

Lima Oscar Victor Echo

ΓΙΜΑ ΟΣΚΑΡ ΒΙΚΤΟΡ ΕΧΟ

A man with dark hair and a serious expression is looking through a circular opening in a dark, possibly metallic, surface. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting his eyes and the texture of the surface. The background is dark and indistinct.

... and the truth  
about everything ...

Suki Fleet

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## LIMA OSCAR VICTOR ECHO AND THE TRUTH ABOUT EVERYTHING

By Suki Fleet

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors,

Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# LIMA OSCAR VICTOR ECHO AND THE TRUTH ABOUT EVERYTHING

By Suki Fleet

## Photo Description

Two young men sit on a wooden bench overlooking the countryside. The men sit with their backs to us. They have their arms around one another, and their bowed heads are touching. They look to be lovers.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I saw this picture and would love to know their story.*

*These two are either long-term friends or lovers, not sure which. They should be happy but for some reason they feel sad to me, maybe they have lost someone close or even a beloved pet. I don't really know. One of them could be ill or going away. Could you please write their story?*

I would like a HEA/HFN, not sci-fi or historical please, everything else is good.

*Sincerely,*

*Tracy G*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary, new adult

**Tags:** first kiss, first time, visual arts, musician, coming out, friends to lovers, family drama, teaching, college student

**Word Count:** 27,489

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Heartfelt thanks also to Tracy G for the inspiration for this story.

*Author's Note*

The South Wales Valleys (Welsh: Cymoedd De Cymru) are a number of industrialised valleys in South Wales. Commonly referred to locally as “the Valleys”.



# LIMA OSCAR VICTOR ECHO AND THE TRUTH ABOUT EVERYTHING

By Suki Fleet

*Oscar*

*If there was one thing you could change about yourself, what would it be?*

The words were projected starkly across the back wall of the lecture hall. The lecturer, Ms De Silva, let them stay there a minute as she stared around at the dozen or so students seated at their tables in front of her.

Everyone was silent.

It wasn't a question that had to be answered aloud or even written in the notebooks they all had open in front of them; it was just to make them think. It was to "get them thinking honestly," she'd say. After all, this was an animation lecture, not a psychology one. But Ms De Silva always said to make good art you had to know yourself. You had to be unafraid of the truth, however painful it might be.

Thing was, Oscar didn't have to think too hard about that question. What he'd change was simple enough: he didn't want to be the only gay lad in a fifteen-mile radius.

Because, he reasoned, if he could change that then perhaps he wouldn't be so utterly, heart-quickeningly in love with his straight best friend.

Yeah, if only love was that simple.

Leah nudged his leg with her boot.

Oscar looked up from his notebook. Outside the sun was shining, and the stained glass windows coloured everyone and everything in red, blue, and gold light. For a moment, Oscar thought his vision had gone weird.

"You okay?" Leah mouthed with a frown.

He smiled weakly and nodded, sliding his hand over the massive question mark filled with smaller question marks that he'd drawn across the page in front of him, covering it from view.

Leah was from Newport, the closest big town to Llanitheth, the tiny blink-and-you'll-miss-it village where he was from. Newport was only fifteen miles down the valley, but sometimes it felt about a million miles away.

With her long pink dreadlocks, crooked teeth, and a fuck-you sense of style, Leah was about a million miles away from the girls Oscar knew in the village—the ones who hadn't left as soon as they could, anyway.

Today she wore a tight black dress and over it a sort of chain mail vest that jingled whenever she moved, and long leather boots that creaked when she crossed her legs. Mostly she was softly spoken, but some days she put on hot-pink lipstick and flirted openly with Ms De Silva, and Oscar was fascinated by the way Ms De Silva took it in her stride. It was as though Leah just quietly did whatever she felt like, as if she were truly unafraid.

Maybe it was because Leah hadn't grown up deep in the Valleys like he had, but he liked that she didn't seem to worry about the shit he would have worried about if he were her.

He liked her. In the past seven weeks, since the short animation course at Cardiff University had started, they'd become friends, and Oscar had so few of those nowadays. But there was no way he could tell her how far from okay he actually was at the moment without all his hopeless secrets spilling out. And he doubted she wanted to know those.

Oscar's brain was whirring. He had stuff to think about, but he didn't want to think about it, and neither could he concentrate on the lecture. They only had one a week, and he needed to pay attention. He sighed and drew a few little stick figures with question mark-shaped heads.

Ms De Silva was talking about honesty and the importance of finding connection with your audience. The most honest and connected Oscar had ever felt with anyone was a few months ago, on the same day he realized that, as far as love was concerned, he was fucked.

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*It was a cold Saturday evening in December, and he was staying over at Jamie's house. Oscar had never been there before. High up in the valley it was a more affluent district, and the house was a mansion compared to the miner's cottage Oscar's family lived in. It even had its own drive and a ten-foot hedge surrounded the neat green lawns at the front, side, and back.*

*Surprisingly Jamie's bedroom turned out to be small and cosy, with most of the space taken up by a plain wooden double bed. When Jamie left the room to fetch something to drink, Oscar lay back, running his hands across the rumpled sheets and thinking of Jamie's slender frame splayed out across them, his beautiful eyes closed, his dark curls spread out like a halo. The thought turned Oscar on, and when Jamie returned a few minutes later, Oscar had trouble looking him in the eye, and he wondered if staying over was really such a great idea.*

*Over the past few months, Oscar and Jamie had become close friends, and Oscar had tried and completely failed to quash his increasing attraction.*

*"I got you an orange and a coke... I didn't know which you'd prefer," Jamie said, carefully placing the tray on the floor and making the bed dip as he sat down so close that their thighs were almost touching.*

*Oscar smiled. "Thanks."*

*"What do you want to do? We could watch a film or... maybe jam together?"*

*Jamie gave him a hopeful look. His eyes shone excitedly. Oscar could tell Jamie was trying to keep still and not bounce a little where he was sitting on the bed, but he wasn't sure why Jamie was stopping himself.*

*"I haven't got a musical bone in my body..."*

*"Anyone can play guitar," Jamie said, picking up a battered-looking guitar that was leaning against the wall and handing it to Oscar. "My mum gave me this guitar. I know it's a bit worse for wear, but it's my favourite."*

*It was surprisingly light. Oscar held it carefully, running his fingers across the surface, feeling a few rough spots where the varnish had worn thin. Jamie never spoke about his mum. Oscar knew what had happened at the end of their final year, a few months earlier. He guessed if Jamie wanted to talk about it, he would.*

*Getting bolder, Oscar strummed his fingers across the strings and smiled at the rich, mellow sound they made.*

*There was a second guitar standing in the corner—it was a dark wood one Oscar had seen Jamie play before. Jamie picked it up, and they played together for a while. Strange, peaceful melodies where Oscar did nothing more than play open strings and Jamie wove it into something musical.*

*“I love that you do this,” Jamie said as whatever they’d been playing seemed to come to a natural conclusion.*

*“Do what?” Oscar looked up.*

*“I don’t know. I can’t explain it.” Jamie shrugged with a smile.*

*After that, they sat back on the bed and watched a film. Oscar couldn’t even remember what film it was because a few minutes in, Jamie leaned his head against Oscar’s shoulder and angled his body in, not quite curling against Oscar’s side, but close enough that Oscar couldn’t think about anything else.*

*It was late, and Jamie fell asleep like that. Oscar tentatively touched his hair, but it must have stirred something in Jamie—a memory maybe—because he murmured words that sounded like ‘Don’t go, Mum,’ and then his whole body began shaking with sobs.*

*Oscar didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know whether or not Jamie was completely asleep. But he only hesitated for a second before folding Jamie in his arms and holding him close until his sobbing stopped.*

*As he lay there, feeling closer than he ever had to anyone ever, Oscar realized all he wanted was to take care of this puzzling, skinny boy. This boy who hid how lost he was so well and cried in his sleep. It was the first time Oscar realized he was falling in love, and falling hard.*

*But they were just friends.*

\*\*\*\*

“Want to grab a coffee in the canteen before we go to storyboarding?” Leah asked, dragging Oscar out of his daydream. He glanced around, shocked to see the room emptying, the lecture over.

Leah waited as he hurriedly shoved his notebook into the only intact pocket left on his ancient rucksack.

He was about to say yes, when Ms De Silva called over, “Can I have a quick word, Oscar?”

He shrugged apologetically to Leah. “I’ll meet you in there.”

Now it was empty, the lecture hall seemed full of a deep, hushy quiet. It reminded him of a church.

Trying to ignore his apprehension at what Ms De Silva wanted to talk to him about, he made his way to the front.

At fifty, Ms De Silva was tall and slim and very striking, in a faintly androgynous, imposing way. She wore tight trouser suits and big jewellery, and her sleek grey hair swept down over one eye. Oscar often tried to imagine what she had looked like when she was younger. He could sort of see why Leah found her so attractive.

“So have you made a decision about registering for the final round of the competition yet?” she asked, leaning forwards and resting her arms on her overflowing black satchel on the podium in front of her, while she fixed Oscar with a gaze that made him feel like he was a little spaceship caught in a bigger spaceship’s tractor beam.

Oscar shook his head, looking away at the spectacular mosaic that covered the floor. Even though some of the tiles were worn and cracked right through, the patterns they made were beautiful.

“The closing date is tomorrow,” she said gently, tilting her head and trying to catch his eye.

Oscar knew exactly when the closing date for registering was. He’d surprised himself by having the balls to enter in the first place. Channel 4’s specifically ‘gay-themed’ animation competition had caught his eye when he’d seen it advertised a few months ago and was just beginning to post his first few short films online. He never thought he’d get this far, and now that he had, the reality of his sheltered valley life (as opposed to the fantasy land he had been living in when he entered the first round) was setting in.

He knew Ms De Silva thought entering the final round of the competition was a no-brainer—especially as the first short animation film he’d submitted had beaten thousands of other entries to even get this far.

If animation was what he really wanted to do with his life, opportunities like this were hard to come by. Once in a lifetime even. And no one else in his life knew.

But he was so fucking scared.

Even if he told her why this was such a hard decision for him, he wasn’t sure she’d understand. Oh, she’d probably say the right words and everything (like ‘go for it,’ and ‘fuck ’em’), but she wasn’t from around here. She hadn’t grown up in his tiny village in the Valley that felt like it was stuck in stasis while the world turned around it; where difference—any difference—stuck out like an ice cream van in hell. A place he hated and yet, at the same time, felt

like he belonged in—and he wasn't sure he'd belong anywhere else in quite the same way.

How could she understand that if he registered for this, his life wasn't going to just change, his old life was going to be annihilated? He would most likely lose everyone he loved—his family, his friends.

They'd hate him.

If he did this, he'd have to leave. He couldn't see another way.

And if he didn't register, if he let this opportunity pass by, he would be stuck where he was, becoming grey as the rocks around him, and slowly going out of his mind. The world would turn, and everything would stay exactly, overwhelmingly, the same.

Then, of course, there was the whole Jamie issue.

Oscar wasn't sure what he could actually stand to do. And doing nothing was a choice in itself.

"Is anything worrying you, Oscar?" Ms De Silva smiled at him kindly. She was the only person in the whole world right now who knew him and had watched his film. The only person outside of the first-round competition judges who'd watched his film.

"No, I'm still thinking about it." *And no closer to figuring out what I'm going to do*, he thought miserably.

The weight of this decision carried a heaviness that permeated his bones. A heaviness that only one person on the entire planet could relieve.

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### ***Jamie***

Thursday was the only day Jamie didn't share his shift at the tiny music store with Oscar. And he was bored. He slumped dramatically over the cash desk, resting his head on his hands and giving Tracy, his boss, his best kicked-puppy expression.

"No," Tracy said simply.

Her curly red hair bounced against her shoulders as she nearly dropped the drum in her hands.

"But it's sooo quiet. You don't need me on the shop floor. You're here!"

Tracy was in the process of dismantling probably the largest drum kit in South Wales from the window display, and was about as stressed as she ever got. “I need someone watching the till while I do this, Jamie. The guy’s going to be here to pick this kit up in a minute.”

He pulled what he hoped was a hideous face at her, but she wasn’t even looking at him.

Thursday was delivery day, and he’d heard the van pull up around the back ages ago. Surely the delivery driver needed a hand back there.

Unloading the new instruments and sometimes bizarre orders that customers had made was at least slightly more interesting than standing behind a cash desk in an empty shop, waiting for some non-existent customer to arrive. Plus there was a whole selection of kazoos in the stockroom.

He sighed. Loudly.

“Here, sort these out for me.” Tracy threw him the tangled chain of tiny cymbals that had been framing the shop window. “I have to admit you never get this antsy when Oscar’s here. My company not good enough for you?” She grinned at him wryly.

Generally, Tracy had a cheery disposition, and as bosses went, Jamie pretty much loved her. Plus she wore silver Doc Martens, and her love of T. Rex and everything glam made him smile.

Jamie smiled back at her now—he wasn’t sure it was convincing enough, though, as Tracy laughed and shook her head.

What she said was true—when Oscar was there, they had fun. Oscar with his offbeat, quirky sense of humour and serious eyes made Jamie laugh. And although he wasn’t quite ready to consciously admit it, being in Oscar’s presence made him feel grounded and somehow safe. No one had made him feel like that before.

It was weird, but Jamie was beginning to look forward to work like he never had before.

Strangely, even when he’d been going out with Rhiannon a year ago and they’d both worked here for a couple of hours after school, the highlight of the afternoons had been the soft kisses they’d stolen in the tiny kitchen, but the actual being-at-work with her had been pretty unexciting. And Rhiannon could be the life and soul when she wanted.

He couldn’t figure it out.

Draping the string of cymbals around his neck, Jamie tried to work at untangling them.

“Think you can give the guy a hand with his kit out to his car when he gets here? He wants the nine-foot banjo with the zebra feet too.”

Jamie nodded absently.

“You really are away with the fairies today, aren’t you?”

He looked up and smiled. “Sorry.”

“Did the school talk to you any more about the teaching position?”

“Nah. I’m sure they’re looking for someone with experience.”

“You’ll get experience.” Tracy grew serious. “I don’t want to see you working here forever, however much fun it is with Oscar around. You’ve got too much to offer for my little shop.”

“More talent than you can exploit, you mean.” He gave her his best evil grin—the grin he usually gave Oscar when he wanted him to do something silly. “You should fire people professionally. You’d be really good at it.”

“I mean it, Jamie.” She gazed at him, a sad sort of expression on her face. “Your mum would be proud.”

Thankfully, Tracy popped out the back for some masking tape after that because that topic was off limits. Even in his own head. Even though it had been nearly a year now.

Cymbals forgotten, Jamie picked at a stray piece of Sellotape stuck on the desk and frowned. He wasn’t going there, not today. Sometimes it felt like he only had two emotions anymore—happy, or determined to pretend that was how he felt.

He thought instead about how at nineteen he’d been out of school for almost a year. He still kind of missed it. He knew Oscar didn’t, though. When they’d been at school, some of the boys he’d hung around with had made Oscar’s life pretty unpleasant because he was shy and a little clumsy, and he knew a lot about stuff no one else knew about.

The teachers had made Oscar’s life unpleasant, too, in a different way—Oscar was the kid who they knew would always have the answers, and they made an example of him. Once, in class, Oscar had had what seemed now like a small rebellion, and had spelled out the answer to every question the teacher



had asked in the phonetic alphabet. At the time, Jamie had been sitting at the back of the class and he'd thought it was kind of cute—he'd thought Oscar was kind of cute full stop, and that had been scary enough. But now it kind of hurt.

It hurt because he'd never done anything to stop any of the bullying at the time (and he knew now that's what it was). He'd never made Oscar's life easier and, apart from the alphabet thing, he'd pretended to mostly view Oscar with disinterest at school.

It was more painful because Oscar really was all kinds of awesome, and school must have been a special kind of hell for him. Jamie knew that was probably part of the reason why Oscar sometimes talked about leaving this place, though he hoped it'd never happen.

After glancing at his phone stowed out of sight beneath the counter, Jamie sent Oscar a text even though he knew Oscar was in uni all day and probably wouldn't answer it.

Only another three hours until his shift was over. A butterfly flutter of anxiety made him shiver. He was giving a few guitar lessons at the local school tonight, and then he was going to be up onstage playing with his newly formed band at the local pub. It was only their third gig, and hopefully it'd go better than the last two. He loved playing, but he didn't enjoy the nerves beforehand.

There was one person that made him feel better about everything, though. Jamie hoped the text he'd just sent would convince him to come.

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### *Oscar*

"You're smiling like you've got a secret," Leah whispered, pretending she was about to lean over his shoulder to peer at the phone in his lap.

He knew Leah wasn't quite that indiscreet, but still he felt caught out and shoved the phone back in his pocket, trying in vain to mask his smile.

Leah raised an eyebrow and chewed on the end of her paintbrush.

"Whoever texted you—just friends, right?" she said after a minute, grinning when Oscar flushed. "Don't worry, I won't spill about your secret little crush." She smiled again, a little more kindly this time. "So who is it?"

"No one," Oscar said automatically. He tried to focus on the mostly blank storyboard in front of him, but he wasn't feeling much like storyboarding today. Or much like focusing—on anything it seemed.

Even though they saw one another nearly every day of the week, either at work or out of it, Jamie would always text him at some point on a Thursday when he was at uni. For a few minutes, Oscar would feel so giddy his heart would do something weird, and he'd wonder if this was *it* because he couldn't imagine feeling this way about anyone else.

Then he'd realize how depressing and one-sided that was, and the happy, giddy rush would die away.

"Okay. Well, I wish 'no one' would text me so I can light up like Christmas." Leah leaned in closer and whispered, "Actually, I gave Nula"—Nula was Ms De Silva's first name, Oscar realized with a jolt—"my number... So yeah, maybe."

He cleared his throat. "She's quite—" He stopped himself just in time. God, he couldn't say she was old, but she kind of was. *Older*, anyway. Leah was twenty. "—teachery." He finished with a wince.

Why couldn't he keep his mouth shut? At least talking about Ms De Silva meant they weren't talking about Jamie's damn text.

"Maybe I like teachery." Leah winked at him and went back to watercolouring the hundred little frogs she'd drawn, all with their little stick arms in the air reaching for a big ball of golden sunshine that seemed to get bigger every time Oscar glanced at it. "It's not like school, you know. She's a lecturer. And in three weeks, she won't even be *our* lecturer anymore... Or are you scandalized because she's a woman?" Leah chewed her lip, but she wasn't looking at him. She wasn't ashamed of who she was.

Oscar wondered what that felt like. "She's nice," he said eventually.

"Thanks for your approval, *Dad*." Turning, Leah grinned, waving her paintbrush in front of his face.

Oscar closed his eyes as the wet end of the brush made contact with his nose.

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"Any plans for tonight?" Leah asked him as they were packing up at the end of the day.

It wasn't the first time she'd asked about his evening plans since they'd started this course. He'd always been a bit evasive. Now he felt bad.

“My friend’s in a band. The local pub is letting them play tonight. It’s only their third gig. It’s a bit last-minute, though.”

“Are they any good?” Leah paused, storyboard half-rolled. Oscar could still make out the hundreds of frogs all reaching for the sun. He thought about Jamie.

“Yeah... well, my friend’s really good... like stunningly good. When he starts playing, you sit up and take notice. He’s just started to give a few guitar lessons at the local primary...” Flushing, Oscar realised he should probably stop going on about Jamie, but Leah was watching as though she was happily drinking it all in. “Singer can be a bit... screamy.” He tailed off.

“My uncle has a pub in Newport. He has bands on twice a week. He’s getting a good rep. Have they got a demo? I could pass it on to him.”

“Nah, they’re not quite at the demo-making stage.”

Leah laughed. “Okay.” Then, biting her lip, she smiled and said, “That text you got earlier... it was from your guitar-playing friend, right?”

*No* was there on his lips, but he couldn’t say it. He could only blink. His palms began to grow sweaty under her scrutiny.

*Say yes! Just for once, say yes. Admit it. Tell her. Tell someone. What could happen that would be so awful?* Some voice inside him raged desperately. Probably the same stupid voice that had convinced him that entering the competition would be such a good idea—the same voice that was desperate for him to fill in the form to the next round.

The voice that knew he couldn’t stand hiding any longer.

*She will be fine with it. She’s either a lesbian or bi herself.*

But even though he was so sick of denials, he wasn’t quite ready to admit his feelings to anyone yet. Maybe he’d never be ready. So he said nothing at all, and Leah gave him a sad smile as though she perhaps understood his silence, but there was pity in her expression too.

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### **Jamie**

The school’s music room was flooded with golden afternoon light, the air filled with dust motes. It was so peaceful and familiar, it felt like a second home.

Jamie had fond memories of having music lessons in here as a kid. He couldn't really believe he was now the one giving the lessons. Just after school as a trial at the moment—he didn't have an official teaching certificate yet, but the school had paid for him to do a short course to make sure he was okay to work with kids.

It wasn't the music teacher job he was secretly wishing for, but it was a start.

He shifted the chairs so the next student could sit warmed by the sun but not blinded by its brightness. Playing in here, the sun on his back as he practised, was a memory that filled him with tingly good feelings. He'd always liked his music teachers.

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“My cousin has a picture of you on her wall,” little Lisa Spencer said, smiling like she was revealing the biggest secret. The small guitar jiggled around in her lap as she bounced her legs up and down.

This was her first lesson, and like most eight-year-olds, she was a bundle of sunshine-bright energy.

He remembered that barely contained excitement kids often displayed if they were doing something they loved or just doing something new—sometimes he still felt it.

Leaning forwards, Jamie repositioned the small guitar in her lap. She wiggled around like an excited puppy, her pigtails flicking against his face.

He liked teaching kids, even if they sometimes didn't concentrate and went completely off tangent. Mostly he found it easier to just go with it. “Who's your cousin?”

“Rhiannon Waters,” she said with a grin.

*Oh.* He ran a hand through his hair. “Well, we used to go out. And we're still friends, so...” He tailed off, not wanting to go into too much detail about his love life with an eight-year-old.

“She drew a heart on it.”

Jamie raised an eyebrow. It would probably be best to derail this conversation. He picked up his own guitar. “I'm going to show you how to play an open chord now, okay? I want you to watch what I do.”

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## *Oscar*

Sitting at the wobbly desk in his room, Oscar stared at the laptop screen in front of him. He'd been staring at it for perhaps twenty minutes when his twelve-year-old sister, Jenny, knocked on the door of his room to tell him it was dinnertime. Groaning with frustration, he glared at the screen for one more minute, then closed the laptop, and went downstairs.

"Nice of you to join us," his dad said with a tight smile. "Interrupting your busy social life, were we?"

Everyone sat around the table waiting for him. The atmosphere made his stomach feel small as a scrunched-up crisp packet. It was a shame, because his mum was a great cook and he doubted he'd be able to eat much.

She didn't look at him at all as he sat down—she wouldn't want to upset his dad by showing any kind of support. "He doesn't mean it. He just worries about you," she'd say, as she stopped in the doorway of his room some nights before she went to bed, and Oscar would wonder how she could still deceive herself after all these years.

"Only two more weeks until you've finished up with this nonsense for good." Oscar heard his dad mutter under his breath.

Every Thursday, after he'd been to uni, things were always worse. His dad would count down the weeks to the course finishing and the usual quiet, hostile atmosphere would intensify.

It wasn't just that his dad thought the whole animation thing a waste of time, even if it was only one day a week for ten weeks at Cardiff University. He'd given Oscar an ultimatum. Oscar had to get what his dad saw as a 'proper' job, instead of messing around at the music store—shop work was to be frowned upon—or live with the consequences. Which Oscar took to mean finding somewhere else to live.

The irony was that Oscar hadn't even told his dad this was just a taster course to see if he'd like doing a full-time degree one day. And he would. God, he would.

Entering the competition, though, had changed the stakes. It had changed everything.

"I had a great day. I learned a lot. Thanks for asking," Oscar mumbled quietly. Mostly he didn't go out of his way to antagonize his dad, but today, worrying what he was going to do about the competition had put him on edge.

They ate in uncomfortable silence. Oscar knew Jenny hated Thursdays, too, and he nudged her foot under the table until she looked at him and smiled. She had their mum's big eyes and light-brown hair. Oscar, unfortunately (he thought), had always looked like his dad. A Valley boy through and through. (Except he wasn't, was he?) He couldn't see there was something beautiful in his strong Celtic build, thick dark hair, and blue eyes. He couldn't see any of that, because something had always marked him as different. He'd never fitted in. He was sure his dad could see whatever it was and that was why he was always so hard on him. Oscar was afraid it was because he was gay, and even though he tried his best to hide it, that wasn't something he could change.

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After dinner, Oscar washed up the dishes alone in the kitchen listening to the local radio station—it was the only one that ever came through clearly down in the valley. Led Zeppelin or Pink Floyd were always on constant rotation as if even the radio stations were somewhere back in time, but Oscar hummed along anyway.

He was almost done with the dishes when his phone rang. He glanced at the screen, dumped the dirty glass in his hand onto the side, and took the call outside in the sloping garden.

“Jamie,” he said, tipping his head back and staring up at the darkening sky, a wide smile on his face.

Llanhilleth was in a deep valley, and the shadows of the mountains towered over them in almost every direction. Oscar guessed it made some people feel protected, but he just felt hemmed in.

“Oh my God, I needed you at work today! It was the worst.” Jamie made a deep groaning sound that made Oscar's cheeks flush. Out here in the dark of the garden, no one could see him, so he didn't care.

“No one to play the banjo badly and make up silly songs for you?” Oscar grinned as he spoke.

Never mind his family and the annihilation of his old life, if he was honest, *this* right now was the reason he'd been upstairs staring at the competition application and not actually filling it in. These feelings. This nebulous happiness. Jamie. He didn't think he could bear to lose this, even if things weren't exactly the way he wished they were.

“No. Tracy was moving the giant drum kit out of the window, so I didn’t get to play around with the new orders, and there was no kazoo time either. Can you believe it?”

“My God. A day without you on the kazoo? I can’t imagine how awful it must have been.”

“It was truly horrific... Listen, did you get my text? Are you coming tonight? Don’t say no. I *need* you.”

The plea in Jamie’s voice made Oscar’s chest hurt.

Tonight would only be the third time the band had played in public. Jamie would look fucking amazing up onstage. Oscar was beginning to think excitable, skinny boys with mad dark curls who played the guitars they carried slung over their shoulders as if those guitars were somehow part of them were his weakness. Or most likely, it was just Jamie.

“I’ll get the bus,” Oscar said, though he had no idea how he’d get back home afterwards. The buses stopped running at ten.

The pub the band was playing at was in Abertillery, ten miles up the valley. Jamie, along with Craig and Matt (the rest of the band), lived there. Oscar imagined he might end up walking back. It wouldn’t be the first time. School had been in Abertillery too. And walking had sometimes been preferable to being on the bus with the other kids from his class.

Walking took a long time, though, and his dad would be furious if he was back too late. Although Oscar didn’t have a curfew (it was the one issue his mum had stood up for him on), his dad had threatened to change the locks if Oscar returned from a night out later than midnight because he didn’t want his night’s sleep disturbed.

“I might have to leave early, though,” Oscar added.

“It’ll be worth it. I’ll make it worth it,” Jamie said, sounding as if he was smiling.

*You always do*, Oscar thought helplessly.

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## ***Jamie***

The Black Sheep was a dark little building in the center of the village, so old and listing, it looked as if it had been formed from the landscape or had perhaps grown out of the rocks beneath.

Jamie's goal was to get the band a gig at the Swan, high up on the outskirts of the village. But Matty's uncle ran the Swan, and he thought they needed a few more practice sessions. This pissed Matty off no end, but Jamie sort of agreed. Raw was okay, but they needed to listen to one another more.

In summer, the Swan was one of Jamie's favourite places to be—out in the pub garden, sitting on the benches, looking at the spectacular Welsh mountains, the way the valley dropped away around him. He wanted to be good when they played there. Maybe it was strange, but it was somewhere he loved and he wanted to be worthy.

After he finished his lessons at the primary school, Jamie swung his guitar strap over his shoulder, grabbed a bottle of Lucozade to stave off his hunger pangs, and headed through the village to the Black Sheep.

The cold spring air made him shiver and rub his bare arms.

Matty was already outside, unloading the drum kit out of the back of his uncle's van on his own.

"Where's Craig?" Jamie asked, placing a hand on Matty's shoulder and peering into the van. Craig was the drummer and therefore in charge of his own instrument.

"Late," Matty growled.

He squeezed Matty's shoulder reassuringly. "He'll be here, don't stress. And if he's not, we can use a backing track."

Using a backing track didn't seem to have occurred to Matty. He looked up, surprised. "Okay... do you have one set up?"

"No, but I have this." Jamie pulled his phone out of his pocket and wagged it around. GarageBand should have something that would work if they needed it.

Craig would turn up, though. Jamie was sure of it.

"Jess says if anything gets broken, we'll have to pay for it."

Jess was the manager of the Black Sheep.

"Matty, you did promise him we weren't going to cause a riot?"

"We cause a riot, we've done a good gig."

Jamie rolled his eyes, shifted his guitar farther round on his back so he could pick up a drum, and headed into the pub.



His older brother Pete did a shift here sometimes if he needed the extra cash. Pete was two years older and the only one of his brothers still at home. Joe and Dean had both left before all the bad stuff had happened. Jamie knew Pete had stayed to keep an eye on him and Dad in the aftermath of their mum dying, and he'd just never left.

Jamie guessed Pete was the only reason they'd managed to score a gig here tonight. Jess was a bit more cautious about whom he'd have playing.

In the eighties and nineties, the Black Sheep had the reputation of being a bit rough, but it was the pub everyone had been going to since they could go anywhere, and Jamie doubted it was any rougher than any other pub anywhere else in the country. And right now, at seven in the evening, the place was just about dead. Hopefully things would pick up by the time they went onstage.

The stage itself was tiny and ran along the back of the pub. The grimy windows at the front of the pub were hard to see through, but if you concentrated, you could still just about make out the main road.

All traffic through the village passed right by.

Matty was still hauling the drum kit in from the van.

Pretending he was setting up his amp, Jamie stole glances out of the window every few seconds, watching for the bus from Llanhilleth.

He was finding it impossible to focus on anything. A prickly sensation, like ants crawling over his skin, made him desperate for someone to stroke his back or hold him. He got like this sometimes.

Despite how happy and confident he was determined to appear, anxiety lurked beneath his skin. Sometimes it got so bad, the lie was just too hard to keep up. The only thing that was helping at all right now was the thought of a dark-haired Valley lad currently (hopefully) on a bus and (also hopefully) arriving soon.

When a bus finally did pull up at the stop just down the road, Jamie forgot about the amp entirely and left it smack bang in the middle of the stage while he darted out the door. Someone yelled something about fire hazards behind him, but he ignored them.

Shivers of pleasure zipped down his spine when he spotted Oscar getting off the bus. Jamie bounced on his toes. God, he felt a hundred-million times better now.

“Hey!” he called out excitedly, only just managing to stop himself waving his arms around as if he were trying to bring down planes out of the sky.

Oscar smiled, hands shoved deep in the pockets of his not quite skintight but definitely slim-fitting black jeans, and made his way across the road.

Often Oscar stooped his shoulders as if he didn’t want to appear as tall or broad as he was, but tonight he looked taller—as though he were finally taking up a space that needed to be filled.

“Hey,” Oscar said gently.

They never hugged. It wasn’t something lads around here did, but tonight Jamie wanted to more than ever. Oscar looked so solid and warm, and, well, Jamie was tactile and imagined that hugging Oscar and feeling Oscar’s strong arms wind around his back would be nicer than he was prepared to admit.

Instead, he playfully nudged Oscar’s shoulder with his own as they walked side-by-side back to the pub. He still felt as though he was bouncing.

“So, how was uni?” he asked, turning to walk backwards so he could watch Oscar’s face.

The quiet excitement Oscar usually displayed when he talked about whatever lecture and class he’d had was infectious, and made Jamie happy in ways he couldn’t quite articulate.

But today all Oscar said was, “Yeah, it was okay.”

Which obviously wasn’t okay. At all.

Jamie drew his eyebrows together. In all the days Oscar had been at uni, he’d never just said ‘it was okay,’ as if it was just another day at work, not doing the one thing he loved more than anything.

It wasn’t just that either. Something seemed off. Oscar always had such serious eyes—blue as the sky and just as unfathomable—but today they were clouded as if something was troubling him. Usually, whenever Oscar looked at him, it was like being bathed in warm, steady sunlight.

They walked a few steps in silence.

Jamie chewed his lip.

Oscar was his best friend. Jamie had never said it outright—not just because it wasn’t the sort of thing nineteen-year-old lads said to one another around here, but because he hoped Oscar knew without him having to say. He hoped

Oscar knew how much he meant to him, and how much Jamie wanted to be the person Oscar could lean on if he ever needed to lean on anyone. But it didn't ever seem quite the right moment to say that either. Instead, he tried to make it known in everything he did.

And right now Oscar looked like he needed to laugh, like he needed something to smile about. Problems were always diminished and less daunting in the face of laughter. That was how Jamie saw it anyway.

Just before they reached the pub, Jamie slipped his arm around Oscar's back, plucked his top up, and tickled his side. God, Oscar's muscles were like rock, his skin smooth and soft and *oh so warm*.

Oscar gave a shocked yelp and squirmed away before laughing and pinning Jamie up against the uneven stone wall of the pub and getting his own back. Although smaller and skinnier, Jamie was the youngest of four brothers, and wriggling out of someone's grasp, especially if they were trying to tickle him, was something he was marvellously adept at. But he didn't try too hard.

If hugging was off the cards, this was the next best thing. Plus play fighting with Oscar left him breathless and feeling good in a way that only one other thing did.

But that was something he'd only ever done with girls.

They tussled for a minute, until Matty and Craig (who had finally turned up) came out of the pub wearing matching leather jackets and griping at one another under their breath about who was going to move the van.

"Come and give me a hand setting up?" Jamie asked, still catching his breath.

"Wait a sec." Oscar paused just outside the pub entrance and dug around in his jeans pocket. "I got something for you."

"And I thought you were just pleased to see me," Jamie said with a grin.

Oscar looked down, his neck and cheeks stained red. It took a moment for Jamie to realize Oscar was blushing and he wouldn't meet Jamie's gaze. Even when he held out whatever it was in his hand, Oscar kept his eyes on something behind them in the dim interior of the pub.

Jamie couldn't figure out what Oscar was embarrassed about—it was probably nothing.

“A kazoo! I love it.” He grinned, holding the thing almost reverently in his hand.

It was a plastic kid’s toy, pretty and bright blue—the same blue as Oscar’s eyes.

Jamie was never going to tell Oscar he had about twenty of these at home in a rainbow of colours. After tonight, he’d give them all away and there would be only this one.

Oscar smiled shyly and shrugged. “Promise me you’re not going to play it up onstage, though.”

How could he promise something like that? Jamie rolled his eyes dramatically, turned, and strode into the pub.

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### *Oscar*

The bottle of beer in his hand was starting to feel distinctly warm. He’d been nursing it for the past half hour as he leaned against a far wall, out of everyone’s way, and waited around for the band to come onstage.

It wasn’t much fun drinking on your own, and Oscar didn’t have any friends in this pub. Even though most of the lads here knew him—he’d gone to school with a lot of them—they never made any great effort to talk to him and include him, and Oscar was just too shy to try to include himself. So he pretended he didn’t care and stood aloof and alone at the back of the pub.

He took a swig of warm beer and pulled a face. Jamie was the only reason he was here. Nobody else mattered.

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Oscar was on his second beer and beginning to feel a little mellower by the time the band came out onstage. Someone dimmed the lights, and the pub was plunged into blackness while everyone crowded round the stage and cheered.

Quite a few people had turned up to watch tonight.

Matty’s low bass started up—a slow, deep throb of sound. The lights flickered over the band but left them mostly in shadow. Oscar held his breath, waiting.

When it came, Jamie’s melody was a sweet rush of sound, so intense and drenched in such sadness and longing, Oscar almost swooned.

Where the hell did Jamie draw such sounds from? What part of himself? Because if he didn't feel those things, he was doing a fucking amazing job getting everyone else to feel them.

Swallowing the rest of his beer, Oscar wished the lights would stop flickering. He wanted to see Jamie's face—he wanted to watch him as he played.

Finally, as Matty started to sing, the lights stopped dancing and lit up the band. But Oscar only got a momentary look at Jamie being as sexy as hell—with his eyes closed as he played and an expression that looked something like bliss on his face—before Rhiannon Waters jumped up on one of the unsteady-looking pub tables with one of her friends and blocked his view.

All the guys nearby gawped up at her. Probably because of the barely there black dress she was wearing, which she had to keep hoisting up over her boobs.

Someone wolf whistled. Oscar guessed most of the guys in this room thought she was attractive.

When he'd first started working at the music store last year, Rhiannon used to come in to see Jamie quite a lot. They'd had something once, Jamie told him. And ever since then Oscar couldn't help the sharp little pangs he felt when he saw her. He wasn't jealous. What would be the point? But he couldn't pretend it didn't hurt that he wasn't, and never could be, anything that Jamie would want.

Oscar moved to the side of the room. Now he was farther away, but at least his view of the stage was clear.

The last song was the band's loudest and their least serious. In the drum break halfway through, Jamie stopped playing and took his kazoo out from his pocket. For a second he shielded his eyes and searched the crowd.

From the small, frustrated twitch his mouth gave, it didn't look as if he found what he was looking for.

Kazoo pressed to his lips, Jamie took the mike with Matty, and surprisingly the weird little duet that emerged didn't sound half bad.

The applause at the end of the set was the best they'd had yet.

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Oscar waited until the crowd dissipated before heading towards the empty stage. The band would be sampling a free beer in the airing cupboard of a back

room just behind the stage. Jamie had insisted earlier that Oscar come and join the squash of bodies after the show. And Oscar had promised—as long as Jamie kept the kazoo in his pocket and not pressed to his lips.

Music and laughter filled Oscar's ears before he got to the door. Taking a deep breath, he knocked.

The door swung open immediately. Matty grabbed his arm and pulled him inside the pooky space, but Oscar wished he hadn't.

As soon as he saw Jamie, Oscar wished he'd stayed at home and had never come out tonight.

Ignorance was bliss, right?

Seeing Rhiannon Waters curled on Jamie's lap at the end of the room, stroking his chest and gazing at him in a slightly drunk but obviously adoring manner, was almost physically painful. Oscar stared helplessly at the lipstick marks on Jamie's neck—or perhaps they were love bites. He couldn't tell. He didn't want to know. The room felt so small, it was beginning to crush him.

He heard Jamie say his name, but if there were any other words, they didn't register.

His chest hurt. Air—yes, he needed a little air.

He backed up, made up some excuse to Matty about not feeling well, which he wasn't sure Matty even heard, and rushed out.

For a moment, he paused outside the pub, drinking in lungful after lungful of the cold night air and wishing himself back home, in his room, in his bed.

He built things up in his head. He knew he did, even if he told himself he wasn't. All the innocent smiles, looks, touches they shared, grew into something much more in his imagination. But the fact was, however into him Jamie seemed, their friendship was just that: friendship.

Jamie would never feel anything more for him. It would never happen.

He had to get over it.

It wasn't as though he hadn't known something like this was going to happen one day. Of course he had. Maybe it had happened on other nights, and Oscar didn't know. Just because Jamie never talked about girls didn't mean he didn't think about them.

His phone buzzed. It was Jamie.

*Where did you go?*

Oscar sank down and looked up. The sky was endlessly dark and yet full of so many lights.

*Need some air. I'll be back soon.*

He gave himself another minute before getting up.

Inside, the bar was quieter now. Oscar ordered himself a double vodka and a couple of beers. Getting completely smashed hadn't been part of the plan tonight, but if he had to survive the next hour or so, the only way he was going to do it was from beneath the nice numbing veil of alcohol. If he got drunk enough, he wouldn't even care about whatever bitter words his dad would have to say when he got home.

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### ***Jamie***

Thursday, and Jamie was alone behind the counter in the music store again. He stared out the window at the sunny street and saw Tracy's reflection in the glass. She was watching him from the half-open door to the backroom.

"You okay, Jamie love?" Tracy had asked him earlier, peering at him with full-on motherly concern.

He'd nodded, no quick reply on his lips, and she'd given him a concerned smile, and every so often throughout the day he'd caught her watching him when she thought he was unaware.

He had stuff on his mind, that was all. He wasn't his usual happy self, but he was trying.

Ever since the band played at the Black Sheep a week ago, Jamie had had this feeling deep in his gut that something wasn't quite right with his world. And it wasn't just because Rhiannon kept popping up where he least expected her.

He couldn't quite put his finger on what was bothering him.

Well, yeah, he sort of could.

Oscar. It wasn't as though Oscar had been acting weird exactly. Just distant, maybe, in that way you only notice when you're really close to someone, like he had a secret or... something.

There was a girl on his animation course that Oscar sometimes talked about—Leah, Jamie thought her name was. Maybe Oscar had a thing for her.

His chest felt uncomfortably tight, as if something were squeezing him in, or pressing him down. Jamie got up and stretched. It was probably indigestion. He walked over to the window. The street was empty. The mountains rose up behind the houses: grey, grey, grey, but somehow, when the sun was shining, the grey didn't seem so bad. He walked the length of the shop, hands on his ribs, and then sat back down behind the counter.

Maybe he'd caught whatever ill thing Oscar had had last week. For two days after the band's concert at the Black Sheep, Oscar had been sick. Too sick to even talk to Jamie on the phone.

Jamie spun his own phone in his hand.

It was only lunchtime, but telling himself he was more bored than lonely, Jamie sent Oscar a text. He wasn't happy about admitting it, but he was really hoping for a reply.

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### *Oscar*

Today Oscar stayed behind after Ms De Silva's lecture. Leah had sent him a curious glance before she'd left, and he'd given her a little shrug. He was considering filling her in about it later. It would be so good to talk to someone. Finally.

His phone pinged with a message as he walked to the front. When he glanced at it and saw it was from Jamie, his disobedient heart gave a happy leap. He quickly put the phone away.

"So, what did you decide about entering?" Ms De Silva asked.

"All registered."

After walking home last Thursday night after Jamie's gig, exhausted and heart hurting, he'd sat down at his computer and filled in the competition form. So far, he hadn't regretted it.

With a smile, Ms De Silva carried on stuffing her notes untidily into her case.

For someone who seemed so meticulous about thought processes and details, she really didn't seem to care too much about tidiness.



“Good.” She looked up. “You’ve got a great chance at winning this, Oscar. I’m not saying that to make you feel better, but if you can produce another animation of the same quality as your submission piece, it’ll blow everyone away.”

And if he won, he’d get forty-K worth of sponsorship and a guaranteed spot on Channel 4’s animation slot.

Yeah, that wasn’t likely.

But even if he didn’t win, thousands would see his animation. This competition was big. His name was going to be out there—his short film on television. Everyone he knew would know what he’d done. A brief wave of terror made his knees want to give way.

“How’s the brainstorming going? Any ideas?”

“I’ve got something.” He gave her an uncertain smile. While he wasn’t exactly feeling good about the competition yet, he was sure the idea he’d had for a film was the right one.

Surprisingly it hadn’t taken long. The theme this time was ‘Something Personal.’ For this one he’d actually taken Ms De Silva’s advice—he was going to be honest. He was going to share his heart with the world, and yeah, wasn’t that a fucking terrifying thought?

With under ten days to get the animation completed, he needed to get on with it. He’d made a start over the weekend, hiding out in his bedroom and telling his mum he was sick. It was the same lie he’d told Jamie—a desperate measure to try and give his stupid damn heart a little break from the pain of seeing Jamie with Rhiannon. But having no contact with Jamie had just made him feel worse.

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“So...” Leah began in an excited whisper, squashing her chair right up next to his, “you’ll never guess what?”

“What?” Oscar couldn’t help whispering back even though they could talk as loudly as they wanted in storyboarding.

“I texted Nula, and she agreed to go on a date with me when the course is over!”

Leah looked as though she was going to burst with excitement as she spoke.

“Really?”

“Uh-huh. She might have mentioned the word friends more than once, but some of the greatest loves start as friendships, right?”

*And end as friendship*, Oscar thought gloomily.

“That’s great,” he said sincerely. “I’m pleased for you.”

“So what’s up with you, Mr Happy? No sarcasm intended.” She nudged his shoulder. The gesture reminded him of Jamie. “You look like you’ve found your mojo but lost your favourite teddy.”

“That’s such a bad analogy.”

“Yeah? So tell me a better one.”

*Fuck it*, he thought, taking a deep breath. He really wanted to tell someone. *Needed to.*

“How about—I’ve got through the first stage of the Channel 4 Fresh Talent Competition for an animation I did, and I’ve entered the final round, which means I have to show a new animation in London in ten days.” He paused to breathe, but not long enough to stop himself from getting it all out. “But my animations are about being gay and falling in love and my dad, well, he doesn’t understand gay people.” This was so much of an understatement it probably hurt more than the truth would have. “And the rest of my family just go along with him. I’m probably the only gay guy in a fifteen-mile radius of where I live. Oh, and I’m deeply in love with my straight best friend. And I decided, if I entered this competition, staying in the valley would be hell. So, I’m not just going to London for the competition, I’m maybe going there to live. I’m leaving. Everyone. So I don’t have to be around for the fallout.”

“Fuck. Ing. Hell. You save it all up, don’t you?” Leah stared at him, her heavily made-up eyes shock-wide.

Oscar closed his eyes. He hadn’t felt this close to crying since... Inwardly he cringed as the long walk home last Thursday after the gig came to mind. Okay, so not that long ago.

“I never intended to come over as quite so pathetic,” he said with a small smile.

Still staring at him, Leah held up her silver-ringed index finger. “Hold on, I’m still assimilating all that. We really need to go for a drink. What’re you doing after this?”

Leah suggested a bar just off the university campus. At four o'clock on a Thursday it was pretty quiet.

They ordered their drinks from a cute Asian guy who smiled so sweetly at Oscar that Oscar had difficulty getting his words out. When the guy asked him quietly if he had any plans later, Oscar dropped his change all over the bar.

Leah looked on, amused.

Once they'd found a quiet corner to sit in, she leaned forwards, staring at him intensely as if she meant to grill him about life, the universe, and everything.

Oscar nearly had a heart attack when instead she gave a yelp of delight, screwed her face up in an ecstatic smile, and gently punched his shoulder.

"I am so fucking happy for you getting into the finals of this competition. This is awesome, Oscar! I can't believe you didn't say anything!"

Oscar blushed.

"Can I watch the animation that got you in?"

"I'll email it to you." It was actually on his phone, but he was too shy to sit and watch it with her, even though it was less than two minutes long.

"What was it about?"

Oscar smiled. He tapped his feet beneath the table. His toes always tingled when he thought about it. "It's called 'Love Is Love.' It's about how gender shouldn't matter if you love someone. I did a sketch of a village in the hills, each person turning into a different-coloured heart, no one feeling ashamed or hiding their colours, because every heart is different anyway and yet they're all still hearts. No one feels bad about who they love."

Leah hugged him. "You're not out, are you?"

"Ms... Nula and all the judges who watch my film have probably worked it out, but I've never told anyone before. You're the first."

"Oh my gosh, I've never been anyone's first *anything!*" Leah's face lit up—her cheeks glowing as pink as her hair. She looked as though she was going to burst.

"I'm going to be someone's first everything." He swallowed as he said it and glanced away—he didn't want to see her pity. Hiding how he felt sucked. He was beginning to think it sucked more than rejection and hate would. At least he wouldn't be so alone.

Leah squeezed his hand.

The guy behind the bar was watching them through the mirror that stretched along the walls all around the room. He smiled when Oscar caught his eye. With trembling hands, Oscar knocked back half his drink.

“What’s his name?”

“Who?” He knew exactly who she meant, but he was buying himself some time.

He hadn’t meant to fall in love with Jamie, but trying *not* to fall in love was a little like trying to stay awake forever—sometimes your body took over, dragged you under, and you woke up with someone’s name carved on your heart like a secret you never wanted to know.

“Mr Guitarist Extraordinaire.”

Oscar looked at her blankly. Leah narrowed her eyes, proving she wasn’t all sunshine and rainbow hair—she could actually look pretty scary.

“Jamie,” he said, feeling his skin heat.

“Does he know about the competition?”

“God, no.”

Leah raised her eyebrow.

“He has no idea about your film or that you’re leaving?”

“No.”

Oscar actually felt worse about that than everything else put together.

Yeah, he’d been torn up about his decision to sign the form, but he’d thought getting through that would be the hard part. He hadn’t given much consideration to the details he’d have to deal with after—things like telling Jamie, handing in his notice at the music store (which he was going to have to do tomorrow), finding a place in London to live, telling his parents and his sister. All of that had been grouped together as ‘things that are so painful I don’t want to think about them and I’m hoping they might go away’.

“He’s your best friend, right?” She took a sip of her beer, then licked her lips and gave Oscar a meaningful look. “You need to tell him.”

*I know.*

But every time he thought about telling Jamie he was leaving, he felt physically sick.

Every time he thought about *leaving* Jamie, he felt physically sick. He wished there was a way he didn't have to.

What the fuck was he going to say?

“Just imagine how you'd feel if he said to you tomorrow, ‘Oh by the way I'm moving to Scotland, see ya, bye.’ I get that you don't want him to know how you feel because he's straight, and yeah, it's fucking terrifying coming out to people you care about, I know, but do you want him to think you don't give a fuck about him at all? Because I'd fucking hate you if you did that to me! Oscar, you're nineteen, right? At some point you've got to start driving the car instead of sitting in the passenger seat.”

“I'm going to hand in my notice at the music store tomorrow. I'll tell him then,” he said heavily.

Leah's phone buzzed, vibrating itself across the table and clinking against her beer glass.

“Sorry,” she mouthed, before picking it up and answering.

Oscar gulped down the rest of his beer trying not to think about what he was going to say to Jamie. He didn't want to do it. He didn't want to leave Jamie. It was almost as if somehow, by not telling him, he could pretend he wasn't—that a solution would magically present itself.

But he had to do this competition, and there was no way he could stay after that. It wasn't as though he hadn't dreamed about leaving for years either.

“Want to come to a party with me?” Leah asked as soon as she put her phone down. “A friend of mine's flatmate is leaving. He's a sweetie, and he's gay too,” she added with a wink. “It's in Newport, so must be well outside your fifteen-mile radius.” She raised an eyebrow as though she was challenging something, but Oscar didn't know what.

He hadn't been to many parties. He wasn't very good at socializing, but Leah was, and that made him feel better somehow. Leah and Jamie would have got on well together.

A pain so sharp it almost took his breath lanced through his chest. He was going to destroy so many things by leaving. In so many ways, his life would change.

The future was unknowable, and Oscar felt terrifyingly blind.

His life right now was anything but how he wished it. He thought about the dinner waiting for him at home. The Thursday-night atmosphere. The atmosphere *every* night, so full of disapproval for every choice Oscar ever tried to make. The way his dad's constant criticism made him feel about six inches tall. The way his dad seemed to enjoy putting him down.

When he imagined that in a week, he might not be there at all, it made him feel strong and yet weak at the same time. But surely everyone felt this fear when their life was about to change. The thought gave Oscar some comfort.

Leah was right—He needed to take control and drive this car. For the first time in his life, Oscar was beginning to believe he was strong enough to make his own decisions and to stand by them.

“Okay,” he said with what he hoped was a smile instead of a grimace. “I’ll come.”

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### *Jamie*

“Hey.”

Jamie glanced up.

Rhiannon. In the shop, where he couldn't brush her off by saying he had a guitar lesson to get to or a collection of kazoos that needed sorting into colour order before he took them to be shipped off to some kazoo-deprived part of the world.

“Hey.” He smiled. Being anything but friendly wasn't in his emotional repertoire. God, he really did have an emotional repertoire. And what a pretty fucking limited one it was.

With her hair piled up on her head, and the short fitted dress she was wearing, she looked like some sort of sixties film icon. At least forty per cent of Abertillery was halfway in love with her. Including Matty and Craig, whom he was pretty sure had been far more turned-on than he was when she'd thrown herself in his lap last Thursday, both assets unabashedly spilling out of her dress. When he'd pulled her against his chest to shield her from view while she covered herself up, she seemed to have taken it as some sort of signal.

Even his brother, Pete, couldn't believe someone as gorgeous as Rhiannon was chasing after him.

So why was it regret he felt when he thought about that night? Why didn't he feel like the luckiest guy this side of Cardiff?

“So, what time do you get off?”

It was a quarter to five. She probably knew what time he got off and that he wasn't teaching tonight, he realized, feeling a little trapped. Although she'd texted him plenty, and he'd seen her out and about, they hadn't talked about what had happened last week after the gig.

“Uh, soon. Look... ah...” The words dried up and Jamie shut his mouth.

Rhiannon sucked her bottom lip between her teeth. Oscar did that sometimes when he was concentrating on something, and if Jamie watched him for longer than a few seconds, it gave him the same inexplicable happiness as when he stopped thinking about the music he was playing and just *played* it.

Watching Rhiannon suck her lip didn't make him feel anything.

“Do you want to... do something?” Her voice wavered. It was the first time in his life he'd ever seen her nervous. She used to be the most confident girl in school. “We could go and have some fun in Newport or something? Maybe the cinema?” she added.

*That clunk is your stone heart hitting the cold concrete your stomach has turned into,* Jamie thought.

He felt bad without knowing why he felt bad. He didn't know why he wanted to say no. But he didn't want to make Rhiannon feel bad either. Oscar hadn't replied to the text Jamie had sent inviting him over, so there was no real reason why he couldn't go to Newport with Rhiannon. No reason at all.

“Okay.” He nodded and made himself smile.

Maybe plain old no wasn't in his repertoire either.

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### *Oscar*

“Please don't get any ideas about setting me up with your gay friend,” Oscar said quietly after they'd got off the bus in the center of Newport.

Rolling her eyes, Leah didn't deign to give him a reply and set off across the street without him, her dress jingling.

“Come on,” she called without looking back. “It's not far.”

The low evening light filled Oscar with good feelings. He loved this time of day. The setting sun shone everywhere—the light was beautiful.

“So where is this party?”

“Ladbroke estate. Couple of miles.”

“Couldn’t we have stayed on the bus?”

“Walking is good for you.” Leah grinned.

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“Want to know what one of the funniest things I almost saw was?” Leah asked as they were walking past the old cinema.

Oscar grumbled something in response. The sun had well and truly set, and he was staring at the phone in his hand, reading Jamie’s last text and wondering what he should reply. He’d texted his mum to let her know he wasn’t eating and would be back late. So far, she hadn’t replied to him.

“This lad I was walking to a party with was playing on his phone, and he walked straight into a lamppost and knocked himself out,” Leah carried on.

Making a frustrated sound, she grabbed his arm and yanked him to the side. Startled, Oscar looked around.

Shaking her head, she pointed at him and then at the lamppost he’d almost walked into.

If they both hadn’t been looking at the lamppost at that exact second, they would’ve been looking in the direction they were going, and Oscar wouldn’t have collided with Rhiannon, and Leah... probably would’ve still sidestepped Jamie as gracefully as she did.

“Aw, God, I’m sorry. Are you okay?” Oscar gasped out.

Rhiannon was feather-light, and Oscar had sent her flying. She would have bruises, he was sure of it. Feeling like a clumsy oaf, he held out his hand, barely registering who it was he’d collided with.

It wasn’t until a familiar grip encircled his bicep that he turned... and found Jamie standing next to him.

“Hey. What are you doing here?” Jamie’s warm brown eyes stared into his.

A lot of the time, Jamie vibrated excitement as though he were full of uncontained energy. He was doing it now, but he also had a slightly puzzled expression on his elfin face.

Oscar floundered, caught off guard. He hadn’t expected to see Jamie. No suitable response was forthcoming. All he could think about was the conversation he’d had with Leah in the pub. How he’d told her about Jamie.



They were holding eye contact for too long, but Oscar didn't know how to look away. Jamie smiled. His eyes crinkled at the corners, and Oscar wondered if somehow Jamie could read his thoughts. If he knew how much Oscar wanted to kiss him right then.

It was moments like these that he dreaded. Moments when his shield was down.

His skin heated as the blush spread across his cheeks, and he swept his gaze to the ground. "I was going to text you," he finally managed to get out.

Out of the corner of his eye, Oscar could see Leah leaning against the lamppost, arms folded across her chest, watching the scene with a raised eyebrow and a beatific smile. Rhiannon was smoothing her perfect hair.

"We're going to a party," Leah said, still smiling.

Jamie glanced at her with a frown that vanished in less than a second.

"This is my friend Leah, from uni," Oscar said, suddenly remembering that they'd never met.

"Hey. I'm Jamie, and this is Rhiannon. Oscar's told me a lot about you." Jamie held out his hand.

"Likewise."

Oscar ran a hand through his hair, wondering how difficult it would be for someone of his height to actually disappear. Maybe if his face got any hotter, he would just spontaneously combust.

"We should get going... the film..." Rhiannon said.

"You could come along to the party with us if you like. The film will still be on tomorrow, won't it? My friend Will throws the best parties. The more the merrier, he always says," Leah said brightly.

Oscar swung his head round and stared at her open-mouthed. He tried to communicate with his eyes. *What on earth are you doing?*

"Yes," Jamie said eagerly, "partying sounds good."

Oscar watched Rhiannon's reluctant nod, and suspected he and Rhiannon felt the same about this idea but for completely different reasons.

Until now, getting drunk hadn't been part of tonight's plan.

## *Jamie*

Leah led them to an old redbrick factory that had been turned into flats. It wasn't far from the old cinema, which was probably a good thing, as Rhiannon couldn't walk far in the four-inch heels she was wearing. The front door was open, the stairwell strung with multi-coloured fairy lights, and the air smelled strongly of marijuana. It was only seven o'clock, but by the state of the few people they'd met on the stairs as they walked up, it seemed as though the party had been going on all day, perhaps even since the previous night.

Someone was playing a guitar. Jamie found himself following the sound automatically, drinking in the melody, figuring out the chords.

A couple of girls in thigh length boots a little like Leah's unmissable ones rushed past with pizza boxes piled high.

"Supplies!" someone called out.

The door to the flat was open. As soon as they stepped inside, a lad with spiky green hair who was shorter—and probably skinnier—than Jamie bounded up to them and introduced himself as Will, their host. He flung his arms around Leah, and they twirled around, Leah's metal dress clinking as they whirled.

Jamie glanced around. A few old leather sofas stood against the exposed brick walls, under the huge factory windows. He had a brief weird vision of sitting on one with Oscar, talking about everything and nothing as the party went on around them.

For a moment, he forgot he was holding Rhiannon's hand. That she was there beside him, even. Guilt made him tighten his fingers around hers.

Leah whispered something to Will, and Will stopped dancing to hug Oscar. Jamie watched Will pull away and squeeze their hands together while Oscar blushed. Whatever Will was saying, it made Oscar smile.

A few more people had arrived after them.

"Help yourselves to a drink." Will gestured over Oscar's shoulder to a door at the end of the room.

Jamie let go of Rhiannon's hand. "I'll go and get you a drink. What do you want?" he asked, still staring at Oscar and the way he was talking shyly to Will.

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After a few beers and a glass of wine, Rhiannon was loud and unstoppable. She was a force of nature and she had a big mouth.

“Valley boys have the biggest cocks.”

She was arguing this point with the two obviously together lads sitting on the sofa next to them.

Jamie cringed. He was sure the whole room was listening. And Rhiannon was holding his hand in her lap.

Despite the lads’ knowing smiles, it wasn’t just the implications of what she was saying that embarrassed him.

Oscar was across the room, leaning against the wall, talking to Leah, who was holding Will’s hand as he danced and sang with another lad with even pinker hair than Leah’s.

“Save me,” Jamie mouthed when Oscar looked in his direction. “*Please.*”

In the end, it was Leah who saved him.

“I need to borrow Jamie,” Leah said to Rhiannon. “I’ll bring him back in a minute.”

She winked at Jamie as she took his hand and pulled him up. Oscar waited on the other side of the room.

“We’re going to play a game. It’s kind of retro spin-the-bottle. Do you mind?” she whispered in his ear.

“I’m easy,” he replied. Alcohol loosened his tongue and made everything he said sound like he was flirting, but he couldn’t remember the last time he’d flirted with anyone.

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### ***Oscar***

Across the room, Oscar watched as Leah grabbed Jamie’s hands and pulled him to his feet. Jamie swayed unsteadily, looking a little drunk. Well that made two of them, Oscar thought. At least the ball of stress that had filled his chest these past few days was untangling a little.

After a few beers, the idea of leaving didn’t seem so much of an issue. He had over a week. It was a lifetime. He had ages to tell Jamie.

Ages to think over what he was going to say.

Even the whole gay thing didn’t seem to be an issue right then. Oscar’s heart had happy-danced madly when he’d met Will’s friends Jay and Dai. Jay

was incredibly shy and hadn't said much more than hello, and now he lay curled in Dai's arms, whispering to him and stroking his chest, on the sofa next to the one Jamie had been sitting on.

God, Oscar wanted what they had. They were their own world.

Leah caught his gaze and beckoned him to follow as she led Jamie into a room behind the kitchen. The lights were dim and the air smelled of incense. Several people were sitting on the floor in a loose circle, drinking, chatting, and holding hands.

Leah motioned for them to sit down.

Before he'd even reached the floor, Jamie slung a warm arm around Oscar's shoulder and pulled him so close, Oscar almost landed on top of him.

"I haven't played this in years," Jamie whispered hotly into Oscar's ear. "My head is spinning, never mind the bloody bottle."

"What bottle?" Oscar whispered back, leaning into Jamie's touch. Yeah, Jamie was drunk but it was too nice being close to him.

"We're playing spin-the-bottle."

"I'm not playing." Oscar couldn't think of a worse game. *Kids* played this. Kids who probably had more experience than he did.

"Yeah, you are." Jamie grinned and laced their fingers together in his lap. "Your turn after Leah's."

Oscar's heart sped up.

"You could end up kissing me." Jamie gave him a lopsided smile as though kissing him would be the funniest thing in the world, and hiccupped.

Kissing Jamie? There were about a million reasons Oscar doubted that would happen. More than likely his first kiss would be with some stranger he'd forget as soon as he sat down again. The thought sobered him up rapidly.

"I really don't want to play," Oscar whispered desperately as Leah spun the bottle.

It landed on the lad with bright-pink hair who'd been dancing with Will. With drunken grace, he crawled across the floor, swept his arms around Leah, and gave her a beautifully theatrical kiss while she mock swooned like a dying heroine in a tragic love story.

Oscar felt sick. Jamie's fingers squeezed his and let go.

“It’s okay,” he heard Jamie whisper and watched perplexed as Jamie got up and squeezed in on the other side of him. “I’ll go first. If you don’t want to do it after, we’ll go and get some air.” He smiled reassuringly.

Jamie spun the bottle. It didn’t seem to be spinning very straight. But Jamie didn’t look as though he were sitting very straight either.

The bottle slowed, and Leah waved her arms, shouting something. Everyone in the room turned to look at her. Out of the corner of his eye, Oscar saw something that looked quite a lot like the edge of Leah’s boot knock into the bottle, and it stopped. In front of Oscar.

Leah smiled and raised her eyebrows as if to say, *Oh, look what happened.*

Oscar stared at the bottle. When he looked up, all eyes in the room seemed to be on him, including Jamie’s.

Jamie wouldn’t kiss him. Not for a stupid game in a room full of people. He’d request to spin it again or something, tell everyone Leah stuck her foot out.

Except he wasn’t... He was looking at Oscar with a sort of hesitant nervousness.

*Is this okay?* His expression seemed to say.

Without his conscious control, Oscar’s body took over and he felt his head give the barest nod.

*What was he doing?*

Shaking. Yes, mostly he was shaking.

“Can we stand up?” Jamie asked, smiling tentatively.

He didn’t need to say it loudly. The whole room had shut up. The whole room was watching. For some reason this seemed to have struck everyone as far more entertaining than Will’s pink-haired friend kissing Leah.

When Oscar didn’t (couldn’t) move, Jamie reached down and took his hands and gently pulled until he was standing, legs about to give way.

Still holding hands, Jamie grinned nervously, leaned forwards, and—Oscar’s heart stopped—brushed his mouth feather-light against Oscar’s. He was so gentle, it was as if he knew Oscar had never done this before.

“That wasn’t a proper kiss!” someone called out.

Jamie's gaze searched Oscar's. His expression was intent and questioning. No drunken veil, no swaying confusion. Oscar was taller, and the height difference was more pronounced when they were this close. The warm shallow breaths Oscar could feel against his lips were not his own—he'd never been this close to someone and felt so electrified. It was wonderful. It was more than he'd imagined. So much more.

When Jamie smiled, licked his lower lip, and then sucked it between his teeth, Oscar considered he might as well have sucked all the air out of the room too, because Oscar couldn't breathe.

The gentle grip on his fingers disappeared, and Oscar thought it was over, but half a second later he stopped thinking at all as Jamie's hand clamped vice-like against the back of his skull, tilted his head, and once again Jamie kissed him, engulfing him with sensations.

This wasn't feather-light. This wasn't even particularly gentle.

This was delicious wet heat as Jamie's mouth opened against his. This was sharp teeth nipping lightly against his lip until he opened his mouth and felt more than heard the gentle groan that seemed to come from deep inside Jamie. Oscar convinced himself later it must have come from deep inside him.

With what seemed like all the tenderness in the world, Jamie sucked on Oscar's bottom lip, before brushing their tongues together, causing Oscar to rock back on his heels, gripping fistfuls of Jamie's jumper as his toes tingled and his cock swelled.

This was heaven, and Oscar forgot everything. Forgot this wasn't real—that this was a game. Forgot they were in a room full of people until someone whistled and they broke apart to laughter and whoops and clapping.

Oscar gasped. In a split second, heaven had turned into his worst nightmare. He couldn't look at Jamie. He couldn't hide how he was feeling. He wasn't ready for everyone to know, and he didn't know how to react.

The animation he'd made played in his head. The way he'd focused on acceptance and love being love whatever your gender. He felt sick.

How could he talk about truth when he was such a coward?

He had to get out of there. Right then. *Fuck.*

"I'm sorry," he mouthed, hoping Jamie saw, and rushed from the room.

## *Jamie*

Eyes wide, Jamie lifted his hands to his face, covering his mouth, which had been pressed so needily against Oscar's, and watched as Oscar bolted for the door.

*Shit. Shit-shit-shit.*

*Was Oscar horrified at what they'd just done?* Jamie's stomach plummeted. He felt like he'd been in a beautiful glass lift being taken to the top of some tall spectacular building, but now someone had cut the cable and he was falling so fucking fast—the glass already shattering around him.

God, his heart was still hammering. Shakily he looked around at all the faces grinning back at him. No one was spinning the bottle. The game seemed to be over.

Why the hell had he done that? He couldn't have been thinking clearly. He had to find Oscar and straighten this out. This was the sort of thing that fucked up friendships, and there was no way he was going to let that happen. Oscar meant too much to him.

The door was still wide open. A lot of noise was coming from the other rooms—laughter, a guitar being brutalized, the sound of a crowd cheering on television. Oscar couldn't have gone far. But before Jamie could take a single step to go and find him, Leah reached up and grabbed his arm.

"Give him a minute. He probably just needs a bit of air," she said.

Jamie didn't know whether to argue with her, ignore her, or collapse to the floor. Digging his nails into his palm, he shook off Leah's grip and headed towards the door anyway. He knew Oscar better than she did. He was closer to him than she was. Wasn't he? A little flicker of jealousy flared in the pit of his stomach, but he refused to let it grow. It was stupid. If Oscar was in love with Leah, which deep down Jamie was pretty sure he wasn't, then he'd be happy for them—or he'd do a damn good job pretending he was. The only thing he wanted was for Oscar to be happy.

Something clicked into place in his brain—he was pretty certain he'd do anything to make Oscar happy.

"Jamie! Where've you been?" Rhiannon flung herself at him as he stepped into the lounge. Two lads holding hands on one of the sofas smiled at him.

"Just in the other room," he said, feeling a little unreal as he peered around. He doubted Oscar would be in here—there were too many people.

“Jamie, I need to get home. It’s only Thursday night, and I’ve got to take my cousins to school in the morning.” Rhiannon stumbled on her heels as she glanced at a non-existent watch on her wrist. God, she was so drunk. Jamie hoped her dad wasn’t going to be pissed off. It was funny, considering the amount of alcohol he’d ingested, but right at this moment he didn’t think he’d ever felt more sober.

“Okay.” He took a deep breath. “I’ll take you. I just... I just need to find Oscar first.”

After guiding her back to the sofa to sit with the smiling lads, he hurriedly searched the whole of the massive flat, but to no avail.

Leaning against the wall in the quiet kitchen, he texted Oscar.

*Where are you? I’ve got to go. I want to say goodbye to you.* Awkwardness could go fuck itself.

Jamie took a deep shaky breath and pinched the bridge of his nose like his mum had told him to when he was little and one of his brothers had made him cry.

*You’re my best friend, Oscar,* he thought. *I want you to be my best friend for always. Please don’t let me have fucked anything up.*

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## ***Oscar***

Leah discovered Oscar halfway up the stairs that led to the roof garden. The door to the garden wasn’t locked, but however romantic it seemed staring out over the town lit up with fairy lights or up into the dark shadowy hills, the wind was too bitterly cold to stand out there for long—which was why Oscar had planted himself down in the stairwell instead.

The metal of Leah’s dress chinked softly against the concrete as she sat down. She stretched her long slender legs out along the step and leaned against the wall. Her tights were the thick black-and-white stripes of a zebra crossing.

“You don’t smoke. And this is a bad time to start,” she said with a disapproving expression and took the cigarette out of Oscar’s fingers before crushing it under her boot.

Oscar frowned, but he hadn’t really been smoking it anyway. It had just been something to do with his hands. “Why did you stop the bottle on me in there?” he asked quietly.

Leah bit her lip. “Are you mad at me?”



Oscar frowned. “A bit.”

“I’m sorry.” She took his hand, sandwiched it in between both of hers and gave him a rueful smile. “I was curious. It was quite obvious I put my foot on it and stopped it. Jamie could have spun it again, but he didn’t. Instead, he kissed you. Twice.”

The door to the flat opened wide below, and for a moment, the noise of the party filled the quiet stairwell.

“Do you regret it?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Oscar said helplessly. “He’s straight.”

“Would you feel better if you hadn’t kissed him?”

“I don’t want to ruin our friendship.”

“You won’t. What’s a drunken kiss between friends? You were drunk; he was drunk. It’s easy to make it into nothing if that’s what you want.”

Yeah, but would Jamie see it like that? What if all those feelings Oscar buried so deep had spiralled between them the moment their lips touched and Jamie could tell how Oscar felt? He wasn’t ready for that.

Even though he was leaving—and he’d fantasied about telling Jamie everything when he left—the reality was terrifying. Being rejected by the one person who meant everything to him would probably kill him.

His phone buzzed. He pulled it out of his pocket and stared at the screen.

A minute passed.

“Was that Jamie? And you don’t know what to say, right?” Leah dipped her head towards him.

Oscar nodded.

She rolled her shoulders back and sat up straighter. “And you’re hiding out up here because you don’t want to see him right now?”

“I can’t act like it meant nothing.”

“Then don’t. Maybe it didn’t mean nothing.”

“In some alternate universe, maybe.”

Leah’s universe, maybe, where no one hid all the secrets in their hearts and straight or gay just didn’t matter. Where all the lonely people got their happy endings. The universe he wished for in his animations.

The worn concrete step felt smooth and cold under his fingertips, flecked with a thousand tiny colourful stones.

Leah reached over and rubbed his arms with long soothing strokes. “Then text him and tell him you’ll see him tomorrow or something. Act like this wasn’t a big deal and it won’t be. I promise.”

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### *Jamie*

“Why do you look so sad, Jamie?”

Rhiannon lifted her head from his shoulder and peered at him, pulling a pantomime sad face. Fine strands of her hair brushed against his face, making his nose twitch.

“I’m okay. Just tired.” He forced out a yawn.

They were the only two people on the top deck, and apart from the gentle roar of the bus’s engine as they climbed into the hills, the world beyond was dark and silent.

“Think your friend Oscar might be gay?”

“Huh?” Jamie swallowed and pulled away slightly, wondering where on earth that question had come from.

“Will was gossiping at the party. Said Oscar kissing this other lad was about the hottest thing that had happened all night.”

Feeling his skin heat and his chest tighten, Jamie winced and turned away, staring at the dark landscape speeding past them. He wasn’t *with* Rhiannon as such, yet he couldn’t rid himself of the guilt her words caused. She liked him, he knew that.

“So what if he’s gay?” he murmured. “It doesn’t matter.”

“With a dad like his? God, I’d be terrified to leave the fucking milk out of the fridge, never mind fly the rainbow flag.”

Willing her to shut up, Jamie closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep.

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After he’d walked Rhiannon home, Jamie wandered around the quiet hillside streets between their houses and ended up in the hilly park just beyond the end of the drive up to his house. Sitting on a creaky swing, he stroked the

kazoo in his hand. It didn't look blue in this light, just greyish-black like everything else. But he didn't need to see it to know what colour it was.

He didn't want to think about Oscar being gay. Instead, he thought about Oscar's dad. They'd only met once, but he agreed with Rhiannon, the man was stone-faced and terrifying, as if the world pissed him off. Oscar in particular.

Jamie sat on the swing for nearly an hour until he felt cold all the way through. Then he headed home to fall into bed and sleep.

In his dream, he kissed Rhiannon. They were at the party again, and he'd spun the bottle. He kissed her and kissed her, as though he was searching for something. But Rhiannon didn't have it, so he kissed the next person and the next—the whole room—until he woke up gasping, blankets wrapped around his limbs as though he'd been fighting them.

Threading his hands in his hair, he stretched out. It was still dark outside. Six a.m. He had work at nine with Oscar. The thought filled him with the same happy apprehension it always did.

Nothing had changed.

*Please don't let anything have changed*, he begged.

Thank God, he didn't have a hangover.

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## ***Oscar***

The day had started badly, and Oscar had this sinking feeling that it was only going to get worse. He'd woken up late, rushed out without eating, and had still missed his bus to Abertillery. His head throbbed dully as he stood in the chilly morning air waiting for the next bus to arrive. He wasn't sure if he was hung-over or just tired.

Jamie had already opened up by the time Oscar made it to the music store. Opening up was something they were supposed to do together—it was hard work for just one person: lifting all the shutters, turning off the alarms, getting the money out of the safe, and setting up the till.

Friday was discount day and customers were already milling around—and Jamie was patiently dealing with two of them. He glanced up as Oscar hurried across the shop floor to dump his rucksack in the backroom.

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“Your T-shirt is on back to front,” Jamie whispered softly as Oscar helped him lift down an electric guitar from the top rack for the teenage lad waiting behind them. The lad shifted awkwardly from foot to foot as he waited with a stern-looking woman who was probably his mum. “It’s a good look on you, though.”

Jamie lowered his eyelashes and grinned before turning away. And just like that, all the tension and the not knowing what to say, which Oscar had lain awake most of the night paralyzed with fear about, just melted away. Jamie was still Jamie, and Oscar was still Oscar, and they fit together like the stars fit the sky.

The relief was so huge, Oscar almost laughed aloud.

His T-shirt *was* on back to front, though. He looked down. His fly was done up, shoes on the right feet (he never wore matching socks anyway), so at least everything else still seemed to be in order.

An hour later Oscar finally had a moment to go through to the back and sort his T-shirt out. He pulled it off over his head and nearly yelled in shock when he turned and found Jamie standing behind him.

“Thought I’d take my break with you... Tracy came in to take over,” Jamie said in a faint voice.

Oh God, *Tracy*. Oscar hadn’t seen her arrive. In the rush this morning he’d forgotten the letter he’d drafted handing in his notice. He’d left it on his desk at home.

Trying not to catch Jamie’s gaze, he quickly turned his T-shirt the right way around and pulled it back on. His arms and chest were toned even though he didn’t work out, but self-consciousness—or maybe it was the way Jamie was looking at him—made him blush.

“Want a tea?” Jamie asked, brushing past.

“Yeah, thanks.”

Jamie filled the kettle and got the mugs out of the cupboard, and Oscar sat down on one of the tatty armchairs. They were silent as the kettle boiled, and Oscar’s skin started to prickle. Jamie wasn’t a silent sort of person. Silence was something he generally filled, and so when Jamie turned, still without a word, a mug of tea in each hand, Oscar’s apprehension rose. He caught Oscar’s gaze and smiled, but it was a serious sort of smile.

“About last night—” Jamie began.

“I was so drunk, I don’t even remember how I got home,” Oscar cut in, heart beating fast, needing to save them both from the awkwardness of this conversation. He tried to laugh—as if getting stupidly drunk was a regular thing for him—at the same time as taking a gulp of too hot tea, and he spluttered the whole lot back out all down his T-shirt.

“Crap,” he groaned, getting up.

There was a cloth hung over the side of the sink.

“Oscar...”

Jamie followed behind him, coming to stand so close that Oscar could feel the warmth emanating from his skin, but he couldn’t turn around to look at him. All he could do was lean against the sink, his knuckles turning white as his fingers dug into the cold metal lip.

“Look... it’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it. Really,” Jamie said in a low voice. “But... but if it’s a problem, don’t—I don’t know—don’t let it become so we *can’t* talk about it at all. Being your friend means so much more to me than one thing that happened one night. Even if it’s just to say ‘*ohmyGod*, I can’t believe we did that,’ or something. I don’t want it to be a big thing or for anything to have changed. I won’t say anything else.” He knocked his forehead lightly against Oscar’s shoulder. “Here, have my tea. I’ll go back out and give Tracy a hand.”

Jamie reached around to place his mug down on the work surface just as Oscar put his hand out. Oscar only wanted to stop Jamie moving away but their hands collided and tea sloshed everywhere across the sink and the floor.

“Shit. Do you think I’m cursed?” Oscar muttered, his fingers wrapping gently around Jamie’s wrist, drawing him closer.

“A little.” There was a smile there somewhere—Oscar could hear it in Jamie’s voice.

Maybe Oscar had pulled too hard, but the full-body contact that followed was unexpected. Jamie just about melted against his back, his bony chin poking into Oscar’s shoulder, his warm breath like kisses against Oscar’s neck. Oscar closed his eyes, toes curling with the rush of pleasure.

When he pulled himself together enough to speak, Oscar whispered, “I didn’t sleep much last night, worrying about how we could get around this without talking about what happened. Stupid, huh?” He could feel the strong, steady thud of Jamie’s heart beating against his back.

“Yep. Dead stupid. I didn’t wander around town in the middle of the night, thinking up what I was going to say to you. Oh no. Definitely wasn’t so stressed I had some really weird dreams. Can I ask you something?”

“You will anyway.” Oscar smiled.

“Could you turn around? ’Cause I could really do with a hug.”

Without hesitation, Oscar turned and clasped Jamie tightly, pressing his face into Jamie’s clean-smelling hair. Was he imagining the way Jamie just about went boneless in his arms? Probably. But he couldn’t imagine he would get to hold the lad he loved in his arms too often, and he was going to make it worth it.

The stuff that scared you wasn’t ever as terrifying in reality as it was in your head.

They stayed like that for the rest of their break—arms around one another, hearts beating slightly out of time. It was only five or so minutes, but Oscar willed the clock above the door to stop moving so fast. He wondered if Jamie was worried about someone walking in and seeing them, but Jamie made no attempt to pull away.

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### *Jamie*

*I didn’t mind kissing you.* Jamie had almost said it as they’d stood pressed so close in the staff room earlier. Until he’d remembered that Oscar had sort of minded—if the shocked look on his face before he’d bolted from the room at the party was anything to go by. And yet, when they were actually kissing, Oscar really didn’t seem to have minded at all.

There was something crazy going on in his head today.

With his favourite guitar cradled in his lap as he sat on his bed, Jamie gently ran his fingers over the strings.

Apart from his soft strumming, the house was silent. Pete was out, working late. The light over the garage was still on, which meant his dad was still working or asleep on his couch.

Jamie wasn’t even thinking about the notes he was playing. His fingers were doing their own thing and his brain was doing another. He thought about writing the melody down but he was content enough just letting it drift.

He did this sometimes, the sounds changing, transforming. He could play for hours. It cleared his head and helped him focus at the same time. Playing guitar was a necessary part of his day. He couldn't imagine it not being.

He thought about the day. Considering how uncertainly it had started, it had ended pretty well.

Earlier he'd received a surprising phone call. The school had invited him in for an interview on Monday for the trainee teaching position—the job he'd told Tracy he doubted they'd consider him for with his lack of experience.

He really wanted to tell Oscar, and yet he held back, still certain he wouldn't get the job, and not sure what it would mean if he did.

Working at the music store was a stopgap job for both of them. They knew it. Tracy knew it. Life as he knew it wouldn't last, however much he was enjoying it.

Teaching had always been what he wanted to do. He loved playing his guitar and seeing kids' faces light up when they played their first notes. When they understood that making music wasn't just magic—it was a magic that was inside them.

If Oscar went to Cardiff University, as he'd suggested he might, and Jamie got this job, then things might work out well. Jamie would be at the uni one day a week. He would have more free time as the school hours were shorter than the shop ones. He might still be able to see Oscar almost as much as he did now. But they hadn't talked about it. Jamie was only hoping.

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### *Oscar*

Oscar's phone vibrated on the desk next to him. It wasn't Jamie. He'd set his phone to beep if it was Jamie, so he ignored it.

He was in full flow, concentrating on the playback as he tweaked the scenes he'd created so far. It was half eleven, and he'd been working on it for nearly four hours now. Ever since this morning with Jamie in the staff room, he'd felt good, inspired, and not even his dad's snide comments over dinner had managed to bring him down.

A small fire now burned constantly in his chest. Oscar told himself it was because he knew that even if Jamie was in love with Rhiannon, they had something too. Not because of the kiss they'd shared, but because of the way

Jamie had been so desperate to make sure everything was okay between them afterwards.

Maybe that could be enough.

Maybe he was deceiving himself again, but falling out of love with Jamie was going to be impossible.

Oscar's phone pinged again. This time he glanced at the screen. It was Leah, asking how his day had gone. Subtext: How had everything gone with Jamie?

Holding Jamie in his arms, all warm and smelling of wood, and guitars, and cinnamon shampoo, Oscar hadn't even stopped himself becoming aroused. He'd let himself enjoy the sensations. Hearing Jamie say being friends meant so much to him was better than anything.

It had all been pretty much perfect. He picked up his phone. Typed a quick message.

*Yeah, all sorted.*

*So did you tell him about the competition? About you leaving?* Leah replied.

The room temperature might as well have dropped to zero. Yeah, he *had* felt good. Now he just felt shitty.

*I'll talk to him on Monday.*

The fire in his chest fizzled out, crushed by the heavy rock his heart had turned into.

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## ***Jamie***

Monday afternoon. Jamie walked through streets he'd known forever and barely recognized them. The early-afternoon sunshine made everything so bright and clear—the mountains, the clouds.

He caught sight of his reflection in the front window of a small town house and grinned. He was just about bouncing as he walked. As a small kid he'd bounced on his toes to try and contain feelings of excitement that wanted to burst out of him, when really he wanted to run around with his arms out, whooping. Sometimes it still happened.

They'd offered him the job.



The local primary school had offered him the trainee teaching position. He kept repeating the words to himself. Testing them out. The folded paper gripped in his hand listed all the benefits, the pay scale, things he had to sign, details of the college course. He hadn't expected it, and he still couldn't believe they wanted to employ him.

For reasons he never let himself think too much about, the last few months of secondary school had been beyond painful. He'd fucked up his A levels and he never wanted to go back and retake them. He hadn't put any reason on his CV for his appalling final grades, although it was obvious something had happened. He'd never been a spectacular student, but the complete failure he'd ended up being wasn't expected. Well, even if it wasn't expected, he guessed everyone understood why, and no one ever mentioned it. Which Jamie was endlessly grateful for.

Your mum dies, and it kinda makes your world tilt and heave.

But the primary school seemed to have looked beyond that.

After coming out of the interview, Jamie had stood in the playground and phoned his dad, then Pete. He wanted to tell Oscar face-to-face. If he was honest, he wanted to figure this out with Oscar. Figure out if this was the right thing for him to do, because it meant a lot of things were going to change—things that involved Oscar. And having Oscar in his life was becoming as necessary as breathing.

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The shouting could be heard out in the street.

Jamie rounded the corner and glanced around, thinking it was coming from the little Co-op or the newsagents either side of the music store. But Mrs Simmons was peering out the window of the newsagents as if she too were looking for the cause of the noise.

It was then Jamie realized with a jolt of real fear that the shouting came from inside the music store itself. And it wasn't Oscar. Which meant someone was shouting *at* Oscar.

Jamie hurried down the road and shoved open the door to the shop so hard it cracked the plaster off the wall behind. The bell above the door clattered noisily.

A man in a creased beige suit was roaring at Oscar, who looked as though he had backed up to the cash desk to try to escape. Oscar's head was down, his

hands gripping onto the table behind him as though he was weathering a storm. He didn't even look up as Jamie stumbled into the shop.

Adrenaline racing through his veins, Jamie rushed forwards ready to plant himself in front of Oscar and protect him somehow, but his steps faltered when Oscar looked up, met his eyes, and vigorously shook his head, clearly upset. That was when he noticed who the man shouting and shaking with anger was.

Eric Moore, Oscar's dad.

This seemed to be the tail end of an argument.

"...dare you go on like this? It's disgusting. You think we're going to sit by and watch you do this with your life? You've been hanging around with—" Oscar's dad paused in his tirade to turn and meet Jamie's wide-eyed gaze "—dropout scum like him for too long."

The man actually pointed. At Jamie.

*What the fuck?* They'd met only once when he'd visited Oscar's house, and Jamie had been nothing but polite. He'd even pointed out Mr Moore had left his lights on in his car.

Jamie was too shocked to be insulted, but it was as though a switch had been pressed inside Oscar.

Amazed, Jamie watched as Oscar suddenly came to life. He pushed off the desk and stood tall. His face flushed with anger, fists clenched.

"Don't you *ever* speak about Jamie like that again," Oscar growled in a low, threatening voice.

The slow smile that spread across Eric's face turned Jamie's insides cold. This man liked a fight. Especially one he thought he'd always win.

"That skinny waste of space? He's nothing. The only reason his dad has any respect around here is because he's bought it. People like that don't deserve to have money. Tainting this country with their filthy offsp—"

Oscar brought his arm up, and for an awful moment, Jamie thought Oscar was going to hit his dad. From the brief flash of fear that crossed Eric's face, it seemed that thought had occurred to him too.

"Get. Out. Now," Oscar hissed, pointing to the door.

Oscar kept stepping forwards, more sure of himself than Jamie had ever seen him. Jamie held his breath until Eric backed off towards the door.

“When you come crawling home tonight, things are going to change. *This* is not happening under my roof,” he spat from the doorway.

“I won’t be crawling anywhere. I’m leaving. I’ll pick my stuff up later.”

“You’re no son of mine.”

“Fine by me.”

Oscar slammed the door shut and stood scarily still, not even breathing, until his dad got in the car half parked on the pavement and drove off, tires squealing. As soon as he was gone, whatever had been holding Oscar up just let go, and he sank to the floor, curling his body around his knees and letting his arms cover his face.

Jamie had never seen Oscar cry. He knelt down on the floor by his side and stroked Oscar’s trembling back. Every so often Oscar would take a great gasp of air, but apart from that, he was completely silent.

The street was quiet now, but it wouldn’t be in about five minutes when the local schools finished for the day. They couldn’t stay here like this.

“I’m going to shut the shop and we’ll go through to the back.”

Luckily, Jamie didn’t need keys to lock the door. He could bolt it shut at the top and bottom and it would be secure. He flipped the sign to Closed.

“Come on,” he said softly, slipping his arm under Oscar’s shoulders and trying to help him to his feet.

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### *Oscar*

They were sitting on the floor in the staff room. Well, Jamie was sitting. Oscar had his head in Jamie’s lap, soothed by the rhythm of Jamie’s fingers as he stroked them gently through Oscar’s hair, over and over. It made Oscar’s heart hurt how good it felt. He didn’t want the sensation to ever stop. Everything else could go fuck itself. He wanted to stay here, like this, forever.

“I’ve made such a mess of everything,” he murmured, not really certain he’d said the words out loud. The whole situation was beginning to seem a bit unreal.

“Have you? Like what?” Jamie’s voice was so soft.

Oscar closed his eyes. There were too many ways to answer that.

“Tracy’s going to be pissed we shut up shop.” *Wow, great evasive move, Oscar. Not obvious. At all.*

“No. She’ll be okay. She’ll understand.”

Understand that his dad was an asshole? Yeah, Jamie was right, she probably would.

“I’m sorry... for what he said to you.” He looked up. Jamie’s eyes were dark and unfathomable. Oscar had no idea what he was thinking.

“It doesn’t matter,” Jamie whispered.

The impulse to reach up and touch was so strong, and Oscar didn’t stop it. He let his thumb brush along Jamie’s jaw, feeling smooth skin and the occasional prickle of hair. The whole time he kept his eyes fixed on Jamie’s, searching for any sign this wasn’t okay.

Exhaling softly, Jamie looked down. At his hands, at Oscar’s hair? Oscar didn’t know. Maybe it was too much. He slipped his arm around Jamie’s back, closed his eyes, and felt Jamie lean closer and curl around him.

Something had been broken when his dad came in the shop. Time, space, he didn’t know, but something fundamental had changed. It wasn’t the first time his dad had threatened to chuck him out, but it was the first time Oscar had stood up to him.

His dad had found a flyer for the ‘gay-themed’ competition along with the letter for Tracy, handing in his notice. Oscar hadn’t denied being gay when his dad asked. Although his reaction hurt, it was about what Oscar had expected. But when his dad lashed out at Jamie, something in Oscar ignited, and to be honest, whatever that was, it was still burning quietly inside him.

This time he wouldn’t go back, head hanging like a kicked puppy. This time he was gone. Where he would go, he wasn’t exactly sure yet. London? But where? He had some money saved, on his laptop there was a film nearly finished for the competition, and a certainty in his heart—which had come from God knew where—that told him he would be okay.

Leah’s words came back to him—he truly wasn’t the passenger anymore, he was definitely driving this car now.

He hoped Jenny wouldn’t hate him. Thinking about his sister made his throat feel tight and suddenly it was hard to breathe. He wished he could stop time and stay here in this room with Jamie.

“You know you can stay with me, don’t you? My dad would be okay about it. My brothers’ rooms are spare most of the time.”

“I know,” Oscar whispered. He squeezed his arm tight around Jamie’s slight form until he was sure he could feel Jamie’s ribs protesting, although Jamie didn’t complain. “Thank you. I think I might need to find my own way through this.”

“Okay. I want to help.”

“Yeah, I want you to help. That might be part of my problem, though.”

“Why?” Jamie’s eyes clouded, his forehead creased. “I feel so close to you right now, don’t be cryptic,” he whispered. “Please.”

Too late, Oscar remembered Jamie had heard only half the argument. He wasn’t sure he was glad Jamie hadn’t heard the rest or not, at least if he had, Oscar wouldn’t have to build himself up to telling yet another person he was gay.

But Jamie didn’t know, and Oscar was beginning to see being cryptic like this with him wasn’t just unfair, it was cruel.

Why did it feel as though they were crossing boundaries into some place Oscar had never been? Why right in this moment, when everything else was so complicated?

Using what felt like the last of his strength, Oscar hauled himself to sitting so he could look at Jamie properly. It always struck him in the most random of moments that Jamie had the most beautiful eyes he’d ever seen. They were breathtaking—impossibly large and wide-set, framed by thick eyelashes and shapely, expressive eyebrows. If you only glanced at Jamie, they would be the thing you remembered. Oscar didn’t know if they were an echo of his mother’s exotic looks or just something Jamie had been blessed with, because there were so few pictures of Jamie’s mother on the walls in his house. He imagined she’d been very beautiful, striking in the same way Ms De Silva was. Jamie had told him she’d come over here as a refugee from Lebanon and his father had had to put up with racist comments for years.

And yet they had still stayed. Despite everything.

Oscar closed his eyes. “I don’t mean to be cryptic. I promise I’ll explain everything. I’m just scared.” *But it seems like I finally grew a pair of balls out there with my dad,* he thought, *and I’m not as scared as I was anymore.* He

swallowed, then blinked and smiled. “I just need to figure out what I’m going to do first. I need to go get my stuff, and I’ll meet you at the Swan in a few hours and we can talk? Navy suits you, by the way.” Oscar ran his fingers down the lapels of Jamie’s suit. “Where did you go this afternoon?”

Despite the fucked-up-ness of the situation, this closeness was turning him on. This knowing that Jamie didn’t seem to mind if he touched his skin, his clothes, and that he wouldn’t push Oscar away if he held him. Whatever it all meant, now he was in Jamie’s personal space, he really didn’t want to get out of it.

“Nowhere important.” Jamie wouldn’t meet his gaze, though. “I’ll tell you about it later.”

“Shit, you’ve got band practice tonight, haven’t you?” Oscar suddenly realized. He knew how important the band was to Jamie.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“You sure?”

Jamie gave him a weak smile. “You might just be a little bit more important to me than the band.”

A loud knock made them both jump. It had come from the shop door.

“Jamie?” a voice called through the letterbox.

“Rhiannon.” Jamie groaned.

“Go let her in. It’s okay. I’ll go call a cab.” Oscar’s legs protested as he pushed himself up off the hard floor.

“I’d rather stay in here with you.”

“Me too,” Oscar said quietly as he turned away.

He had draped his coat over one of the chairs. He picked it up and pulled it on, feeling a little shivery.

“What if your dad’s there when you get back?”

“He won’t cause a scene in front of Jenny.”

“I could go with you if you want.” Everything in Jamie’s expression seemed to plead *I want to go with you*.

“It’s okay. I think I need to do this on my own.”

Rhiannon banged on the door again, but Jamie held Oscar's gaze for a moment longer.

"We're not... together. Rhiannon and I... She... I..."

It wasn't often Jamie ran out of words, but now he gazed at Oscar a little helplessly.

"She doesn't like your kazoo?"

Jamie snorted.

"Maybe you should give her a few lessons," Oscar said. He just wanted to make Jamie smile.

"I'd rather play with you. Rhiannon doesn't understand about kazoos."

This was exactly the wrong moment to start getting all hopeful.

So Jamie wasn't interested in Rhiannon. There'd be other girls.

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### *Jamie*

Jamie watched Oscar get into the cab with a mixture of regret and longing and some bone-deep ache that weirdly made him want to put his hand on his dick. Crazy mixes of emotions, as though he was bittersweet and horny all at once.

Since the party, his emotional repertoire seemed to have expanded exponentially. He would've laughed at that thought if he weren't so worried about Oscar.

"So what's going on?" Rhiannon whispered over his shoulder.

He turned and saw she was poking the crack in the plaster behind the door.

"You don't close 'til half past."

"Do you want a cup of tea?"

"Okay," she said, drawing her eyebrows together as if she could perhaps guess the direction of the conversation Jamie wanted to have.

He wished she could read his mind. It would make things a hell of a lot easier, because whatever was going on in his head wasn't making much sense to him.

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“You’re probably the most longed-for girl in Abertillery, you know.”

“Doesn’t make me feel any better right now,” Rhiannon said, stirring her tea.

She wasn’t drinking it. She’d put so much sugar in, spoon after spoon—almost one for every word he’d said as he navigated the minefield of letting her down gently and asked her if they could just be friends. It probably tasted disgusting.

“We were good together,” she said, spooning in one more sugar.

*Were we?* he thought. *We broke up because it wasn’t going anywhere.* He’d never felt any spark, any magic. Sweetness in spades, yes, but he knew there was more to love than that.

And after the sparks and sweetness he’d been feeling recently, sweetness on its own was never going to measure up.

“You’re in love with someone else, aren’t you?”

She hadn’t looked at him once during this whole conversation, but she did now. In all the time he’d known her, he’d never noticed quite how blue her eyes were, how they darkened to almost navy around the rims. And didn’t that say something, because he could write a fucking dissertation about Oscar’s.

“I don’t know,” he said. But that answer didn’t feel entirely honest. “Maybe.”

She’d get over him. She deserved sparks too. Didn’t everyone?

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## *Oscar*

As soon as the cab rounded the corner of his street, Oscar breathed a sigh of relief. No sign of either his mum’s or dad’s cars. No one was home. Then he remembered, Monday evening Jenny had swim practice.

Two minutes was how long it took to shove his shelf of T-shirts and trousers, the three shirts he owned, and his drawer full of pants and socks into a large black bin bag. They’d never been on holiday as a family. They’d never had any need for suitcases.

He laid his rucksack out on the bed and went to pick up his precious laptop from his desk. When he got closer, he could see something didn’t look right. The closed screen tilted wonkily, and the little machine was usually so perfectly



square and neat. Heart thudding in his ears, he tried to pick it up. The screen slid with a sickening clatter to the floor. It had been completely detached from the keyboard. The keyboard itself had a deep depression in the center, R to I and F to K were loose. Oscar stared at the broken mess in his hands, then at the screen lying on the floor. He pressed the power key, not really expecting it to try and boot up, yet still feeling like he wanted to curl up and cry when it didn't.

He'd saved up for half a year to buy this laptop and all the animation software on it, and with a couple of slams of what was probably his dad's fist, it was destroyed. Utterly.

With legs like jelly, Oscar sank down onto his bed and stared out the window.

His film had been on his laptop. The one for the competition he'd spent the past few nights working on.

For as long as he could remember, he'd been scared of his dad, but it was as though he could suddenly see everything clearly. Eric Moore was just a bully. And there was nothing strong about that. Nothing he had to be scared of. His dad had done his worst, and Oscar would survive it. It had kind of taken the wind out of his sails, but he was okay. He took deep breath after deep breath.

He did wish Jamie were with him, though, but when he pulled the phone out of his pocket, he didn't call Jamie. He called Leah. Mainly because he wanted to talk about Jamie and he couldn't do that to Jamie himself.

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"You okay? I can come and get you now," Leah said. She had the use of a car, which she shared with her flatmate.

"Honestly, I'm okay."

Oscar had told her everything. He'd put her on hold while he called another cab to take him to the Swan, and now she was trying to take his mind off what he was going to say to Jamie.

"I could be like your knight in shining pink armour... or something. Swooping in to brandish my mighty weapon to turn him into a frog if he says the wrong thing."

"He won't say the wrong thing. I'm the one who's likely going to do that."

“Just remember if he truly is your best friend, then he loves you. Okay, maybe not in the way that you want, but love all the same, and he’s not going to hate you whatever.”

Oscar knew she meant well, but that didn’t actually help. He still felt sick. Even sicker than he had standing up to his dad or finding his computer broken.

“I’ll call you after I talk to Jamie... are you sure it’s okay, me staying with you?”

“Of course. The sofa is yours for as long as you want it.”

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### *Jamie*

Jamie arrived at the Swan early. He ordered a whiskey at the bar and knocked back the smoky-tasting liquid before heading outside. The temperature was beginning to drop and he rubbed his arms as he stood in the beer garden, looking down over the valley. He wished he’d brought his coat. The alcohol still burned in his chest and he considered going back inside and ordering another, but the noise of a car pulling up made him turn around.

Oscar climbed out of the car. He held up his hand as soon as he spotted Jamie, but all Jamie’s strength seemed to have vanished and he just nodded in response.

“Do you want a drink?” Jamie asked, staring at the half-full bin bag and rucksack Oscar was carrying.

Oscar shook his head. “Do you want to sit out here?”

Before the fire of summer had burned away last year, they’d come here, just the two of them, to drink and talk. There was a bench set just down the hill outside the beer garden. The view was spectacular. Best view in all South Wales.

Still feeling weak, Jamie turned and headed towards it.

“You first,” Oscar whispered, sitting down. “You were going to tell me where you went this afternoon and why you were wearing a suit.”

“I had an interview at the school and they offered me the teaching job,” Jamie said miserably. He wanted to curl up, protect himself somehow from whatever it was Oscar was going to say.

“That’s great.” Oscar reached out, hesitantly stroking his arm. “Isn’t it?”

“Doesn’t feel so great right now. What the fuck’s going on, Oscar?” He tried to stop the words, but he couldn’t. He was so scared.

The way Oscar was looking at him wasn’t helping either—as if he was trying to get his words in order so he could control the damage they might make.

“Fuck. Put your arm around me,” Jamie whispered. He needed something tethering him down, and Oscar’s solid warmth was the best tether he knew.

Oscar took a deep, shuddery breath. “A few months ago I entered a competition run by Channel 4 animation. I won a place in the next round. One of the things they get you to agree to if you enter the finals is for your animation to be played on TV. So I was kinda scared because then everyone could watch.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Jamie asked quietly.

Oscar looked away, and Jamie felt the arm around his waist squeeze a little tighter. “Kind of. I suppose it depends on the animations you make.”

Jamie felt like he was missing something.

“So the finals are in a week, in London. I don’t think I’ll win, especially not now...” Oscar paused and ran his hand through his hair. “But the prize money is forty thousand in sponsorship. I could put myself through uni, get a flat. And for lots of reasons, though a lot of it is to do with the backlash I’ll get if I stay here, from my family—I mean, you saw what happened with my dad—I knew if I entered I was going to have to start anew somewhere... Start again... get away from this fucking place. I can’t stay here, Jamie. I just can’t do it anymore. I’ve got to go... I’m... I’m leaving.”

Oscar only breathed the last few words, but the force of them was like a punch to Jamie’s solar plexus. He gasped. All the air, everything, had been knocked out of him.

Those words were the only thing Oscar had said so far that made any sense. The only words he could focus on. “*Leaving* leaving? For London?” The words rasped against the back of his throat, barbed and painful. “When?”

“I don’t know. Not tonight. But tomorrow, maybe. I really don’t know. Tonight I’m staying with Leah, I think. She’s picking me up.”

*Why aren’t you staying with me?* Jamie thought helplessly, his gaze searching Oscar’s. *I don’t understand.*

“I don’t *want* to leave like this, but I think I have to. I don’t want to leave *you*, but I need to get over you, Jamie.” Oscar’s voice cracked. “I still want us to be friends.”

“You’re not making any sense.” Jamie’s voice sounded wooden, yet he felt anything but. Everything was blurry. Tears spilled down his cheeks into his lap. He didn’t wipe them away or try to stop them.

“Don’t cry. I’m sorry.” Oscar pulled him close, and Jamie couldn’t help but lean in letting his head fall against Oscar’s shoulder. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I couldn’t tell you, but I should have. I fucked up. It wasn’t supposed to happen like this. I thought I’d have more time.”

Right then he hated that Oscar smelled so good—it was partly the deodorant he always wore, which Jamie had felt compelled to buy a can of to keep at home, and partly just Oscar: tea, earth, musk, some unknowable combination.

“Why? Why didn’t you tell me?” The words sounded angry as he said them, but he wasn’t angry, he was falling apart. This was fucking huge. And what hurt the most was that he was beginning to think he must have imagined how close they were if Oscar could keep this from him.

It was as though a part of him had been torn clean away.

“I was scared, Jamie.”

*Yeah, so am I, Jamie thought. I’m scared I’ve lost you.*

It was fucking cold. Everything was so fucking cold. The sun had gone in. The world was growing dark. Ink-black shadows hugged the base of the hills around them. Jamie closed his eyes. Tears still ran down his cheeks. He wanted to sob his heart out, curl up, and just let go. But with trembling determination, he kept it in.

Barely opening his eyes, he gently pushed away Oscar’s arm from around his back and got up.

“Jamie?”

There was no way he could look at Oscar and keep it together, so he turned and walked back up the path towards the pub.

Oscar ran after him, but instead of stopping him, Oscar thrust a folded piece of paper into his hand. “I understand. I’ve hurt you. I’m sorry. This might explain some stuff.”

Jamie unfolded the paper, and stared at the words—a website address, then Romeo\_Romeo, and below it the words ‘Lima Oscar Victor Echo’.

“It’s a username and password for that website. I’ve a few films on there.” Oscar drew his sleeve across his eyes. His lip trembled.

With a small nod, Jamie shoved the paper in his pocket and fled, not sure if he was half hoping Oscar would follow him or not.

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### *Oscar*

“You made him cry?” Leah accused as they sat side by side on one of Will’s leather sofas.

Leah had decided to make a detour on the way to the house she shared, and after sending a quick text, had driven over to Will’s. Oscar guessed she thought he needed all the moral support he could get.

Leaning forwards, he rested his head in his hands.

Will, who had been in the shower when they arrived—Leah had her own key—bounded happily into the room dressed like a pirate, shouting “Ahoy there, matey!” and brandishing a plastic sword, but he became immediately subdued and quickly headed over to the sofa to squeeze into the tiny space on Oscar’s other side.

He began rubbing Oscar’s back reassuringly. “So what’s going on, then? Leah told me your dad figured you were gay and you chucked yourself out. Who did you make cry?”

“The boy he loves.” Leah sighed.

“What happened?”

“I told him I was leaving.”

“For London,” Leah cut in.

“You’re going to London?”

“I don’t know.”

“Sounds painfully romantic.”

“Doesn’t feel it,” Oscar mumbled, meaning the romantic part, the painful bit, yeah, he was definitely feeling that. “I’m so confused about everything.”

He didn't know where he was going to go now—what to do about the competition he wasn't sure he could even enter anymore now that his dad had broken his computer; his job at the music store; Jamie; his family—who he was sure all hated him.

“So why London? You have friends there?”

“It's far away.”

“He doesn't want to be the only gay guy in a fifteen-mile radius,” Leah added.

Oscar shot her a glacial look for bringing that up. He hated how pathetic it sounded. Especially right now in Will's flat.

“Aw, baby, is that what you think?”

“It's stupid, I know.”

“You must have been so lonely.”

Will pulled him close. It felt good to be hugged by a guy, even though there was nothing sexual about Will's touch, and though it didn't set him alight like hugging Jamie did, it still undid some hook in his chest. He leaned in closer.

“I'm a Valley boy. I get you,” Will whispered. Oscar looked up and saw the tears filling Will's dark eyes. “Everyone kinda worked out I was gay before I did, so there was no real coming out for me, but yeah, I know that loneliness. The loneliness of those hills. Love to hate them, hate to love them. It's why I moved here, to Newport. Far enough away but not too far, you know?”

Taking a deep breath, Will wiped his eyes and smiled as though he was determined not to let anything drag him down. Jamie was like that. It was one of the things Oscar loved so much about him, that he'd laugh through his tears, that he'd been through so much and he never let the darkness touch him. That he made everything seem like it was going to be okay.

Except tonight, there'd been no laughter. That luminous ball of energy that was his best friend had been crushed to nothing. Tonight, Oscar knew he'd hurt him, badly. He'd broken something. *Trust*, a little voice in his head helpfully supplied.

Yeah, he wouldn't blame Jamie if he never wanted to speak to him again. It didn't make it any easier to bear, though.

“You don't have to be lonely anymore. I want to introduce you to my family, Oscar. The family I made for myself when I moved here. They're gonna

love you... wait, you probably met some of them at the party, right? Jay and Dai and loopy Shane? Don't go to London just yet. I've got a spare room now Cal has moved out." He paused, and Oscar could almost see the thought as it occurred to him. "You could stay here, with me."

To Leah's shocked laughter, Will slid off the sofa and got down on one knee. "Oscar," he said in a serious voice, eyes twinkling. "Will you consider being my new flatmate? At least for a little while?"

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### *Jamie*

Jamie had phoned his brother as soon as he was on the road outside the pub and walking. "Pete, can you come get me?"

"Where are you?"

"The road outside the Swan, heading into town."

"You okay?"

Jamie knew he didn't sound anything like okay.

"Please don't ask. Just come get me, all right?"

\*\*\*\*

As soon as they'd arrived home, Jamie had jumped out of the car and run upstairs. He'd locked the door to his room, and was now curled up on the floor next to his bed. He felt numb. The piece of paper Oscar had given him was cutting into his palm. Carefully he unfolded it. For a moment, he stared at the writing. The phonetic alphabet. Romeo\_Romeo Lima Oscar Victor Echo.

Love.

He typed the web address, then the username and password into his phone.

Romeo\_Romeo had eight videos. It was a private profile but quite a lot of people were following it and the videos had a decent amount of views. The one that caught his eye had the same name as the password—'Lima Oscar Victor Echo'. It was only two minutes long.

He pressed Play.

In less than sixty seconds, he was smiling through a fresh wave of tears and picking up his guitar.

He'd been so fucking dense.

\*\*\*\*

## *Oscar*

Two a.m. and Oscar couldn't sleep. With a sigh he rolled onto his side and stared out the floor-to-ceiling window at the empty street below. He couldn't quite believe Will had offered him a room in his flat, even if it was just until he figured out what he wanted to do. The rent they'd agreed was only a little more than he'd been paying at home, and here he had a good-sized room, a queen-sized bed, a large workstation in smooth curved plastic, and a walk-in wardrobe. Plus the whole flat was huge and beautiful and Will was... a life raft maybe—someone who wanted to help him. Someone who understood. If he moved to London, he'd know no one and his money wouldn't last long.

Before Leah had gone home for the night, she and Will had taken a look at his computer. "Beyond repair" was the general consensus. But Will said he knew a computer guy who might be able to get Oscar a discount on a new machine.

*It's going to be okay*, he told himself, trying to believe it.

It didn't help the ache in his chest any, though. There wasn't much he could do for that.

So many times during the evening, he'd thought about texting Jamie. Scrap that—all he'd thought about all evening was texting Jamie, talking to Jamie, being with Jamie. If he was perfectly honest, everything else was just background noise. Jamie was the song that filled his head.

He brought his hands up to his face and covered his eyes. What he'd done hurt so badly, he wanted to take it back somehow, but he knew he couldn't. Even though it was fucked up because there was no way he could go on pretending, he still just wanted everything back the way it had been.

The sound of his phone pinging with a new message broke through his wallowing. Absently, Oscar patted the clean white cabinet next to the bed where he'd left it. He'd forgotten to turn it to silent.

Just an email. A comment on one of his videos. More as a distraction than anything else, he opened it.

The comment was from a user called Juliet. It read, "You should change the ending."

Oscar stared at the message. It was a bit odd. Cryptic.

Okay, he was curious. The ending of what? He couldn't see which video the comment was left on without going into the site.



He logged in.

His channel was private. People had to request to be added. Apparently, he'd added Juliet as a user one hour ago. He frowned. Maybe it was a glitch, or a hacker.

The comment was on the first video he'd ever uploaded. 'Lima Oscar Victor Echo'. It was a short about a lonely boy who'd fallen in love with his best friend. It was Oscar's story and it meant a lot to him. It was the video that got the most comments.

It was also the video he'd felt particularly self-conscious about Jamie seeing when he'd given him access to the account. But he'd convinced himself it wasn't so obviously about him, and he'd been more worried about the 'Jamie figuring out he was gay and being okay about that or not' to really stress about the film anyway. The animation on it was whimsical and a little cartoony, influenced by Ghibli films and anime.

And Juliet had commented he should change the ending? Well, obviously Juliet didn't have a fucking clue. The video didn't have a happy ending because that was life, wasn't it. The boy in the video's best friend was not in love with him. That wasn't going to change.

His phone pinged again. Juliet had commented again with a link to another video on a different channel.

Feeling weirdly apprehensive, Oscar followed the link.

The video loaded. It was entitled 'The Truth About Everything'.

He was the first viewer.

A guitar started playing. The tune was familiar somehow. Something in the melody tugged at him, made him feel melancholy and longing.

*First thing I should warn you is... I can't draw.*

The words scrolled across the screen and a little stick man appeared, arms out wide. It was just a still.

*And it took me all night to do this short sketch*

In the next frame, the stickman had bags under his eyes and he was yawning.

*But I had to try...*

*Because there's this lad and I thought we were friends, but it turns out I was wrong...*

The frame changed and now there were two stickmen on opposite sides of the screen, far away from one another.

*So wrong.*

It changed again and the stickmen were holding hands. They both had crazy hair and big smiles.

Blood thumped in Oscar's ears. He felt light-headed.

*And he needs to know 'The Truth About Everything', so here goes...*

The melody rose into the beginning of a song and Jamie's voice filled his ears, warm and rich, so much better than Matty's voice, but Jamie hated singing in front of anyone. Oscar felt like his heart was going to beat out of his chest, and his hands were sweaty and shaking.

There was another two minutes left of the video, but with a trembling thumb, Oscar paused it.

Jamie?

Jamie had posted this?

He stared at the screen, heart beating fast. Right then he was possibly more nervous than he'd been in his entire life. He pressed Play again.

The stickmen were gone. This time Jamie filled the screen. From the slightly dropped angle, Oscar could tell it had been videoed using the webcam of Jamie's computer. Jamie was sitting on the edge of his bed, his favourite guitar in his lap, his eyes closed, and he was singing his heart out.

His voice hit Oscar deep in the pit of his stomach. It turned him on, and not just because he got the feeling Jamie was trying to tell him something here, but because Jamie was the song—he was the music.

The first time the video played, Oscar hardly heard the words Jamie was singing, so he played it again.

*I don't care about anything as long as I'm with you.*

*I left tonight because I thought I'd lost you and I didn't know the truth.*

*I didn't know the truth.*

*My mother she once told me there was a girl who'd make my heart sing, but she hadn't met you, baby, and I'm too scared to wish.*

*I'm not made of storm clouds, but your first film made me cry. I told someone I loved you, baby, but you didn't know and somehow neither did I.*

*I've never felt about anyone the way I feel about you. I don't want to lose you so I need to tell you every truth.*

*I didn't know I loved you until the floodgates opened.*

*I can't promise I won't hurt you, but I can promise that I'll try.*

*I'm not made of storm clouds, but your eyes are like my sky.*

\*\*\*\*

Oscar played the song over and over. It became more beautiful every time—a helium balloon lifting him up, filling his chest, until his ribcage felt like it would crack and his heart burst free.

Jamie should have been the singer of the fucking band.

Every time the song ended, Oscar became afraid the whole thing was the work of his fucked-up imagination. After the tenth play, his finger hovered over the comment box.

*Fuck it*, he thought and commented with a <3. Then another, and another. Less than twenty seconds later, his phone pinged with a text.

Jamie.

*I thought you'd be asleep.*

*No chance.*

Jamie didn't respond for ages. So long, Oscar considered picking up the phone and calling him, but he wasn't sure he'd be able to say what he wanted out loud.

*I miss you so much already*, Jamie finally texted.

*I miss you too.*

*Can I see you before you leave?*

Ouch. *You tell me how you feel, and we're still saying goodbye?* he thought. Oscar wasn't sure how to handle this at all.

“So honest it hurts” seemed to be the only suggestion his heart could come up with. So he went with it.

*Jamie, I wish I could see you right now. Not on the phone, not in the video I've watched over and over, but here in my arms.*

No response. He stared at the phone, hands shaking. Had that been too much?

*I'm staying at Will's flat,* he typed.

*I could get a taxi.*

*Now?*

*I'll be there in half an hour.*

*YesYesYes*

\*\*\*\*\*

It was forty minutes later when the taxi pulled up outside and Jamie climbed out. Oscar was waiting up on the roof, so high with happiness, he felt like he was soaring.

He near-jumped down every flight of stairs to reach the ground floor and skidded to a halt in front of the glass front door, breathing hard.

For a moment, they just stared at one another. Jamie wore the same clothes he'd had on earlier. They looked rumpled and sleep worn. His hair was as crazy as the stickmen's he'd drawn. Dropping his gaze, Jamie smiled and placed his palm on the glass. After a heartbeat, Oscar did the same. He imagined pulses of energy passing through the glass between them: all his need, desire, want. His hard-on was so obvious in his loose pants, he pushed it against the smooth glass, and shuddered, watching with wonder as Jamie mirrored the movement.

Not taking his eyes off Jamie, he blindly felt for the door release button and jumped backwards as the door swung inwards.

"Hi," Oscar said, dipping his head, to meet Jamie's eyes.

Whoa, he felt all shaky now.

"Hi," Jamie whispered.

*I want to kiss you,* Oscar thought, but he didn't have time to process the thought into action before his arms were full of warmth, Jamie's hands were in his hair, and the softest lips in the world smooshed against his.

Jamie touched Oscar's chest and splayed his fingers over Oscar's heart.

"Wow," he whispered, his mouth still lightly pressed against Oscar's. "I can feel every beat."

For half a second they stayed like that, then Jamie groaned and Oscar was lost. They kissed open-mouthed, tongues sucking, moaning and gasping. Jamie

kissing him so deep it was as though he wanted to somehow climb inside him. Oscar forgot he had to keep breathing—it hardly seemed important. And when warm fingers slipped beneath his waistband to cup his aching cock, he forgot entirely.

“You feel so good,” Jamie whispered. “Take me upstairs.”

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### *Jamie*

They lay kissing on Oscar’s bed. Just kissing, though Oscar’s pants were slipping and every time he moved his hips, Jamie could feel the wet drag of Oscar’s hard cock against his bare stomach. He lifted his T-shirt higher and tried to unbutton his jeans, but it was so hard to focus. He wanted it all, and he wanted only this. He wanted to come, and he wanted to remain on the precipice. It was living and dying. It was everything.

Jamie felt as though he were cracking open. His heart, his mind, all of him exposed. It was fucking terrifying. Fucking exhilarating. He never wanted it to end.

“Hey. You’re crying,” Oscar whispered.

He touched the wetness of Jamie’s cheek, lapped at it with tongue-soft kisses, but Jamie just slipped his hand around the back of Oscar’s head, and pulled him down and kissed him deeply on the mouth.

Somehow, finally, he managed to free his dick from the confines of his stupid jeans.

Oscar gasped into his mouth when Jamie rubbed their cocks together, both gripped in his fist.

In a frantic battle of arms and legs, they both managed to struggle out of their clothes.

“Lie on top of me,” Jamie instructed breathlessly.

“I’ll crush you.”

“You won’t. It’ll just feel so fucking good.”

“Feels fucking good now.”

Jamie laughed. Tears still filled his throat, his eyes, but there was always laughter too. He felt *everything*.

Tenderly Oscar cupped his face and knelt straddling Jamie's hips. His large cock lay heavy against Jamie's stomach. "I don't want you to cry. It's scaring me. Talk to me."

"Oscar, I've not let myself feel anything for so long, and you've opened the fucking floodgates. Kiss me through it. Make me come."

Oscar's legs trembled as he thrust, their cocks bumping. Jamie rubbed them together, but he was almost too lost and somehow the friction wasn't enough.

"Don't hold back," Jamie groaned. "You won't hurt me."

Finally, Oscar came down on top of him. His weight crushing Jamie breathless, containing him enough that he could let go and lifting his hips, he came with a shout, squirting in the tight space between their stomachs, feeling Oscar follow in long, slow, deliciously slick thrusts.

"Please don't move," Jamie whispered when he could breathe.

"I don't think I can," was Oscar's groaned response.

"Glued."

"Yup. This is it for us."

"I love feeling you like this. I feel so safe."

He squirmed as Oscar's tongue traced swirls on his shoulder, for a moment closing his eyes, just feeling. Heaven didn't get much closer. For him it wasn't in the shattering apart of orgasm, it was here in these quiet moments after, when everything came together again.

"What I said before. I meant it. About the floodgates. About not letting myself feel anything," Jamie whispered.

Shifting a little, Oscar brought his hand up and stroked through Jamie's hair. "You cry in your sleep, you know."

Jamie stared, trying to work out how Oscar could know that.

"First time I stayed over at your house, you fell asleep on me. It's about your mum, isn't it?"

Oscar's blue eyes met his.

They'd never talked about his mum dying. Never mentioned it, even. Jamie had never talked about it with anyone. Not his dad, not Pete, or Joe, or Dean. He'd never wanted to.

“Hurts... so fucking bad. Until today I hadn’t let myself cry since the day she died—” *When I’m awake anyway*, he thought, “—and I used to cry a lot... I’m sorry, Oscar. I couldn’t admit how I felt, even to myself. My mum used to tell me my life story. She said I would find some beautiful Valley girl and we would fall in love and have four happy children and our life would be full of light. Even though people could be so cruel to her because of where she had come from, she loved the valley.”

“But you didn’t want a Valley girl.”

“No. I didn’t want a Valley girl... Thing is, she would have loved you, Oscar. I think she would have understood. But I don’t know... at the time I was still so confused about how I felt, I was still figuring it out. So I never told her maybe falling for a Valley girl wasn’t really my thing. I tried being with girls, but it didn’t feel right. Then, after Mum died, nothing felt right... I think it was always you, though.”

“What?”

There was something infinitely adorable about the hopeful confusion on Oscar’s face.

“The first time I really noticed you was at school, in class, when you gave every answer in the phonetic alphabet. I think I fell a little bit in love with you that day and just never stopped falling.” Jamie smiled. “That’s probably the most truth about anything I’ve ever admitted.”

“India Lima Oscar Victor Echo Yankee Oscar Uniform Tango Oscar Oscar,” Oscar whispered.

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### *Oscar*

They slept curled around one another. When morning came with its evilly bright, slanting light, Oscar pulled the duvet over both of them and discovered Jamie quite liked being held really tightly as they spooned and they could both come hard from Oscar just sliding his cock up and down Jamie’s backside with maybe just a little pressure of Oscar’s cock against his hole. Jamie also liked kissing quite a lot. Which was good, because it was among Oscar’s favourite things.

“Work,” Jamie mumbled. “I don’t want to leave this bed, but Tracy—”

“It’s only eight. We’ll get a cab.”

“We?”

They’d talked about a lot but not this, Oscar realized, and his words began to tumble out in the rush to get them said.

“I didn’t hand my notice in... last night... Will said I could live here, rent this room. He’s sweet—you’ll like him. I know you didn’t get to talk to him properly at the party. And living here is not much more than I was paying at home. My dad smashed my computer so the competition might be off for me anyway. Plus, if I keep working at the music store, I might be able to fund my way through uni at Cardiff if I get on the course. I was scared about everyone finding out I was gay—no one in a fifteen-mile radius of us is gay—and having to deal with all that homophobia, and my dad, I couldn’t. So I had to leave, Jamie, but maybe this is far enough.”

The force of Jamie’s tackle hug threw them both back on the bed. Jamie kissed him roughly before bouncing up.

“This is definitely far enough! But Oscar, we are not the only gay people in the village.” Jamie sat on his chest, hands on hips. Completely naked with a semi-furious expression on his face. “Jess the bar manager at the Black Sheep is gay. My uncle Tommy, Cliff Gates from school, that girl with the beautiful red hair who drew those weird cat pictures in art. Loads of people we don’t know and never will. We are not fighting some lonely battle against everyone we’ve ever known. We are living our lives, and if it matters to some people who we love, then they shouldn’t matter to us.”

Someone clapped and gave a little whoop outside the room, and Jamie shoved his hand over his mouth and flushed an adorable shade of pink.

“I guess that’s Will, right?”

“Oh, he’s going to love you,” Oscar said drawing Jamie down for a kiss.

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## *Epilogue*

### ***Jamie***

The ballroom filled with people as the call went out that the ceremony was about to start.

Jamie wasn’t sure he’d ever felt so proud to sit at someone’s side and be there for them as he did right then with Oscar. Plus Oscar looked amazing in a tuxedo, and Jamie couldn’t take his eyes off him.



He knew how nervous Oscar was, though. Every few seconds Oscar kept turning around and glancing at the three tables of people chatting happily behind them.

“They know it’s not going to win, right?” Oscar whispered.

Jamie squeezed Oscar’s hand under the table. “They’re not here for that. They’re here for you and for what your film says about their lives.”

“They’ve travelled four hours for something that’s three minutes long and your singing is the best bit.”

Jamie laughed. “The kazoo at the end is the best bit, and that’s only two seconds.”

It had been his suggestion to use Oscar’s first film, to tweak the ending a little (Juliet would stand for nothing less than HEA) and Oscar’s idea to play the song Jamie had written over the top. It was intensely personal (that was what the competition had required, though), but after they’d shown it to Will, Leah, and a whole roomful of their friends, Jamie had witnessed with something like awe how the film had become important to each of them, no longer a story about Oscar and Jamie. It held echoes of everyone’s story in the room. Every one of them wanted to belong, to love and be loved.

Will had organized the coaches to London and now Oscar had his own fan club cheering him on.

Jamie knew that wasn’t the real reason Oscar was glancing about nervously, though. Oscar was looking for his mum and his sister.

It was Jamie who’d suggested Oscar should buy them the tickets. He’d held Oscar and stroked his trembling back as he’d spoken with his mum on the phone, heard her beg Oscar to come home, and wiped away the tears those words caused Oscar. She’d been angry at what his dad had said, and Jamie could see Oscar needed to hear that, but he needed more than that too.

He needed her to really be there for him, not just with words.

Jamie understood that and had even phoned her once himself. But she wasn’t here.

Jamie had faith, though. He believed in people. It was a trait he’d picked up from his mum, and he knew she’d be happy about that. In the past few weeks he’d done a lot of grieving. He wasn’t hiding from his feelings anymore.

Jamie glanced up. Oscar was watching him, checking he was okay.

“I love you,” Oscar mouthed, scooting his chair closer so he could place his arm around Jamie’s shoulders.

Oscar wasn’t hiding anymore either.

The lights dipped around them so only the stage was lit.

At first, they didn’t see the woman rushing down the aisle in her heels or the young girl gripping her hand. They did hear Will’s loud whisper directing her to the table in front, though.

Oscar stood up, blinking back tears, and hugged his mum and sister.

Their little table was complete. Whatever happened tonight, this was enough.

Sometimes you don’t know the truth, and sometimes you aren’t ready for it, but that is okay as long as you never close yourself off from it, because the truth is a lot like love.

“Lima Oscar Victor Echo and the Truth About Everything,” the announcer said, reading out the title of their film.

The crowd behind them erupted.

Oscar squeezed Jamie’s hand and smiled.

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*Suki Fleet grew up on a boat and as a small child spent a lot of time travelling at sea with her family. She has always wanted to be a writer. As a kid, she told ghost stories to scare people, but stories about romance were the ones that inspired her to sit down and write. She doesn't think she'll ever stop writing them.*

*Her novel, This is Not a Love Story won Best Gay Debut in the 2014 Rainbow Awards and is currently a finalist in the 2015 Lambda Awards.*

## **Contact & Media Info**

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