, a teammate's laughter echoes through the corridors, a stark reminder that life continues outside this room. The thud of a ball bouncing on the field reverberates faintly through the walls, amplifying my sense of isolation amidst the vivid world moving on, untouched by my turmoil.

And then there's my parents. I can barely tell them when I haven't been doing great at football... but this? This would break them. I remember one Sunday dinner,

the whole family gathered around the table, the soft clink of cutlery on plates, a homemade pie steaming in the centre. My dad looked up, smiling, and said, “My all-star footballer son,” his voice filled with warmth and expectation. His words echo in my mind just before I imagine telling them the truth, amplifying the dread and fear that seize my chest. My mom nodded, adding how they couldn’t wait for me to carry on the family legacy. The thought of shattering that smile, of turning it into disappointment, feels like tearing a part of me away. I’d be disowned for it. I’d never be able to bring Chris home, do the normal family dinner routine, plan a wedding and know they’d actually show up. That just isn’t happening. Not in their world.

My pacing gets faster, tighter, like I’m wearing a groove into the tiles. A locker door rattles when I brush past it too hard. My breath fogs in the cool air as panic circles me, trapping me in its relentless grip. In a sudden burst of frustration, I slam my palm against the locker, the metallic clang reverberating through the room. The anger flares up, stoking the fire within, before I attempt to press my palms to my thighs to steady myself, but the anxiety refuses to release its hold, swirling around me like an inescapable storm.

I can see it now, the disappointment in their faces. Their only son is letting them down like this. Dragging the family name just by being who I am. Just because I am not who they want or need me to be! This realisation,

the anger bubbling up inside, suddenly becomes a catalyst. I can no longer bear the confines of their expectations. With a surge of determination, I decide it's time to stop living in fear and be true to myself. This newfound resolve compels me to action, pushing me to confront what I have been avoiding for so long.

The anger burns out as fast as it flared. My legs give a little, and I drop back onto the bench, elbows on my knees, breath shaking out of me in uneven bursts. The room feels too big and too small at the same time, like the walls can't decide whether to close in or let me fall apart.

For a moment, there is nothing but silence—a deep, echoing stillness that fills every corner of the room. It presses down on me like a weight, an emptiness that highlights the collapse within. The silence allows the emotional exhaustion to settle in more deeply, a reminder of the void left by my choices.

I have spent most of my time alone since he called it off, thinking, crying... *how do I fix this?* How can I make us work without everyone having to know?

I stand, still only wearing my birthday suit, because I can't rip that off to discard the shame, get my black joggers, jumper and T-shirt from my backpack. I take a moment to just stand, allowing the air to circulate my body once again, which seems to bring a small sense of calm to my mind. Then something clicks in my head. At that very moment, my phone pings, the urgent vibration

distracting me from my thoughts. I grab it hastily from the side zipper on my bag, but the screen flickers with a warning: 'Battery Low - 5% Remaining.' Panic surges as I wade through missed calls and messages I hadn't dared to check. Desperation adds urgency to my movement, I open up our messages and begin to type, praying it doesn't die on me.

Chris, I'm so sorry, can we meet up and...

I stop and clear the text. He doesn't deserve a text from me; he deserves me to at least speak with him in person, in public... I am going to do this right!

I hurry to put on my boxers, socks, and tracksuit, pack my kit into my bag, and grab it—it might take me a while, but I will wander campus until I find him, until I see him. Even if it takes me hours.

After checking most of the halls and even Refuel, he was nowhere to be seen, heard or found. I went back and checked the pitch, knowing that a bruised footballer would spend a lot of time kicking the ball to release frustrations. Surprisingly, he wasn't there. Eventually, I circle back around into the main University car park, and see him walking across it, that perfect lanky streak with his shiny hair blowing over his face in the wind.

He's too far away, but I can just picture his glowing brownish eyes looking right into my soul. If only I knew how to say the words in my head out loud, he would probably have never left... I push myself toward him, the urgency pounding in my chest. As I shout, 'Christopher!'

E L I J A H N O X L E Y

the sound echoes sharply off the parked cars, hanging in the air. My voice catches momentarily, a mix of fear and hope tightening my throat, imprinting this climactic call with raw sensation.

ALL THE WAYS TO WIN ME BACK

On my way back from Refuel, I hear a faint echoing call of my name. I lift my head from my phone, it's him, dressed in all black as if he is in mourning.

I stop, unsure whether to turn or wait... before I can decide, he is already too close.

Breathless, he pants, 'Ch—Chri—Chris...'

'What do you want?' I sigh.

He takes my hand. In that moment, my heart skips a beat; a flutter of anger, mixed with a desperate hope, swirls inside me. Does his touch mean he finally understands the pain he caused? Yet, my mind screams at the public setting: 'Let me go, someone is going to see you, we're standing right in the middle of the car park.' I remind him, but it doesn't seem to faze him.

'I just need to see you again; I miss you so much. I should never...'

'Look, I know your ego is hurt, but this... this isn't the answer, and really, it's kind of cheap. All I wanted from you was acknowledgment, a proper apology... for you to tell me you felt the same. But we can't be together, Laker, it's *not* going to work.' Despite the icy wind, my throat

tightens, betraying the fear that maybe I had hoped he would fight for us more. As I say it, I swallow hard, fighting the lump that rises, hoping Laker doesn't notice this fleeting moment of vulnerability.

I yank my arm back, releasing my hand from his and turn away, making my way back into the Uni. He yanks on me again, 'Listen, please.'

'You've had nearly a month to come talk to me. Now, because you're practically left with nothing, you decide to show up? I glance into his eyes. There might be tears building up. I swallow my guilt because what I'm saying needs to be said. I'm worth more than your reputation. Your ego. You had your chance, Laker. You blew it.' I yank my arm again and finally walk away. I don't look back, not even a glance, so he knows exactly how it feels to be dismissed.

I knew this wasn't the end of this, and god knows how long I was going to be pestered before he finally got the point. But I was happy to let him try.



I walk down the hallway of Braeburn, I can see Laker a few feet in front of me, *must be heading to our next class*, I think. The students are all bustling about, going in all different directions. As I move forward, a door slams shut nearby, echoing loudly and adding to my growing sense of unease. Then, I feel it first, the vibration in my pocket, before one phone goes off to my right and

another to my left. Before I know it, there is an orchestral band of phone notifications going off in the hall. I don't pull out my phone quite yet, but from the muttering I can hear from the crowd... 'it's a *Level Ten*...' that can't be good.

Is it me? No, it can't be, they would all be gawking at me if it were... I then feel a sharp tug at my left arm, the sudden force causing my shoulder to sting as if pulled in one swift, unexpected motion. Time seems to slow for just a heartbeat, capturing the abruptness of the moment, before I'm suddenly transported from the hallway into a classroom where the door bangs closed.

'Did you see?' He says with his hands shaking as if he is standing on a vibrating plate from the gym.

'I heard the notifications... what is it, Laker?'

'It's not good, Chris... *Level Ten*...'

'No... has someone outed you?'

'Yeah, they have.' He paces along the floor.

'Wait, outed us?' I ask, taken aback.

'No, no thank god, no... my captaincy... someone leaked it to Burnblog... the whole Uni now knows, look.'

He turns the screen of his phone to me, and I read:

Level Ten Burn 🔥 x10

"Braeburn's golden boy has been scorched. Sources say that team captain Laker Luxton has been officially stripped of his title as Captain.

Coach Klarke's office has tried to keep it quiet, but whispers point to "off-field distractions" and an alleged leadership breakdown. Looks like the pitch isn't the only place things are falling apart for our former champion.

First a breakup, then apparently, he was cheating... Although he strongly denies that according to some of his teammates, now he's lost his Captaincy, what next? - xcx BB"

The air inside the locker room was thick with the earthy scent of damp turf, mingling with the sharp tang of sweat clinging to the walls. Shadows flickered under the dim, buzzing fluorescent lights, casting a ghostly glow over the tiled floor. 'Chris, I can't... I can't go out there...' he freaks.

'Yes... yes, you can.'

'No, I need to get back to my room, I need to pack, leave...'

'Don't be stupid, Laker, you're still a great player, and to be honest, I think captaincy was holding you back if anything.'

He just looks at me with those pale eyes, filled with hope yet such despair. 'You think so?'

'I know so, so play it off... make it seem like it was what you wanted Coach to do... You did it deliberately... just so you could focus on playing the game you love.' I

say.

His eyes widen, “That, that is brilliant. Thank you.” He jumps on me and gives me the tightest hug ever, “Honestly, without you through this term, I don’t know how I would have survived Chris.” He finishes by wiping his face on my jumper, to hide the tears he thought I never noticed.

“You take a few minutes in here, I’m gonna head to class so we aren’t seen leaving this room together, I think the last thing you need right now is another Level Ten.”



The days moved on without a word from him. Not even once. Maybe he was crafting some master plan or perhaps respecting the space I needed. How can I truly know? His mind remains a mystery, an inexplicable puzzle I was never allowed to piece together. I know he’s not a threat—his gentle heart speaks louder than his temper when cornered. Yet his unpredictability keeps me guessing; soft, kind, but vexingly elusive.

It isn’t until the end of practice on Friday that I see him again. He had skipped all other lectures, and when I asked after him, the lecturers just said he was sick and couldn’t come to class. I took this as “he’s drowning in his own self-pity.”

I stayed behind on the pitch. Coach asked me to practice *the Zidane Roulette* manoeuvre for a while; apparently, he needs me to master it before the big game.

I didn't question him. As I performed each spin and step, my fingers nervously fiddled with the hem of my jersey, betraying the tension twisting in my mind. That meant I was last to get into the changing rooms and get a shower. The water was warm on my back, easing the tension from my muscles bit by bit. One thing I really liked about being last into the showers was the freedom of having the entire changing room to myself. I could just freeball and dry off at my own pace, without having to get changed quickly, and breathe in the solitude. It was relaxing after such an intense game.

As I walked out of the showers, the cold air smacked my entire body. It was stingy at first, but then I felt good, I opened my eyes, and Laker is just sitting right there... I wrap the towel around my waist as quickly as I can. 'Ugh, you alright?'

'Honestly, no... but I need to talk to you.' He says.

'Haven't I made myself clear?'

But... you haven't listened to what I've been trying to tell you. And after that Burnblog post... it just... it kinda took away my chance.

'Maybe... because I'm no longer interested in whatever pitiful excuse you have to tell me?'

'Chris, I want to try again,' he says with a crack in his voice.

'Oh, so you're basically asking me to be *your* secret again cause you have nothing left?'

'I... er, no.'

‘So, we get back together, and you’d allow me to go and shout it from the rooftops of campus?’

He doesn’t say a word.

I just shake my head, don’t know what he was thinking, *surely, he must have had a better plan than that?* ‘Yeah, didn’t think you were ready for more damage to your already shattered reputation.’

‘Sit.’ He says.

‘What?’

‘Sit with me... please.’

I take a seat on the bench beside him, far enough away that I’m still showing him I want distance but close enough to hear what he has to say, cause I’m genuinely interested in that, you know... ‘Go on.’

He swallows the lump in his throat, ‘I didn’t come here expecting you to forgive me. I just... I hate the idea of you thinking I felt nothing for you.’

‘I never said th—’

‘—Shut up and let me finish, will you?’

I widen my eyes.

‘I want to be the guy who stands beside you in the light... turns out I’m still just a coward watching from the shadows.’

I see a tear fall down his cheek, genuine emotion, something I haven’t seen before.

I told you, that’s alright, you may never come out, this may just be your burden Laker, but only you can deal with that, you have to do what’s right for you, fuck me,

fuck everyone else, fuck what they think, cause at the end of the day... they don't matter when you're in the darkness alone, you do! Yet, even as I say this, a flicker of doubt crosses my mind. Am I being too harsh? What if I'm pushing him away when he needs support the most? Feeling quite proud of myself for these words, a small smile grows on my face, really channelling my inner Adam here, but the doubt lingers at the edges.

He has a half smile on his face before he looks up to me again. 'Sometimes I still replay that first night in the forest... not for what we did—just for the way you looked at me. Like I was someone worth being proud of. I haven't felt like that since... all I feel is shame.'

I inch closer, enough to place my hand on his back. I may be mad, but I'm not cruel. I told him I'd be here for him when he needs someone to talk to, and I guess, right now, that's all he needs. 'And that's the hurdle you need to get yourself over... sure, everyone in the Uni now knows you're no longer captain, but really, how bad would it be if they also knew you were gay?'

He shifts at the word, confused, maybe to how easily I can say it, how freely it comes off my tongue?

'I practised what I was gonna say so many times, and now I'm sitting here, and none of its right... It's too late, isn't it?'

'I don't know the answer to that, I want you to know that I did, and still do have massive love for you,' I take his hands in mine, 'you need to decide what you want,

find yourself.' Letting his hands fall from mine.



A couple of days go by, and my phone rings.

'Hello Chick-a-dee.'

'Can you come in to support me on shift? Struggling a little since Tristan quit.' Kaylan shouts.

I pull the phone away from my ear and scrunch up my eyes, 'yeah, sure... why are you shouting at me though?'

'Sorry you're on loudspeaker, and I'm running back and forth from the till to the dishwasher, get your arse down here asap, oh! And Heartbreaker, thank you!'

I hang up the phone and jump out of bed, 'Where ye aff to?' Adam asks.

Jumping up and down as I put on my jeans, 'Kaylan needs me to go in.

'Oh, well, I might have a girl... or a guy...hmm, maybe both in tonight, check the handle for a sock, eh?' he says with a grin.

I look at him with a stare that could have bored a hole in his head, 'Ha! Ha! So not funny. See you later.'

I trudge through the back arch of Refuel and immediately duck as a tea towel comes flying across the kitchen like a failed pigeon.

Kaylan stands on a crate, apron twisted sideways, elbow-deep in a mountain of dishes and muttering, 'If one more fresher asks for the vegan menu that doesn't exist, I swear I might just laminate myself and hang in

the window.'

She spots me and lights up like she's just seen the second coming of caffeine. 'Thank you for coming, Heartbreaker—I'm two seconds away from throwing myself into the panini press!'

I fold in half right there beside the dishwasher, laughing so hard I nearly slip on a rogue strawberry.

'Let me get my shirt and apron on, and I'll help you.'

'Just need to get these all in the dishwasher... swear, I could pin that Tristian up with the ears for letting me down like that!'

'It wasn't his fault,' I slip but stop myself.

I start piling the dishes into the dishwasher baskets as she rinses them. 'What do you mean "not his fault?"' '

'That it's busy... I'm just glad of the break to be honest.'

'Why?'

'Ugh, Laker, he's been hounding me all week... he keeps trying to get back with me, it's draining.'

'Wish I knew what that was like... my greatest love is this fucking coffee shop.' She says.

'I mean, how difficult could it really be for him, if he really loves me and wants to be with me... then why can't people know... we can't live our full lives as two best mates that share a flat. Well, at least I can't.' I say.

'Maybe he just needs time... you're trying to create space between you, maybe it will make him realise.'

'Yeah, maybe... listen, Kaylan, I need to say

something.'

She just looks at me.

'Tristan quit...' I pause, wondering if I should continue...

'Yeah, dumbass, I know...'

'No, you don't! Tristan quit, he quit—because of me, I came onto him during our shift, I was upset, and well... it's just complicated... I think he freaked out, I'll talk to him and hopefully get him back for the rest of the term.'

'You what?'

'Sorry... it was right after I broke up with Lake, my head was a mess, and he was just there, I don't even like him that way.'

'Have you told Laker?'

'Only you... Tristan isn't gay; he went for the kiss, but after it, he moved on from there. He just freaked and ran out...'

'You better speak to *him*, Heartbreaker, I don't have enough time to train someone new... You'd better get him back. And stop using this shop as a love shack, health and safety, you know!'

'I will, and I will work all and any shifts you need until I do. We good?'

She looks at me, purses her lips, furrows her eyebrows... 'Course, now, let's get this place into shape, eh?'



I linger outside Tristan's door like a ghost with commitment issues. One fist is raised mid-air, poised to knock, but I just kind of... hover. What if he answers and doesn't want to talk to me? Or worse—what if he answers and actually wants to *talk* about it? God, I hate when people do that thing where they make eye contact *and* have expectations.

Screw it—I knock. Like I'm canvassing for a coffee cult I don't believe in.

The door creaks open just wide enough for his face. No expression. Not a flicker.

'Chris.'

Then boom—closed. That's it. Scene over. Five stars for dramatic stage exit. 'Okay,' I mutter. 'Cool... uhm, good chat.'

But no, I'm not giving up that easily. I knock again, louder this time, with a rhythm that says, "I have unresolved issues and also very stubborn knuckles."

'Tristan,' I say, leaning close to the doorframe. 'Look, I know I messed up. And you're well within your rights to ice me out forever. But I'd rather not have to emotionally spiral about this for the next month. Can I just... explain?'

Silence. Or maybe faint scowling—I can feel it through the wood. Then I hear the sigh. A soft one. Followed by the most passive-aggressive door click in recorded history.

‘You’ve got two minutes,’ he grunts, stepping aside.

I slide in like I’m sneaking into confession, hands up like I’m negotiating a hostage situation. Honestly, it kind of is. ‘I wasn’t thinking,’ I start, pacing immediately, because standing still makes it harder to sound casual. ‘Or I *was* thinking—just not clearly. My brain was going through a... uhm, eh... problem and a credibility crisis at the same time, and for some reason, I thought, “hey, let’s kiss our emotionally unavailable co-worker and *definitely* not discuss it ever.” ‘

Tristan just blinks at me; arms crossed like he’s buffering.

‘And the thing is,’ I continue, ‘I know you’re straight. Always knew. I wasn’t trying to test it, change it, or... bend reality to my will. I just—I don’t know. I wanted to feel chosen, and you were there, and I panicked with my mouth.’

He blinks again. Which is fair. It’s a lot.

‘I get that I made it weird,’ I say, quieter now. ‘I’m sorry for putting you in that position. You didn’t deserve the ambush of surprise intimacy. That was selfish of me.’

There’s a pause. The kind that stretches just long enough to make you mentally start drafting a resignation letter. Then he says, ‘It freaked me out.’

‘Totally fair.’

‘But it wasn’t, like... traumatic,’ he adds with a shrug. ‘Just unexpected.’

That feels like... progress? Maybe?

‘I talked to Kaylan,’ I say, testing the waters. ‘She’s drowning without you. We miss your spreadsheet obsession and your ability to prep a Cappuccino without emotionally unravelling. Please come back. And I promise, no more *weirdness*. Full platonic vibe. I’ll even make you a playlist of aggressively straight anthems, if that helps?’

He almost laughs. Almost.

‘You really don’t have a filter, do you?’

‘I do. I just frequently misplace it.’

He exhales through his nose—maybe the beginning of a reluctant smile.

‘Alright. Fine. I’ll come back. But *only* if we pretend that whole thing never happened,’ Tristan replied, a hint of a smirk playing on his lips. ‘And just remember, you’re still opening for the 7am flat-white rush on Sunday.’

‘Done. Buried. Yeeted into the vault,’ I say, zipping my lips. ‘And I’ll work any shifts Kaylan throws my way until you’re fully emotionally rehydrated.’

He opens the door and waves me out. ‘You’re still opening Sunday.’

‘Wouldn’t miss it for the world.’ And just like that, I survive another social disaster with minimal emotional blood loss. I should get a badge or something.

The door slams behind me, and I’m convinced I feel the walls shake in protest. I make my way up another floor and along the hall, I swear it’s like some kind of de-ja-vu, I see someone standing at my door with the

hovering arm just like I had done a mere ten minutes ago.

I stayed silent, steady. I knew it was Laker, but I wanted to wait, see what he decided to do, *would he knock?* Or walk away.

Then I hear it, his knuckles wrapping against the door in a harmonic rhythm of three. I quickly make pace down the hall, grab him and throw him to the side of the door, Adam opens it ‘What ye knockin’, fur?’

‘I lost my keys, think I left them at Refuel, I’ll head down and grab them.’ I say, creating an excuse for Laker, who was currently pulling faces at the side of the door, trying to make me laugh.

‘Fine, the door was open anyway,’ Adam says.

‘See you in a bit.’ I say as I close the door in a totally non-suspicious way.

‘C’mon,’ I whisper to Laker, we walk down the hall and get to the stairs, ‘Let’s just sit here, what did you come for?’ I ask.

‘I needed to see you.’

‘Again... thought you’d have been sick of my face this week.’

‘Can you just not?’ He says sternly.

‘Not what?’

‘Have that half-assed sarcasm... I’m trying to be serious here, will you just, I don’t know? Talk with me?’

Whoa, this throws me off, Laker, Laker Luxton wanting to be “serious”, well, shit on a brick. ‘Fine, yeah, course... sorry.’ I just look at him. ‘About what exactly?’

'I have a few questions.' He says.

'Sure, anything... fire away.'

'Have you... been seeing anyone else?' He asks.

'No... well...' I pause. 'Why do I have to tell you?'

'You don't, but I'm asking...'

'I kissed a guy... but it meant...nothing, it was actually more of an emotional accident really.' I screw up my face before wiping it with my hands. 'What about you?'

'I tried to sleep with a girl... last night.'

Wait what? He seriously came here to tell me he's been shacking up with a woman?

'It didn't go to plan; thought I'd have learned that by now... but I needed to try... I needed to confirm it to myself, y'know? That I'm—'

'—Gay...' I finish his sentence for him.

His eyes screw up, 'Yeah.'

'Well, that's something, I suppose?' I leave the question hanging in the air.

'Do you still love me?' he blurts out.

I look away, unsure if I can look him in the eye, unsure if I can even admit it to myself... 'I do, Laker.'

'Well... y'know how I said I couldn't say it...'

I nod, knowing exactly what he's referring to.

'Chris...' He looks me dead in the eyes, my heart begins to melt, in only the way he can make it. 'I love you too.' He finishes.

I freeze... I don't know what to say... I don't know where this is going, then I remember. He couldn't say he

was gay out loud; his healing and acceptance weren't done yet. 'That... that makes me so happy to hear.' I pause. 'But Laker—'

—'Can we try again?'

'No, we can't, listen. You clearly still have some things to accept and deal with... if we got together now, it would just be a repeat of what we had before... and I'm not okay with that, not being able to tell anyone... I couldn't even bring you up in general conversation for fear of outing you.'

I just look at him, his face smothered with disappointment, and I lean in and hug him. 'I'm still here always if you need to talk, but until you can happily say the words out loud and show me you accept and are happy with yourself... we *cannot* be together.'

'I... I get it. I need to know there is still a chance for us though... say I do y'know...'

'I will wait, if that's what you're asking... till the end of term, if not by then. I'll move on.' I say as I stand. 'Now, I'm going to head back to the room, I'm knackered.'

He stands and hugs me one last time... it almost feels like an ultimate goodbye; I give it to him, and he looks into my eyes one more time before he turns and walks down the stairs.

BRAND NEW . . . TERMS

April's first breeze tasted of cut grass, carrying with it the vibrant scent of budding life. The rest of March passes by with speed, the spring air is flowing into my lungs, and the lawns are sprawled with yellowing daffodils; there's a sense of freedom in the grounds of the University, and everything's slowly going to plan, well, everything apart from one thing.

With Tristan back in Refuel, Coach Klarke giving us the full week off any physical training in preparation for the game in May and Laker finally giving me space since our last talk in the darkened stairs of North Hall, I've actually managed to claw my way back into the land of academic competence. And by that, I mean I went full goblin mode and finished off every half-written essay that had been haunting my laptop like neglected little ghosts. It wasn't just about the essays; it was the fear gnawing at the edges of my mind—fear of falling behind, fear of losing control in the spiralling chaos that was my life. Goblin mode was my way of taking back control, like a knight flailing his sword in an overgrown jungle of deadlines.

In Sports Science & Physiology, the pressure had been mounting. Somewhere between a half-eaten protein bar and a nap brought on by pure exhaustion, I attempted to capture the dance between cortisol and athletic decline. The highlight came through an extended metaphor: athletes running on fumes, their bodies' engines sputtering without fuel, inching forward out of sheer willpower—a feeling not unfamiliar in my own life's marathon. I tied it all together with polished citations, letting the core image burn brightly, hoping it would resonate.

For *Practical Sports Training*, I'd outlined the difference between a warm-up and a medically adjacent death jog, but hadn't touched on periodisation cycles. Finished that while half-asleep with my left eye and simultaneously focusing on a Star Wars movie with the right, and somehow, I still managed to tie in our Braeburn schedule like a genius.

Teaching & Coaching Methods had been staring at me with judgmental eyes for weeks. All it took was one good shift at Refuel, a lecture replay, and some deep personal reflection on whether yelling 'try harder' counts as motivation. *Apparently, it does not.*

Now, *Biomechanics & Movement Analysis*? That one was hanging on by a ligament and a diagram. I finally wrapped up my section on knee loading with a makeshift drawing that looks like a drunk flamingo, but I *think* it counts. It better had, and *Psychology of Sport & Exercise* turned out to be weirdly cathartic. Half of it was already done—it just needed... less crying and more citations. It

became part essay, part therapy. Ten out of ten, would recommend.

And then, my personal Everest: *Tactical Analysis & Game Theory*. I had diagrams started, half-baked arguments about passing patterns, and no conclusion. Ended up finishing it at 2 am on Tuesday with an energy drink in one hand and a whisper-prayer in the other. By the end, even *I* was convinced I understood zonal marking. Truthfully, I don't. But what loomed ahead was the real test of my attempts at mastery—our match in May, where all this theory would need to come alive on the field. The thought of it electrified my exhausted brain, hinting at a promise of triumph or another challenge to conquer.

So yeah, finally taking time for me. Coursework's done. Probably a little unhinged, but completely honest and mine. Now all that's left is navigating emotional landmines, coffee shop shifts, and maybe, maybe finding some way to enjoy my time here at Braeburn as term is slowly but surely coming to a close. Exams are at the end of next month. The thought sends a ripple of panic through me. My hand shakes as I hover over flashcards, the edges curling from overuse, eyes scanning words that blur into one another. Sweat beads on my forehead. I can already imagine the F's emblazoned in red. Shitting a brick for those.

I walk cheerfully across the lawn to the group. Someone has had the bright idea to bring a blanket out

to the grass, Adam, Sherry, Gwenyth and Blake are all sitting laughing away, I have no idea what.

‘Hey.’ I say from behind them.

Adam swishes his head dramatically, his wavy hair flying round and smacking him back on the other side of his face, ‘It’s you.’

‘Yeah, it’s me... What are you all laughing at?’ I ask.

Sherry’s already wheezing. ‘Oh my god, Chris—you missed the cultural event of the *decade*.’

‘Truly historic,’ Gwenyth adds, wiping her eyes with the corner of someone’s scarf.

‘Okay, so—’ Blake says, already hiccup-laughing, ‘you know that guy from the drama course—the one who thinks he’s method acting all the time?’

‘The one who wore a toga for three straight days?’ I ask.

‘Aye, that wan,’ Adam says, nodding solemnly. ‘He just attempted to stage *Romeo and Juliet*. Solo. On top of the water feature.’

I blink. ‘You mean... the duck pond?’

‘Don’t insult the arts,’ Blake gasps.

‘He climbed up there like he was *possessed*,’ Gwenyth chimes in. ‘And started shouting: “Thus with a kiss I die!” then full-body launched himself backwards—’

‘—off the edge!’ Sherry finishes, cackling. ‘He backflipped into the water with a cape made out of his duvet cover!’

‘Campus security came over, but they were laughing

so hard they couldn't even drag him out,' Blake says.

'He shouted, "let me drown in tragedy," and then immediately begged for someone tae rescue his vape,' Adam adds.

I stare at them, slowly lowering myself onto the blanket. 'This Uni's unhinged.'

'We are,' Sherry says proudly. 'And you're one of us, *don't* forget that.'

'No takebacks,' Blake grins.

Adam flips his hair again. 'So dae ye fancy playing Juliet next week, or should A dust aff ma ball gown?'

I laugh, take a seat on the grass, 'I'll pass on that one, it's all yours.'

Sherry nearly chokes on air as she squeals out the next topic of conversation. 'Laundry room confessions.'

'Oh no,' I say, immediately invested. 'Whose dignity are we sacrificing first?'

'Adams, if we're talking about socks,' Blake says, grinning. 'He left one in my room last week. It was just sitting there on my lamp. Like an ominous warning.'

'Wasn't ma sock mate, fuck knows how it got in ma bag...' Adam mumbles, stealing a sip of his smoothie.

Immediately, I clench up at the thought of missing socks, Lakers... could it be the one he put on the door handle? Adam often left his over-the-shoulder bag open; it is completely possible it fell off the handle and into his bag, shit.

'You would say that, eh? Smelt like cheese too,

straight in the bin it went.’ Blake adds quickly.

‘Right, tell me everything. Who’s been cursed by Uni accommodation this time?’ I ask, trying to move the conversation on, trying not to think about it, about *him*.

‘West Hall had someone wash an entire sleeping bag last night,’ Gwentyth says, like she’s still recovering emotionally. ‘Left it in the machine for *four* cycles. It started dripping on the floor like it was trying to escape.’

‘Not just any sleeping bag,’ Sherry adds. ‘It was bright orange. Looked like a radioactive caterpillar having a breakdown, look, she sent me a pic.’

There it was, on her screen just as vividly as she had described.

‘It oozed,’ Blake says, deadpan.

I cackle. ‘Absolutely not. Burn West Hall to the ground.’ I pause... a slither of Laker coming into my mind again as I know that’s where he’s situated... maybe the sleeping bag was his? I try and wrestle with my memory of the camping trip we shared... nope, his were green. ‘What about yours, Adam?’

He leans back dramatically. ‘North Hall’s dryer makes a noise like it’s digesting the sins it’s dried off, man. I put on my trackie bottoms and came back to find one leg twisted into a balloon animal. Don’t ask... It’s still traumatising.’

‘Someone in my block... South Hall hangs their knickers and bras on the stair railing,’ Gwentyth says. ‘Just out in the open. Airing their shame for all to see.’

‘Are they at least *normal* pants?’ I ask.

She shakes her head solemnly. ‘Granny Knickers...’

Sherry’s already gone—crying-laughing into a paper cup. Adam clutches his chest like he’s been physically assaulted by that mental image.

‘What about you?’ Blake nudges me. ‘North Hall always has lots of filth.’

I pause. Think. Grimace.

‘I found an entire lasagne in the dryer, a couple of weeks after I got here... just... sitting there. Still to this day I’m unsure if they read the cooking instructions or were just too wasted to realise it was not an oven...’

The group erupts.

Adam physically rolls backwards off the blanket. ‘Ye never telt me that one, Chris!’

Sherry’s gasping, ‘That’s not even laundry-adjacent!’

‘I’ve been living with that knowledge alone,’ I tell them solemnly. ‘Now you must share the burden.’

‘We need to start documenting this shit,’ Blake says, wiping tears. ‘Laundry Lore: A Cautionary Podcast.’

‘Episode One,’ Gwenyth says. ‘The Haunted Knickers of South Hall.’

‘God, I love this place.’ And for once, I really, really mean it.

I catch a glimpse of Laker coming down the stairs of the main entrance. It’s strange behavior for him. Normally, he would watch from the sidelines, thinking I can’t see him. My heart skips a beat—what has changed?

Why is he coming over now?

He strolls right up to us all, and I can't help but wonder what's prompted this bold move. What is he planning to say?

'Hey, Chris... can I have a word?'

Guys... Laker—Laker, Sherry, Blake, Adam, and Gwen.' I introduce each friend to him.

'What's this about? Football?'

'No, no football... *us*, can we talk?'

My eyes widen... he just said 'us' right in front of them all... as in 'us' like we were a couple or something... I hadn't told anyone about Laker, no one apart from well... Kaylan, so I now have the whole group looking at me with confusion, they all know I'm gay... but they don't know a single thing about Laker.

'Uhm... right, do you guys mind?' I ask.

'Go ahead, Chrissy Boy,' Blake gives me his blessing, not that I needed it cause I was going anyway. Manners and all y'know.

I stand and walk with Laker till we are a good distance from the group. I rub my knuckles together, a swirl of excitement and fear coursing through me, before I say, 'Us... you literally said *us* right in front of all of them you do know that, right?'

'I know... and I meant to do it, now come with me.' He says.

I follow him.

Not because I've got a clue where we're going—God

no—but because he said *us* in front of *everyone* and now my whole body's vibrating like a phone set to anxiety mode. I've got questions. Like, a lot. But also? I'm slightly terrified to hear the answers.

We cut across campus like he's dragging me to some secret underground bunker for emotional debriefs. Past the library. Past the statue that looks vaguely like a teabag holder. Into the woods. The actual woods.

And then it hits me.

Oh.

OH.

'You're joking,' I say, brushing a branch out of my face. The forest's quiet contrasts sharply with the rush of my racing heartbeat. It's like the woods cradle our secret, amplifying every leaf whisper and soft rustle. 'You did not just bring me to—no. No no. This is the place.'

He says nothing, just keeps walking, the silence accentuating the weight of the moment, like the trees have ears and he doesn't want to be overheard by a squirrel.

I keep up, heart now doing a full gymnastics floor routine in my chest. This clearing? This mossy, weirdly symmetrical pocket of nature? It feels both serene and charged, a backdrop perfectly mirroring the chaos of emotions within me. This is where we... You know. *Did it*. Had our very first 'oh my God, did that just happen' moment. Where it was messy and breathless, and I accidentally kneed him in the thigh halfway through and

still somehow managed to feel the most alive I've ever felt.

'Seriously?' I say again, voice about two octaves higher than usual. 'You brought *me* here? For a chat?'

He turns around, finally. Calm. Annoyingly handsome. And *weirdly* sure of himself for someone who used to disappear faster than a biscuit at a study session.

'I meant to,' he says. Like that explains *anything*.

'You meant to bring me back to *our spot*? What, you gonna reenact it for nostalgia's sake? You wanna play flashback roulette with my emotional stability?'

'Chris—'

'No, no, I'm fine, I just wasn't expecting a tour of my own sexual activity history. That's cool. Totally chill. Not unravelling at all.'

He steps closer.

'You made me *feel* something here,' he says, softly. Honest. Which is almost worse. 'And I didn't say it then. I didn't know how. I said it in the right way, but in the wrong place before. But I'm saying it now. Now that I know it's the right place and I know *how* to say it properly.'

He stands in front of me, gently takes my hands and looks deeply into my eyes with those cool blues, 'Christopher Daley, I love you.'

Cue my soul short-circuiting.

'You... okay. Wow. So, we're just... saying feelings now? Out loud? In the daylight?'

‘Yeah.’

‘In the forest. Where the birds can hear us.’

‘I also have something else I need to say. But bear with me, take a seat and let’s chat, yeah?’

And that—God, that gets me. Because he used to care so much. He used to flinch at shadows. And now he’s here. With me. *Saying things.*

‘I followed you out here... actually, I don’t even know why I came... I guess it was the “us” thing... got me intrigued.’

He sits first, right on a moss-covered rock, then pats beside him. I join, cautious. Curious. Full-on heart-thumping like there’s an EDM DJ living in my chest.

He doesn’t rush. Just sort of stares ahead like he’s measuring his thoughts against the trees.

‘So...’ I prompt, because silence is not my personal love language.

‘I’ve been thinking about that first night, in fact every night’, he says.

Oh God.

I nod, warily. ‘I, too, think about us. Often.’

That earns the tiniest smile from him.

‘But I also think,’ he goes on, ‘about how I felt afterwards. Not the panic. Or the hiding. But this weird quiet in my chest. Like it was the first time in ages, the first time in my life. I didn’t feel like I was faking something.’

I blink. That’s... not nothing.

‘You were the first,’ he adds, eyes flicking to mine just briefly. ‘And not just... You know, guy, I’ve been physically with. But the first person I didn’t want to lie to. The first person I ever truly wanted to love.’

I *am* blinking rapidly now.

‘And I know I’ve been crap at proving it,’ he says quickly. ‘I’ve been hot and cold, up and down and increasingly became more cowardly and confusing, but somehow you’re still here, willing to continue listening to me in the bloody forest, as I’ve earned it.’

I want to say a million things, but none of them make it past the lump in my throat.

‘I need you to know,’ he continues, voice smaller now, ‘I want to do this right. I want *us*. Not in secret. Not in pieces. Just... whatever this is, properly. With actual conversations and eye contact, and me not ghosting every time I feel something or get scared.’

I look at him, really look. His knees are pulled up, hands clenched like he’s bracing for rejection. But his eyes? They’re steady. Brave in that quiet, shaky sort of way. And I realise—I’m not scared anymore either.

‘Okay,’ I say, breath catching. ‘Okay.’

He huffs a laugh. ‘You seem a bit, erm... lost for words.’

‘That... uh, is kinda cause I am.’

‘It’s not just that, though, I wanted to tell you something else, not just that I do love you, but I also wanted to say to you, Christopher Daley.’ He stands up

and faces me as if I were some kind of audience member at his stand-up comedy routine. 'My name... is Laker Luxton, and I am...' He pauses for a second before looking right into my eyes. 'I am a gay man, and I am in love with one very special bloke... one guy who takes my fucking breath away... I am in love with Christopher Daley.'

The forest falls silent, the sky brightens, my heart throbs, and the waterline begins to sting slowly. 'This is a full-body, heart-palpitating, moment-suspended-in-time kind of like the earth could split open beneath us, and I still wouldn't look away from him. Because he just did that. For me. In this forest. In that voice. With *that* look. And my whole nervous system? Yeah, it's currently trying to evacuate through my ribcage.

'Right,' I say, because that's apparently all my brain can conjure when someone declares gay love in the middle of woodland. 'Well... I'm gonna need a second, yeah?'

Laker just nods, lips twitching into something soft, as if my internal meltdown is exactly what he hoped for.

'You do know,' I add, standing now, hands flailing vaguely, 'that you just came out in the most dramatic way possible. In a forest. With a monologue. Like some kind of queer woodland prince.'

He shrugs, but he's smiling. Really smiling now. 'You deserve a lil' bit of drama.'

'You trying to out romantic me?'

‘I think I just did.’

And God help me, I laugh. The kind that bursts out of your chest when your whole world shifts in a way that feels like breathing for the first time in weeks. ‘I cannot believe you did all that *and* used my full name. Like you were summoning me.’

‘I was.’

And it’s stupid. And terrifying. And more real than anything’s felt in a long time. So, I inch closer, just enough for his sleeve to brush mine, and say, quietly, honestly, before I combust— ‘I love you too, Laker Luxton. You dramatic little sod.’ I lean in and kiss him gently on the lips.

‘So... are we back on?’ he asks.

‘Hmm... do we still need to live in secret?’

‘Well... I do have some brand-new terms on that if you’re willing to listen, you can of course agree and disagree, whatever your highness wishes?’

‘Sure, go on.’ I eye him up and down, inside I’m dreading it... because the moment we just shared was special... it was what I had asked for, and now I’m thinking with whatever these “brand new terms” are... he’s gonna bawls it up!

‘So, we keep it quiet... I’m not saying no one can know, but we only tell people *we* trust, people who matter to us, the whole University doesn’t need to know... break me in a little bit, eh?’

‘And?’

‘Well... that’s kinda it... Well, there is the making out in public... that’s not a me being gay thing, it’s just not really something I’ve ever done... well, not in years anyway.’ He says.

‘Fine... I agree, and under these new terms, I’m willing... to have another go at this cause fuck knows I’ve missed you.’ I pounce on him, and we don’t talk much after that. Just lie there, half-tangled on a bed of damp moss, while birds gossip above our heads and his thumb draws endless circles into the back of my hand. And for once, I don’t try to fill the silence, cause it’s not awkward.

We emerge from the forest as we’ve just completed a quest—emotionally levelled up, slightly dishevelled, and seventy-eight per cent more vulnerable than when we went in. I’ve got moss on my sleeve and probably tears on my face, but my hand brushes his as we walk, and I don’t pull away this time.

Ahead, the group’s still there—blanket chaos, Blake throwing crisps at Sherry, Adam playing human pillow, Gwenyth lying flat like she’s auditioning for an over-the-top shampoo advert.

Laker breathes in deep like he’s about to do a trust fall onto the social tightrope of his life.

I glance at him as we walk. Nudge his elbow. ‘So... when we get to them, can I tell them?’

He looks at me.

‘Tell them what?’

I raise an eyebrow. ‘That you’re madly in love with me

and can't bear another second pretending I'm not the centre of your entire emotional universe?'

He snorts. 'I mean... maybe worded *slightly* differently.'

'Alright, how about: "Hey guys, so me and Laker aren't just emotionally constipated teammates anymore."'

He laughs again, softer this time, then tugs at the sleeve of his jacket like it's holding all his nerves.

'Chris, I...' He pauses. Exhales. 'Yeah. You can tell them. If you want. They're *your* people. And I trust you, so I trust them.'

That makes my stomach flip and settle at the same time.

'You sure?' I ask.

He grins. 'I don't want to sneak around anymore.'

We're almost back. I can hear Sherry going full banshee about someone stealing her Coke. I'm warm all over, not just from the sun. And I realise—I'm about to tell my friends the truth. The real truth. I've never been more scared or ready all at the same time.

We're about ten feet out when Sherry glances up first. Her eyes flick from me to Laker to our not-so-subtle proximity and widen with barely contained mischief.

'Well, someone's survived the wilderness,' she says, grinning.

'Yeah, but emotionally or physically?' Gwentyth adds, propping herself up on an elbow.

I swallow, glance at Laker—he nods, once, quiet but solid—and I know this is it.

‘Right,’ I say, already feeling myself spiral, ‘so, um, just before anyone makes assumptions—’ my eyes dart to Sherry, who once before had me on the gay train before I’d even known I’d boarded.

‘I wasn’t going to say a thing, Chris.’ Sherry added quickly.

—I’ve got something to say. And it’s... kind of a *big* thing.’

Everyone pauses. Even Blake stops chewing.

Adam narrows his eyes, and in the softest, most Adam-trying-not-to-be-overbearing way, he says, ‘Aye... ye alright, mate?’

God, his voice. That gentle lilt with the quiet concern beneath—it nearly undoes me.

I nod. ‘Yeah. I am. Actually. Better than I have been in ages.’

I glance at Laker again. He meets my eyes. Doesn’t flinch. Our hands find each other, fingers interlocking instinctively. The warmth of his touch seems to speak louder than words, a silent confirmation that floods between us and outward to my friends, who catch this telling moment before any words cement the reality.

‘So,’ I continue, heart hammering, ‘Laker and me... we’re together. Like, properly, together.’

Sherry lets out the tiniest gasp before clapping both hands over her mouth like she’s physically restraining her

excitement. ‘I knew it! I knew it from the night of the party!’

‘*What?*’ Blake practically yells, full-body vibrating. ‘I knew it! I bloody knew it. Gwenyth, you owe me a fiver.’

‘I do not,’ she says. ‘I said they were in love, not *together*. Subtle distinction.’

‘Lads,’ Adam says, lifting a brow at Laker now, ‘you treat him right, yeah?’

Laker doesn’t waver. ‘That’s the plan.’

Something in Adams’s shoulders relaxes, and he nods. Just once. Then flops back onto the blanket like nothing earth-shattering’s just been said.

Sherrys already tearing up. ‘God, I knew it. I *knew* the energy on that stair’s moment Adam was talking about was suspicious.’

‘Wait, the North Hall stairs thing?’ Blake says.

‘Yeah, remember, Adam says about Chris chapping the door and then pretending he lost his keys... well, he seen Laker standing at the side of the door and watched them walk off into North Hall’s stairs together through the peephole in the door...’

‘*You*—Adam, why didn’t you ask me about it?’ I laugh, high on adrenaline and sheer relief.

‘Nonae ma business mate, ye would tell me when ye were ready... and look, ye did.’

Gwenyth just hums. ‘About time.’

And that’s it. No drama. No weird silence. Just my friends—this messy, brilliant crowd—welcoming our

truth.

Laker sits next to me, legs brushing, pink just under his cheekbones. My chest feels cracked open and flooded with light.

‘Told you they’d be alright,’ I whisper.

He doesn’t say anything.

But the way his hand finds mine under the blanket tells me everything I need to know.

Later, after the crisps have been demolished and Blake has somehow convinced everyone to debate which Uni professor would survive a zombie apocalypse first, I feel Adam shift beside me. He doesn’t say anything for a second. Just stretches his legs out with that fake casualness he uses when his brain’s doing laps.

Then, in his low, calm, distinctly Scottish drawl, he says, ‘Ye alright?’ It’s simple. But in that way, Adam does—like it’s not just about right now, but about *all* the nows.

I nod. ‘Yeah. Actually. Weirdly. I think I am.’

He watches me for a second, his expression unreadable, then adds, quieter, ‘Didnae expect that today. You and him.’

‘Didn’t exactly plan it either,’ I say, fiddling with the edge of the blanket. ‘He just... showed up. Said things.’ Adam huffs a tiny breath—almost a laugh but not quite.

‘I clocked something was up,’ he says. ‘You’ve had that look. The one where you’re pretending to breathe but actually forgetting to. Been there.’

I glance at him, surprised.

He shrugs. ‘I know what it’s like. Keeping stuff in. Trying to manage everyone else’s temperature while you’re freezing. That was you, man. For a good bit.’

That catches me square in the chest. I swallow. ‘Thanks for not—y’know—interrogating him or me for that fact.’ Adam snorts.

‘Didn’t need tae. Watched the way he looked at you when he thought no one noticed. He’s terrified, yeah—but not of *you*. At least that’s something.’

I’m quiet for a second, then say, ‘You don’t think I’ve made a mistake?’

‘No,’ he says instantly. ‘You wouldn’t let him near your heart if he hadn’t earned it. Yer a smart wee cookie that way, seen that fae ye on day one. And if he screws it up—’ he leans back, eyes closed, ‘—well, I ken a lad who kin smuggle a mildly aggressive squirrel intae someone’s bed. Jus’ say the word.’

I laugh, properly, and it shakes something loose in my ribs. Then I bump my shoulder gently into his. ‘You’re the best, y’know.’

He shrugs again. ‘Just makin’ sure yer still you under all the chaos. Seems like ye are.’ And just like that, he picks up a crisp and returns to the group’s current debate, which, somehow, has devolved into whether lecturers should have battle cries. But me? I stay in that moment a little longer. Because sometimes, the quietest check-ins are the ones that keep you whole. Some check-ins don’t

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

need words.

HE CAN'T TAKE HIS EYES OFF ME

There's something oddly grounding about hearing Laker's sleepy breathing in the dark. We've really started to bond with one another again, and a few days have passed with everything going great between us. Being able to share a bed in mine or *his* room has to be one of the best parts of his new terms.

His roommates basically moved into East Hall with his new girlfriend, so I've found myself in Laker's room more and more. There's a comforting familiarity there—the walls are covered in old training schedules, and that one haunted-looking calendar hangs like a relic of past anxieties. The room smells of clean laundry and the absurdly named spray, probably “Sport Blast” or “Alpha Mist,” making it feel like a safe haven, albeit a temporary one.

I can't move in there, though. It would draw too much attention. And that, at this moment in time, is not something I'm willing to mess with. Not when things are going so smoothly. Not when I've got this little peace pocket carved out of chaos.

Lakers also stopped being such a loner. He's with *us*

more. Sitting across from me right now in the canteen, actually. And the way he's leaning forward, chin propped in one hand as he talks? It's soft. Natural. Almost like he's always belonged.

The canteen has its usual mid-afternoon hum. Steam rises from a vat of soup, carrying with it an aroma tinged with disappointment. Blake startles every time someone throws a tray on the pile. Adams has one headphone in, nodding to the beat of whatever song is playing in his head. Gwenyth is shredding a bread roll with surgical precision while Sherry argues with the sandwich queue from the safety of her seat.

And Laker, he's talking about football. Dreams. His voice is steady, animated in that way it gets when he forgets to be shy. As he speaks, though, there's a moment—a slight pause—where you hear something deeper. 'I just hope... if I'm good enough... maybe one day I'll make it.' It's this hint of vulnerability that makes his dream feel real, more than just ambition.

His dreams are slightly more ambitious than mine, which doesn't surprise me. All he wants is to play for a good team, maybe a championship name. *Me?* I'd be happy enough just to become a coach someday. I imagine myself on the sidelines, whistle around my neck, a worn clipboard smudged with chalky plays—a vision that feels within reach. Something like Klarke, maybe?

Nah. He's too brash.

But I don't know... seeing Laker like this, with his

shoulders relaxed and laugh lines starting to surface, it stirs something deep inside me. My heartbeat quickens, a warm flutter spreads through my chest, and my throat loosens as if whispering possibilities I hadn't dared to consider. It makes me wonder if maybe dreaming big isn't such a ridiculous idea after all—like a door has cracked open, inviting me to step through and embrace what lies beyond.

And then I hear a ping, then another and another.

'Why is everyone looking at their phones?' Blake asks.

'Probably just that stupid blog,' Gwen says.

Before I knew it, there was a popcorn show of audible pings echoing around the canteen, and people began to look over in our direction. I glanced up to see Laker frozen in place. Ever the manners enforcer, I never have my own phone out at the table. So, I'm waiting on someone telling me what's going on.

The eyes on us were more and more. I could feel them piercing through my skin, Laker's face is getting hotter and hotter as he just looks at me, then back to his phone...

'Fine... I'll check my own phone then, shall I?'

I pull it out of my pocket, and there's a notification from Burnblog:

Level Twenty Burn 🔥 x20

**"WE HAVE A FIRST IN HISTORY: A DOUBLE BURN
– A LEVEL 20!"**

Guess who's been playing for the other team?

After weeks of questionable eye contact, suspicious exits from North Hall, and that one tragic incident where he lost his captaincy, prolonged shoulder brushing on the pitch and Laker "supposedly" cheating on his ex-girlfriend... we finally have confirmation:

Freshers *CHRISTOPHER DALEY* and *LAKER LUXTON* are officially an item.

Yes, you read that right.

Resident football star Laker Luxton has allegedly stopped brooding from a distance and started *holding hands*...With Christopher.

My source tells me they heard a great deal of their conversation about how they loved each other, and they said they personally heard Laker come out as Gay to Christopher for what they believed to be the *first* time.

What can I say... no surprises there really, they both are fascinated with playing with balls after all... - xcx BB"

There is a photo of us under it. Although blurry, from memory I can remember the moment clear as day. The scent of pine and earth wrapped around us like a comforting blanket. Sunlight filtered through the treetops, dancing shadows on our faces. We lay on a soft bed of moss, his hand warm in mine as we gazed up at the sapphire sky, sharing dreams and secrets amid the symphony of rustling leaves and chirping birds. I look up at Laker, and he is still just sitting there frozen, the full canteen now gawking at our table.

Laker goes rigid, jaw clenched. There's a moment where everything seems to still—the chatter fades into a low hum and the clatter of cutlery against plates stills. The room feels heavy with anticipation. In that heartbeat of silence, Laker stands, nearly knocking his tray off the edge of the table, and storms out of the canteen.

'Laker,' I call as I get up and chase after him.

Outside the cafeteria there are more students, their eyes darting between Laker and me. There's a mix of expressions—some curious, some indifferent, and a few that flicker with encouragement. A girl with brightly dyed hair gives us a discreet thumbs up, her eyes shining with solidarity. Nearby, a couple of students whisper to each other, their glances filled with intrigue, hinting at the campus's wider attitudes. I grab Laker's arm firmly, pulling him into an empty lecture room, and slam the door shut, standing against it to stop anyone from entering.

I can see the liquid drip from his waterline, ‘This... no, I can’t—Chris, I can’t do this!’

‘Yes! Yes, you can!’

‘It’s not supposed to happen like this. Not like that. They *outed* us, Chris...’

‘But we *are* out now, and we can’t just run... we need to go back in there, heads held high... take our seats and block out the noise.’

‘I...’ he stops.

I take his hands, look him in the eyes, ‘Together, no fear, this is it... No turning back, we have to own it now, and besides... the people are not okay with us, they’re just jealous they don’t have what we do. C’mon, *our* friends are waiting for us.’

He turns away from me, hands shaking, staring out the window like the glass might shatter just to help him escape.

‘They’ve taken this from me,’ he says. ‘I didn’t get to say it. I didn’t get to say it how *I* wanted.’

‘Fucking assholes... knew I hated that fucking blog! We need to go back in there Lake. We can’t show them they got to us.’

By the time we get back into the canteen, everyone has taken their seats again, but their eyes still linger over us. We stride back in and take the seats we had before.

‘You guys alright?’ Blake asks.

‘Fucking idiots, why would they do that?’ Adam adds.

‘No... it can’t be framed like this... It’s not good

enough,' Laker says.

'What do you mean? There's no way to change it...'
Sherry states.

'No? I'm gonna do what someone very special once told me... I'll take the narrative and control it! It's my story to tell and they ain't getting their kicks out of it!'

Laker gets up and begins to climb onto the table.

'Laker, get down,' Blake hisses, already reaching for his arm.

But I know that look now. That one in his eyes when he's not scared—just done being quiet.

'So... you all think it's funny? All think it's alright to gawk upon the *queer* footballers, eh?'

A whispered giggle rose from a corner, quickly hushed by an elbow nudge from a friend. Chairs shuffled softly as a few students shifted uncomfortably. A single cough echoed, momentarily breaking the silence. The room fell silent again, but the tension was palpable, like the atmosphere right before a summer storm.

'We are just humans! Just like any of you lot, and god forbid we fall in love, funny thing is... I got with a girl, an amazing girl, last year, and it wasn't plastered all over that fucking blog! So, why should this be any different, eh?'

The room stays silent.

'Yeah, didn't think any of you would have a fucking answer. This guy right here,' he reaches down for my hand, I take it, and he begins to pull me up with him. 'Chris and I are indeed together.' He takes a brief

moment to look at me with his pale blues. ‘He makes me feel brave. He makes me want to be better, and I won’t let some gossipy post define that, define who we become! I love this man... I love him! As the words hang in the air, I feel my heart race—caught somewhere between an intense surge of pride and a fleeting whisper of fear. Public declaration, after all, carries weight, a finality that feels both liberating and terrifying. In fact, I can’t take my eyes off him and yes... I’m a failed team captain, and yes, I’m gay—but y’know what... that’s alright.’

He gently grabs my face and kisses me in front of the whole canteen, and not one phone I could see came out to capture the moment.

‘That blog only breathes because you all feed it. Stop giving it air. Start living your own damn lives, and maybe you will find life here at Braeburn a bit easier! That’s all.’

The moment Laker finished, the canteen erupted with energy as if a thunderclap had torn through the air. Trays clattered in enthusiastic agreement, and the sound of chairs being pushed back filled the room as students stood to clap. Someone whistled from one corner, a shrill note cutting through the noise like a battle cry. A spontaneous cheer broke out, echoing off the walls, and at the back, a group of friends pounded the table in rhythm, creating a rumbling like approaching storm clouds. The celebration carried an intoxicating, almost electric atmosphere, mingling with the scents of fried

food and warm coffee, creating a tapestry of sensation that could not be ignored.

Laker did it; he took the narrative back and controlled it, and I could not have been prouder. He's mine, and now the full University knows, no more secrets at all. I used to dream about a quiet kind of love. Turns out, ours makes noise, maybe even change—and I wouldn't have it any other way.

'That... was epic, man!' Blake says as he helps Laker down.

'Yeah, truly inspirational, definitely a moment in history for this Uni.' Sherry says.

Adam, on the other hand, extends an arm and just shakes Lakers' hand, no words needed from my Jedi Master apparently.

'Well done... both of you, it needed to be said, Laker.' Gwen chimes in.

Lakers looked a thousand tons lighter than he did, almost as if he had just had a shipping container lifted off him. 'You alright?' he asks.

'Fantastic.'



A few hours passed, and Burnblog had been silent on the matter. We'd all gone back to the grassy area, taking refuge under the bright sun. Yet, as we sat there a few days earlier, an inexplicable flicker of unease began to sprout. A lone cloud, dark and heavy, drifted across the

sky, casting a fleeting shadow over us. A distant whistle, sharp and unexpected, broke the laughter momentarily. Although the moment that followed seemed calm, it was as if the air around us buzzed with unspoken apprehension. We carried on, having a laugh and talking general shit to pass the time.

‘Can you lads come wi’me?’ a voice asked from behind me.

‘Jarred... hi, why, what’s up?’ Laker asks.

‘Come on, lads. We’re waitin’ on yer.’

Laker and I pounce up. ‘Won’t be long, guys,’ I say, though my stomach’s twisting. *Could they be about to kick us off the team?*

‘This is it. This is what I knew would happen,’ Laker mutters.

‘Calm down—it’s alright... maybe they just wanna talk?’ I add.

‘We’re getting kicked off. I know it.’

We get to the corridor just outside Coach Klarke’s office.

‘Down this way, boys,’ Jarred nods, signalling toward the changing rooms.

I step in—and it’s like my brain glitches. Rainbows. Streamers. A bloody massive hand-painted banner made out of an old dirt-stained bed sheet strung across the lockers like a pride parade crashed into a sports event. And in the middle of it all: my teammates, trying very hard *not* to look awkward while holding paper cups of

cola.

‘Well, uhm... eh?’ I fall over my words.

‘Why are we here? ‘I think he meant to ask.’ Laker says.

Jarred steps forward.

‘Right, so... we had to do a bit of a meetin’ without yous, yeah? Just needed a chat with the lads—proper one—cause it might’ve been hard sayin’ stuff with you two there. No offence like, just bein’ honest.’

‘Cool.’ I frown.

‘Anyway, we wanted to tell yous... regardless of you two bein’ yeno... *together* and by the way, everyone’s buzzin’ for yous—you’re sound. Still part o’ the team. Nothin’s changed there.’

‘Tell us about what? About the changing room? You want us to go to the toilets and have a wash in the sink?’ Laker bites.

‘Nah, lad, come on, we’re not like that. It’s fine, swear down. Honestly, not like any of us haven’t copped an eyeful before in here anyway. It’s a bit hard not to, innit? Towel fights and all that.’

‘Glad to hear it... Now that we’re out and together... it should allow us to focus solely on the game coming up, no distractions. Right, Laker?’

‘Right,’ Laker says, but he’s not smiling. His jaw’s tight, like he wants to believe it’s real but hasn’t figured out how to breathe into it yet.

The room’s still thick with what-just-happened energy

when one of the lads—Tommy— clears his throat.

‘So, uh... does this mean I can stop pretending I didn’t see you both getting cosy next to the leaning old oak a couple of weeks ago?’

A ripple of laughter spreads. Laker jolts slightly, but I just blink.

‘Mate,’ says Reece, raising an eyebrow, ‘you’ve been making goo-goo eyes at him since your first day. It’s not exactly been MI5 levels of secrecy.’

‘We all knew,’ grins Zaid. ‘We just didn’t want to say anything in case it wasn’t the case... yeno, now it’s, like, campus canon.’

‘That banner was my bedsheet, by the way,’ adds Euan from across the room. ‘I wanted it to say, “Power Couple FC”, but Jarred said no.’

Laker exhales, and for the first time since we walked in, his shoulders drop properly. ‘Euan mate, you could have at least put it in a wash.’

I nudge him gently with my elbow, and he glances at me like he’s still not quite sure this is real.

There’s a pause, the kind that’s just beginning to settle when Matty—usually the one doing impressions of Klarke behind his back—leans against the lockers and goes, ‘Y’know... someone in first-year Gender Soc told me once that the numbers *eleven* and *six* are like... kind of symbolic numbers in queer culture.’

We all turn.

He shrugs. ‘I dunno the full thing, but I remember it,

stuck with me. Eleven's two ones—side by side, that's, like, visibility or something. And six, that's been tied to identity for donks. Like, six colours in the original rainbow flag, yeah?'

Laker and I both look at each other; Eleven's my number and Six is his. There's a strange little hush, just for a breath.

'Maybe it's bollocks,' he adds, rubbing the back of his neck. 'But still. Feels kinda... fitting. Dunno. Makes you two look like you were always meant to play this season together.'

Laker stares at him like Matty's just recited Shakespeare.

I whisper, 'What *is* in that cola?'

'God knows...' He shrugs again. And then he smiles. Just a little. We're just about to head out when Zaid calls after us.

'Oi, Daley—Luxton—hold up!'

We turn. He's grinning like he's about to present us with a cursed artefact.

'We made you something. Technically, two things. A bit of teamwork between me, Tommy, and Euan. Don't say we never give you anything.'

He hands us each a laminated plastic circle — wonky, with smudged edges and rainbow glitter clinging to the sides like it'd been attacked by an overzealous pride fairy.

Mine read:

"I SURVIVED BURNBLOG AND ALL I GOT
WAS THIS LOUSY BADGE"

Complete with a cartoon of me mid-panic, hair askew.
Lakers read:

"BURNBLOG COULDN'T BURNNN THIS"

And underneath, in smaller scrawl:

"Kicking for the other team."

There's even a tiny football with sparkles on it, exuding a faint whiff of the adhesive holding the sequins together—a mix of sharpness and something almost citrusy. It's as if the scent alone could conjure images of a glitter factory, each sparkle hand-placed with care.

'You spelt "burn" with three Ns,' Laker says flatly.

'Adds emphasis,' Zaid replies. 'Also, pen ran outta ink halfway through.'

Tommy gives a double thumbs-up from the bench. 'One-of-a-kind. Collector's items. Could be worth millions after graduation.' He laughs, but there's a flicker of something in his eyes. 'Or at least enough to pay off some of that student debt, you know?'

Laker blinks at the badge, then at me. Then back at the badge.

'I'm wearing it,' I declare.

‘You’re insane.’

‘And that’s why you love me.’

He sighs.

We pin them on like battlefield medals. As I touch the badge, a memory flashes through my mind—of the first day I walked into this locker room, feeling like an outsider. Back then, the walls seemed colder, the faces unfamiliar, and the silence was deafening. But now, with this badge, I’m reminded of the late-night laughter, the shared victories, and the bonds forged through adversity. And for once, it doesn’t feel like surviving. It feels like belonging.

We’re literally just heading for the door, me and Laker both about to make our great escape, badges on like complete muppets, when a sudden silence fills the room. For a split second, it’s like the world holds its breath. The faintest squeak of hinges follows, like a whisper of impending doom, and a gust of cold air brushes past, raising the hair on the backs of our necks. Then the door swings open so hard, I actually flinch.

Coach Klarke walks in.

And I swear, the atmosphere goes from cheery to “we’re at your grandmother’s funeral” in about two seconds flat. He stands there with his arms folded, as if we’ve personally offended his ancestors, a whistle hanging from his neck, glinting in the light. It wasn’t just his presence; it was the emblem of authority he carried, that whistle, a small but potent reminder of the power

imbalance. And his face. Thunder. No, worse than thunder.

He just stares at the room—at the banner, the paper cups, the rainbow flag someone tried to tape over the whiteboard—then does this long, slow breath through his nose like he’s counting down the seconds before the apocalypse.

‘Didn’t I give you lot the week off to *rest?*’ he says, calm in that way that makes it worse. ‘Didn’t say anything about turning my locker room into a bloody *pride parade.*’

Yup. He actually said that. Loud enough for the glitter to wilt.

Tommy sort of half-hides behind Euan. Zaid stops mid-crisp. Laker steps a little in front of me, like that’s gonna save anyone.

Klarke paces deeper into the room, each step sounding like a warning. Then he lands on *us*. Laker and me. Full eye contact. No blink. Like we’re training dummies, and he’s plotting drills to emotionally destroy us.

‘This room’s supposed to be for discipline. Focus. *Football*. Not banners, badge-making and bloody kumbaya moments. You wanna run a social movement, do it on your own time. This—’ he waves vaguely at the air like queerness is somehow floating around. ‘—ain’t what this space was made for.’

My jaw’s so tight my molars are practically vibrating. Laker moves his hand just enough to graze mine.

And Klarke, as if he hasn't already sucked every last spark of comfort out of the room, goes:

'And you two—keep it professional. I don't want another headline unless it's a match win. That clear?'

Oh, it's clear. Crystal, in fact.

Then, just when I think he's gonna wrap it with a passive-aggressive motivational speech, he gives the banner one last death glare and says, 'All this? Down by tonight. That's it.' In that moment, a thought flickers through my mind, clear and unyielding: Not this time.

And just like that, he turns and leaves. Door slams. The whole room flinches.

No one says a thing. Like, even the *air* needs a minute.

Then Tommy, being Tommy, mutters, '...we should probably hide the glitter.' A light joke, but I see it for what it is: a flimsy shield against the tension he's feeling. In the silence that follows, I catch the tightness in his knuckles. Tommy's humour was never just comic relief; it was a way to fend off the anxiety, to fill the growing void with something less threatening, at least for a moment.

And bless Zaid, 'Too late. I've already breathed in half a tube.'

Laker leans in and whispers, 'You okay?'

I shake my head, trying to hold it together. 'Yeah. What rattled Coach Krabby's cage?' I say, but it's a lie that sits heavy. My fingers tap anxiously against my side, a nervous rhythm betraying my words. Deep down, I'm

not okay.

‘Dunno, la. He’s been sounding off ever since I had a word with him earlier. Bit off, y’know what I mean? Proper unprofessional, if you ask me,’ says Jarred, team captain and full-time bringer of brutal honesty.

Still, I look around at the lads. At the banner. At the badge on Chris’s hoodie, catching the fluorescent light. And I think... maybe we’re not alone in here, even if it feels like it sometimes.



It’s after nine by the time I get in. My feet ache in that low-level way they always do after a Refuel shift, like my legs are punishing me for pretending I’m cheerful while scanning flapjacks and dodging awkward chat with third years trying to flirt over protein bars. That ache somehow echoes the bruising encounter we faced with Coach Klarke earlier, a reminder of the weight I’ve been carrying all day, both physically and emotionally.

Kaylan had cornered me behind the coffee machine, pressing a hot chocolate into my hands like it was a remedy. She said some girls had come in earlier and couldn’t stop talking about ‘the table speech’ and ‘the kiss,’ as if they’d witnessed the second coming in the canteen. One of them even showed her the Burnblog post like it was headline news. The post had started circulating through group chats and hallway whispers, the campus buzzing with snippets of gossip. By dinner

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

time, it seemed like everyone had some version of the story, each recount adding its own flair, fueling curiosity and sparking debates across the campus.

She looked at me, eyes sharp but kind, and said, ‘You alright? You look taller. Like something broke off you—but in a good way.’

‘I really am y’know... lighter than I have been in a while—a long while.’



Now, back in my room, shoes kicked off, hoodie hanging from the desk lamp like it’s given up on fashion. The air smells vaguely of coconut lip balm and Adams herbal tea. He’s lying flat on his back on my bed, muttering to himself about burdock root as he highlights a passage in *Medicinal Botany of the North Atlantic* with surgical precision.

I’m at the desk, my football coaching textbook open, half-heartedly revising and toggling between notetaking and messaging.

— Today —

**You still smell like coffee, or have
you evolved?**

21:44✓✓

**I’m mostly a mocha-based lifeform now.
Fully sentient. Slightly sticky.**

21:47✓✓

E L I J A H N O X L E Y

Hot.

21:50✓✓

Obscenely.

21:57✓✓

He sends a *GIF* of a frog sipping wine, savouring it slowly. I send a red heart. Then delete it and send a purple one instead. He never said it was his favourite—but he always uses it. Feels right.

Adam makes a sound halfway between a sigh and a hum. ‘Kin a ask ye somethin’ that’s probably too deep fur a Wednesday?’

‘Why stop now?’ I murmur.

He sits up, cross-legged, textbook balanced on one thigh. He fiddles with the corner of a page, eyes flicking briefly to the door as if he’s half expecting someone to walk in. ‘Are ye scared it’s no gonna last? This *thing* wae Laker.’

I blink. Not because I didn’t expect the question. But because of how gently he asked it. ‘Yeah,’ I say. Honestly. ‘Every time something good happens, I think... what if we’ve reached the top of the hill and now it’s just downhill. Like maybe this was the peak. Like if this ends, I’m losing not just him but believing in the rise of something meaningful in my life again.’

‘So, what if it is?’

That makes me pause.

He shrugs. ‘Ye love him right now. And that’s still worth somethin’.’

I lean back in my chair, the worn fabric brushing

against my arms, staring at the ceiling. There's a crack above my wardrobe that looks like a lightning bolt. Or maybe a branch. Either way, it's been there since I got here. The faint smell of dust and old wood fills the room, resonating with the feeling of being on the edge of something fragile.

'Klarke doesn't feel like the end,' I say slowly. 'He feels like a weight. Like, proof we've still got so much further to go before we're sturdy. Y'know?'

Adam nods. 'He's a load of bark. And a wee bit of a bite. But, people like him get loudest right before their grip slips.'

'Maybe. Still feels like a bruise.'

'Course it does. Yer no a wall. Yer a person.'

I go quiet then. Let that sit. Let myself feel it instead of pushing it down.

Across the room, my phone pings again.

**Wish you were here. My pillow smells like you
but it's just not quite smug enough. ^_^**

22:15✓✓

**Your pillow smells like lynx cherry
& redemption arc, not me :P**

22:17✓✓

Oooh, sassy much!

22:18✓✓

I laugh. Properly. Which, for a second, makes me forget about Klarke's tone. About the shimmer of the banner. About whether I'll ever fully unclench when someone says, 'Can we talk?'

Adams flips back to reading but looks over when I

laugh. ‘Aht’ Him?’

‘Always.’

‘Good,’ he says, turning a page. ‘Because am rootin’ fur the two ae ye, like it’s ma part-time job or somethin’.’

My throat tightens. Not the bad kind. Just enough to know that today cracked something open and tonight, somehow, stitched it partway closed again.

Outside the window, the faint noise of someone’s bike creaks past on the cobblestones. There’s music from someone’s Bluetooth speaker in the next block over—low, lazy, early *2000s* pop.

Here, in this borrowed quiet, I let myself just be for a change.

WHAT'S UP WITH COACH KRABBY?

Things after the *post* were... different.

I started noticing the glances *again*. Not the hard stares like the day of the post, but the quick ones, the double takes. Like people didn't know whether to high-five us or write dissertations about us. I could feel their eyes when we touched fingers. When we laughed too loud. Even when we didn't do... well, *anything* at all. Those glances cut deeper than I'd like to admit, sparking a fear that maybe we were too much, too visible, in a way that couldn't be taken back.

It took Laker a couple of days to fully come back around after his canteen heroics, not that I blame him. I mean, he literally stood on a table and declared his love for me in front of the entire student body. *For me...* if I wasn't already completely gone for him, *that* would've sealed the deal for sure.

Still, something about the aftermath made us retreat. We started gravitating toward each other more. And by we, I mostly mean *me*. I found myself spending nearly all my downtime with Laker and less with the wider group I'd built here at Braeburn.

I was okay with it, mostly. I needed him near me. I told myself it was temporary. That I'd plug back in. I even kept replying to the group chat, thumbs-upping memes like that counted for meaningful connection. But more and more, they'd be out at the pub or someone's room, and I'd be lying next to Laker with some movie blaring and a half-eaten packet of crisps between us, whispering in my head that I didn't miss it. Except sometimes... I did. And I hated that admitting it felt like disloyalty to a relationship that had felt like *I'd*... we'd fought so hard for.

But part of me refused to start hiding again, not after everything we'd faced down, not after all the noise and pain and pride. A small part of me wished that the Burnblog would move on... post about someone else, maybe it would take the heat off us, but *they* didn't.

Dragging us back out into the grassy commons was my resolution. We brought a frisbee, a little chipped from years of backyard games, and passed it between us in the late-afternoon sun. Laker laughed as he missed a catch, the sound echoing like music over the lawn. A couple of friends joined, and soon we were all tangled together, lying in the grass, catching breaths and sharing earbuds, listening to a song with too many inside jokes to count. As the sun dipped lower, painting everything in shades of gold, we felt it: we existed again.

Being outed like that... in front of what felt like the whole universe... wasn't cool. I've not spoken to my

siblings yet. Still haven't figured out how to even start *that* conversation. Maybe I'll wait until they come to the big game—if they come.

My sister texted me a meme the other night. No message attached. Just one of those recycled YouTube shorts, some cat knocking over a plant like it held a grudge against it or something. I watched it five times. Not because it was funny. Just because it was *something*. Mostly because it was on autoplay. We haven't properly talked in weeks. Just this slow, awkward drifting that we now call our siblingship.

Funny thing is, she was always great with words, not so much now. And me? Well, I'm not exactly fighting to fix it either. Sometimes I type out a "how's things?" or "missing you" and then just backspace the whole thing like it's too much, or maybe not enough.

I think we're both waiting for the other to make it easy again.

And then there's Cedric.

Not a word from him. But then, that's always been our rhythm. Even before Mum was gone, we were two static charges drifting around the same house, close enough to spark, never quite meeting to cause a fire.

After Mum died, whatever thread was left between us frayed faster than either of us could fix. He grieved like a soldier, tight-jawed, productive, but never once cracking. I grieved how my mother asked me to be, brave and supportive, never quite letting it show—if only for

the sake of my older sister and my younger brother.

Sometimes I think he might resent me for grieving the “wrong” way. Truthfully, I don’t think there is a one-size-fits-all when it comes to losing someone you love.

I have always found that funny; such a funny way to put such a great loss, ‘Someone you love.’ But loving a mother isn’t quite as straightforward as that, is it? Your love for a mother is different, bigger; she is the one sole reason you even exist. I remember her voice calling my name on a lazy Sunday afternoon—there was a warmth in her tone, a softness that wrapped around you like a favourite blanket. It made you feel safe, made the world seem right.

Love seems like much too small a word for such an important person.

But now Cedric floats in and out of group chats. Birthday calls, maybe. A meme every few months, like a breadcrumb trail back to some version of closeness. I don’t hate him. But whenever something big happens in my life. I wouldn’t even *consider* texting him first.

And that screams volumes, doesn’t it?

Truth is, I don’t know how to cross the line of silence between all three of us, and now I know there’s certainly no easy fix for the breaks in our siblingship, no polly filler that can fill these cracks.

But I still check. All the time, and I always will, and maybe, one day... things can go back to how they used to be.

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

I scroll past their names in my contacts with slight hope that they'll light up. Sometimes I even open our *old* family group chat—the one Cedric has clearly muted—and Cammi renamed it “Chaos Central”—and that still makes me smile. The last message was a photo of someone's lunch two months ago. Dead silence after that.

And yet... I can't bring myself to mute it. Can't leave it. Can't bring myself to start a new one either.

Because no matter how many cracks there are—how wide the space feels between who we were and what we've become—I still *want* to show up if one of them calls. Still want to be the person who answers. Still feel like it's *my* job to keep the light on, just in case.

But I'm tired.

I'm tired of carrying a lifeline that only goes one way. Of loving people who feel more like ghosts than a brother and sister now. I want to believe we'll find our way back to something whole, *but what if this is just the shape of us now?*

What if I can't be that thread anymore?

Mum used to tell us that family was everything.

But what do you do when the main glue that held it all together dissolves?

‘You alright?’ Laker asks softly. He sees me hovering my thumb over the family chat.

I nod.

And then there's been Coach Klarke.

He's been distant. I mean, properly blanking me like I'm white noise on a radio. We tested it—me and Laker. Just to be sure. Laker suggested, half-jokingly, that I take the keeper role for the next match. Something daft. We expected confusion, maybe a laugh. You know what we got?

Klarke's voice cut through the field with the sharpness of a referee's whistle. 'No. Everyone plays where they've played all year. No variations, no changes of any kind! Just because *you* boys like to be different don't mean we change the game to suit the likes of you!' The air around us seemed to still, except for the distant echo of that whistle, leaving a chill as real as the cold mud beneath our boots.

Deadpan. Ice cold. Didn't even *glance* in my direction while saying it.

And that was that.

Laker still gets *some* interaction. Barely. Eye contact here and there. A grunt if he asks something tactical. We think it's because he used to be captain, and Klarke might need to rely on him if something happens with Jarred. But even then... It's stiff. Like we've both become bad dreams he can't wake up from.

Lake went to his office the other day to try to clear the air. Barely got through the door before being told to leave.

We've talked it through. Tried to rationalise it.

Is it the relationship? The fact that we're both kinda-

openly-gay now? *Maybe*. But perhaps it's also just the pressure Klarke's under with the big game looming. But then again... if it *were* just that, surely, he'd be like this with the *whole* team—not laser-focused on pretending *we* don't exist.

Truth is, I haven't even asked the others if they've noticed it. Probably cause part of me doesn't want to hear it be confirmed.

Most likely because I'm scared, scared they'll say, 'No, he's only been like that with *you*.'



The library's air is thick with the scent of old paper and the faint hum of the heating system trying its best to keep the chill out. Outside, the sky's a dull grey, the kind that makes you feel like the day never properly started. Inside, it's all fluorescent lighting and the occasional cough or shuffle of pages. Revision season has turned the place into a pressure cooker of stress and caffeine.

I stare at my notes, but my mind's not on them. It's on Klarke. On the way, he's been acting. The clipped tone. The cold shoulder. The way he looks past Laker and me like we're not even there.

Adam slides into the seat beside me, dropping his bag with a thud.

'Ye look like shit,' he says, not unkindly.

'Cheers,' I mutter.

He leans in, voice low, asking what's up with Klarke.

I meet his eyes, take a breath, and admit it: ‘He’s off with us. Cold. Distant. Like we’re in trouble for just being.’ Adam frowns, all business now. ‘Think it’s because of you two?’ ‘I do,’ I answer, sharper now, the weight of it settling like a stone.

He rubs his jaw, thinking. ‘That’s messed up, mate. Proper messed up. Ye’ve done nothin’ wrong.’

‘I know. But I don’t know how to deal with it. Do we confront him? Go to Koothrappali? Let it slide?’

‘Slide? Nah. Ye don’t let that slide. But maybe talk to him first. Give him a chance tae explain himself. Maybe he’s just... I dunno, awkward.’

‘Awkward doesn’t excuse treating us like a bit of shite on his shoe though.’

‘True. But if ye go in swinging, he’ll just shut down. Ye want peace, no war.’

Sherry, sitting nearby, turns slightly.

‘Are we talking about Klarke?’ she asks.

I nod.

‘He’s been weird lately.’

‘How’d you know?’ I ask.

‘We do all walk the halls, y’know, Chris.’ She replies.

Blake swivels in his chair. ‘I thought he was just stressed. Y’know, with your big match coming up. But now you mention it... yeah. He’s been a bit of a dick to everyone.’

‘It’s more than stress,’ I say. ‘And it’s starting to feel personal.’

Sherry leans forward. 'You need to say something.'

'We're thinking about it,' I say. 'Just trying to figure out the best way.'

'You want backup, we're here,' Blake says.

Adam nods. 'Aye. And if he tries to deny it, we'll remind him we've all seen his behaviour.'

I glance around the table. Revision forgotten. Notes untouched. But for the first time in days, I feel like I've got a bit of ground beneath me.

'Thanks,' I say. 'Means a lot.'

'Just don't bottle it,' Sherry says. 'You're allowed to take up space, Chris. You and Laker.'

I nod, the knot in my chest loosening just a little.

'Ugh, studying is so fucking boring,' Blake moans, changing the subject as he's slumping further into his chair like he's trying to melt into it.

'Yeah, tell me about it,' I reply without looking up from the desk. My eyes are now glued to my notes, but none of it's going in. I've read the same paragraph three times and still couldn't tell you what it's about. Exams are just around the corner, and so is the big game. Trying to squeeze everything in is like trying to fit a foot into a shoe that's *obviously* far too small.

It's a nightmare.

And I'm properly, bone-deep exhausted.

Coach has had us grinding for two weeks straight—five days a week, morning sessions that start before the sun's even up and late-night drills that leave my legs jelly

and my brain fogged. My body aches in places I didn't even know existed. I've got bruises on bruises, and my knees feel like they belong to someone twice my age. It's clear *Klarke* is eager to win this match.

And when Klarke's eager, apparently, he turns into a bloody tyrant.

I keep thinking back to last Thursday—rain hammering down, pitch soaked, boots squelching with every step. We were halfway through sprints when Laker slipped and landed flat on his back. Klarke didn't even flinch. Just blew the whistle and shouted, 'Get up! It's only a bit of mud! You think the other team's gonna wait for you to dry off?'

Then there was the time he made us run suicides because someone left a cone out of line. *One cone*. We were knackered, soaked in sweat, and he stood there with his clipboard like a general surveying the battlefield. 'Sloppy prep leads to sloppy play,' he barked. 'And I don't coach slop.'

I remember looking over at Tommy, who mouthed, '*He's lost it*,' while trying not to puke into the grass.

Even the warm-ups have turned brutal. Klarke's got this new obsession with "mental sharpness," which apparently means doing tactical drills at 6am while half-asleep and freezing. He doesn't smile. Don't joke. Just watches, arms folded, eyes like a hawk.

He used to be different. Used to crack jokes, call us "lads" and slap backs after a good session. Now it's all

clipped orders and silence. I don't know what changed. Maybe pressure. Maybe something personal. But whatever it is, it's made everything heavier.

And it's not just me feeling it. Lakers been quiet. Tommy's stopped messing around. Even Matty, who usually chirps through everything, has gone mute during drills.

We're all just trying to survive Klarke's warpath.

Lake and I especially!

Coach has barely spoken to us. Just nods, barks instructions, then walks off like we're invisible. It's awkward. Worse than awkward. It's like we're being punished for something we don't understand. I keep trying to brush it off, but it's starting to get under my skin. I catch myself watching him during drills, hoping for some kind of sign, a nod, a word, anything. But he just moves on.

I glance at my phone. Half past ten. Still got another hour before I can justify a break. My stomach grumbles, but I ignore it.

'Sherry, how you getting on?' I ask, hoping someone else is drowning too.

She looks up at me, screws up her face before shaking her head, pink bangs swishing from side to side like a frustrated little flag.

'Take that as a "not good" then.'

'Not good,' she mutters under her breath, eyes flicking back to her textbook.

I shift in my seat, stretching my legs under the table. The chair creaks. Everything creaks in here. It's like the building itself is tired of students.

At least Kaylan gave me time off from Refuel. If I'd been pulling shifts on top of all this, I think I'd have just curled up in a corner and given up. She didn't even hesitate, just told me to focus on the game and exams. I owe her for that. Still, even with one less thing on my plate, I feel like I'm running on fumes.

And then there's Cammi and Cedric. I haven't heard a word from either of them. No texts, no calls. I don't know if they're coming to the game. Part of me *hopes* they don't. Not because I don't want them there—I do, I really do—but if they show up, I'll have to have *the* conversation. The one I've been dodging. The one where I say, 'I'm gay,' and watch their faces for whatever comes next. I don't know if I've got the energy for that right now. Not on top of everything else.

'Well, am... am gettin' on fantastically,' Adam says, he's sitting with his legs crossed, his massive feet perched on the tabletop, swinging in his chair like he's on a beach holiday. I've already told him multiple times that if he doesn't watch what he's doing, he'll end up on his back with a sore head and his legs spread wide. He told me to 'shuup,' and to 'git ma own head down.' So, that's what I did. Sort of.

'How? How exactly are you getting on fantastically... you've sat there for the last two hours and done nothing!'

Blake says, voice rising slightly. A few heads turn from nearby tables, but no one says anything. We're all too far gone to care.

'Exactly ma friend... cause unlike you, doughballs... I had the brains tae dae my studyin' at night, allowing me the sweet time to chill out during the day.'

Blake opens his mouth, then closes it again. Looks like he's lost for words. Rare moment.

'Aye, ye all thought a was daft didn't ye.' Adam lets out a small laugh, the kind that makes you want to throw a pen at him.

Sherry slams her pen down.

'Oh my god, Adam, will you just shut up for once?' she snaps, voice louder than she meant. A few heads turn. Someone shushes from the next table.

Adam blinks. Caught off guard. 'Eh? What did a say?'

'You're sitting there like you've cracked the bloody code to life, acting like we're all idiots for trying to keep up. Some of us don't have the luxury of "chillin oot," alright?'

She's flushed now, pink bangs trembling as she gathers her books with jerky movements.

'I've got three modules, two essays due, and a tutor who thinks I'm thick. I don't need your smug commentary on top of it.'

'Sherry—I start, but she's already standing.

'—No, Chris. I'm done. I've had enough of this place, enough of revision, and definitely enough of him!' She

slams her books shut, the sound echoing across the library like a gunshot.

Adam flinches.

Blake stares.

I just sit there, stunned.

Sherry grabs her bag, throws it over her shoulder, and storms off, boots thudding against the carpeted floor.

Silence settles over the table.

Adam scratches his head. ‘Was it somethin’ a said?’

Blake snorts. ‘Mate, it’s always something you said.’

I lean back, rubbing my eyes. The words on the page blur into one long smear of nonsense. I can feel the pressure building behind my temples—not quite a headache, but close. I think about the game. About the crowd. About the roar when we score. That’s where I want to be. Not here. Not buried under textbooks and highlighters. But I’ve got to pass. I’ve got to keep my place. Klarke made that very clear.

Someone sneezes three rows down. A printer whirs to life. The guy across from me has been chewing the same pen lid for an hour—I’m starting to worry about his dental health. The air smells faintly of instant noodles and desperation.

I glance around the table. Blake has got his head in his hands. Adams is still swinging, smug as ever.

I sigh and flip the page.

Back to the grind.



Friday rolls around, and we've finally had enough of the vibe Coach Klarke is giving off. Some of the other boys have started to notice it too, sharing their playful digs here and there. It feels like a cloud settling over the team, and it's become impossible to ignore. If it wasn't for the fact that the stakes are so high—potentially losing my scholarship or my starting spot—I might just let it slide. But he's our coach. We're expected to be laser-focused on the game, not be undermined by personal issues with him.

He's supposed to lead by example. How can we be expected to play at our fullest potential when the coach doesn't even believe in us anymore?

'I've had enough. Come.' I say as I grab at Lakers' arm.

'Hold up... were we going?'

'To speak to this *loony* before the big game rolls around... I can't be—'

'—You seriously think that's a good idea?' Laker asks with a frown on his bushy brows.

'I do... y'know why?' I share a look with him as if I have it all sorted out.

He raises one eyebrow and patiently waits for a valid explanation of why *I* think this is a good idea.

'Because without us... he has nothing! So, we'll go sort this out and if he works with us... We're all good,

otherwise, we leave!’

Laker pulls his arm back. His mind flits to a vivid image of his parents’ faces, their expressions hanging somewhere between confusion and disappointment, overshadowed by the silence of a thousand eyes in the stadium. ‘I can’t do that Chris... you know I can’t!’ he finally says.

‘No...’

‘Well... what are the chances of him actually letting us leave the team? Who would replace us... two of the best players—if I do say so myself.’

‘I can’t! How do I even begin to explain to my parents that I’m not gonna play?’

‘It won’t get to that... you trust me, right?’

Laker stops and thinks for a moment as if what I’m saying makes complete sense, yet is still the idea of a lunatic. He sighs. ‘Fine... worst that can happen... he squashes our dreams right under his dog shit-smothered shoe.’

I smile... not just a general smile, I can feel the skin around my cheekbones stretching. Reminding me that I haven’t used those muscles in a while... ‘Let’s do it!’

We get to the office door. I read the name *Mr L. Klarke* on the sign one last time as if I’ll never see it again after this interaction. Take a shallow breath and place my hand on the cold, worn handle of the door and push.

‘What do you two want?’

‘For a start, before we even go there, Coach... I’d

appreciate it if you could speak to us both with some respect. Something you've been lacking lately,' I say.

'Sit down,' he says. 'What can I do for you... *gentlemen!*' He cracks one of those totally unhappy-to-help smiles.

Oh, now he's getting sarcastic, and I can feel my blood begin to boil. *Keep it calm, Chris*, I remind myself. I grab Lakers hand under the table, hoping it's out of sight. I didn't need it for support... merely something to clench at so I wouldn't grit my teeth or wrap my hands round that big thick neck of his.

'You see, Coach. Me and Laker and I have been feeling a slight coldness coming from you over the last week or so... and we wondered if *maybe* you had some kind of issue with us?'

'No... no, not at all,' he says quickly.

'Coach, you do know the behaviour that we've tolerated from you could easily be put into a complaint to Mr Koothrapalli, yeah?' Laker says.

'Outrageous! I've treated you both the same as every other player in this bloody team!' His face begins to screw, resembling that of the receptionist I met here on my first day.

'No, you haven't. That's exactly why we're sitting here. Look, Mr Klarke, if this doesn't get sorted right now—' Laker stands.

I don't have a clue what his next move is, and I really didn't expect this to go in this direction.

I'm heading straight to Mr Koothrappali to tell him

all about your homophobic as—'

'—Ahh-nough...' I say as I stand. 'Coach, we're coming to you because we believe you may have an issue with our relationship... and we just—'

'Wait, hold up! You think I'm... homophobic?' Coach butts in.

'No—'

'Yes—' Laker says.

'But—' Coach Klarke points to Laker.

'Just let me finish, will you?' I frown.

He huffs and gestures his hand for me to continue.

'We just want to... *clear the air*, so to speak. *Maybe...* answer any questions you might have. We both adore you, Coach Klarke... you really are a *great* coach. We don't want to see you get in *any* kind of trouble,' I glance at Laker, 'over a simple... misunderstanding, now would we.'

Coach sinks into his seat, crosses his arms and appears to be contemplating the words I just shared with him.

'Fine... I do, maybe have a *small* issue with...' he swishes his chubby finger between us, 'whatever *this* is.' Klarke glances at us both. 'But it's *my* problem. And I do feel bad that you boys feel like you've received the brunt of it.'

'So, how about we help with it?' Laker suggests.

Coach leans back, eyes flicking between us. 'I just... I don't get it. I mean, I've never had to deal with *this*

before. Two lads on the same team, together. It's not what I'm used to. I didn't know how to act. Didn't want to say the wrong thing.'

'You already did,' I say, softer this time.

He nods, eyes dropping to the desk. 'I know. I've been a bit of a dick. Excuse my language...prat. I really shouldn't have sworn there.'

'Just a bit?' Laker mutters.

Coach lets out a dry laugh. 'Alright, a full-blown see you next Tuesday then.'

From there, we went on to answer his curiosity. And that's all it turned out to be a misunderstanding between us. It wasn't that Coach Klarke was a homophobic man. He just didn't quite understand it.

He asked questions. Some awkward. Some clumsy.

'So... do you ever feel like it affects the team? Like, lads being *weird* around you?'

'Sometimes,' Laker says. 'But mostly they're fine. Jarred's been supportive. Matty too. It's more the silence that gets to you. Makes you wonder what people are really thinking.'

'And you're not worried it'll be a distraction?'

'Coach, we're not here to be a spectacle. We're here to play football. Same as everyone else. It just so happens that we kinda fell in love with each other along the way, trust me, this came as much of a surprise to us as it did to you, if not more!' I say.

In that office, we shared some personal things with

him. Stuff you wouldn't normally tell a lecturer. But we allowed him to ask us *any and all* questions until he felt completely content and understood us. Personal boundaries weren't an option for us at this point. He needed to understand, and we needed a coach. But above all else, we could help him, and by helping him, we were also able to help people who may come through this Uni after us and have to deal with this *exact* same issue.

By the end of it, Klarke looked different. Not softer, exactly. But clearer. Like something had shifted.

'I appreciate this,' he said. 'I really do. I've got a lot to learn, clearly. But I want to get it right. For you boys. For our team. For my future students, clear things are, well... different from my day, eh?' He nodded slowly, like he was recalibrating everything he thought he knew. 'It's just... I grew up in a place where this wasn't talked about. Where it was either ignored or mocked. I'm not proud of that. But it's the truth.' His voice wasn't defensive anymore. Just tired. Like he'd been carrying something he didn't know how to name.

We didn't flinch. We didn't back away. We let him sit in that discomfort and offered him a way through it.

'We get it, Coach, and to be honest, I wasn't okay with it either, well not to begin with, eh—Chris?'

'Honestly... Laker was a mess, Coach.'

'We're not here to change your past. We just want to make sure it doesn't mess with our present or future.' Laker added.

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

Klarke looked at us—really looked—for the first time in weeks. Not as a problem. Not as a disruption. Just two lads trying to play the game they love without having to shrink themselves to do it.

Honestly, through this whole experience with Laker, I've started to realise that it's not that people really set out to be homophobic or mean... mostly that they're misinformed, or their upbringing deems it unacceptable. Of course, there are those who disagree with homosexuality entirely, but I really can't allow that to rule my life.

I'd never get anything done.

THE MATCH OF OUR LIVES

The sheets were cool against my skin, a faint whiff of lavender from the freshly washed pillowcases permeating the air. I lay back in bed, the quiet hum of night broken only by Adam's whispering tune.

'Big match tomorrow, ae? Chrissy boy's nervous cause the big match's tomorrow, eh!'

'Shut up, will you?' I groan, dragging myself upright and raking my stick-like fingers through the tuggy mess that's my hair.

'Sorry... just excited for you,' he says, voice softening with sincerity.

'Well, *that's*... sweet of you, and I love you for it, really I do, but can you just... *not?*' Sighing as my nerves coil tighter around every orifice of my body. 'I'm a wreck, man. Don't know how I'll even sleep tonight.'

Collapsing into the pillows and burying myself in the layers, drowning the light, willing the anxiety to wait until morning.

The stadium glows gold.

Not match-day bright, but softer, warmer, like the entire place has been dipped in honey. Floodlights

E L I J A H N O X L E Y

shimmer overhead, not harsh but haloed, casting long, elegant shadows across the pitch. A white runner stretches down the centre circle like an aisle; petals scattered across the grass in colours too vivid to be real. It begins with a heartbeat, slow and deliberate, the sound reverberating through the air. The stands are full, yet silent—every face blurred, every shape softened, as if the world itself is holding its breath.

At the far end, waiting beneath the crossbar like it's an archway, stands Laker.

He's in a blue suit that fits him like a second skin, hair neat, eyes bright, smiling that small, private smile he only ever gives me. My chest warms, loosens, melts. My shoes feel light as I start walking toward him, each step slow and deliberate, as if the moment itself is sacred.

The grass is perfect beneath my feet. I notice I'm wearing a bright red suit. The air smells like summer. My heart beats steady, sure.

Laker lifts his hand toward me.

I reach for him—

—and the world flickers.

Just once.

Like a lightbulb dying.

The petals on the ground blacken. Sludge. The white runner decays. Rot. The golden glow drains to a sickly grey. Blur. Lakers outline shatters, stretches, then fragments like smoke in a gale.

The stadium exhales—a long, low groan—and

everything collapses.

The room fades. A small whistle shrills past my ear.

Opening my eyes to blinding white, slowly, they refocus. Floodlights stab upward from the soggy ground at the edge of the pitch, warped and too tall, bending like they're made of bone. Goalposts rise like twisted scaffolding. The air smells wrong—damp earth and burnt rubber, thick enough to choke on.

Adam stands mid-field.

His jersey flickers with strange red letters:

HE'LL CHOKÉ

His grin is jagged now, his eyes hollow.

I try to move, but my boots sink deep. The grass beneath me feels alive, cool and smooth like the scales of snakes, slithering and coiling tighter around my ankles. I can hear the faint hiss as if the ground itself is whispering secrets. The stands loom around me, filled not with fans, but mirrors. Hundreds. Thousands. Each reflection showed me messing up in some spectacular form or another.

Then my eyes are dragged magnetically to one massive mirror in the centre stand, *and I miss the winning shot. The image flickers to a brief glimpse of childhood—me, younger, in our backyard, tears stinging as I fumble a simple throw. Dad's words—before he fell out of my life for good—'Focus, or you'll keep falling short,' echo in my mind like the clang of a bell. Suddenly, I am back in the present, the sound haunting the arena*

E L I J A H N O X L E Y

as if it has a life of its own, underscoring the weight of expectation pressing heavily on my shoulders. The loop of devastation feels endless.

My jaw clenches. Shame burns hot in my chest. Rooted beneath the shame is a fear of never measuring up, of proving those lingering doubts right. I can feel myself starting to punish myself for the miss, the familiar spiral tightening when a roar swells around me. But they're not cheers.

Something darker.

Distorted.

I turn.

My siblings. My coach. My teammates.

All staring.

All melting.

Their faces begin to soften, wax sliding down their features. Yet in those brief moments before the full cascade, hints of humanity linger; trembling lips struggling to form words, eyebrows flicking upward in a parody of anguish, eyes widening with a sorrowful plea. I catch my brother's eyes, flickering with a desperate spark, pleading as if to say 'Help us' before his gaze is swallowed by melting wax. A surge of desperation rushes through me, a fleeting thought to save them, to freeze the wax before it overtakes them completely. But action escapes me, leaving only a painful regret, a bitter reminder of my helplessness as wax drips from wide, open mouths.

‘Big match,’ they chant, the first repetition barely a whisper, like a distant memory. ‘Big match,’ the second is louder, gaining weight, each echo vibrating with a familiar tension. ‘Big match,’ the chant grows sharper, transformed into a demand, the relentless rhythm mirroring the racing pulse of my escalating anxiety. Their voices swell around me, drowning out my thoughts, as the wax flows down them in small, glistening rivers.

A ball appears at my feet.

I kick.

It bursts mid-air, exploding into a spray of black-red ink that bleeds across the sky. Letters drip downward, forming themselves into a word I partially register.

F A I —

My vision shudders as I catch the familiar smell of damp grass mixed with the faint, steady hum of the stadium floodlights. The pitch tilts.

The mirrors crack, fragments slicing through the air with a sound like ice shattering on a frozen lake. A sharp metallic tang of blood and sweat fills my nostrils. The silence stretches, each heartbeat loud in the void, time slowing as the nightmare clings to reality. Then, ‘—Chrissy? Wake up, mate...’ Adams voice again—real this time—cutting through the haze.

The blood-ink sky dissolves. The pitch collapses. I bolt upright, breath ragged, soaked in sweat.

‘Ye were muttering. Proper panicked man.’

‘Good—ba—bad... bad dream,’ I stumble. ‘Don’t ask.’

‘Still nervous?’

‘...Terrified.’ I look at the clock, it’s three in the morning... ugh, still time to have another nightmare. ‘Why are *you* still awake?’

‘Got distracted with some coursework, am heading to bed now.’

‘What was I muttering?’ Screwing my eyebrows as I ask.

‘Failure...’

I rolled my eyes right to the back of my head, *that’s what the words in the sky spelt out*, I realised and fell with force back onto the pillow. ‘Ughh... hit the lights.’



‘Youse all know we’ve got this, la. We’re bringin’ it home this year, no doubt.’ Jarred was rambling on passionately in the changing room.

Since it’s a home game, we’ve got the comfort of our own pitch and our own changing room. It also means we can slack off a bit before the match, instead of travelling god-knows-how-many miles to the next inhabited area that actually plays any kind of sport, never mind football.

I’m tired... not just of the captain’s rambling, but from the broken, sweat-soaked sleep I had last night. I know there’s a chance I won’t play at my best today, and to add to that, I’ve got *my* sweet little distraction playing

alongside me. Ugh. *Fun for me, eh?* Not that it matters much—the chances of them picking me out of the team are slim. I know that. For both Laker and me, the chances are slim. First year at this University and all. But it's not just about making the team; losing my scholarship is a real fear. If I don't perform well, I could lose the financial support I desperately need and, even worse, let down my family, who I know deep down have high hopes for me. The weight of their expectations is heavier than any defensive line I'll face today.

'Just keep yer eyes on the ball, la, heads in the game, and we'll bring that cup home, sound? And listen—none of you gobshites better make me look a div out there.'

'Bit harsh, Jarred, don't ya think?' Owen speaks up. It's a bit of a shock, actually, because he usually shies away into the corner. The only place the boy seems to have any confidence is on the pitch.

I just look at Laker. His soft nod tells me firmly to keep out of it and shut up. I take it as a captain's prerogative to say something like this before a game of this scale.

It finally clicks in my brain why football's always felt like an addiction. Every major game I've ever played has been the biggest game of my life—a chance to prove something, to earn a place, to survive the next cut. Each match is like levelling up: a new team, a new skillset, a new big boss to beat. No wonder I'm wired like this. And the worst part? The rush I get from it... It's the same rush

I get from Laker. The dopamine, the chase, the adrenaline. It all feels too similar—like feeding a never-ending craving.

Somewhere between that thought and reality catching up, I walk onto the pitch, the edges surrounded by onlookers, though I can't see them properly through the floodlights blinding my eyes. Laker wishes me luck and smacks my arse as he heads out in front of me. Jarred gives some huge speech in the pitch huddle about how 'We've got this, la!' and 'Teamwork's got no "I" in it, la!'

The sheer number of times he says 'la' in that unwanted speech... I swore he was about to burst into that old Sam Smith song. Of course, I shrug it off and just intend to give this my best.

The thought of making it—being selected—sounds too good to be true. Something I'm sure they'd only offer to the captain of the team. So, I don't get my hopes up for any of us. Besides, they could offer it to *none* of us. We're still at the beginning of our careers. And the weird thing is, this doesn't always happen. Not every year. Scouts only come around when they need or want a fresh face on their teams... and it just has to happen this year, eh?

The whistle shrieks and I'm off like a shot, boots hammering the turf as the floodlights burn down on us. Just before I take the first step, I remind myself: 'Steady... Compose.' This is my grounding ritual, a whisper of calm amid the chaos—a mental anchor formed from

countless hours on the field. The crowd is a blur of colour and noise; a living storm wrapped around the pitch. Jarred's already barking orders from the centre circle, arms waving like he's conducting a riot, and Lakers tearing down the wing with that terrifying, beautiful focus he gets when he's locked in.

I slide into midfield, scanning, breathing, trying not to let the nerves choke me. Not just nerves. Him. Laker. The way he looked at me before kick-off, that half-smile that somehow says I love you and don't mess this up in the same breath. We haven't talked properly since yesterday. I don't know if we're okay. As I brush past him, our shoulders touch, and the contact is electric, a jolt sending a shiver through my spine. The fleeting connection echoes the desire I've buried, each step on the pitch pulsating with unspoken longing. I don't know if I'm okay. All I know is I need to play like my life depends on it.

'Back post!' I shout as Matty whips in a cross, mud flicking off his boots as he sprints past. I dart forward, but their centre-back rises first, heading it clear with a crunch that rattles my ribs. The crowd groans. Jarred claps his hands, shouting, 'Reset! Reset, la!' like we're a bunch of kids who've dropped our crayons.

We regroup.

Laker jogs past, slapping my shoulder. 'Keep at it, mate. We've got this.' *Mate*. That word stings more than it should, like he's reminding me of the line we're *not*

supposed to cross on the pitch.

The ball's back in play, and everything descends into chaos. Their number ten—tall, cocky, ponytail bouncing—slips past Tommy, who swears loud enough for half the stadium to hear, and rifles one low into the corner. Reece doesn't even get close.

0-1

Jarred kicks the ground, furious, yelling at Tommy to 'wake the fuck up, la!' but we don't have time to sulk. We push forward. I take control, threading passes, dragging us back into shape. Zaid overlaps on the right, shouting for it, but I spot space on the left, take a touch, and whip in a low cross. Laker slides in—bang. Back of the net.

1-1

He doesn't look at me, just pumps his fists and sprints back, and I swallow whatever words were about to fall out of me.

Second half. Rain spits down, turning the pitch slick and unpredictable. The water blurs my vision as it mixes with the sweat on my brow, and for a moment, Laker seems to fade into the mist, like an uncertain memory I can't quite grasp. The cold droplets feel like they are weighing down on me—not just my t-shirt but my thoughts as well. I can almost feel the slippery ground whispering doubt, urging me to second-guess each step, each pass. Euan goes in late and gets booked, muttering under his breath. Their lot starts mouthing off. 'You think you're Premier League already?' one ugly bastard

sneers as we line up for a corner. Jarred fires back, ‘Shut it, la—you’re only on this pitch because someone dropped out.’ I ignore them, eyes on the ball. It curls in, bodies everywhere, and somehow Laker gets a toe to it. It pings off the post, hits the keeper’s back, and trickles over the line.

2–1

The LED board flashes the score, teasing us with hope.

But they come back swinging. Ten minutes left, and their midfielder smashes one from thirty yards. It dips, swerves, and crashes into the top corner.

2–2

Reece collapses into the mud, fists hammering the ground. My legs feel heavy, lungs burning.

Lakers limping.

Zaid’s bleeding from the elbow.

Tommy’s shouting at anyone who’ll listen.

Jarred’s voice is hoarse from yelling.

We’re all wrecked, but nothing will stop us! I glance at the crowd and catch a few unfamiliar faces, a couple of people in suits holding notepads. My pulse quickens. Could they be scouts? In a match like this, it wouldn’t be a surprise, and the mere thought ignites something within me.

Final minute. We win a free kick just outside the box. Jarred jogs over, breathless, eyes wild. ‘Take it, Chris. You’ve got the best curl on the pitch.’ Hearing that from

him hits harder than it should. I step up, rain dripping from my fringe, the wall lining up, the keeper shouting orders I can't hear over the pounding in my chest. I glance to the sideline and catch Coach Klarke watching me—and he gives me a small, sharp thumbs-up. Not much, barely anything, but enough to tell me we're good. Enough to steady me.

I look back at Laker. He's watching me too, pale eyes glistening.

Three steps back. Breathe. I glance up, taking in the wall of defenders and the tension-filled faces of my teammates. This is it. My heart thrums in rhythm with the spectators' anticipation, and I hold my breath for one agonising moment, feeling the weight of the game resting on my shoulders. Run up. Curl it.

The ball sails over the wall, bends like a dream, and smacks into the top corner of the net.

3–2

The crowd erupts. Someone screams my name. Jarred punches the air. Tommy tackles me in celebration. For a swift moment, a seed of doubt flashes through my mind: Did the scouts even notice me? The thought is gone as quickly as it appeared, swept away by the rush of victory. Then Laker grabs me, lifts me clean off the ground, spinning me as the world blurs. His arms lock around me, tight, desperate, and his hand slides low—not by accident—pressing against me, firm, deliberate. I don't flinch. I meet his eyes, and for a heartbeat, the stadium

disappears. Floodlights blur into stars. The roar fades into static. Every nerve in my body lights up like a struck match.

Just us.

The final whistle blows. We've done it. I don't know what the scouts will decide, but under these lights, soaked in sweat, rain and mud, heart still racing from him and the game, I know I've given everything I had.



Everyone is sprawled across the benches, knackered. Shirts clinging to skin, boots kicked off, steam already fogging up the mirrors.

'Y'know, I really thought the wind was gonna carry that ball just a smidge too far in the wrong direction...' Euan says, still panting, his fringe stuck to his forehead.

'Lack of faith in me, *Eneyy-boy?*' I say with a grin, tugging off my socks.

'Not at all, our champion!' Jarred exclaims, throwing his arms wide like he's announcing me to the bloody Queen. That sets the lads off—they burst into song, loud and off-key, belting out "*You'll Never Walk Alone*" like it's the FA Cup final.

They gather round me and lift me up—arms under my legs, back, shoulders—suddenly I'm crowd surfing across sweat-soaked bodies and laughter. I'm laughing too, dizzy from adrenaline and the sheer madness of it all. I catch Lakers' eyes through the chaos. He's smiling,

but it's that quiet kind—the one that doesn't quite reach his mouth, only his eyes.

They set me down eventually, and the room settles into that post-match hum. Banter fades into towel slaps and the hiss of showers. Jarred's dancing in nothing but his socks, Euan's in the buff, trying to towel-whip a bare-skinned Tommy who's dodging like it's part of training.

I sit on the bench, half-dressed, watching it all unfold like I'm outside my own body. The buzz of the win still hasn't worn off. My limbs are jelly, but my head's spinning for a different reason.

Lakers across the room, peeling off his kit, slow and methodical. Top, shorts, boxers—all gone. He doesn't flinch. Just grabs a towel and slings it low on his hips. As he turns, a rush of heat races up the back of my neck, pooling behind my ears, where my heartbeat pulses in quick, betraying thuds. The silent language of our connection hums in the air, potent and undeniable.

He catches me watching. He doesn't smirk, doesn't look away, just holds my gaze for what feels like an eternity, something tight and unreadable flickering behind his eyes. Then he turns and disappears into the showers. I hesitate for a moment before I stand, strip off, and follow him in, heat from the cloud of steam prickling across my skin. 'You okay?' I ask, keeping my eyes level with his.

He's standing, drowning himself in the spray from the shower next to mine, the water trialling over his head

flattening his usually bushy hair.

‘Fine, just a bit of a kick in the balls that I wasn’t captain...’ he rubs his hands over his head, pushing back his hair.

I think for a moment before I speak, letting the hot water clear the fog in my brain, ‘Y’know, you still have a *lot* to be proud of, you were team captain for a long time before Jarred was, plus you’ve had your own shit going on too.’

He slaps his hands to his sides, his eyes flicking to the floor as if trying to find words he can’t quite grasp. Briefly, his fingers tremble, curling into fists before relaxing again. ‘I should have been able to handle it *all*, Chris, that’s what being a team captain is... maybe *this*, just isn’t for me anymore.’

I’m fully aware the showers aren’t empty—lads still milling about—so I resist the urge to reach for him. ‘You played fantastically. That’s what matters. And if I’m honest, there’s no other job you’d be better at. Football runs in your veins.’

‘Yeah... sure thing, *champion!*’

‘Getting salty cause I scored the winning goal, are we?’

‘You wish!’

He steps under the rain again, water running down the lines of his back, and I have to force myself to look at the tiles instead of him.

‘You’re staring,’ he mutters.

‘No, no—I’m not.’

‘Chris...’

I swallow. ‘Hard not to when you’re sulking like a wet cat.’

He snorts, but there’s something softer underneath it. ‘You’re an idiot.’

‘And you’re not quitting football,’ I say quietly.

He doesn’t answer, just continues to drown his skin.

Just then, Coach Klarke’s foghorn voice cuts through the steam. ‘All teammates back here for eighteen hundred hours—team meeting!’

He pokes his head into the shower room. ‘Laker, you’re wanted in my office. Get dressed and be there like yesterday! Daley, you’ve got visitors waiting in the hallway just around from my office.’

I look at Laker, don’t need to say anything cause its clear we are both just as confused as each other.

I whip on the soap and scrub the dirt away; get out of the shower and throw on clean clothes like I’m auditioning for a part as *Sonic the Hedgehog*. I make for the hallway, still clueless as to who could possibly want to see me. I’m almost certain it’s not the big leagues, then again—I did score the winning goal.

I burst through the double doors, and the sight in front of me stops me cold.

‘Cammi! Cedric!’ I move in for a group hug, Cedric being reluctant as always, but I pull him in anyway.

‘Congratulations on your win!’ Cammi beams.

‘Yeah, congrats,’ Cedric adds, offering a handshake.

Me-being-me, I grab him in for another hug.

‘Y’know, I’ve got some news for you both. I wanted to wait until I saw you in person—it’s pretty big, and...’

‘Well... go on then!’ Cammi insists, eyes wide.

I can tell by the look on their faces they’re not expecting what I’m about to say. And this setting—fluorescent lights, damp kit smell, lads shouting in the distance—*really?*

‘Well, I was hoping you’d both be up for a cuppa? We could go to Refuel—the coffee shop I’ve been working in. Just a ten-minute walk? You can meet Kaylan...’

Cammi glances at Cedric, then back to me. ‘It’s a bit of a drive to get up here, Chris. We’ll need to head back to the hotel soon.’

‘Oh... alright.’

‘Fuck it, sure. Let’s go for a coffee,’ Cedric says, shrugging.

I blink. That’s the most spontaneous thing he’s said in years.

The walk to Refuel is quiet. The cool air nips at us gently as we move, our footsteps punctuating the stillness. I can’t help but tread with urgency, thoughts already brewing ahead. Cammi offers up snippets about the drive, and Cedric shivers against the cold, pulling his jacket tighter. Meanwhile, I fixate on the rhythm of the conversation, mentally rehearsing the words I need to say.

‘So... where’s Dave?’ I ask, keeping it casual.

Cammi hesitates. ‘He’s back at the hotel. Said he was knackered and didn’t fancy the drive. Y’know, he’s never been that into football.’

I nod, but the silence that follows says more than she does. Cedric raises an eyebrow but doesn’t comment.

‘How’s everything been?’ I ask, nudging the conversation forward.

‘Busy,’ Cammi says. ‘Work’s been full-on. And with Dave away so much lately, it’s just been me juggling everything. Bills, dog, house... You know.’

Cedric snorts. ‘She’s basically a one-woman army. I just show up and eat her food.’

Cammi laughs, but it’s thin. ‘It’s fine. Just... tiring sometimes.’

I don’t push. I can tell there’s more she’s not saying, but this isn’t the time.

By the time we reach Refuel, my thoughts are tangled in everything Cammi didn’t say—and everything I still need to. The bell above the door gives a little jingle as we step inside.

It’s warm, smells like cinnamon and burnt espresso.

‘Heartbreaker!’ Kaylan exclaims from behind the counter. ‘Feels like it’s been weeks since I last saw you.’

Kaylan, usually full of wise words, points out the obvious. ‘That’s because it has been a week and two days.’

She laughs. ‘Oh yeah, you brought guests...’

‘This is my sister Cammi and my brother Cedric.’

‘Nice to finally meet you—Chris never shuts up about you guys.’ She says, giving me a knowing look.

‘Nice to know,’ Cammi says, polite but guarded.

‘Can we get a coffee pot and some milk and sugar over at my usual spot?’ I ask. ‘I’ll square it up later.’

‘No need, it’s on the house, I’ll bring it right over.’

I lead Cammi and Cedric to the corner booth—the one by the window, where I usually sit when I’m in here. It’s quiet, tucked away, the kind of spot where you can think without the world barging in.

‘Yeah, that’s Kaylan,’ I say, settling in. ‘She’s become like a best friend over the last year. Fantastic woman.’

Cammi leans in, eyes sharp. ‘So... what’s your news, or are you going to keep me hanging on until I’m sprouting greys?’

‘You already are, aren’t you? Few wrinkles too, I see.’

‘Shuup you. Now tell us!’

‘Well, the thing is—’

Kaylan arrives with the coffee pot, saving me from having to finish that sentence. She sets it down with a wink and disappears back to the counter.

I pour the coffee slowly, buying time. My thoughts drift—not to the scouts, not to the match, but to Laker. *What did Klarke want him for?* Maybe he’s being reinstated as captain. He did play brilliantly. Better than me, maybe.

A sharp pain shoots up my calf, snapping me back to the moment. I reach down and rub the muscle, wincing.

Cammi watches me, waiting.

Cedric's already halfway through his first cup.

I take a breath.

I wrap my hands around the coffee mug, even though it's too hot to hold. My palms are sweating. My heart's thudding like it's trying to punch its way out of my chest.

'Okay... the thing is,' I start, voice barely above a whisper, 'I *met* someone... while I was here.'

Cedric groans. 'Ugh, there I thought you were going to tell us you made it to the big leagues. What a letdown. Nothing's more exciting than that!'

Cammi places a hand on his chest, gives him a look that shuts him right up. 'Go on, Chris.'

I stare into the steam rising from the mug, watching it swirl like it might carry the words for me. 'Well, uhm... my time here at Braeburn has been... an eye-opener. Really. It has.'

Cedric sighs. 'Will you just get to the point, bro?'

I rub the back of my neck, then my jaw, then tap my fingers against the table—anything to keep my hands busy. I take a breath, but it catches halfway. The subtle clink of a spoon against porcelain, the soft hiss of the steamer, echoes around us, filling the silence.

'One of the things I've learned is...' I pause, swallow hard. 'Is that I'm gay. And I have a boyfriend. Right here at this University.'

The words hang in the air like smoke.

My fingers tighten around the mug.

I brace for silence. Try comforting myself with

thoughts that Kaylan is right there if I need her.

I wait for the gasps of shock. Or someone collapsing onto the floor. Something, anything...

I don't look up.

I can't.

Cammi is the first to move.

She reaches across the table, places her hand over mine—firm, steady. 'Thank you for telling us,' she says softly. Her voice wavers, just a little. 'I know that couldn't have been easy.'

I nod, still staring at the coffee mug like it might offer me a way out.

Cedric shifts in his seat. I can feel him drill holes in the crown of my head, but I don't meet his eyes.

'So... you're gay,' he says, like he's testing the word out loud. 'And *you've* got a boyfriend.'

'Yeah,' I say. 'His name's Laker.'

Silence.

Cammi squeezes my hand. 'Chris, you're still you. And I love you. That's not ever changing.'

Cedric leans back, arms crossed. 'I mean... I didn't see that coming. At all. I thought you were just... sporty. Not into all the feelings and stuff.'

'Didn't think I'd be the type?' I ask, trying to keep my voice light.

'No, pfft, you used to play with Barbies, the signs were there, it's not that. It's just... I dunno. It's a lot... *a gay brother*... I'll get slagged off for this, y'know.'

Cammi shoots him a look, but he holds up a hand. 'I'm not angry. I don't care, your life and all, I'm just... surprised. That's all.'

I finally look up. Cedric's face is tight, his jaw clenched as if holding back a torrent of thoughts. His knee bounces slightly, unconsciously matching the rhythm of his internal turmoil. He isn't hostile, just... grappling with the situation.

'Can I ask... slagged off by *who* exactly? Do you ever actually think before you speak, Ced?'

He shrugs. 'I don't know... but I do think. Just not always the way people want.'

I soften. 'You don't have to get it. You just have to be supportive, well, that's if *you* want to be.'

Cedric nods slowly. 'Yeah. Okay. I'll try. I'm glad you told us.'

Cammi smiles at me, eyes glassy. 'Mum would've been proud of you.'

That hits harder than I expected. I swallow the lump in my throat and pour another cup of coffee, hands still shaking.

'Y'know, me and her had this conversation years back, I think she already knew her *golden boy* was really a rainbow boy.' Cammi says with a laugh.

'Yeah... I didn't even know, really, I didn't until I met Lake.'

We talked for a while longer—about the match, about Mum, about everything and nothing. We made promises

to keep in touch more, though I knew they'd be broken just as quickly as we made them. The coffee cooled, but the air between us felt warmer than it had in years.

When it was time to head back to the car, we stepped out into the fading light and ran into Laker as we crossed the car park. Turns out he'd been looking for me.

I introduced him to my brother and sister. Cammi didn't miss a beat. She looked him dead in the eye and said, 'You look after my brother, or you'll have me to deal with.' Big words from a girl of five-foot-two aimed at a six-foot footballer—but Laker shrivelled under her stare like a deflating ball. I couldn't help but laugh.

For once, everything felt exactly where it was meant to be.

We stand there, finally able to place my hand in his, watching as the car drives off.

'So, what did Coach want you for?' I ask.

'Uhm... let's not talk about that right now. Enjoy this moment,' he says.

But this only made me want to know more. I nudge him. 'It's a long enough walk back to my room. C'mon, tell me.'

He hesitates. 'Okay... I met with the scouts in his office. They want me to leave here and go join Liverpool FC.'

'That's amazing! When?' I press him, wanting to know more.

'Right after exams...' But there's only six weeks left,

and the thought of deciding so quickly makes my heart race.

I feel my blood turn cold. For a second, I could swear I was deceased on the spot. ‘Wait—what? So, you just won’t finish the term? What about us?’

‘Well... you could come to Liverpool after University. They’re putting me up in a nice apartment. We *could* live together.’

I sigh. ‘What, and I just become the footballer’s wife, yeah? Throw my own dreams away in the wind so you can chase yours?’

‘Chris... this is why I told you to leave it!’

‘So what? You were just going to go... without saying anything?’

‘No! I was going to talk to you before I left. I—I just didn’t want to do it *right now*.’

I frown, ‘Oh, so—you’ve already taken the offer then?’

‘I accepted, yes. How could I not?’ he pauses, rubbing his fingers over his forehead. ‘This is what we both came here to achieve. Chris... this *is* the dream. Do you know how many players at our age get a chance like this? It’s quite literally the chance of a lifetime.’

I stop walking. ‘My dream changed, Laker... the day I met you!’

‘Chris... we can still—’

‘—Forget it!’ I say, pushing him away, and I head for my room alone. The air, cold and damp, mirrors the

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

broken organ now raging in my chest.

A D R E A M O R L O V E

Exam week has finally begun!

I can't get Laker out of my mind ever since our breakup. Things ended without a real conversation, and it's been tearing at me. Things are hectic and, to be honest, I couldn't be happier about it. The workload's a distraction, a kind of shield. I've even picked up extra shifts at Refuel to make up the money I lost during training and the match. Kaylan needed some time off; she's been working like a trojan. Covering for her felt like the very least I could do.

Adam hasn't been around much either. I've been confining myself to the coffee shop or room for the last three days. He tried to talk to me, but I told him, shortly, that Laker was the issue. After that, I pretty much zoned out from any and all socialisation. If I didn't need my phone for morning alarms, it'd be nothing more than an expensive shiny brick on my nightstand.

Lakers also tried to message.

I switched to aeroplane mode—the only way I could still use my phone without being bombarded by sad attempts at what *he* was calling an apology.

I've come to realise something else: football... really

isn't what I want to do, well, not anymore. In fact, I'm not even sure what I *do* want. But I'll finish this year, pass the exams, and make sure all the hard work wasn't for nothing.

I lie back on the bed, staring at the ceiling. *Maybe I could become a personal trainer? A masseur? Nah, I'd rather be the one getting the treatment. Who knows... a career on OnlyFeet could be a choice. But amidst these jokes, a knot of uncertainty tightens in my stomach. What if I'm left wandering through a fog of indecision, unsure of what truly drives me?*

Nah, I'd rather be the one getting the treatment. Who knows... a career on *OnlyFeet* could be a choice.

I've started planning what my new life without him might look like. How his decision to leave—to break things off without really saying it—has given me freedom. I have been thinking about experimenting. About hitting the gay scene back home. I heard Manchester's Canal Street is buzzing—learned that from a re-run of *Queer as Folk* last month.

Or maybe Gran Canaria... I deserve a holiday.

Hit the infamous beaches, have my pick of the men.

Screw Laker over—while someone's quite literally screwing me.

I bite the end of my pen and daze on that satisfying thought for a few more minutes before flipping back to my textbook: *The Study Skills Handbook* by Stella Cottrell.



By Thursday night, the campus had thinned out, and most people were buried in revision or already halfway through their exams. I've finished two today and have another one tomorrow, but my brain is completely fried. It feels like my temples are pounding to the rhythm of a marathon. Every time I try to focus, my pen quivers between my fingers, as if it can sense the pressure of the looming exams. I feel like I'm bursting for air. Something other than my own thoughts reverberating off the same four walls. So, I grab my hoodie, pick up my phone out of habit and throw it back on the nightstand as soon as I realise I don't actually need it. Then, I proceed to Refuel, hoping that with Kaylan, maybe I'll get at least five minutes of something *normal*.

I push open the door, which feels slightly heavier than usual, and it emits an ear-torturing creak. This causes Kaylan to look right at me from behind the bar, and the smell of hazelnuts, coffee and sugar invades my nostrils as I enter. I give the door a look up and down the hinge as if it has offended me, then look back at Kaylan, pulling a "the fuck happened to that look" that she picks up on immediately: "Hinges are a bit messed up, need to order some hinge oil." She replies loudly as the door screeches closed behind me.

'Yeah... you think? Better get it fast before someone complains it bursts their eardrum!' I reply.

Kaylan waddles out from behind the bar and stretches out her arms as if she knew what she was offering was exactly what I needed: A hug. The warmth of her embrace takes me back to the first time she saved me from myself, when I had messed up a lecture because I never focused, and she sat with me, calm and patient, and offered great advice.

‘Oh Heartbreaker. You doing alright?’ Her small hand rubs my back.

For a moment, I wanted to say *‘yeah, why shouldn’t I be?’* but then I remembered this is Braeburn, and I haven’t been using my phone, so instead, ‘What’s on the Burnblog?’ I ask.

Kaylan takes my hand and half-heartedly drags me through the back, like some kind of sad attempt to keep my private life private, when it hasn’t been since the day we were outed.

‘One of the students told me about your breakup with Laker, he’s apparently moving to London or Leicester or something?’

‘Liverpool—damn gossip is like a bad game of The Whisper Game. I mean, if they are going to talk about my life, couldn’t they at least have the decency to get the facts right?’ I slam my bag on the metal counter, turn and lean my butt and palms on the cold edge, awaiting Kaylan’s reply.

‘You know what they’re all like. Anything on the Burnblog is the central discussion point for the entire

University. Ignore it.' She rolls her eyes.

'Y'know... I wish I could, Kaylan, but I was—am...' In that moment, a part of me wants to challenge the voice calling me stupid. Maybe I wasn't foolish; maybe I was just hopeful, open to love. It's not wrong to trust someone you care about, even if it didn't work out in the end. I pause for a second to recalibrate my brain.

I pause for a second to recalibrate my brain.

'Was... in love with him.' The confused smile that was jittering at the corners of my mouth faded.

'We had made so much progress together, went through some life-changing stuff... then he just thinks that *I* will give up my dreams so *I* can go and chase him and his fucking success! After everything he has put me through this year, all the cold shoulders, the back and forth with *I'm not gay, I'm not ready I'm... I'm... I'm...* I mean, how stupid was I? Should have seen this coming a mile away.' I throw my hands over my face and drag my palms down, stretching the soft skin of my face with them.

I slam my hands onto the counter, the sound jarring in the small space. 'Fuck! It's always about him.' My fists clench so hard the skin stretches over my knuckles. Hot salty tears begin to pool in the corners of my eyes, threatening to spill over. Pacing back and forth, I moved in desperation to outrun the boiling anger inside me. 'It's not even about the placement offer,' I continue, my voice cracking. 'It's the fact that he accepted it without even a second to think about what else he had going on, or how

it might make me feel.' I slump back against the metal counter, letting out a heavy sigh like air escaping a deflated balloon.

'It would have just been nice to—to, to have at least just spoken about it first, y'know?'

Kaylan doesn't flinch. She just takes a step closer, her small hand finding my shoulder.

'Chris... you're allowed to be angry. You're allowed to feel like this. But don't you dare for one second think it makes you stupid. You loved him...'

'Love...' I but in with a mutter, eyes fixed on the floor. Unconsciously correcting her.

Ding. The bell out front rings.

Kaylan tilts her head, unshaken. 'You love him. And that's not a weakness.'

I shake my head, wiping at my face with the sleeve of my hoodie. 'Feels like weakness. Feels like I gave him *everything* and he gave me nothing but a slap to the face in return.'

Ding. Ding. Louder this time, like the customer's finger is getting impatient.

'I'll be right out!' Kaylan roars before returning her attention to me.

'No,' she says firmly, eyes flicking toward the door as if she were waiting for another *ding*. 'You gave him honesty. You gave him yourself. That's more than most people ever manage. And if he couldn't handle that or didn't notice what he had? That's on him, not you.'

Ding. Ding. Ding!

Her words settle in the air, heavy but steady. I let out a shaky laugh. ‘You always know what to say.’

Kaylan smirks, but the bell shrieks again. She finally snaps, shouting over her shoulder: ‘For God’s sake, I said I’ll be right with you! I’m sure your caffeine withdrawals can wait while I deal with an actual mental breakdown back here!’

We both make our way out the back and come face to face with the University’s head, Mr Koothrappali.

We freeze in place like Elsa just blasted us with ice, the silence that follows golden, though mortifying.

I can’t help it. The laugh bursts out of me, sharp and unexpected, catching in my throat before spilling into the room. Kaylan shoots me a look, half-horror, half-amused, and mutters. ‘Shit...’ under her breath.

‘I hope all is well here?’ Mr Koothrappali asks, his voice low and resonant.

He isn’t someone I’ve ever really spoken to—just the occasional polite ‘hi’ in passing or those long-winded speeches he’s delivered over the past year. I’ve never had to deal with him personally. Still, he comes across as a decent enough guy: dark, greying hair parted neatly down the middle, skin the shade of warm caramel, and a smile so inviting it practically drags one out of you in return.

His chestnut eyes flicker toward me, steady and unreadable, and all I can think of is that guy from *The Big Bang Theory*. Although our Mr Koothrappali is

neither a doctor nor thirty-odd years old.

‘Yes, sir, was just having a little heart-to-heart with the boss lady, y’know.’ I say, glaring into Kaylan’s eyes, hoping she picks up my imaginary smoke signals.

‘Mr. Koothrappali, the best customer Refuel has... your usual Caramel Latte topped with cream?’ Kaylan asks brightly.

He nods at her before diverting his attention back to my reddening face. ‘Well, if there is anything—anything at all—you need to talk about, or need help with, Christopher Daley, you know where to find me.’ His eyes lock onto mine, steady and unyielding.

I pause, startled he knew not only my name... but my full name. ‘Of course, sir. Just a small personal matter. I’m sure I’ll be fine. Thank you, though.’

As Kaylan is rattling around the coffee machine frothing milk, I take the chance to make a swift exit. ‘I shall catch up with you later when I come in for my next shift, eh?’ I say, pulling open the door as it screams for hydration for the umpteenth time.

As I head back toward my room, the May sun sinks behind the line where the sky meets the land, smearing the horizon in soft gold.

The air is cool against my face, the kind that settles your nerves without asking permission. My hands tucked deep in the uni-pocket of my hoodie, shoulders hunched, head down. It’s the universal sign for don’t approach, don’t talk, don’t even think about it.

For a few precious seconds, it works. The world is quiet. My thoughts slow. My chest loosens. I hear a notification buzz softly in my pocket, but I ignore it, feeling too drained to check who it's from. Maybe it's better not knowing, I think. Still, the thought of it lingers at the edge of my mind like a whisper that refuses to fade.

Then—

Something shifts in the corner of my eye. A shape. A silhouette. A familiarity my body recognises before my brain does.

I glance. I just glance, just long enough to see *him*. Laker. Standing in the car park talking to someone. His head turns in my direction; I can just picture his pretty sapphire eyes in my head. My stomach drops. My head snaps back down so fast I'm surprised I don't give myself whiplash. I turn slightly, as if the pavement has suddenly become the most fascinating thing I've ever seen in my life.

But it's too late. He's already seen me.

'Chris!'

His voice cuts through the quiet like a stone through glass. Footsteps follow—quick, uneven, desperate.

I squeeze my eyes shut for half a second. So much for peace. So much for five minutes of normal.

And then he's there, right in front of me. I try to keep walking, keep my head down, but he places his big hands on my shoulders and stops me.

I say nothing, try to keep my head down, I want to

keep my head down but another huge part of me just wants to see his face again.

In this moment, I realise how much I miss him, how great a hug, just a hug would be from him right now. I miss the feeling of his velvety lips touching mine. I can still remember the scent of his cologne, the one that matched my own, always leaving me feeling safe and wrapped in warmth. That familiar smell that brings back flashes of us laughing together, the world fading around us, just for that moment.

‘What do you want, Laker?’ I finally say, the words slipping out on a tired sigh.

‘Can we talk?’ he asks as I raise my eyes to meet his.

‘Oh, so now you want to *talk*?’ I reply, flat and tired.

He drags his fingers through that lovely, thick brown hair of his and lets out a small, defeated sigh. ‘I wanted to talk before, but you just... disappeared. Ever since the night of the big game, you’ve been off the face of the earth.’

‘D’you blame me?’ I mutter.

He reaches out his hand, ‘Take it.’

I hesitate to, *should I?*

My gaze drops to the ground instead, to the crushed brown leaves scattered across the pavement—brittle, broken, stepped on. I can’t help thinking how stupidly poetic it is that they look exactly how my chest feels. When I finally lift my eyes again, his eyes are waiting for me. And for the first time, I see something there that

wasn't there before.

Slowly, almost against my own better judgment, I move my hand toward his. My fingers brush the edges of his before I finally let him take it.

Laker gives a gentle tug, already pulling me along.

'Where are we going?' I ask.

'You'll see.'

My curiosity gets the better of me—and pretending I'm not enjoying this tiny moment with him would be a lie. I can feel warmth creeping back into places inside me that have felt cold for days. I know it won't last. I know I shouldn't let it.

But for now... I let myself have it.

The scenery around me blurs as my focus narrows to him, to the steady pull of his hand around mine. And yet, as we walk, something settles in me—a strange comfort, a flicker of familiarity. He's taking me somewhere I know. Somewhere I've felt safe before.

I glance around and realise we're surrounded by trees, stretching out in every direction, tall and quiet and watching. If I didn't trust him as much as I do, I'd swear this is the part where he drags me into the woods to kill me. But I know that's not who he is.

No—the only thing I'm in danger of losing out here is whatever's left of my soul.

Though honestly, I gave him most of that the moment I walked away.

Eventually, we reach it.

E L I J A H N O X L E Y

It looks different without the winter snow—softer somehow, less harsh, as the world has thawed just enough to let memories breathe again. The ground is a patchwork of new grass and damp earth, the trees standing tall around us like quiet sentries. The air smells of pine and something faintly sweet, the kind of scent that only appears when spring is trying its best to take over.

And then I see it.

He's been here already.

His tent was pitched neatly beneath the tallest tree.

A small fire pit arranged with care, ready to be lit.

Little signs of preparation everywhere—footprints in the soil, a folded blanket, some cheap battery-operated LED string lights that are just about visible in the daylight.

He brought me back to the place where everything started. Where *we* hid from the world before the world knew about us. Where we laughed, argued, kissed, and pretended reality didn't exist. The place that held our secrets long before anyone else did.

Our spot.

The one that helped our love blossom, even when we were terrified to let it. And standing here now, with him beside me, it feels like the whole forest is holding its breath along with me.

'Laker... what is all this?'

'An apology... sort of maybe,' he says, twiddling his

thumbs.

‘And you expected to bring me here to do what? Return straight back to how things were? Have one last hurrah and pretend you weren’t leaving?’

‘No, no, it’s not like that at all, Christopher,’ Laker insists, shaking his head.

‘Then what is it like?’ I growl.

‘I just wanted to talk. I can’t give up on us that easily. There has to be a way to fix this.’ His eyes dart down, hesitating before he finally speaks again. ‘I got an offer from Liverpool United. It’s a two-year contract, Chris. This is everything I’ve been working for.’

‘There is only one way to fix... this Lake. And that’s by you not going, how do you expect us to work out when you are a thousand miles away?’ I move toward the small triangle fishing stool and lower myself into it, slow and deliberate. I don’t tell him I’m still hoping. I don’t tell him I’m giving him a chance. But sitting down feels like saying it anyway—a quiet invitation, a small surrender I’m not ready to admit out loud.

Laker stays standing. The space between us is small, but it feels impossibly wide. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, hands flexing uselessly at his sides before he finally lowers himself onto the log opposite me. Not too close but somehow still not far enough away.

For a moment, neither of us speaks.

The fire pit sits cold between us.

He looks at me. Looking deeply as if this is the first time he has seen me. I feel it before I meet his glimmering eyes.

‘Chris...’ he says softly.

I swallow. My fingers curl around the hem of my jumper, knuckles whitening. ‘Yeah.’

He leans forward, elbows on his knees, head bowed. His hair falls into his face, and he pushes it back with a shaky hand. ‘I don’t want this to be the end.’

I breathe out slowly. ‘Then don’t go.’

His jaw tightens. He doesn’t answer. He doesn’t have to. The silence is the answer. I look away, blinking hard. The trees blur for a second. When I look back, he’s watching me with that same expression—regret, longing, something like fear.

He reaches out, hesitates, then lets his hand fall between us, palm up. I stare at it while my chest aches. Then I place my hand in his. His fingers close around my hand instantly, like he’s been waiting for permission to breathe.

‘Chris...’ he whispers again, voice cracking this time.

I shake my head. ‘Don’t.’

He looks like he’s being pulled apart by a huge pair of invisible hands. ‘Chris...’ he tries again, voice barely there.

I watch him. The way his eyes flicker between me and the ground. The way he keeps rubbing the heel of his palm against his chest like he’s trying to calm a heartbeat that won’t listen. The way he looks at me like I’m

home—and at the same time, like I’m the thing he has to walk away from to survive.

And suddenly, it hits me.

He’s not choosing against me. He’s choosing for himself. For *his* future. For the thing he’s worked his whole life for. And it’s killing him.

I remember our shared victory on the pitch, the way we celebrated under the floodlights, the uncontainable joy in his eyes that mirrored my own. We were a team back then—not just in the game, but in everything. How seamlessly we meshed our ambition with our intimacy. Standing shoulder to shoulder, we felt like nothing could come between us.

Now, that shared triumph feels like a haunting memory—a reminder of what we once had and what might be lost. The choice between love and career should never have felt like a betrayal, yet here we are. It hurts to see the ambitions we could have celebrated together pulling us apart.

He drags a hand through his hair again, fingers trembling. ‘I don’t know what to do,’ he whispers. ‘I want both. I want you. And I want this chance. And I can’t have both. I can’t—’ His voice breaks. He presses his palms to his eyes, shoulders curling inward like he’s trying to fold himself into something smaller.

Something inside me softens.

He nods, swallowing hard. His thumb brushes the back of my hand—slow, almost apologetic. It says

everything he can't.

I shift closer. He mirrors me, and our knees touch, but neither of us pulls away.

'If I stay,' he murmurs, 'I lose everything I've worked for.'

'If you go,' I whisper back, 'I lose you.'

His breath stutters. He lifts his hand to my cheek, fingertips barely touching, like he's afraid I'll break... or he will.

I lean into it. He closes his eyes, exhaling shakily. 'I'm sorry.'

'I know.'

He opens his eyes again, and for a moment, we just look at each other like we're memorising the shape of this moment, the shape of us.

Then he leans in. Slowly.

Giving me time to pull away, but I don't.

Our lips meet, soft, trembling, full of everything we're about to lose. His hand slides to the back of my neck, mine to his chest, feeling the frantic beat of his heart against my palm. It's not a kiss that fixes anything. It's a kiss that says goodbye without saying the word. When our lips finally part, our foreheads rest together, breaths mingling, eyes closed.

'We'll be okay,' he whispers.

'Yeah,' I lie.

'They're picking me up tomorrow after our last exam, will you come see me off?' he asks gently.

‘I—I don’t... sure.’ I agree, knowing that it will break me apart, but also aware that if I don’t see him one last time, I will regret it.

We sit there for a long moment, hands still tangled, neither of us ready to let go.

Eventually, we do. And we walk back in silence, side by side but already drifting a million miles apart.



I stand at a distance, far enough away that he can’t see me, but close enough that *I* could reach him if I changed my mind. He’s waiting for it to arrive—the almighty chariot that will take him away from Braeburn, away from me.

I can’t bring myself to let him see me. To let him see me watch him go.

This isn’t how I pictured our story ending. I always knew there was a chance we wouldn’t last forever—what University romance does, statistically speaking. But we were never just a “University romance,” *were we?* What we had was forged in fire, trust, and discovery. We know each other in ways most couples can only dream of.

I wipe the tear slipping down my cheek, my chest tightening as I watch him stand there alone. No one to wave him off. No one to tell him they’ll miss him. No one even seems to notice he’s leaving.

And something about that... breaks me in an entirely different way.

E L I J A H N O X L E Y

I can't let it end like this. Not with him thinking he's walking away from a life that won't even look up to see him go. This time, I have to be the bigger person. Because once he steps into that car, once the door shuts, once the engine roars and pulls him away—*that's it*. There's no fixing the way we left things if I stay hidden in the shadows like a coward.

My breath shakes.

My feet feel glued to the ground.

But my heart... my heart is already moving toward him.

If I don't go now, I'll regret it for the rest of my life.

So, I take one step.

Then another.

And another.

Each step is heavier than the last, but somehow easier too—like the universe is nudging me forward, whispering that our love is too strong to let go that easily.

I'm trembling inside, terrified of what he might say, terrified he might not want me here at all. My hands stay buried in my uni-pocket, hood up, head down, as I make my slow, humiliating walk toward him.

And then suddenly... I'm here.

I lift my head just enough to meet his eyes—those piercing, bright blue irises I'm not sure I'll ever see again.

'Hey, you,' he says, voice cracking like he's holding back tears.

'Hey.'

He shakes his head, a sad little huff of disbelief. 'Well, by the looks of it, I'm not going anywhere. The car was supposed to be here ten minutes ago.'

I reach for his arm, gently. 'Relax. It'll come. In the meantime, would it be okay if I—I just sit and wait with you?'

His eyes soften. 'I'd like that.'

I grab one of his heavy duffel bags, he takes the other, and together we walk toward an empty bench. Our shoulders brush once—just once—but it's enough to send a warm ache through my chest.

'So... that's it between us?' he asks, voice barely steady.

'It has to be, I think. This is still too fresh for us to force it into something long-distance and complicated. Anyway, I've been thinking.'

'Oh dear,' he chuckles weakly. 'You know you really shouldn't do that.'

'Do what?' I ask.

'Think...' He bursts into a chuckle.

I slap his arm. 'Enough, you.' I laugh, but it's soft, fragile. 'No, really though, I've thought a little... well, a lot. And this could be a good thing for us both, Lake.'

'How do you mean?' he asks, brow creasing.

'Well... this whole thing, being gay and all, it's really new to us. And let's be honest, neither of us has much experience. So maybe this will let us go out, explore, rediscover ourselves. But will finding freedom in this exploration mean embracing solitude, or will it guide us

towards a new sense of community?’

‘I—’ He stops. His eyes drop to the ground.

‘What?’

‘I can’t. Not without you. I can’t...’

‘Sure—you can,’ I say gently. ‘You can go out and meet someone. Lots of other people’s. I hear Liverpool has a good scene too—*Pride Quarter*, I think it’s called...’

He huffs a tiny laugh. ‘You really have done your research, eh?’

‘Well, I needed something to keep me off that fucking Burnblog...’ I mutter.

He smiles—small, sad, almost grateful. ‘A fresh start. Just when I thought I had that.’

I take a breath, steadying myself. ‘Sometimes we have to make the choices that are best for us. I kinda get that now. I know you weren’t being selfish. I know you do love me. You just... need to follow this path. And that’s okay.’

His smile falters. His throat works around a swallow. His fingers twitch like he wants to reach for me, but doesn’t trust himself to. For a moment, neither of us speaks. The silence between us is warm and aching.

A black car pulls up, sleek and silent, and a man steps out from the driver’s side, holding a sign, the way posh people are greeted at airports.

“LAKER LUXTON”

‘Well... guess that’s you,’ I say, grabbing his bag. The metallic clunk of the handle echoes in the quiet, a small sound that carries the weight of the moment, hinting at the separation to come.

He gives me a semi-smile—the kind that doesn’t reach his eyes—and we walk together to the boot. The driver takes the bags from us, efficiently and wordlessly.

‘I forgot to tell you,’ Laker says suddenly. He hesitates, his eyes flicking to the ground, then back to me. A deep breath follows, his chest rising and falling as if bracing for impact. ‘I told my parents...’

‘And?’

He swallows, the pause pregnant with unspoken turmoil. ‘They said they’d rather have no son at all than have a gay one.’

My chest tightens, a knot forming beneath my ribcage. There’s a warmth creeping up behind my eyes, threatening tears. I swallow hard, trying to keep my voice steady. ‘Lake... you okay?’

‘I’ll have to be,’ he says quietly. ‘But if they can’t love me for who I am, then I don’t really want them in my life. Besides, not like I need their support or money anymore.’

I don’t think. I just moved. As my arms wrap around him, pulling him in tight, one last time, a surge of memories hits me—our first awkward hello, the laughter on rainy days, and every promise whispered in the dark. My mouth finds his ear. ‘You will be alright.’

I feel him tense—just for a second—before he melts into me, arms circling my waist like he’s afraid to let go.

‘I still love you, Chris,’ he whispers, voice breaking.

‘I know,’ I breathe. ‘I love you too. But you,’ I pause, ‘you gotta go.’

When we pull apart, his eyes are bloodshot, his cheeks streaked with tears. I’ve never seen him cry like this. Not Laker. Not the guy who always pretended he was made of steel. He opens the back door of the car, then pauses, turning to look at me one more time. He straightens his shoulders just slightly, a flicker of resolve amid the heartbreak. ‘I’ll never stop loving you.’

My throat closes. ‘Text me once in a while, yeah?’

He nods, a tiny, helpless movement, and slips inside. The door shuts with a soft thud that feels louder than a gunshot. I stand there, staring through the tinted glass. I can barely make out his shape—just the faint outline of him. Then his hand lifts, presses against the window.

I raise mine to meet it, the cold glass between our palms, the slow ticking of the clock as time runs out, the car’s engine roars to life before pulling away, and within seconds, the love of my life is gone.

A DOG COMES INTO OUR LIFE FOR A REASON

The constant hum of my phone vibrating against the wooden dorm desk fills the air, an unending reminder that my private life is public fodder. It's been days since Laker left, but Burnblog's still chewing on our breakup like it happened this morning.

Level Three Burn 🔥 x3

"Aww... poorballer got dumped & benched. Looks like Laker finally realised he needed a real man, not whatever Braeburn's poorballer was trying to be. Chin up, Chrissy... practice makes perfect, if you ever get the chance. - xcX BB"

'I just don't get it...' I say, frustration bubbling in my chest.

'Get wit?' Adam asks, looking up from his phone.

'How could you get that blog post *so* wrong. That is *not* why we broke up.'

'They're just trying to regain control,' he says. 'You

must've upset them when you and Laker took over that dining hall.'

'Why has no one ever taken these bastards down?' I ask.

'Not sure, mate. Probably because nobody actually knows who they are.'

'Well, thank fuck I'm almost done here. Dunno if I'll return for a second year after this, to be honest. Might just get a job in a shop or something. Be easier.'

'Yer no gonna continue football?' he asks, eyebrows shooting up.

'Nope.'

'Then why the fuck did ye no leave with Laker!'

'I had already made my decision. And so did he, Adam. If he'd changed his mind... if he'd decided to stay for my sake... then yeah, I probably would've left with him.'

Adam throws his hands up. 'Well, if yer no comin' back, no finishin' yer course, then go-and-get-him, you twat!'

I freeze, Adam's words hanging in the air. It hits me harder than any blog post ever could, all the noise fading as I process what he just said. There's a sudden shift inside, like a gear turning in an old clock, finally clicking into place.

'I can't...' I whisper, unsure now if I'm arguing with him or with myself.

'Ye bloody well can! After listenin' tae you the full

year, what have ye actually got goin' on back home?' Adam insists.

'My brother. My sister. They both need me.'

'Excuses, Chris! There's literally nothing stoppin' you from goin' and gettin' him. Yer just scared tae admit ye were wrong.'

I flop back onto my bed, staring at the ceiling.

But I can't just go and get Laker like that. We said our goodbyes. It was pretty clear to me that, for all intents and purposes, it was well and truly over between us.

'Nah,' I say, forcing a shrug. 'We've got two more days here before we need to be packed up and out. I'm just gonna pack, say my goodbyes to Kaylan, and head off. Start fresh.'

'Yer an idiot,' he huffs.

I know what he's trying to say, but I just can't bring myself to do it. It's been a few days now, and I haven't even had so much as a "hey, I arrived okay" text from Laker. A part of me is terrified that maybe I was never as important to him as he was to me, that while I've been trying to move forward, he's moved on completely. It feels like confirming that lingering fear that I was just a temporary chapter in his life.

I mean... I clearly wasn't man enough for him, just like the post said. He left too easily. And besides, where would they have even got that from? To say something like that? It had to have been *him* who told someone.

Nah.

E L I J A H N O X L E Y

A clean break is what I need.

A fresh start.

That's what I'm telling myself, anyway.



As I zipped open my trusty old duffel, the sharp snap of the latch seemed to echo off the bare walls, a stark contrast to the bustling chaos my room once was. The stale scent of neglected books and crumpled notes hung in the air, mingling with the faint odour of last night's attempt to empty the mini-fridge. I spent the morning clearing my things away. It wasn't until I started packing that I realised how much rubbish I'd managed to collect over the year. Half of it went straight into the bin, leaving me with much lighter luggage. I took my textbooks to the library and handed them over to Nona, the librarian, figuring they might help some poor soul next year.

With everything packed and the room looking strangely bare, I headed for the showers for one last scrub in the splash-and-dash cubicles. I started calling them that months ago—you really do have to splash and dash with how crowded they get.

Honestly, if there's one improvement they could make to these buildings, it's bigger shower spaces. Some of the guys here aren't exactly... compact. Let's just say elbows aren't the only things you bump into.

After my scrub-down, I head out to Refuel.

The door opens with a smooth glide, and I'm greeted

by a sense of relief. She finally got the oil for it, I guess. Nice not having it scream at me on the way in.

The shop is quiet, not a soul in sight. Everyone must be too busy wrapping up their year.

‘Kaylan?’ I call.

‘In the back! Be out in a second.’

Well, no, you won’t, because I’ll just come get you.

‘Hey,’ I say as I poke my head through the beads.

‘Oh, Heartbreaker—it’s you.’ She stops tugging at a box and flicks her head around. ‘Fancy giving me a hand?’

‘For you? Anytime.’ I move over, lift the box myself, and place it in the storage room.

‘Damn, when did you get so buff?’ she asks.

‘Playing football non-stop for a year has that effect on the body,’ I laugh.

‘That you come to say your finals?’

‘Yeah. All packed and ready to go.’

‘You heard from him yet?’ she asks.

‘No. I was talking to Adam about that this morning. They posted on the blog about us—saying Laker left because I wasn’t, quote, unquote... man enough.’

She freezes, eyes widening. ‘Well, ain’t that some pile of dog shit.’

‘Yeah. Then I mentioned I was looking forward to not having to deal with it, and that I might not be back next year cause I’ve no intention of continuing my course... and he started rambling on about me letting

Laker leave, and why didn't I just go with him if I knew I wasn't going to continue. He just doesn't get it.'

Kaylan freezes again—like she's buffering. 'Why didn't you go?'

'Ugh, not this again. He made his choice to leave me... not the other way around.'

She tilts her head, studying me. 'You sure that's how it was?'

'Uhm, yeah... You were there for most of it, *he* left *me* remember?'

Kaylan moves to lift another box. 'See, I remember him deciding to go and chase his dream—but *he* didn't—I didn't—And by the sounds of it, your roommate didn't even know—you, had no real intention of staying on after this year... so...' She trails off.

'So?' I ask.

'So,' she says, turning to face me fully, 'it sounds to me like you, my dear, are the one who left Laker.'

'No—'

Kaylan fixes me with a stare sharp enough to cut. 'No ifs, buts, or coconuts, Heartbreaker. You had a choice. You had a way of keeping the two of you together. And *you* alone decided not to follow through. Why was that? Because it certainly wasn't because you didn't love him.' Her words sting, piercing through my defences. For a fleeting second, a knot of fear twists in my stomach—a fear that maybe, just maybe, she's right.

My mouth opens, but nothing comes out. A cold,

sinking feeling crawls up my spine.

‘No—’

The word feels thin, useless. I swallow, trying to re-register what she just said.

‘No, it wasn’t like that...’

‘You sure? What else did Adam have to say to you?’

‘He said I should go get Laker, said it like I could just call him, and everything would be hunky-dory...’

She fixes me with another stare.

‘What?’

A beat.

‘Go-and-get-him.’

‘I can’t! Look,’ I say, rubbing the back of my neck, ‘they say a dog comes into your life for a reason, and once it’s served its purpose it either moves on or dies... that’s exactly what’s happened with Laker and me.’

‘You’re just spouting rubbish now. Get on a plane. Go to Liverpool. You know where you can find him.’

‘I don’t,’ I snap, louder than I mean to. ‘I don’t know where he is. I don’t know where he’s staying. I don’t know anything!’

Kaylan goes still. Not shocked, more like she’s finally reached the part she didn’t want to say.

‘Yeah... you do,’ she murmurs.

I frown. ‘What’re you talking about?’

She sighs, walks over to the counter, and pulls open the drawer beneath it, rummages for a second, then takes out a folded, crumpled piece of paper.

‘He came here before he left,’ she says quietly. ‘Stopped in for a drink. Said goodbye. And he gave me this.’

She holds the note out to me.

My stomach drops.

‘Why... why didn’t he give it to me?’ I ask, barely above a whisper.

Kaylan looks at me like she’s seeing straight through every excuse I’ve made.

‘Because he thought you didn’t want it, Chris. He thought you’d already made your choice.’

I stare at the note in my hand—his handwriting, his name, the hotel address staring back at me like a lifeline I didn’t know I’d lost.

Kaylan steps closer.

‘You didn’t lose him,’ she says softly. ‘You let him go. Now go fix it.’

‘I really messed up, didn’t I...’

‘Just temporarily. You two are *meant* to be together. Now stop talking, give me a hug, and head straight for that fucking airport!’

I pull her into a hug, holding on a second longer than I mean to. When I step back, I look down at the note in my hand, then back at her—my rock through this entire year. Something inside me sparks, a little bounce in my chest like excitement finally breaking free.

I grin.

The first in days.

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

Then I'm running out the door, up the winding road, calling a cab while I sprint back to my room to grab my stuff.

When I get there, Adams is nowhere to be seen. Typical. I grab a scrap of paper and scribble:

"Thank you for being like a brother to me.

May the force be with you.

And thank you for making me see I made the wrong choice.

I'm off to get Laker. Text me sometime <3"

I leave it on his pillow, sling my bag over my shoulder, and bolt downstairs.

And then I'm standing there—in the exact same spot he left me three days ago—heart pounding, cab on the way, note in my pocket, and for the first time since he left, I have hope.

The cab ride to the airport felt like it took an eternity. Each red light seemed deliberate, as if the universe itself was testing just how badly I wanted to fix things. Somewhere along the motorway, I tried to book my flight, but my hands were shaking so much I kept hitting the wrong letters. At one point, I opened Laker's chat and typed a whole paragraph. I stared at it until the words blurred. But I couldn't send it. What if the answer was something I couldn't face? So, I deleted the lot, pretending I hadn't even tried. The driver glanced at me in the mirror, probably wondering if I was about to

explode from my own anxiety.

Check-in was quick, too quick. It was as if the world was suddenly in cooperation, having mocked my previous agony. Security, on the other hand, dragged on. Shoes off, belt off, laptop out. Every step felt like a re-examination of my choices; each pocket emptied felt like exposing more of myself than I had intended. Still, despite the lengthy process, my focus stayed locked on that note in my pocket, reassuring me of the reason I was here, the rightness of this sprint to Liverpool.

But none of it mattered. Because now I'm here. On the plane.

The seatbelt clicked over my waist. Bag shoved under the seat. Heart pounding so hard I can feel it in my throat. The engines hum beneath me, a low vibration that settles into my bones. People around me are chatting, scrolling, yawning—like this is just another flight, just another day of the week.

For me, it's everything.

I stare out the window at the runway lights, tiny dots stretching into the distance. I imagine Laker somewhere out there, maybe asleep, maybe awake, maybe thinking about me, maybe not. My stomach twists at the thought. I grip the armrest, knuckles white.

For the first time in days, I'm heading in the right direction.

The engines hum as the plane settles into its climb. I try to focus on the seatback in front of me, but my leg

won't stop bouncing. It's like my body's trying to run even though I'm strapped into a metal tube, soon to be thirty thousand feet in the air.

The man beside me—mid-fifties, business-casual, smells faintly of booze—glances over.

'You alright?' he asks, not unkindly.

'Yeah. Tired... Just... long morning.'

He nods. 'Airports'll do that to you, young man, wait till you're my age.' He laughs. I think of the clue he mentioned earlier, regret. It's not just the travel stress—it's also this heavy doubt gnawing at me. I wonder if the businessman's regret, the seven-letter word he's searching for, mirrors my own uncertainty. My chest feels hollowed out and stuffed with bees, not just because of the flight, but because of everything unresolved between Laker and me.

We lapse into silence. He pulls out a crossword. I stare out the window, watching the clouds swallow the world below. It's strange—everything looks peaceful from up here. Like the mess I made of things that can't reach me at this altitude.

After a minute, he says, 'You heading home or heading away?'

'Away,' I say. 'Kind of last-minute.'

He chuckles. 'Those are the best ones. The impulsive trips. Means something got you off your butt.'

I swallow. *Yeah. Something.*

'Yeah,' I say. 'Something like that.'

He doesn't pry. Bless him. He just nods and goes back to his crossword, muttering something about a seven-letter word for "regret". I almost laugh.

If he only knew.

I shift in my seat, trying to get comfortable, but my heart's still hammering. I keep thinking about the note in my pocket. His handwriting. The address. The fact that he gave it to Kaylan, not to me. The fact that he thought *I* wouldn't want it.

A few minutes later, the man taps his pen against the paper. 'You know, every time I've taken a last-minute flight, it's been for something important. Weddings, funerals, proposals, apologies... life stuff.'

Life stuff—yeah, that's one way to put it.

I look at him. He's still focused on his crossword, completely unaware he's just punched me in the ribs with a single sentence.

'Hope yours is a good one,' he adds casually.

I manage a small smile. 'I hope so too.'

He goes quiet again, and I let my head fall back against the seat. My thoughts won't stop spinning. *What if he's angry? What if he's moved on? What if I'm too late? What if I'm exactly on time?* The plane hits a small bump of turbulence. My stomach flips. The man beside me doesn't even look up.

I close my eyes and breathe.

The wheels hit the runway with a heavy thud, and the jolt snaps me out of the half-daze I'd fallen into. I glance

at my watch: 3:47pm. Around me, the impatient earlys—as I call them—are already reaching for their bags even though the plane has barely touched the ground. Some are stretching, checking their phones, but I stay still for a moment, letting the reality of it settle. I've actually made it. I'm in Liverpool. The city he ran to. The city I'm hoping he hasn't run away from.

As the plane slows and turns towards the terminal, my palms start to sweat again. The man beside me closes his crossword book neatly and gives me a small nod, the kind people give when they don't know your story but can tell you're carrying something heavy.

'Good luck, son,' he says as he stands, and before I can reply, he's already in the herd moving down the aisle.

I force myself to stand, my legs unsteady, my bag suddenly feeling heavier than it did when I boarded. The air that hits me as I step off the plane is cooler, sharper, and it wakes me up in a way that feels almost cruel. I follow the stream of passengers through the jet bridge and into the terminal, where the noise hits me all at once—announcements echoing overhead, suitcases rattling across the floor, people greeting each other with hugs and laughter. It's too much and not enough at the same time.

I keep one hand in my pocket, fingers brushing the folded note, the one thing anchoring me to the reason I'm here.

His handwriting. His name. The address. Proof that

he didn't want to disappear completely, even if he thought I didn't want him.

The arrivals hall stretches out below me, full of faces and signs and movement, and for a moment I feel completely out of place, like I've stepped into someone else's life. My stomach twists as I scan the crowd without meaning to, even though I keep telling myself not to expect anything because he doesn't even know I'm coming. I'm not here for a dramatic reunion in the middle of an airport. I'm here to find my bag, get a taxi, and go to the hotel where he *might* be. That's the plan.

What if he's angry? What if he's already left? What if I've come all this way only to find out I'm too late? The questions pile up until I feel like I'm carrying all of them on my shoulders.

When I reach the gates, the crowd swallows me instantly. Someone bumps into me, someone else mutters an apology, and I move through it all like I'm underwater, my mind fixed on one thought: he's somewhere in this city. Somewhere close enough to reach.

Passport control is a row of e-gates glowing green and red, a line of tired travellers shuffling forward one by one. I join the queue, trying not to stare at the clock on the wall. Every minute feels like it's being stolen from me. The line moves quickly, but not quickly enough.

When it's my turn, I step into the gate, place my passport on the scanner, and stare at my own face on the

screen. I look exhausted. Pale. Like someone who hasn't slept properly in days. The machine takes its time—too much time—flashing between 'Processing...' and my face that doesn't look like my face on the screen. My heart thumps harder with every second.

Come on.

Come on.

The gate finally clicks open, and I step through, resisting the urge to sprint.

Only then do I take a steadying lungful and start walking towards baggage claim, telling myself this is the first step. Find my bag. Then I find him.

The carousel groans to life, and bags begin to appear, none of them mine. The crowd thins as people collect their luggage and head for the exit, leaving me with the last few stragglers and the dull hum of the belt. When my suitcase finally emerges, scuffed and slightly misshapen, I haul it off and steady myself with a breath that doesn't quite settle.

I follow the signs towards the exit, the wheels of my suitcase rattling across the floor in a rhythm that feels too loud in my ears. My mind keeps trying to prepare me for disappointment—a hotel room that was checked out before I got here, a polite conversation, a door that stays closed—but my chest refuses to accept any of it.

The arrivals hall opens up in front of me, bright and noisy and crowded. Families reunite with loud hugs, couples kiss, and children run in circles around suitcases.

I keep my head down, weaving through the clusters of people, telling myself not to expect anything. Not to imagine anything. Not to—

I stop walking.

A large handmade sign stands out among the printed ones, held up by a pair of tired hands. Written in thick black marker, the letters are uneven, and the cardboard is bent at the corners as if it's been held for far too long.

For a moment, I genuinely think it must be for someone else. No one knows I'm here; no one knew I was coming... I glance behind me, half-expecting another guy with the last name Daley to be approaching, but when I look back, the sign lowers just enough for me to see the face behind it.

No.

No, that can't be—

Laker!

His hair is a mess, his eyes are red-rimmed, and there's a worn, anxious tension in his expression that tells me he's been here far longer than he should've been. He looks exhausted in a way that isn't just physical. He looks like someone who didn't know if I'd actually show up, but I came anyway.

My duffle handle slips from my hand.

I move without thinking, cutting through the crowd until I'm standing in front of him. Up close, I can see the smudges of marker on his fingers, the faint tremor in his hands, the way he keeps blinking like he's afraid I'll

disappear if he ever looks away again.

‘Chris...?’ he says, barely above a whisper.

‘How did you even know—’

‘Kaylan called,’ he says, swallowing hard. ‘She told me you were coming. I got here hours ago. I didn’t want to miss you. Why didn’t you call? Or even send a text...’

Something inside me gives way.

The sign slips from his hands and hits the floor, forgotten.

He steps forward, and something in my chest cracks open as he holds me with a force that knocks the breath out of my lungs. It’s like the first time I ever borrowed his hoodie back on campus, the worn cotton warm against my skin, anchoring me in a moment that felt too good to be real. Relief, guilt, and love all tangled together as I meet him halfway.

His arms wrap around me, almost like he’s been holding himself together by sheer will and finally can’t anymore. His forehead presses into my shoulder, and I feel the shudder of his breath against my neck.

I hold him just as tightly, my hands gripping the back of his jacket, grounding myself in the warmth of him, the reality of him, the fact that he’s here and I’m here, and somehow, we’ve found our way back to this moment.

He starts to move away from me.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Grabbing your bag before they think it’s an abandoned—’

He mouths the next word.

‘What?’

He mouths it again. It takes my tired brain a second to catch up.

Oh. Bomb.

‘Right. Yeah. Maybe don’t say that in here.’

He nods in agreement, ‘I thought I’d never see you again,’ he murmurs, voice unsteady as we make for the doors. But as we step out into the bustling world, a small flicker of doubt tugs at the edge of my mind—what if the issues that drove us apart before resurface again? I push it aside, determined to embrace the moment. ‘I thought you wouldn’t want to,’ I say quietly.

He pulls back just enough to look at me, his hands coming up to cradle my face, thumbs brushing my cheeks with a tenderness that makes my chest ache.

‘I can’t believe you’re actually here, don’t ever leave me again,’ He says.

‘I won’t.’

We make our way out of the automatic doors. The cold air bites at my cheeks, butterflies flickering in my stomach. I couldn’t be happier.

‘Wait till you see the apartment,’ he says, grin breaking through the exhaustion. ‘Fuck me, it’s awesome—the bed is huge.’ His words hang in the air, but what anchors me is the feel of his hand, solid and reassuring in mine against the cold night. The crisp air bites at my cheeks, but all I can focus on is the warmth radiating from our

F O R T H E O T H E R T E A M

intertwined fingers. I couldn't be happier.

Acknowledgement

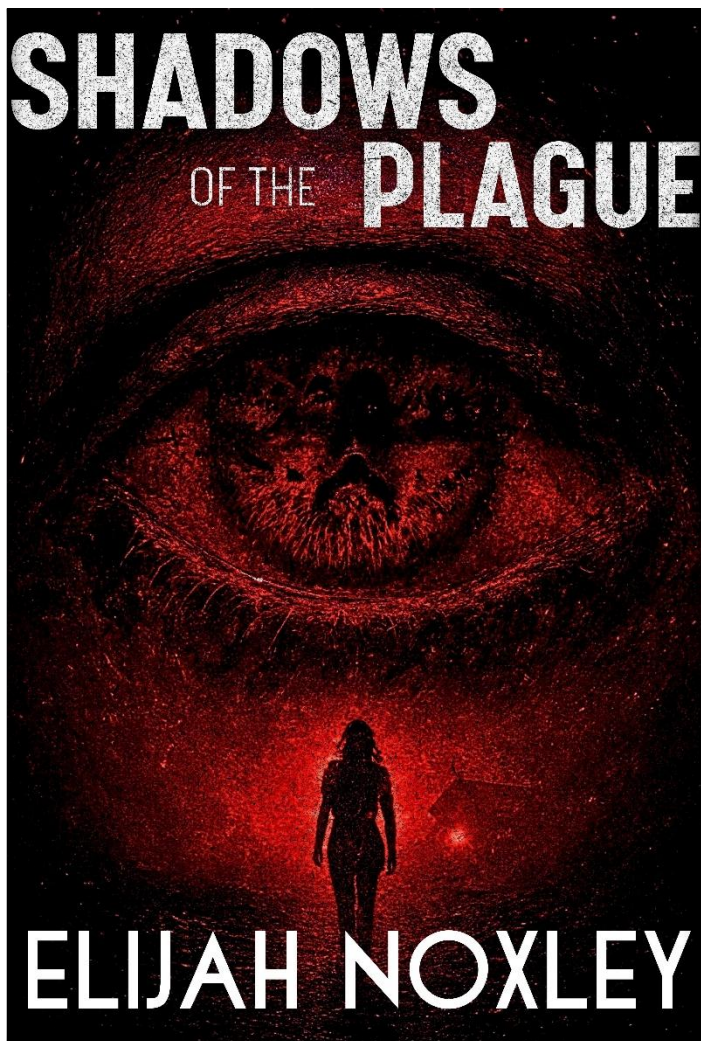
Thank you to the reader for picking up this book and choosing to spend your time with these characters. Stories only come alive when someone is willing to step into them, and the fact that you stepped into mine means more than I can say.

If you saw yourself in these pages—in the fear, the hope, the messiness, the love—I'm glad you found something here that spoke to you.

If Christopher and Laker's story made you feel understood, less alone, or simply gave you a place to breathe for a while, **thank you** for letting it.

Simply by you reading this novel, you gave it a home outside my head, and that's a gift I'll never take for granted.

Also, By The Author



Available on
amazonkindle

About This Author

Elijah Noxley is a rising multi-genre author whose work blends gripping storytelling with emotionally resonant characters. After debuting in sci-fi with *Shadows of The Plague*, Noxley expanded into MM Sports Romance with their second novel, *For The Other Team*, showcasing a growing range and a talent for character-driven narratives across genres.

Noxley grew up immersed in books, films, and anything with a compelling plot. Influenced by both novelists and screenwriters, they spent years refining their craft, developing a style marked by vivid world-building, emotional depth, and a cinematic sense of pacing.

When not writing, Noxley draws inspiration from new places, unexpected conversations, and the small moments that spark big ideas. They continue to build a body of work that invites readers into stories shaped by imagination, heart, and authenticity.

One thing this author will always ask: **Please leave a review for the books you read.** Reviews not only support the author's body of work, but they also help new readers discover stories that are the perfect fit for them.

Dear Reader,

Thank you for embarking on this journey with me through the pages of this book. Your support means the world to me, and I hope the story resonates with you.

If you enjoy reading this book, I would be incredibly grateful if you could take a moment to **leave a review.**

Your feedback not only helps other readers discover this story, but it also encourages me as a writer and fuels my passion for writing.

Every review, no matter how brief, makes a significant difference. Thank you for being a part of my literary adventure and for your invaluable support.