

You Turn the Screws

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You Turn the Screws

by Anonymous

Summary

Alex supposed it was hardly surprising that more than a few people read their relationship as "kinky". It didn't bother him, one way or the other, as long as people found it funny. Which luckily they did seem to. The only thing that troubled him about it was that sometimes the word would sort of get stuck in his head for a bit. It would bounce around his skull and kick at certain memories or fantasies and make him wonder. If, maybe. Well, maybe, he wasn't exactly normal. But, surely, he couldn't be considered "kinky".

Chapter 1

It's not like it's something Alex hadn't thought about before. That he might not be exactly normal. Or that his tastes might not be. Or, well, it wasn't something he had ever picked apart in great detail, but on occasion a thought would pop into his head. Something like, 'Oh maybe this is unusual,' or 'Probably other people would really dislike this.'

It wasn't until somewhere around series three that he could recall the word "kinky" starting to get thrown around jokingly on set with increased frequency, and then fan response started to include it more often too. He supposed the dynamic between him and Greg did come off that way. It hadn't been his intent. He simply knew someone else would fit better as a host. And it had always been his opinion that an assistant role was funnier the more servile and obsessed they came off. It seemed like a fairly common comedic dynamic to him.

Though it hadn't been difficult for him to play to it considering how much he truly admired Greg's ability to be cruel, kind, and funny in equal measure. It was almost startling to him sometimes how effortlessly charismatic Greg was, and it was always impressive. It also seemed, that as Greg got more comfortable with the role, he became more comfortable with being cruel to Alex. And certainly more comfortable with being flirty towards him. Which, with that combination, Alex supposed it was hardly surprising that more than a few people read their relationship as "kinky".

It didn't bother him, one way or the other, as long as people found it funny. Which luckily they did seem to. The only thing that troubled him about it was that sometimes the word would sort of get stuck in his head for a bit. It would bounce around his skull and kick at certain memories or fantasies and make him wonder. If, maybe. Well, maybe, he wasn't exactly normal. But, surely, he couldn't be considered "kinky". Just the thought would turn his cheeks pink and make him feel like something was stuck in his throat. Then he would shake himself out of it and tell himself that as long as Rachel was happy with him none of it really mattered. It was just a word.

Unfortunately, he had spent most of his life placing quite a lot of weight on words. So, inevitably, it would always come kicking around again sooner or later. He would try to remind himself that it didn't just mean sexually deviant. It could also mean outlandish or closely twisted or curled. The latter of which generally referred to hair but would make him think of rope. Which would bring it back to sexual deviancy and around it would go again. It wasn't like it was a constant thought. Most of the time it would just glide right off him when someone said it. Which he was rather grateful for since people were saying it more and more often around him. Sometimes though it would keep kicking around for days.

One night, during the filming for series five, he found it kicking around quite actively. It was after they had filmed the dog bed outro, and everyone was rushing around getting ready to leave for the weekend. More than a few people were prepping things for Monday. Alex didn't have anything left to do, but felt he couldn't leave until more people filed out. Back during the first series he would have been rushing around too, but they seemed to get more of a

proper crew with each new series renewal. Which was good, obviously. Though he really wished he had something to do right then.

The dog bed hadn't gone exactly how he thought it would. Or, well, it had gone better than he thought it would actually. It certainly got a bigger laugh than most of his other outro bits. At least it felt like it did. He would have to watch it to be sure. He felt his face grow a little warm at the thought. He sighed. Then anxiously looked around to make sure nobody was looking at him sighing and blushing and leaning against a wall while other people were still actually working. Maybe he should just head out. He sighed again since nobody seemed to be looking.

The dog bed had been what he had written it to be. But not exactly what he had written it to be. And it certainly hadn't felt how he expected it to feel. He thought it would be a safe joke to make that nodded towards the "kinky" thing people seemed to like. Because he thought he couldn't feel anything but silly lying in a dog bed at Greg's feet. He didn't think Greg would bend down and pet him. He hadn't written that. He didn't think Greg would say "good boy". He didn't think that either of these things that he never considered happening would instantly twist his insides into knots. Would compel him to turn over and stare up at Greg looking like... Well, he didn't know what he looked like, but he knew what he felt like. And, God, he hoped he didn't look how he felt.

And worse than any of that was, somehow, it had reminded him of Rachel. He couldn't really pinpoint why. Maybe it was simply that she was the person he was most used to looking up at from the floor. Though never from that angle. Never from a dog bed. And he determinedly wasn't thinking about doing so while he was still at work. But really he thought it was probably the way Greg could be gentle and mean at the same time. Sharp eyes and a soft smile. Or, no, that was Rachel. Greg was more the other way around.

He wasn't sure how long he spent lost in thoughts that he really shouldn't be having. Comparing Greg and Rachel. Greg, who was his employee, technically. Rachel, his wife, who he loved and worshipped and no one could ever compare to. No one ever had before at least. It came back to him then that he had written this joke. He wrote it last series. He had said it, "I love you and I love my wife equally." But that was meant to be a joke. It was meant to be funny. He supposed it was a bit funny. As it was the sound of his own low, miserable chuckle that snapped him out of his thoughts.

He had another anxious look around and it seemed people had started heading out. They waved and wished him a good weekend as they passed him on the way to the exit. He wondered if anyone had tried to say good-bye before, or if they saw him spaced-out and politely ignored him.

Mark bounced around the corner at the end of the hall and noticed Alex immediately. He was pulling at the ends of his sleeves and biting his lip attempting to stifle a giggle as he made his way towards him. He leaned in close with a faux scandalized expression on his face and mock whispered, "Er, that was, well, a bit. Kinky, wasn't it? At the end there?" and pulled back with a massive grin on his face.

Alex should have met that with exaggerated confusion or denial or enthusiastic excitement. Played along, one way or another. But he suddenly felt like he had been slapped across the

face. He slowly realized, as Mark's fake shock started to look more real, that he was just standing there red-faced and wide-eyed. He looked panicked and caught out and probably absolutely miserable. Mark's mirthful giggle turned to a nervous titter. He clicked his teeth together then let out a solitary, "Ah," and awkwardly patted Alex on the shoulder.

"No, I. No. Th-that's not. I don't. L-listen," Alex stuttered out.

"No, no, mate. It's fine. I shouldn't have- I mean. It makes a certain sort of sen-"

"No! No, it doesn't! It doesn't. I don't. I've nev- It doesn't make sense," Alex knew as he said it that the delivery was too forceful to be believable. He could feel himself flush a deeper red. He didn't think he had ever been so mad at himself. His body and mind had never so fully worked against what he was trying to express. And to think that Mark, who knew him so well, would so easily believe. That. He started to feel a bit sick.

"Ah. Well. That's alright. Either way," Mark said awkwardly but attempted a smile. He gave Alex's shoulder a squeeze with the hand that still lightly rested there.

Alex shut his eyes and let out a breath, "No, really. It's not- I'm not," he opened his eyes and chuckled joylessly, "God. I mean. I know how this sounds. But really."

"Alright. It's alright," Mark said with a smile more firmly in place, "Ah, yeah, forgot. Really just came over to say sorry again. You know, for not being able to get drinks tonight with you and Key."

"I- what? Yeah. No. That's alright. But real-"

"Yeah, no. That's alright to you, actually. All alright, Horne," Mark chuckled and patted his shoulder one last time for good measure then started to back away, "I'll see you Monday, yeah? Talk to you sooner. Maybe. It is possible. I do have your number. Alright. Buh-bye."

"Alright. Buh-bye," Alex repeated belatedly and mostly to himself as Mark was nearly out of the building at that point. He groaned and dropped his face into his hands.

"Jesus Christ!" Came from behind him, exhaled loudly on a laugh.

Alex froze. His head was already swimming, and now it felt flooded. His face somehow became hotter and started to drip sweat into his clammy palms. Which seemed to create a hot, humid atmosphere that encompassed him. His ears felt heavy somehow. Like they were so full of blood they had started to droop. His heart had climbed up his throat and he thought he might choke on it.

Greg had heard. Greg was right behind him. He was still laughing. And he had heard. And now he thought. He thought Alex was. Oh God. And he wouldn't be wrong, would he? Alex had liked it, hadn't he? Lying in the dog bed. At Greg's feet. He liked that, and he liked Greg's sharp smile and soft eyes. And he liked doing anything and everything his wife asked of him in any context. And he liked kneeling in front of her and feeling small. And he liked that he didn't have to do that to feel small in front of Greg. Greg was standing there laughing at him because he thought he was some sort of pervert. And the thing was, he was right.

Alex needed to drop his hands and spin around and laugh at himself with Greg. That's what he needed to do. Anything else would just be more incriminating. He didn't move. Except for how he started to shake. His breathing was fast and uneven. He thought he might cry. He couldn't do that. He couldn't. He had to turn around and face Greg. He took a few deep breaths and managed to move his hands down below his eyes. Though they stayed firmly over his nose and mouth. He blinked away any moisture that may have started to collect in his eyes and slowly, shakily turned around.

Huh.

Greg wasn't as close as he thought he was. He was close enough to hear if he had been paying attention, but he had been chatting with Nish halfway down the hall. How in the world had Alex not heard Nish's very distinctive laugh as well? That would have to be something to worry about later. He let out a breathe he didn't realize he had been holding as relief rushed through him like a wave. His arms went from tense to limp in an instant and his hands dropped heavy from his face and clapped loudly against his thighs. That did manage to get Greg's attention.

"You alright, mate?" he called down the hall, slight concern on his face.

"I, uh," Alex laughed nervously, "Yes! L-long day! Just leaving actually," he started to back up the same way Mark had, "Night, night. Er, I meant night to each of you. Or good night, really, to each of you. Not night-night. Though I suppose we could go for night-night, night-night! But why not, then, just go for good night, good night, goo-"

"Alright, mate," Greg interrupted loudly just as Alex was getting to the door and thankfully the concern on his face had been replaced by annoyance, "See you monday."

"Yes! Night!" Alex called one last time as he made his way through the door. And of course he could hear Nish's very distinctive laugh now. What was that about?

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

So I ended up writing about 5 pages of dialogue with Tim. Which I'm not sure is the follow up anyone wanted, but it's what came out of my brain. Did end up earning that M rating somehow though. Also, would actually like to follow this one up more than the last chapter, but it seems far less likely I'm going to. So, again, marking as complete.

Alex made his way through the car park feeling wobbly and lightheaded. He pulled himself into his car and immediately called Rachel. The phone rang twice before he realized he was calling her. He let out an odd sort of squawking noise and hung up. She would almost certainly be asleep by now. He hoped he hadn't woken her. Not that she would actually be angry. She didn't have to be up in the morning, but he hated causing her any discomfort.

He stared at his phone for a few minutes, equally dreading and hoping she would call him back. He rested his head against the steering wheel and after a few more minutes took some deep breaths. He slowly started to feel more collected than he had since he laid down in the dog bed. His phone buzzed. It was a text from Tim: *That Horne fellow's a real prick for keeping you this late. Shit boss really.*

Alex had nearly forgotten he was supposed to meet him. He texted back: *Sorry! On my way!* Then started his car and headed out.

When he got to the pub, he was slightly concerned to realize that he didn't actually remember the trip there. It wasn't a long drive and he couldn't see any damage to the car or hear any sirens in the distance. Job done well enough, he supposed. Maybe he was still feeling a little more shaken than he thought.

He was glad he was meeting Tim at a pub that was familiar to him. It was small, not too loud, and fairly close to both the studio and Tim's flat. The bartender nodded at him as he walked in. Alex recognized him but couldn't remember his name. So, chose to stand from a distance and wave awkwardly rather than approach the bar. He scanned the room for Tim. He spotted him in a booth in the corner and made his way over.

"You look terrible," greeted Tim.

"Thank you. You look quite nice," Alex replied as he sat down. He was grateful to see Tim had already ordered him a pint.

"Thank you. Really though, you look," Tim squinted at him and thought for a moment.

"Yes?"

“Trying to think of something clever,” Tim said in a singsong voice.

“Trying to think of something clever,” Alex sang back.

“Oh well, doesn’t matter. You look like absolute dog shit, mate.”

Alex huffed out a laugh, “Ooh, quite clever. Thank you!”

Talking to Tim was always easy, and eventually Alex started to feel truly relaxed, which made him realize exactly how tense he had felt previously. It had been an odd night, hadn’t it? He felt a bit more introspective than usual, but did his best to keep up conversation. He often found himself feeling grateful for the relationship he had with Tim, but he felt particularly grateful that night. However, by the time he was nearly finished with his second drink, he was finding it rather difficult to stay out of his own head, and starting to get the impression that Tim was feeling particularly annoyed that night.

“Al!” Tim slammed his hand on the table, “You’re not listening at all, are you?”

“No, I... uh,” Alex winced, thought better of lying, and shook his head sheepishly.

Tim let out an exasperated chuckle, “Listen, if you need to talk about whatever *clearly* happened at work, I’m all ears. It’s just, I know, from knowing you way too fucking long that you’re definitely not going to.”

Alex swallowed and said, “That’d be weird, wouldn’t it? If somebody was all ears?”

Tim looked disappointed but unsurprised, “Right. Why don’t you go get another round in and then I’ll start over telling you about *the very odd day I had that you definitely want to hear about*, again.”

“Yes!” Alex replied as he hopped up from his seat. He grabbed Tim’s empty glass and downed the rest of his drink as he made his way to the bar.

He still couldn’t remember the bartender’s name, but luckily, the man seemed too busy to try to make conversation. He nodded again at Alex and held up a finger to indicate he would be with him in a moment. Alex used that time to chastise himself for being such bad company. He told himself, determinedly, that he wouldn’t space out again. He would stop thinking about Greg and the feelings he, apparently, had for him. He would stop thinking about kink, and stop wondering at what point one had to consider oneself kinky. And he would definitely stop thinking about curling up in a dog bed at Rachel’s feet. He was very glad he had managed to keep it out of his mind until after he had left the studio, but thinking about it while sat across from Tim wasn’t ideal either.

It was a lovely image, though. He always liked being at Rachel’s feet. It was one of those things that the word kinky tended to kick at when it was bouncing around his skull. Then he would consider that it seemed like an awful lot of people talked about having a “foot fetish” anymore. Enough people, it seemed to him, that it couldn’t really be considered that unusual. It wasn’t actually about her feet anyway. They were lovely, but every part of her was lovely.

It was about the way he felt like he could truly worship her from the ground. Bend over and kiss her feet like she deserved. Sometimes she would sit down on the bed and tell him to lick the bottoms of them clean and he would, happily. He would do anything Rachel liked him to. And that was the thing. She really liked it. While he knelt there and slobbered all over her feet, she would squirm slightly and bite her lip, to stifle moans, while her cheeks went pink. And that, just knowing she liked it, was always enough to turn Alex into a panting, drooling mess. Sucking sloppily at her toes and thrusting into nothing. If he was very lucky, she would take pity on him and take her foot away from his mouth to press it against his cock. Then slowly but firmly shift her weight from the bed to him, until it hurt just a bit. She would laugh at him for the way he could never control himself after that. It would hurt more with each thrust forward, but he just couldn't stop. It was so, so much every time. Feeling the weight of her pressed down against him. Having to crane his neck back to look up at her gorgeous face, tinted pink, with a cruel glint in her eye. Hearing her gently tell him how desperate he was in between breathy laughs. It was perfect. It was so perfect.

That was the thing, maybe. The hang-up. It didn't feel wrong or dirty or perverted. Not while they were doing it, anyway. It felt, well, really good, and like it was exactly how it was meant to be. And it just seemed like something kinky would require more leather or spikes or a willingness to frequent clubs.

It was odd to him that, after a single moment of panic, it felt much easier to accept that, probably, he was a bit kinky. It was certainly easier to accept than the other revelation he had that night. But he still didn't really understand it. He and Rachel had never spoken about it. Not really. Anytime they tried something new there were plenty of questions from both of them toward the other's comfort and pleasure, but they tended to be hurried and followed by quick reassurances during the act itself. They never sat down and talked about it or discussed safewords or anything like that. Surely, they didn't need a safeword. Did they? If either of them wanted the other to stop, they simply would. Why would they need a safeword? Did they have to have one? To be kinky?

His thoughts had wandered again. He was meant to be reining them in. What was he meant to be thinking about? The dog bed? No. Probably not. But.

Would Rachel like it if he played at being a dog for her? He thought she probably would. How would he suggest it without having a discussion? Should he suggest it? He didn't tend to suggest new things. He just did whatever Rachel liked. She would like it though, wouldn't she? Him being her little pet. Her deciding whether he got praise or his face rubbed in his own mess. He would like it either way. Would she put him on a leash? God! It all felt like too much to ask for.

Maybe... Maybe he could write it into the show. Have Greg put him on a leash. His hand had felt so big and strong when he reached down to pet Alex earlier. Would he keep him on a short leash? Yank at it and choke Alex when he was bad? Was that disloyal? To want to do something with Rachel and transpose it onto the show? Onto Greg. Greg, who wouldn't know Alex was getting off on it. That wasn't alright. It was very not alright. Oh, but. What if he did know? He would be so mean about it. It would be lovely.

Alex needed to stop thinking about this. He desperately needed to talk to Rachel. It wasn't cheating, was it? To lie down at someone's feet and enjoy it when he wasn't expecting to. But if he kept trying to manufacture similar scenarios, knowing he would enjoy them, would that be cheating? Yes, probably, or close enough. How could he even be thinking about this? Rachel was everything to him.

"You alright?" said the bartender, quite loudly, with a look on his face that could have been either worry or irritation. Alex looked down and realized there were two new pints in his hands. He had no idea if he had paid for them.

"D-did I pay?" he asked, feeling himself turn red.

The bartender frowned, "You've only had two, haven't you?"

"Y-yes, I'm not drunk! Just. Just distracted. Sorry"

The man narrowed his eyes and raised an eyebrow, "Your friend's got a tab open," he said with an inflection that implied he had already said it.

"Ah! Thank you! Sorry," Alex called, as he turned away from the bar and headed back toward the table.

Well, okay. Starting now, he wasn't going to think about any of those things. Not for the rest of the night. He was going to be a good friend and listen to Tim's stupid story.

"You look worse than you did before," Tim said as Alex sat back down.

"Oh, well," Alex searched for an excuse, "I couldn't remember the bartender's name. And we've been here more than a few times."

Tim winced slightly, "Oh no, did he say your's and then you had to go, 'Oh, hi... you... guy?' Awful when that happens."

Alex, feeling relieved, replied, "Yeah, exactly! I guess it'd only be half as bad if his name was Hugh. Or Guy. But I've no idea, really."

Tim clearly didn't remember his name either. He sucked in a breath through his teeth, turned a little pink, and said, "Probably going to be something like... hmm. Barman Barry."

Alex laughed, "'Probably'? Do you think?"

"I'd wager."

"Feels like an awfully convenient name."

"No, sorry. Barry Barman."

"Ah, much more likely."

Tim started telling his story for, Alex thought, the third time. He purposefully, intently listened. It *was* an odd one. Tim was meant to meet someone at a park but missed his train. He ended up getting an uber, which would get him there too early, but that was fine. He figured he would go for a stroll. However, his driver got them both incredibly lost. Tim still wasn't sure how, or really, where they had ended up. At some point, he just asked to be let out. Assuming he would hire a different uber to bring him back. He realized then that he didn't have any service.

"Had you left civilization?" Alex asked, feeling far too proud of the fact that he was still actively listening.

Tim scratched at his chin and sipped his drink before replying, "Don't know. I mean, there were shops. But definitely more of a village feel than a city one."

"Ah then, not exactly wilderness."

"Not too far off! I had to go into a shop and ask to use an actual phone! With buttons and cords! To ring for a genuine cab!"

Alex laughed, "Did it make you feel young again?"

"Made me feel older, if anything. Had nearly forgotten how to do it," Tim rubbed at his face and let out a sigh, "Anyway, so I'm being driven to the park by a genuine cabby, and a few minutes in we, I guess, drive out of the dead zone. And, turns out, my date had texted me at some point. To cancel, of course."

Alex grimaced, "Oh no. I'm sorry."

"Nah. It's fine. At that point, I was just determined to get to the park for some reason. I was going to have that fucking stroll!"

Alex chuckled, "Quite funny. To aggressively want to go for a stroll."

"I'm, eh, a fairly successful comedian. So, yeah, I get to the park and I go for my nice, lovely stroll. Along a nice, lovely path. And I end up walking right into someone's film shoot. And ruining it a--"

"Wait, hold on," Alex interrupted, "How were you able to just walk on without noticing?"

"Well it wasn't a real shoot, was it? It was for youtube probably, or, what's it? The other one," Tim opened and closed his hand as he grasped for a word, "Something like clock, or. Something. Tock! Tock-Tock? Is that a thing?"

Laughter bubbled out of Alex, "Yeah! TokTok, I'd wager."

"You prick. What's it called?" Tim waited briefly for an answer but Alex only laughed louder, "Whatever. Doesn't matter. Point is, it was children filming things for the internet."

"Children-children or just young people?"

“Oh, uh, probably just young people. You know, how the older you get the more... hmm, well,” Tim’s eyes drifted to the side. He seemed to get lost in his own thought for a moment and Alex realized he might have started drinking before him.

He tried to finish Tim’s thought for him, “The more twenty-year-olds look like they might be twelve?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“So, anyway, these young people, they’re off the side of the path, and they’ve got their camera set up across the other side of the path. And they’ve got loads of things set up on a tarp and these great, big boots on.

“What sorts of things?”

“Oh, a bunch of delicate things that go squish.”

Alex blinked, wondering if he was starting to feel a bit drunk himself, “Delicate things that... what?”

“That go squish or splat or, you know, pop or burst. Like eggs and balloons filled with things. Or, uh, I think there was quite a nice teapot that was probably just filled with tea. That was more of a shatter. It was like, like something from the show, honestly. I think you’ve been a bad influence on the whole nation.”

“And they, uh,” Alex could feel himself start to lose the thread of the conversation, “They, uh. What did the-“

“They stomped it all to oblivion! Just stomp, stomp, stomp! Right as I was walking past.”

“With their great, big boots,” Alex mumbled.

“Yeah, yeah. Which was a shock. Stopped right in my tracks. Ended up with all sorts of things spurted onto my shoes.”

“Spurted. Onto... shoes,” Alex was aware enough to know he shouldn’t be letting his mind wander, but he wasn’t sure why.

“Uh huh. And I was stood there, blocking their camera, for all of it. They weren’t very happy about it. But I wasn’t very happy about the state of my outfit. So.”

Alex sat there and nodded. He knew he should say something, but his mind was suddenly feeling muddled. He was afraid he might say the wrong thing.

“Greg has really massive feet,” forced its way out of his mouth without his permission. Instantly it was followed by a wave of regret and embarrassment.

Tim, however, found it hilarious. He threw his head back laughing and pounded the table with his hand. He had to catch his breath to say, “Well, yeah! I’ve not, personally, paid attention, but I would imagine,” he fell into a smaller fit of giggles, “God, I mean, what? You get lost in your little head imagining Greg’s ‘massive feet’ stomping cream-filled balloons?”

“Y-you didn’t mention the cream, actually. Yet, that is how I pictured it.”

Tim laughed harder than he did the first time. He looked like he might be in actual pain.

“I, uh, well, th-the,” Alex tried to force an excuse out, but he couldn’t even begin to form one. He, instead, trailed off and let his eyes drift down to the table as he felt his face grow increasingly warm.

Tim exhaled a high whine through his teeth and flapped his hands around a bit while he took some deep breaths. Laughter still bubbled out on his exhales but he collected himself enough to say, “O-o-oh, mate! That little crush on Greg getting a bit unmanageable?”

Alex looked up feeling absolute dread and croaked out, “What?”

The joy on Tim’s face started to turn to confusion as his laughter began to die down, “Uh, what?”

“My what? On? I don- Why would- I don’t have a-“ Alex cut himself off, knowing he was doing nothing to make Tim’s claim less believable.

“Erm, yeah, alright,” Tim looked wildly confused now, “This a bit? Cause, hate to break it to you. But like a lot of your material. It’s not *very* funny.”

“It’s not. I don’t. Hn. Why would you think-“

“Alright, going to cut you off there,” Tim said, as he pointed a finger at Alex, “Why do *you* think you *don’t* fancy Greg?”

“Well, because,” Alex paused. Considering he did fancy Greg, he couldn’t really work out why he wouldn’t. He knew why he shouldn’t. He said, simply, “Because Rachel.”

Tim snorted, “Uh huh, right. Rachel,” a grin returned to his face. He was looking at Alex like they both understood something unspoken.

Alex didn’t understand, “Yes, Rachel. M-my wife.”

“Yes! I am familiar with Rachel! *Your wife*,” Tim paused to laugh, “Might even say we’re chums. Maybe. After all these years of being chum-like. Me and Rachel.”

“It’s Rachel and I,” Alex muttered too low for Tim to really hear.

“Rachel! Rachel, your wife.”

“Yes,” Alex agreed, feeling very worried about where this was headed.

“Rachel, my dear, close friend and your wife.”

“Yes.”

“Who teases you, I’m going to say, hm,” Tim paused and scrunched up his nose, “near constantly? About your big, little crush? On Greg.”

“Well, yeah, b-but that’s just a joke,” Alex said, feeling a little lost.

“Yeah, sure. Just a laugh. Makes sense. I mean, she likes teasing you, doesn’t she?”

“Um, y-yea-“

“And you like being teased. Which is one hundred percent your business, mate.”

“Uh.”

“I just, real quick, would love to ask, who else does she tease you for fancying?”

Alex blinked slowly at Tim. His mouth was dry and his face was hot. He moved his mouth to try to reply but nothing would come out. Tim waited patiently with his eyebrows raised and a smirk spread wide across his face. Eventually, Alex managed, “Am I just... unbelievably thick?”

“Oh-hoh! Understatement of the bloody century!” Tim yelled, probably a bit too loudly for the pub they were in.

Alex still felt embarrassed and like his brain was moving much slower than it should, but he also felt incredibly light. Tim knew. He knew all of it, seemingly, and it was fine. And he thought Rachel knew about Greg, and it seemed like she did. And that was fine. It all seemed like it might just be fine. Could it be? Really?

Alex felt tipsy and unburdened and almost giddy. He started giggling. Then felt like he shouldn’t be, so covered his mouth with his hands. He stared at Tim, red-faced and wide-eyed, but he didn’t feel the dread he felt earlier. He just felt foolish. In between suppressed laughter, he asked, “How did you-? How do you know?”

“How do I-?” Tim laughed but collected himself quickly, “How do I know what? That you fancy Greg? Mate, I think everyone knows you fancy Greg.”

“R-really? Everyone? Not just as a bit? Everyone thinks I really fancy him?” The thought was a bit of a shock but not enough to entirely wash away the relief Alex was feeling.

“Well, maybe not everyone-everyone, but I think most of the people that have actually seen you with him. Like, in person. Probably do,” Tim was scrunching up his face. He looked nearly apologetic.

“And Rachel knows? For sure?”

Any hint of apology left Tim's face. He scoffed, "Yes, *for sure*, you twat. I mean, really. I don't know how the two of you work sometimes. I know she tries to talk to you about things, but trying to talk to you about anything even slightly heavy is like shouting into a void. There's just not much going on up there, is there?"

Alex had another fit of giggles and shook his head at Tim, "I don't know! I think I had every thought at once earlier and then, I'm pretty sure, I had a panic attack. It's best when there's not much going on!"

Tim suddenly looked concerned and a bit uncomfortable, "You had a panic attack? That's what happened at work? You alright?"

"Yes, I just," Alex had to pause to let out a few breathy laughs, "I only realized I fancied Greg, today."

Tim looked shocked, then sort of outraged, and then a sharp, guttural laugh seemed to punch its way out of him, "Fuckin' Hell," he shook his head and then took out his phone.

Alex watched him unlock it, "What are you doing?" he asked, mildly.

"Calling your wife."

"What? No! She's sleeping!"

Tim looked up at him sharply, but his expression quickly softened. He let out a huff of air and said, "Fine! I'm texting your wife. We'll make fun of you in the morning. Or, well. She'll make fun of you in the morning, and I'll join in midday when I wake up."

Alex smiled, "Oh, that's fine then. Seems fair."

Tim shook his head then looked down to type what was, apparently, quite a long message. Alex kept smiling. It really was fine. He was actually grateful to know that Rachel would know first thing in the morning. It had felt awful keeping anything from her. Even if it was just for a night. He would have to talk to her when he woke up. That was always the plan, but it seemed much less daunting then it had earlier. Part of him felt a bit anxious. Not in a bad way, though. He knew Rachel was going to be mean about it, but in that lovely way she was.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Okay so I had this chapter mostly written by the time all the channel 4 nonsense started happening. Prior to that I was actually planning on un-anoning but yeah no haha. Very sorry to anyone that was approached.

But yeah I've accepted that this is an ongoing story regardless of my schedule. Please expect updates to be infrequent (after the next chapter which is mostly done and should be up shortly) and of varying length.

A short disclaimer: I've taken liberties with the timelines of actual people's lives, the timeline of specific fan interactions vs specific series, and the way film scheduling works. Sorry if that bothers anyone!

Also I'm worried that this might feel a little disjointed, but I wasn't sure how to move forward without Greg's perspective. Which isn't really an excuse for writing what's essentially a flashback in a flashback. Really hope this is comprehensible!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Greg found it unreasonably annoying that one of the most frequent questions interviewers asked was in regards to how him and Alex met. It seemed it was universally assumed that their chemistry was too good, their dynamic too natural for them not to have been friends before the start of the show. It had been Alex, who pretty solely handled the early promotion, that said they hadn't known each other at all. Which was true but not exactly true. Alex was good for that. Telling lies that were closer to the truth than the actual truth was. He was good at it in a way that would occasionally make Greg think twice, but ultimately dismiss him as a simple man who couldn't bear to over complicate any facet of his life.

The truth was, that of course they had known each other. Greg had just known of him at first. He had seen some of his work, but they had also met more than a few times. They were in the same fairly small scene and shared a few friends. There had been a number of parties both of them were invited to that Alex hadn't turned up to until Greg was already half sloshed, and he was always one of the first people to leave. Still, the two of them managed to have a few stunted, awkward conversations within Alex's short party attendance windows. Never a long enough conversation for either of them to really glean anything about the other. So, a lie that wasn't really a lie. Greg could understand that. Why go through an overly long explanation just to say they hadn't really known each other?

That wasn't what annoyed him about it. Glossing over aspects of your life or relationships was a necessity when it came to interviews. What annoyed him was the same thing that had annoyed him back then. Him and Alex hadn't been friends, and he never really understood

why. Him and Alex still weren't friends, and it would frustrate him to no end if he let himself think about it. It was hard not to think about it when every interviewer kept assuming they were best mates. Perhaps the most irritating thing about all of it was that Alex seemed to prefer to do interviews in his servile persona. He would be completely honest about them not being friends but imply it was Greg's fault for simply being so far above him.

Greg's opinion of Alex, back when he had been an acquaintance instead of the most distant coworker Greg had ever had, was that he was genial, awkwardly funny, and annoyingly clever. He supposed that was still how he came off. He genially turned down every attempt Greg made to invite him to any social interaction. His entire brand was awkwardly funny. And, well, maybe he was more cleverly annoying than annoyingly clever, but more than any of that he was frustratingly, blankly distant.

Greg knew he didn't have any right to be so bothered by Alex not wanting more than a professional relationship, but he couldn't help that he was. It was just odd at a certain point. They could chat like mates at work, but as soon as Greg asked him to go for a pint Alex would stutter out an excuse and find an exit as soon as possible.

Every time he did, it would bring up foggy memories of parties Roisin had thrown years ago. Greg had always tried to talk to Alex when he actually showed up. If he was being honest, he had sort of been a fan of his. Or, at least, he had been a fellow comedian that admired his work. So, he would bring up the latest thing he saw or heard about, and Alex seemed aware enough of him to bring up some of his work. They would have a nice chat for a bit, but then at some point Alex would go a bit pink and start to stutter. Then he would make himself scarce for the rest of the night.

Had Greg said something so offensive at some point that Alex still hadn't forgiven him years later? Had he hit on his wife? Spit in his drink? Did Alex really just not like him? Greg remembered having a similar line of thought years ago, more clearly than he actually remembered any conversation with Alex.

He had been sprawled on the floor of the living room in Roisin's flat and feeling phenomenally hung over when he asked the ceiling, "Does he just think I'm a prick?"

"Who?" came from the kitchen along with sound of a tap running.

"Alex. You know, Alex Horne."

"Alex?" Roisin asked sounding truly puzzled as she turned off the tap, "Why would you care what Alex thinks," she made her way into the living room and held a glass of water above Greg's head, blocking his view of the ceiling.

He closed his eyes and sighed, "I mean, I don't."

She laughed a bit, "Oka-a-ay. Then why are you lying about looking absolutely tragic and moaning about him?"

"Not moaning," he moaned as he forced himself to sit up and took the glass from Roisin.

"Oh god," she sounded comically disgusted, "Do you like-like him? He has a wife you know!"

Greg rolled his eyes as he drank down half the glass. He decided not to dignify that with a response. Roisin chuckled as she sat down on the couch next to where he was leaning back against it.

"Alright, what is it then," she asked.

"Well it's just. He's friends with my friends. You're friends with him. I've tried to make friends with him. Why doesn't he like me? What did I do?"

"Ah, just your normal crippling insecurity, is it?"

"Yeah, alright," Greg thought for a bit and shifted himself to face more towards Roisin, "But really, do you remember me doing something that would make him hate me?"

She scoffed, "He doesn't hate you. Not sure he hates anyone. Not even really sure if I'd say we're 'friends'. Friendly, maybe," she looked thoughtful for a moment, "He's an odd bloke, honestly. Me, him, and Tim went for drinks once and they told me about this list he's been keeping since he was at school. It's his favorite insults, right?"

Greg couldn't really see how that was relevant, "What in the world are you talking about?"

"No, listen, like that people have said to him. His favorite insults. Some brutal stuff on that list, from what I remember. And he just thought it was funny."

Greg had just looked at her with a confused expression.

"What I'm saying is, I don't think it's actually possible to offend him. So I don't think you have," she said very slowly like she was talking to a young child. Greg glared at her and drank the rest of his water.

That had been the extent to which he had ever discussed it with anyone. Roisin had, of course, continued to accuse him of fancying Alex and refused to stop. He determinedly acted like none of it bothered him. He had been quite successful, in his opinion, up until he had to face Roisin's manic delight at both the news of his casting and Alex asking her to be in the first series.

Over a celebratory pint or seven he had embarrassingly and pathetically begged her not to mention the imaginary crush she thought he had on Alex during filming. Because what if it made Alex dislike him? And it wasn't even true! And that wasn't fair!

Roisin had looked at him quite sadly after his outburst. She looked like she wanted to ask him a million different questions, but instead she finished her drink and quietly agreed to not bring it up. She hadn't brought it up since, not even to him. Instead she would just look at him pointedly whenever Alex came up in conversation. Greg knew that meant she actually believed it now. Just another frustrating thing. If he tried to deny it without her actually saying anything it would only strengthen her belief. There was no way around it.

And because things only ever got worse, it would seem Roisin, at some point, had shared her theory with all his other close mates. If their pointed looks and silences were anything to go by. Except Rhod, who was never silent and had unfortunately made it very clear what his opinion was.

Even more unfortunately, it was worse than Roisin's. He thought Alex was in love with Greg and that he was an absolute pervert and apparently that he had all the cold, calculated cunning of a complete psychopath. A cunning he was using against Greg to twist his feelings and manipulate him into acting out all his sick fantasies on national television. Which did imply Greg had feelings to twist but at least had the ring of a joke to it. Greg didn't think it was entirely genuine. But it could be hard to tell sometimes with Rhod.

Regardless of how sincere Rhod's belief was, that still left Greg with most of his friends thinking he was interested in Alex and most of media thinking they must be best mates. And the fans, well. It seemed like a good portion of them lined up somewhere near Rhod. It had been a small portion at first, but each new series it seemed like more and more tweets about the show included words like "homosexual" or "psychosexual" or "kink". Which fair enough to the first one. He had pointed it out himself. In fact, it was often a screenshot of himself that he was confronted with. But taken out of context and used in regards to something between him and Alex.

The fact of the matter was, he was so frustrated about all of it, that he couldn't actually identify any feeling he had for Alex aside from frustration. He wasn't even sure why he wanted to be friends with him in the first place. Maybe Roisin had been right the first time. Just his standard insecurity. If Alex liked his friends but didn't like him that meant Greg wasn't as good as his friends. Therefore, he wanted to be liked. How stupid. But it did sound very like him.

Though even he could admit, if only to himself, that the man did occupy more of his thoughts than necessary. Thankfully, mostly just when they were actually filming. He could manage a week or two twice a year. Except they were only on the fifth series. It felt like it had to be more.

Maybe it was because in between series Alex would text him on occasion like they actually were mates. And Greg would fall for it every time. With the distance it was easier to believe that maybe Alex really had been busy every single time Greg asked him to do something. Why would Alex text him out of the blue if he really disliked him? Why would he feel the need to tease a task he thought Greg was really going to like? But then after months of feeling like they were at least friendly, Greg would go into the studio and treat Alex like a mate and ask him to grab a pint when they wrap. And Alex would shrink back and look... Appalled? Frightened? Greg wasn't sure, but he knew Alex would stutter out a polite excuse and then avoid him as much as possible unless they were on camera.

Alex's wife would text him too sometimes. Greg thought he actually liked Rachel better than Alex. Even though they had only met a few times. She would try to spend at least one day with the kids on set per series, which was nice. Alex's family seemed so normal in comparison to him. His kids were just kids, and Rachel was lovely. She was warm and sociable and loud. And honestly, funnier than Alex. During the first series she had insisted on

exchanging numbers with him and seemed to assume they would be seeing a lot more of each other.

Obviously they hadn't, and obviously it was because Alex had some kind of issue with him. And maybe. Maybe Greg was getting a tiny bit obsessive about this. But he just didn't know how he couldn't. They were in the middle of filming, and very annoyingly there had been some kind of scheduling conflict with the studio. They had filmed just a few episodes at the tail end of one week, would film shorter days all of the next, and then had to go in to film the last episode at the beginning of the week after that. It wasn't exactly three weeks, but it might as well have been. That was too long to spend thinking angrily and intensely about Alex Horne.

He hadn't asked Alex to socialize with him this time. He decided he wasn't going to beforehand. He felt like he had finally learned his lesson. He knew, despite the pleasantries exchanged via text in the months prior, that Alex would reject him and then act really weird. And whatever. It didn't matter. Like Roisin had said all those years ago, he was an odd bloke. He liked Greg well enough to want to work with him and occasionally text him a dumb joke or wish him a happy holiday. That was fine.

Except. One of Alex's friends was on this series. One of his really close mates. And that was fine too, obviously. Just because he didn't want to be mates with Greg didn't mean he couldn't have mates. Obviously. Not that Greg had any say in any of it. Because, of course he didn't.

Yet, it had really gotten to him earlier in the day. He hadn't meant for it to. He knew not to expect anything from Alex. That was fine. He was fine with it.

But, just when filming had been about to start for the day, while walking past Alex's dressing room, he heard Alex ask Mark to go to the pub with him at the end of the day. Greg had stopped in his tracks. Every part of him became tense at once and his vision sort of narrowed. His heart rate must have doubled. He could hear blood drumming in his ears. He felt like he finally understood where the expression "seeing red" came from. He had never been so angry in his life. He felt wild. Some narrow reserve of willpower was the only thing that stopped him from bursting through the door and, and... He wasn't sure what he would have done.

No. That was a lie. He knew exactly what he would have done. It was playing in his head on repeat as he stood paralyzed in the hallway. He would have burst through the door and got his hands around Alex's throat. He would have slammed him against the wall. He would have hurt him. He would have given Alex a reason to look at him the way he does. Appalled. Frightened.

He had realized what he was thinking and ended up frightening himself. His hands, which had balled into fists without his permission, unclenched and started to shake. He stumbled away back towards his own dressing room and tried to collect himself. He ignored knocks on his door. Then pretended he hadn't noticed them. Filming had started twenty minutes late thanks to him.

Despite his efforts he had still felt a rage simmering inside of him, tempered slightly by a thin layer of shame. He had been awful to Alex most of the day. Far worse than what was scripted. He hadn't been particularly kind to Mark Watson either. He had been petty and

childish and downright cruel. And, horribly, everytime he twisted the knife just a little further than he should Alex had looked up at him wide-eyed and barely holding back a grin, nearly giddy.

He really was just an odd bloke who collected insults, wasn't he? The man probably didn't have a negative thought in his head, if he had any thoughts at all. He didn't have anything against Greg. Yet there Greg was being obsessive and possessive of a man he still barely knew. And bloody jealous of Mark Watson, of all people. The shame had won out over the anger, and by the end of the day he was being far kinder than anything that was scripted. Which, weirdly, garnered a similar response from Alex. Maybe the man simply didn't like his own writing.

At the very end of the day they filmed the scripted outro bit. Alex grabbed a dog bed from behind his throne, tossed it in front of Greg's, and crawled into it. It was astounding to Greg how much he managed to curl into himself to fit into it. While he stared down at him he could hear Rhod's voice somewhere, distantly, in the back of his head, but it was mostly drowned out by the crushing guilt he felt for his behavior earlier in the day. Alex looked absolutely pathetic down there.

Greg had reached down to pet him without even thinking about it, suddenly feeling remorseful and somewhat affectionate towards him. "Good boy," had slipped out without a thought too. That had gotten a different reaction out of Alex than anything else that day, though Greg hadn't managed to identify what it was exactly. Alex seemed a little out of it and slow to get up after the take was done, but it had been a long day.

Greg had seen him on his way out of the building. He had been pinker than usual and his eyes were sort of glassy. He was talking absolute nonsense while literally scrambling backwards towards an exit. Which usually would have pissed Greg right off, but it was the first time it seemed like it might have been reasonable.

Greg was, currently, sat on his couch, most of the way through a bottle of wine, trying to make sense of the day. Or really, he supposed, of about the last three years. He was staring at an unsent text that he had written, deleted, and rewritten at least three times. It was meant for Rachel. It read, simply: *What the fuck is wrong with your husband?*

He deleted it one last time. He finished the bottle of wine. He tried to remember exactly what he was thinking in the hallway. Did he really want to hurt Alex? The man was infuriating, but Greg had never wanted hurt him. Maybe shake some sense into him, or an honest answer out of him. But he could still see the images of what he had wanted to do so vividly in his mind.

Burst through the door. Grab Alex by the neck. Slam him against the wall. Squeeze tighter around his throat. Listen to him whine and gasp and sputter. Watch his eyes widen with shock. Feel him struggle and squirm desperately. Push further against him. Trap him against the wall. Feel the heat of his skin as it turns slick with sweat. Feel the hammer of his pulse against the palm of his hand. Lean in and- wait, no, hold on.

Maybe it was the influence of a bottle of wine but it felt different to think about than it had earlier. He searched for another bottle of wine. He tried to stop remembering what he had been thinking about in the hallway. He wondered if he should call Rhod. He laughed aloud at

himself. The sound echoed slightly in his empty flat. He abruptly felt terribly lonely. He called Roisin.

"Greg," she answered accusingly, her voice thick with sleep, "You had better be in a ditch somewhere."

"Ah," he said, realizing he should have checked the time before he called, "No. I'm at home. God, sorry. I didn't think-"

"Well I'm up now! Ugh," Greg could hear the sound of fabric rustling as she, presumably, sat up in bed, "What is it then?"

He really shouldn't have called. He didn't even know what he wanted to say, "I, augh, God," he chuckled nervously, "Please don't be angry Rois, but I- I don't know... uh," he let himself trail off. He sighed.

"Well, you're clearly having some kind of crisis," Roisin said. Greg could hear more rustling. It sounded like she was getting fully out of bed.

"No. No, I'm fine. I'm sorry. You should go back to sleep."

"I'm coming over."

"No! Rois! Go back to sleep. It's fi-"

"I'll be there in, uh. Twenty?"

"No! Don't," he cut himself off, realizing she had already hung up.

Just over a quarter of an hour later he opened his door, shame-faced, for Roisin. She was wearing slippers and holding a bottle of vodka. She pulled him into a hug immediately. God, he loved her.

They shuffled over to the couch and took a few pulls straight from the bottle, one after the other. Then proceeded to not really talk about anything. Greg had a few stuttered starts where he couldn't really work out what he wanted to say, and Roisin just calmly waited for him to sort it out. He ended up with his head resting in her lap and his legs dangling off the end of the couch while she ran her fingers through his hair.

She was blinking down at him, valiantly trying not to nod off, when he managed, "Am I- Am I just a very bad person?"

"Don't be daft," she said firmly, seeming marginally more awake, "Why in the world would you think that?"

He closed his eyes, "I think I, sort of. Sort of, really, want to hurt. Alex. A bit."

"Right," she sighed, "And have you?"

"What?"

"Have you hurt him?"

Greg's eyes flew open, "What? No! Of course not!"

She smiled slightly at him, "Huh, appalled at the thought. That's probably fine then."

"Is it?" Greg asked with a disbelieving tone.

Roisin shrugged, "I mean, I think we all sort of want to hurt people all the time."

Greg felt confused. He laughed and shook his head, "Do we?"

"Sure we do! When somebody's holding up a queue because they've suddenly forgotten how paying for things works, well, everyone behind them *sort of* wants to go kick them in the shins. We all think about it. And then we don't do it. And yeah, that's probably fine."

"Well, yeah, sure. But that's different."

"Is it?" She echoed back at him in a purposely poor impression of his voice.

"Yes," Greg stared at her seriously, refusing to take the bait, "That's a stranger. It's not someone you know. Someone you... you work with," he finished lamely.

"Or someone you want to fuck," she said while giving him one of those pointed looks.

He felt his face go a little red, "Yeah," he let out on a sigh.

"Hmm," she was doing her best not to look smug but wasn't very successful, "Well, I don't know, that might be fine too."

"No. I don't think so, Rois," he sounded absolutely miserable.

"Well," she said, shrugging her shoulders again, "I mean, we've all had angry sex, I think."

"No, but," he struggled to get his elbows under him and push himself up, "Yeah, but- That's not-" Roisin leaned back and let him maneuver himself into a sitting position, "I don't think I've ever, in my life, been as angry as I get at Alex," he turned his head to look away from Roisin and stare down at the coffee table, "And it's not even real, is it? It's all in my head. We're not even- We're just coworkers! And I'm, basically. I mean, obsessed with him and it's- God, I'm nearly fifty! It's pathetic!"

"Sort of," Roisin agreed bluntly and immediately, which shocked a laugh out of Greg.

His laughter sputtered out into a groan as he dropped his face into his hands, "I mean, Alex Horne, of all people. Christ."

Roisin patted him on the back and said cheerfully, "Yeah, it is pretty pathetic."

"Cheers, Rois," he chuckled.

She slid her arm around his back and rested her chin against his shoulder, "Have you considered that maybe you're not actually that angry at him."

"What?"

"Maybe your just, you know, pent-up? I mean you've been lusting after him for what? Fifteen years now?"

"What?!" Greg exclaimed as he dropped his hands and tried to twist around to face Roisin, which forced her head to slide down his back. He could feel her giggling into his shoulder blade, "It's not been fifteen years!"

She pushed herself up to lean back against the couch, "Fine then. Somewhere between that and ten."

"It's not been the whole time I've known him! I had a bloody relationship! A really serious one! Which you know!"

Roisin laughed, "Right! Cause I stop wanting to fuck Gordon Ramsay every time I go on a date!"

"Ew," Greg shifted to fully face Roisin, "You want to fuck Gordon Ramsay?"

"Not the bloody point! The point is, you're not a bad person for being hung up on someone. Or feeling frustrated about it. Or, just in general, getting angry at one of the weirdest, most annoying people we know," that got a laugh out of Greg. Roisin paused and smiled at him. Then felt compelled to add, "You might be a bit odd for wanting to fuck him, but you're not a bad person."

"Thanks, Rois," He said quietly, really meaning it. He suddenly felt completely exhausted.

"Right," she said loudly while shifting forward on the couch, "If that's it then, I'm going to sleep in your bed," she stood up and held a hand out to Greg even though there was no chance she could pull him up, "You're welcome to as well, if you're done wallowing."

Greg snorted, "Thank you, so much, for allowing me to sleep in my own bed," he ignored her hand and used the couch as support to stand.

"Yeah, well, I'm very kind. Endlessly giving, really," she said as she pushed past him and headed towards the bedroom.

He smiled as he followed her. She really was. He thought he had probably needed to have this talk for a long time. Something inside him felt like it had been untangled. He felt like he could now identify things he had been refusing to even acknowledge the existence of for years. He still wasn't looking forward to Monday, but somehow knew it would be easier than it had been.

If anyone's curious this chapter was heavily influenced by Greg briefly talking about Taskmaster in this ep of RHLSTP: <https://youtu.be/yjRGHcbhTP8>
The relevant bit starts around 56 minutes in. But if you haven't seen it and have the time it's definitely worth watching all of it.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

After more than 10,000 words here's Greg and Alex interacting with each other more significantly than shouting down a hallway. Thanks to the real troopers that have stuck in there. Just realized I should probably tag this with slow burn cause if you think there's going to be pay off in the next chapter haha

Monday came sooner than it should have, but Greg found himself walking into work with far less dread than usual. Nearly none at all. Roisin had spent the night Friday and stayed late into Saturday. They had talked a lot more, and Greg ended up feeling ridiculous for the amount of denial he had been in. He spent Saturday night alone and found himself bursting at the seams to make fun himself. Maybe it was just part of being a comedian, but as soon as he understood something embarrassing about himself, well enough that it didn't feel like an open wound, he would desperately want to joke about it.

He couldn't stop himself from calling Rhod on Sunday. He had basically worked out a whole routine, and he needed to shout it right into somebody's ear. Plus, he had to tell Rhod about the dog bed. Greg knew he would run wild with it and he had. Greg was in tears from laughing so hard, which was a marked difference from the terrible, tense feeling he would get previously when Rhod talked about him and Alex. It felt amazing to finally be in on the joke.

However, the thought of having to actually interact with Alex was less funny. Of course, he knew nothing had actually changed. Not outwardly. Not in any way that mattered. But he did feel somewhat guilty for lusting, as Roisin had put it, after a married man who was also his coworker, or well, boss, technically. The fact that his lust didn't seem to want to manifest in a straightforward way wasn't helping with the guilt either. Despite Roisin's claim that everyone had, Greg had never had angry sex. He had never had anything approaching a violent inclination toward someone he fancied. He was always terrified of scaring or intimidating his partners. Because, well, just the sight of him was enough to scare or intimidate plenty of people.

For some reason that was different with Alex. It would annoy him when Alex was obviously intimidated by him, but it wouldn't make him uncomfortable or concerned like he was with other people. It was the only part of all of this that he was still having trouble processing. Surely, he should be more concerned about intimidating Alex not less. It would seem some part of him actually liked it, if the fantasies he very recently let himself indulge in were any indicator. Maybe it was just hard to imagine any interaction where Alex didn't end up shrinking back from him.

As he made his way to the green room he convinced himself, for maybe the fifth time that morning, that there was no point in thinking about it because none of it mattered. Nothing

would ever come of it. Really he just hoped he wouldn't make a tit of himself while talking to Alex, now that he was more aware of his feelings. He thought he could probably manage, but he wasn't entirely sure. He had never been very good at ignoring an elephant in the room. Even when, or maybe especially when, it was his elephant.

Just as he was about to step into the green room he heard Alex call from behind him, "Greg," his voice cracked in the middle of his name. He cleared his throat and tried again, "Ah, sorry. Greg, could I-"

Greg was laughing as he spun around to face him, "Christ. Puberty's been a very long ordeal for you, hasn't it?"

Ah, apparently he was just going to bully him. Well, that was fine. Alex always seemed more comfortable with their onstage personas anyway.

Alex's eyes widened and he covered his mouth as he laughed. He was very red for such a light jab, "Sorry, I, uh," whatever he wanted to say he was giggling too much to get it out.

"Do you think, when you finally reach the end, you'll be tall enough to go on all the fun rides at Disneyland, little Alex," Greg said, in a tone he tended to reserve for children, as he stepped closer to Alex.

Alex visibly swallowed and his eyelids fluttered a bit as his face turned a deeper shade of red. He dropped his hand, no longer laughing, and Greg could see his mouth was stuck halfway between a grin and a grimace, "I, uh," Alex looked away from Greg and let out a small chuckle, "Huh, I can't remember wh-"

"Probably something to do with the show," Greg interrupted and Alex looked back at him. His flush had spread down his neck. Greg wanted to reach out and pull his collar aside to get a better look. Instead he said, "You know, the television programme we're here to film."

"Yes," Alex said, grinning as he took a step towards Greg. He then looked down and his grin dropped into a frown. He took a step back, "No."

Greg found it fascinating to watch. It was as though he had pressed a rewind button in his head. Even his blush started to recede a bit.

"I, uh," Alex cleared his throat again, "I wanted to ask if you, um, if you, maybe, would like to have dinner? With me and Rachel?"

Greg felt gobsmacked. He would wager he looked it as well. His silence stretched out long enough that Alex started to fidget.

"Or, well, I mean, if you'd like. Whenever you'd like," Alex's blush was back in full force, "Or if you wouldn't like, that's fine. Obviously."

Greg looked past Alex. He could see Andy at the end of hall making his way towards them. He was about to corral them onto the stage. Greg was slightly put out he hadn't gotten a chance to have a coffee. He looked back at Alex who was looking a bit wobbly. It was funny,

wasn't it? This was what Greg had wanted for so long, but now that he knew it wasn't all he wanted it felt dangerous.

"Um, yeah, maybe," Greg said noncommittally as he nodded his head towards Andy, "We're about to get herded onto stage. Let's talk about it later, yeah?"

Alex whipped his head around to look down the hall and then back towards Greg. He nodded with a cautious smile on his face. They greeted Andy, and then let themselves be led out to the stage to warm up the audience.

Greg found himself in quite a jovial mood through the first half of filming, while Alex seemed a bit twitchier than usual. Greg felt compelled to point out that Alex wrote his own scathing intro, and no one asked to do pick-ups to correct it. Similarly, while he often found Alex's banter section funnier than Alex preferred he let on, he simply couldn't be fucked to pretend he didn't like this one. Alex looked pleased and dismayed at the same time. He, again, didn't ask for a correction.

Greg being in a good mood tended to lead to quite a bit of unusable material. He was sure they would end up with some outtakes. Usually Alex would get fussy about sticking to schedule at some point, but he seemed to be in a bit of an odd mood himself. The Andys were left to pick up his slack, and Alex looked surprised everytime one of their voices buzzed into the earpieces to move them along. Perhaps Alex's persistent flush had something to do with that. Maybe he was feeling spacey and embarrassed about other people having to do things he felt responsible for.

Obviously, it hadn't escaped Greg's notice that Alex blushed easily, but he was definitely redder than usual. It was sort of distracting. Greg knew he was looking at him more than he normally did but it was hard not to. It felt like everytime he looked over Alex was somehow redder. At some point he started flinching just from Greg turning his head. It should have been annoying. Partially it was, but part of Greg was absolutely giddy about it. He just wanted to poke at him.

During the prize task things got a little out of hand with Sally's item. 'Piggy Make Ya Fat'. A fake brand name that Alex had clearly chosen and then practically begged Greg to feed him. Greg found it interesting. Alex had clearly set it up to make the joke, yet could barely stumble through it. Though, he supposed Alex couldn't find a good avenue to insert it. Sally had gone a bit off the rails.

They were asked to do pick ups for that, and Greg couldn't stop himself from physically poking Alex. Instead of waiting for Alex to ask to be fed pig food, Greg demanded he eat it while poking at his stomach. Alex gasped and a high breathy laugh escaped from his throat as he jolted back from Greg. He dropped his iPad and nearly fell out of his throne in his scramble to grab it.

Sally hadn't actually gotten to describe her item very well. They were asked for another pick up. Greg didn't bother with a poke and went straight in for a tickle. They were asked for another and it went in a similar direction. They weren't asked again. Greg assumed they would end up using the first take with a few bits cut out.

If Greg thought Alex was flinching before then he didn't know what to call what he was doing now. Quivering, maybe. At the very least, it was a series of flinches while he blinked rapidly and tried to avoid eye contact. Greg was delighted. Alex's face was so red he thought something might burst. Whatever Greg was doing, he didn't think he could stop.

He started spreading out and taking up as much of Alex's space as he could manage. He was gesturing wider and putting his hand out to grab Alex's armrest instead of his own. He could see Alex squirm in his periphery. He really wanted to smack his hand down onto Alex's leg instead of the armrest, but Alex had pushed himself as far to the other side of his throne as possible. He still could, but he would really have to reach. He was sure it was obvious that everything else had been purposeful, but it felt like that would be too obvious. He was considering it anyway when Andy informed them it was time to break for lunch. Alex seemed to deflate slightly with relief.

Greg felt a bit guilty. He turned towards Alex and said, "Sorry, mate," with a slight wince.

Alex tensed right back up, "No! No, no it was really good," he let out a stuttered breath that sounded nearly like a laugh, "You were great! I mean, it was. I mean, I really liked it, the handsy boss thing," his eyes bulged for a second. Then he looked down, turned an even deeper shade of red, and quickly mumbled, "I mean, I'm sure it was funny."

Weirdly, the audience laughed. Then Andy was in their ears again informing them that their mics were still on. Alex was so flushed that his face was actually puffy. Greg hadn't known skin could swell like that just from embarrassment. Horribly, he felt something like pride expand in his chest.

As they made their way backstage, after their mics had been turned off, Greg grabbed Alex by the arm to stop him jogging ahead. He turned to Greg looking like a deer in headlights.

Greg stopped himself from laughing and said, "I would like to have dinner with you and your wife."

Alex's eyes lit up and he smiled, "Really? That's great," he said with wonderment in his voice like he couldn't believe his good fortune.

"Yes, really," Greg felt annoyed. Why was Alex acting like it was always Greg turning him down? He huffed slightly, "I mean, if you want me to."

"Of course, yes! Why wouldn't I want you to?"

"Well, you have refused to grab a pint with me for nearly three years," Greg sounded more cross than intended.

Alex looked shocked, "What? No, but," he looked to the side like he was trying to recall all the times he had turned Greg down, "You were just being polite."

Greg raised his eyebrows, "Was I?"

He looked back at Greg, "Yes. Er, I thought," he frowned, "It's just, you know, the done thing with coworkers."

Greg nodded, "Yeah, exactly."

Alex nodded too, "Yeah."

Greg felt like he was having a stroke, "Are we having two different conversations?"

Alex shook his head, "I don't think so."

"Okay, then you're saying that you're shocked I would accept your invitation despite the fact that I've taken the polite and expected steps someone would take to get to know their coworker, for years. While you've been... averse."

"Yes. No," Alex looked confused, " Sorry, I'm saying that I assumed you were just being polite and felt like you had to ask me to the pub on occasion."

Greg felt his jaw twitch. He was trying very hard not to lose his temper. He took in a deep breath and exhaled before he replied, "And you always said no, because..."

"Well, I," Alex's eyes were darting all over the place. He looked positively lost, "I assumed you didn't want me to say yes. No one really wants to drink with their boss, do they?"

Greg let out a bark of a laugh and clapped his hands onto Alex's shoulders. Alex swayed slightly under the weight of them. Greg squeezed his shoulders and leaned down a bit, trying to get Alex to steady his gaze, "I want you to know, genuinely, past the first meeting, I have never once thought of you as my boss," Greg knew he was grinning meanly and being more aggressive than necessary, but it was true, "Because, even if you hadn't made me the face of your show, I know for a fact that you would never have the balls to fire me. Or, probably, anyone. I don't think you could find an intern that actually respected you as an authority. I mean, you couldn't handle giving out meaningless judgements to comedians. You had to get me to do it for you."

Greg paused as he thought for a moment. Alex made no move to argue. He looked rapt. Greg felt strange. He didn't want to poke at Alex. He wanted to bite him, chew at him. Gnaw until he got to bone. He licked his lips before he tore back in, "Surely, you don't think anyone actually respects you as their boss. I mean, does anyone even ask you for anything or to do anything? Surely, they go to the Andys or whoever's directly above them. You just schedule and order things, don't you" Greg laughed and it sounded like gravel and glass, "You really are just admin, aren't you?"

Alex felt like he was vibrating under Greg's hands. His flush, which had dissipated somewhat during their misunderstanding, had returned. His eyebrows were raised and his lips parted slightly. And his eyes. Greg had seen that look just recently. When Alex had looked up at him from the dog bed, his eyes were the same then. Soft around the edges and so open and trusting. So vulnerable. And from this close he could see how dark they were. His pupils were blown wide.

Greg felt something twist inside him. He leaned in closer. Close enough to feel soft, warm puffs of breath from Alex's parted lips. He said lowly and slowly, "Look at you, shaking like a wet dog. It's just pathetic, really. Don't you think?"

Alex shuddered and stumbled forward slightly. Greg had a second of panic. What was he doing, taunting Alex like that? When he so clearly liked it. When Alex was married. Married to someone Greg really liked. Greg pushed Alex a step back and took a step back himself. Then cleared his throat. Alex blinked a few times and seemed to come back to himself. Greg let his hands slip off his shoulders.

Alex's cheeks were redder, but his eyes were wide and alert. His arms, which had been hanging limply at his sides, seemed to spasm slightly, and he clasped his hands firmly together in front of him.

"S-sorry," he stuttered out, looking away from Greg and grimacing.

"No, I'm sorry," Greg frowned and rubbed at the back of his neck. He decided the best course of action was to act like he hadn't noticed that Alex looked like he was about to start rubbing himself off against Greg's thigh. He felt his own cheeks go a bit pink, "That, uh, came out a lot meaner than I meant. I guess, I just meant you better not be thinking of this dinner as some sort of performance review. Because..."

Alex kept his head down but his eyes darted up towards Greg, "Because I'm too pathetic for anyone to view me as their boss," the corner of his mouth was turned up slightly.

Greg's frown deepened, "Well. Um, yeah."

Alex lifted his head, "But you still wanted to come over?"

Greg's eyes widened. He hadn't realized he had been invited to their house. He had assumed Alex meant to grab dinner at a restaurant. There were a lot of implications stacking up that he didn't really have the time to think about. He chewed on the inside of his lip, "Mmm hmm," he hummed.

"Good," Alex let out on a breath, sounding incredibly relieved. He smiled shyly, "We should probably figure out the details later, if you want the chance to actually eat something."

Greg saw an opportunity out of this baffling and awkward situation and grabbed hold of it with both hands, "If?!" Greg practically shouted as he pushed past Alex. He could hear his sputtered laugh behind him, followed by light footsteps.

Greg decided to keep his hands to himself for the rest of the day. More accurately, he decided to keep his hands to himself until he had time to mull the implications he had been presented with. He knew he would have to call Rhod at some point and tell him that he was, at least, partially right. Alex Horne did, in fact, seem to be a pervert.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Oh boy so sorry this took so long. And sorry for the lack of response on the last couple chapters. I just sort of had to be very offline for a little. But I wanted you to all to know how much it meant reading through your comments. You're all so incredibly kind! Thank you! Will try my best to get the next update up sooner.

"Why in the world did you tell him Wednesday?" Rachel asked for about the twentieth time since Monday while noisily stacking dishes as she pulled them from the dishwasher.

Alex winced as ceramic clattered against ceramic, "Well it just seemed, I don't know. Well, the kids are away with your parents an-"

"The kids are away until *next* Wednesday. Why wouldn't you say the weekend?" She slammed the dishwasher closed and turned to face him.

Alex fidgeted with his hands. Then dropped them and moved past her to take the stack of dishes to start putting them away.

Rachel sighed, "I'm not angry... Okay, I'm a bit annoyed. But mostly confused."

"Well it was just, I don't know, we were talking about the shorter days this week. And I said it was almost like a holiday. Having short days, the kids being away, getting a break from shooting tasks for series six," he finished stacking dishes in the cabinet and turned to face Rachel, looking quite red in the face, "I actually said Tuesday at first."

Rachel laughed a bit meanly. She brought her hand up to her mouth and muttered from behind it, "Oh, sweetie."

"And he, uh, he suggested later in the week. And I, like an idiot, said 'Wednesday?' and he, well. He said yes, but it seemed..." He trailed off as Rachel's laughter got louder. She snorted and tried to hold it in but just couldn't manage it. She pulled him close and laughed directly into his chest.

He brought his hands up to her back and pushed his face into her hair. He let out a sigh and said quietly, "I don't know. I don't know if I've always been like this around him or... I don't know. Maybe I have."

Rachel pulled back slightly and looked up at him. Her cheeks were pink and her smile was wide. She was looking at him like he was the thickest person in existence but in the fondest way possible. On a stifled laugh she said, "Oh, sweetie, you have. That's why I thought you were purposefully avoiding being around him as much as you could."

Alex sighed. He bent down to bury his face in her neck and mumbled against her skin, "No, not purposefully. I really didn't know I was," he paused just to breathe her in for a bit, "It's not that big of a deal, is it? He's only expecting takeaway. And I know you would've liked more time for us to prepare the house, but it looks fine."

He heard a dissatisfied hum next to his ear and corrected himself, "Nice. I meant, it looks nice."

"It's not really like we can reschedule now," she said while running her nails lightly against his scalp, "It's just, generally, when you and your guest have to be up quite early Thursday you don't make plans for Wednesday night."

Alex chuckled, "I am aware of that, it's just. I mean. Have I really always been this bad at speaking to him?"

Rachel pulled back to look him in the eye, "Yes," she said firmly.

Alex blushed and closed his eyes, "God, I made such a fool of myself. I know I already told you but... There's just no way he doesn't already know. Why are we even doing this?"

"Because you wanted to. Maybe it's just because you really sort of like making a fool of yourself, but you wanted to. You planned it. You *scheduled* it. And now it's happening," she pulled away and gave his hand a squeeze, "And I really have to go pick up the food."

"Right, yes," he leaned down and gave her a quick peck on the lips, "Thank you, love you."

"Love you too," she threw over her shoulder as she grabbed her keys and headed for the door.

Greg parked at the end of the street. He was far too early and needed to collect himself anyway. He still hadn't really worked out what to think of this invite. It had seemed, briefly, very clear what the intention was. When Alex had seemed so incredibly grateful for Greg's acceptance while standing there flustered and seemingly turned on.

Then they had spoken more, at the end of their short shoot, about how nice it was that Alex would get home in time to have dinner with Rachel. He had asked Greg to join them the next day, and Greg was suddenly unsure of his prior assumptions. He pushed for the weekend, to test the footing of his theory. Alex suggested Wednesday instead. So, Wednesday it was.

He had still called Rhod. He thought he could at least have a laugh about the odd conversation he had with Alex. Weirdly, Rhod had just seemed concerned. He cautioned Greg about getting into anything too fast. That was an oddity in itself. Rhod advising caution, in any context, just didn't happen. But he was quite adamant.

"The thing is, I do have some experience with couples and it can be good fun but," he trailed off and sighed, "Hm, well, sometimes the thing with couples is, well, they're a couple."

"Wow."

"No but, listen. They're a couple and you're... not," he let out a loud breath of air which created a grating static noise in Greg's ear, "Not saying it's always the case, but. If you have feelings. It might get to you."

Greg really couldn't work out what Rhod was trying to tell him, "... Okay. I mean, I'm very aware they're a couple. So, no, I don't think it's going to bother me?"

"Yeah, no, I don't mean that them being a cou-"

Greg, waved his free hand frantically as though Rhod were actually sat across from him and shouted, "Say what you're trying to say, Rhodri!"

"I just mean, being treated like a marital aid. Might get to you."

"Being treated like a-" Greg cut himself off and rubbed hard with the heel of his hand against his eye, "What?"

"Like I said, I'm sure it's not every couple. But, the way I see it, at best you're a fuck buddy, and at worst you're there when they want you and out the door right after. Either way, it's not breakfast in bed and cuddles in the morning."

It had made Greg realize, with a cold shock, that he didn't even really know what he wanted. Even if his initial assumption was right, what was he expecting exactly? To be absorbed into their marriage? To have an actual relationship? Did he even want that? He couldn't even begin to picture how it would work. But could he just have a bit of fun with them and then pretend everything was normal? That didn't seem likely either. God, he hated when Rhod was right.

Not that it mattered. At this point, he was nearly certain his initial assumption was wrong. He must have wildly misinterpreted Alex's body language. The only thing he was having trouble rationalizing was how dark Alex's eyes had been. He looked it up earlier, and it turned out that fear can make pupils dilate too. But if it had been fear, why would Alex be so pleased with Greg accepting his invite? It just didn't add up.

Greg drummed at his steering wheel and looked at the clock. If he pulled up to the house now he would only be a few minutes early. He figured he might as well get it over with.

Alex triple checked that he had gotten all the kids' toys out from under the cushions and off the floor. He refolded a throw blanket and draped it back over the couch. Then fussed with it for a bit. He tried to tuck some frayed fringe under a fold. Then considered cutting it off. Then scooped the whole thing up and threw it in the laundry room. He straightened a picture in the dining room.

A vague memory drifted into his head of Greg saying something about finding houses that are too neat a bit unsettling. He nudged the picture back to its original position and was on his way back to the laundry room when the doorbell rang. He froze, allowed himself to panic for a few seconds, and then dashed towards the front door.

"Hello," he said, high pitched and breathless and before the door was even fully opened.

Greg chuckled, "Hi."

Alex stood there still catching his breath and grinned dopily at him.

Greg stared past him and hummed. Then put his hands in his pockets and cleared his throat.

"Oh! Right, yes," Alex said as he stepped back and to the side, "Please, come in."

Greg grinned and side-eyed him as he stepped past, "Thank you. Were you just running a marathon?"

Alex laughed awkwardly, "No, just uh, trying to tidy up a bit."

"Oh," Greg took a moment to look around, "Well it looks lovely."

Alex was embarrassed to find that such a small compliment could make him blush, which only made him blush more. He turned away from Greg and headed towards the kitchen. He heard Greg follow behind him.

Without looking back he said, "Rachel went to get the food. She should be back any minute."

When he got to the counter he chanced a look at Greg. He had stopped at the fridge and was smiling down at the drawings and tests that had been hung up there. Something about it made Alex's chest ache but he wasn't sure why. He leaned back against the counter and asked, "Would you like anything to drink? We have wine. Or beer, if you'd like."

"Uh," Greg seemed to think on it for a second, "No, probably won't be that late of a night. Better not."

"Ah, sorry. Probably should have invited you over later in the week."

"Oh, really?" Greg looked amused. He turned to face fully towards Alex, "Why didn't you, then?"

"Why? Th-that's a good question," Alex chuckled nervously, "Why?"

"Hmm, yeah," Greg took a few slow steps towards him, "Why?"

Alex pushed himself further back against the counter and felt himself go red, "Well, um, I guess, I was nervous, and when I'm nervous I tend to just say things or not say anything, but when I do say things I don't really thi-"

"Why were you nervous?"

"Why?" Alex found himself really laughing this time, because he realized they were just asking the same question back and forth and found it a bit funny.

Greg laughed a little too and took another step forward, "Yeah. Why?"

Alex's laughter died in his throat as he realized how close they were. He felt like his face was on fire as he quietly mumbled, "I'm always nervous around you."

And that's when he knew it was true. He was always nervous around Greg, and he always had been. It really was as obvious as Tim had said. He used to be the same way around Rachel. He still was sometimes, but not to the point of it hindering every interaction and generally only in a good way. Of course it had been glaring to Rachel and Tim. They had seen it before. How could Alex have missed it?

Greg took in a deep breath and took another small step forward. Alex could feel another 'why' coming and was terrified at what he might say in response. Luckily the sound of a lock turning stopped Greg from saying anything. He looked down at how close they were standing and took a step back. Alex muttered something about needing to help Rachel as he carefully made his way past him.

Greg made his way into the dining room as they were setting down the bags. Rachel instructed Alex to get plates ready as she threw her arms around Greg. She had the side of her face pressed against his belly, and Alex could see her arms strain to reach all the way around him. Greg chuckled and squeezed her back. Alex found himself absolutely fascinated by the sight of Greg's huge hand curled gently around his wife's shoulder, but shook himself out of it and did as he was told.

He made up Rachel's plate and set it at the head of table. He stilled after he set it there. It was where she always sat, but what if Greg wanted to sit there. Maybe he should ask. Would Rachel get mad if he did? He thought he probably shouldn't. He started plating his and Greg's meals slowly, feeling indecisive.

"It's been too long," Rachel's voice was muffled slightly by Greg's body.

"It really has," Greg said pulling back from her and gesturing towards the table, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Oh no, Alex can manage putting some kebabs on some plates," she grabbed his arm and started pulling him into the kitchen, "Let me get you something to drink."

"Oh, nothing alcoholic for me tonight."

"No, we all have to be up a bit early for that," Rachel said and Alex swore he could feel her glaring over her shoulder at him. He definitely heard Greg snort. He made a decision and put his and Greg's plates on either side of Rachel's.

She continued, "Tea? Or is it a little late for you?"

"Uuuumm, may-"

"You know, the kids have a bunch of fizzy juices that aren't half bad."

Alex knew that Rachel and Greg got along easily, and it was nice to let them take over conversation as they all sat down to dinner. They caught up like old friends, talking about

family and work. Apparently, they were even keeping up with a few of the same shows. Alex contributed sparsely. Mostly just an "uh-huh" here or an "oh yes, that was nice" there.

Rachel was talking animatedly about a trip they had taken recently while Greg nodded attentively and sipped at a fizzy mango and something juice that their oldest preferred. And Alex's chest was aching again for some reason. Was he old enough that he had to start considering heartburn before ordering takeaway?

Somehow talking about holidays had led back to talking about family. Alex was vaguely aware that Rachel had brought up his parents, but thought he must have spaced out for a bit. They were both looking at him, expecting him to say something but he had no idea what.

He swallowed his mouthful of food with some difficulty and said, "Um," searching Rachel's face for a hint.

"Oh, I think we can admit, at this point, that he really didn't like me at first," Rachel was grinning at him but there was a dissatisfied tilt to one side of it.

Oh. They were talking about his dad. Alex cleared his throat and said, "No. No, he liked you."

Rachel scoffed, "Please. He would've preferred you marry Tim."

That shocked a laugh out of Greg. Rachel turned to him and pointed her fork at him, "No! Genuinely! He told him!"

A breathy, "What," escaped out of Greg on a cascade of giggles.

Alex set down his fork, "No, that's not what he said."

"But he said something akin to it!?" Greg asked from behind his hand, looking positively giddy.

"No, it was," Alex sighed and tried to fight the grin forming on his face, "It's just, I guess neither of my parents believed that, well, that I had any interest in women."

Greg's eyes widened and his eyebrows shot up, "They. They thought...?"

"They thought I was his beard," Rachel said losing her own battle not to laugh.

"Mm," Alex hummed while smiling fondly at his wife, "Yes. And my dad, in particular, thought it was unfair on Tim to take this 'charade' so far."

Greg, off pitch and with tears in his eyes, asked, "Whe-when did they start to believe...?"

"Ah! Hmm," Alex squinted at Rachel and bit his lip.

"Ooh, definitely took until after the second kid," Rachel answered for him.

Greg doubled over from the force of his laughter. His hands gripping hard at the edge of the table like it was the only thing keeping his head out of his plate. Alex thought maybe he should feel embarrassed, but he just felt incredibly warm. Rachel and Greg both looked so pleased. It was lovely.

"Really though," Alex reached for Rachel's hand, "He did like you. He just thou-"

"Sure, sure. He liked Tim better though," her grin deepened and she scrunched up her nose as she said, "Honestly, I think he still might."

Without missing a beat, Alex replied, "Honestly? I think he likes Tim better than me."

Greg snorted and pushed himself up, trying to get his laughter under control. He let out a long sigh, "Ah, sorry. Fuck, I mean," he fought back another fit of laughter, "Poor Tim! The pitying looks he must've got at the wedding!"

"Oh! And the stunted sympathetic gestures," Alex trilled, "For years!"

Greg had excused himself for the toilet. Then been stopped halfway down the hall and redirected to use the one connected to their bedroom. The main one had a plumbing issue that was only half fixed, apparently. Rachel had taken him into their room and pointed him to the right door.

As he washed his hands, the vanity mirror informed him that he was grinning like a buffoon. He shook his head at himself and looked down at his hands. He really was having a lovely evening. This had been what he wanted originally. Just a nice time with nice people. Ridiculous that he had built it up in his head to be something else.

When he made his way back into the bedroom he noticed that Rachel had closed the door on her way back out. Then he noticed something sticking out from under the bed that he hadn't seen on the way in. Though he supposed he had been focused on Rachel. Obviously, the door being closed wasn't an invitation to snoop.

But it was an odd looking thing. It looked like it might be a box, but it also looked soft. He glanced back at the closed door. He went over to the bed and stuck his foot under it, just to nudge the thing out a bit. Huh, well, that was odd. The Hornes didn't have a dog. Yet, that was certainly a dog bed.

He crouched down and pulled it out further. It was nicer than the one Alex had used on the show. A little bigger, plusher. There was a lead and a collar tucked inside it. Greg heard himself let out a quiet, breathy laugh. He felt hysterical.

Alex, who had laid down in a dog bed at Greg's feet as a bit, a gag, a joke. Alex, who had done that, had a dog bed. Here. In his home. Under his bed. That he shared with his wife. Or was it Rachel's bed? And Alex just slept at her feet. Or the floor. In the... Fuck. Alex who had looked up at him, from the dog bed, with that look. That look that Greg had so nearly convinced himself was fear.

He reached out to the collar. His hand was shaking. He picked it up and turned the tag over. He turned it over again. It was blank. He took a few deep breaths. Okay. Maybe, they were planning on getting a dog? It was possible. Maybe they had one picked out and a date to pick it up. And they were hiding it under their bed, because? A surprise for the kids? It was possible. But Greg couldn't make himself believe that it was likely.

He wanted so desperately to lean further down and see if there was anything else under the bed. He wanted to go through their wardrobe. He wanted to tear apart the whole room. He put the collar back and stood up. He nudged the dog bed back to about where it had been. He told himself that he couldn't bring this up, and he shouldn't think about it. He had to go back out there and pretend like he didn't know this thing that he had no business knowing.

When he made his way back to the dining room he saw Alex sitting there looking at Rachel like she had hung the moon. She was making a snide comment about one of the boys' teachers. But somehow it did sound nearly like music coming out of her mouth. He could understand it. The devotion he seemed to have for her. The worship, really. The want to curl up at her feet and be called a good boy.

It was all the more reason he wanted to say something. Wanted to ask. What was this? What were they doing? Was it okay to make it into a joke? Was it just a joke? Why was Alex always nervous around him? While he seemed so at peace next to Rachel. He shouldn't ask. He had already decided, he couldn't bring it up. He knew he was going to.

He stood behind his chair, resting his hand on the back of it. He looked at Alex and waited for him to look back.

Alex looked over briefly, then back at Rachel, then back to Greg questioningly, "Were you planning on heading out?"

"Hmm, maybe," Greg tapped his fingers lightly against the chair, "Just curious. Were you planning on getting a dog?"

Alex went red instantly as his mouth dropped open. His jaw worked up and down like he was trying to say something but nothing came out.

"Ah," Rachel said, "Well, that's as good of a segue as any. Alex would like to tell you something."

Rachel was smiling sweetly at Alex who was looking at her like she had just pushed him off a cliff. Suddenly the whole thing felt very absurd.

Greg tried for a joke, "I'm guessing you're not getting *me* a dog."

It shocked a solitary, sharp laugh out of Alex. Then he stuttered out, "W-well, ah, th-the thing is," he chewed at his lip, "Um, well, a-actually," he dissolved into more laughter but it sounded sort of frantic.

Greg grimaced and looked over to Rachel. She grabbed Alex's hand, moving her thumb back and forth across his knuckles. He looked over to her, terrified.

Still smiling softly, she sighed and asked, "Do you want me to do it, sweetie?"

Alex nodded, "Oh, yes, please."

Rachel turned to Greg. Her hand was still gently soothing Alex. Her smile was still soft and sweet, but there was something in her eyes that betrayed the rest of her demeanor.

She leaned forward and said, "Alex is really, very attracted to you. And he's quite worried about the future of the show."

Greg felt like he had been punched in the gut twice, "Uh, what? Sorry," he looked at Alex, "What does that mean? 'The future of th-"

"Uh, no! That's not," Alex interrupted, shaking his head. He turned to Rachel, "That's not how I would've, um..."

"Oh really?" Rachel asked, with a laugh in her voice. She leaned back in her chair and let her hand slip off of Alex's. She crossed her legs. Her voice shifted from sweet to firm as she said, "Then *you* should've said it."

Alex looked down. His face was beet red. He nodded rapidly as he shrunk back from her a bit. Which did manage to temporarily distract Greg from his career ending. That was interesting. That was little Alex Horne. That was Alex anytime he talked to Greg for longer than ten minutes, excluding tonight.

Alex shifted in his chair towards Greg but kept his head tilted down. Speaking to the table he said, "I'm sorry. This is my fault. Nothing's going to happen to the show. Not unless you want something to happen to the show."

"Why wou- *What*," Greg sputtered. He was baffled. He turned away from both of them for a moment and scrubbed a hand over his face. He turned back and gripped the back of the chair with both hands. He put his weight against it and leaned forward, closer to Alex.

He practically shouted, "Why would I want anything to happen to the show?"

He could see Alex jolt back at the sound of his voice but then try to stop the corners of his mouth from turning up. He heard Rachel stifle a laugh next to him.

Weirdly, Greg felt like he was about to laugh too when he asked, even louder, "And what in the world does that have to do with the lead under your bed?"

Alex's eyelids fluttered close and a shiver seemed to roll through him. He opened his eyes slowly and cautiously looked up at Greg.

In an incredibly meek voice he said, "Well, that's the, the thing. I'm worried it's already written into the show. That's the dynamic. People like it. But if it bothers you we can, I don't know. Change it, I suppose."

Greg felt his hands grip tighter on the chair, "Already written in- You're the one that writes it! You wrote in your... I don't know. Dog fetish. Why are you acting like you have no control

over it?"

Alex looked mildly horrified, "It's not called a dog fetish."

Greg shrugged his shoulders, "Well, I don't know!"

Rachel chuckled a bit meanly and said, "He didn't write it into the show. The show wrote it into our lives."

Greg stared at Rachel while he tried to puzzle out what that meant. He whipped his head back towards Alex when he had, "I'm sorry. Did you go out and buy all your little dog things last weekend?"

Alex frowned, "Yes?"

Greg decided he really needed to sit down. He pulled out his chair and dropped his weight on it. It groaned under him.

Alex sighed, "I feel like I'm not explaining myself properly."

"You're really fucking not," Greg said at the same time Rachel said, "You could be doing better, sweetie."

"Right," Alex took in a deep breath and let it out, "Okay. As Rachel said, I'm, uh, attracted to you. Which I only realized very recently, but I think I probably have been for a long time."

"Right," Greg said, ignoring the heavy feeling in his chest and how familiar that all sounded. And how odd it was for Alex to just say it with his wife sitting right next to them, looking mildly annoyed at worst.

"Right. Obviously, that could be a problem on its own. I mean, I know how you feel about me being your boss. But I am, in fact, your boss. So, I don't want you to feel, um, well-"

Greg snorted, "What? Harassed?"

"Yes," Alex said seriously, "And I haven't ever tried or meant to write anything that would, uh, that would, hm," he bit his lip.

"That would what?" Greg thought of Alex looking up at him from the dog bed, "That would turn you on?"

Alex looked like he just swallowed something sour, "Yes."

"But sometimes you, what, discover something and bring it home with you?"

"Y-yes, I guess. That's new too. I just, I guess I felt, if you didn't know, that I might, sort of, be taking advantage of you. And I don't want you to feel like, well, like-"

"Like you're manipulating me into acting out all your sick fantasies on national television?"

Alex looked like he might be sick, "Oh God! Is that how you feel?"

Greg chuckled, "No. It's just, Christ. You should really have Rhod on the show. He might be your match."

Alex looked puzzled, "Rhod Gilbert?"

Greg waved his hand at Alex, "Yeah, it- doesn't matter. Bad joke. I don't feel like that. Or," Greg hummed to himself, "Maybe I do. But I don't really care?"

Alex blinked at him, "Um? What?"

"Yeah. What's the plan? Moving forward, or whatever, if I'm... Just fine with it," Greg shrugged and scrunched up his face, "If I just think it's funny that you're a weird little pervert."

Alex, throughout the conversation, had shifted from looking embarrassed to uncomfortable. And Greg was starting to understand that those might be two entirely different things for Alex. That last comment seemed to slap him right back to embarrassed though. He flinched back and squirmed in his chair as his flush spread down his neck. Something about his face looked, well, pleased. Greg was glad to see it.

Obviously, he didn't really think it was just funny. Somewhere inside him, closer to the surface than he would like, something was screaming. This was so close to his initial assumption, yet so incredibly far. Alex and Rachel were sitting here sharing something... intimate, because Alex felt obligated to *professionally*. This wasn't about how Greg felt. This wasn't an invitation to share something personal. So, there was no need for Greg to try to make it personal.

Alex looked down, then back up at him through his eyelashes, "Well, I guess," he chewed at his lip a little, "I guess we could... Use it?"

Greg felt his eyebrows inch up his forehead.

Rachel sighed and stood up, "I think I will have a drink actually. Might take you boys a while to work out some ground rules."

"W-well I, I don't th-think- That's not really ne-" Alex sputtered.

Rachel gave him a stern look over her shoulder, "We literally just had this conversation. Remember? Last weekend?"

Alex went redder and nodded.

Greg leaned back in his chair, "What kind of wine do you have?"

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

[BenAffleckSmokingACigarette.jpeg]

Sorry guys. I'm so mad this took so long. It's not even what I meant to write and it's far too long. I'm not very happy with it but I've rewritten it 4 times and I just can't look at it anymore.

Also I know foot fetish is already tagged but just to warn you more than a third of this is foot stuff. So, so sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Greg felt surprisingly hungover Thursday morning. He barely drank anything. He supposed he must have had fairly fitful sleep, with the night still rattling around in his head. He stayed later than any of them intended. Despite that, the list of "ground rules" he came away with was woefully short and vague.

It seemed he was going to get to improv a lot more. He liked that on its own. And Alex had seemed quite keen to be surprised by any humiliating fact or fiction Greg could come up with. He was also very encouraging of Greg ordering him around. Rachel had offered to help Greg if he wanted to come up with something that would really sting, but she had also really tried to get Alex to set some boundaries.

The only hard no on the list was that Greg wasn't allowed to make any jokes about Alex servicing any rugby teams. Which, of course, was very interesting, and Greg had absolutely no way of asking about it. Considering it had only come up in the context of not bringing it up. Alex tried to backpedal after, saying it wasn't a "hard-hard no". Rachel had insisted.

Nothing sexual, in terms of their interaction, had come up at all which made it conclusively clear to Greg that this wasn't meant to be sexual. Not between him and Alex. Well, not exactly. It was sexual for Alex, which would end up being sexual for Rachel, and presumably they assumed it wasn't sexual for Greg. Which was fine. Good, actually.

Greg was surprised by how fine and good it seemed to him. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed like the best possible option. It was a way through without overly complicating things, without having to worry about his career, and with the promise of a closer relationship to Alex and Rachel. Plus, he really sort of liked the idea of winding Alex up, while seeming like he was unaffected and above it all. Then sending him home to Rachel, all desperate and whiny.

He barely got into his dressing room before there was a knock on the door. He wasn't that late. Makeup shouldn't be bothering him yet. He tiredly made his way to the door and opened

it to Alex. He was holding a coffee and a plate with a pair of danishes on it.

"Hi," Alex beamed up at him and didn't look at all like he had stayed up past his bedtime.

"Hi," Greg said, aware of how pleased and confused he sounded.

"I, uh, stopped at the place you like down the road," Alex cleared his throat and went a bit pink while he thrust the coffee towards Greg, "I got an extra shot of espresso. Sorry for keeping you so late."

In the same odd tone Greg asked, "How do you know about the place I like?"

Alex blinked at him, "Well, you come in with cups and boxes that have their name across them all the time."

"Right," Greg said, suddenly aware that Alex had been paying attention to him. Which made sense, he supposed, if Alex had been attracted to him the whole time. He would have been doing the same things Greg's been doing. Watching and listening and holding onto things like they might be important in the future. A thing Greg hadn't really realized he had been doing until he had that conversation with Roisin.

Alex was still standing there with the coffee awkwardly extended out for Greg. His hand was shaking slightly and his face was growing redder. Greg grabbed the coffee and muttered a thanks while taking a step back, giving Alex room to step in if he wanted. He ducked his head down as he made his way past Greg to set the plate on the table in the corner of the room. Then he just stood there awkwardly, looking at the ground.

Greg took a sip of the coffee and let out an exaggerated moan, "Mmm, thank you. Just how I like it."

Alex looked up and seemed incredibly pleased. Greg stared at him for a bit. He wasn't really sure what he was meant to be doing. This hadn't been covered last night. He really didn't think any of this was meant to extend outside their personas. He wasn't even sure if it was or if Alex was just being friendly and apologetic for keeping him out late.

"Oh right," Alex let out, seeming to startle himself out of his self-satisfaction, "I wasn't sure if you usually get strawberry or raspberry," he gestured at the plate, "Because they look quite similar at a distance. So, I got both."

"Well, tha-"

"Also I did have casting contact Rhod's agent. I don't think they've heard back yet. I'll let you know when they do. And obviously, the earliest we'll be able to get him on is series seven. Sorry."

Greg felt his eyes widen, "You actually- you- That was a joke!"

"But you- you said," Alex trailed off and started to look very worried, "Sh-should I not have?"

Greg found himself laughing with both amusement and incredulity. The longer he laughed, the less worried Alex looked. So, that was nice.

After he collected himself he said, "I mean, I don't think he's going to say yes. But, no, you didn't do anything wrong."

"Oh, good," Alex let out on a sigh, "If there's anyone else you'd like on, you just need to say."

Greg stopped himself from saying it was Alex's show. Alex most certainly knew that, and it wasn't the first time he had asked for Greg's input on contestants. It was the first time Greg knew he actually wanted it. It was absurd that he wanted to hand over that much control to Greg. This show was his baby, his great success. And Greg didn't actually do any of the hard work. He should tell him he didn't have anyone else in mind. He should thank him for letting him have some say. He was suddenly overwhelmed with the need to know how much control Alex would let him have.

"Yeah, I have a few people I'd like. Actually, probably enough for a whole series. More, if they all said yes," Greg grinned like a shark and started to move forward, boxing Alex into the corner he was standing in.

Alex's eyes widened as he shuffled back the bit that he could, "Oh. Really?"

"Yeah. That's alright, isn't it?"

"Um," Alex swallowed and nodded hesitantly, "Y-yes. Of course."

Greg was now firmly in Alex's space. He tilted his head to the side, scrutinizing him, "Yeah? I can pick a whole series?"

Alex's gaze hovered around Greg's mouth as he let out a squeaky sounding, "Yes."

Greg put his free hand on Alex's shoulder and squeezed harder than would be comfortable, "Why don't I just do that for you from now on? I'll pick them all, yeah? You don't have to worry about it anymore. I have far better taste than you anyway."

Alex leaned into Greg. Pressing up into the pain in his shoulder and brushing lightly against Greg's belly. His eyelids fluttered as his gaze moved up to Greg's eyes, "Yes, please."

"Christ," Greg let out on a scoff as he took a step back. He loosened his grip on Alex's shoulder and let some derision seep into his voice, "Alex. You can't just hand over full creative control because you want to fuck someone."

"What? N-no," Alex blinked at him, "Th-that's not," his eyes darted around and he broke off into giggles as he seemed to realize that was, in fact, exactly what he was doing.

Greg bit his lip to stop himself laughing as he shook his head at Alex.

"I, uh, we- No, uh," Alex took in a deep breath and squeezed his eyes shut. He opened them again as he let out a long exhale. He stared down at Greg's chest and said, "I mean, I do think you should have some say. I always have. It's better when you think they're funny."

The hand that had been gripping Alex's shoulder started to lightly massage it without Greg really thinking about it, "They've all been funny, Alex."

"Hmm, but," Alex worried at his lip, "I'm sure it'd be better if you had more say. Maybe you should give me a list each series and we'll try to get a few from that."

"A few? There's only five!"

Alex looked put out as he meekly asked, "Two?"

"One," Greg said firmly, feeling particularly amused. He had never been in the position to have to haggle *down* his own decision making.

"Alright, one," Alex said with a pout while looking back up at Greg's eyes.

Greg was starting to feel like a twat for thinking he could come off as unaffected, but he was determined to try his best. He took another step back and let his hand slip off Alex's shoulder, "Don't you have things to do to make the show happen?"

"Oh! yes! Sorry," Alex started towards the door immediately but stopped to turn around when he reached it, "Thank you, Greg!"

Certainly, Greg hadn't done anything worthy of thanks. Alex had brought him breakfast. Alex had taken an off hand comment and put it into motion to get Greg's best mate on the show. Alex had been ready to hand over as much creative control as Greg was greedy enough to take. What in the world was he thanking Greg for? He wasn't sure if he should ask or accept it. He wasn't sure which Alex would prefer.

There was an oddly charged moment where Alex could have just run off but seemed to notice Greg's confusion and stayed stuck in place. He started to look a bit uncomfortable like he realized it was a strange thing to say. Something clicked in place for Greg as they both stood there stock-still, eyes boring into each other.

"You're welcome," Greg let the words drip with overconfidence and kept his face blank, "A lesser man would have taken advantage of you. Your little mind, so full of dirty, over-sexed thoughts. You were ready to hand over everything. Weren't you? Poor, little boy. So overwhelmed. You're lucky you have someone like me looking after you. Aren't you?"

"Oh," Alex sighed, relief clear in his voice, "Yes, I really am."

Alex lingered in the doorway. His face looked softer than Greg had ever seen it. It was red as anything and his eyes were a little glassy and half-lidded. There was a slight upward curve at the corners of his lips. Greg felt something drop in the pit of his stomach. He felt like he just made a promise he knew he couldn't keep.

"Well, trot along then."

Alex's smile deepened as he turned away and did as he was told.

Filming had felt weirdly and utterly normal, after what happened in Greg's dressing room. The only time it felt off was when Greg would let his thoughts wander. He found himself trying to dissect the last few years far too frequently lately. At a point, he had to wonder if he remembered any of it correctly at all. Alex had always been like *that* when they were onstage together. Greg was sure he wasn't like that offstage the whole time.

Offstage Alex was distant and focused but still easily flustered. He was a bit bossy but in a spoiled, over-achiever kind of way. When he was very angry with someone, one might get the impression he was about to storm off and tattle to his dad before writing a very strongly worded letter. He was rarely angry, though. Usually, he was kind and agreeable and overly accommodating. Yet, he was still odd enough to be a bit tiresome to most people.

He made unfunny jokes on purpose and latched onto misspoken words like he found a bit of gold. If you had the misfortune of accidentally inserting an L-sound into the word shop in front of Alex Horne, you would have a day's worth of slop puns to look forward to. Still, somehow, he was soft-spoken and awkward. He would clearly bite his tongue in conversations with multiple people because he wasn't sure when to speak. Often, though, he would use a front of awkwardness to purposely make people uncomfortable. He seemed to find it quite funny. He was formally and stiffly polite but rude enough to laugh at others' displeasure.

He was too many things at once and half of them were contradictory. It was part of what Greg had always found so annoying about him. He was hard to pin down, and it was almost impossible to know what was true. Sometimes it seemed like he was acting more offstage than he was on it. Not least of all because the kind of man he appeared to be offstage seemed like he shouldn't be comfortable onstage at all. Yet, he always was. And the more Greg leaned into the character Alex had created, the more comfortable he seemed to be.

Greg had been the cause of too many pick-ups that morning. He could hear Andy's voice getting more irritated before he called for an early lunch. Alex spared him a concerned look before he scuttled off ahead of everyone. Greg followed him while the rest the cast loitered on the stage. When he caught up with him, Alex was stirring a cup of tea.

"I probably should have double-checked how you take it, but I'm fairly confident I've got it right," Alex handed Greg the cup and grinned up at him, "Of course, if I'm wrong, you have every right to be cross with me."

Greg narrowed his eyes at him and took a sip. It was absolutely perfect. It was odd to think that while Alex was nit-picking schedules and bossing people about (always with the appropriate amount of pleases and thank you's), out of the corner of his eye he had been watching Greg make tea and thinking: *I should be doing that*. It was ridiculous and fantastic and Greg wasn't sure what to do with it.

"I feel like the 'ground rules' weren't that helpful," Greg said bluntly.

"Ah, no," Alex looked past Greg just as he heard the others start to make their way in, "Rachel informed me that I was unduly difficult. I really am sorry for keeping you so late."

Greg grabbed Alex's arm just above the elbow to pull his attention back towards him, "I know it's not the best time, I just have a few questions."

Alex blushed and nodded.

"Do you really not like being in charge? At all? Not even of this?" Greg gestured backwards with the hand holding his tea, meaning to encompass the whole show.

"No. Not really. Er, a bit. I mean, I like making things and having control over the things I make. But when it gets to the point where I have to tell other people what to do it's... a bit irksome," Alex was speaking softly and grimacing, "You were quite right about me not even being able to judge. It got rather stressful during the Edinburgh shows. It's always surprising how much some people care."

Greg lowered his voice, "Alright, just one more question for now," he noticed Sally hovering next to them and used his grip on Alex to shuffle them away from the counter they were blocking. Alex giggled. He looked absolutely delighted to be shoved around by Greg.

Once Greg had gotten them fairly far from anyone else in the room, he leaned in close and whispered, "Is there anything you won't do? If I asked," Greg glanced down at the tea he was still holding, "Or if you think I might ask?"

It was lucky that Greg had crammed them against a wall because Alex seemed to melt a bit. His head knocked gently back against the wall as he let out a sigh, and his blush really began to bloom.

"Ah. Hmm, that sort of was the problem. I think I'd probably do... Well, anything. If you asked."

Greg felt his hand tighten around Alex's arm. Alex squirmed a little, but there wasn't a hint of displeasure on his face. Quite the opposite. Greg was really regretting not just dragging Alex out of the room. He took in a shaky breath and tried to think.

Alex was attracted to him. He knew that. He had been informed. It made sense and it didn't at the same time. It kept hitting him like brand new information every hour or so. It was hard enough to believe on its own. And this... This felt like more. Too much. And what about...

"What about Rachel?" the question was louder than Greg meant it to be.

"Oh, it's much the same with her," Alex let out a chuckle, "that was the second very unhelpful conversation I've had this week. I am trying. You're just both so... Well," his eyes widened on the last word as though it were enough to inform Greg of something.

Greg felt frustrated and overwhelmed and really, very horny. And there was an incredible happiness spreading out from his chest and rising up into his throat. He had to bite down on it and look away from Alex.

He was surprised, looking out at the rest of the room, that no one seemed to really have any interest in them. With the exception of Mark Watson, everyone seemed fully engaged in their

own conversations. Mark was half paying attention to Nish but kept glancing over every couple of seconds.

Greg looked back to Alex, "When you say 'anything' you mean anything that could get past the censors, right? Because you said we could use it. For the sh-"

"For the show," Alex interrupted, his voice flat and his face morphing into the picture of dread, "That's what I said, yeah. I've made you uncomfortable."

"No," Greg said quickly. He took his hand off Alex and wrapped it around his other one, which was still holding the tea close to his chest. He looked down at it, "I just don't know what this is. Or if it's... Alright?"

"It's tea," Alex replied loudly then grimaced at himself, "Sorry. I, uh, I don't know. I mean, it's alright. You mean with Rachel, right? Because, yes. It's, I- I didn't mean to, um, I wasn't really trying to-"

"Spit it out, you prick."

Alex laughed and rubbed a hand over his face, "Sorry. It's- I think I was just trying to be friendly but you're you and I- uh, I thought we'd," he moved his hand back and forth between himself and Greg, "I don't know. Sorry, I wasn't trying to cross any boundaries."

Greg lowered his voice again, "You didn't set any boundaries."

Alex matched his pitch to Greg's, "Neither did you."

"I'm not the one that's meant to!" Greg frowned and looked back out at the room. He wished he was better at keeping his voice low.

Alex looked out as well and gave Mark a half aborted wave, who subtly shook his head before pointedly averting his gaze.

Alex frowned and looked back to Greg. He seemed to carefully consider his words before he spoke, "I guess, I wasn't really thinking that we were just talking about the show. But that's what I led with, so I should've been. Sorry."

Greg was still confused and his frustration was starting to outweigh any other emotion, "So, you'd be happy for me to humiliate you in any context?"

Alex nodded.

"Really? So, for instance, if I yelled," Greg took in a deep breath then yelled, "Alex Horne is an incompetent, impotent bed-wetter!"

The room broke out into laughter. Greg didn't look, but he was sure all eyes were on them now. Alex cringed and shuddered and managed to look very grateful at the same time.

Greg quietly picked up where he left off, "That would be just fine? Not just fine. You'd like it. You want to be little Alex Horne all the time?"

Alex spoke very softly, "No, not- I'm not being anything. I jus- I quite like it. And you like it, and I like that you like it."

Greg felt caught out, "*I* like it?"

Alex corrected himself quickly, "Not the same way I do, but yeah. You get a look in your eye. You like it," he chewed at his lip and started to look less confident, "Surely, you would've quit if you didn't."

Greg realized he might not be keeping his cards as close to his chest as he thought. He also realized the noise level in the room had ratcheted up quite a bit. There was still laughter, and there were insults being lobbed. He couldn't work out in which direction and decided he didn't care. He set his tea down on the nearest flat surface, before he grabbed Alex by the arm and dragged him out into the hallway. He let go of him once the door shut behind them.

"Alright, friendly. These are the rules you want to apply to us being... friends?"

Alex shuffled awkwardly on unsteady feet like he had quickly gotten used to not having to support his own weight. He blinked in surprise at Greg, "Oh! Yes, if we're... friends. Are we friends?"

"I mean, yeah? Maybe? Sort of feel like I know too much about your sex life for us to just be coworkers."

Alex nodded rapidly, "Yes, probably."

Greg nodded slower, "Right. Friends. And coworkers... And I get to treat you like an awful, putrid, little worm that I'm quite annoyed to have to look at."

"Uuh-huh," Alex said but one could've mistaken it for a whimper.

"And you get to go home and ask your wife if you're allowed to think about it while you come."

Alex did whimper.

"And that's just how we interact, *always*. Have I got all that right?"

Alex closed his eyes and spoke with a quiet, shaky voice, "Yes. Except, I-I think... I think I would need your permission, as well."

Greg felt his neck go a bit warm. He hoped it wasn't noticeable, "Oh, really? Huh... Well, I'll have to think on it."

Alex's eyes flew open. He looked positively distraught but was fighting to hold back a grin, "R-really?"

With great effort, Greg managed to keep his voice nonchalant, "Yeah, I'll get back to you."

He saw genuine panic start to form on Alex's face before he turned around and went back through the door. He wasn't going to waste his whole lunch.

Alex spent the rest of the day following Greg around like a kicked dog. Anytime the camera wasn't on them, Alex was looking up at him with pleading eyes. Greg found it much easier to ignore than he was expecting. It was a good look on Alex, and he wasn't in too much of a rush to stop seeing it.

After filming wrapped for the day, Greg made his way to his dressing room quickly. On the way there he passed Alex, who looked trapped in a conversation with Andy. Greg could feel Alex's eyes on him as he continued down the hall. He was sure he would follow when he had the chance.

Greg took off his jacket when he made it through the door. He peeled his sweat soaked shirt off and replaced it with a fresh t-shirt. He sat himself down on the couch and checked his phone for the first time in hours. He had eighteen missed messages and suspected that most of them were from Rhod. He put his phone face down on the end side table and contemplated his shoes.

He hated dress shoes. He always tied them too tight to just slip them off and the laces were so small that he always ended up pulling the wrong bit to untie them. Then he would have to fumble with this tiny knot that his massive, clumsy fingers could never manage to untangle easily. He sighed and lifted his right foot to his left knee. He was wrestling with the inevitable knot when he heard the door click open.

He didn't look up to say, "Rude boy. Didn't even knock."

He heard Alex mumble, "Sorry," from across the room.

There was the click of the door closing. Then, suddenly, Alex was kneeling in front of him, his hand hovering over Greg's.

After some hesitation, Alex placed his hand lightly against his and said, "Please. Let me."

Greg was shocked still by the clear want in Alex's voice. He let his hand retreat and leaned back against the couch. Alex sorted the knot quickly and easily with his slim, careful fingers. Then he wrapped his hands around Greg's heel. He looked up, pleading permission with his eyes, as he cautiously maneuvered Greg's foot off his knee and down towards his own. Greg nodded, though he had no earthly idea what he was agreeing to.

A sweet smile spread across Alex's face and he let out a happy little hum as he sat back against his heels. He rested Greg's foot against his thigh and traced his thumbs down the throat of the shoe as his face turned quite a deep shade of red. He circled his index fingers over the top eyelets, then carefully hooked his fingers under the lace and pulled. He continued down in the same fashion, slowly and meticulously loosening the laces of Greg's shoe.

It should have been funny to see Alex treat his foot with such... Reverence. Greg couldn't think of a word that fit better. It decidedly didn't feel funny. In fact, the whole world felt a bit

lop-sided and the air felt thick.

Once Alex had loosened all the laces, he tucked his fingers between Greg's shoe and his heel. He carefully slipped the shoe off, running his fingers all along the bottom of his foot. It felt extraordinarily nice, which was ridiculous. Greg had never been turned on by anything happening to his feet. He wondered if it had more to do with the way Alex's breathing had audibly gotten heavier or how he kept subtly shifting his hips.

Alex set Greg's shoe to the side and asked in a breathy voice, "Do you have a change of socks?"

Greg could hear the question in his own voice when he hesitantly replied, "Yes."

Alex didn't answer the unspoken question. He, instead, looked up at Greg with wide eyes as he slowly trailed his fingers under Greg's trouser leg and just as slowly stripped off his sock. He tucked his fingers inside and sort of massaged it off his leg and down over his foot. He continued to caress the arch of Greg's foot with one hand while he neatly tucked the sock into the discarded shoe.

It really was ridiculous how much of Alex's thigh was taken up by Greg's foot. Greg found himself a bit fascinated by it. He shifted his foot so it sat aligned straight with Alex's thigh. He pressed down slightly, digging his toes in near Alex's hip. Alex's hand slipped up to Greg's ankle and gripped hard as he let out a strangled mewling sound.

A quiet, "Fuck," escaped Greg's mouth, followed by a somewhat nervous sounding chuckle.

Alex seemed to fold in on himself a little. His shoulders hunched and he tucked his chin down against his chest. He repeatedly, softly muttered, "Sorry, sorry, sorry," as he gently guided Greg's foot off of him. He then reached for the other one and took it onto his other thigh to begin the slow, careful process of untying his shoe all over again.

Greg started to feel a little unsteady. This almost didn't feel real. It was easily one of the most absurd things to ever happen to him. It was also easily one of the most intimate. It definitely didn't feel like it fit within the rules they had just established and then re-established. This was supposed to be the uncomplicated option. Part of him was furious at Alex for being so shit at communicating. Part was furious at himself for being perpetually confused. And part was twitching with interest in his pants and so deeply curious to see how this would play out if he just let it.

Greg sighed in frustration at himself, then asked, "Is this friendly behavior, Alex? Do you do this for all your friends?"

Alex's gentle hands faltered and Greg's newly removed shoe dropped to the floor with a light thud. He froze for a moment, then softly replied, "No," before trailing his fingers up Greg's leg to reach for his sock.

"Do you do this for your wife?"

Alex's hands stayed steady as he mumbled, "My wife doesn't have shoes like this."

Greg lightly kicked Alex's hip with his bare foot, "Doesn't really answer my question, does it?"

Alex paused with his hands cupped around Greg's heel, the sock only half removed. He took in a deep breath and quickly pulled the sock the rest of the way off. He started to massage Greg's foot in earnest.

His face looked oddly determined as he said, "No, it doesn't. Sorry. Yes, I do this for my wife."

Greg pictured that for a moment, found he quite liked picturing it, and said, "Right. Why are you doing it for me?"

"I just," Alex's hands slowed, "I've thought about it. Well before I knew that I actually fancied you, I thought a lot about your f-" Alex cut himself off and winced.

"About my stinky, old feet? Oh, Alex," Greg felt genuine disgust and desire commingling easily within his chest, "That's actually appalling."

Alex looked up at him and giggled, but still managed to look deeply ashamed.

"I mean, really," Greg knew there was much more affection on his face than his words would imply, but he just couldn't manage anything else, "You have this gorgeous, wonderful wife that, to be clear, you do not deserve," he wagged his finger in Alex's face for emphasis.

Alex grinned and shook his head, "No, I don't."

"And you're spending time thinking about popping my disgusting toes into your mouth."

"Oh," Alex whined as his hands stopped massaging entirely and clenched around Greg's foot.

"You should be happy she'll give you the time of day! And infinitely grateful that she puts up with these awful perversions," Greg tutted.

Alex moaned as he seemed to be pushed forward by some invisible force. He shook slightly as he panted next to Greg's knee.

"And now you want permission, for what? To think about me while you're with her? Absolutely not!"

Alex stayed folded over but craned his neck to look up at Greg, his eyes wide and worried, "Oh, really?"

"Really."

"But," Alex took in a breath. His eyes darted down and then to the side. He looked like he was doing difficult maths in his head, "Just when I'm with her?"

Greg raised his eyebrows and smirked, "Ah, no, thank you for pointing out my unclear wording. Not at all. Never. You are never allowed to think about me or my gross feet when

you come."

"Never," Alex looked truly, deeply concerned. He let out a breathy, panicked laugh, "It's just- I'm worried..."

"I can see that."

"I'm worried th-that if I'm not allowed, at all, then anytime I'm, er, close... I'll think 'Oh no, am I thinking about Greg?' and then I will be thinking about you and, and well..." Alex trailed off and sighed.

Greg bit his lip to fight the laughter he could feel bubbling up, "Hmm. I could see how that could be a problem, but I'm afraid it sounds very much like *your* problem."

Alex's eyes looked devastated but his mouth dropped open to take in a shuddering breath which was released as a low whine. He closed his eyes and dropped his head back down. His cheek pressed against the inside of Greg's knee and his forehead rested against the couch cushion between Greg's legs. His hands started moving again. He massaged his way up to Greg's ankle then back down to the ball of his foot. One of his thumbs stroked aggressively over Greg's toes. His movements were firmer than before and lacked any of their former finesse. Greg realized Alex was essentially groping his foot. Oddly, it made his cheeks colour a little.

When Alex spoke again it was somewhat muffled from his position, but Greg could still hear how ragged his voice sounded, "What if I can't do it? Will- ah, will you punish me?"

Greg took in a sharp breath, then cleared his throat to cover it, "I... I suppose I would have to. Rules are meaningless without consequences. Aren't they?"

Alex moaned and nodded, as best he could. The subtle shifting of his hips had gotten increasingly less subtle as he continued to rub erratically at Greg's foot. His motions were progressively pushing Greg's foot higher and further towards the inside of his thigh.

"I think if things continue how they're headed, you're going to end up being a very naughty boy."

Alex stopped all at once and tried to swallow a whine. Greg stared at the back of his neck. He thought it must feel like it was on fire. He cupped Alex's neck gently, just to prove himself right. Alex convulsed and let out a noise that sounded quite similar to a sob.

He lifted his face, just barely, from the couch cushion and pleaded in a high, urgent voice, "I, I need s- oh God, something cold! Please, please."

Greg withdrew his hand as though he had been scalded. He tried to nudge Alex back gently but ended up having to wriggle his foot quite aggressively in order for Alex to let go of it. Alex's hands stayed tense and curled in on themselves as he leaned back with his eyes screwed shut. He tilted his head back as he took in a deep breath and shook.

Greg got up quickly but with care. He was worried about touching Alex at all. He looked like he was about to pop. A million different thoughts were flying through his head. Surely, Alex wasn't actually about to come in his pants. He hadn't even been touched. He looked like he was in pain. He had seen Alex appear to be in physical pain from embarrassment before. Maybe he just wanted a nice, chilled glass of water to cool his face and calm down a little. Greg couldn't actually tell from looking if he was hard or if the zip of his trousers was folded awkwardly. Certainly, it was an ill-fitting suit. Greg could hear the desperate, little noises Alex was trying to stifle on his exhales and see the restrained twitching of his hips. Fuck, he hadn't even been touched!

Greg tried to stop thinking and went to grab a bottle of water from his mini fridge. He walked back over loudly, but Alex stayed where he was. His whole body tense and his eyes squeezed tightly shut. Greg was afraid to say anything. He shook the bottle in front of his face. The sound of the water sloshing was enough for him to open his eyes. They were bloodshot, and Alex looked positively dazed. He looked at the water bottle as though he had never seen one before.

Greg spoke softly, "It's water. Cold water."

Alex looked up at Greg. Relief and recognition seemed to hit him at the same time. He moved all at once, reaching for the water bottle with one hand while he frantically tugged at his belt with the other. He barely popped open the button of his trousers before he was shoving the bottle straight into his pants. He thrust forward once and a strangled keening sound escaped from his throat. It dissolved into a low, whining moan as a few tears rolled down his cheeks.

And Greg's confused arousal shifted quickly to intense discomfort. He could taste something sour in the back of his mouth. He hunched down and reached out, but his hands hovered quite far away from Alex.

"Fuck," Greg tried to swallow the sour thing down, "Are you alright?"

Alex pulled the bottle out from his pants and let it drop to the floor. His hand went back to cup himself over his trousers, and he took a few deep, shuddering breaths before he started to relax.

He looked up at Greg, the picture of exhaustion, and croaked out, "Yes. I'm sorry. Thank you."

Greg felt winded. He didn't know what to say. He dropped himself back down on the couch and scrubbed at his face with his hands until he felt Alex tug at his trouser leg.

Alex's hand was hovering around Greg's calf as he stuttered out, "C-can I, sorry, could I-I just-"

"Yeah," Greg interrupted, again not knowing what he was agreeing to.

Alex sighed as he wrapped his arm around Greg's leg and nuzzled the side of his face into his thigh. There wasn't any of the heat or tension there was earlier. Alex looked pleased and tired

and there were still tears drying on his cheeks. Greg felt a strong ache in his chest. He thought about placing a hand on Alex's head. He, instead, gripped at the couch cushions.

"Did you want a proper cuddle?"

"No, this is perfect," Alex mumbled into Greg's leg.

"Alright," Greg attempted to sit in silence for as long as Alex needed, but thought he probably lasted all of thirty seconds, "You know, obviously, if not thinking about me actually interferes with you coming when you're with your wife... Well, then, clearly, she overrules me."

Alex let out a soft chuckle, "I think she'll actually really like it. If she does have a problem with it, I'm sure you'll hear about it."

"Oh. Alright."

They did sit in silence for a bit after that, though Greg couldn't really say for how long. When it started to look like Alex might nod off, he nudged him with his leg.

"Rachel will be worried where you are."

"Mmm, yeah," Alex looked up at him sweetly, "Did you want me to fetch your trainers?"

And Greg really did, but he said, "No, that's alright. You better head out."

Alex sighed and unwound himself from Greg's leg. He stretched slowly, and Greg winced as he heard his joints pop. He used Greg's knee to support himself, as he stood up on unsteady feet. He looked an absolute mess. He was still flushed under his collar, his suit was horribly wrinkled, and his trousers were still undone. Greg wanted to touch him so bad it hurt not to.

"I'll see you tomorrow, then."

Alex smiled dopily at him, "Yes. Thank you, Greg."

He did up his belt then turned and stumbled slowly out of the room. And Greg was left alone in his bare feet feeling like a right fucking idiot. Why did he think he could do this? What even was that? Why had he liked it? Except the part where he made Alex cry. God, he hadn't liked that at all. Though, Alex hadn't seemed to mind.

He sat there and stewed for a bit, stuck in the position Alex had left him, hands still clutching the couch cushions. He heard his phone buzz on the table next to him and remembered he was going to have to speak to Rhod. Well, whatever, he was definitely going to go home and have a wank first.

Here's a list of the dumbest searches I made while writing this chapter:

1. "Do british people call danishes danishes" (Result was inconclusive. Sorry if you don't and that pulled anyone out. Probably should've picked a different pastry but I didn't want to.)
2. "Do british people even use the term dress shoe" (Result was inconclusive and it wouldn't have mattered if it wasn't. I will never know or care what the difference is between an oxford and a derby)
3. "Parts of a shoe"

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