

The world was changing, and yet only half the population cared to pay any heed or mind to it. Half, approximately, assuming there was an even split between men and women.

I sat pensively on the train, trying to feel at least a little hypnotized by the slight jostles, rocks or bumps the cars may feel from the old and used railroads sprawling throughout the subway system.

But I hardly felt at ease today, and even more sick to my stomach than usual. I'd been dealing with the onset of disaster for so long now that I was probably a matter of days from it no longer being just the signs of what I feared. Any day now could be the arrival.

"Hey...? I'm talking to you, you know?" A soft voice nudged.

I kept my head looking down at the floor from my seat, but I couldn't ignore the couple flirting right nearby. Likely another product of the same system that was affecting all of us. The same *movement*.

"I'm...I'm listening," I could hear her sheepish lover reply. *Were* they lovers anymore? Likely just the loved and once loved by this point.

"I was asking you what you wanted for dinner tonight, silly. Were you distracted? Or...oh! Did you...?"

"No!" He raised his voice that'd certainly warrant stares, but I sure didn't. It was my best guess that no one did either. I needed none of the context nor the visual to know that it was all some unfortunate byproduct of a malignant force affecting all of us; all-consuming. "It's...it's nothing... I don't care what we eat."

"Don't be like that...!" she whined back in a tender voice. She spoke like it was only them inside this packed train car. "I can make your favorite?"

It's not that I wanted to hear their conversation, but everyday made it harder to tune out conversations like these if it meant having to go deaf entirely. Maybe it was morbid curiosity, wondering what the future might look like for myself. The goosebumps were infecting my skin and I could feel them creep from underneath my suit jacket and button-up shirt.

I wouldn't get to hear the end of their chat though, once the train came to a groaning, screechy halt and a synthetic female voice announced over the intercom that it was my stop.

“Mikey? Come on, this is us,” a woman announced to her boyfriend. Spouse, maybe? It hardly seemed to make a difference, nor was there any seeming distinction in treatment anymore. All that remained was lingering attachment for what once was and will no longer be. I watched multiple couples with all the same kind of lead take themselves off the train with me following in tow. My heart was beating a mile a minute, hardly able to keep my eyes straight. It was all superstition that was eating away at me, but unfortunately the well-placed kind. Something inevitable that I had no power over. Something that—

“Oh!” A woman gasped in front of me. In my internalized moment of panic, I wasn’t watching where I was going and walked straight into the back of someone. I went back on my butt, but she didn’t.

As she turned around a sick feeling welled up in my stomach. Shit! The one thing I had to do; go unnoticed and not make waves. In trying so hard to disconnect myself from reality I’d become blind enough to collide right with it.

“Honey, are you alright?” She didn’t reach out her hand, and I knew her as only the stranger of many that apparently used the subway. Yet I assure you that in spite of all the madness this world was seeing, disregarding social etiquette was not normal. Or maybe it was now, and the new normal was just to embrace the madness.

She didn’t reach out her hand, but she reached out both hands. Her arms, too. She was partly bending over, taking advantage of the little meek me who was still five steps behind trying to think of a response that wouldn’t land me in hot water. By the time I was ready to say something, this woman was assertively lifting me by the armpits and back on my feet.

Her brow was furrowed as she fussed all over me, going as far as to dust off my backside. One might call it sexual harassment, but that was of a different time. Maybe a few years ago it would have held some weight, but now everything’d become as light as a feather.

“Sweetheart?” she asked me again, and I blinked in worry, realizing that I was too engrossed in a conversation with myself that I hadn’t verbalized since my mandatory goodbye to my boss at the office.

“Y-Yes,” I replied quietly, underneath the bustling crowds and cacophony of train noises, scheduling departures, and other couples. “I’m...fine...” I wasn’t fine. Far from it. Physically? Maybe. The springtime of my youth, as I liked to think. Assuming that’s what early 20s could be called. Mentally, though? Life was certainly taking its fun in fileting away at that.

I looked up at her, nearly wincing when I saw her tilt her head with a curious smile. I wanted to blush, feel bubbly over what felt like genuine affection; flirt back, even. But I didn't because I didn't believe that any of it was what I wanted it to be. Well, that and because I was a faithful man.

And then the line of questioning began.

“Are you here by yourself? Actually—” she peered over her shoulder, seeing much better above the crowd than I could. “It’s a bit stuffy here, isn’t it?” She chuckled while she slipped a loose hair behind her ear. “Why don’t we go somewhere a bit more quiet?”

I looked out at her extended hand.

“I..I should go...” I did my best to diffuse myself from the situation, but all that did was put a concerned look on the woman’s face.

“It’s okay, honey,” she suddenly met me more than halfway, going the full distance to grab my hand by my side. “I just wanna talk.”

Her grip was solid. Soft, yet firm. From all the feats I’d seen as an onlooker and all the women I had witnessed lift and move with might, my will to physically resist had been quashed quite early on.

Maybe it was wishful thinking, but I wanted to be the one to disarm myself from her. I wanted to have the courage, intellect, and charisma to talk myself out of this. To convince someone part of the hivemind for the first time that I was independent and could be let go. Give back to myself at least a shred of agency.

But the moment I could see the crowd thinning out, enough to see a few feet on either side of us, I could see the door, sign, and destination we were headed.

So in a panicked, shameful moment, I raised my voice and shouted, wiggling my arm in her hand. I wiggled not to try and break free, but to make my sleeve droop and slip down my arm.

“W-wait!” I begged to her back, “L-Look! See?”

The woman barely even glanced, like by this point it didn’t really matter what I said, and unfortunately I knew how true that was. But I still played my last card. My only card. The one weapon I had that wasn’t even mine. Someone else’s that had been forced on me.

Her half-glance over the shoulder was enough, because I could tell she was having a double-take once she saw my wrist. We stopped and she turned around.

“You already have a...?” Whether it was really hers or manufactured, the disappointment in her voice was thick and heavy, like she was just denied from an Ivy League school. I didn’t even try to fight back when she tried to wedge her nail between my bracelet and wrist as a last ditch attempt. I didn’t stop her because I was dreadfully aware of its strength.

I was able to tug my hand free, solely because she had lost the will and simply allowed me to. “I...” And yet my embarrassment and shame were at an all-time high, having to rely on what I feared and hated the most. “I should go...”

Nothing else needed to be said. She was the enemy, but she wasn’t a foolish one. She knew what it meant, and so did I. “Be safe...” she said in a sad voice, standing where she stood, seeing me off.

Hurriedly I tugged back down my sleeve as I scrambled up the steps. I tried to stay inconspicuous for the few more minutes I had to go home. It wasn’t terribly often when moments like that happened, but the frequency was undeniably going up. Once or twice a month at first, but now once or twice a week for sure. The outcome never changed, but it made me sick having to solve it the same way every time.

I opted for the road typically less traveled, meaning the strongest likelihood of not seeing anyone by taking the stairs over the elevator. Traveling eight tiers of floors I walked down the hall, feeling the pace of my heart rate coast from the adrenaline of exercise to anxiousness. Was today finally the day? Was it when my final oasis dried up and a new reality set in?

Nervously, I slipped my key in the door, turning the lock, stepping inside.

“I...I’m home!” I called out to the apartment.

And my heart melted the moment I heard her voice.

“Hey...!” Kailey called back, and I instantly felt at ease.

The same voice and tone she always had the past two years we had been together. The same loving, feisty voice she had in public and in bed. My sweet, beautiful, sexy girlfriend whom I never wished to part with.

After kicking off my shoes, I followed the light and poked my head into the kitchen, spotting her.

I caught her mid-slurp of a large wooden spoon, standing by a boiling pot of something. I could smell it already. Pasta with tomato sauce. My absolute favorite.

I couldn't help but smile the moment she gave me hers.

"Hey!" she greeted me again and it made my heart overjoyed.

Without a word I came in for a hug, wrapping my arms around her waist.

"Ah-ah! Wait! Wait!" Kailey begged me with a giggle, disarming me with ease as she gently put some distance between us. "Look at me!" She swept her hands down at herself, showing off the stained apron. "Geez," she frowned disapprovingly, "look at you!"

My once-white shirt now had a stain of red on it. But I hardly cared. Not after what I just went through at the subway. I needed something to feel right again, and that's exactly what Kailey was, and now this tomato sauce too.

"I can wash it later," I said dismissively, coming in for a kiss, and she did respond lovingly.

And as I was recharging, the look on Kailey's face changed. It was concern, and that made me uneasy. The one thing Kailey could do to make me upset was indicate that she was privy to the outside world. She wasn't a stay-at-home girlfriend that only dealt with me. She worked and was a contributing member of society. A part of *that* society.

"It happened again, didn't it?"

My shoulders drooped just the slightest bit. I always hated wearing my emotions on my sleeve. Once upon a time it was fun being an open book to your lover, but not anymore. Not in this kind of world.

"It's nothing; I'm just glad to see you?"

But she knew. She always knew. "Did you show her your bracelet? Like we practiced?" Kailey asked with a hand on her hip. I tried not to frown. I hated when she was like this. She was the one thing that was the antithesis to the world outside these four walls. My one reason for thinking that things could still be normal for me. For *us*. In ways we've already had to adapt, but for the most part we were still just us. Boyfriend and girlfriend.

“Y-yes,” I mumbled, trying to get past this. “It’s done and over with now, okay? How was your day at work, was it good?”

Maybe my emotions were a bit easy to read, but I could at least tell some of the looks on my girlfriend as well. It was her signature, ‘I still want to keep talking about this’ face.

But we didn’t.

“It was good...” she started slowly before turning back to stir the pot. Good, we were successfully changing the subject. “Actually, I got out even *earlier* than usual today, so I got to do some errands. Oh! And remember my coworker? Martha? I was chatting with her today and she mentioned the park a few blocks over? She said there’s gonna be some kind of show and I thought we might be interested?”

“Yeah? Music?” Rock was always a nice reprieve.

“Should be some fun tunes,” she nodded. “I was thinking that I could make us some sandwiches and we’d go?”

I was a much bigger fan of indoor at-home activities, but Kailey always knew how to give me strength.

“Sure,” I smiled. “Sounds good.”

“Great! And how was work for you?” Her interest subsided for a second-hand frown. “Those girls better have stopped harassing you...”

“It was fine...” I glossed over with a sigh. “And don’t worry about them; it’s fine...” It was easy for me to say that now that Kailey was in the same room as me. My beacon, my pillar. She was overprotective of me and I liked to see that as her way of shielding us from how much society had changed in such little time. How topsy-turvy everything had become.

She set the spoon down just to turn and look at me. “I worry about you, you know?”

“Thank you, I appreciate it. I worry about you too.”

“I know you do,” she smiled with her pearly whites. Then her eyes started to wander away from mine, starting to sound a bit less certain. “I...could always start picking you up, you know...?”

“Kailey, n-no. That’s fine. Really... We’ve...we’ve already talked about this.”

“I *know* we’ve talked about it,” she sunk her hands into the front pocket of her apron, “but I really want you to think about it? Oliver, don’t you want strangers to stop walking up to you on the street?”

“But that’s why we agreed to this stupid bracelet, didn’t we?” In a small burst of frustration I flashed the emasculating jewelry on my wrist. “So I could still keep things the way that they should be?”

Kailey frowned. “Yes, to keep you safe. Oliver, you know those bracelets are only good until the end of the year.” The end of the year. So many months away, and yet the time until then was burning away like we were hurtling towards the sun.

Her face softened as she tried me with another plea of reason, “Look, my workplace is already letting me out early? Because they think that I’m already using this time to come and get you?”

“Yeah,” I hurriedly tried to deflect and dodge, “but I’m sure you like having the time to come home and relax sooner?”

“Not as much as I’d like making sure you get home safe,” she said without any sort of smile. Kailey always cut the jokes when she was serious. “Oliver, please? Would it convince you if I said I just want to see your face more? Because I do?”

And like that one of my big buttons had been pressed. A sweeping strike had stripped off my armor completely.

“Unless you don’t wanna see me?” she put on a dejected, hurt sort of look. She was acting and it was obvious, but my heart was as gullible as I was afraid of losing what we had. What made it so hard to stay resolute against Kailey was the worry of her retaliating in some way. The worst outcome was breaking up, and I could never let that happen. Not only because of how much I loved her, but because I knew that a relationship like this would never be attainable. Not now. Not in this kind of world.

“I…” I caught myself halfway. With a quiet sigh I finally gave in to yet another compromise. “Fine.”

And as a small reward, her face lit up like the sun.

“Really? Oh…! Thank you so-so much!” Kailey assaulted me with pecks all over on the cheeks, sauce-stained apron included.

And at least with Kailey, giving in meant easier post-mortem negotiations. “But! Can...can we not start until next week?” I rubbed my face with a blush. It made me feel silly for thinking this, but still I said, “I...I just want to feel the same for the rest of the week...”

Without hesitation Kailey said, “Of course!” That made me smile. Things were normal again. For at least a little longer. “I’ll make sure to call your boss tomorrow to let her know...” Kailey mumbled to herself back by the stove.

I chose not to comment.

“Uhm...I’m gonna take a shower,” I started to excuse myself. “I’m guessing dinner’ll be ready by then?”

“Yes it will be!” Kailey said so chipperly. “By the way, I was doing some laundry and your underwear is still in the dryer, so could you just wear the ones you have on now?”

“Sure thing!” I called halfway down the hall.

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The best part about someone you love and spend so much time with is getting to pick up on their mannerisms and habits. Kailey, of course, was no different.

“And then?” she excitedly pointed with her fork, either moving with her hands or the things in them, “Then she wanted me to re-run the samples just because Stacy wasn’t wearing gloves in the next room over! Can you believe that?”

“Wow,” I mumbled through a mouthful of food. “That does sound kinda excessive...”

“Right?” She shrugged. “Like, don’t get me wrong, I think these accelerated trainings we’ve been getting are great. It lets us do some really interesting work and think a lot more critically. It’s just that it’s also starting to make everyone *super* specific about how work gets done. It’s so ridiculous how quantum causations are really just causing our work to be more anal...”

I nodded like I understood, but in reality I couldn’t even get my foot in the door when it came to imagining the kind of work Kailey did. It wasn’t always like this. Originally, she was a lab technician handling maintenance on tools. I knew that much. But after enough “accelerated trainings” and suddenly she was being promoted and moved up the ladder to more and more

demanding things. Hell, Kailey didn't even have a masters and she was doing such high-level work. Work that I barely understood anymore.

But nevertheless, I tried to stay engaged. "And you...uhm...what about that thing you were talking about the other day? The...Complex...Combine-?"

"Oh, the Conflux Collider Theory?" Kailey seemed to know immediately what I meant, quite casually picking up the pieces on my lack of comprehensiveness. She never discussed the details with me because the last time she did I was left feeling confused and incompetent, unfortunately.

She nodded the thought into her brain. "It's good, actually. We're already starting to design some stuff to test out some theories?"

"That's cool." And my commentary on her work was about as rich and substantive as there was culinary grace and technique to a microwaved grilled cheese.

"How about you?" Kailey smiled. She always knew how to make my stuff sound interesting, even when both of us knew that it wasn't. "I *know* you said nothing special, buuut...?"

"Uhm..." I scratched my head. I never liked being before or after Kailey's work stories. There was no other way of describing it than as inferiority. I could hardly set the bar, nor could I follow up. My work wasn't just different from Kailey's, it was less than. Not so long ago we dealt with similar levels of difficulty. Kailey managed lab equipment and I was designing and maintaining financial infrastructure. But now? All my work lived inside a spreadsheet software.

I barely even had side-to-side banter with coworkers. Almost everyone I interacted with nowadays was just superiors. There wasn't room for joking and chit-chat with the people too busy dissecting my menial work for mistakes.

*Helen* was responsible for all my previous projects now. As HR described it, I was "needed elsewhere." My unofficial demotion was explained as an "allocation of resources." My favorite part though, was being told, "think of it as stepping to the side." Sure, of course it wasn't stepping down.

"I...so, okay," I did think of one thing, immediately starting to try and flare it up. My work was more mind-numbing than anything else. Engaging would have been a vast oversell. Life as it was now, even if I left this job I knew work would be next to impossible to find, much less something that suited my degree at this point. For those of us who still had a job, we were just hanging onto a title that was being consistently made more and more meaningless.

“Georgina?” My boss. “So, she wanted this one file delivered to the system? But it turns out she wanted that and something else. She said that ‘If I always ask for X, you should know by now that I want Y too.’” I scoffed aloud. “Jesus, she’s frustrating! She just *assumes* that I’m supposed to know what she wants? One of these days I’m just gonna...” And yet, the audience wasn’t laughing, nor was I given any applause. I don’t know what it was, but my mouth ran dry. Maybe it was just coming face to face with reality. One of these days wasn’t going to happen... I wasn’t going to do anything. “So...yeah.” It ended much more awkwardly.

And yet, Kailey could always get a read and keep the momentum. “Ugh,” she scoffed for me, “is she still giving you a hard time? You know, I really thought things were gonna be better once they issued that whole restructuring for the country,” she frowned. “All I hear now from coworkers about how their husbands and boyfriends are just being picked on by their new bosses...!”

“W-well,” I didn’t intend for that to be the subject, and I didn’t feel that I was being picked on, nor did I need the concern...

But once Kailey got the microphone, she always seemed to run away with it. “Do you want me to talk about that when I call her?” Kailey stoked her flame, “I don’t want her picking on you anymore.”

“K-Kailey, she’s...she’s not picking on me.” What had this become? It was elementary school all over again. From day one I was weirded out when HR contacted Kailey behind my back just to form communications. Like she was my guardian. I can say with certainty that her workplace made no attempt to give me a direct line to her boss. From speaking with other guys in the office and hearing secondhand accounts, we weren’t the only ones either. We weren’t the only company.

“But maybe it wouldn’t hurt just to ask? So we can make sure that she’s being patient with you?”

“Kailey, please, I don’t need anyone being ‘patient’ with me.” Of all people, hearing Kailey say that made me upset. I was her equal, and she didn’t need support, so why did I?

I watched her purse her lips before finally saying, “Okay...I’m sorry. I just worry, you know?”

“There’s no need to,” I smiled confidently. “I’m an adult,” I tried to make a joke, and it did make Kailey smile.

“All done?” Kailey suddenly asked and I looked down at my plate. Mostly empty. It was delicious, after all.

“Uh...yeah,” I said as she was already lifting it from the table.

“Stay right there. I have another surprise~!”

A surprise?

Surprises were always great with Kailey. From memory’s past, surprises could mean a new game, new bottle of alcohol, a nice plant, photo, maybe, or a new piece of lingerie for her to get frisky in. Surprises with Kailey were fun.

They always were.

Always.

They were exciting, which is why I didn’t understand the knot in my stomach. I felt...uneasy. What was she about to spring on me? Maybe it was the awkward start we had once I got home. Maybe it was in all the ways she’d been brushing up against...reality during dinner. It almost made me want to throw up for some reason. And in gaslighting myself I was suddenly sitting with a cold sweat, waiting for her to return. What was she about to do?

“Close your eyes?” She called from the kitchen, still out of view. Close my eyes? For what? Since when? Surprises never started like this. They just happened...!

Before I knew it I was already clenching my fists, pressing them into my legs. Slowly I closed them, against my nervous and crumbling will.

“K-kay!” I called from my chair.

I could hear her walk back in and around the table. She set something on it. Plastic, maybe? Could it...was it...? I was bracing myself to bolt from the chair. No. Not her. Not Kailey...please! Anyone but her...!

“Ready to open them?”

No. Never. Not if it meant keeping what we had. Keeping things still the same. Like they’d always been. Like they always would be.

“S...sure?”

“Okay...! On ‘now’,” she started, then slowly recited.

“3...”

“2...”

“1...”

“Now!”

Maybe it was me wanting to deny reality, but I’m pretty sure I waited another second longer.

Slowly, I drew back my lids, readjusting to the light as I looked at what was in front of me.

*Plastic...Fuck...Fuck!*

But not the bad kind.

I remembered to breathe once I noticed that it was a thin plastic container. Inside it were three hearty long rows of large, delicious-looking cookies. Not crude and crinkly...whatever.

“Ta-da!” my girlfriend excitedly clapped her hands. “You know what they are, right?!”

“Co...cookies?” I asked almost half-skeptically. I was still trying to recover from the shock of fully expecting my life to end right then and there on the spot.

“Yes, just boring old cookies,” Kailey rolled her eyes at me, grinning all the way. “No! Cookies from *Jasmine’s*?” She placed extra emphasis on the name.

Jasmine’s. My favorite bakery. My favorite place for sweets, sugars, and confectionaries of any kind imaginable. How could I not love the place? After all, it was the first place Kailey and I went since we started dating. A fun silver lining to a place that I already liked. With my favorite kinds of cookies, no less.

Chocolate Chip. Marshmallow, and M&M’s.

“W-” I finally had shaken enough nervousness from my system to laugh. “Wow...! You, you didn’t have to, you know?”

“I know that much,” Kailey laughed, “I did it because I *wanted* to! Now, I don’t suppose you’d be willing to share?”

“Share *my* cookies?” I cockily challenged her, to which she raised her brows. We both burst into giggles while I tore open the packaging.

Soft, chewy, and delicious. All the right things with the perfect mouthful.

“God,” I mumbled in cookie-speak. We had since moved over to the couch. “I dunno how they do it...”

“Right?” Kailey was wiping her mouth. “These really are good. If I remember though you’re the one who took us there for the first time? Guess I gotta give you credit,” she rubbed shoulders with me.

“...Kailey...?”

“Yeah?”

“I...I’m really glad you’re my girlfriend, you know?”

“O...” Kailey looked at me for a moment with her mouth agape. I could see her eyes starting to glisten with a forming smile. “Oliver...I’m really glad we’re together too.”

And cookie crumbs be damned, we shared in an intimate kiss.

We didn’t talk much for the next few minutes. Too much cookie eating and plenty enough love to communicate what we didn’t have to say.

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“Sooo...?” Kailey’s voice sang into my ear, arm draped over my shoulder. Since the not-so-distant Jasmine Cookie massacre of 20XX, Kailey and I had been right next to each other on the couch. Her arm was around my waist; the normal position she started doing a few weeks back. Maybe it helps her feel secure? Don’t care and don’t think much about it, solely because it made me feel comfy too.

“So?” I turned my head back at her. She was smiling from ear to ear, so obviously it was something. Something I obviously wasn’t getting at.

“SooOOOooo,” she repeated with a thicker dose of implication and all I could do was laugh.

It was comfy time, not twenty questions, which is why I gave up quickly. “What? *So* what? Tell me!”

And yet all Kailey did was giggle, nuzzling her cheek against mine.

“I love you, you know?”

“I love you too...” Duh. I’d hope that there was love after everything we had gone through together.

Kailey’s hand left my shoulder, creeping down my arm and following to my wrist, the one with the unfortunate shackle on it, but skipped right over and to my hand. Our fingers interlocked and felt her fingers against mine.

“Did you enjoy dinner?” She asked in a soothing, yet cheery voice. Damn, her angelic voice could always put me to sleep. Her vocal cords were wrongfully unregistered weapons that I’d occasionally fall victim to.

Staring off into space, feeling warm and loved, I muttered back, “Of course I did, you made my favorite, after all...”

“Good.” I felt her squeeze my hand again. Not too strong, but not weak either.

“And the cookies?” Kailey did say, but was already chuckling. I could already imagine her eyes peering over at the half-empty container sitting on the coffee table. In my defense, I was only responsible for two-thirds of the murders.

“Yes...” I rubbed my head against the crook of her shoulder. Intimacy like this really was dangerous for the senses. I’d be asleep before I even knew it. My sight may have been fading, but I still could feel the touch, hear the sounds, taste the last few crumbs on the corner of my mouth.

And so eloquently with just the right lack of class, Kailey chuckled, “Double good.”

It was one of her patently “dumb-time” moments, and that couldn’t make me feel any fuzzier than it already did. It was my way of knowing Kailey could let her guard down. Around *me*. How I knew she didn’t do this with anyone else was really a baseless assumption, but with how smart she was and how dignified, I simply couldn’t imagine it any other way.

Two years. Two amazing years of just this. A long and loving relationship with so much intimacy, trust and vulnerability. In the few times that I felt scared Kailey could always drown that out ten times over. It was perfect. Magical.

But I was on cloud nine, and nothing could make this moment any better. Nothing more than just one thing. Something I was feeling so daring and so happily selfish to ask. A question we'd entertained and humored with nudges and kicks down the timeline; never answered nearly in full or even halfness. Never until now...?

It was all tonight Kailey's gift to me, but the passion and desire was growing, and I desperately wanted to give back with a gift just as great.

"...Oliver, I—"

My adrenaline accidentally let me cut in. "--Kailey?" If I didn't ask now, I'd probably lose the courage to for another whole month. But not this time, even if it meant stealing the lead.

"...Y-yeah?"

"...I want to ask you something," I stated so confidently, yet despite being the small spoon with my hand cradled and coddled by hers. My eyes were aimed at the muted TV, but my focus was in another place entirely. "Something serious."

"Of...of course?" Kailey listened, and I shuffled in turn with her own body trying to get comfortable. "What's up?"

"We've...we've been together for two years now... Two...amazing, awesome years together. A part of my life I'd never want to give to anyone else but you, Kailey. You've made me the happiest person in the world."

"O-Oliver...!" Kailey whispered in a hush, squeezing me by the waist. I couldn't see her face, but I had no need to.

"So that's why I don't want to lose you to anyone else...I want us to be together for the rest of our lives."

And instead of another affectionate squeeze or lovey-dovey comment, all I got was a light slap on the shoulder, surprisingly.

“Hey, don’t take my opening line!”

A few seconds of laughing later and I kept going.

“You’re the smartest, hardest working, and most beautiful person that I’ve ever seen... Since day one I knew you were the one for me. You talk, you listen, you care, and you love. As jealous as I am of who you are as a person...having you all to myself makes me just as happy.” The words were making me blush and my heart flutter, but it was all true and I was so desperate to say it all, especially with the way her fingers were starting to weave through mine.

I kept going. “S...so...Kailey...I was wondering, if uhm...would you–”

“--Wait!” Kailey, the love of my life, interrupted at the worst possible time. “S-sorry...” she muttered in a flustered voice. *My Kailey? Flustered?* So rarely did she ever sound like this, and it made my heart do somersaults in pure euphoria. It was instinctual. My second wind to try again after hearing her out, simply because of how much I *knew* this was going to work out. It was certain now.

“I...I think I know what you’re trying to say...” she giggled, like we were sitting face to face in Jasmine’s for the first time all over again, splitting a big round cookie with two cups of coffee. “But...everything tonight...the dinner, the dessert...I...I was trying to do it too...”

My heart nearly stopped. Her thumb danced in my palm and I tried not to fidget; to not explode from stimulus overload. Far too much love intake, not enough exhaust. She was going to *ask*. To confess. *I had the worst timing...! I interrupted her!* I laughed aloud.

“I-I guess we know each other too well, huh?”

“Yeah,” she laughed right back, “guess we do...! So...how about this? Together? Let’s ask each other together?”

A thought we both had, but a question we would pop together. I knew exactly how it would sound; our words and voices matched in perfect harmony. Screw the sound of my own voice, though. Just to hear it from Kailey would be enough to let me die an early death. I could already cry from the insinuation and my imagination alone.

We briefly separated just to sit on either end of the couch, facing each other. Our hands laid in our laps, nervous as all hell just from trying to re-summon the courage we kept accidentally taking from the other.

“T-together?” I asked, or tried to confirm? Like maybe the rules had inexplicably changed or one of us forgot.

“To...together...” Kailey nodded, smiling so widely and so excitedly, and before I knew it she was a perfect mirror for my emotions.

“On three?”

“On three...!”

“One...”

“Two...”

“Three!”

And then it happened. The words I’d been waiting my whole life to ask.

“Will you marry me?”

The moment was paralyzing, and just to find the courage to say them and offer myself for such a wonderful lifelong commitment tuned out my surroundings entirely. The world we lived in wasn’t a factor and neither was the society we were trying to find our safe haven in. She hadn’t even said yes yet; I hadn’t even said yes yet, but here I was, already starting to tear up.

Pure happiness in its rawest form possible. Nothing but joy and excitement for who I had and always will.

“Oliver...!” The sound of her voice. Sweet. Serenity. Now I wish I did talk to her about this beforehand, at least about giving her a ring... It felt like a crime at this point. How could I not give something as thanks to the most beautiful person in the world? *My* treasure?

“Oliver?”

I blinked and found my feet in reality again, coming back into place with my emotions and senses again. I laughed aloud. I really was dumbstruck with love.

“S-sorry...” I wiped my teary eye apologetically, “It’s just...a lot, you know? But I promise you, Kailey. I mean it. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

Kailey, the love of my life, softly smiled, sliding over on the couch. She put her hand on my leg. “I do too, Oliver...”

And there it was.

*Yes.*

She said it. Accepted. Agreed. No backing out now. Not ever. Never. I played the game and won. I found my hope before this entire set could crash and burn entirely. Kailey day by day felt more like salvation itself, but she in her own right as an individual was irreplaceable, and to know that she’s the one who chose *me*...!

Her gentle rub on my thigh got me out of my own head again. Crap, hopefully she didn’t back out if I started getting distracted the next few days...or next whole month? This was going to be an amazing novelty that frankly I wouldn’t mind ever wearing off.

“Oliver?” she asked me, and I smiled dumbly. That put a weird smile on her face too. Oh! This is too good! “You didn’t answer *my* question?”

“Wh-what?” I chuckled, then I remembered her disappointed attitude a couple minutes ago. I’d gone and stole the show; skipped to the ending by popping the question before even she could. Sure I felt guilty, but I felt loved, and that mattered more. But never one to be selfish, and one more than willing to please, I straightened my back and proudly said, “Yes, Kailey, of course I’ll marry you!” Two proposals in one night? What a story this’ll be to tell!

Residual giggles dissipated from me and I settled down, but it was only just me making the noises. Frankly I was wondering why Kailey was being so tardy to the emotion party. But Kailey was showing emotion, just a much more quiet one. A sideways look with her brows sliding up towards the center.

“That’s...uhm...” My fiancé momentarily avoided my eyes, adjusting her loose hair, “that...”

And maybe for just a moment, my fantasy cracked.

“That isn’t what I asked...”

I blinked, still with my confident and eternal smile. My dearest love laughed apologetically. Awkwardly? The room felt a little tighter when I squinted my eyes, but I shrugged it off.

“O-okay? Well, what’d you ask?” Kailey was my rock and I did believe in her, but I didn’t want to be the one to say that whatever small misunderstanding there was, it didn’t *really* matter that much...!

She gave me a brief discerning look, and just maybe, just somehow, maybe it was me. Maybe I was missing something? But her lips came back together and her smile was back, so mine was too. I was happy again because she was as well. Then her mouth opened and her lips moved.

Silence. Total silence.

“W-wait,” my shoulders bounced with my laugh as I reached for the remote. “S-sorry, too loud,” I excused my suddenly bad hearing as I killed the TV. “One...one more time?”

“Sure...” she agreed and her teeth were starting to show again. Every time I asked it was like pressing a euphoria switch for her. It had to have been the same way I felt about proposing just then.

And then it started all over again. “Oliver, will you...” but she grew quiet. So quiet to the point that either I’d gone deaf or she was mute. And I knew it wasn’t my fault, I think, once I heard a distant car driving outside the apartment.

“Wait—” I waved up my hands, motioning to the window as I walked to it, “noisy outside. Just a sec?”

“Are you just pulling my leg?” Kailey was starting to smirk now; playfully impatient.

“No! I’m serious!” I doubled down with the smooth slam and shut of the street-side window. “Okay, I promise this time; I can hear!” Probably? I took my seat back on the couch. “Ready this time. Swear it.” Just to prove it, I took a nice deep breath, even. Part of me even wanted to ask if she could speak up a little, but I feel like I’d beaten that sound business to death enough...

“Oliver...” Kailey started, but she paused, edging her head forward.

Reading her mind, I pleaded, “Still listening!” She laughed.

“Okay, just checking. Oliver, will you, the most loving, wonderful person I’ve ever had the privilege of meeting in my life, be...”

But drat, now my foot was tapping and my knees were bouncing all on their own. Just the tiniest squeak from the ball of my foot on the wood could somehow be such a noisy disturbance! Both our eyes fell down to my legs, and I looked at her apologetically, yet again.

“Sorry, my—uhm...” I held down on my knees firmly this time. “Promise! Last interruption! I can hear for real now, so—!”

“--*Oliver!*” Kailey came right over and latched her hands on my arms. The distance between us was just a single head’s width.

“Will you be my little boy?”

My mouth opened, but I wasn’t making any noise. My jaw hung agape, and my lips tried to move now, but somehow I’d become silent to my own noise. The tremors started again as soon as my hand left my knee, trying to raise a confused protest for something I totally did not just hear. Not from Kailey. Not from my new fiance.

I tried to move my eyes, looking away and dropping my head, but every which way I looked there Kailey was, finding me right at the receiving end.

“Oliver...?” she squeezed my arm, smiling and curious. “Hey, enough games, already! You’re *not* gonna tell me you didn’t hear that too, right?” Because I doubt she’d let me get away with that. Get away with trying to say I’d somehow magically forgotten this entire fucking evening. Just to protect what I desperately wanted back now. What maybe was still salvageable.

“I-I...” I blinked and tried to look for something to stand my conscience on, but I was slipping and falling farther and faster the longer she held onto me. “W...What? Wh-what did you ask?”

“Ugh,” Kailey’s eyes did circles with an exaggerated scoff. “This isn’t a very fun game, you know. If you’re just trying to get me more comfortable saying it, well you got the job done!”

“B...but...I...” And would my unfortunate luck have it, I caught a glimpse of my naked, shackled wrist. It wasn’t any kind of ring, but it was a proposal. An offer I should have refused. A chilling realization far too late. “Ka...Kailey...wh-why?”

I watched her hand fall around mine.

“Baby? What’s wrong? Did...did I say something wrong?”

The room was finally spinning; catching up with the rest of the world already trapped in full-swing. The tremors and shakes, the waves and wobbles had finally caught up. There were cracks in the ceiling and the walls, the floors and the cushions beneath us. It was all seeping in.

“Why...” I asked as my voice came to me, “Why would you even...ask something like that?”

“Wh...” she stuttered and squeezed my hand, “W-well, we love each other, don’t we?”

It was finally a sense of reason that I could speak to. “Yes! I-I love you more than anything, Kailey!”

“Oliver,” she drew me into a hug, “I love you more than anything too? So why are you being so weird right now?”

“Weird?” I slipped further down the couch and I was graciously let go. “I’m the weird one? When...when you’re the one who just asked me *that*? Kailey, I just asked you to *marry* me!”

She slowly and barely nodded, adjusting a hair behind her ear as she said, “I...” I watched her trace her thigh with her palm, slowly sliding up and down. “I know...”

And as my girlfriend sorted through her awkwardness, I tried not to cry from recalling what was supposed to be a core memory of the moment we became hooked on eternal matrimony. I *heard* it. Both our voices when we asked and popped the *same exact* question...!

*Will you marry me?*

*Will you marry me?*

*Will you marry me?*

*Will you—*

*Be my little boy?*

A sick knot twisted in my stomach and I knew it wasn’t the cookies or the pasta. I heard her voice. I was hearing it the whole time. I heard everything. Everything. But it didn’t make sense...! Not one fucking bit! We *loved* each other, and she just said how much she loved me! So why? Why the fuck was this happening?!

“B-but...you said...you said you loved me too?” My voice cracked with the words and the confusion in them couldn’t have been more obvious.

“Oliver, I *do* love you! So much! More than anything!”

“S-so...why? Why won’t you...?”

“...Oliver...” Kailey finally looked saddened and pained, thankfully in a place that was recognizable to me. The Kailey that *I* knew. A Kailey that could be hurt, and not the one that could ask something so outlandish and...*indoctrinated*. “M...marriage...I... Just...don’t you think that isn’t a good fit for us?”

The feeling left my face, and all I could do was stare.

“I mean I just...” she started her rant, then stopped when she saw me. “O-oh, no, Oliver— please, I promise you. I promise I wasn’t trying to mislead you or...or anything like that! Baby,” and why did she have to use that kind of pet name? Suddenly it meant so many gross things now, “We’ve been together for so long, and I’d *never* give you up for anything. Oliver, you’re my *world!*”

I sniffled back, “Y-you’re my world too...” So why? Fucking *why*?

“I...I’ve known for a long time I’ve wanted to spend the rest of my life with you,” she smiled and it made my chest feel warm, despite the typhoon of confusion and upset in my head and heart, “but...only these past few months I guess I’ve really been starting to...’shape’ that.”

“--A-and I did the same!” I cut in desperately, finding just the right moment to jump in and save my girlfriend from whatever propaganda was taking her from me. “Y-you thought about it, right? Day after day? Thinking of the best way to ask and how to propose?” I needed this more than anything. Her like-mindedness. The desperate hope of saving any of this.

“*Yes!*” She smiled so widely and it made my vision blurry. “*So...so long... H-how to ask...what we should do that night: Go to the movies? The park? A festival? Restaurant? I’ve thought so much...*” So clean and so honest. It was exactly what I was thinking! “I’ve talked t-to friends, read blogs...forums...” No...no...no...!

“So why won’t marriage work?” I wiped my eyes just to stop Kailey coming for them herself.

“Oliver, it’s just...that isn’t for me...it’s not for *us*.”

“How is it not?!” I raised my voice, “You *love* me! I *love* you!” I may have been a fool compared to Kailey, but I sure as hell knew one-plus-one logic.

“And you’re right; it is like that. But...my love, Oliver, it’s...different, okay?”

“*Different?*” In what possible way?

“Yes, different,” she nodded assertively. “Oliver...do you know what makes me happy the most when I’m with you?”

And suddenly I was afraid to ask.

“It’s...it’s not the sex. It’s not the kissing—the making out,” it sounded like she corrected herself, like some kinds of kisses were different from others. “Oliver, it’s when I get to see you after a long day at work. When I get a big hug and kiss from you. When I get to hear about your day; help you make your problems feel small, or help push them away...! When we sit down on the couch, I can surprise you with your favorite cookies, or make you your favorite dinner! When I can cuddle with you!”

What a chilling revelation.

“Y-you mean...you don’t...?” All those nights? All those times? When we were sharing a bed, loving each other in the most intimate way possible...? “Wh-what about those outfits? Th-the lingerie? You love those! Y-you’re sexy, Kailey! You’re *hot!*” Not some cute mommy!

“I did that for *you*, Oliver, because that’s what couples do. We do the things our partners love.” Her words dropped like a guillotine. Like I’d been living a lie my whole life. “L-look, baby, please... I don’t mean any of this in a cruel way, I promise! I liked it all too, okay? I did, but...”

“But *what?*” I poured my heart out to her. I thought I knew her. But apparently I knew nothing at all.

“But it’s different now. I don’t know...that changed somehow, sometime. But it doesn’t matter, because my love for you is still the same! I don’t love you any less, it’s just...different!”

“So if you can love me like that, why can’t you marry me, Kailey?”

“Because...it’s not being honest with myself and it’s not being fair to you,” I watched her nose gently exhale. “Oliver...I know it bothers you with how things are right now,” bother couldn’t even begin to describe it, “but...how I feel hasn’t changed. I’ve given it some time and tried to

think. Maybe I could see it some way differently, but...I can't. I can't and I won't. This matters too much to me. *You* matter too much to me. I love you and that's why I want what others have, but for *us!*"

"I don't want that! I don't want any of it!" I stepped back finally from the couch and came to my feet. "I want *you*, Kailey! None of that crap society is forcing on either you *or* me! I want you as my wife, and nothing else!"

"Oliver..." Kailey stood up and tried to reach for me, but I took one more step back. "Please? Just try to think about this from my perspective?"

"I already *have!* I've...I've been thinking about it from yours— from society's for so *fucking* long!" Every man bemused into a boy. Taken down every single peg they have until they're just incompetent, dependant stumps for their lovers. Their *mommies*.

But now it wasn't any unknown face or magic brick wall. No set of talking-points casually and softly pushed on a daily basis from passing adverts or politicians and speakers.

Now it was in our home, and it was Kailey herself. My world was crumbling as reality itself smashed all my dreams and hopes, and I was in tears.

"Oliver, please! We...we can still do those things? We can still kiss like we used to, and we can...we can still do some of those other things!"

*Some?*

"What could you possibly want that we already don't have?" I shot out my arm, trying to swipe away at any of the madness still wafting in the air.

"*You*, Oliver. I want *you!*" Kailey suddenly and for once raised her voice. "I don't want a boyfriend anymore that stays mad, bitter and scared of the outside world! I don't want a boyfriend who has to feel scared just for trying to live his life! Don't you get how that makes me feel? How that tears me up? Having to call your boss, not knowing if she made your life a living hell that day? *Hoping* you'll come home safe to me on your own?"

"Can't you listen to yourself?! Who even are you, Kailey? I don't need a babysitter to manage my worklife and get me home! I'm a grown-fucking adult!"

"You're a *BOY*, OLIVER!" Kailey cried back in a yell and it sent tingles down my spine. Her hands were balled and there was a fierce, passionate look in her eyes. "Y-you're...!" Finally, she

sniffled, pinching the bridge of her nose. “You’re *my* boy! M-my...my sweet thing that I want nothing more than to protect! I’m *tired* of seeing you so distant and upset! Mad and angry! Scared! I just want you to be happy, and I *know* how to give that to you! I don’t want you to have to carry around responsibilities like they’re the weight of the world you feel some imaginary obligation to hold on to!”

“T-then where does that leave me, Kailey? Where does that leave us? I-I can’t...I can’t do that. I won’t. I want an equal, Kailey. A partner. I’m not looking for a *Mommy!*” And probably neither was any of the rest of the male population in the world. And yet, here we all were, far too late to realize just how much the water was really boiling. And if we couldn’t come to an understanding, then... “I-is this it? Does this mean we’re breaking up then?”

It didn’t take long for her to answer. “No, Oliver, it doesn’t mean that! Not even close!” she cried in an offended tone. “Honey, please, I’ve said it so many times, and I’ll *keep* saying it for as long as I need to: I love you! I love you more than anything! We’re not breaking up, and I’m not letting that happen.”

“Then where the hell does that leave us, Kailey? I’m *not* being your little boy! I want a wife!”

“And I won’t be your wife,” her hands finally dropped on her hips. “I won’t because I love you too much to be. A wife isn’t what you really want, Oliver; it’s not what you need!”

“Don’t tell me what I *need!*” I trembled with the words firing from my mouth. “N-no...no. This isn’t happening. This isn’t!” I turned and stormed off to the bedroom.

*Duffel bag. A suitcase. Something to pack clothes.*

“Oliver? Where are you going?” Kailey called right from behind me. We listened to two pairs of feet moving down the hall.

“I’m packing. I’m leaving.” Maybe some time apart could help her. Help Kailey come to her senses. Or maybe...really...this was it. This was somehow actually the end of us.

But it wasn’t the end yet when I stopped short of the doorway at the end of the hall. My wrist was tugged and Kailey’s hand was on the other end of it.

“Oliver! You’re being ridiculous! Can’t we just talk this through?”

“Talk *what* through?! Talk about how you’d want me to quit my job that’s already been so fucking mutilated? St-start dressing down to stuff more ‘socially’ appropriate?” Those were the

fucking worst. Watching all the commercials about ‘social’ rebranding of men’s wardrobe. Dressing down into their ‘new roles’ and ‘inner selves.’ Stripes and neons. Suspenders and fucking elastics...!

“We’d talk about *all* of it, Oliver! I’m not trying to trick you! I want to discuss everything, because we’re partners! I...I just want us to become more than that!”

I roughly yanked my arm away, but only with a struggle. A struggle I was allowed to win. “I *don’t*. I’m not doing this, Kailey. I don’t want to become your *little boy*, and I don’t want to call you anything else other than your actual name!”

“Oliver, please! Mommies let their kids call them by their real names all the time! You can too!”

And in a brief deafening silence, I gave her such a deranged look, just to communicate how far out of touch we were.

“Where’s my suitcase,” I said while my back was turned, storming into the closet of our bedroom. A bedroom I wouldn’t be seeing for a while.

“Gone, Oliver.”

“*Gone? Why?!*”

She was leaning by the doorway, like she was waiting for me to finish a tantrum. “Because I’ve been thinking about this night for over a month! I planned for everything. I tried to think of every possible way you might react.”

“So you thought I might react *rationally* and try to leave?”

“That you might not want to confront the truth,” she frowned. The fucking nerve...! The person I loved...! “You’re not leaving, Oliver. We’re discussing this.”

“What, until I just cave in and agree to everything you demand of me?!” I angrily knocked down a small stack of empty shoe boxes. Right where I remembered our suitcase being. I stepped out of the closet, slamming the door. Fine. We have plastic bags in the kitchen.

The first thing I did was go up to the dresser, yanking open the top drawer for my briefs. Empty. Second drawer. Empty. I gave her an accusing look.

“I told you, laundry,” Kailey put it gently, but it hit me no less hard than any of her other knife-twisting, hypnotizing blabber. “But, your briefs...well...” all she could do was sigh, and seeing a stranger so far from the person that I thought I knew made it so much clearer and easier to connect her to the worst facets possible of this entire movement.

“Y-you...my...my fucking underwear?”

*Plastic cookie tray. Plastic.*

“N-no,” I shook my head. Violently. “No. Absolutely not. Never in a *fucking* million years! What the hell are you thinking, Kailey?!”

“Oliver, please, calm down!” she stepped off the doorframe and rushed over, gently, yet firmly forcing me to have a seat on the bedside. “This is *all* a discussion, okay? So please, just let’s talk? I’m not going to decide anything without you!”

“Is that why you acted behind my back?”

“It’s because I wanted to make sure everything went right. And...from everything I’ve read, this...this is expected.”

“What the hell are you reading?”

“Forums and posts. Other...mommies...people that have been in the *same* exact place as us right now. What we’re going through right this minute.”

“Kailey, we’re about to lose our fucking relationship!”

“No we’re not, because I know you love me, Oliver, and I love you too.” And she had the nerve to say it so passionately, too...! Making my heart ache so much despite becoming everything I’ve hated and feared!

“It’s natural, okay? To...to feel angry, and scared. Oliver, we’re not losing anything between us, okay? This...this is a lot like marriage, just different!”

“How is this anything like marriage?” No similarity other than a contract between each other.

“For one thing,” she grabbed my hand, massaging it like things were somehow still the same, “we still love each other, right? We don’t care for each other any less? Oliver...what you’re looking for...what you think you are... It’s...it’s not out there.”

“E-excuse me?”

“Marriage? Husband and wife? That’s...no... Oliver, *this*,” she pulled up my hand, forcing my bracelet in front of me, “*this* is what love is!” she sniffled and her eyes started getting glossy, “I want you so badly to understand that!”

And no matter what she said, the fact of the matter was how rocked to my core I felt. Kailey, a person I’d loved so long and so intimately for two long, wonderful years, and still love now despite the situation, was ultimately no one different than the rest. She’d decided on a “love” like this despite being my world and my everything. If the person I trusted most could turn out like this, what meant that there was anyone else out there who could be different?

I had met her before a mass-indoctrination of sexist domineering opinions and she was still corrupted in the end. *My* Kailey. Claimed and changed. Permanently. Trapped behind a prefabricated wall of logic and reason that wasn’t hers but the armor she wore. What snowball’s chance in hell did I have of ever meeting someone post all of this corrupting propaganda? With Kailey I had the chance of a normal relationship for years. A fucking stranger this afternoon was getting ready to diaper me in a bathroom...!

“We’ll start slow,” she sniffled and pressed her forehead against mine. “We’ll talk about everything. All of it. I want us to be happy, Oliver, and I can’t keep things the same as they are now because I’m not happy, and I know you’re not too. So please, can’t we stop pretending and just rip off the bandage?”

Maybe we could try to stay the same, but society wouldn’t stop moving and gears wouldn’t cease turning. Between us and the world, Kailey for the first time was finally telling me to get ahead of it...

“K-Kailey...” my hand found its way on her shoulder, and I started to sob. “I can’t...! I don’t want this! I...I wanted something else with you...but not this!”

“I know it’s scary,” she pulled me in for a hug, locking me in place with her deceptive warmth. “But you have me? I’m gonna get us through all of this because I *know* how happy we’ll *both* be on the other side of it. No more having to deal with mean coworkers and bosses; doesn’t that sound nice?”

It actually did, and that’s what made me feel worse.

She let go of me and I watched her kneel in front of the bed. My heart made a nervous tick as she lifted the bed skirt and the sound of plastic packaging rustled from underneath. I fought the urge to close my eyes once it slid out from underneath the shadows I wished it had never crawled out from.

The love of my life stood up, holding the purest most vile poison I'd ever seen. The worst part of it all. Rock bottom the truest sense of romantic loss I'd ever laid eyes on, and was unfortunately forced to see on so many others. So many other emasculated men.

"K-Kailey..." I winced, like I was looking straight at the cancer-giving sun.

"Oliver..." her hands slightly pressed and the large plastic cube crinkled some more. This couldn't be real. It had to have been the twilight zone. "This is part of the discussion... It's...it's important to me."

Suddenly my briefs in the laundry, if that's where they really were, didn't feel so coincidental anymore. Kailey may have claimed to not be a liar, but she certainly betrayed, deceived and tricked.

And before she could even have the pleasure of speaking it aloud, I whimpered the word myself. "D...diapers...really?"

Kailey quietly sat beside me, holding her arms over them like it was a treasure.

"I...I want it so badly, Oliver...!"

I barely glanced at them before looking away. Already torn open, a stack of thickly designed adult diapers sat between my girlfriend's arms. Smiling trucks, cars, and planes. Like there was legitimate joy to be had in losing out on actual toilet privileges. Quietly she set the package aside though, strolling over to the dresser.

"I...wanted to try and surprise you with one..." she opened the lowest drawer and pulled out the lone disposable rectangle.

My heart was beating a mile a minute. I wanted to run, so desperately, but I knew she wouldn't let me. Kailey would physically prevent me. For *us*, as she'd claim. And what sucked so badly was just how much I loved her. How in spite of everything up until now, deep down I *still* wanted *us*. Even if this whole world had gone to hell and had become some terrible dystopian situation, I wanted to suffer in that hell with at least the one person I loved, even...even if that love was different.

It was the sadness of settling in. The displeasure of knowing I'd never get anything better than this.

"K-Kailey..." I wiped my eyes, "...please...!"

I could barely hear my sobs over the unfurling of plastic padding. She smoothed the comforter, setting a towel that'd magically appeared on it while she spoke. "Oliver, it's going to be a lot of change, but that's nothing you weren't expecting if you wanted us to be married, right? There's always growing pains. There's always new experiences. There's always new discussions. We'll talk about this. About all of it, and we can compromise." She fully spread it now, letting both ends have their wings spread free. The interior lining looked terribly soft. Unfortunately so. I was meeting my maker by the hands of the person I'd least expected.

"Can you please come over here? We can talk while we give this a try?" she pressed her hands on her legs tentatively.

Calling it out as *we* felt so disingenuous, and yet Kailey wouldn't stop trying. As much as she was robbing me of the lead, she kept on asking me. Begging me to accept in a way that made this less painful. She wouldn't let me go because she knew I wouldn't find anyone else. No one as accommodating as her, nor as kind. That, and just maybe, she actually did love me. *Was* this how other guys felt? Was this exact situation really as common as those fake and phony articles said?

I hiccuped the moment she undid my slacks, dropping them to the floor.

"You know I still think you have the most handsome body, right?" she touched her nose with mine, and in some twisted confusion I let out a small chuckle, holding back the tears. And like it was somehow approval, Kailey laughed right back, smiling so widely. So clearly. Shining the sun down on me so strongly that I was yet again afraid to look. Afraid because it actually made my heart ache. I wanted the affection so badly, yet I was right in the midst of having to deal with what came with it.

My body flinched the moment my naked behind hit the top of the diaper.

"Is it soft?" she asked, tugging the plastic sides out from underneath me, and I shivered in uncertainty and shame. Was there a chance at just locking this away as a form of roleplay? Letting our normal lives stay as they were?

I didn't answer, so she continued.

“Oliver...please, I know this might be hard at first, but you’re going to understand just how much I love you. I’m going to show you that in so many more ways now.”

“Th-this is love for you?” I croaked up at the ceiling, feeling the crinkly thick front draw up to my crotch, only after a tender massage from my would’ve-been wife from a white cloud of wispy smoke being powdered on me.

“Yes, Oliver,” and the sides drew to a close. One-two-three-four, and a quartet of tapes were pressed onto my front. “It is.”

And she looked down at me, and I looked up at her. Just as my bare leg moved my diaper crinkled and just then I saw the twinkle in her eye. A look I hadn’t seen in so...so long. Something that I had never noticed until now.

“Ollie...” she whispered, bringing her hand right between my legs that felt so forced apart now, leaving a large runway for nothing now but my lover’s invasions. A spot that used to be occupied by what we shared in bed on naked, restless nights.

But her smile and her grin. The tears in her eyes. The pure, unadulterated joy that even I could tell, laying there sad and confused in my very first of many diapers. This really was everything to her. *I* was everything to her. Just as I’d been from the start. I doubt she’d ever have any interest in sex again. I wasn’t even sure if I’d see her fully naked ever again. Not that I couldn’t, but because the power structure had just been rocked so heavily that roles and rules were changing on the spot.

“Thank you...” she cupped my cheeks and kissed me on the forehead. Not the lips. “You’re my everything. You look so precious...!”

I let her sit me up, crinkling all the way, and now I couldn’t even sit reliably on the edge anymore. My plastic, smoothed behind, couldn’t make up anything now other than frictionless touches.

“Oops!” she giggled so softly, holding an arm on my stomach, just like she did when we cuddled on the couch, tugging me back a safe distance from the edge. Far back enough to stop slipping.

“S-so...we get to talk about this...right?” I asked weakly, fighting a whole new wave of tears from a life well-lived, and a fearful attitude for what was to come.

“Of course we will... But let’s leave it like this for tonight, okay? There’s a lot to cover, so...I just wanna take things slow.” Slow enough to give me plenty of time in diapers... For what I had

no doubt Kailey would desperately try to make a permanent solution. I feared for what really was a discussion and more just an explanation for how things assuredly were now...

I moved and my underwear crinkled.

“And Ollie? I did just think of one thing?”

I looked up at her.

“It’s kind of like marriage, if you think about it? I mean,” her arm came around me and she smirked, hugging my far shoulder.

“After all, you’re getting my last name now, right?”

Maybe nothing really changed, after all.