

“And now raise it a little on your side, dear.”

“Mum, you know I can’t reach as far as—“

“She was talking to Colin, Gregory.”

“Well, how was I supposed to know? We’re both dear.”

“I don’t know, you were just supposed to get it,” says Hyacinth with a long suffering sigh.

Colin snickers when he catches the twinkle in her eye. She gives him a curt nod before they both turn expectantly back to their mother, awaiting further instruction.

“Well, now I think the bottom corner needs to be tilted left a little.”

“Agreed,” says Hyacinth, turning back to the banner. “Colin, tilt.”

“Fine,” he says, adjusting his corner, “but we’re leaving this banner up for an entire month now. There is no taking it down after a five hour party— we’ve worked too hard for that.”

“It says back to school,” points out Gregory.

“Technically it’ll still be accurate,” Hyacinth cuts in, just to argue. “People go back to school every day.”

“Exactly. Then they return home. Then they go back to school.”

“If the two of you are quite finished redecorating my house,” says their mother wryly, looking very much as though she’d rather have done this with any of her other children.

“I think we can pin it,” Hyacinth decides, carefully scrutinizing the banner once more before returning to her phone.

Seeing as Hyacinth doesn’t actually get to decide anything, Colin and Gregory look to their mum for confirmation. She nods.

They pin the banner up and climb down their respective ladders. Their mum gives Gregory a kiss on the cheek before sending him off to the kitchen for a snack.

“Need anything else before I head out for the day?” asks Colin, shoving his hands into his pockets. His mum peers across at him, her expression masked as she studies the lines of his face.

“Is there something you need to talk about, dearest?”

He tilts his head, trying to read her intentions.

“Why do you ask?”

“To start, Gregory is in the kitchen eating biscuits and you’re talking about heading out the door.”

“I’m just tired, mum.” Colin avoids eye contact when he says it, not wanting her to see through him. “I want to get home.”

“I understand,” says his mother gently. “Before you go, I was wondering if you had heard from Penelope?”

Colin’s head snaps up. He knows Eloise had most likely been venting to their mum about him and Penelope, but Colin hadn’t expected her to come right out and ask him about it. He’s too taken aback to answer her question with anything resembling ease. Instead, his words come out jerky and panicked.

“What? Why?”

“I asked Eloise if she was coming tomorrow and Eloise didn’t know. So I thought maybe you would.” Despite his clear discomfort, his mother seems very calm when she speaks. “You two got quite close at Aubrey Hall this summer, didn’t you? It would be odd if you weren’t in touch after all that.”

“Mum,” he croaks.

Her brows contract at the noise he makes. He suspects they’re both wondering whether Colin is about to cry.

“I gather you aren’t speaking, then.”

He shakes his head.

“It wasn’t my decision.”

“I see.” She inspects him for one more moment, then gathers him into her arms for a tight hug, rubbing his back soothingly. It’s the same way Daphne had hugged him when she said goodbye on Thursday. “You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to.”

“It’s not that,” he says, feeling pathetic. “It’s... I don’t know how it’s going to end yet, and I don’t know how it *should* end, either, and the only thing I know is how much I fucking miss her, but then maybe I’m not allowed to miss her or maybe I’m supposed to know if I should be allowed to miss her and... and...”

He splutters, suddenly out of words, and squeezes his mother extra tight as she holds onto him. She still smells the same she did when he was a little boy, the scent almost dizzying in the comfort it supplies. It calls up memories of the times he sought her out for comfort as a kid, whether it was because of a scraped knee or a banged up heart.

His chest aches because here he is, holding onto the exact summer he had claimed to be looking for. He had manifested this by insisting it was what he wanted. Right here, feeling too emotional in the embrace of his mother, feeling spindly and overwhelmed and like his emotions are too fucking *much* for his body to contain, he feels like a child again.

“Everything is going to end up exactly as it should,” she murmurs. The words would’ve been comforting once, but he pictures Penelope turning her cheek away from him and a yearning to leave London fills his gut and he realizes that he doesn’t believe her like he used to.

“How do you know that?” he asks petulantly, tucking his face into her shoulder.

“You have always been so perceptive, Colin. Always aware of what others need, always trying to be helpful or offer a joke to lighten the mood. You see the people you love. You know what they need without them needing to tell you.” She pulls back from their hug and cups his cheeks, looking up at him with so much love in her eyes, Colin wants to look away. He feels unworthy of it. “In fact, the only other person I know who has the ability to perceive people as adeptly is Penelope.”

He blinks twice.

“No, Pen’s *really* good at that.”

Her eyes flash proudly.

“Well, so are you.”

“Mum,” Colin scoffs.

“I’m not saying she executes the same way you. It’s quieter, what she does. You’ll stand in front of the bullet and take it for someone else, whereas Penelope will tell them where it’s coming from and when to duck. But it’s the same, the way you two are able to read people. Which also means you have the exact same blind spot.”

“What’s that?” he asks, because despite himself, he wants to know what his mum thinks about them. He wants to know about how they are connected and how they are entwined and maybe, just maybe, how he can untangle the knot that has tied up the threads of their story.

She raises her eyebrows, knowing she has him.

“Yourselves, dear. Neither of you can quite see yourselves the way you are. And that, my courageous boy, is how I know that everything is going to turn out just the way it should.”

And when his mum touches his cheek and smiles at him, Colin is inclined to believe exactly that.