

## **Garden Party in August.**

The flowers were blooming, wildly and colourful, like some paradisaic meadows. Wide green grassland was overtowered by grand trees that offered some semblance of shadowy shelter from the burning sun. I heard bees buzzing over the bright flowers – tulips, roses, cornflowers –, some birds singing on the roofs of the trees, and the sweet, fresh smell of flowers and greenness filled my nostrils.

Saoirse was pulling me along, arm tucked into her arm, eyes on her friends who were sitting on a half-shadowy, half-sunny part of the grassland. As we got closer, Cael's eyes fell on us, and he jumped up to envelop Saoirse (who let my arm go in consequence – I missed the warmness of her skin on mine) in a tight hug.

“Hey, Sloane.” Cael greeted me with a warm smile over Saoirse's shoulder.

I smiled back, waving shortly at him.

Saoirse pulled out of the hug, grinning at her friend, and patting his shoulder.

“Afternoon, Cael.” She said. “We brought lemonade.” And she pointed at the basket I was holding. “To counteract the alcohol the lot of you bought. Don't think I didn't see the photo you sent in the chat.”

Cael blushed, but the corners of his mouth pulled up into a smile. “Don't tell my dad.” He said. “You know how he is about alcohol. Doesn't matter if I'm sixteen or twenty-six, the lecture stays the same.”

“I won't, mate.” Saoirse promised, before walking over to the rest of her friends, greeting them with wide smiles and charming remarks.

*I haven't seen you in forever. I missed you, Alice.*

*How have you been, Michael? The new hair looks great.*

*Diane, how are you doing? You look lovely. The new job's suiting you?*

“Shall I take that?” Cael asked, gesturing to the basket that I was holding tightly.

“Oh.” I looked down at it. “Yes. You know where to put it, I hope.”

Cael smiled and took it from me. “Yes. It's nice that you came with Saoirse, by the way. She's always talking about you when you're not here. How have you been?”

It took me a minute to digest the information, then I put on a bright smile that I had learned to copy from Saoirse's authentic one and answered breezily: “I've been good, thanks! And thank you so much for letting me join you.”

I felt pretty sure of the easy-going face that I was putting on although my stomach and mind were in turmoil upon spending the evening with Saoirse's friends. They were such a tightly woven group of friends that knew each other since school years that I usually felt like an

intruder in their midst.

“Yeah, sure. You’re always welcome.” Cael put down the basket next to some crates of beer and a table with a buffet of picnic food – noodle salad, potato salads, bread, and meatballs.

“Tell me, though, what is it that you’re doing? Because Saoirse always says that you have to work when we meet.”

Now it was on me to blush because the excuse to have ‘work’ when Saoirse got ready for their Tuesday evening pub meet left my lips too easily recently and wasn’t true. Saoirse accepted it with a shrug and a bright ‘How unfortunate!’ before throwing me some air kisses and breezing out of the apartment, and it had always surprised me how easily she accepted something that wasn’t really situated in the realms of logic because I *never* worked past 6 PM. And Saoirse usually didn’t come home until 12 PM. But considering that it suited me, I never questioned her easy acceptance of the fact. Cael, though, seemed more interested in questioning it.

Still, I smiled and didn’t lie. “I work in a shop. Full-time and all.”

Cael just nodded, a thoughtful look glossing over his face. “Where exactly?” He asked, and before I could answer, he added: “My brother works in one here too. And there aren’t *that* many shops around here. A common problem in small villages. So dull.” He added with a grin.

“The one at High Street. Ms. Doyle’s shop.” I answered, curiously observing how Cael’s eyes lit up.

“Do you know Liam? I mean you must.”

I feel my lips edging up, a real smile coming over me. “Liam, yes! I know him. He’s fun!”

Cael laughed and in the gleam in his eyes and the row of white teeth showing, the shaking of his shoulders, and the bright laughter, I saw the similarity to Liam, my always-joking, good-natured co-worker.

“Yes, he has that effect on people. Always fun.” He said.

“There you are, Sloane!” Saoirse appeared on my side again and slung her arm around my shoulder. “What’cha talking ‘bout?”

“We were talking about Cael’s brother.” I informed her, putting an arm around her waist to steady our –a bit unbalanced – position.

“Oh, Liam! How is he?” Saoirse asked cheerfully.

“He’s great.” Cael answered. “Do you want something to drink?”

“A coke, thank you so much!” I said to him cheerfully, channeling my inner Saoirse, however deeply hidden my light-heartedness actually was. In human interactions, I found that it was

easier to imitate Saoirse's easiness and just-don't-care attitude instead of my obvious and innate awkwardness. There is an age where it isn't charming anymore.

"For me too, mate." Saoirse grinned. "You're a dear."

I turned to her – a harder task when our torso and arms were as interwoven as they were.

"Liam's actually my co-worker in the shop." I told her.

"That's funny!" Saoirse crunched up her nose while smiling widely. "I haven't seen Liam in ages, Cael, I thought he moved away."

"No." Cael handed us our cokes. "He's still living here."

"And you know him?" Saoirse turned her eyes to me, and I nodded.

"Yeah, we're actually pretty good" –I hesitated to find the right word, and for lack of a better word – "friends." I nodded uncertainly. "Working with him is fun. He has great charisma." I said, directed more at his brother who agreed with a laugh.

Saoirse chuckled into my ear, and I tightened my hold on her because she was swaying with an ABBA song that was playing on Bluetooth and didn't quite seem to care that her complete hold on not falling down was on me. I didn't mind it; I actually enjoyed the closeness to her. I could smell the flowery perfume she had put on before we left, and the small crumbles of her old mascara on her lower eyelashes, almost invisible under her long lashes. Saoirse grinned up at me.

Sometime later, I was sitting on the grass, leaning back on my hands, observing Saoirse's friends moving to the music and laughing together. The sun had sunken already behind the trees and the flowers had closed their petals, leaving the bees buzzing away. Alternately, there were Queen songs, ABBA songs, and current pop songs playing. The coolness of a summer evening lay heavy in the air, I felt the absence of the sun with every goosebump on my bare arms. Saoirse was somewhere out in the darkness that was only scarcely illuminated by some fairy lights. Before leaving me sitting here, she had asked me if I was good. Hand on my shoulder, cheerful smile on her lips, eyes so very focused on me, I only managed to smile and nod before she breezed away with a wave of her hand.

I laid back on the cold grass, my whole body pressed to the ground and I saw the night sky, many stars, and some planes up there. If I wasn't wrong (which was very possible), there was Jupiter or maybe Mars or Venus, but surely it was a planet – too bright and big to only be a star. It had been forever since I looked up at the stars, but I found that I missed the light-headedness that came with looking up at the endless darkness that was broken by the cold far-away light of stars. The universe, the galaxies, the endless possibilities that lay out there and brought the much-needed distance from human's artificial world. It was easier to breathe

when the distance was greater. When I closed my eyes, I could imagine standing on a rock in space and looking down at the blue planet just floating – far, far away from me. It was even pretty from here. Humans seemed sweet from up here – antlike creatures with quaint habits. “You wanna dance?” The bright voice sounded above me, pulling me out of my imagination. I opened my eyes and sat up, supporting myself on my hands and blinking at Saoirse who was standing in the fairy light, open red hair cascading down to her shoulders, eyes mirroring the light.

“Sorry?” I blinked at her and brushed off the remnants of grass from my back.

“I asked if you want to dance, Sloane.” Saoirse smiled at me, friendly and hopeful as far as I could decipher her curious expression.

“Oh, no.” I quickly opposed it. “I can’t dance.”

“Oh, dear.” Saoirse laughed carefreely. “It’s dark. No one will see you dancing. And anyway, no one cares. Safe space, you know.”

I squirmed uncomfortably. “I really don’t like dancing, Saoirse. Sorry.”

“But I want to dance with you.” Saoirse said, sounding crestfallen. Her eyes were looking at me intently, her shoulders slumped, face moved into an adorable, sincere pout. I frowned at the display of unhappiness. She seemed genuinely crushed that she wouldn’t dance with me.

“Really?” I asked. Saoirse nodded. “You know what then? I’ll dance with you. I’d be happy to. You’re leading, though, because I really *really* can’t dance.”

Saoirse brightened up and offered me her hand to pull me up from the ground. I smiled a thank you.

“Surely, you can’t be such a bad dancer.” She remarked, encasing my hand with hers and pulling me closer to her with her other hand on my waist. I imitated her position with a slight alteration and followed her lead in swaying to the melody. It was a quiet song, a melancholic melody. Saoirse was humming along, a soft, comforting murmur.

“I am already sorry for your toes.” I told her quickly. Saoirse chuckled, her hold on my waist getting tighter.

“They’ll be fine.” She told me. “They have been through worse in school, I can tell you. Did you enjoy the night sky?”

“I did.” I said surprised. “It’s beautiful. I don’t look up to it often enough, to be honest. I can just imagine all the planets and adventures out there. The beauty of those unknown planets and just the sheer endlessness of space, darkness and all – I’m sorry, too much of that, hm?” I smiled at her yawn.

“Oh, God!” Saoirse exclaimed, her other hand falling on my shoulder and gripping it tightly –

it didn't hurt, only felt like a comforting constant. "No. I didn't mean you. I'm just tired. I had to get up too early today and now I'm getting tired – Sorry, that wasn't directed at you. Talk more, please. I enjoy your voice." She hid another yawn by turning her face into the darkness and not letting go of me.

I chuckled, feeling my cheeks reddening like Snow-White's apples. Lightly swaying with Saoirse in the almost dark, to a soft song, with all the stars shining above us, and her closeness to me, warm skin on warm skin.

"All right. I'll talk some more." And I talked while she listened, eyes closed, almost in a trance of some kind. It was magical, like fairies cast a spell over this evening. I wanted to lock it in a jar, close the lid and keep it forever near my heart (a memory like a warming flame for colder times.)