

The table at Number Five is already laden with breakfast foods when they arrive.

“Mum!” says Colin cheerfully, reaching out to hug her. No matter how depressed he is, he’s always happy to see food. “I see you were warned we were coming.”

It’s something of a habit that even the Bridgertons who have moved out will come to their mother’s for breakfast after a night of drinking. The tradition was started by Benedict, who had gone off to uni and had hopped aboard a train home while still drunk, insistent that he needed their mum’s black pudding. The rest of them had woken up to see Benedict already sat at the table with a full English set before him, Violet looking pleased as punch to have her son back even for a day.

They’d made fun of him for it, but when Colin had gone off to uni, he’d done the exact same thing.

The circumstances are a bit different today. For one thing, Benedict lives just on the other side of London. For another, his children are currently perched at the table. William is being diligently fed by Gregory, while Hyacinth is engaged in a seemingly intense conversation with Charles about Bluey.

“How are you this cheery?” asks Sophie from the stove, where she’s been helping Violet with the cooking.

“He never gets hangovers,” replies Michaela grumpily. “It’s stupid. He’s stupid.”

“Yeah, love you too,” Colin says as he makes a fish face at Alexander. “And the only reason I’m not going after you for calling me stupid is that you were very helpful last night.”

“Why does helping always have to end up with me hungover and you completely fine?”

“It’s a good thing he doesn’t have existential crises very often,” notes Sophie.

“Ha!” says Michaela loudly. Colin glares at her and she snaps her mouth shut, looking appropriately guilty, he thinks.

It’s not subtle enough to be missed by Sophie. Luckily, she is distracted by Benedict, who has finished parking and entered the kitchen. He sweeps Sophie into his arms and kisses her adoringly, much to the horror of their children.

“Ew!” Charles shrieks, and then is immediately copied by Alexander, who seems more interested in mimicking his brother than he does the kiss.

“I love you and I appreciate you,” Benedict says when he pulls back, hands squishing Sophie’s cheeks. “These two are *such* sadsacks. It’s genuinely been depressing.”

“Oi!” protests Colin, while Michaela flips Benedict the bird.

“Mummy, what does that mean?” asks Charles, pointing.

“Let’s *eat*,” suggests Violet quickly, clapping her hands twice to redirect the group.

Michaela and Benedict barely make it through one plate each, complaining all the while about their hangovers. Colin has two, then finishes his nephews’ food for them. He had discovered on holiday that the boys find it funny when he fills his cheeks with food and talks with his mouth full, then pretends to be confused when they can’t understand what he’s saying. It has the rest of the table groaning, but Colin is delighted.

Hyacinth is in the midst of listing her classes for the upcoming term when the front door to Number Five squeaks open and slams shut. Eloise storms into the room, tripping over the untied shoelaces on her boots.

“Mum cooked a hangover breakfast and none of you prats told me?” she huffs, not even pausing to look at them as she grabs a plate. “I had to find out through Hyacinth’s Instagram story!”

When she turns around and sees the lineup of people, she pauses, her eyes meeting Colin’s. She must notice the way he’s perked up at the sight of her, because she subtly shakes her head and settles down at the opposite end of the table, avoiding his gaze as she eats.

All Colin can think is that he had been at her flat twelve hours ago kissing Penelope, who he may or may not be in love with.

And it doesn’t matter whether he is or isn’t in this moment. He still wants to know how she’s doing.

He decides he’s going to corner Eloise the moment she leaves the room, but Eloise seems to anticipate it. She remains stubbornly seated at the table, refusing to leave the kitchen even as their siblings peel off to go about their days. Eventually, it is just Colin, Eloise, and Michaela left at the table with their mum, who seems quite content to host the conversation.

In fact, he’s feeling excellent about his chances until his little sister thwarts him.

“Mum,” she says, eyes darting nervously over to Colin as she does so, “I need to speak with you privately before I leave. I’m looking for some advice.”

Their mother brightens instantly.

“Of course, dear!”

It’s Violet Bridgerton catnip, Colin thinks with exasperation. Eloise will go somewhere private, talk with their mum, and sneak out while Colin has been banished.

Eloise is clever, but he hasn’t spent his life annoying his siblings for nothing.

When the front door opens ten minutes later and Eloise is ready to head out into the street, Colin is prepared to ambush her. He waits until she is a decent enough distance from the front door that she cannot turn around and run inside again, then emerges from his hiding spot in the bushes and sidles up next to her.

“Eloise,” he says in greeting, as his little sister shrieks in surprise. The bag of food that their mum had packed for her to take back to Penelope swings back and forth as she repeatedly tries to smack him with it. Colin dodges each attempted strike, feeling surprisingly agile.

“You don’t scare a woman like that, Colin!” Eloise scolds. She begins to walk down the street and he falls in line beside her.

“I had to talk to you.”

“Isn’t the fact that I’m avoiding you hint enough that *I* don’t want to talk to *you*?”

“El,” Colin says pleadingly. Something in his tone must strike his little sister, because she stops in her determined march down the street and turns to face him. “H...how is she?”

He doesn’t mean it to come out as vulnerable as it does, but even Eloise’s eyes soften as they sweep over his face.

“You know I can’t talk to you about this,” she says gently. “Best friend rights.”

“I just want to know if she’s okay,” says Colin, which isn’t the whole truth, but it’s certainly a start.

“She’s fine,” says Eloise. “But I can’t get involved any more than that. I know things about her that wouldn’t be fair to tell you because she’s told me not to. You need to discover them for yourself.”

“Is it the same the other way around?”

“No,” admits Eloise. “But that’s because I’m more concerned about the things I don’t know about you, not the things I do.”

His heart seems to freeze mid-beat.

“What?”

“Penelope is special to me, Colin.”

“She’s special to me!” he interjects frustratedly, but Eloise continues as if he hasn’t spoken.

“And I don’t know how strongly you feel for her or what your intentions for her are. I don’t even know if you’re going to stay. And Penelope deserves someone I know can stay for sure, who will put her first for sure, who loves her for sure.” Eloise pauses to study his face. “Can you say that of yourself?”

Shame fills his gut because he doesn’t know. Not for *sure*, like Eloise wants. He understands why she doesn’t trust him with Penelope. He shouldn’t trust himself with her either, maybe.

“I’m trying to figure it out,” he mumbles. Eloise sighs.

“Yeah. It’s not your fault none of this shit makes sense.”

He chuckles at that, because he thinks that's what she was aiming for, but it's false. He doesn't find it funny at all. He doesn't know how he can want someone so, so badly and not know if he's right for her.

"I love you a lot, you know," says Eloise, awkwardly punching him on the shoulder. "I'm sure it doesn't seem like it right now, but I—"

"No, I get it," Colin replies, even though his voice is strained. "I think."

She nods, scuffing her foot back and forth against the street like she used to when she was a little kid. The shoelaces on her boots are still untied. He worries that she's going to trip on the way home, but Colin knows from history that she doesn't like it when anyone tells her to do up her laces.

The only person who stands a chance at telling Eloise what to do, really, is Penelope.

It hits Colin for the first time that the stakes are high for him, but they're through the roof for his little sister.

"I can tell her you asked about her," Eloise offers. "If you want?"

"Please do," he says, jumping at the offer, and then Eloise nods once before turning around and walking off towards the train, the bag of leftovers still swinging from her wrist.

Colin drags his feet all the way back to the house, turning into the living room and collapsing face-down on the sofa so that he can loudly groan into a pillow. He is deep in a contemplative pit of self-flagellation when he hears soft footsteps pad into the room behind him.

"I'll come help you with the dishes in a second, mum," he says, voice muffled by the pillow.

There's a giggle, then the sound of an indignant "Gregory, you ruined it!" from Hyacinth. Colin opens one eye and turns his head to see the two of them lined up behind him, both brandishing cupfuls of ice cubes that they had clearly been intending to dump down the back of his shirt.

"Are you joking?" he says, eyeing the cups. "You two are in your twenties."

"You're the one who said you wanted this summer to be like when we were kids," says Gregory, shrugging.

"We were just trying to help," adds Hyacinth as she plops herself into the armchair opposite Colin to look at him with a critical eye. "Why do you look a bit like you're dying?"

"Don't get old," he advises. "Your shitty little siblings will attempt poorly executed pranks on you and have the audacity to insult your appearance when it doesn't work."

"Is it an insult if it's true?" says Hyacinth, pondering this with her fingers tapping against her chin.

"Yes," says Colin firmly.

“Yes,” says Gregory forlornly.

“Seriously, though. What’s going on?”

“It’s nothing to do with you.”

“I know *that*,” she says dismissively. “I was thinking it had to do with you and Penelope.”

Colin lifts his head up from the pillow a second time.

“How did you know that?”

Gregory handles this answer, perching on the arm of Hyacinth’s seat like he is settling in for a long conversation.

“Eloise complains loudly.”

It feels like another nail in the coffin that is Colin’s ability to think straight. If Eloise had been complaining to their mother about the situation, it has to be bad.

“Nothing is going on between me and Penelope,” he answers, feeling heavy with how true it is. “I don’t think anything can.”

Hyacinth and Gregory exchange glances. They seem to communicate wordlessly with each other, which just makes Colin feel more embarrassed. Gregory is an entire decade younger than him and is somehow weighing in on his love life; Hyacinth is still in uni. The optics of his ability to navigate adulthood are not looking great.

“Why not?” asks Gregory.

“Did she reject you?” asks Hyacinth knowingly.

“*Hyacinth*,” scolds Gregory, before leaning forward. “Did she? Because if she did, you should do a grand gesture.”

“We can help!”

“We could plan a whole thing!”

“How much would you be willing to spend? I’ll need a commission, of course.”

“Would you be open to jumping out of a plane while holding a very large banner?”

“And I want to be a bridesmaid and I want the dresses to be blue or pink.”

“Or, you know, maybe she’ll change her mind.”

“No, wait, pink would clash with Penelope’s hair. Blue it is.”

“Ooh, *she* could grand gesture *you* instead!”

“Although I suppose it depends on the shade of pink, really.”

“What if Penelope chased you down at Heathrow or something! That would be brilliant.”

This finally gives Hyacinth pause.

“No, you can’t do that anymore. Stop watching movies with mum and go out into the world.”

“I actually agree with Hyacinth on that,” Colin interjects.

“The point, arseholes, is that it’s never too late!” says Gregory, face glowing with his triumphant belief in what he’s saying.

“Also incorrect: it is often too late.” Here, Hyacinth pointedly turns to Colin and crosses her arms over her chest. “So the important thing is to elbow your way in there before you lose your chance.”

“Thanks, Hyacinth,” says Colin, but he’s just patronizing her, really. The shitty truth is that none of this negates anything he’s already realized. Penelope is still Eloise’s favorite person, she had still told him not to phone after they kissed, Colin still doesn’t know if he loves her. All of that remains true.

He gets off of the sofa, gives Gregory a customary fist bump, tugs on Hyacinth’s braid, and wanders to the kitchen. His mum and Michaela are still seated at the table, chatting back and forth. Colin stops in the doorway, leaning his head on the frame as he watches them. He doesn’t know what they’re talking about, but he knows how important Michaela is to the family. How she fits. How much his mum loves her. How ruinous it would be if she were to suddenly vanish from their lives because she took a risk that didn’t pay off.

“What’s that face for?” asks Michaela, finally directing her attention to him. Colin watches as his mother searches his face, keeping her features straight and non judgemental. He wonders what she thinks of him right now. Then he thinks that maybe he doesn’t want to know.

“Nothing,” says Colin. “We should talk about where we’d want to go for our next trip.”

Rather than stay to witness the concerned glance exchanged between Michaela and his mum, Colin heads over to the sink, rolls up his sleeves, and grabs the first unwashed dish.

“Sure,” Michaela says. “If that’s what you want.”

“Yeah,” Colin replies over the din of running water. “It might be time.”