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Set in 10/16pt Kingfisher by Becky Chilcott

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‘Hope will never be silent.’
Harvey Milk

For my grandad, who taught me young
that there is hope even in the darkest places and times.

Chapter 1

EXPLOSIVE TEMPER

Chop. Chop. Chop.

'Mum, can I speak to you for a minute?' Mum was chopping carrots.

Chop. Chop. Chop.

'Is it important?' she responded.

'Yeah, kinda.'

Chop. Chop. Chop.

'Well, if it can't wait . . .'

'I don't know the easiest way to say this.'

Chop. Chop. Chop.

'I guess what I'm trying to tell you is . . . is . . .'

Chop. Chop. Chop.

'I'm trying to tell you that I'm gay.'

Chop. Chop. Ear-splitting scream.

'Mum?'

'Shit. Shit. Shit.'

'Mum? Are you OK?'

'Get me a tea towel. Get me a bloody tea towel!'

I grabbed one. Mum can barely drive with eight fingers and two thumbs. Looking at the severed finger next to the carrots, I called an ambulance. Mum went ballistic, cursing and shouting. I could taste my salty tears and I was seriously freaked out. I didn't know what to do. I had a plan and that was most certainly *not* part of the plan.

By the time the ambulance arrived, the tea towel was more red than white. I climbed in. Mum wouldn't meet my eyes. I guess this was because of her accident.

We arrived at St. Andrew's A&E department. Mum was ranting and raving like she just lost a leg. I walked alongside her, mortified, thinking, *Jesus, it was just a finger. I'm pretty sure they can grow them in petri dishes.*

The doctor asked a hysterical mum how it happened. I'll never forget her answer. Ever. 'How do you think it happened, you specky twat?'

I whispered to the doctor, 'she cut her finger off with a knife.'

When she caught me talking, she pointed and said in an indifferent voice, 'my son is gay'.

So, it could have gone a lot worse.

* * *

I always imagined "coming out" would be my moment. A sacred ritual like Communion or marriage. I'd ask mum if I could speak with her. We'd sit on our black, pleather sofa and I'd tell her 'I'm gay'. She'd cry but they'd be tears of happiness. She'd be so proud to see me come to terms with who I really was and whip up a chocolate "coming out" gateaux for me – because she knows chocolate is my favourite everything.

Dad would come home from a long day's work on the site. He'd take off his high-vis vest and ask if I was OK. Mum would give me a little push and I'd stand up like I was going to deliver the Queen's Speech. I'd tell him and he'd hug me so tight that I'd have to say he was hurting me. We'd laugh and after collecting Kayleigh from her playdate, we'd sit as a family and watch a movie.

I'd tell Em at Lizzie's house party. We'd laugh and cry, and we'd talk about all the silly things we'd done. We'd do shots and some hot guy would ask me to dance. We'd go out to the porch and stand next to the heater, watching the stars and the full moon – kissing and holding hands.

That's how I pictured it.

Now, that picture was fading before my eyes.

* * *

Later that evening, dad must have got a call from the hospital. Mum was lying in a bed and her finger had been sewn back on. I wanted to be sick every time I looked at it but I couldn't tell her that. I couldn't spend too much time in the room with her either. She was uncharacteristically quiet. That scared me more than anything. If she'd shouted at me, I could have dealt with it but the

silence; the silence killed me. She must have known that was the best way to hurt me too.

When dad burst into the room, I was flicking through a festive edition of *The Star* which featured oiled-up men in Santa hats and red thongs. Christmas might have passed but with those sexy Santas, every day was Christmas. He rushed to her side, a bunch of red carnations in one hand. I raised my eyebrows, thinking *and it's a stereotype for gays to be melodramatic*. Fair enough if she had a heart attack, but she lost a finger, and she didn't even lose it because they stitched it right back on like Gran had done with a button on my teddy bear when I was three.

'Are you OK? Are you both OK?' he asked, his eyes trained firmly on mum.

Mum motioned for dad to lean in close and I could tell then that she was going to tell him. I rubbed my sweaty palms against my jeans. I was excited because dad would understand where mum didn't. I saw her lips move and I noticed dad's jugular vein throb with excitement. He ran across the room and I threw my arms wide for a hug. I never thought dad to be the hugging type. A fist came at me hard and fast.

'How could you?' he shouted. My head rocked back and hit the glass window. I tried to concentrate on my surroundings. I counted five stars. Hands grasped me by the lapels of my leather jacket and launched me across the room.

'RICHARD!'

I heard thundering footsteps. Two nurses burst into the room. The nurses tackled dad as he lunged at me. I wasn't confident they

could keep dad down though. Dad was a weapon when he wanted something and in that moment, he had an I-really-want-to-beat-the-crap-out-of-you look in his eyes. For the second time that day, I could taste tears on my tongue.

I watched as mum reached new levels of hysteria and dad exploded and I experienced my worst fear – fear of snakes – times a hundred.

'You disgust me!' His voice rang out as security arrived and dragged him down the corridor. I sat huddled in the corner, doctors examining my head and asking if I was OK. Mum asked if she could have a moment with me. The medical staff obliged but they didn't go very far and there was now a security guard stationed outside, as if I had a whole collection of crazy, messed-up relatives waiting with crowbars in the car park to beat the shit out of me.

I couldn't move. I just sat there like I was fused to the clinically white linoleum floor, the bag of ice the nurses gave me pressed tightly to my bruised eye. I could feel mum watching me but I wouldn't look up.

'Cal.' That word stirred something in me. I jumped to my feet clumsily, sprinting for the door. 'Cal, wait!' I ran and I ran, but I stopped at a door. I stepped into the cleaner's cupboard and sat in the corner, sobbing into a dirty, blackened rag. No one followed me. Maybe they realised what a mess I was. Maybe they didn't know what to say to a kid whose dad just gave him a black eye. I stared at the chemical cleaners and bedpans. Someone probably should have locked the door. I gave myself ten

minutes to calm down. I drew my hood over my head and slipped into the corridor. I made it to the lift. A nurse spotted me and frantically gestured for me to stop, but the door had already closed. There were only two women in the lift; a middle-aged woman who shrunk in on herself and the other, who must have been born when dinosaurs roamed the Earth. I knew they wouldn't give me any trouble. I admired the older lady's black, thigh-high boots.

The cheesy elevator music filled the silence. The woman turned her head towards me. Click. Click. The sounds of her last two vertebrate shattering. 'Are you that Justin Believer?'

The door pinged open. I fumbled in my pocket for my phone, trying to distract myself. My fingers closed around slick plastic. I removed it from my pocket, eyeing the single square of chocolate that had melted into the wrapper. I glanced around me before licking the chocolate from it.

I arrived at our flat on autopilot. I felt the void.

No Mum.

No Dad.

No Kayleigh.