



Always on My Mind

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Category: Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: Tessa Gallagher knows who her soulmate is. She went to a past life regressionist to find out. Unfortunately, it's her ex-girlfriend. The same ex who wasn't ready to come out after a year together. Now, they don't even live in the same city. Tessa has to move on. But she can't seem to forget.

Jamie Hupp is back in London. She's come back after three years to play for the newly promoted Stanmore FC women's team. She left after Tessa broke her heart, but when a coach made things uncomfortable for her, Jamie found her way back home. And back to Tessa.

After all these years, Jamie should be able to stand up to her perfectionist father, who controls her footballing career and her public image. He certainly doesn't want her to be the stereotype of a gay woman athlete. But if Jamie wants another shot with Tessa, she'll have to confront him or risk losing the love of her life.

Despite knowledge of their deeper connection, Tessa is slow to trust that Jamie will get there. Jamie was the one who ran away in their past lives, after all. And Tessa remembers the hurt. She knows she can't love Jamie out of being afraid.

Can they find a way to be together? Or will they have to wait for the next lifetime?

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Prologue

“What brings you in today, Tessa?”

Tessa eyed the woman with a quirked brow. This room wasn't right—there were no bohemian tapestries, no crystal balls, no lingering smell of incense. The house smelled of lemon furniture polish. This woman didn't look the part either. Tessa braced herself for a turban, perhaps, and rings on every finger with bangles that jingled around her wrists. But no, this woman, Lila, donned a crisp white button down and mum jeans with penny loafers. Her brown hair, streaked with some gray, hung in a plait over her shoulder with a ribbon tying it off. Her only eccentricity was a pair of large glasses with a whimsical floral pattern on the frames. All of it was friendly enough.

“You don't look like a psychic,” Tessa said.

“That's because I'm not a psychic.” Lila's mouth turned up into an amused smile.

“I'm a past life regressionist.”

“And the difference is?”

“The difference is in where we look. Psychics, in whichever practice, be it tarot or palm or what have you, most of them are looking into your future. Usually to help you with a decision, or give you comfort about what's coming. I'm here to help you uncover your past. Which unfortunately, you can do nothing about. Though it can help you understand yourself.”

Tessa let that percolate, still unsure if she was doing the right thing. But after seeing not one, but two friends find their soulmates from a past life, she had questions of her own.

“How does it work?” she asked.

“Have a seat, and I’ll explain everything,” Lila replied, gesturing to the plush gray couch against the back wall of her pristine sitting room.

Tessa hardly realized she was still standing. She took a hesitant step, wondering if she should drop this whole thing. She had Jamie in mind when she booked this appointment and. . . it hadn’t worked out for them. For good reasons. Did it really matter if she found out they’d known each other in a past life? What difference would it make? Inexplicably, she took a seat on the couch.

She glanced around at the family photos placed sparsely throughout the surfaces of the room—a couple on the wall, one on the mantel, two on the end table. Otherwise the room was all whites and beiges.

“I never thought a psychic would be such a minimalist.”

“Again, not a psychic,” Lila said, and sat in a brown leather chair that was catty-cornered to the sofa. She crossed her legs and folded her hands into her lap. “Now, why don’t you tell me what brings you here today?”

“Well. . . my friends have recently had some. . . past life experiences,” Tessa began, being intentionally vague, but Lila only nodded. “And it’s made me curious about my own.”

“I see,” Lila said. “Did they see someone about their experiences?”

“No, they just sort of. . . revealed themselves to them. Through objects and shit. I mean—stuff. Sorry.”

Lila shot her another amused grin. “No need to apologize. It’s best if you are your most authentic self in this space.”

“Oh, thank fuck,” Tessa sighed, and let her shoulders drop.

“That’s more like it. Now, my next question. Have you ever had a past life experience before?”

Tessa pondered that. She remembered Billie telling her about dreams and visions she had when she met Ethan, her now-husband. And as mad as Tessa found it at the time, she could relate. She just hadn’t known anything like that since Jamie.

She cleared her throat. “I think so? Not knowing if they were real made me squash down anything.” She paused for a beat. “Plus, I’m Catholic. If my ma knew I was eventhinkingabout seeing a psychic, she’d fucking wipe me out.”

“Still not a psychic, but I think I get the general idea,” Lila said. “You’d had suspicions, but ignored them because of your upbringing. You weren’t compelled to explore in earnest until you saw what happened with your friends. Is that correct?”

Tessa swallowed. “Aye, I’d say that’s the truth of it.”

“Excellent, let’s begin.”

She had Tessa lie down on the couch and close her eyes.

“Now, Tessa, I want you to take several deep breaths,” Lila instructed in a dreamy voice. The kind used by yoga instructors and dishonest gynecologists. “In through

your nose, out through your mouth. And with each exhale, let your muscles relax. Let your body sink into the cushions, whilst your mind sinks into the farthest reaches of your soul. Forget any troubles you have in this life and allow your past to come forward. Whatever you see, let it form. Recognize the things around you. . . ”

Tessa let her body go leaden as the brightness of Lila’s lamps disappeared behind her eyelids. Her vision grew darker and darker. Lila’s voice faded in her ears. Replaced by the sound of. . . waves?

She opened her eyes and glanced around. It was still dark except for the moonlight above and the lanterns hanging here and there. The salty smell of the sea wafted up from below her, and Tessa gazed out at the immense, inky black of the ocean. She took a step, and realized she stood on the wooden deck of a ship, which rocked beneath her feet. She was also in a dress unlike anything she’d ever worn before, most notably the long skirt and corset.

“Verity!”

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She turned her head and saw the familiar face. Angular jaw; rounded, mousy nose; and even in the blinking starlight, the unmistakable blue eyes. Her brown hair was plaited and strewn over one shoulder. She wore a gown, with a slew of petticoats giving the illusion of much wider hips than she had, and much more expensive than the attire of her counterpart.

“Abigail.” Tessa felt her mouth move and heard her own voice, but didn’t recognize the name. She didn’t question it, though.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” Jamie/Abigail said. “But I thought one of the watchmen spotted me, so I hid myself away until I was certain he was gone.”

“It’s alright, you’re here now.” They clasped hands. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Of course. If we made it to Jamestown, there would be no way for us to—”

The ship groaned as it crested over a wave, and the women clung to each other as it righted itself. Abigail held Verity’s gaze firmly.

“The men have bought and paid for us to be their wives. There would be no way for us to be together.” She reached up and cupped Verity’s cheek. “I would rather depart this world together than face a lifetime apart.”

Verity blinked. A tear rolled down her cheek, but Abigail wiped it away. Hands firmly together, they stepped up to the side of the ship, climbing to stand on the edge. When it lurched again, they held onto a rope hanging above them from the mast.

Abigail squeezed her hand.

“One last kiss?” she asked.

Verity yanked her in and captured her lips, swaying to keep their balance as the ocean breeze whipped around their skirts.

“I love you,” Verity whispered.

Abigail replied with a watery smile.

With one final nod, they stepped off together and plunged into the abyss.

“Tessa?”

Lila’s voice sounded as if it was coming from across a football pitch. Tessa couldn’t find her voice with the goose egg-sized lump in her throat.

“Tessa, I see some turmoil on your face. We can stop here, or we can continue after a moment.”

“I’m alright,” Tessa croaked out, without opening her eyes. “I want to go on.” After a beat, she asked, “Am I meant to be telling you everything I see?”

“Only if you’re comfortable. I’m just here to guide you.” Lila cleared her throat. “Take a few more deep breaths for me and let the images come forward again. Allow them to be familiar. Allow yourself to step back in time. . . .”

Tessa let out a long exhale as she walked through the hallway of a mansion. The place was eerily quiet as she made her way downstairs. In the foyer beneath the grand chandelier, the other servants were gathered, heads together and speaking hushed

voices. The housekeeper, Mrs. Posner, whirled around at the sound of approaching steps.

“Aisling!” she cried, eyes on Tessa. “I thought for sure they would take you with them!”

Aisling/Tessa’s brow furrowed. “What?”

“The family’s gone,” one of the footmen chimed in. “Took off this morning with nothing but a few trunks.”

Her heart dropped to her knees. She stepped back and clutched onto the railing to stay upright, images of Kitty and their time together surging to the front of her mind. That sweet, perfect smile, sparkling blue eyes, her soft brown hair that Aisling never minded being in her face when she held her at night.

“It. . . it can’t be. . .” she said shakily. “She—I mean, they wouldn’t!”

Mrs. Posner shook her head. “The master knew the Revolution was coming this way, but I never believed they would abandon us all.”

“Even the governess,” the footman said with a disdainful nod in Aisling’s direction, but she wasn’t paying attention.

It wasn’t possible. Kitty had spoken words of love. They were planning to head out west, or to Mexico if they could make it. Anything to escape the fighting between the colonies and the English and find their peace together. Aisling turned, lifted her skirts, and fled back up the stairs, heading for the mistress’s bedroom.

She burst through the door and caught her breath, searching wildly around for any sign that Kitty had stayed behind. But all the evidence proved what the others were

saying. Haphazardly open dresser drawers with garments hanging out. The jewelry on the vanity was gone, appearing to be swiped off by the looks of what was left behind. Aisling put her hand to the unmade bed, and she found it cool. It had been empty for hours.

Tears stung her eyes. As she was about to leave, she spotted it. There on the mantel, pressed between two books, was an envelope.

She flew over and plucked it out. Her name was on the front in Kitty's neat script. She tore it open and yanked out the parchment inside. It didn't say much.

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Aisling, I'm sorry. Arthur thought, with the growing rumblings of revolution, it would be better for us to return to England as a family. I have left some money for you in my shoe, the third pair on the left in my closet. I hope you will make a life for yourself. I know this must be difficult, but you must understand. There's no place for us. Not really. Maybe, if we lived in a slightly more tolerant world, we could do as we wished. But it isn't to be. I shall always remember you and our time together.
–Kitty

Aisling crumpled the paper into her fist, trembling with the raw hurt of it. Money? That's all Kitty could offer for breaking her heart? For abandoning her a continent away with no warning? With war on the horizon to boot?

She sank to the floor and wept.

Tessa stirred out of the scene, hot moisture building up behind her eyelids. But still, she did not open them. She brought herself back to Lila's couch and resumed her deep breathing.

“Very good, Tessa,” Lila said. She sounded closer now. “We can also stop here, or—”

“There's more,” Tessa cut across her. “I can feel it.”

“We'll carry on, then.”

Tessa hardly needed prompting. She slipped back into her mind, and this time, was walking through a hospital ward. Young men in dirt soaked uniforms were carried in

on stretchers, their wide, flat helmets cast aside. Their cries for help, for something to ease the pain, tugged at her heart, but she was on a mission. She assured them they were doing all they could. Down the row of cots, she spotted the fellow nurse she was seeking out. Fresh blood stained the white apron over her gray dress, the crimson a much deeper shade than the redcrosses on their uniforms. She was tying up a bandage as the soldier she worked on slept. When she looked up, her bright blue eyes widened.

“Rosie!”

“Dinah.”

She came around the bed and wiped her hands on her apron. “I . . . I assume you heard the news.”

Rosie’s expression must have betrayed the fury inside her. She folded her arms over her chest. “Imagine my surprise hearing it from him.”

Dinah cut her gaze to the floor, and Rosie appreciated she at least had the decency to be ashamed. She glanced nervously around before taking Rosie’s hand and leading her to the nearest supply closet. After ensuring they weren’t followed, she shut the door.

“I’m sorry,” she said with a sigh, removing her nurse’s cap, revealing her dark brown hair, plaited and pinned up around her head.

“How could you?” Rosie snapped. “You don’t love him.”

“Few marriages are based on love,” Dinah said. “And there is no marriage that can exist between us.”

Rosie took her hand. “Things are changing, Dinah. Women are more independent than ever. When the war is over, we could even get the vote. It’s changing.”

Dinah shook her head, pulling her hand away. “They won’t change that much. And Roger is a good man. I’ll want for nothing.”

“Except what matters.”

Dinah blinked away the mist in her eyes. “I’m sorry, Rosie. I wish I was braver. But I’m scared. Of what people might think, of what might become of us. All of it.”

“So, that’s it, then?” Rosie shot back. “You’ll settle for the safest life?”

“And you would be wise to do the same,” Dinah replied. “I’m sorry, Rosie. But it’s the best for both of us.”

“You’re a coward.”

Dinah sighed and reached for Rosie’s hand again, but she jerked it away. “When the Great War is over, go home to Ireland, Rosie. And forget me.”

Rosie speared her with a scowl. “I can never forget.”

“I . . .” Dinah trailed off, biting her lip as her eyes welled up. She dug into her pocket and retrieved the Emily Dickinson book Rosie had gifted her. “Here. You must want this back.”

“No, I think you should keep it. That way you can never forget either.”

Heart in pieces, she turned and stormed out of the supply closet, leaving Dinah stricken where she stood.

Finally, Tessa opened her eyes. Fixing her gaze on the ceiling, she reminded herself that she was in London, in a posh row house, in the year 2024. She blinked a few times and shook her head, muttering a few select swear words.

“I was supposed to ease you back from all that, but I suppose this is fine,” Lila said.
“How are you feeling?”

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“Christ, I feel sick,” Tessa answered, putting a hand to her racing heart.

“Please mind the carpets if there’s to be any retching.”

“Fuck off, Lila, I’ve just seen three lifetimes.”

“Let me fetch you some water.”

“That’ll be grand.”

Lila departed. Slowly, Tessa forced herself upright. Her shirt clung to her back, damp with sweat, and her hair stuck to her neck. She didn’t know why she was surprised. She had rather expected her results. She just didn’t realize she was the one getting hurt in all of them. That same face, over and over, tearing her heart out each time they found each other.

Lila returned with the water, and Tessa thanked her before allowing it to cool her down. It slid down her throat, and ran through her body, easing the pain of it.

“Better?” Lila asked.

“You don’t have to worry about cleaning up boke.”

“Fantastic.”

She took the glass back to the kitchen, and when she reappeared, she gazed at Tessa with curious eyes. “So. . . did you see anything interesting?”

“Aye, I suppose. . . there were things I expected and things I didn’t.”

“Were there any constants?” she asked. “That is, was there anyone or anything that appeared in all three?”

Tessa nodded slowly. “Aye.”

“Anything you want to share?”

Tessa shook her head. “No, sorry.”

Lila shrugged. “No worries. But now that our session is over, that’ll be seventy pounds.”

“Seventy—” Tessa gasped. “Christ, but the rate for psychics has gone up.”

“Not a psychic,” Lila said, and held out her hand.

Tessa fished into her purse, counted out the bills, and handed them over. As she stepped back out onto the streets, she still had one face in her mind—Jamie.

Chapter 1

Jamie’s stomach dropped, and not because of the rocking of the car as they stopped and started through London traffic. Each time she peered out at the city, she remembered when she left, and the heartbreak that followed her.

It didn’t matter that it had been three years. The memory of Tessa sent a pang right through Jamie’s chest, so sharp and so cold, it took her breath away. It might as well have been a day ago. The hurt was still that fresh. She wondered if Tessa hurt too, or if she had moved on like she said she would. Jamie saw on social media that Tessa’s

best friend and flatmate, Billie Axton, had married Chelsea striker Ethan Knight. Had Tessa also found someone to settle down with? Someone who could give her what Jamie never did?

She shook her head. It was too painful to think about.

“We’re here, Miss Hupp.”

Jamie looked up at the sound of her driver’s voice and forced her gaze back out the window. The Hive loomed large over the sidewalk. Home of the Stanmore FC Wasps, and Jamie’s newclub as soon as she signed the papers awaiting her inside. Her ticket away from everything she was running from. And the one thing she was running toward. She climbed out of the car with a sigh.

The signing passed in a blur, and before she knew it, she was in the press room. Camera flashes blinded her. Journalists swarmed in like vultures on fresh roadkill. She could already hear the ringing in her ears that came with facing the press. Especially now, when they were going to ask her all the questions she had been carefully avoiding all summer. She should have prepared; she couldn’t run forever, after all. Even a football pitch ran out of grass, eventually.

The first journalist stood up—a young brunette chap who fiddled with his press pass before meeting Jamie’s eye.

“Ben Fergusho, London Pursuit,” he said.

Jamie’s heart skipped a beat. That was the paper where Tessa worked. She could practically hear Tessa saying it that day they met, when she was briefly filling in for the sports reporter. Her thick Northern Irish accent took Jamie by surprise. Almost as much as her lack of fear behind her sweet brown eyes, despite being in a beat she had never covered before while in a room full of seasoned sports reporters. She was five

foot four of pure courage. Nothing seemed to scare Tessa. And though Jamie had three inches on her, that amount of bravery often made Jamie feel small.

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After that fateful press conference, Tessa sought Jamie out in the parking lot to ask a few follow-up questions. One of which included an invitation for a drink, and the rest was history. They had a whole year of bliss, of finding a home in one another, before Jamie fell back on her fears, and Tessa had enough. Jamie lost the only real relationship she'd ever had, the only woman she'd ever loved.

In her reminiscing, Jamie realized poor Ben had asked her a question, and was looking at her with an expectant stare. She cleared her throat. "Sorry, didn't catch that."

"I said, are you ready to give a reason for leaving Manchester City before your contract was up?"

"Oh, um. . ." she trailed off, trying to rid her mind of memories of Tessa in order to come up with a lie. "It's nothing personal. I had a great run at City. But I was ready for something different. A challenge."

"Is that why you went to Stanmore instead of returning to Arsenal?"

"Yes, partly. Arsenal will always be close to my heart, but they didn't ask me to return. And as I said, I wanted something different."

"And what does your father think of that choice?"

She took a moment to quiet her racing heart. She knew the question was coming. Her father, the Arsenal legend, had been her biggest cheerleader the whole time she was with the club. He was also her harshest critic. From the time she was a child, he was

harder on her than she was on herself. Eventually, her inner voice was not her own—it was Dexter Hupp, shouting at her to run faster, pass better, shoot sooner.

She swallowed, fighting the dryness in her throat. “You know. . . we haven’t spoken much about it. I’m sure he’s. . . disappointed that I’m with a London club that’s not the Gunners, but I’m sure he’ll understand. Football is a business, after all.”

Another journalist stood up, older than Ben, with gray throughout his ponytail and horn-rimmed glasses that he slid up his nose as he got to his feet. Jamie knew who he was before he said it. “Myles Dantana, Dantana Sports Report.”

Jamie resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Fucking Myles. He constantly criticized women’s football, but instead of focusing on the men, he brought up women’s sports for the sole purpose of dragging the athletes through the mud. Which he didn’t have to do since he worked for himself. No one was forcing him to cover it. He once said on his podcast that Jamie “rode the coattails of her father’s success and maintained relevance by having a great arse.” Her father called her fuming and demanded she wear looser shorts on the pitch.

“D’you think if Arsenal knew you were going to ditch Man City, they might have reached out? Or perhaps they’re still sore about your premature departure from them as well?”

She steeled herself, rolling her shoulders back. “My contract with Arsenal was already up, so I didn’t leave them prematurely. If they needed midfielders, they might have shown some interest, but as we all know, they have a strong line up as is.”

He opened his mouth to ask another question, but thankfully, another reporter got to her feet. Jamie could turn her head and ignore him. This reporter was another Jamie was familiar with, so she addressed her by name.

“Yes, Judy?” she asked.

Judy smiled. “You’ve made a career playing for clubs with winning records. And you’ve made a name for yourself internationally each time you’ve been called up for England. I suppose the question on everyone’s mind is—why Stanmore? They’re newly promoted with a team that analysts are already predicting will be relegated again at the end of the season. What draws you to that story?”

Jamie knew she couldn’t say, “That club puts me closer to my ex-girlfriend, and I’d move heaven and earth to get a glimpse of her, especially now.” So she took another deep breath.

“I . . .” she trailed off. “I suppose every athlete questions their own success. There’s this nagging feeling when you’re with a winning club that makes you wonder—is it me? Am I actually good? Or am I just part of a group that’s good enough to carry me? Stanmore are back in the WSL for the first time in ages. And while I know that I can’t bring them up myself—it’s a team effort—I want to know if I’m good no matter where my club sits on the table.” She paused for a beat. “And maybe. . . all together, we can find out if we’re great.”

Judy raised an eyebrow, a hint of a smile turning the corners of her mouth up. Then she scribbled down the rest of the quote.

“Jamie—” Myles began, but she cut him off.

“No more questions. See you all on the pitch.”

Jamie walked home, needing to work off the press room. She’d found a new row house, closer to the Hive, that would suit her needs for now. She came around the corner and spotted a figure sitting on her front steps. She halted. The figure rose, and she recognized the silhouette immediately.

“Dad?”

Dexter Hupp turned his dark head and speared Jamie with an icy glare that turned her stomach. She gulped, but proceeded onward. There was no avoiding him now.

“What the fuck, Jamie?” he barked. “Stanmore? When you might have gone to any of the top clubs?”

She bit back a sigh and climbed the stairs to open the door. Inside, her bags had been carefully placed. Her father followed her over the threshold, slamming the door behind him. She knew better than to flinch these days. She went to the kitchen, desperate for some water, but remembered it hadn’t been stocked yet. She would have to face him unhydrated.

“I’m sorry,” she said quickly, turning around, but keeping her gaze toward the floor. Meeting her father’s furious eyes—deep blue eyes that she inherited from him—would only make her legs wobbly. “I should have told you about my plans, but I didn’t think you’d understand.”

“You’ve got that right,” he shot back. “Why d’you want to leave City in the first place, huh? You’ve been brilliant there. I thought you liked it.”

“I did! I just. . .” she trailed off. How could she explain? It wasn’t something her father would understand. Every time she thought of that club now, the memories of what happened there made her skin crawl. “I don’t think their style suited me.”

“Is that a fucking joke?”

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“Dad, I—”

“Seriously, Jamie,” he cut across her. “What’s going on?”

He folded his arms over his barrel-like chest, a thin-lipped frown on his face. She searched him for an ounce of sympathy, but found none. A question of her own came to her.

“Hold on. How’d you get my new address?” she wondered.

“From your agent,” he said with a shrug. “Never thought I’d beat you here, considering I found out about the move from said agent instead of my own daughter.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, meeker this time.

“Best start explaining yourself, then.”

She picked at her cuticles, searching for the right words. “Did you see the press conference?”

“Not yet.”

“It’s in there. I’m feeling. . . like I’m not sure if I’m good or if I’m just part of a club that’s successful because of everyone around me.”

“So. . . you’re joining a shitty club to prove yourself?”

“They’re not a shitty club, Dad—”

“Sure they are. They haven’t been in the WSL in a decade.”

“They’re back in now. That has to count for something.” She paused for a beat. “And. . . I think I was ready to come home.”

He heaved a sigh and relaxed his shoulders, letting his arms fall back to his sides. “I’m still confused. Three years ago, you said you needed to get out of London. So you turn down Arsenal’s offer to keep you and take less money to join Man City. Now, you say you want to be home? Why not go back to Arsenal?”

“They didn’t make me an offer.”

“Chelsea did. You turned them down.”

She held back a huff and inwardly cursed her agent for agreeing to run everything by her father. “That goes back to the other thing. Y’know. . . seeing if I’m good.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Is this a. . .” He gestured vaguely in front of her. “A lady thing?”

“Dad!” she cried, her face burning.

“I don’t know how else to explain all this! You keep changing your mind about everything!”

“That doesn’t mean it’s lady stuff!”

“Are you pregnant?” he asked, the color suddenly draining from his face. “Fucking hell, Jamie, if you’ve gotten yourself—”

“I’m not pregnant!” she interrupted. “I swear!”

“Good,” he said, jutting out his chin. “Have you got a boyfriend here or something?”

“Seriously?” She rolled her eyes. “I’d never switch clubs for a man.”

It wasn’t technically a lie, so she didn’t feel too bad about saying it. Truth was, she missed Tessa. And it took the actions of a man to show her how much.

“Right, well. . . that’s good too. You don’t need any distractions.”

“Men have never been a distraction for me, Dad.”

“Good.”

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The air grew thick between them.

“I got you a therapist,” he said, almost to himself.

Jamie’s eyes went wide. “What?”

“I didn’t know what else to do!”

“Dad!”

“You’re acting so erratically! And while I don’t necessarily believe in therapy, at this point, I reckon it can’t hurt!”

“Are you joking? I made one decision you don’t agree with and you think I must be pregnant or having a nervous breakdown?”

“I don’t know what’s going on, Jamie. But whatever it is, it must be worked out. By signing with Stanmore, your career’s taken a hit. If speaking to someone will help, I think it’ll get you back on track for a better club.”

“I didn’t ~~task~~to speak to someone! And my career’s doing fine!”

“For now!” he bellowed, loud enough that she flinched this time. Doors she could predict, but she never knew when he would start yelling. “Actions have consequences, Jamie! And I’ve had enough of your back chat!” She shrank back as he inhaled. “Now, I’m going to get the footage from today’s press conference, and I’ll call you later to discuss it. Unless, of course, you intend on ignoring my calls

again. Is that the case?"

Her shoulders sank. "No, sir."

"Good. Your first appointment is on Thursday. I'll speak to you later."

He gave her no time to respond before he turned and stormed out. He slammed the door behind him and Jamie squeezed her eyes shut. Quiet settled back over the house and she sank into a dining chair. Tears pricked her eyes, and she blinked them back. For the rest of the evening, she asked herself if she'd made a huge mistake.

Chapter 2

Tessa scratched off another name with a sigh, red ink sinking into the paper in front of her.

"It's no use, Billie," she said, holding her phone between her cheek and her shoulder.

"I'm never gonna find a flatmate at this rate."

"It can't be that bad," her former flatmate but reigning best friend replied. "This is London. Thousands of people move here every day. Surely someone is suitable to live with."

"I'm telling you, there's no one."

"What about that Scottish bloke?"

"He's a bagpiper, Bills. How's anyone supposed to live with a professional bagpiper?"

"Okay, fair enough. Have you got any other interviews lined up?"

“Ten.”

“See, there are options!”

Tessa glanced over the list of so-called options once more. She had one more interview left for the day, and the rest would have to come throughout the week. She was considering giving up on the whole thing and moving to a one-bedroom. But even that would be difficult to maintain in London on a single income. A writer's income at that.

She never noticed how much Billie was covering when they lived together. She made about twice Tessa's salary working for a football club, and now that she was gone, Tessa realized how steep the difference was. She'd canceled half her streaming subscriptions, created a meal plan with only the cheapest ingredients, and sold vintage items from her collection several times a week on Etsy. And she was still struggling.

“I dunno. . . ” she trailed off. “Are you and Ethan looking for someone to keep house?”

Billie chuckled. “Believe me, Tess. You don't want to be living at ours.”

“Shagging everywhere, are you?”

“Literally in every room.”

Tessa gagged, but she knew Billie understood the sarcasm behind it. Tessa was thrilled that Billie had found her soulmate. And she was honored to have been part of them discovering they were soulmates at all. Tessa found the letters and photographs which revealed that Billie, in a past life, was a Land Girl during World War II, working on a farm outside Aldbourne. And Ethan, in that same timeline, was a US

paratrooper stationed in the small town before the D-Day invasion of Normandy. He was eventually killed in the Battle of the Bulge, but almost eighty years later, through Billie and Ethan, they found each other again. Now they were married and had started their life together.

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It was their story that drove Tessa to see the psychic—or, past life regressionist—in the first place. Unfortunately, it was what she feared all along. That Jamie was the person her soul was tied to. But Jamie was no longer an option. She wondered if she could find the happiness Billie and Ethan had, or was she condemned to a life alone by refusing Jamie? Was everyone seeking out their soulmates from times gone by? Or did some people choose a partner regardless of anything from the past?

“I’ve got noise canceling headphones, y’know,” Tessa said.

“Tess.”

“Alright, alright, I understand. Newlywed bliss and all that.”

Billie hesitated for a long moment. “You know. . . if you need a loan, Ethan and I can—”

“No,” Tessa cut her off. “I know he’s a footballer and money’s no object for you, but I couldn’t accept it.”

“There’s no shame in asking for help, Tess.”

“Aye, I know. And seeing as I’m not asking, there’s especially no shame in it.”

“Tessa.”

“If that day ever comes, Billie, you’ll be the first to know. But I grew up in Derry. I know how to get by.” She paused for a beat, then whimpered. “Fuck, Billie, what if I

have to move back to Derry?”

“I won’t let that happen.”

“Promise?”

“Cross my heart.”

Tessa took a deep breath. “Good. Because you know what’s in Derry, don’t you?”

“No, what?”

“Fucking nothing, that’s what! Just a bunch of other poor, Catholic girls with nothing to do all day and no prospects and—”

“Tessa, calm down! I won’t let that happen, I swear.”

She sniffled. “You’re the best friend I’ve ever had, Bills.”

“I know. And I owe you my marriage, so I’m here for anything you need, yeah?”

“Understood.”

A male voice sounded from Billie’s end, with a Southern drawl that Tessa would have recognized from anywhere. Ethan must have gotten back from training. She knew that was the case when Billie let out a girlish laugh that only Ethan was capable of drawing from her.

“Sorry?” Billie suddenly asked.

“I haven’t said anything,” Tessa answered.

“I—” Billie stifled another giggle and scolded Ethan. “Sorry, was there anything else?”

“The last interview might be better,” Tessa said. “Name’s Niamh, so there’s a pretty good chance she’s Irish.”

Billie said some other muffled thing to Ethan. “Oh, really?”

“Could be from the Republic, though.”

“Would that be a bad thing? I mean—Ethan!”

Tessa huffed. “Sweet, suffering Jesus, go ride your husband already!”

“You sure?”

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“Aye, call me back after you’ve been properly plowed.”

“Later, Tess.”

The line went dead. Tessa rolled her eyes and shook her head, muttering to herself that she’d never understood the term “dickmatized” until Billie met Ethan. She poured herself a generous glass of cabernet and headed out to the sitting room. That was when she heard the knock on the door.

Tessa opened it to reveal a young woman in a tracksuit, her bleach blonde hair pulled up into a high ponytail that swished around her head as she turned it. Her gray eyes crinkled with her wide, toothy smile, and she greeted Tessa with a warm, definitely Irish, “Hello!”

Tessa couldn’t help but smile back. “Hi, there. You must be Niamh.”

“You must be Tessa.”

“Aye, come inside.” She opened the door to allow Niamh across the threshold.

“Thanks for coming.”

“Thanks for meeting me,” Niamh replied. “Finding a place in London’s not been easy.”

“It never is. Can I get you anything before we start? Glass of wine? Tea?”

“What is it you’ve got there?” Niamh asked, nodding toward the glass in Tessa’s

hand.

“Cabernet.”

“My kind of girl. I’ll have one as well, thanks.”

Tessa smirked. This was already off to a much better start than the interviews before. Especially the bagpiper. She fetched another glass from the cabinet and poured Niamh as generous a serving as she’d given herself. Niamh thanked her and took a sip.

“So, Niamh, obviously you’re Irish,” Tessa began, though she had already clocked the accent from the Republic. “What brings you to London?”

“A job,” Niamh told her. “I’ve just signed to play for Stanmore FC women’s team, now they’re promoted and all.”

Tessa blinked. “You’re a footballer?”

“Yes. I was playing for Everton women, but they stacked their midfield in the January window, so I had to move on.”

Tessa swallowed against the tightness in her throat. So much for this going better. After Jamie, she swore she was done keeping up with women’s football. How could she when the woman who broke her heart was everywhere? Jamie was always a discussion for pundits because of her father, and she was so talented, there was no avoiding hearing her name on broadcasts. If Tessa let a footballer move in, it would only put her one foot back into Jamie’s world.

“Are you alright?” Niamh asked, a shadow of concern coming over her features.

“Oh, aye,” Tessa said, and she cleared her throat. “Let’s go on, shall we?”

She asked the stuff she had to know—about salary, lifestyle, cleanliness, all the things that might make them compatible flatmates. Niamh answered everything kindly and with things Tessa liked to hear. She made more than enough needed to split the basic bills in half. She was social, but not a partier since she had training every day and couldn’t afford to be hungover. She was neat, too, and even offered up a chore chart idea that Tessa thought was brilliant. If only she weren’t a footballer. Like one of those rubber balls tied to a paddle, Tessa was flying one moment, and smacked with that harsh reminder the next.

“Where about in Ireland are you from?”

“I grew up near Dublin, where my Mam’s from,” she said. “Dad’s from Derry, though.”

Tessa froze with her glass halfway to her mouth. “What’s your surname again?”

“O’Hartigan,” Niamh said.

“Any relation to Dierdre O’Hartigan?”

“She live over on Oakfield Road?”

“That’s the one!”

“She’s my auntie!”

“She was my year three teacher!”

“No way!”

“Yes, way!”

“This is the most Irish conversation I’ve had in months!”

“Me too!” Tessa set down her wine and yanked Niamh into a hug. All doubts about living with a footballer washed away. Niamh was not just a footballer, she was Dierdre O’Hartigan’s niece. She was a connection to home. And as much as Tessa didn’t want to live there again, she missed the people. “Welcome to the flat!”

“Really?” Niamh cried, pulling back to meet Tessa’s eyes. “You mean it?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely!” Tessa assured her.

Niamh was worth it. Besides, it wasn’t as if Jamie was coming to Stanmore. She was too good for a newly promoted club, her father would never allow it. As Tessa brought the lease, she told herself not to worry. Jamie was in the past. For good.

Chapter 3

Gray clouds hung low in the sky over the Hive, threatening to douse the women Wasps with rain on their first day of training in the new season. But even the clouds couldn’t dampen the spirits of a newly promoted team in the Women’s Super League. Hope surged through the air like electricity. Jamie felt it in the goosebumps erupting over her skin.

She had just gotten her practice kit on when a pair of tan, muscular arms engulfed her around the waist and lifted her off the ground. Jamie yelped with surprise and tried to wriggle free to no avail.

“Welcome to the Wasps!” the assailant said with a friendly squeeze before setting Jamie back down. She whirled around to see it was the goalkeeper, who loomed large with her broad shoulders and six-pack abs. Luckily, her smile was warm. “I’m Eliana. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Yeah, you too,” Jamie said after catching her breath.

“Jesus, Eli, you can’t just go around picking people up,” the woman two lockers down from Jamie interjected. Jamie recognized her—Neriah Price, an American defender Jamie had played against in international competitions. She shot Jamie an apologetic look. “You’ll have to forgive my girl. She’s overly friendly, but we’re working on boundaries.”

Eliana chuckled and kissed Neriah’s cheek. “Whatever you say, baby.”

A twinge of envy curled up in Jamie’s stomach, but she forced a smile. “Really, it’s fine.”

“Glad we’re on the same team, finally,” Neriah said, tying her locs behind her head. Then she offered her hand, which Jamie shook. “Welcome.”

“Thank you,” Jamie replied. Their kindness made it easier to forgive them for the ease with which they dated.

“Jamie!” a familiar voice called.

Jamie whipped around and grinned. “Paige!”

She flung herself into her England teammate's arms and they laughed together. Paige Sutton was as reliable a defender as she was a friend, even if she was intense and opinionated at times. Jamie was thrilled to be her teammate on a club level as well.

As they swayed in each other's embrace, another new signing arrived. Someone else Jamie recognized. Irish midfielder Niamh O'Hartigan, who had a friendly disposition, but a threatening one on the pitch. Jamie saw the news of Niamh's signing shortly after her own transfer was finished.

"Jamie Hupp," Niamh said brightly. "We're on the same side at last."

"And sharing the midfield," Jamie replied as they exchanged a high five. "Happy to see you."

"You too."

Two other defenders, Salma Chafik from Morocco and Kiri Taimona from New Zealand, came over to say hello to the new signings as well.

"Oh no!" A young woman came around the corner, holding her hijab at her chin. "Does anyone have a pin? Mine broke."

A collective groan went through the team, but they all moved toward their lockers.

"Got it!" Salma spoke up first. "It's my turn, anyway."

While she took care of it, the hijabi woman blinked her kind brown eyes at the newcomers. "Oh! Hi! I'm Zahra. It's nice to meet you."

"Jamie Hupp," Jamie said with a grin. "Nice to meet you too."

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“Here you go,” Salma said as she returned. “Need help with it?”

Zahra lifted her head. “Yes please.”

Jamie watched as Salma assisted Zahra and found herself smiling. “The whole team keeps pins on hand?”

“When your teammate is as accident-prone as Zahra, you learn to adjust,” Kiri said.

“I’m not that bad!” Zahra protested, and tried to turn her head before Salma grabbed her chin.

“Be still,” Salma warned. “I don’t want to stab you.”

“I’ll be adding some to my locker, then,” Niamh said.

“Me too,” Jamie added.

Zahra’s lips turned up, and she shot them a thumbs up from where she stood.

The door burst open and in walked three of the most stunning women Jamie had ever seen. They strode into the dressing room as if in slow motion. She also knew them from international competitions.

Sofia Saldaña from Spain, head-turningly beautiful with her long, dark hair in plaits down her back, a smile that could be in toothpaste commercials, and eyes like rich earth. Next to her was Mai Thu Phong, a Vietnamese national Jamie had met for the

first time during the World Cup. Mai had the speed and accuracy of an arrow, with a disarmingly sweet grin.

And finally, from Germany, was Monika Deschant, a tall blonde striker, who Jamie had faced in Euros and World Cups. She was painfully familiar with the damage Monika's left foot could do. The press constantly speculated why she wouldn't sign with a WSL team before, or even move over to America and play for an NWSL team. But all Monika would say was that she loved Stanmore. Jamie had to respect that level of dedication.

The trio came to a stop in front of Jamie and Niamh. Sofia and Mai smiled, but Monika's blue eyes raked over them, pausing on Jamie. Jamie could see the questions in Monika's mind, but didn't try to say anything before Monika spoke.

"Well," she said. "You are here."

Jamie lifted her chin. "I am."

"Willkommen," Monika replied and put her hand on Jamie's shoulder. Jamie spied the captain's armband on her sleeve. "You will be good for us, I think."

"I hope so, thanks," Jamie returned.

Monika patted her arm and then moved aside so Sofia and Mai could introduce themselves. They were decidedly warmer than the captain, but Jamie understood some skepticism. It was pretty much unheard of for an athlete to leave abruptly from a club they performed well with only to join a club everyone underestimated. She was sure the whole team had questions, even if they weren't asking them outright.

"Alright, ladies, listen up!"

All eyes turned on their manager, Rebecca Nelson. Jamie read up on her when she signed with Stanmore. Rebecca was a legend of the US Women's National Team and NWSL. Being coached by a woman, like she was when she played for England, excited Jamie. Especially after everything that happened with Manchester City.

"I want to start by welcoming our new signings, Jamie Hupp and Niamh O'Hartigan," Rebecca said. "We're happy to have you both."

Jamie and Niamh nodded in acknowledgment.

Rebecca looked around at the group, locking eyes with each of them as she scanned their faces. "I also want to say, welcome to the WSL!"

Cheers and applause went through the room, but Jamie hesitated to participate. She'd always been in the WSL, and she certainly hadn't helped this team get there. She let her arms fall to her sides.

"I want each of you to know, you deserve to be here," Rebecca went on. "We worked damn hard to earn our spot. And I don't give a shit what the pundits say, we belong here. Let's plan to stay."

"We're staying up!" Paige shouted, and the team all cheered in agreement.

Jamie could get on board with that. Especially when Zahra slung an arm over her shoulder and squeezed. As if she was already a seasoned member of the squad.

"We're not gonna let anyone intimidate us," Rebecca continued. "We're here!"

"We're here!" the team echoed.

"We're Stanmore!"

“We’re Stanmore!”

“And we’re gonna kick some ass!”

“And we’re gonna kick some ass!”

Rebecca beamed. “Excellent. Now, let’s get dressed and get out on the pitch.”

They did, and excited chatter went through the room. Rebecca touched Jamie’s arm.

“Jamie, could I speak to you in my office?”

Jamie swallowed, but nodded, and followed her new manager. Rebecca closed the door behind them and the sound died down. Jamie shifted her weight between her feet, unsure if she should sit down or remain where she was. She hoped this was a conversation that wouldn’t be too long. Being singled out on the first day was already tough. If she were late, she didn’t want anyone under the impression she was getting special privileges.

“Obviously, a lot of people are confused by why you’re here,” Rebecca said, tucking a lock of curly auburn hair behind her ear. “But from what I understand in my discussions with your agent, this was your choice.”

Jamie nodded. “It was.”

“Why?”

Jamie opened her mouth to give her carefully prepared answer, but Rebecca stopped her before she could speak.

“And don’t give me the bullshit you gave the press about wanting to prove yourself,” she said. “I want an honest answer from you. Why now? And why this club?”

Jamie chewed her lip, racking her brain. “Um. . . can I ask you something first?”

“Sure.”

“Has my father been in contact with you?”

Rebecca smirked. “As a matter of fact, he has.”

Jamie’s heart sank. “And did he tell you to ask me this?”

“He did.” She leaned against the desk and folded her arms over her chest. “But I told him to fuck off. This is my team, and how I deal with my players is my business.”

Jamie blinked, but the corners of her mouth twitched upward. “You did?”

“Yeah. Sorry if that puts you in a bind.”

He’d be calling to complain, but Jamie shook her head. “It’s fine.”

“I’m asking you this, Jamie, because I want to know what your intentions are. As you saw, what we’ve accomplished means a lot to us. You’re a great footballer, and I have no doubt you’ll do well here. I want to know if you’re in this for you, or if you truly want to be a part of us. And what we’re building here.”

Jamie glanced out the window and watched her new teammates milling about. Neriah

braided Kiri's hair, and Sofia adjusted Niamh's headband to keep it in place. Monika laughed with Mai while Eliana and Paige did some sort of secret handshake. Zahra and Salma were helping each other stretch.

"I want to be a part of this," Jamie said, facing Rebecca again. "I'll admit, I came here for selfish reasons. Something happened at City, and I . . . couldn't be there anymore. I wanted to come home to London, and Stanmore said they wanted me."

Rebecca's brow furrowed. "Something happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it. I'm fine. Everything's fine. I want to move on."

"Understood." Rebecca paused for a beat as her features relaxed. "I hope you know that you're safe here. And anything you tell me or them—" she nodded toward the team. "It won't get to anyone else."

Jamie wanted to believe it. Desperately, she wanted to trust them. But her father had eyes and ears everywhere. One slip up, and he'd know.

"He Googles me every day," she blurted out. "My father."

Rebecca only smirked. "Do you know how long Neriah and Eliana have been together?"

“No, why?”

“A year and a half.”

Jamie blinked, taken aback. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. And believe me, they danced around each other with their flirting and blushing for at least six months before becoming official. It was nauseating.”

Jamie chuckled, but her mind was filled with questions. How did no one know? Neriah Price was a well-known figure with the US Women’s National team. If she was dating someone, especially for that long, it would have been in the press.

Rebecca continued. “But Eliana’s parents are devout Catholics, so they keep it low-key.”

Jamie watched Neriah and Eliana share a kiss and a high five as they prepared to head out to the practice pitch. Rebecca put her hand on Jamie’s shoulder, drawing her attention again.

“Nothing from this dressing room ends up on Google.”

Jamie nodded, but didn’t have words to reply. Her throat was suddenly tight.

“See you on the pitch,” Rebecca said, and left the office.

Jamie lingered only a moment longer before following her out.

After warm-ups, they ran some passing drills. Jamie found easy chemistry with Niamh and Zahra, which surprised her since they were all new to each other. But scatterbrained as Zahra seemed in the dressing room, she was focused on the pitch—accurate and alert. She helped Niamh and Jamie find a rhythm with the squad with the grace of an orchestra conductor. It was especially impressive given she was only twenty-two years old. Six years younger than Jamie.

When they played first team against second team, Jamie’s nerves were all but gone. She inhaled deeply and grounded herself in the moment. This was where she was at her best. With acres of green in front of her and the ball at her feet. In the first thirty seconds, she passed a ball through to Monika, who dropped a shoulder to avoid her defender and took a shot. The ball rocketed into the back of the net. Monika ran over and gave Jamie a high five, smiling at her for the first time.

“I think we will keep you,” she joked.

Jamie laughed. And realized she couldn’t remember the last time she’d laughed at training. Monika elbowed her playfully and jogged back out to restart. Jamie followed, feeling lighter than she had in years.

After training, once everyone was showered and dressed, Niamh stood up on the bench.

“Attention please, girls!” she shouted.

The room went quiet, and they all watched her.

“Thank you. Now, I wanted to let you know that you’re all invited to a housewarming party my flatmate and I are hosting. She’s a sweet girl, I think you’ll all love her. It’s this Saturday night, and the theme is the Spice Girls. How about it?”

The team exchanged surprised looks before collectively agreeing and pulling Niamh down into their arms. They created a group chat where she could send the details for time and place and what they all might bring.

“One note on the theme,” Niamh said. “You can’t all be Sporty Spice, so you’ll have to work it out amongst yourselves who gets to—”

She hardly had the words out before she was inundated with complaints. Even as they bickered with each other, there was laughter and smiles. Jamie was already planning her Posh Spice outfit.

Chapter 4

“Ugh, Itoldthem they couldn’t all be Sporty Spice,” Niamh said with a groan.

Tessa chuckled. “S’alright. It’s still less than I expected.”

A solid half of the women showed up as Sporty Spice, the other half divided pretty equally among Scary, Baby, Ginger, and Posh. They had the flat rammed, but luckily, Tessa and Niamh had thought ahead enough to stow the living room furniture in their bedrooms for the evening to clear enough space for mingling. Though there was more dancing than mingling when “Who Do You Think You Are” came on over the speakers, and a couple girls went into a full-on karaoke performance. With choreography and everything.

“Did they rehearse that?” Tessa asked.

“No idea,” Niamh replied through a laugh.

A knock on the door drew them over to answer, and Niamh introduced Tessa to the new arrivals.

“Tessa, these are more of the girls, Salma, Kiri, and Paige.”

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Paige was one Tessa recognized from watching the Lionesses. Back when she had a reason to root for England. Though those days were long over.

“Niamh, for the last time, we aren’t girls, we’re women,” Paige said.

“Bit of a craic killer,” Niamh said to Tessa.

“Aye, so she is,” Tessa replied.

“I am not!” Paige protested. “But the language we use is important because—”

“I agree with you, Paige, but let’s be honest,” Tessa said. “D’you honestly think the Spice Girls would’ve been the iconic pop legends they are if they’d been called the Spice Women?”

Paige opened her mouth, but closed it again. “Alright, fair enough.”

Tessa and Niamh giggled together.

They led the group inside, Tessa showing them where the food and drinks were, and she noticed the crisps were getting low. As she moved to correct that, there was another knock on the door.

“I’m away to the kitchen, can you get the door, Niamh?”

“On it.”

Paige, Salma, and Kiri blended into the crowd who were all serenading each other with “2 Become 1.”

The kitchen was thankfully clear. Tessa went right to the cabinet to retrieve a fresh bag of crisps. She put her hand on the wood to close it back when she heard a voice that sent a chill up her spine.

“Baby Spice, huh?”

Tessa jumped, slamming the cupboard door shut as she whirled around. Her worst nightmare stood there in her kitchen, looking like an absolute fucking ride in her Posh Spice get up. The figure hugging black dress with matching heels made her ass as firm and round as a peach. But Tessa’s eyes didn’t linger there long. They trailed all the way up to Jamie’s face, which, despite the makeup, appeared exactly the same as Tessa remembered.

Her heart lurched inside her chest. Her stomach dropped like a sandbag. Her knees buckled, so she took a step back to steady herself. How was it possible that Jamie Hupp was standing in her flat?

“I—what—fucking—” She stopped to take a deep breath. “That dress is cracker.”

Jamie’s mouth twitched upward. “Thanks.”

They stood in silence for another moment while Tessa tried to make her mind settle on one question at a time. She had several thousand. And clearly Jamie wasn’t going to initiate things. Which was typical.

Tessa narrowed her eyes at her ex. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Haven’t you heard?” Jamie finally had the decency to look uncomfortable. “I signed

with Stanmore.”

Tessa stumbled backward, catching herself on the wall before she fell. The air whooshed out of her lungs as if Jamie had sucked it out herself.

“What?” Tessa said, in almost a whisper.

“I think we should talk.”

“This is a bit public for you, isn’t it?”

Jamie drew back, stung. “I . . . I was going to suggest we step outside.”

“Of course you were.”

“Tessa, I—”

“Crisps!” Tessa cut across her and shook the bag noisily in front of her. “I’ve got . . . crisps to refill. Very busy time of year for crisps, y’know.”

Jamie blinked, and Tessa mentally kicked herself, but pushed past Jamie anyway to get to the kitchen table. She tore open the bag with more force than she meant to, turned it over, and dumped its contents into the bowl. The whole time, she could feel Jamie’s eyes on her. Those stunning blue eyes that Tessa now knew she had loved in more than one lifetime. She had followed those eyes into the Atlantic before they would reach Jamestown, across ballrooms during the American Revolution, and around a hospital ward throughout the First World War.

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After unlocking the past lives with Lila, the memories came to Tessa more frequently, especially when she was sleeping. She had vivid dreams of their previous times together, and each time Jamie ran away. Only the first time did they escape together. Centuries later, and Jamie was still afraid.

“Tessa,” she said, voice hushed. “Please, I want to talk.”

“Well, I don’t,” Tessa shot back, shaking the last few crisps into the bowl. Then she turned on her heel and swept back into the kitchen to throw it away, but Jamie was behind her like a shadow.

“I don’t know why you’re acting this way. You’re the one who broke my heart, not the other way around.”

Tessa whipped around so fast, she shocked herself at staying upright. “That’s not true, and you fucking know it. I may have ended the relationship, but I wasn’t—”

“Knew that’d get you going.”

“Fuck off,” Tessa huffed out, already imagining slapping the satisfied smirk off Jamie’s gorgeous face.

“Tess, please. With one of my teammates living with you, I’m sure we’ll be seeing more of each other. Can’t we clear the air?”

Tessa’s first instinct was to ask her what air there was to clear. They’d said everything they needed to say three years ago, hadn’t they? But at the pleading look

in Jamie's eyes, her heart softened.

"Fine," she said. "Grab a bin bag. It'll make it look like you're helping me."

"Thank you."

They each grabbed a bag and headed toward the front door.

"Jamie!" Niamh called over the sound of "Spice Up Your Life." "You don't have to clean, you're a guest!"

"It's no problem!" Jamie replied. "I enjoy helping!"

Niamh shrugged and returned to dancing with Sofia.

Tessa didn't speak the whole way down the hall toward the outside of the building. She wasn't sure if there was too much on her heart or nothing at all. She hadn't even thought about Jamie lately until a few months ago when she was viewing an estate home with her new friend, Laci Miller. Or Laci Frawley now since she'd married the Stanmore men's goalkeeper, Jordan. Laci had been worried about her relationship with Jordan at the time, and Tessa had shared some experiences with Jamie to commiserate. Out of respect, she had not given Jamie's name, so there was still no one outside of them, Billie, and Tessa's family who knew that they were ever a couple.

They reached the wheelie bins outside, and Jamie lifted the lid to swing her bag in, and she held it open for Tessa, who followed suit.

"Honestly, I'm surprised it took me cornering you to notice me," Jamie said. "I've been here for nearly an hour."

“Sorry, I could hardly see around that massive closet you’re in.”

“How long have you been sitting on that one?”

“Three years.”

Jamie deflated. Silence fell between them, and Tessa’s rage bubbled up through her chest. How dare Jamie waltz into her life as if they hadn’t ripped each other apart. How dare she show up at her house and surprise her this way. How dare she disrupt the carefully created peace Tessa had gotten herself.

“How’ve you been?” Jamie asked.

“Oh, y’know, grand so,” Tessa replied with sarcasm. Then she scowled. “Are we gonna be talking pure shite all evening or are you gonna tell me why you’re here?”

Jamie heaved a sigh and dropped her gaze, her eyes seeming to trace the white painted lines on the street as she considered her words.

“I miss you,” she finally said.

Nostrils flared, Tessa raised herself to her full height. “Fuck you.”

Jamie’s eyes locked onto her gaze. “I know it’s not nearly a good enough reason to come barreling back into your life like this, but it’s the truth. I’ve missed you since the moment I walked out of your flat three years ago. I’ve missed you every day I’ve lived in Manchester. I’ve missed you at every match, at every award ceremony, and every night when I crawl into bed alone. I miss you, Tessa.”

Tessa’s stomach churned with fresh ire, even if her heart broke a little. As angry as she was, part of her still had love for Jamie. Part of her always had. Part of her always

would.

“Nothing’s changed, Jamie,” she said. “Unless you’re suddenly ready to come out?”

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“No,” Jamie shook her head. “I’m not.”

“Then there’s no point to this! I told you then and I’m telling you now, I won’t run around and hide in the dark like a criminal with you! I don’t know what you thought would happen by coming here and telling me something I already know!”

Jamie blinked. “You know how much I miss you?”

“Of course I do,” Tessa replied, blinking back tears. “Because I miss you too.”

Jamie stepped forward and reached for Tessa’s hand, but she yanked it away.

“It doesn’t change anything, though,” she said. “So. . . why? Why would you leave Man City like this?”

“I couldn’t stay,” Jamie told her. “I missed you so much, I couldn’t take it anymore. And then. . .” she trailed off. “It wasn’t working.”

“How d’you mean?”

“One of the coaches, we. . . didn’t see eye to eye.”

“So they let you out of your contract?”

“I actually initiated the transfer.”

Tessa searched Jamie’s face, finding her jaw tighter and her lips drawn in. When she

folded her arms over herself, Tessa saw it even clearer. Discomfort. And a little bit of shame.

“Jamie,” she said softly. “Did something happen?”

“No!” Jamie snapped. She took a deep breath and softened. “Nothing happened.”

“You’re lying.”

“Tessa, please don’t push me on this.”

“So, somethingdidhappen.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

Tessa groaned and stamped her foot. “It’s always secrets with you! Never trust, never faith! Everything must be kept close to your chest because God forbid you believe that anyone else cares enough about you to keep you safe!”

“I know that you do, and you have by keeping my secret all this time, but this is not something I’m ready to talk about.”

Tessa sucked in a sharp breath and leaned against the wall. Several beats passed, the silence between them thick and murky as mud. If someone at Manchester City had harmed Jamie, Tessa was fully prepared to. . . to what? What right did she have any more to knowledge of Jamie’s welfare? And why, when she was the one who refused to give them another shot, was she heartbroken at the idea? She’d drawn the line herself, hadn’t she? She needed to stick to her guns.

“Fine. Makes no difference to me, anyway.”

“Tessa. . . I. . .” Jamie trailed off, chewing her lip. “I don’t know what I expected. All I knew was that I had to see you again. And maybe, I dunno. . . bury the hatchet.”

“The hatchet’s long buried, Jamie,” Tessa said. “I just remember where.”

Jamie looked at the ground, wounded. “Got it.”

“We can be friendly,” Tessa went on. “For Niamh’s sake. Even if she did know our history, which she won’t, it wouldn’t be fair to put her in the middle.”

“Yeah. Agreed.”

Another beat passed. Tessa wondered if there was something else Jamie wanted to say based on the way she kept shifting her weight and squaring her shoulders. In the end, she didn’t let it out. No surprises there.

“We should get inside,” Tessa said. “Get back to the party.”

“Sure.”

Tessa opened the door and Jamie followed her back to the flat in silence. Funny how at one time, words flowed between them like a river. Now there was nothing.

Chapter 5

Tessa always thought nothing screamed Billie quite like her home office. Her desk was meticulously organized, from the alphabetical files to the color coded pens. A calendar with different symbols sketched over different dates sat in the middle, and Billie scribbled down another for the coming week. Her phone was sleek and modern, with her and Ethan's wedding photo next to it. Already, she had some from their honeymoon framed and on the wall behind her, but with her diploma in the center. Off to the side, a steaming cup of coffee waited for her to take a sip.

For over a year now, she'd been running the Larry Lowe Foundation, a nonprofit she and Ethan started for children of addicted or absent parents to have resources to keep them involved in extracurriculars like sports or music. It was named for Ethan's first football coach, who passed away. In his honor, they heard out every case brought to them, and if there was some way they could assist, they did.

Tessa remembered all the days Billie agonized over going to law school, and now she knew why Billie never took the plunge. Her heart wasn't in law, it was in helping people. Ethan showed her that. If the glow about her wasn't enough proof that she was fulfilled, the smile on her face did the trick. Tessa's heart warmed with pride.

“. . . Yes, we do have volunteers in Birmingham,” Billie was saying as she pulled up a map of the town on her computer screen. She caught Tessa's eye and waved her inside. “Actually, we have a volunteer already taking one client to football in that

area, I'm sure they'd be more than happy to take little Emily to her violin lessons." She paused while the person on the other end of the line spoke, her smile turning further upward. "You're quite welcome, Mrs. Waterson. And do let us know when Emily's next recital is. If we can, Ethan and I would love to be there to support her."

Tessa heard Mrs. Waterson's shout of excitement through the phone. Billie's grin remained, even as she held the receiver away from her ear. She and Tessa exchanged a quiet laugh together before Billie spoke again.

"Yes, it's no trouble at all. Of course. You have a wonderful day as well, and we'll speak again soon. Yes. Bye, Mrs. Waterson."

She hung up and heaved a sigh, but that smile betrayed her exasperation. Tessa couldn't help but grin too. As much as she missed living with Billie, it was wonderful to her best friend happy and thriving.

"What about you, Bills?" Tessa said, taking a seat opposite her friend. "I've hardly seen you since you got back from honeymoon."

"Things have been absolutely mad here," Billie replied, finally giving that coffee some attention. She hummed to herself as she swallowed. "That's lovely."

"How many cups is that, then?"

"Just two. Though Ethan made me a whole pot, including my sugar and cream. All I'll have to do is pour when I want more."

"Fuck's sake, you'll be ruined."

"Fancy a cup?"

“No, thanks, I’m suddenly feeling a bit bokey,” Tessa teased.

“Hey, I enjoy being spoiled,” Billie chuckled. She took another sip and cleared her throat. “What brings you by if not a cup of the Billie Special?”

“Fuck off, that is not what he calls it.”

“It is.”

“Now I am gonna boke.”

Billie rolled her eyes. “Seriously, Tess. What’s up?”

Tessa paused and eyed the coffee cup, realizing she hadn’t had coffee much since Billie moved out. It reminded her too much of all their breakfasts together, and it made her ache. Tea helped to soothe that, but there was no real cure for your best friend moving on. She forced a half-hearted smile.

“Besides my breakfast? A lot, I’m afraid.”

Billie’s brow furrowed. “Is everything alright?”

“Sure, everything’s grand. It’s just that Jamie’s back and playing for the Stanmore women’s team.”

Billie sputtered into her coffee, sending a few droplets out across the calendar. She coughed and pounded on her chest to clear her airway. If Tessa wasn’t so worried about this conversation, she might have laughed.

“Are you serious?” Billie wheezed.

“As a heart attack. She was at the flat the other day for the housewarming party.”

“Housewarming? You’ve lived there for years.”

“Niamh hasn’t, and it gave her a way to bond with her new teammates.”

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Billie cleared her throat again and dabbed at her eyes, which were still watery. “So, your new flatmate also plays for the club?”

Tessa nodded.

“So, it’s likely you’ll be seeing more of Jamie?”

Tessa nodded again.

“That is fucked.”

“You’re telling me,” Tessa agreed. She got to her feet, unable to remain seated now that thoughts of Jamie were coursing through her. “I can’t even tell Niamh about it because I can’t betray Jamie’s trust. You’re still the only person that knows. Though, I suppose maybe Ethan does too now.”

“No, he doesn’t.”

Tessa blinked only to find her eyes stinging. “He doesn’t?”

“No, nor will he,” Billie went on. “He’s asked about your relationships before, but I’ve only told him the basics. Never Jamie’s name, or even what she does.”

“That, uh. . .” Tessa trailed off, swallowing the lump in her throat. “Thanks.”

“I’d never betray your trust, Tess. Not even to my husband.”

Tessa only nodded. She hadn't intended the conversation to take this emotional turn. That is, she fully anticipated emotion, but not because of Billie saying something that touching. And exactly what she needed to hear the longer the distance between them grew. She always knew the friendship would take a hit once Billie got married, but it was good to know some things never changed.

"Now," Billie said, sitting up in her chair. "What was it like? Seeing Jamie again?"

Tessa blinked rapidly a few times to ensure the mist was fully out of her eyes before she answered. "It was. . . weird. She wanted to. . . talk."

"And did you?"

"Aye, but it didn't help."

"Was it supposed to help something?"

"Ach, I dunno. She said she missed me. But nothing's changed so what that fuck am I supposed to do with that, y'know?"

"She's still not ready to come out, you mean."

"Aye."

"Because of her father?"

"I suppose."

Billie leaned back again, tapping her chin with one finger. "But that's all she said? That she missed you?"

“Oh aye, and she made quite the fucking production of it, to be sure. All this romantic gobshite about the moments she’s missed me, but it was all meaningless in the end because we’re in the same place we were three years ago.”

“It’s such an unfair thing to say to you. Especially after everything she put you through.”

“That’s what I’m saying!”

Tessa turned around and scanned Billie’s bookshelf. In front of some thick leather volumes, there was another framed photo. This one was smaller, and in black and white. It wasn’t of Billie and Ethan, not technically, but their past lives, Maggie and Henry. Henry in his dress uniform and Maggie in a wedding gown made of the silk of his reserve parachute. The picture that unlocked Billie’s full memories of her life in the forties, and the decades after, as Maggie Owens.

Tessa realized she hadn’t told Billie about her visit to Lila. In fairness, Billie had still been traveling with Ethan to the United States on a pre-season tour with Chelsea, so the time difference had interfered with regular phone calls. But it wasn’t something Tessa wanted to discuss over the phone. Even if Billie was the one person she knew would completely understand.

“There’s one thing, though,” she said.

She heard Billie’s chair shift. “What is it?”

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“I went to see a psychic who helps with. . .” She touched the photo gently with her index finger before facing Billie again. “She helps you connect with your past lives.”

Billie’s brows went almost up to her hairline. “Youwhat?”

“I couldn’t help myself! After seeing you and Ethan, and then Jordan and Laci too, I had to know if the reason I still have this. . . this hangup on Jamie might be because we’re soulmates!”

“And what did you discover?”

Tessa couldn’t stop the tear that escaped her now. “We are.”

“Oh, Tess.” Billie’s gaze softened, and she rose from her chair to cross the room and embrace her friend. “I’m so sorry.”

Tessa sniffled and buried her face in Billie’s shoulder. “Sorry?”

“I know how hard that must be to learn when you feel as if you can’t be with that person. I’m sorry you’re hurting.”

“She ran away before, too. Twice, she left me out of fear.”

“Jesus.” Billie drew back to look into Tessa’s eyes. “There were two times before?”

“Three, actually.”

“Okay, let’s get to the kitchen and have some of that coffee. I want to know everything.”

Tessa nodded and allowed Billie to lead her into the immaculate Knight kitchen, with all its adorable vintage touches and references to their life before. Billie poured Tessa a cup, then sat beside her on the cushions by the bay window with her own. Tessa took a sip and resisted making a face. Billie never used nearly enough sugar. But she wasn’t about to complain. Not when she was finally getting to have coffee with her best friend again.

She launched into the story, and everything she’d seen at Lila’s. The first lifetime, where they were some of the women chosen to sail to Jamestown to be wives for the men that had settled there. And that first time, they escaped their fates together by leaping to their demise in the sea before they ever set foot in Virginia. The second life, nearly two centuries later, they had somehow made it to America, but Jamie was married to a British officer and Tessa was their governess. The family fled with the American Revolution on their doorstep, leaving the household staff behind. And the final time before the present day, during the First World War, where they were both working as nurses in France, and had planned to be together when peace came. Only Jamie (or Dinah as she was called then) backed out again and accepted a marriage proposal from a soldier.

“You see, she’s given into fear every time,” Tessa said. “Even now, when we could be together, she still lets that stand in her way.”

Billie hummed thoughtfully. “But her father is a real obstacle.”

“He isn’t though. It’s not as if she relies on him for money. He’s just up her hole about every fucking thing she ever does. But she could cut him off if she wanted to.”

“Do you think a man like that would let Jamie cut him off?”

Tessa considered it. She remembered the incessant phone calls, the social media monitoring, the constant showing up at training. But mostly she remembered all the times Jamie came over in tears, unable to take it anymore, and Tessa was her place to hide for a while. Even then, eventually Dexter would find her and start the whole thing over again. Billie had witnessed Jamie's breakdowns more than once. In fact, Billie was there when Dexter had finally figured out where Jamie's hiding place was. He came bursting into the flat and practically dragged Jamie out, all the while screaming at her. Billie nearly called the police, but Jamie begged her not to.

"I suppose. . . No, he'd surely come looking for her again." She paused for a beat. "But that doesn't mean I should accept half a relationship!"

"I'm not saying that," Billie replied, holding up her hands with innocence. "But was it really so bad? Maybe with some time, Jamie might—"

"No." Tessa shook her head. "I gave her plenty of time before. Hell, she had three other lifetimes to choose me, and she didn't."

"You're not being fair. Jamie probably has no idea about those. And if she does, it's vague."

"Yes, dreams and visions and all that shite. I had them back then. But I ignored them."

"I can't say I blame you there. You know better than most how long it took me and Ethan to admit them. Though Jordan and Laci were honest with each other their whole journey."

"Were they?"

"Yes, they told each other everything. And to think they were in a fake relationship at

the time!”

“And how do you know all this?”

Billie shifted on her cushion. “They’ve come over twice this month for dinner.”

Tessa hoisted an eyebrow. “They have?”

“Well. . . they’re our couple friends.”

Tessa swallowed down the sting of that by cutting her gaze to her now empty coffee cup. So much for things were back to normal.

“I see,” she said.

“I’d have invited you, Tess, but I don’t want you to feel like the odd one out or anything. And sometimes it’s nice to be around people who understand marriage. It’s different from dating, y’know. Plus, they get the whole soulmate thing, and—”

“No, I get it,” Tessa cut her off.

“I didn’t know you understood too.”

“I haven’t had the chance to tell you.”

Billie chewed her bottom lip. “I suppose I had that coming. I’m sorry, Tess. I haven’t been a proper friend lately, have I?”

“You have today,” Tessa said, wanting to cut her some slack. She never wanted Billie to feel bad about finding her partner and settling down, she just wanted her friend every once in a while. “I don’t begrudge you your happiness, Bills.”

“I’ll do better going forward, I swear,” Billie said, taking Tessa’s hand.

“I’ll hold you to it.”

They smiled at each other for a moment before Billie's cell phone rang from inside her pocket. She stole a glance at the screen and her brow furrowed.

"I better answer, it's my doctor," she said.

"Doctor? Are you ill?"

"I'll explain later. One moment."

She got to her feet and headed back toward her office, dropping her coffee cup on the kitchen island before she swept out of the room. Tessa glanced around the grand home, decorated with all things that represented Billie and Ethan. Unable to keep still, and in need of a tad more caffeine, Tessa stood up and padded over to the percolator and grasped the handle to pour herself another cup.

As she reached for the sugar bowl, a tri-fold picture frame caught her eye. Each one contained a photo of Billie and Tessa. One from their uni days, one of them in the kitchen the day they moved into the flat, and one of them together on Billie's wedding day, beaming at each other as they embraced. Tessa's mouth kicked up into a half-smile. Billie still had pieces of her here. She had nothing to worry about.

The sound of heels clicking against hardwood made Tessa turn around, only to find herself staring at an ashen-faced, teary-eyed Billie. Tessa set her coffee down and rushed over to her friend, putting her hands on Billie's shoulders.

"Bills? Everything alright with you? Has Ethan been hurt?"

Billie shook her head, squeezing her eyes shut as her brown curls bounced with the motion.

"What is it, then?" Tessa asked.

Billie opened her eyes and held Tessa's gaze. A smile slowly claimed her lips. "I . . . I'm pregnant."

Tessa blinked and drew back, almost as if Billie had swung at her. "With a wain?"

"No, we're having chipmunks—yes, with a baby!" Billie laughed.

Tessa chuckled too. "Are you . . . happy about it?"

"I . . ." Billie's smile widened and her eyes misted over. "Yes, actually, I am."

"It's not too soon? I thought you weren't even sure you wanted kids."

"I wasn't sure, and Ethan and I certainly weren't trying. But thinking about a family, and a family with this man that I love more than I thought I was capable of. . . it makes me excited."

The grin on her face and the sparkle in her eyes said it all. Tessa swallowed her own mixed feelings, which were swirling around inside her chest like a tornado, and yanked her friend back into the hug. Not unlike the one they were sharing in the wedding picture. She squeezed Billie tight, hoping to convey that at least some of those feelings were good ones. Thrilled ones, even. Even if part of her heart sank at the knowledge that a baby meant there was no way Billie would be able to keep her promise of spending more time with Tessa.

"Oh, Bills. I'm so happy for you."

Chapter 6

Picking at her nails, Jamie took in the office. It wasn't what she imagined a therapist's office to be. In the movies, they were always clinical in appearance. Lila's office, despite the crisp white and beige color palette, had yellow flowers and old leather books, and crochet blankets in the soft cushioned chairs, which made it homey. Or straight out of a Nancy Meyers film, Jamie hadn't decided.

Not that it put Jamie at ease. A blanket didn't cover up that this woman was clearly an agent of her father. Dexter Hupp had his hand deep into anyone that was remotely close to Jamie, especially when it came to her career. He'd been in the ear of every manager, agent, and physio she'd been in contact with. A therapist would be no different. She didn't even want to be in therapy. Who needed therapy when she was perfectly capable of smothering her emotions until her inevitable death?

"Fucking hell. . ." she muttered to herself, thinking that perhaps she did need therapy after all.

The door swung open and Lila walked through in an oversized button down and jeans, her graying brown hair tied back with a scrunchie. Funky floral glasses framed her face. She resembled the photograph on her website, which Jamie had stalked for most of the previous evening. Lila had been a therapist for fifteen years. She specialized in women's issues and ran her own practice. All of that was well and good until Jamie found, under the "Other Services" tab on the website, that Lila also claimed to be a psychic. Or "past life regressionist" as she called it online, but that didn't fool Jamie. She offered Jamie a smile that went unreciprocated.

“Good morning, Jamie,” she said, taking a seat across the coffee table from her.

Jamie sucked her teeth. “Morning.”

“I must say, I’m excited for this journey with you. I’ve never worked with an athlete before, though they do fascinate me.”

Jamie’s brow furrowed, wondering if she ought to be offended by that, but she didn’t get the chance to say as much before Lila continued.

“Especially the men. Can you imagine having that size ego? I suppose you can, given your father is one of the most prolific footballers in England’s history.”

“Spoke to him, did you?” Jamie tried to keep the venom out of her voice, but wasn’t successful.

Lila took it in stride. “Yes, in fact, he booked this appointment for you. He warned me you weren’t keen on the idea.”

“I’m not.”

“And yet you showed up.”

Jamie lifted an eyebrow. “So?”

“Well, you are an adult, Jamie. Most adults would simply ignore their parents if given a suggestion they didn’t agree with. And your disagreement is written all over your face.”

Jamie schooled her features, but folded her arms over her chest. The corner of Lila’s mouth turned up as she leaned back in her chair.

“I’m here under protest,” Jamie said.

“Shall I make a note of that in your file?”

Jamie huffed and pushed herself to her feet before striding over to the bookshelf. She expected to find volumes on psychology and other sciences behind therapy, so it took her aback to see book after book of poetry. She blinked at a tattered hardback—vintage by the shabby appearance of it—of an Emily Dickinson collection that held her gaze. Before she realized she was doing it, her hand was reaching toward the weathered spine, fingers outstretched with a familiarity she couldn’t explain.

“Lovely things, aren’t they?” Lila asked, her voice drawing Jamie out of her stupor.

She snatched her hand back to her side.

“You can touch it, I don’t mind,” Lila said. “Though do be careful. It’s over a hundred years old.”

Jamie shook her head, even if her eyes kept flitting over to the book. Where did that possessiveness come from? “No, I . . . sorry.”

“Quite alright.”

“Why poetry?”

Lila crossed one leg over the other. “Because I don’t believe there’s any greater insight into human nature.”

“What? You’re a therapist.”

“Yes, I’m aware.”

“So you should know that it’s trauma or genetics or something. Poetry, are you serious?”

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“Trauma and genetics and somethings are what’s in our brains. Poetry reveals what’s in the soul.”

Jamie wasn’t sure how to answer that. She chanced a glance back at the shelf.

“Are you much of a reader?” Lila wondered.

“No, not really. I wish I read more, but with my schedule, it’s difficult.”

“That schedule should open up a bit now that you’re not involved in European competitions.”

Jamie shot a glare at Lila. “Wow. Okay.”

“Why should you take offense? It was your choice to change clubs, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, but—” Jamie stopped short. “You’re not going to trick me into talking by pissing me off.”

“I’m not trying to trick you, Jamie.”

“Please,” Jamie scoffed.

“Truly, I’m not. What makes you think so?”

Jamie scowled at her.

Lila nodded. “I do see how that’s a leading question. Forgive me.”

A thick silence came over the room like a fog. Lila seemed unperturbed by it, drumming her fingers on her chair and humming softly to herself. Jamie’s eyes slid back over to the bookshelf, finding the Dickinson book again. She didn’t know why, but it stirred something in her chest. And it conjured up Tessa’s smile in her mind. That sweet, gorgeous smile, which often accompanied her warm laughter.

“You don’t have to tell me anything major, you know,” Lila finally said, and Jamie forced her memories of Tessa to the back of her mind. “Anything that’s on your mind, even if it’s simply things going on at training.”

“You think I don’t know the minute this session’s over you’ll give my father notes on everything I said?”

Lila blinked and sat up. “Is that what you think?”

Jamie found herself unable to look at her, so she cut her gaze to the floor. Something in Lila’s tone made her ashamed she’d made the accusation, similar to when she first spoke to her new manager. Cheeks growing warm, she toed the carpet with her shoe.

“Jamie, your father may pay for these sessions, but that does not entitle him to anything that transpires in this office.”

Once again, Jamie found herself desperate to believe it. She wanted to trust. But her father’s shadow loomed in her heart, imposing and dangerous. She shook her head.

“He always finds out,” she said, half to herself.

“What does he find out?”

“Everything.”

“Surely not everything. I bet if you thought hard about it, you could come up with at least one thing your father doesn’t know about you.”

The memories of Tessa she’d been keeping at bay surged to the forefront of her mind. Her smile again, and that laugh. All the Northern Irish and Derry slang she’d use more frequently the more emotional she was about something. Their trip to Derry, where Jamie got to hold her hand at a table for the first time, because the Gallaghers had sworn to protect her. Mundane things like going to the chippy together to pick up dinner. And intimate things like waking up with Tessa’s blonde hair tickling her nose. Every kiss, every touch, every late night talk. All of it without her father ever knowing.

“Yes. . .” Jamie said softly. “I can think of one thing.”

“Well,” Lila said with a smile. “That’s a start.”

The rest of the session, Jamie only gave away surface level things. Her favorite film (The Parent Trap, the 1998 version), her family and growing up in London, and a few things about football. And to test the waters, she mentioned Tessa. Not by name. She referred to her as “an old friend,” but she knew if her father heard about it, he’d call and question her. If he did, it meant Lila was in his pocket. If he didn’t, Lila could be trusted.

When their time was up, Jamie was the first to get to her feet, and she headed for the door. She had a hand on the knob when Lila called her to a stop.

“One moment, Jamie.”

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Reluctantly, Jamie turned to face her. Lila carried the Emily Dickinson book in her hands as she approached, then held it out to Jamie.

“Go on, then. Start reading more.”

Jamie took it, however reluctantly. The moment her fingers brushed the hard cover, warmth spread from her hand down to the tips of her toes. She barely held back a gasp at the sensation. She forced her eyes back to Lila’s face.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” Lila said with a nod. “Besides, I need some assurance that you’ll be back.”

Jamie’s mouth twitched up, threatening a smile. “Yeah, I suppose.”

“I hope you enjoy it. I’m really looking forward to hearing your thoughts.”

Jamie swallowed, nodded, and swept from the room before anything else could be said.

The next day, as Jamie was getting ready for training, her phone rang with her father’s special ringtone. After tying off her plait, she answered.

“Hello?”

“How’d it go yesterday?” he asked quickly. “With the therapist woman?”

Jamie chewed her lip, glancing at herself in the mirror. “Fine.”

“What did you talk about?”

She stiffened. Did he truly not know? “It was basic stuff. Y’know, where I grew up, what the family was like. All that.”

“Good, good.” He paused for an extended beat. “Nothing more specific?”

Her stomach lurched. Maybe he did know. “Specific how?”

“Jesus, Jamie, the reason I sent you there in the first place. Switching clubs suddenly, abandoning your contract? Did you get that sorted?”

She blinked. He didn’t know. If he did, he’d have mentioned it by now. And his line of questioning combined with his frustration, led Jamie to believe he’d already called Lila and had been told she wouldn’t say.

“Sorted?” she asked.

“All the mental stuff. Is it done?”

Her fingers found the book, tracing the author’s name with her nail. It still gave her a tingle every time she touched it.

“Actually, Dad, I think I’m going to need a few more sessions.”

Chapter 7

Tessa darted across the street at Cecil Court, flipping off the disgruntled driver blaring his horn as she narrowly avoided his front bumper. Her eyes remained on her

fellow vintage enthusiasts gathered at the entryway of the side street that was Bookseller's Row. As she approached, she caught her breath before offering her excuses.

"Sorry I'm late," she panted. "I ran from the tube station."

"No worries," her friend Lottie replied. "We haven't gotten started yet, anyway."

"Grand so."

She greeted the others and was surprised to come across a new face. A young woman with bubblegum pink hair cut into a stylish pixie, pale skin, and deep blue eyes. Her makeup was glowy and fresh, enhancing her soft cheeks and wide smile. Her eyes lingered on Tessa a moment longer than they did everyone else.

"Tess, this is Skylar," Lottie said. "She's just moved back to London after studying in Germany for. . . what was it, two years? Three?"

"Two and some change," Skylar said with a shrug. "What can I say? Munich is fantastic. So much culture."

“And beer,” Lottie joked.

Skylar cracked a smile. “That too.”

“To say nothing about the men.”

“And the women.”

Skylar shot Tessa a wink as she said it, which made Tessa’s heart skip a beat.

Lottie laughed. “Alright, let’s shop already.”

The stores were too small for them all to shop together, so they split up into the ones they were most interested in. A couple ducked into the one with a focus on military history. The others went into the larger store that had some new releases available. Tessa decided to head to the children’s book store. She started at the back, perusing the vintage editions of Alice in Wonderland. As she turned to pick up a rare copy of Winnie the Pooh, another outstretched hand made her stop. She looked up to find Skylar had followed her in.

“Children’s books?” Skylar questioned, picking up the Winnie the Pooh copy and examining it before handing it to Tessa.

“Aye,” Tessa replied with a smile. “A friend of mine is up the duff, I’m afraid. I’m about to be an auntie before my time.”

Skylar chuckled. “Is your friend at least happy about it?”

“Oh, aye, she’s buzzing. Her husband will be too, I expect.”

“Y’know, it’s early for books. They can’t read for ages.”

“Wains love having stuff, even if they can’t use it.”

Skylar smirked and ran her hand across the table as she crossed around it, letting her fingers brush the aged covers. “You’re a sweet friend to think of her. How far along is she?”

“She’s only just found out,” Tessa replied. “Perhaps it is too early. Aren’t you supposed to wait twelve weeks or something?”

“I mean, if they’re already telling people—”

“Shite. They haven’t told anyone.”

“What?”

“I only know because I was around hers when she got the call from her doctor. Am I giving them bad luck by telling people?” Tessa’s heart rate picked up. She dropped the book on the table. “Fuck-a-doodle-doo, I’ve cursed them.”

Skylar approached and placed a warm hand on Tessa’s shoulder. “Tessa, I’m sure it’s fine.”

Tessa took a deep breath. “Sorry. I dunno why I’m so nervous.”

“It’s alright.” Skylar slid her hand down Tessa’s arm to take her hand. “You’re cute when you’re nervous.”

“I’m actually cute all the time, but thank you,” Tessa returned.

Skylar threw her head back and laughed before giving Tessa’s hand a squeeze. “You should go with Winnie the Pooh.”

“Yeah?”

“Of course. He’s sweet, body positive, gender neutral. Can’t go wrong.”

Tessa picked up the book again and held it to her chest. “Perfect.”

She took it up to the till and paid. They wrapped it in paper before handing it to Tessa in a bag, and she met Skylar by the door.

After shopping, the group headed to a café for lunch. Most everyone had found one little treasure from Bookseller’s Row. One of Tessa’s favorite things about London was the variety of vintage shops. If you had one thing in mind you needed, it was easy to narrow down. When they had a showcase or an auction, there was always a good spread of different items. And sometimes, a find could be returned to its rightful home.

Last year, Tessa found a jewelry set at a secondhand shop, did some research, and found out they were more valuable than what she paid for them. They once belonged to the Colfield family, the head of which was an earl. Though the estate eventually fell out of the family due to financial strain. Tessa sold them at a charity gala to Laci Miller, a model whose family owned the home the Colfields previously occupied. That kind of serendipity always made Tessa glad she had this hobby. Though she supposed with her multiple past lives, it was no wonder she was drawn to old things.

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“What got you into collecting vintage?” Skylar asked from her seat beside Tessa.

“Ach, I dunno,” Tessa answered with a shrug. “I suppose it helps me feel connected. To the past, and to people.”

“I find it hard to believe a beautiful girl like you struggles to connect.”

Tessa flushed. “You’d be surprised.”

Skylar carried on. “I love your accent, by the way. Where are you from?”

“Derry, but don’t hold it against me,” Tessa joked.

Skylar’s brow furrowed. “I could never. That must have been a tense childhood. I’m surprised you even wanted to come to England.”

“I was just a wee girl when it was really bad,” Tessa said, looking at her hands. “The tension lingered even after peace was official, but compared to what my parents lived through, I don’t have the right to complain.”

“How old were you when the Troubles ended?”

“Four, but as I said, it wasn’t quite over. People don’t just turn off hate.”

One of her earliest memories, when her da was teaching her to read, and she was practicing on the signs along the road as they drove to Portnoo for a holiday. She spotted the fresh paint on the brick side of a building that said ALL TAIGS ARE

TARGETS and she asked him what that meant. She would never forget the way he swallowed and told her—it was a nasty word for Catholics—and he pressed his foot further onto the gas. Her mother crossed herself and gripped Da’s hand. That was three months after the Good Friday Agreement. Jamie was the only person who knew that story. And a couple others she remembered from that time, things she never even told Billie about.

“Is that why you came to England, then?” Skylar asked. “To get away from the violence?”

“That, and to go to university,” Tessa answered, grateful for the shift in subject. “I was particularly drawn to London because of the diversity. I wanted to be somewhere I knew I’d meet people from all walks of life.”

“No shortage of that here, especially with the massive amount of tourists each year.”

She dug into her purse and retrieved a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. She lit up and took a long drag, turning her face to blow the smoke away from Tessa.

“I suppose a similar thing took me to Germany,” Skylar said. “Growing up in London, it lost its appeal for me. I wanted to be somewhere I could walk around and truly not know anyone. Leave it up to fate to decide who would cross my path.”

“Did it work?”

“Like a charm,” she said with a wink. “I met loads of people, and I loved it.”

“But you’re back in London.”

“Not for long.” Smoke billowed out from between her lips. “I know I’ll be traveling again soon.”

“Where to?”

“Not sure yet. I’ve never been to Ireland before. Perhaps there’s somewhere you can recommend.”

“Oh, aye, but I’m not as familiar with the Free State, so—”

“Actually,” Skylar cut across her with a smirk. “I think I’ve found what I’m looking for right here.”

Tessa’s back hit the corridor wall, Skylar’s lips pressed into hers, moans in the backs of their throats, their shopping bags abandoned on the floor. The flat door was only feet away, but they couldn’t wait. After lunch at the café, the group continued shopping. As they did, Skylar kept brushing her hand against Tessa’s, she wrapped a warm scarf around Tessa’s neck, and she tucked a flyaway piece of hair behind Tessa’s ear.

At first, Tessa resisted the advances. She didn’t do casual sex anymore after getting that wild streak out of her system in the immediate aftermath of her breakup with Jamie. But Skylar was flirty and cute, with the prettiest pink lips, and Tessa wanted to kiss her. And, she told herself, moving on was the only way to get rid of her thoughts of Jamie. So, she asked Skylar back to hers, and there they were, making out in the hallway.

“God, you’re gorgeous,” Skylar said breathlessly between kisses.

“You should see yourself,” Tessa replied.

Skylar, with flushed cheeks and kiss-swollen lips, standing in the dim hallway, was like a shot from an indie movie. She grinned and pulled Tessa back in for another heated kiss, this time slipping her tongue into Tessa’s mouth. Tessa whimpered, her

hands flying to Skylar's hair and gripping it between her fingers.

A sound from behind the door made Tessa stop, drawing back from Skylar, whose brows furrowed.

“Tessa?”

“Shh, I think I hear something.”

Tessa stepped closer to her door. There was a voice, but she didn't recognize it as Niamh's, who would have been at training, anyway. Billie still had a key, but it wasn't her either. It did sound feminine, though. Skylar gathered their shopping bags and followed.

“Is that. . . music?” she whispered.

Tessa heard it too. A driving beat and some piano. The melody hit, and Tessa recognized it immediately. “I Will Survive” by Gloria Gaynor. Which could only mean one thing.

“Oh, sweet, suffering Jesus.”

“What?” Skylar asked with alarm.

Tessa didn't answer. With a heavy sigh, she reached for the doorknob and turned it. The music blared as she threw the door open and her sitting room came into view. She stormed in.

“MA!”

“Ach, Tessa, it’s yourself!” her mother said pleasantly, as if she’d walked back into their house in Derry.

“Aye, well, I do, y’know, live here,” Tessa shot back. “Which leads me to wonder what you’re doing here?”

Mary Ann Gallagher bustled over to the record player and turned the volume down until it was almost inaudible. She tucked a lock of her pixie-cut hair behind her ear and faced her daughter with a nod. Tessa often saw herself in her mother—the blonde hair, brown eyes, and willowy frame were all inherited from her. Only Mary Ann had an intense love of jumpers with cats embroidered on the front and mum jeans. And she wore her glasses on a beaded chain around her neck like a grandma. Glasses which she promptly set on her nose to give Tessa a hard stare.

“I’m here because I’m your mother and I heard your ex-girlfriend was in town,” Mary Ann said. “And it’s a good thing I did, too. You’re clearly in pieces about it by the state of this place.”

“Ma, I’m fine,” Tessa insisted. “You didn’t have to come all the way from Derry to—”

“Alright, Mary Ann, I’ve taken the rubbish out to the bin, but—”

Tessa whipped around to spot her father’s hulking frame in the doorway, mouth open from stopping mid-sentence before cracking a smile. He pushed his long, dark hair—with streaks of gray around his face—off his broad shoulders and opened his arms to engulf Tessa within them. The squeeze forced a groan out of her.

“Tessa, love, it’s wonderful to see you,” he said, dropping a kiss to the top of her head.

Tessa's face got hot, especially once she spied Skylar's amused expression out of the corner of her eye. Tessa pushed herself free of her father's embrace.

"You came too, Da?" she asked.

"Of course," he said. "Do you know one of the wheels on your wheelie bin is broken?"

Tessa averted her eyes from Skylar. "I'll ring the owner and let him know."

"This being London and all, I thought it would be more efficient. How can a city this large have broken wheels on wheelie bins? It's not right."

"Jim," Mary Ann cut across him. "Maybe we don't have to worry about the wheelie bin just now."

Jim's brow furrowed. "No?"

Mary Ann jerked her head toward Skylar. Jim started, as if only realizing she was in the room, despite having walked by her to get to Tessa. Skylar offered a polite wave.

Tessa heaved a sigh. "Ma, Da, this is—"

"Mary Ann, you won't believe this!" a third newcomer cried, which Tessa immediately recognized as her grandfather, Colm. The full head of white hair and signature green cardigan were unmistakable. He came shuffling out of Niamh's bedroom, carrying a framed photo. "Tessa's flatmate's got kin in Derry! Look here, it's Eamon O'Hartigan's wain, the footballer!"

"Is she now?" Mary Ann gasped and swept over to gaze at the photo. "Ach, so she is!"

“Granda!” Tessa cried, her skin pricking with humiliation. Not only had her grandfather gone through her new flatmate’s things, Skylar was there as a witness. She thought she heard a giggle, but it was quickly snuffed out.

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Colm lifted his gaze to meet Tessa's. "Did you know your flatmate had—"

"Yes, Granda, I knew!" Tessa said, exasperated. "But you can't go rummaging through her room! That's private!"

He waved her off. "It's high time you were rid of that English girl. I never did like her. She had a fella's name."

Tessa heaved a sigh and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Billie and I are still best friends, Granda. And she moved out over a year ago when she got engaged."

"Tessa was about to introduce us to someone, Da," Mary Ann said, placing a hand on Colm's shoulder.

Tessa cleared her throat. "Aye, well. I hadn't exactly planned on you all being here, but this is Skylar. Skylar, this is my ma, Mary Ann, my da, Jim, and my granda, Colm."

Her family turned eyes on Skylar, who had pressed her lips together to keep from bursting into laughter. She took a breath and smiled.

"Are you Irish, Skylar?" Colm asked.

Skylar shook her head. "No, sir, I'm English."

Colm huffed. "Christ, but this place is crawling with them."

“Aye, it’s wall to wall English out there,” Mary Ann agreed.

“We are in England, love,” Jim reminded her.

“Siding with the colonizers, are you, Jim?” Colm barked.

“No, Colm, just reminding you we are on their land.”

“And they’ve been on ours for centuries. See if I care that they’re unhappy I’m here!”

“No one is unhappy that you’re here,” Skylar interjected.

“Speak for yourself,” Tessa muttered. “Skylar, I’m sorry, but could you give me some time with my family? I’ll text you later.”

“Understood,” Skylar said with a smile. “Looking forward to seeing you again, Tessa.”

With a wink, she left, and Tessa closed the door behind her. She squeezed her eyes shut and opened them again to brace herself for her family once more.

“Well,” she began. “I can’t say I was expecting a family reunion.”

“We’re only trying to be here for you once we heard Jamie was back in town,” Mary Ann said gently.

“London’s a big city, Ma. It’s not as if we’re neighbors,” Tessa said. “I’m fine.”

“Still, it can’t be easy, love,” Jim said. “We know how much she meant to you.”

She debated telling them that Jamie was Niamh’s teammate, and that they had already

seen each other. In this flat, too. But she didn't want them any more worried than they were. Especially considering the concern on their faces as they stared at her.

"Skylar seems nice," Jim continued. "Pretty, too."

"Aye, she's decent, but why does she have to be English?" Colm said. "Surely, there are nice, pretty Irish lesbians about. Catholic too, if you can swing it."

Already, Tessa was trying to form a message to Skylar to even half explain what she'd witnessed in the flat, but it was difficult to describe her family with words. Perhaps Skylar was a mistake in the first place, and her family's appearance had been divine intervention that stopped her from doing something she'd regret. As much as she wanted to put Jamie out of her mind, it wasn't right to use someone else to do that.

"Aye, Granda, I'm sure there are Irish Catholic lesbians to be found somewhere," she said. "Let me put the kettle on and we'll all talk."

"Already done," Mary Ann said, leading the way back to the kitchen.

"I simply refuse to believe that their lesbians are better than our lesbians," Colm went on as they all filed in behind her.

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“I don’t think there’s a ranking of the quality of each country’s lesbians, Colm,” Jim said.

“There should be,” Colm said gruffly.

Tessa rolled her eyes. It was going to be a long afternoon, indeed.

Eventually, Tessa did confess to her family that she and Jamie had a confrontation at the house warming. She left out her thoughts about how good Jamie looked dressed as Posh Spice, though. Only that nothing had changed.

“Ach, love,” Mary Ann said, sympathy in her voice as she took Tessa’s hand and squeezed it. “I’m sorry.”

Tessa shook her head, tired of the pitying expressions from everyone around her. “I’ll be fine, Ma. Honest.”

She wondered if she should tell her mother about the past lives too. Did Mary Ann even believe in such a thing? Tessa wasn’t sure. But she witnessed such a strong love from her parents, there was no way they weren’t soulmates too. Was it their first time? Or had they loved each other in several lifetimes? Did you only get a second chance if the first one didn’t work out? Tessa didn’t know the rules, but perhaps she could pay Lila another visit and find out.

“You’re always fine, Tessa,” Mary Ann said, drawing her daughter from her thoughts. “I want you to be blissfully happy.”

Tessa swallowed, unsure if it was possible for her without Jamie. “I’m sure I will be.”

The lie sat bitterly on her mouth hours later as she got ready for bed. Her family had gone to their hotel and Niamh was in her own room, presumably asleep after a long day at training. Tessa pushed the clothes hanging in her closet to the side and crouched down, her right arm extended. After shoving a few pairs of shoes aside, she found it. An old England National Team jumper Jamie had left there after their breakup.

Tessa pulled it in close to her chest, bringing the collar up to her face and inhaling deeply. A faint trace of Jamie’s scent lingered, and it was enough for Tessa’s eyes to well up, flooded with memories of their time together. Jamie holding her close as they drifted to sleep. Jamie laughing as they watched a movie on the couch. Jamie coming up behind her and wrapping her up in a hug as they prepared dinner.

Tessa sniffled. No matter what she told herself, the truth was she wasn’t over Jamie. And knowing what she did about their past lives, she was certain she never would be.

Chapter 9

The floor swayed beneath Jamie’s feet. She squinted as she gazed ahead, fixing her eyes on the single light source yards in front of her—a lamp giving off a yellow glow that hardly pierced the smothering darkness. A warm breeze curled around her, carrying the salty scent of the ocean with it. She could hear the waves lapping at the vessel she stood on. She took a determined step, seeking something. . . someone. . .

Another woman appeared on the opposite side of the deck, and Jamie’s heart leaped with relief. There she was! Finally, they could escape together.

Hardly aware it was her own mouth moving, she called out. “Verity!”

The other woman turned her blonde head, and Tessa's familiar brown eyes (sans glasses) tethered to Jamie's gaze. "Abigail."

Inwardly, Jamie questioned everything. Why had she called Tessa Verity? And why was Tessa calling her Abigail? Why were they dressed in corsets and more skirts than anyone should be wearing outside of a Renaissance fair?

"I'm sorry I'm late," Jamie heard herself say. "But I thought one of the watchmen spotted me so I hid myself away until I was certain he was gone."

"It's alright, you're here now." Tessa/Verity took her hand. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Of course. If we made it to Jamestown, there would be no way for us to—"

The groan and sway of the ship cut Jamie off. She pulled her lover closer to keep them steady until they were right again.

"The men have bought and paid for us to be their wives. There would be no way for us to be together." She reached up and cupped Tessa/Verity's cheek. "I would rather depart this world together than face a lifetime apart."

A tear escaped Verity's eye when she blinked. Jamie, with Abigail's soft hand, wiped it away with her thumb. Together, they hauled themselves up to the side of the ship, grasping a rope for the last semblance of balance. Jamie's stomach lurched with the pitch of the ship, and she held her lover's hand harder.

"One last kiss?" she offered. If this was to be their end, she wanted to feel those lips before she met it.

Verity pulled her close and captured her mouth in a fiery kiss as the wind whipped

their hair and skirts around their bodies. Bodies they would soon surrender to the sea.

“I love you,” Verity whispered in Tessa’s distinctive voice. One that Jamie could recall on her nights in Manchester when her flat seemed to swallow her whole.

With timid, tearful smiles, and their hands clasped, they threw themselves from the ship and into the inky black water.

Jamie shot up, gasping for air. Panting, she looked wildly around her bedroom, blinking away the image of the water rising above her head. Her bedroom came slowly into focus—its empty walls and basic furniture more of a comfort now than it had been when she first arrived. She brought her hand to her sweaty, cold chest, her fingers still tingling with Tessa’s touch. Or was it Verity’s? Something told her they were one and the same.

She shook her head.

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“It was a dream,” she said softly, willing her heart to return to a normal rate. “It was just a dream.”

She sat up straighter and her free hand met something hard. Glancing down, she found the Emily Dickinson book there. She had fallen asleep reading it.

With a huff, she picked it up and set it on her nightstand. She still wasn't sure Lila was right about poetry revealing the contents of the soul. Jamie hardly understood most of it, though apparently the language was affecting her. Only that, and her thoughts of Tessa, could explain that dream.

“Old-timey lesbian rubbish,” Jamie muttered, turning her back on the book and closing her eyes.

The dream still lingered in Jamie's thoughts as she pulled her kit over her head in the Stanmore dressing room the following morning at training. She had eventually gotten back to sleep—dreamless, thank goodness—but the images flashed before her eyes all through her morning coffee and breakfast. Now, as she laced up her boots, the look in Tessa/Verity's eyes haunted her.

“Jamie,” Niamh said, drawing her out of her thoughts.

“Yeah?”

“Is my ponytail off center?”

Jamie blinked and gazed at her. The bleach blonde strands were pulled into a perfect

ponytail at the crown of Niamh's head, with a pink headband to keep the baby hairs back.

"Looks dead center to me," Jamie said.

"Good," Niamh replied with a sigh of relief. "Thanks."

"Of course."

Jamie glanced around at her other teammates, chatting and helping each other get ready for training. It was Monika's turn to help Zahra with her pins. Sofia braided Mai's hair. Neriah sat on Eliana's lap on the bench in front of the latter's locker. A few of them were already warming up, helping each other with calf stretches. All eyes turned on Rebecca when her office door came open and she emerged with her mouth in a grim line as if she were about to announce someone had died.

"Ladies, I've got some news this morning," she said, and Jamie's stomach twisted. "There's been a . . . PR issue with Stanmore's owner, and—"

"Is this the hooker thing?" Neriah piped up. "I read about that last night!"

"The what?" Paige gasped.

"Apparently our owner was caught with two hookers at a hotel and now the press is eating him alive and saying he hates women and shit," Neriah said.

Jamie's jaw dropped, and the room erupted with questions. She couldn't place who said what, but she heard "Will he be resigning? When?" "What does that mean for the club?" "Maybe we'll get a woman owner!"

"Ladies, ladies, please!" Rebecca called over the din, waving her arms to quiet them

further. The noise died down and they were all focused on her again. “Mr. Rogers has unfortunately been the subject of scrutiny as of late. In an effort to prove he views women equal to men, he has decided the women’s professional team should not be using the academy facilities.”

Jamie raised an eyebrow at the manager. “So. . . we’re getting our own?”

Rebecca’s mouth turned down. “I’m afraid not.”

“Then what—”

“We’re sharing with the men’s team.”

A pregnant beat of silence passed before Eliana let out an anguished “NO!” and the rest of them shouted their agreement with the sentiment. Again Jamie only picked out bits and pieces of her teammates’ protests.

“But what about dressing rooms?” “This only further proves he hates women!” “They spit! My boots will be covered in spit!” “We need our own pitch!” “This isn’t fair!” “Why are we being punished?”

Rebecca raised her hands once more, and the team fell silent. “Listen, I’m as upset about this as you are. I appealed to everyone I could to keep us where we are, but they said he is absolutely firm in this decision. As of today, we will be training alongside the men and our matches will take place at the Hive.”

For a long moment, no one spoke.

“But. . . what about dressing rooms?” Zahra asked, fingers toying with her hijab.

“We’ll keep our dressing room,” Rebecca assured her. “We’ll just be huffing it over

to the men's practice pitch once we're ready."

"We can use it as a warm up jog," Monika said, though it was half-hearted.

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One of the things Jamie learned about Stanmore when she researched was that their facilities were all close together. The main stadium, the Hive, served as the stage for all the matches. But beside it were three other pitches. One for the professional men's team to train, one for the academy and women's team to train, and one for the women's team and academy to play their matches. It had about a quarter of the seating capacity of the Hive. The four clustered together gave the appearance of a hive or wasp nest, which was how the facilities got its name. The academy training pitch was on the other side of the stadium from the men's training pitch.

“A jog, indeed,” Rebecca said with a sigh. “Way to find the positive, Monika.”

“Does he seriously think this will make the public forget about him paying for sex?” Paige questioned. “I mean, it's a performative gesture. Not that sex work should even be criminalized or carry a stigma, but—”

“I can't explain the inner workings of Ray Rogers' mind,” Rebecca said. “Apparently, there was also an incident at the end of the 22/23 season with a female employee getting assaulted at the club. He thinks that showing the women's team this kind of 'support' will give himself and the club a better image.”

Jamie remembered reading that too. Stanmore's head lawyer had attacked a legal assistant when she discovered that he had been hacking players' personal emails to prevent certain players from being traded. The lawyer was fired, but the legal assistant still left the club, though not without pressing charges against the lawyer. The club put their full support behind the legal assistant, publicly stating they worked with law enforcement and had offered to let her keep her job. That statement was one of the reasons Jamie chose Stanmore. They protected their people.

She held back a shudder as the memories of Manchester City crept up on her. She couldn't think about that now. It was behind her. She had moved on.

“The thing to keep in mind is the positives,” Rebecca went on. “They will want to fill the seats if we're playing at the Hive, so we'll get more marketing and exposure. It'll be a boost to our spirits throughout the season. Because make no mistake, the season will be tough with us newly promoted.”

Jamie had not played professionally in a league lower than the WSL. And she and Niamh were newcomers to a team who had worked hard to get to that level. She hadn't known these women long, but she was determined not to let them down.

“The Lionesses filling Wembley for the women's Euro final was only the beginning,” Rebecca said. “With the support we're getting from the highest level here at Stanmore, we can get people regularly and genuinely interested in women's football. So let's go out there and show them that this isn't being gifted to us. We earned it.”

They nodded, smiles appearing on their faces as they readied themselves for the next challenge.

Monika led the team in the jog across the grounds to the men's training pitch. It had about as much seating as the academy match day pitch, but it wasn't risers, it had individual seating. Similar to the ones at the Hive. Five rows of them. On the practice pitch they shared with the academy, the women only had two rows. Jamie watched the frowns form on her teammates' faces as they took it all in.

“What the fuck are they doing here?”

All eyes turned to the source of the question, a forward from the men's team named Peter O'Riley. He ran a hand through his auburn curls as he glanced frantically between their manager, Donny Warren, and the approaching women. Who came to a

stop at his accusatory glare.

Coach Warren, a stocky, sweet man, heaved a sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose. “If you’d been on time, O’Riley, you would’ve heard the announcement. The women’s team is training with us until further notice.”

O’Riley’s jaw dropped, and he cast a furious glare around at his teammates, as if hoping they might contradict their manager and say it was a joke. When no one moved, he scowled at the women.

“No fucking way,” he said.

“Get over yourself, O’Riley,” their goalkeeper and captain, Jordan Frawley said in his thick Scottish accent. He stood almost a head taller than the rest of the team, though Jamie thought Eliana could give him a run for his money. The outline of a ring hanging on a chain around his neck protruded through his shirt. He faced the women with a friendly smirk. “Alright, lads, let’s make them feel welcome.”

Jordan led the way, and the rest of the team—sans O’Riley—followed him. Monika ushered the women forward to meet them halfway. Jamie clasped hands first with a Colombian national, Hector Rizo, who greeted her with a warm smile and a kind “Bienvenido.”

“Thank you,” Jamie replied.

He nodded and moved to Zahra next, who did not extend her hand, but placed it over her heart instead and offered a humble nod. Hector didn’t miss a beat, mirroring her even as a flush came over his dark skin as he looked at her face. His teammate and Egyptian national, Osahar Shadid, leaned over and whispered something in Hector’s ear. Hector grinned and, eyes still on Zahra, said “Marhaba.”

Zahra beamed when she answered with, “Gracias.”

Jamie held back a laugh as the pair continued to stare at one another. Osahar greeted Jamie with a knowing smirk.

“Do you think it’s love at first sight?” he joked.

“If there are any skeptics about the concept, they are surely believers now,” Jamie said.

Osahar chuckled. “Welcome. Don’t let Peter deceive you, most of us are fine with you all being here.”

“Thanks very much,” she replied.

It turned out Osahar was right. All the men but O’Riley were perfectly friendly as the managers lined them up for drills. Jamie paired up with Zahra for a passing drill, but noticed the latter’s eyes kept drifting over to where Hector was paired with Artem, a Ukrainian midfielder. Jamie didn’t have it in her heart to even tease Zahra, not when she knew how it felt to be drawn to someone so strongly and so quickly. It was how she had felt about Tessa. It was still how she felt about Tessa. In fact, it almost reminded her of her dream about Verity and Abigail. Whatever that meant.

Chapter 10

“Come on, Tessa, please,” Niamh begged, forcing her bottom lip into a pout. “You’ll really be helping out the club. And it’s only part-time. You’ll still be able to work at the magazine.”

Tessa heaved a sigh. The last thing she wanted was a part-time job that put her in Jamie’s vicinity. But the London Pursuit had been giving her fewer assignments, and

her bank account was reaching a point where she wasn't sure she could afford her next trip to Tesco. But Jamie. . .

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“I don’t know if I’m right for it,” she argued. “I’m not a social media manager.”

“You do socials for the magazine,” Niamh said. “It can’t be that different for a football club. And Nelle needs someone to cover the women’s team.”

“Who was covering it before?”

“No one.”

Tessa blinked. “No one?”

“Rebecca posted to our pages herself after getting some graphics from Nelle,” Niamh explained. “But now that we’re promoted, Rebecca says she shouldn’t have to. Plus, we’re playing in the big stadium, so we need more marketing to fill the seats.”

Tessa shook her head and got to her feet, disappearing into the kitchen to avoid her flatmate’s pleading eyes. Unfortunately, Niamh followed. Tessa didn’t look at her and reached up to the cabinet for the ruse of making herself something to eat. But to her dismay, her side of the cabinet held only a jar of peanut butter and a half-finished box of biscuits. Niamh’s side was bursting with crisps, crackers, dried fruits, and nuts—everything a young footballer could put away and burn off the next day in training. Tessa’s stomach rumbled. She needed to get to the grocery store.

Pulling her phone out of her pocket, she opened up her banking app. Her eyes misted over at the number and she cursed her measly salary at the London Pursuit. Especially since her next paycheck wouldn’t come through for another week.

She slammed the cabinet and faced Niamh, who eyed her with a raised brow.

“Fine,” Tessa said with a frown. “I’ll give it a go.”

“Yes!” Niamh cried, pumping her fist in the air before yanking Tessa into a hug. “It’ll be fun to have you at work too!”

Tessa wished she could say the same. She adored Niamh, but the thought of seeing Jamie again already had her stomach in knots. Maybe with the amount of other people around, it wouldn’t be too bad. Jamie would be another face in the crowd. Even though Jamie’s face always managed to hold Tessa’s attention. At the party, she hadn’t been looking. Knowing Jamie was there, though. . . Tessa wondered if she would be able to keep herself from seeking Jamie out. She would have to give it her best shot.

The September morning sun warmed Tessa’s face as she walked out on the pitch with Nelle, who Tessa found business-minded but friendly. Billie had always said good things about Nelle, so Tessa hadn’t been nervous to meet the Stanmore head of social media. The job seemed simple enough—take loads of pictures and videos at training, edit things down to fifteen to thirty-second clips, and post three times a day. For forty pounds an hour, Tessa wouldn’t complain.

The men’s team were running a drill with the goalkeepers, while the women’s team played a four-on-four match on their side of the pitch. Tessa remembered Niamh complaining the first day about training with the men, but she hadn’t said much more since then. Tessa assumed that meant it was going smoothly.

It seemed to be as she observed from the boundary. Tessa focused on the women’s team, her eyes finding Jamie in spite of herself. Jamie had always moved with the efficiency of a well-oiled machine. Her muscles and joints created a familiar dance as she dribbled the ball away from her defender and passed it up to Zahra, who scored

after one touch. Their side cheered and exchanged high fives. Jamie's radiant smile made Tessa's breath catch.

"I really appreciate you doing this," Nelle said as they came to a stop on the touchline. "With the men's season already underway, I had no idea how I was going to manage the women as well."

Tessa shook her head to clear it of Jamie's laugh. "Oh, sure, yeah. No problem. I'm sure I'll have loads of content by the afternoon."

"If you're ever stuck, do the question game," Nelle said.

"The question game?"

"When they're going into or coming out of the locker room, have a question prepared to ask each player as they pass you. 'Which club d'you think will win the league this season?' 'What footballer has inspired you the most?' 'What artist would you want to see open the Champions League final?' Stuff like that."

"Does it have to be football-related?"

"No, it could be anything."

"So. . . I could ask who their celebrity crush is?"

Nelle giggled. "I love that. Can I steal it for the men's team, too?"

"Better yet, let's ask them all together and post to both pages," Tessa suggested. "If everyone's training together, we can show that on social media."

"Brilliant!" Nelle agreed with a grin.

Even though Tessa wouldn't be working with them directly, Nelle still introduced her to the men's team. She knew Jordan already, but the rest of them she had never officially met. The manager was especially warm, with joy-reddened cheeks and a friendly smile.

Tessa disclosed to Nelle that she was Niamh's flatmate and had already met most of the women's team at their housewarming. After being introduced as the social media assistant, the women embraced Tessa. Most of them, quite literally, pulling her into quick hugs before they returned to training. The only person she didn't know was Rebecca, the manager, but she was nice enough, albeit focused. She greeted Tessa with a professional handshake, thanked her, and then was off to say something to her goalkeeping coach.

Jamie approached last. Tessa's shoulders stiffened at Jamie's outstretched hand, but she refused to let anyone around know there was tension. She forced a small smile and wrapped her fingers around Jamie's palm, doing her best to ignore the shooting warmth that went up her arm the moment they touched. A quiet gasp from Jamie told Tessa that she felt it too.

Jamie cleared her throat. "Nice to see you again."

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“You too,” Tessa said, and it didn’t feel like a lie. The truth was, touching Jamie made her more relaxed than anything. Even nerves about doing the new job faded.

Jamie let go first, but maintained eye contact for a long moment afterward. She held Tessa’s gaze until Monika called her name, and she had to turn her head. Tessa watched the swish of the brown ponytail and ached to run her fingers through Jamie’s hair.

The sound of Rebecca’s whistle drew Tessa from her preoccupation with Jamie and made her alert. Pulling out her phone, she shot some videos of the women’s drills. Rebecca wanted to work on set pieces. She split the team up into two teams, one playing defense and one playing offense. Jamie was on offense. Tessa had to remind herself to move the camera off Jamie’s flexed, gorgeous legs, and get shots of the others. She couldn’t let this job turn her into the creepy friend from *Love Actually* who only filmed Kiera Knightley.

But Jamie stole the show when she launched herself into the air to meet the ball with her head, steering it right into the top right corner of the net.

Tessa’s heart fluttered as she watched Jamie’s joy. Tessa hadn’t seen that in a while. When Jamie was at Arsenal, she was riddled with anxiety. In fact, Tessa had talked her down from more panic attacks than she could count. The few times she caught a Manchester City match, Jamie walked around the pitch with a furrowed brow and a frown. Something was different at Stanmore. For the first time, Jamie appeared to be enjoying football.

In an uncharacteristically cheeky move, she blew a kiss to the camera. Tessa grinned.

Smiley, playful Jamie was. . . cute. There was no other word for it. And Tessa found herself wishing she could kiss those smiling cheeks again. It was easy to ignore missing Jamie when Jamie wasn't around. But when she was, Tessa's chest cracked open with the misery of it.

Damn that forty quid an hour.

When the athletes wrapped up on the pitch, Tessa parked herself in front of the exit to the dressing rooms to deliver her celebrity crush question. The first few answers were expected, with several names of models thrown out. Hector mentioned Bella Hadid. Peter O'Riley switched to actresses and named Sydney Sweeney.

"Jordan, who's your celebrity crush?" Tessa asked the goalkeeper, and he tugged off his gloves.

He pulled out the chain hanging around his neck from under his kit and flashed his wedding band before pressing a kiss to it. "My wife."

"Awww," Tessa said before she could stop herself.

"Oh, come on, give us a real answer," Nelle urged through a laugh.

"That is a real answer," Jordan argued. "My wife is more famous than I am."

Nelle rolled her eyes as he made way for Paige.

"Paige, who's your celebrity crush?"

"Jordan's wife," Paige answered, snorting through the word "wife" as Jordan whirled around, affronted.

“Oi!” he warned.

“You be nice to Laci,” Paige quipped. “Or I will be so,sonice to her.”

They elbowed each other playfully as they walked down the tunnel. Tessa’s mouth turned up into a smile. Maybe the men and women could train together peacefully. Paige and Jordan teased each other, Hector and Zahra exchanged a few flirty looks, and Monika and Callum gave each other tips on the best way to take a penalty as they walked.

Jamie approached next and Tessa braced herself as she asked, “Jamie, who’s your celebrity crush?”

Jamie’s face froze, and Tessa saw a glimpse of panic behind her eyes. She recovered quickly, blinking and clearing her throat, but Tessa knew it was a ploy to buy time. Jamie had never been attracted to men. There was no way she had an answer ready to go.

“Er. . .” she trailed off. “Hozier? I guess?”

Tessa bit her lip to hold back a laugh. For someone who didn’t want people to know she was a lesbian, Jamie was not hiding it well with that answer.

Neriah, who was behind Jamie, halted. “Hozier?”

Jamie blinked. “Is that odd?”

“No, but it is gay,” Neriah said with a scoff.

The color drained from Jamie’s face. “But. . . he’s a man.”

“And? Have you seen that man? He’s not for the straights.”

“I don’t understand—”

“Okay, why don’t we get your celebrity crush, Neriah?” Tessa intervened, and Jamie shot her a grateful look before she disappeared down the tunnel. “You seem to have put some thought into this.”

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“Mine are a tie between Bad Bunny and Kristen Stewart,” Neriah said.

“Thank you for that extremely bisexual answer,” Tessa joked.

Neriah chuckled and shrugged. “I am what I am.”

She went down the hall, and Tessa continued the interviews. She hoped Jamie wasn't overthinking the moment with Neriah. But Jamie was who she was. And that meant she would be kicking herself for hours, all while coming up with a list of male celebrities to use instead in case she ever got that question again.

When the interviews were over, Tessa approached Nelle about the footage.

“Hey, d’you think we could leave out Jamie’s answer and Neriah saying it’s gay?” she asked.

“No worries,” Nelle said. “I want to post the interaction between Paige and Jordan. It shows the men’s team and women’s team are friendly, which is what our owner wants.”

Tessa let out a sigh of relief. She didn't want Jamie to get an earful from her father for something Tessa came up with.

“When the women are done for the day, could you get some b-roll footage from their dressing room?” Nelle asked. “I think some before and after shots could be cool for the opening match day post.”

“Sure, no problem,” Tessa agreed.

She followed the team out the tunnel and walked to the women’s facilities.

Chapter 11

Jamie let the hot water roll down her body, her head against the tile of the shower wall, still kicking herself for saying Hozier. He was the first male celebrity she thought of because she listened to a couple of his songs on the way to training that morning. She appreciated the man’s talent, but she didn’t have a crush on him. While they were watching game film of their first opponent of the season, Chelsea, she Googled “hot men.” She scrolled through list after list of dreadfully boring white men that she somewhat recognized from movies and other sports. None of them were Hozier, though he did appear on a list of male celebrities that lesbians have a crush on. Why, why, why had she said that?

Her dread had led her to take a second shower. After everyone was gone for the day and she had the dressing room to herself, she stripped out of her sweats and let the water wash away her shame. If they put that clip on social media, her dad would call her screaming. No daughter of mine is a gay footballer, he’d shout. That was his favorite line any time a hint of a rumor started. Queerness would limit her sponsorship opportunities, and she needed to be recognized for her talent, not as an LGBTQ+ icon.

Thankfully, Tessa had been there. If she hadn’t changed the subject, Jamie knew she would have talked herself into a hole. Any time someone came close to discovering her identity, she panicked. Her ears rang all through her first shower. It was the first touch of her anxiety returning since she’d seen Tessa again at the housewarming.

Her heart rate returned to normal for this shower, at least. For some reason, a shower always helped. Whether it was the sound of the water or the heat from the steam, she

didn't know. It just worked.

The alarm on her phone went off, letting her know it was half past seven. She needed to get home if she was going to eat dinner at a reasonable hour. The hot water tap squeaked as she turned it off, and the room went quiet after she tapped her alarm. She wrapped a towel around herself and padded back to the dressing room.

Motion from Paige's locker made Jamie's heart skip a beat, but she saw that it was only Tessa, taking some pictures on her phone. Tessa turned the camera, as if to get a panning shot of the room, but when she spotted Jamie, she dropped her phone and screamed, followed by a cry of, "Sweet, suffering Jesus!"

Jamie flinched, taken aback by Tessa's alarm, but quickly relaxed as Tessa recovered, swearing under her breath as she picked her phone back up. Jamie held back a chuckle.

"Sorry, I didn't expect anyone to be here after hours," Jamie said.

"What are you even doing here after hours?" Tessa wondered.

"Just. . ." Jamie trailed off, but decided to be honest. If the goal was to get Tessa back, she needed to let her in. "I was brooding about the celebrity crush thing."

"You don't have to worry. We're not going to post it. Nelle wants to use Paige and Jordan instead."

Jamie's shoulders dropped with relieved tension. "Oh, good."

A pregnant pause hung between them.

"Thank you for earlier," Jamie said. "For stepping in with Neriah. You saved my

neck.”

“It was no trouble.”

She noticed that Tessa wasn't looking at her. For a moment, she was confused, as it wasn't in Tessa's nature to be shy. But then she remembered she was only wearing a towel. Memories swam to the front of her mind of Tessa's hands in her hair, on her skin, between her thighs. Heat rushed to her cheeks, and she glanced at the floor. Her body longed for Tessa's touch again. Even shaking her hand earlier had driven Jamie crazy. Now, standing before her in only a towel, she could too easily picture herself kissing Tessa, letting that towel drop to the floor, and having an orgasm right up against the wall.

She shook her head. “Er, Tessa?”

“Yeah?”

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“Could you turn around so I can get dressed?”

“Oh, aye. Of course. Sorry. I can leave if you—”

“No, that’s okay. I’d like to talk. If that’s alright?”

“Sure. But get dressed first.”

Tessa turned her back to Jamie, who crossed the room to her locker and unwrapped herself from the towel. She was half-tempted to tell Tessa to turn back around. But having sex with Tessa now wouldn’t help her cause. She needed to show that she was doing the work.

She stepped into her underwear and joggers before putting on a sports bra. Deciding to push her luck, she faced Tessa.

“You can turn back around now,” she said.

Tessa faced her. “Fuck’s sake. Can’t you put on a shirt?”

“Sorry, I’m still hot from the shower. Will it be a problem?”

“No,” Tessa snapped. “I’m not an animal.”

Jamie bit her lip to stop herself from smiling. She took a seat on the bench and patted the spot beside her. “Well?”

Rolling her eyes, Tessa took a seat. “What is it you want to say?”

“I know you think nothing has changed between us, but that’s not true,” Jamie said.

“We both know our feelings haven’t gone anywhere.”

“I know. The only thing that hasn’t changed is your situation.”

“It has, actually. A bit.”

Tessa hoisted an eyebrow. “How?”

“I’m seeing a therapist,” Jamie told her. It relieved her that someone other than her father knew. And she knew there was no one more trustworthy than Tessa. “And it’s going well. She hasn’t told my father a thing.”

“She shouldn’t, that would be fucking illegal,” Tessa grumbled.

“I know, but you know how he gets. The point is, I think. . . I think I can get to a place where I’m comfortable setting boundaries with him.”

“What does that mean for us?”

Jamie glanced away. “I don’t know yet. But it’s progress. If I can set boundaries with him, then there are things I can keep from him, too. I don’t know how it’ll work, but—”

Tessa got to her feet with a groan. “It doesn’t mean shit, Jamie! I don’t want to be something you keep from anyone!”

“I can’t change overnight, Tess,” Jamie said, pleading in her voice. “If you’d only be patient, I—”

“I was patient! For a whole year, I waited for you to be ready!” She took a deep breath and looked up at the ceiling before facing Jamie again. “Jamie, it’s great that you’re working on yourself. I want you to get to a place where you can live authentically. But living in the shadows was incredibly painful. I can’t do it again.”

Jamie blinked back the mist in her eyes. “What can I do?”

“There’s nothing you have to do,” Tessa said. “Coming out is something you do on your own time. I can’t dictate it to you.”

Jamie got to her feet as well and drew close to Tessa. She had come to prove to herself and to Tessa that this could work. All she needed was the knowledge that Tessa would be open to being there when it did.

“All I need is some time,” Jamie said. “I know I can get there.”

Tessa met her eyes, her gaze softening. “Jamie. . .”

“Can you give me that, Tessa?” Jamie pressed, taking Tessa’s hand.

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Tessa's fingers tightened around Jamie's. "I don't know."

"I'll make it worth your while." Jamie traced Tessa's jawline with the first two fingers of her free hand and Tessa's eyes fell closed.

"How?"

Jamie closed the distance between them and captured Tessa's lips in a heated kiss. Time slowed as their mouths moved in practiced harmony. Everything Jamie had ever felt for Tessa rushed to the front of her heart, and she clung to it. Her arms wrapped around Tessa's slim waist to pull her close until their chests touched.

Tessa's hands roamed Jamie's back. Jamie moaned softly into Tessa's mouth. She had missed her scrappy, Northern Irish ex-girlfriend like the flowers missed the rain. The drought was finally over.

For some absurd reason, that dream on the ship also flitted through Jamie's mind as she kissed Tessa. She forced it back. She needed to be present, to commit every touch to memory, because she had no idea when she might be able to kiss Tessa again. It was everything, all-consuming and endless.

Until it wasn't.

Tessa pulled away, her lips swollen and pink from the kiss. Her chest heaved as her half-lidded gaze landed on Jamie's.

"We. . ." She took a few breaths. "We can't do this right now."

Jamie linked her index finger with Tessa's. "Can you give me some time?"

Tessa huffed out a laugh. "I've waited centuries. What's a few months?"

Jamie didn't have time to question the "centuries" comment. Tessa was out the door before either of them could say another word.

Jamie was still thinking about kissing Tessa when she went to her therapy appointment the following day. Lila hummed to herself as she took her usual seat and opened up her notebook on her lap. Crossing one leg over the other, she met Jamie's gaze.

"So, Jamie. How've you been?"

Horny and pathetic was the first answer that came to mind, but Jamie couldn't say that.

"I . . ." Jamie swallowed. She knew what she wanted to say, but the words were stuck in her throat. If she could start being completely honest with her therapist, then some close friends, then maybe it would be easier to be honest with her father. "Can I tell you something?"

Lila smiled in that gentle, patient way of hers. "Of course. It's why we're here."

"And you promise you won't tell my father?"

"Your father doesn't know a thing you share with me. I had to block his number, but as long as he makes payments, I don't care if he's angry."

Jamie longed for that level of confidence. She inhaled until her lungs were full before exhaling slowly. It occurred to her that she'd never said the words aloud. She hadn't

had to come out to Tessa or Billie or Tessa's family. Lila would be her first go at it. And it had Jamie's chest so tight she wondered if it was possible to psychosomatically suffocate.

"I'malesbian," she blurted out, all in one breath.

Lila blinked. "Sorry?"

Jamie forced her brain to slow down and let the words come out at a rate someone outside of it would understand. "I'm. . . a lesbian."

"Ah. Alright."

"And yesterday, I kissed a girl."

"That does usually come with the territory."

"Aren't you surprised?"

"That a lesbian kissed a girl?"

"No, I mean—" Jamie stopped short and shook her head. This wasn't the reaction she had anticipated. "I mean, aren't you surprised that I'm gay?"

"Not entirely," Lila said with a shrug. "I'm more surprised that you've told me after only a few sessions. I'm honored to have earned your trust in so little time."

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Jamie blinked, still bewildered. “I expected. . . something else.”

Lila set her notebook aside and leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. “Tell me, Jamie. Would you expect me to be shocked if you told me you were heterosexual?”

“No. But that’s normal.” Lila stared at her for a long moment, and Jamie let herself consider what she’d said. “Okay, I heard it.”

“I’m going to take note that we may need to unpack some internalized homophobia next time,” Lila said, picking her notebook back up and scribbling on the page. “Have you come out to anyone else?”

Jamie heaved a sigh. “No. That’s the problem.”

Lila stopped writing. “What problem?”

Then it all came spilling out. Jamie told her therapist her whole story with Tessa, right up through making out in the locker room, though without mentioning her by name. Jamie knew it wouldn’t be an issue, but she wanted to hold on to something for herself. But the main thing she explained was that because of her father’s views and his involvement in her life, she never felt it was safe to come out. She wanted to be better, to have a group she could trust beyond Tessa and the other Gallaghers. She wanted her own friends, her found family.

“. . . but I’m scared to come out,” she finished. “I’m still scared, after all this time.”

Lila finished writing and peered at Jamie over her glasses. “Have you heard of an alternative to coming out known as ‘letting in’?”

Jamie wrinkled her nose. “No?”

“It’s a recent concept I read about. The idea is that you don’t necessarily have to make a big announcement to the world about your sexual identity. You can choose to tell a select few people. Inviting them to where you are on your journey. It’s far less pressure.”

“Inviting in. . .” Jamie said to herself, letting the idea settle in her mind. It was exactly what she wanted. And a tangible step she could share with Tessa. “I like it.”

“Implement it whenever you’re ready,” Lila said. “There’s no rush on these things.”

“I think I’m ready to share with a few people,” Jamie said. Her teammates and manager came to mind.

“Excellent. I’d love to hear how it goes for you when you do.”

“Of course.”

“Now,” Lila continued, and adjusted her hair scrunchie. “I still have one question.”

“What’s that?”

“What happened after three years at Manchester City to make you come back and rekindle things with your ex?”

Jamie’s hand curled into a fist. This was the part that absolutely no one knew. But she’d come this far with Lila, who had proven to be trustworthy. She could share this.

“I was.” she cleared her throat. “I was sexually harassed by an assistant coach there and it escalated to him following me home, trying to kiss me, and get into my flat.”

She’d finally said it. Finally told someone about the events that made her realize that she wanted to be home, where Tessa was. Because after it happened, the only place she wanted to be was in Tessa’s arms. So she’d called her agent instead of the police or the club, and arranged to get out of her contract and sign somewhere in London.

It didn’t scare her now. Something about naming it gave her some courage. And once again, Lila wasn’t shocked. Only sympathetic.

“I’m so sorry that happened to you, Jamie,” she said. “Are you comfortable discussing it further?”

Jamie nodded. “It began after my first year at City. . . .”

Chapter 12

Billie poured some soda into two wine glasses. The fizz bubbled up over the ice cubes before settling back down, and Tessa watched with rapt interest for something to look at. She told Billie everything and had hoped for more of a response from her best friend than cracking open a Coke. Tessa let her eyes drift back to Billie’s contemplative face.

“So. . . Jamie is hoping for what, exactly?” Billie finally said as she walked over to dispose of the can in the recycle bin. “That you’ll be satisfied with half a relationship purely because she’s able to set a proper boundary with her father?”

“I suppose,” Tessa replied, accepting the chilly glass when Billie offered it. “When you put it like that, it sounds like I’d be settling.”

“You would be.”

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Despite feeling as if Billie had slapped her, Tessa followed Billie's lead into the sitting room, where an array of junk food waited for them in a spread on the coffee table. Popcorn, crisps, biscuits, and more tempted them as they took their seats on the floor. Billie picked up a chocolate chip and popped it into her mouth.

"I don't mean to sound like a bitch," she said after chewing. "But you've always said you wanted to be with someone who was out already, especially after Jamie."

"I know," Tessa replied, more defensively than she meant to sound. "I just think, since we're soulmates and all, I should give it another go."

Billie stopped mid-sip of her drink and blinked. "But that puts you right back where you were three years ago."

"Come on, Bills. It is different. Jamie never would have seen a therapist before, and now she is. That has to count for something."

Tessa could hardly believe what she was saying. Days ago, she had made the same arguments Billie made now, instead to Jamie's face. Throughout those days, though, Tessa had been thinking. And she'd concluded that therapy was progress. Tessa had recommended it to Jamie countless times when they were together, and Jamie always said she couldn't. She couldn't trust a therapist not to betray her to her father. If she could come around on that, maybe it would be possible. Against her better judgment, Tessa allowed herself to hope.

"I'm not saying that's not a good thing," Billie said. "But if Jamie is working on herself, she shouldn't be with anyone right now. Especially given all your history."

Tessa frowned, reaching for the popcorn. “Damn you and your logic.”

Billie smirked. “Tempting as that locker room kiss must have been, it was only a moment of weakness for you both.”

Tessa chewed her popcorn and considered it. It was true, Jamie has weakened her resolve. One brush of the lips and centuries of longing flooded through her bloodstream. But Tessa couldn’t bring herself to regret it.

“Maybe it was,” she admitted. “But also, moments of closeness might be necessary to get her to finally see our past lives. Now that she’s making herself vulnerable, it could come to her.”

“I’m not sure vulnerability is the key. I was as closed off as anyone, and just touching Ethan gave me flashes of our life in the forties.”

“Will you let me have anything?”

“Sorry, Tess, it’s. . . . I don’t want you to get your hopes up only to have Jamie hurt you again.”

Tessa turned her eyes away from Billie’s earnest expression and toyed with the string on her pajama pants. “I broke up with her, remember?”

“Because you’d reached your limit,” Billie reminded her. “And it nearly destroyed you.”

Tessa had no argument there. After she broke up with Jamie, she didn’t leave her bed for days. And then when she did, she was out at all hours, going to clubs and kissing anyone who was willing to kiss her back, having dangerous amounts of casual sex, and narrowly avoiding alcoholism. Anything to numb the hurt. It was Billie who

pulled her out of it all and got her into therapy. Tessa realized she could not ask that of her best friend again. Not when there would soon be a child who needed her more.

“I won’t be that way again, Bills,” Tessa said. “I promise.”

Billie reached over the table and took Tessa’s hand. “You know I’m here for you if you fall apart. But it hurt me to see you in that amount of pain.”

“I know.” Tessa squeezed her hand. She never knew how to thank Billie properly for all that. She wasn’t sure she would ever have the words. “You’re gonna be a good mum.”

Billie grinned. “I hope so. And Baby Knight will have the best Auntie Tessa.”

“They’re going to have a real auntie in your sister,” Tessa reminded her.

“They’re going to have a real auntie in you too,” Billie argued. “You are as much my sister as Stevie.”

Tessa cleared her throat to get rid of the lump in it. “Have you thought of any names yet?”

“Hardly,” Billie said through a chuckle. “We’ve decided to wait until we know the sex.”

“But surely you’ve got one or two in mind—”

“Stop trying to distract me by talking about the baby,” Billie warned.

Tessa scoffed indignantly. It was the only way to mask that Billie was right. “I am wounded, Billie Knight, that you would think I’d use your child, your precious wain,

who I am prepared to love as my own—” She stopped herself at Billie’s raised eyebrow. “Alright, fine, we can talk about me and Jamie.”

“Good. Because my next question is, which past life did you see when you kissed her?”

“It was the first one, when we were on our way to Jamestown,” Tessa said. “I wonder if she saw it too. Something tells me she did.”

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It was another part of the equation that Tessa couldn't stop thinking about. Something deeper passed between them, the same as when they first met at that press conference. The familiarity, the certainty that they had met before.

“Would it be mad to ask her?” Tessa asked before she could stop herself.

“I want to say no, but it is,” Billie said. “She’s only just getting to know this version of herself. You don’t want to overwhelm her. Plus, the idea might give her false hope that you’ll relent because of the soulmate thing.”

Tessa groaned. “Seriously, damn you and your logic. I thought you were supposed to have pregnancy brain or something.”

“Nope, none of that for me, I’m just hungry and horny all the time,” Billie said.

She reached for a handful of crisps and sprinkled chocolate and gummy bears over them before she stuffed everything into her mouth.

Tessa curled her lip in disgust as her friend chewed with chipmunk full cheeks, moaning to herself as she swallowed the ungodly concoction. When Billie finished, Tessa crossed herself and her friend.

“Fuck off, I’m pregnant,” Billie said, swatting at Tessa.

“I’m praying the baby doesn’t come out as if he’s had a Red Bull,” Tessa teased. “All that sugar you’re giving him—the wee critter doesn’t stand a chance.”

Billie chuckled and took a sip of her drink. “‘He’ eh?”

Tessa shrugged. “Just a feeling.”

A slow smile parted Billie’s lips as she looked down at her tummy. Tessa couldn’t help but smile too. Billie deserved a happily ever after.

Tessa got distracted when her phone lit up from its place on the table. She glanced at the screen, and Jamie’s name appeared beside the new text icon. Curious, Tessa opened it.

Jamie

If you were coming in the Fall,

I’d brush the Summer by

With half a smile, and half a spurn,

As housewives do, a Fly.

Tessa’s brow furrowed. “The fuck?”

“What?” Billie asked, glancing between the phone and Tessa’s face.

“It’s Jamie, she’s sending me. . . poetry?”

Another text appeared with the next stanza.

If I could see you in a year,

I'd wind the months in balls—

And put them each in separate Drawers,

For fear the numbers Fuse—

She texted the entirety of the poem, but one stanza in particular stuck out to Tessa.
The second to last, which read:

If certain, when this life was out—

That yours and mine should be

I'd toss it yonder, like a Rind,

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And take Eternity—

And then Jamie finished her string of messages with credit to the poet, Emily Dickinson. Tessa stiffened. In their last life before the present day, she had gifted Jamie a book of Emily Dickinson works. If Jamie was seeking the poet out, that had to mean she did feel what Tessa felt, whether she knew what it was or not. It was there, it was real.

“She feels it, Billie,” Tessa said. “She must.”

She handed over her phone for Billie to read. “The old me might have said it was only a coincidence, but now. . . I think you’re right.”

“I mean, Jamie’s never read poetry before. She hardly read anything that wasn’t about football or tactics or whatever shite. She’s. . . she’s changing.”

Billie took her hand. “Don’t jump into anything yet, Tess. Being open doesn’t mean you can’t take it slow to figure out if it’s what you truly want.”

Tessa swallowed and nodded. “What do I say?”

Billie smirked. “How about a poem?”

Jamie laid in bed, staring at her phone, willing Tessa to reply. She had hoped the poem would be an olive branch. A way to further prove that she was changing. And the poem spoke to her. Something about the words evoked Tessa’s image in her mind. It brought forth a wave of emotion that threatened to overwhelm her.

The previous owner must have felt the same. In the margins, they had written a name, Rosie, in neat script. Jamie wondered if part of the connection came from the handwriting. They wrote their s's in that same funny, half-cursive way that Jamie did. The curve on the R was similar, too.

Finally, three little dots appeared in a text bubble. Jamie sat up. Tess was writing back. She watched the three dots appear and disappear a few times until a message appeared at last.

Tessa

It cannot be my spirit,

For that was thine before;

I ceded all of dust I knew, –

What opulence the more

Jamie's heart was ready to burst. She wanted to respond, but three more dots appeared, followed by the next stanza.

Had I, a humble maiden,

Whose farthest of degree

Was that she might,

Some distant heaven,

Dwell timidly with thee!

She finished the message with a snarky

As if you could out-woo me.

Jamie snorted and fell back against her pillows with a grin on her lips. Lips that had been warm and tingly from the moment she had kissed Tessa again. Three years of yearning had ended. And now, perhaps, there was hope for more.

Jamie texted back.

Is that a challenge, Gallagher?

Tessa

You bet, Hupp.

I've got a whole book of these poems and I'm not afraid to use them.

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Sounds like quite the arsenal.

Your return fire was formidable too.

It took some Googling lol

No shame in the Google game. I had my book in front of me.

Is that what happened? You read it and thought of me?

Yeah. Is that lame?

Not at all. I want the whole arsenal.

Well, some of them seem to be about men.

Gross.

Agreed. But I promise to send you any of the poems that make me think of you.

I'm looking forward to it.

Me too ;)

I'm having girl's night with Billie, but feel free to send more as you read.

Enjoy your night. Tell Billie hello from me.

Will do. Night, Jamie.

Night.

With a sigh, Jamie brought her phone to her chest and let herself bask in the glory of a moment with Tessa. Digital or not, progress was progress. She was going to have to tell Lila she'd be holding on to her book for a while longer.

Chapter 13

“Well, well, well, if it isn't the weekend's worst losers.” Peter O'Riley's greeting was met with scowls as the women's team joined the men on the practice pitch.

Jamie narrowed her eyes at him. None of them needed a reminder of their tough loss to Chelsea in their season opener over the weekend. That five-nil final score haunted them via headlines and social media. Comments were made about Jamie in particular since she had gotten an offer from Chelsea and had turned it down. Speculations about her supposed regret made her turn off her phone. Not to mention the slew of texts from her father about every step she went wrong.

“Fuck off, O'Riley,” Paige replied, throwing up her middle finger for emphasis.

“You're not angry at me,” Peter shot back, his voice laced with sarcasm. “You're angry at yourselves. For getting absolutely fucking embarrassed on your first match day in top flight football.”

Jamie glanced at the touchline, wondering if the men's manager might call the forward off, but found Donny deep in conversation with Rebecca, both of them with their phones in their hands. Jamie shot a glare in Peter's direction.

“It's early in the season,” she said. “We have all the coming matches to prove

ourselves.”

“Yeah, to prove yourselves all the way back to relegation,” he scoffed.

“Chelsea are the defending champions, it was always going to be an uphill battle,” Neria chimed in.

Jamie found herself charmed by how united they were. After the match, there had been some bickering in the dressing room about missed opportunities. But like people not allowing outsiders to disparage their family, this squad would not let some fuckboy get between them.

“Oh, please,” Peter said. “Just admit you’re shit.”

“Shut the fuck up, O’Riley,” Jordan interjected before Paige could charge at him. “You can’t talk shit when you hit the crossbar three times in our latch match.”

Peter gaped at his goalkeeper. “That was unlucky.”

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“Aye, a bit like your face,” Jordan replied. “Now leave the women alone and work on your aim.”

Jamie hid her snicker behind her hand as Peter stalked off. Jordan offered a wave of apology to the women and jogged to his spot in front of his goal.

Rebecca approached as the squad stretched. She appeared alarmingly similar to when she announced they were training with the men.

“Alright, managers and staff have been called up to the owner’s office,” she said. “Something about furthering integration of the men and women’s team. So, the captains will be running this morning’s training. I want you all focused on set pieces and forward passes. Monika, can you handle that?”

Monika nodded. Jamie glanced over to where the men were gathered in front of their manager, who was likely giving them the same news. She dreaded thinking what training would be like without managerial supervision. Peter would have the comfort to continue his taunting. They would have to ignore him. Hopefully, he would get focused on himself after the rebuke from Jordan.

Her wish was not granted. With the managers gone, Peter became relentless. Every time they took a water break, or even got within earshot, he hit them with a snide comment. A sarcastic “what a shot!” when Zahra skied the ball from a set piece rebound. A pained “oohh” when Jamie crashed into Eliana trying to head the ball past her. A pitying “it was a good try” when Neriah missed a shot from around twelve yards. Finally, after Jamie went down while challenging Salma for the ball, and she had to fix her hair when she got up, he said the worst one of all.

“See, this is why women aren’t fit for football.”

Anger flared inside Jamie’s chest, and once her ponytail was secure, she rose herself up to her full height and rounded on him.

“The fuck did you say?” she demanded.

His mouth curled into a sneer. “I said women aren’t fit for football.”

“That’s it.”

Jamie charged at him, and before he could react, she slammed her palms into his chest and knocked him to the ground. He blinked up at her in shock while the others surrounded them.

“Women are fit for that,” she spat.

Peter scrambled to his feet and loomed over her, his face within inches of hers. With a tilt of her head, she could have touched her nose to his. Instead, she glowered up at him, imagining burning a hole through his smug face with her ire.

He raised his hands to push her back, but she was faster and slapped them away to get another push in herself. He stumbled backward, but didn’t fall. He tried to move toward her again, but Jordan held him back. Monika did the same for Jamie.

“Let him go,” she said, for only Jamie could hear. “He isn’t worth it.”

“Yeah, but he won’t be able to run his mouth if I stuff his boots in it,” Jamie replied through clenched teeth.

Honestly, Jamie was proud of herself. Three months ago, a man getting her face that

way would have sent her into a panic attack. Thanks to her work with Lila, she was confident enough to assert herself more.

“Just as well,” Peter said loudly. “You’d only lose again.”

Jamie whipped around and lunged at him. “Alright, you and me, O’Riley, let’s go!”

Her teammates jumped in to restrain her, while the men did the same for Peter, though he and Jamie continued to spout obscenities at each other as they struggled. Each set of teammates yelling to calm them down. Normally, Jamie was able to ignore this stuff. People were always saying women didn’t belong in the sport. But Peter got under her skin. He was one of those guys that deserved a fist in his nose to teach him some respect.

When her muscles protested another go against her teammates, Jamie settled down, her chest heaving as she caught her breath.

“Something tells me that wasn’t a friendly huddle I just saw.”

Jamie turned her head to see Tessa approaching, camera bag slung over her shoulder, and a gorgeous smile on her face. Her brown eyes danced with amusement behind her glasses. Only in Tessa’s presence did she feel the least bit embarrassed. But knowing Tessa, Jamie realized the feeling was unfounded.

“Fucking O’Riley,” Jamie said.

“Say less,” Tessa replied, rolling her eyes.

“Where’s Nelle?” Neriah asked.

“She’s ill, so it’ll just be me today,” Tessa told her. “Though perhaps I should keep

the cameras off if there's to be a brawl. Not exactly the image the club wants to portray."

"If he says 'losers' one more time, I'll give you a warning before I start swinging," Jamie said.

Tessa blinked. "That's what he said?"

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Jamie nodded. “And that women aren’t fit for football.”

“If he’s so confident, why don’t you all play a match against each other? You could come after hours, use the practice pitch, and settle the score once and for all.”

“I like that idea,” Jamie said with a smile tugging at her lips. She glanced around at her teammates. “What do we think?”

“I don’t know about y’all, but I wanna shut that man up,” Neriah said.

Murmurs of agreement followed, but they deferred to their captain, Monika. She faced them with a determined furrow of her brow. She nodded, and it was all the permission Jamie needed.

“Oi! O’Riley!” she shouted, and the entire men’s team turned to look at her. She met Peter’s gaze among them. “Men’s team versus women’s team. Tonight. For all the glory. You in?”

Peter smirked. “You’re on!”

The match was set for ten o’clock that night. The September air cooled Jamie’s skin as she walked out onto the pitch. Under the lights, she always thought it was as if the sun were out, and only the temperature reminded her of the late hour. She and her teammates warmed up the same way they would for a real match. Oddly, Jamie found herself more nervous for this than she was in the opener against Chelsea.

The men emerged from their dressing room, and Jamie could hear them grumbling as

they walked out and began their stretches. Behind them came their appointed officials—Tessa and former men’s team player, Ethan Knight. Jordan suggested their former teammate because he was “annoyingly ethical” and Tessa was chosen because well, everyone liked her.

Without the usual music playing, the warm-ups went by in eerie silence. Then Tessa and Ethan summoned the captains to the center of the pitch. Jordan and Monika met them, their teams in school circles behind them.

“Alright, let me lay out some ground rules,” Ethan said in his deep, Southern drawl.

Jamie had seen him in several interviews, but his voice always surprised her. He sounded straight out of a cowboy movie. He played for the Chelsea men’s team, and whenever he scored a goal, the crowd sang “Save a Horse, Ride a Cowboy.”

“I understand this match is unofficial, but y’all still have your regular seasons, so no malicious play or violent conduct,” he warned. “We don’t need nobody getting injured over this. Also, we don’t have cameras. There’s obviously no VAR or anything. So what Tessa and I say goes. We gotta trust what we see, and so do you.”

“Also, to save everyone some time, we’re only playing two thirty-minute halves,” Tessa added. Jamie took a brief moment to admire Tessa’s legs in the shorts she had on. “Ethan will decide on any stoppage depending on what happens during the match. We won’t do cards, only fouls and penalties. Any questions?”

They all shook their heads, Monika and Jordan shook hands, and then everyone took their places. Jamie watched Tessa jog to the touchline and had to force herself not to stare at Tessa’s ass. Jamie thanked every deity she could think of that Tessa was not a real official. Otherwise, she’d never get through a match.

Ethan placed the ball and blew the whistle for the kick off. Monika beat Peter to the

ball and passed it back to Zahra who passed to Jamie. The men pressed, forcing the women back to Eliana in goal. Eliana kicked a straight shot to Jamie, who tucked her shoulder to avoid Luka, the defender marking her. With him out of her way, she had a clear path toward midfield and she dribbled through it as fast as she could. Zahra was ahead of her, so she passed, and Zahra took control easily, directing the ball up the right side of the pitch. Osahar met her but she beat him with a nutmeg and pressed on. Monika made a run up the middle, careful to stay onside until Zahra passed, then the striker sprinted toward the goal. She took one touch, and with her second, she sent a rocket past Jordan into the back of the net.

“Fuck yeah!” Jamie cried, hurtling forward to celebrate with her teammates.

They hugged and high-fived Monika through cheers and laughter. Jamie could hardly believe they’d scored on the men’s team within the first two minutes of the match.

“Offside!” Peter yelled as he charged toward Tessa.

Jamie didn’t even think before she ran after him. His face was within inches of Tessa’s when Jamie arrived, and she yanked him back by his jersey. She planted herself between him and Tessa.

“Don’t you dare start in on her,” Jamie warned.

“What, is she your girlfriend?” Peter mocked.

Jamie stepped toward him. “I’ve put you on your arse once already, O’Riley, I’ll do it again.”

Tessa stepped between them and put her hands out. “O’Riley, I had a clear view, it wasn’t offside. You all agreed to the terms, and I say the goal stands. Question me again and I will fucking lay you out.”

God, Tessa was hot when she was threatening.

“Fuck off,” Peter scoffed, and stalked back toward the middle of the field.

Jamie moved to follow him, but Tessa caught her wrist.

“Thanks for coming to my defense,” Tessa said, and Jamie noticed the way her cheeks got pinker as she spoke.

“Of course,” Jamie replied. “Though you handled him pretty well yourself.”

Tessa smirked and nodded. She released Jamie and then met Ethan’s gaze in the center of the pitch. Jamie jogged back out to join her teammates for the restart, but her skin still tingled with Tessa’s touch. She decided it was good luck.

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The first ten minutes passed with no luck for the men, except for their defense and Jordan's remarkable saves. Jamie had to admit, he was one of the best keeper's she'd ever seen, in the men's game and the women's.

As Zahra made another run up the side, Kâmil, one of the men's defenders, tried to poke the ball out from under her feet and into touch. She leaped to avoid the challenge, but as she did, her chest met his shoulder. The contact must have dislodged her pin, because her hijab came loose and began to slide off her head. In her panic, she tripped over the ball and careened across the grass.

"Shit!" Kâmil cried as he slapped his hands over his eyes and turned his back, letting the ball roll out of play.

"LOOK AWAY!" Osahar bellowed at his other teammates. "COVER YOUR EYES AND LOOK AWAY!"

Jamie and the other women all surrounded Zahra, who got herself to her knees and searched the grass for the pin.

"Oh no!" she cried.

"I've got one in my bag by the bench," Jamie said. "Back in one second."

The group closed in the gap she left and she hurried over to her bag to retrieve the box of pins. As she jogged back toward Zahra, she looked up and saw the men. They all had their backs turned with their hands over their faces. Even Jordan, acres away in the goal. Peter too, at midfield and not in direct line of sight. All of them respected

it. Respected Zahra. And in that moment, Jamie felt they respected all the women.

Smiling, she made her way back to the huddle and helped Zahra.

When Zahra was decent again, Tessa whistled, and they all took hesitant looks at first. Kâmil was the first to approach a watery-eyed Zahra.

“I’m so, so sorry,” he said. “I didn’t see anything, I promise.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” she assured him. “But thank you, anyway.”

He nodded and let her be. Hector on the other hand, came all the way from the other side of the pitch. He moved to put a hand on her shoulder, but stopped himself before he touched her.

“Are you okay?” he asked, with such tenderness to his voice that it almost brought Jamie to tears.

Zahra nodded, a smile forming on her lips. “I am. Truly.”

“I’ll punch Kâmil if you want,” he offered. “Just say the word, and I’ll—”

Her laughter stopped him. “I appreciate it, but really, it’s not necessary.”

“Okay. Offer stands, though.”

She giggled and shoed him back to his side of the pitch.

The sting was gone from the match after that. Not that the men had much of it to begin with, other than being disgruntled at Peter for instigating this whole thing. Peter and Jamie did not come to blows again. Not even when the women scored from a

bicycle kick Neriah put into the net from a corner. His deep frown and narrowed eyes told them he wasn't happy, but that was nothing they didn't get from other players after a goal anywhere.

Jamie scored the third goal. Monika took a shot that ricocheted off the post. With one touch, Jamie redirected it to the opposite corner. It bounced right past Jordan's outstretched hands.

The men got one back before the end, putting the final score at three-one. When the whistle blew, the women all ran together and cheered. Peter was silenced.

"Whoo!" Neriah cheered. "Man, what a slaughter! And we just mowed the pitch with you from one end to the other!"

Peter rolled his eyes. "Okay,slaughteris a strong word."

"Face it, O'Riley," Jamie teased. "You guys are good. But we're better."

He looked at Jordan, who was shaking hands with Eliana. "You didn't let any get past you on purpose, did you?"

"Did I fuck?" Jordan returned, affronted. "They won fairly. I'm going home to my wife now."

Chuckling, Jamie made her way over to Tessa and pulled her in for a hug. Tessa stiffened at first, but leaned into it, wrapping her arms around Jamie's waist.

"I want to kiss you more than you know," Jamie murmured into her hair.

Tessa pulled away and met Jamie's gaze. "You won't, though."

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Jamie's breath caught in her throat. Tessa's tone was difficult to read. Part of it was accusatory, the other protective. Jamie also detected some disappointment. Maybe she hadn't made as much headway as she thought after their kiss in the locker room and the poems. But those things were all private. Jamie hated it, but she understood. She swallowed and nodded, all the triumph from their victory gone in an instant.

Chapter 14

Tessa watched the Mersey River flow beneath the bridge as the Stanmore bus crossed over it, ignoring a text from Skylar and feeling like a proper asshole. Ever since kissing Jamie, Tessa had been ghosting Skylar, and now she was faced with the direct question:

Skylar

Have I done something wrong?

Of course, she hadn't. Skylar's only transgression was not being Jamie. That was Tessa's issue. She glanced over the seats where Jamie sat with Niamh, the latter showing Jamie videos on her phone before they laughed together. Tessa sighed. Right when she had met someone else, Jamie came back into her life. And unfortunately, with Jamie around, Tessa couldn't focus on anyone else. It had to be due to their soulmate connection, but that didn't make it any less painful.

How many more lifetimes would it take for Jamie to be where Tessa was? Was there an amount where the universe would finally give up on them? Or was Tessa truly cursed to live an eternity waiting?

Shaking her head, she opened up her phone again and typed a quick message

No, you haven't. But I don't think it's a good idea for us to see each other. Something's come up, and I'm dealing with it.

Another message appeared within seconds.

Skylar

Something being your ex-girlfriend?

Aye. I'm sorry.

It's okay, I understand. We all have the one that got away.

I dunno if it's like that, but it is complicated.

I get it. But my advice? Don't let each other get away this time.

Tessa blinked at her phone. With a huff, she locked it. That was easy for Skylar to say. She hadn't been abandoned in three different lifetimes, only for that person to come back asking for yet another chance. And yes, there was the therapy, but would that be enough? When Jamie told Tessa she wanted to kiss her after the match against the men, her temper flared. Her response was mostly to express what her expectations were—that Jamie would not act on her feelings. Also, a small, petty part of her meant it as a dare. For all intents and purposes, Jamie chickened out.

They arrived at St. Helen's Stadium, and Tessa got off the bus first, pointedly not looking at Jamie as she disembarked, and waited for the team to follow. She would take a few videos of them getting off the bus for Instagram and TikTok. The women usually waved to her if they acknowledged her at all.

Tessa set up a tripod to get both the Stanmore bus and a Liverpool flag in the background of the shot. The team made their exits, pulling their jackets tighter around them to combat the chill in the October air, waved to Tessa, and headed inside.

Tessa followed them once all the players were through, and while they warmed up, she got shots of their shirts hanging in their lockers. She shocked herself sometimes with how quickly she'd fallen into the match day routine. But once she had the basics, she didn't have to think much about it.

The match kicked off on time, and that was when Tessa knew she had to be "on." Ninety minutes passed quicker than she thought, and she needed to pay attention to get all the highlights from the match. Jamie featured in most of them. Her command of the midfield had strengthened Stanmore's attack. She created more chances for a goal than they ever had before. The Liverpool goalkeeper was incredible, and she continued to deny Stanmore throughout the first half.

Tessa remembered how it was when she and Jamie were together three years ago. Jamie wanted her at matches, but not too many so they wouldn't arouse suspicion. She didn't want Tessa sitting with the other families, because it might tip her father off to their relationship. Tessa could have a shirt, of course, but not Jamie's, because that might send a message. Eventually, Tessa gave up and watched from home.

Watching from the sidelines was worlds different. As if she weren't already a massive ride, seeing Jamie up close gave Tessa an even greater idea of her talent. Jamie dribbled and passed with knife-like precision. She could deliver the perfect cross and corner, and even score if the ball came to her feet at the exact right moment. Which was how Stanmore earned the opening goal against Liverpool.

The Liverpool keeper blocked a header from Monika, which bounced right to Jamie, who didn't even take a touch before she hammered it into the back of the net. It sailed past the Liverpool defenders and under the keeper's flying body. The Liverpool

crowd booed, but Jamie found the corner of Stanmore supporters and leaped into the air in front of them, pumping her fist. The fans waved their scarves in reply. Her teammates flew to her and engulfed her in hugs.

Tessa caught the whole thing on camera. Then, Jamie blew her a kiss. On camera, it appeared to be directed toward the device, but Tessa knew better. Jamie met her gaze and blew her a kiss. It felt. . . intentional. For her.

Stanmore remained one-nil up for most of the second half. Tessa's heart fluttered every time Jamie caught her eye. When Jamie delivered the cross that gave Monika the shot for Stanmore's second—and the winning—goal, Jamie beamed at Tessa over Monika's shoulder when they hugged.

When the match concluded, A sea of athletes and staff engulfed Tessa as they celebrated their first win of the season. Jamie's hand lingered on the small of Tessa's back when they all parted.

Alright, you, Tessa thought. You've got my attention.

In true Stanmore tradition, the team went out for karaoke following the first out-of-town away match of the season. Tessa got the invite from Niamh, and decided to join them. They picked a tiny place that was within minutes of the stadium. The bar was so small, the team took up the entire place.

“Alright!” Paige called over chatter. “We can go in any order we want, but remember, Niamh and Jamie, as the newest members, must sing before the end of the night. Got it, you two?”

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Jamie gave a thumbs up.

“I want to go first!” Niamh cried, and her teammates and Tessa cheered.

“Come on up!” Paige replied and offered the microphone.

Niamh took her place on the barely there stage and leaned over the bar to whisper her song choice. Taking the microphone, she addressed the team.

“I’ll be starting us off with a classic,” she said. “The absolute artistry of S Club, formerly S Club 7.”

The team cheered and Tessa laughed as the first notes of “Never Had a Dream Come True” played over the sound system. One thing Tessa had learned about Niamh was that the girl was obsessed with anything 90s and Y2K. Not that Tessa minded. It only rubbed her the wrong way when Niamh referred to those eras as “vintage.”

The song hit differently, though, with Jamie sitting across the room. Niamh’s beautiful vocals were hardly a distraction from the meaning of the words. Especially lines such as “a part of me will always be with you” and “I just can’t say goodbye.” Jamie’s gaze found Tessa’s from across the room, and Tessa didn’t look away. She held on, staring into the blue depths of Jamie’s eyes, knowing she felt it too.

Tessa cut her gaze from Jamie’s as the song finished. She clapped and forced a smile as Niamh came down from the stage, and Zahra took her place, singing a song in Arabic.

Paige went next, followed by Eliana full-on serenading Neriah. Then Monika elbowed Jamie, indicating it was her turn.

Jamie gave her song to the bartender before stepping up behind the mic. She didn't say anything, she only locked eyes with Tessa again and began her rendition of Willie Nelson's "Always On My Mind."

Tessa sucked in a soft gasp. A memory of their last time together swimming into view. They stood in Tessa's kitchen, Tessa chopping vegetables and failing to explain what it meant when a recipe called for a "whack of spuds." All she could say was that you knew it when you saw it. Jamie giggled at the idea, but let the argument go once that very song came on shuffle.

"Oh, fuck yeah," she'd said.

"Willie Nelson? Seriously?" Tessa had questioned.

"I absolutely love this song, and no one does it better than Willie, not even Elvis," Jamie had replied, setting her drink down to join Tessa at the counter. She extended her hand. "Dance with me."

Tessa had glanced between Jamie's hand and her face. "I'm chopping spuds here."

"Stop and dance."

And with that, Tessa had given in. She took Jamie's hand and let Jamie pull her into her arms. Back then, Tessa had never felt safer in any place. She rested her head on Jamie's shoulder and they swayed together, Jamie singing softly in her ear, dinner forgotten. For three minutes and thirty-one seconds, they were the only people in the world.

From her seat beside her, Niamh nudged Tessa with her elbow, bringing Tessa back to the present as Jamie sang “Tell me that your sweet love hasn’t died.” Jamie was still gazing meaningfully at her, no doubt reliving the memory as well.

“Alright, Tessa?” Niamh said. “You look about ready to cry.”

Tessa frowned. “Catch yourself on.”

She turned away and blinked, but the tears rolled down her cheeks. The room spun around her. She needed to leave. The song faded out, and Jamie’s voice rang clear with the words “you were always on my mind.” Tessa had to get some fresh air, or she was certain she would suffocate. She launched herself to her feet and pushed her way through the crowd to the door. She burst through it, sucking in the October air, raw grief encasing her heart.

“Tessa!”

She knew it was Jamie without having to look. That voice had followed her across centuries.

“Tessa, wait,” Jamie said, jogging to catch up with her on the pavement. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you back there. I only. . . I wanted to bring back a good memory. It was for me, anyway.”

Tessa sniffled. “That’s just it, Jamie. You do something like that and then say something so sweet and you are making it impossible for me to stay mad at you!”

A smile threatened the corners of Jamie’s mouth. “That is sort of my goal.”

“Sweet suffering Jesus. . .” Tessa sighed and ran a hand through her hair. “I like that you send me Emily Dickinson poems and that you remember dancing in my kitchen.

But getting over you was the hardest thing I've ever tried to do. And now you're here, and it feels like all that effort was a waste. Because everything I have ever felt for you is still right here in my heart." She put a hand over her chest and turned her face toward the sky, but the stars were hidden behind thick gray clouds. "I want to be with you again, Jamie, but I'm scared."

A hand clasped hers, and Tessa looked forward again, finding Jamie right in front of her.

"I'm scared too, Tessa," she said, interlocking her fingers with Tessa's. "I wish I was ready. Truly, I do. I never want you to hurt the way you did last time. All I can do is promise to keep working on things."

Tessa swallowed hard. "I hope you know I am proud of you for that."

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“It’s not enough,” Jamie replied. “Not yet.”

“Can’t you tell me what it is you’re afraid of? What do you think your father will do to you if you come out?”

Jamie dropped her gaze to the ground. “I don’t know.”

“I think you do. You just don’t want to tell me.”

A drop of rain fell between them, creating a dark spot on the pavement. Steady rain followed, pattering against the windows of the shops and soaking into Tessa’s clothes and hair. Jamie looked up at the sky as a rumble of thunder sounded above them.

“I’m getting there, Tessa,” she said. “I’m doing my best.”

“Could you do your best a wee bit faster?”

Jamie met her gaze and chuckled. Her chocolate brown hair turned black as the rain saturated it, making Jamie’s face appear as pale as marble. Tessa often thought Jamie looked like a work of art. But soaking wet, under the light of the lamp posts, it was especially true.

Jamie nodded toward the alley around the corner from the bar entrance and led Tessa into the safety of darkness. There, she pinned Tessa against the wall, lifted her arms over her head, and kissed the daylight out of her.

Heat surged through Tessa’s body, along with the memories of their past lives.

Flashes of them stealing kisses outside the ward during WWI, sneaking away to the kitchens before the American Revolution, and holding each other as the ship swayed beneath them on their way to Jamestown. All of it flickered behind Tessa's eyes as Jamie's mouth moved with hers. All their time together. All their attempts at honoring their love.

When they parted for air, rain streaming down their faces as they panted and gazed at each other, Jamie cupped Tessa's face.

"Fast enough for you?" Jamie said.

Tessa smirked. "For now."

With that, she pulled Jamie in for another kiss.

Chapter 15

Knock, knock, knock.

Jamie ignored the sound and continued kissing Tessa. They were lying in a field under a Georgia summer sun, though how she knew that, she wasn't sure. All she knew was that their flush bodies pressed against each other in the warm grass was making her dizzy. Did anything matter other than Tessa's sweet mouth?

Knock, knock, knock.

No, nothing else mattered. Tessa's tongue danced along Jamie's mouth, drawing a moan from deep in her chest. She tightened her arms around Tessa's waist. Every muscle in Jamie's body demanded to be closer. She reached for the stays on Tessa's corset. She didn't even question why Tessa was wearing such a thing.

Knock, knock, knock.

Jamie snapped her eyes open. A groan escaped her as she took in her bedroom, which was unfortunately sans Tessa. They had kissed for minutes that passed like hours in the rain against the wall only a day ago. Because Tessa was gone, it felt like years ago now.

Jamie pushed herself upright and rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. She could have sworn someone was—

Knock, knock, knock. “JAMIE!”

The sound was coming from her front door, and the voice was unmistakably her father’s. With a gasp, Jamie shot out of bed. She wrapped herself in a dressing gown, stepped into her slippers, and flew down the stairs. She hadn’t even bothered to check her appearance in the mirror.

Dexter was still knocking when Jamie yanked open the door. “Dad! Good morning!”

He met her bright greeting with a scowl. Instead of a reply, he held up a magazine. A photo of Jamie and Tessa holding hands outside the bar covered the front page. The blood drained from Jamie’s face.

“Care to explain yourself?” he demanded.

“I—”

“Get inside,” he barked, and pushed her back over the threshold as he stepped in and kicked the door shut behind him. With his fingers wrapped around her upper arm, he dragged her to the kitchen.

“What have I told you about this shit, Jamie?” he shouted. He slammed the paper down on the counter with a resounding thwack. Jamie flinched. “Are you seeing this girl?”

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“No!” she cried. The lie tasted like ashes in her mouth, but she couldn’t tell him. Not this way. “Dad, I’m not seeing anyone! She’s a friend who works at the club.”

“You two seem to be a bit more than mates in this.”

Jamie chanced a glance at the photo, and the fondness between them was fairly obvious. Small smiles, heady gazes, clasped hands. It screamed romance. And now it sent Jamie’s heart rate skyrocketing for all the wrong reasons.

Her father’s lip curled with disgust as he glared at her. “You know how I feel about this, Jamie.”

“I know, and it’s not what you think, I swear.”

Sweat trailed down the back of her neck. Moisture formed along her hairline too. Her fingers tingled the way they did when an anxiety attack was coming on. She squeezed her eyes shut and forced herself to focus. She couldn’t have a panic attack in front of him. He wouldn’t stand for it.

“I—er—well,” she stammered. “I was comforting her. Just as a friend.”

“And does she see you that way? Just as friends?”

“I’m sure she does.”

“Good, because this shit is not okay. I understand there are a lot of queers in women’s football, but you mustn’t let them convince you that it’s normal, Jamie. It’s unnatural,

it's a sin, and I won't allow it with my child."

She swallowed down the sting of his words and nodded. Her legs were going numb as well, but she was afraid sitting down would make her appear weak. Or worse, guilty.

He heaved a sigh. "You had a good goal against Liverpool, but that cross in the twenty-third minute was shit. Work on that with your striker."

"Yes, sir," she replied dutifully.

"I'm gonna meet with your agent and work on getting this fucking photo taken down anywhere I'm able. Be more careful going forward. This speculation about your sexuality is distracting from your football."

"I understand."

Jamie hated how meek she sounded. She hated herself for diminishing Tessa yet again. So much for the progress she had promised. She told herself that next time she would set a boundary, she would tell her father as much of the truth as she could. But the moment came, and she retreated into herself, meek as a mouse.

"Get on the pitch today, if you can. I'll see you later."

With that, he was gone. Jamie collapsed into her kitchen chair. Cradling her head in her hands, she tried to draw in air, only to find her lungs couldn't fit it. Stuttering gasps overtook her and tears filled her eyes. She failed. She bent to her father's anger the same as she always did.

With trembling hands, she grasped for her phone in her dressing gown pocket. She managed to dial Lila despite her shaking fingers. Lila picked up after two rings.

“Good morning, Jamie,” she said. “Are you alright?”

“I can’t—I can’t—” Jamie sputtered. “I can’t breathe.”

“Yes, you can, Jamie, I promise.”

“No, I can’t, it’s like—my lungs aren’t working. And I can’t feel my legs and my fingers feel like they’re asleep and I can’t stop shaking. Lila, Jesus Christ—”

“Jamie. You’re having a panic attack. I want you to breathe in and out with me, alright? Can you do it if I show you how?”

“Yeah. Alright.”

Lila inhaled through her nose, and Jamie followed suit, but found it shallow and lacking. Lila exhaled through her mouth. Jamie’s release came with a shudder.

“In and out. Breathe with me.” Lila’s voice was smooth and calming.

Jamie did as she instructed, and found that with each breath, it got easier. Finally, when Jamie was able to inhale and exhale without restraint, Lila told her she could breathe normally again.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“No,” Jamie said. “A picture of me with another woman got printed and my father stormed into my house furious about it.”

“Who is the woman?”

Jamie bit her lip. “My ex-girlfriend.”

“I see. Did you tell your father the truth?”

Jamie’s chin wobbled, and she swallowed a lump in her throat. “No.”

“Why don’t I come over and we can discuss it, hm?”

“Okay. Do therapists normally make house calls?”

“Sure. Besides, since your father caused this, I’ll charge him double for the session.”

A chuckle escaped Jamie’s chest. “I’ll see you soon.”

Lila arrived within half an hour. Before she began therapy, she put the kettle on and made them each a cup of tea.

“It’s much too early to have this kind of talk without a cuppa,” she said. “And that your father would accost you at this hour before you’ve even had a chance to caffeinate is totally barbaric.”

Jamie watched the steam rise out of her cup for a long moment before she took a sip. It warmed and soothed her chest, sinking into her stomach and relaxing her muscles. She sank into her couch.

“Start from the beginning,” Lila said gently. “What happened with the photo?”

Jamie relayed the night of the match, but was honest with Lila about the kissing in the rain and what she had said to Tessa.

“And then my father came bursting in here and I didn’t do anything,” she said. “I’ve let her down. I let myself down too. I thought I’d be able to stand up to him.”

“Jamie, you’re a remarkable person, but did you honestly think that after only two months of therapy, you’d be able to make that drastic of a change?” Lila replied. “Your father is the greatest source of trauma in your life. It’s going to take you longer to get to a place where you can face him the way you want to.”

Jamie blinked. “That’s. . . honest.”

“It’s part of my job to be honest with you. And in pursuit of that, I have to say, I’m curious as well about what your ex-girlfriend asked you. What do you think your father will do if you set a boundary or even come out to him?”

“I. . .” Jamie drummed her fingers on the side of her teacup. “I don’t know if I can talk about it.”

“Has he ever struck you?”

“No.”

“Threatened you?”

“Not really.”

“Anything other than using his words?”

“No. But his words are what did it.”

Lila paused, her eyes fixed on Jamie, who couldn't make herself look back.

“What did his words do, Jamie?”

“I can't talk about it because it didn't happen to me.”

“Jamie,” Lila said, with a sternness Jamie hadn't heard before. “Clearly, whatever it was has affected you enough to fear him beyond even your own desires. If you name it, we can work through it together.”

Jamie glanced down at her tea again. “I've never spoken to anyone about this.”

“There's no time like therapy to share something of that nature.”

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“Hardly anyone knows this, but,” Jamie paused to clear her throat. “I have. . . had an older brother.”

Lila raised an eyebrow. “Had?”

“He died. A long time ago.”

“How did he die?”

“He killed himself.”

Lila blinked. “I’m so sorry, Jamie. That must have been difficult.”

“It wasn’t, really. I wasn’t close to him. He was ten years older than me. And I was only five when he died. Nowadays, I can barely remember what he looked like.”

“That’s normal. Most adults have difficulty recalling anything earlier than six or seven,” Lila said. “Can you tell me what you do remember of him?”

“I remember that he was nice to me,” Jamie said. “All my friends with big brothers talked about how they pulled their hair and teased them, but not my brother. He doted on me. And I idolized him. He played football too. And Dad put a lot of pressure on him. I remember once, I came into his room and he was crying. He had his football in his lap, and he was crying over it. Of course, being a kid, I ran in and hugged him.”

“That sounds rather sweet. Do you remember what you said to each other?”

“No, not really,” Jamie shook her head. “But I remember feeling so. . . safe.”

She paused for a long moment, toying with the tag of her tea bag as she tried to remember more. But it was all hazy.

“I feel guilty sometimes that I don’t get emotional or anything when I think of him,” she said.

“It is hard to grieve for a person you hardly got the chance to know,” Lila replied. “And I cannot imagine his death being your fault.”

“No, it was. . . the pressure, I suppose,” Jamie continued. “My brother was good at football. Really good. Probably better than my dad was at that age. He was fifteen and there was already talk about his professional career. Maybe even playing for England. I remember my parents talking about it while my brother and I listened outside their door. But it seemed like the better he got, the more Dad pushed him.”

“Hence you found him crying in his bedroom.”

“Exactly. And I remember one fight in particular, after my dad found a note from a boy in Theo’s class in his school bag. He went absolutely mad, raving at Theo. He shouted so loud, I remember thinking the house was shaking. That was the night.”

Lila nodded. “What do you remember of that night?”

“I remember my mother screaming,” Jamie said. That memory was distinct. She had never heard that kind of a wail before and hadn’t heard one since. Filled with unimaginable agony. Complete and total despair. “I remember the lights when the ambulance came, and them carrying him out on a stretcher, a sheet over his body. Mum and Dad had a neighbor come over and stay with me while they went to hospital. I snuck into Theo’s room and took the note.”

“Were you able to read it?” Lila asked.

“Not until years later,” Jamie told her. “And it may not shock you to learn that it was a love letter between Theo and the boy at school.”

“It doesn’t shock me, but it does make me sad. For Theo, and for you.”

“And the worst part is, it’s all I have left of him.”

“You still have it?”

Jamie nodded. “Yeah. Dad got rid of every trace of my brother in the house. All the photos were put into an album. Theo’s trophies went into a box. It all went in the attic. All his clothes were donated. His room became my dad’s home office. It was like I never had a brother after that.”

“What did your mother have to say about all this?”

“Nothing. She’s been bedridden on mood stabilizers ever since it happened. She hardly speaks. She never leaves the house. She’s. . . a shell. We’ve never spoken about him since the day they told me he wasn’t coming home.”

Lila shook her head and put her tea on the end table beside her. “I have been a therapist for many years, Jamie, and that might be the saddest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Jamie wrinkled her nose. “Surely not the saddest.”

“It’s up there,” Lila said. “You said before that it didn’t happen to you, but Jamie, it absolutely did. Watching your brother succumb to your father’s pressure and bigotry happened to you. Watching your mother grieve so deeply she never escaped it, happened to you. It left you alone with the man who drove your brother to take that

drastic action. All when you were much too young to truly understand the depth of it.”

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“Everyone has stuff in their family that—”

“No, don’t you dare try to minimize this,” Lila cut across her. “You were robbed of a proper childhood. You were robbed of a brother who loved you. And you were robbed of an ally that you might have had in your mother. That’s trauma, Jamie. You are perfectly justified in your fear of your father.”

Tears flooded back into Jamie’s eyes. At last, it all made sense. She had never put it together before, and no one had ever validated her fear. But she had never told anyone the real story. Now that she had, and Lila confirmed the connection, Jamie felt as if she’d heaved massive bricks off her shoulders.

“I don’t want to be afraid of him anymore,” she said.

“You won’t be,” Lila assured her. “But you have to understand something to face it. And you have to face something to grow from it. Let’s do that together, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Jamie said with a nod and a smile.

Lila took Jamie’s hands in hers. “I want you to repeat after me.”

“Alright.”

“My fears are valid,” Lila said.

“My fears are valid,” Jamie repeated.

“My past is part of who I am.”

“My past is part of who I am.”

“But it does not define me.”

“But it does not define me.”

“Well done, Jamie,” Lila said, patting her hand. “Now we can begin the real work.”

Chapter 16

Rain plastered Jamie’s kit to her body and her wet ponytail clung to the back of her neck. Mud painted her shorts and legs. In true London fashion, it was pouring, but that didn’t stop the match between Stanmore and Everton. Even with the chill of early November in the air. A cold breeze made gooseflesh erupt over Jamie’s skin, but she shook it off and jogged toward their end to defend a corner.

The referee blew her whistle. The Everton winger sent the ball in a high arc toward the center of the goal. Eliana leaped forward through the jostling players, her fists raised, and punched the ball back into the dark sky.

“I got it!” Jamie shouted.

She shoved a defender off her back and followed the ball. She ran to meet it, building momentum to leap into the air. She reared back to strike it with her head.

Only she didn’t get the ball. She caught a mere flash of the opponent’s boot before it slammed into her forehead. Her vision went black, and she collapsed onto the soaking pitch. The crowd’s collective gasp faded in her ears, along with her teammates’ shouts of her name, as if she was turning down the volume of her television.

When Jamie opened her eyes, she was back on the ship from her dream. She was Abigail again, seeking out Verity in the darkness aboard a ship headed for Jamestown. They found each other, reassured each other, and then leaped into the sea together. As her body plunged into the water, the image shifted.

She lifted her skirts and ran from her closet. Her candle waited for her by the door in its holder. She lifted it carefully to light her way through the grand house. Once down the stairs, she slipped into her husband's study. She opened each drawer in the large mahogany desk, frantic for something, anything, that she could use to leave a note for Aisling. Finally, in the top right-hand drawer, she found a loose leaf of parchment.

She slapped it onto the desk and snatched up her husband's quill. Holding her sleeve back, she dipped it in the ink. Then she began to write. She hardly had the words for what she was going to do. But it was her only choice. After all, if she abandoned her husband, he might take the children with him anyway, and she couldn't bear to be parted from them. He so often used them as weapons against her. And what life would there be for her and Aisling? Revolution or not, there was nothing for them. Nothing real.

Aisling, I'm sorry, she wrote. She had to begin with an acknowledgment of the wrong she was doing. Sneaking away in the night to get back to England and leaving the house and staff behind was not what she wanted. She wrote the only explanation she had. Arthur thought, with the growing rumblings of revolution, it would be better for us to return to England as a family. I have left some money for you in my shoe, the third pair on the left in my closet. I hope you will make a life for yourself. I know this must be difficult, but you must understand. There's no place for us. Not really. Maybe, if we lived in a slightly more tolerant world, we could do as we wished. But it isn't to be. I shall always remember you and our time together. –Kitty

She dropped the quill and read it over. Should she have said "I love you" somewhere in the note? They had whispered it to each other in the still of night, after Kitty had

escaped the bedchamber she shared with her husband and snuck away to be with Aisling.

No, it was better this way. If the roles were reversed, reading those words would only hurt and make things worse. Kitty sat back in the chair, hating herself. It was impossible to win. To choose Aisling would be to betray her family. Choosing her family meant betraying Aisling. How had fate dealt her such a cruel hand? Was it God's way of punishing her for being unfaithful to her husband? A husband she had only married to secure a life for herself, but still. An affair was an affair. No matter how much love might exist between them.

Calling it off was the right thing. Putting an ocean between them was the only way they would truly remain apart. She steeled herself against her desire to remain. No matter how much it hurt, she would erect a wall around her heart so that she would never have to face this again. Aisling was her last and only love.

She folded up the note, found an envelope, and tucked her last words to Aisling inside. Carrying her candle, she returned to her room, where she slid the letter between two books, peeking out so that Aisling would be able to find it.

Then she had to pack. She swiped her jewelry into her first bag, nearly clearing the dresser in one go. Tears burned at the back of her eyes. She blinked them away. There was no time for tears now. Her focus had to be on herself and her children. She knew they would ask about Aisling, their beloved governess. Kitty tried to come up with a few reasons they might be leaving her behind. None of them felt right. None of this felt right.

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She grabbed her clothes and stuffed them into her trunk before shutting it with a slam.

The scene changed. When she looked around, she saw metal bed frames with thin mattresses lining each wall. Nurses in gray caps and white aprons, with red crosses on their arms bands, flitted back and forth across the ward. She glanced down to find herself in the same uniform, sitting in a chair next to an occupied bed.

The soldier beside her was missing his right leg below the knee. A bandage covered his forehead. A cast encased his left arm. He stared at her through shining brown eyes. Eyes that reminded her of Rosie's.

“So. . . what d’you think?” he said.

“What?” she replied breathlessly.

“Nurse Dinah, I asked if you would marry me.”

She blinked. “Oh! Oh, golly, Roger, I—”

“I’m not just asking because of the way you’ve taken care of me. I’m quite fond of you, and I. . . well, I would take care of you, Dinah.”

“Roger, the war is still on.”

“It’ll be over any day now. Do you already have a man in your life? Is that your plan for after?”

“I . . .”

She found herself lost for words. She didn't have a man. She had Rosie. Who was arguably the love of her life. Impassioned kisses stolen in store rooms flooded to the front of her mind. Nights after a shift holding each other until sleep took them. It was all well and good now. But if the war was truly to be over soon, what happened next?

“I don't have any plans for after the war,” she said. “I can hardly think of that now.”

“You should. The war will end, Dinah. And what will you do?”

She didn't have an answer. Her parents were gone, and she had no other close family. She would be on her own in the world. She had counted on marrying a boy from back home in London, but he had been killed in the fields of France. Perhaps it was fate that put Roger on her rotation each day.

He was kind. He asked about her work as a nurse and was cooperative with the doctors. He never spoke harshly to anyone, and he came from a decent family in Brighton. Perhaps life with him wouldn't be so bad.

But there was Rosie. How could she explain Rosie to anyone? The love between them burned hot as a wildfire. Society would never accept their relationship. They had talked about the future, but in broad terms, never laying out specific plans. After all, what future could there be between them? Confirmed old maids living together? People would still talk.

“I don't know,” she told him. “As I said, I haven't thought of it.”

“I think I could make you happy, Dinah,” he said. “My family lives right on the coast. We could forget all the terrible things we've seen here and watch the sea every morning.”

She peered at him for a long moment. “It does sound nice. . . .”

“It will be peace beyond peace, Dinah. Think about it.”

She was thinking about it. And the truth was, there was no place for a young woman with no family and no husband. Once the war was over, the only work available would be more nursing. And she never wanted to hear men screaming and dying ever again. She wanted to hear the waves lapping at the shore and seagulls calling over the wind.

“Yes, Roger. I will marry you.”

A smile lit up his face. For the first time since he had come into this hospital on a stretcher, he was happy. She couldn't help but smile back.

“Oh, Dinah, you won't regret it,” he said through an elated sigh. “You've made me the happiest man in the world.”

She put a hand on his arm. “Don't get too excited. You still need to rest and get healthy. Then we can think about what happens after the war.”

He reached up and patted her fingers. “Thank you, Dinah.”

“Would you like me to read to you?” she offered.

“I'd love it.”

“More poetry?”

“Absolutely.”

She pulled her Emily Dickinson book from her pocket, opening it with a pang of guilt. It had been a gift from Rosie. And now she was going to break Rosie’s heart. It killed her to do it. But maybe in another life, where she was braver and bolder. For now, she wanted to be safe. That was what the war had taught her—above all else: be safe.

Jamie!

Someone was calling her, but they sounded as if they were on the other end of a tunnel. She wanted to open her eyes, but her lids were too heavy. She wanted to slip back into the dark.

Jamie, can you hear me?

The voice sounded somewhat familiar, but she couldn’t place it. She hardly even felt like Jamie. She was Abigail and Kitty and Dinah. They lived and breathed within her. They were her. She carried their love as well as their fear. She wanted Verity, Aisling, and Rosie—Tessa. No matter the name, she wanted the sweet brown eyes, soft blonde hair, and passionate heart of her love.

“Jamie!”

Jamie opened her eyes to the faces of her Stanmore teammates surrounding her. Monika, Niamh, and Zahra came in clearest at first, followed by Eliana and their manager, Rebecca. Calling out was their physio, Ruby. Her coily curls were

slickedback into a bun over her dark face, where Jamie fixed her gaze. She wondered when it had stopped raining.

“There we go,” Ruby said. “Jamie, can you hear me?”

Jamie tried to nod, but it made her head throb. “Yes.”

“Do you know where you are?”

“Hospital,” Jamie murmured back.

“Not quite, but we’ll get you there. Can you tell me what year it is?”

Numbers swirled around in Jamie’s head. “It’s 1918. The war’s almost over.”

“Jesus,” Ruby muttered. “I’d say it’s looking like a concussion.”

“Fuck,” Rebecca said.

Ruby waved over some more medical staff. More faces appeared and Jamie winced, closing her eyes against anything else she might have to see. Ruby patted her cheek.

“Don’t sleep, Jamie,” she said. “We need you to be alert.”

“I’m tired,” Jamie groaned. “Head hurts.”

“I know it does, love. Someone nearly kicked your skull in. But stay awake. Once we know how severe it is, you’ll be able to get some rest.”

“My book,” Jamie muttered. “I want my book.”

“Your poems, Jamie?” Zahra’s voice asked. “The book in your locker?”

“Yes, my poems. Emily. . . whatever her name is.”

“I’ll fetch it.”

“Zahra, you’ve got to get back to the match,” Rebecca protested.

“I’ll only be a moment, gaffer,” Zahra said, and then she was gone.

A dozen hands jostled Jamie onto a stretcher. She wanted her book. That was the connection, the thing that had started it all. It was rightfully hers. A gift from the love of all of her lives.

As the medical staff lifted Jamie off the grass, Zahra came skidding to a halt beside them. She took Jamie’s hand and tucked the hard cover under Jamie’s arm. Jamie smiled weakly at her.

“Thank you so much,” she said.

“Of course,” Zahra panted back. “We’re here for you, Jamie. Tell us once you’re well, okay?”

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She and the rest of her teammates came over to pat her on her arms and legs, and she felt the well wishes in every touch. Then a woman she didn't recognize came over. A young brunette with a soaking braid down her back and tears in her dark eyes. She wore the Everton crest on her chest. She took Jamie's free hand.

"I'm really sorry, Jamie," she said. Her accent told Jamie she was likely a Liverpool native. "I didn't mean it, honest."

"S'alright," Jamie assured her. "Thanks."

She meant it with the thank you. That woman had opened Jamie's eyes to the link she didn't even know she was missing. The only thing now was for her to find out if Tessa felt it too. She waved to the fans and a fresh drop of rain hit her arm.

Chapter 17

Tessa could hardly focus on her work. She kept seeing Jamie's injury in her mind, like some horrible sports replay. The sickening sound of the boot cracking against Jamie's head. The way she fell into a heap on the pitch. The agonizing minutes Tessa watched medical staff bent over the woman she loved, and her heart kicked into overdrive with worry. She was supposed to be editing a video together of the three Stanmore goals that won them the match, but her brain kept coming back to Jamie. Was she alright? Was it a concussion or something worse? It had been a day since the match, and most of the comments on their pages were questions about Jamie's status.

Tessa wasn't sure who to reach out to. She didn't have the numbers of medical staff since she was technically only a part-time employee. Nelle promised to send any

updates once they were available, but Tessa was beginning to think that wasn't true. Surely, they should know something by now. She checked her phone again, but similar to the countless times she had checked in the hours since the injury, there was nothing.

Billie had reached out that same night, but Tessa didn't have any news. Then Billie, like the wonderful friend she was, asked Tessa how she was holding up. At the time, she was so shocked, she didn't know what to say. She told Billie that. Billie offered any support should Tessa need it. But Ethan had never been concussed, so Billie didn't have any insight.

There was one person Tessa thought of. Laci Frawley, the wife of the Stanmore men's goalkeeper. Tessa had helped Laci through her own soulmate experience with Jordan. Jordan had also suffered a concussion last season, meaning Laci would be able to relate.

Tessa pulled up her latest messages with Laci.

Hey, I know this is random, but when Jordan had his concussion last year, how long was it before he went home?

Laci responded within minutes.

Laci

Not random at all! I've been seeing Jamie's injury all over social media. You all must be worried about her.

When Jordan got hurt, he was home the next day. They kept him overnight to monitor him.

D'you think Jamie's was worse or not as bad?

Hard to say. They both got boots to the head, but in different ways. I'm sure you'll hear something from the team soon.

Grand, so. Thanks, Laci.

No problem. You were such a nice friend to me when Jordan and I were struggling. If I can give you any comfort, I'll say that Jordan was only out for two weeks with his. I'm sure Jamie will recover just as quickly.

Fingers crossed.

Tessa locked her phone and heaved a sigh. Even though it wasn't clear, she did feel better after talking to someone who understood. Now if only the club would send something. Anything to ease everyone's mind.

Niamh emerged from her room in joggers and a windbreaker. She offered Tessa a half-smile.

"I'm going for a run," she said. "If you get anything about Jamie, will you ring me?"

"Oh, aye," Tessa assured her. "You'll do the same?"

"Of course."

With a nod, she left. The door snicked shut behind her. Tessa shook her head and faced her laptop, preparing to force herself to work on the video. She needed to get it done by the end of the day. She watched the individual clips over again to determine where to cut them. Only a knock on the door interrupted her.

Inwardly cursing Niamh for forgetting her keys so often, Tessa got up and marched to the door. Only it wasn't Niamh standing behind it.

“Jamie?” Tessa gasped. “Sweet, suffering, Jesus, are you alright?”

“I've got concussion, but otherwise, I'm fine,” she replied. Tessa wanted to yank her into her arms with relief, but Jamie had her arms over her chest. Closed off. “Can I come in?”

“Aye.”

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Tessa stepped aside and allowed Jamie over the threshold into the flat.

“Did you see Niamh on your way in?” she asked. “She asked after you.”

“I must have missed her,” Jamie said. “I’ll text her later. There’s something serious I need to speak with you about.”

“Serious, is it? Let me put the kettle on.”

Tessa wondered what Jamie thought was urgent enough that she came to Tessa’s flat before the club seemed to know that she was alright. She let the water boil and retrieved two cups, placing small bags in them. She picked a blend without caffeine, for Jamie’s sake. She wasn’t sure, but it seemed like a good precaution to take for someone with a concussion.

When the tea was ready, she brought it out to the small dining table where Jamie sat waiting. Jamie didn’t take the cup right away. She reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a tattered hardback book. She slid it across the table, and Tessa sucked in a sharp gasp. It was the Emily Dickinson book. The one she had given to her in their last lifetime.

“Does this mean anything to you?” Jamie asked.

Tessa held her breath as she glanced between the book and Jamie’s face. “Where did you get this?”

“So it does?” Jamie pressed. “Mean something to you?”

Tessa gingerly picked up the book, and it instantly warmed between her palms. Memories flashed through her mind like a film reel of when she was Rosie and Jamie was Dinah. Sneaking kisses between shifts on their ward. Falling asleep leaning against each other after a long surgery. Letting their hands brush as they passed each other in the corridors.

“Yes,” Tessa said, voice thick with emotion. “It means something to me.”

Jamie swallowed. “It means something to me too.”

Tessa’s heart slammed into her chest. Could it be that Jamie remembered? Was getting kicked in the head the key to unlocking their soulmate connection? It hadn’t taken that for Billie and Ethan or Jordan and Laci, but maybe with their extra lives, it required more. Tessa didn’t know. All she knew was that there was hope.

“Something happened when I went down yesterday,” Jamie continued. “I saw things. Things I think I always knew, but they were buried in my soul.”

Tessa cleared her throat. “Such as?”

“I saw us together, only in the past. Not three years ago, I mean, centuries ago. We looked the same only in different clothes and we had different jobs. No matter what, we kept finding each other.”

It was happening. Finally, it was happening. Jamie was getting there. But Tessa needed more. She needed absolute certainty that Jamie remembered what she remembered.

“Tell me everything,” Tessa said. “With as much detail as you can remember.”

Jamie launched into the stories, explaining that the first one, where they jumped ship

together, she had already seen once in a dream. Then she told Kitty's story from the American Revolution and her turmoil in choosing between love and family. And finally, she told Dinah's story, and her desire for peace, not struggle, once the Great War was finished. Verity, Aisling, and Rosie, all surviving in Tessa's soul, ached.

They ached for the women with no choices. They ached for the lost love. They ached for a time where a love like theirs could be celebrated. Could it be now? Had the world changed enough? Had they changed enough?

Tessa blinked, and a tear rolled down her cheek. She was finally not alone. Jamie remembered. At last, they were together, at least in this.

"I never thought I believed in soulmates," Jamie said. "But there was always something. Even before we broke up, I remember feeling like you were familiar every time I kissed you. It was like coming home."

"It was the same for me," Tessa said. "And then I saw my friends find their soulmates, and I had to know for sure. I went to see a psychic, and I saw everything. It was—"

"Hold on," Jamie stopped her. "You what?"

"Well, she's not really a psychic, she's a past life regressionist—"

"No, Tessa, it's not that. Are you telling me that you've known about this connection between us since before we saw each other again?"

Jamie's brows were drawn together over her eyes and her mouth was turned down into a scowl. Tessa blinked.

"Are you angry?" she asked.

“Yeah, a little!” Jamie cried. “Here I was thinking I was bringing this revelation to you, only to discover you knew the whole time!”

“But I—”

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“The whole time, Tessa!”

“I couldn’t very well just tell you I know we’re soulmates—you’d think I was mad!”

“I came here and just told you!”

“Well, for the first time, you were braver than I am!”

Jamie heaved a sigh, but the corners of her mouth twitched upward. “I suppose I had that coming.”

“Be honest with yourself,” Tessa said. “If I had come to you and said, Jamie, I saw a past life regressionist. You and I have had three more tries at being together before we ever broke up. Would you have believed me?”

Jamie chewed her lip. “I suppose not.”

“You’d have thought I was talking balls, so you would.”

“You could have given me some indication—”

“Oh, come off it, Jamie. I could not.”

“Alright. I admit that even though I’d seen things too, I would not have immediately believed you. It just seems so outlandish. Soulmates. Literal soulmates from across lifetimes. How can that sort of thing be true?”

“I know it sounds straight out of a fairy tale,” Tessa agreed.

“Hold on, you said you’d seen your friends find their soulmates,” Jamie said. “So you know others that this has happened to?”

“Oh, aye. Billie and Ethan are one. They had a past life from World War II that was sweet. Only he died in the Battle of the Bulge.”

“That’s terribly sad. Who else?”

“Jordan and Laci Frawley. They were lovers in the Regency era, but she was an earl’s daughter and he was a fencing teacher, so her father didn’t approve. She was killed accidentally by a stray bullet in a duel between him and her father.”

Jamie tapped her chin. “They each only had the one life before?”

“Seems to be.”

“Meanwhile, we’ve had three. I wonder. . . ” She trailed off, staring at her tea cup.

“Wait. Neither of them got their happy ending in their past life?”

“Correct.”

“And none of our past lives got it either?”

“What are you getting at, Jamie?”

“I think there’s a pattern,” Jamie said. “That our souls will keep finding each other until we get a real life together. A happily ever after. We keep mucking ours up, so we keep having to come back.”

Tessa considered it. It made sense. Time after time, they had not ended up together. Even in this life.

“Jamie, I hate to be an asshole about this, but the reason we’ve never gotten there is—”

“I know, it’s been me,” she said. “Well, not the first time.”

“Aye, no, that time seemed pretty mutual,” Tessa agreed. “But every time after. . .”

“Yeah, it’s been my fault. My fears. My cowardice. And that’s the case this time, too.”

“That’s another reason I never brought it up before. I wasn’t sure it would change anything.”

Jamie winced. “I don’t blame you. I’ve hurt you over and over again. And now, even if most of society would be accepting of us together, there’s still my father.”

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“Have you made any progress there?” Tessa asked with some hesitation. She wasn’t sure she would like the answer.

“Not really,” Jamie told her. “He sent me into a panic attack the other day.”

“Shite. Are you alright?”

“I called my therapist, and we worked through it, but there’s a long way to go.”

Tessa deflated. “I see.”

Jamie took her hand. “But there is hope, Tessa. It’s progress that I even want to get to a place where I can stand up to him. And I am working hard to get there. In the meantime, I want to be with you.”

“How can that be?”

Tessa didn’t want to re-hash their argument again, but it would always be an obstacle.

“Have you ever heard of the concept of inviting in?” Jamie asked.

“What, like a vampire?” Tessa replied, wrinkling her nose.

“No,” Jamie chuckled. “It’s something my therapist told me. It’s an alternative to coming out. Instead of telling the whole world at once that I’m gay, I tell a few trusted people.”

“Like who?”

“Like my teammates,” Jamie said. “I want to come out to them. Then whenever we’re all together, we can be a couple. As annoying and mushy as Eliana and Neriah are.”

Tessa let a giggle out. “They are ridiculous, aren’t they?”

“I want to be that ridiculous with you.”

Tessa squeezed Jamie’s hand. “I want that too.”

“It’s not everything, but it’s what I can give you right now. Is that alright?”

“Aye, I’m alright with that.”

With a grin, Jamie leaned in to kiss her. The kiss was everything. Centuries of heartache were put at ease. They were going to compromise. To try. To be together in whatever way was possible, with the hope that would eventually become safe for them to be out in the open. Tessa would put her faith in Jamie, and pray that this time, it wouldn’t end in sorrow.

They parted for air and locked eyes.

“The soulmate thing, we should keep to ourselves,” Jamie suggested.

“Definitely,” Tessa agreed. “Though, we can talk to Billie and Laci and them about it, if you want.”

“I do, but later. Right now, all I want to do is kiss you.”

“By all means.”

Their lips met again, and heat shot through Tessa's body, from her chest to the ends of her fingers and toes. This was how it was meant to be. When she was about to suggest taking it to the bedroom, the flat door opened.

Tessa and Jamie jumped apart to see Niamh standing at the door with her mouth agape, her eyes flicking between her teammate and flatmate as if they were the ball at Wimbledon. Then she beamed.

"I knew it!" she cried. "Paige owes me twenty quid."

"Don't say anything yet," Jamie requested. "I want to address the team myself."

Niamh stopped typing on her phone and tucked it into her pocket. "Oh, right. Of course. I'll leave you both to it, then."

Giggling, she disappeared into her bedroom.

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Jamie smiled at Tessa. “D’you think Niamh would mind having the flat to herself for a couple weeks?”

“No, why?”

“As I am concussed, I need someone around to help me with things like cooking and making sure I get plenty of rest. Are you up for it?”

Two weeks alone with Jamie? Tessa wasn’t turning that down for anything.

“You bet,” she said. “I’ve got a history with nursing, you know.”

Jamie smirked. “The uniforms are much sexier these days.”

“Uniform? Who says I’ll be wearing anything at all?”

Jamie laughed and sat back in her chair, her eyes landing on the book still between them on the table.

“Can you believe this book found its way back to us after more than a hundred years?” she said. “Mad, isn’t it?”

“Aye,” Tessa agreed. “But it did what it was supposed to, didn’t it? Neither of us forgot.”

“May we never forget again.”

Chapter 18

“Honey, I’m home!” Tessa called as she came through Jamie’s front door.

“In the kitchen!” Jamie replied.

Tessa walked in and set her work bag on the counter. Jamie sat at the kitchen table in front of her laptop. She was reclined in her chair, eyes fixed on the screen with her brow knit over them., thumbnail between her teeth. From the green glow on her face, Tessa knew she was watching game film. It would have been more annoying if she wasn’t sexy with her thighs spread out. It should have been illegal for her to look like such a ride in bike shorts and a sports bra, with only a zip-up hoodie over it.

“Film again?” she said.

“It’s all I can do since I can’t train,” Jamie said.

Tessa crossed her arms over her chest. “Is that what you’ve been doing all day?”

“No. I went for a slow jog and did some light weightlifting, all cleared by my doctor. I also did the laundry and the grocery shopping. Pasta sound good for dinner?”

“Come off it, Jamie, you know the answer to that.”

“One of these days you might say no,” Jamie said through a chuckle.

“Oh, aye, when hell freezes over, you mean.”

She strode over and claimed Jamie’s lips in a kiss. Jamie’s muffled surprise faded in her throat as she leaned into it, a soft moan escaping her instead. Tessa had almost forgotten what it was like to be with Jamie. Kissing in the rain in Liverpool had been

hot, but restrained, since they both knew it couldn't go further. Now, on Tessa's first night as Jamie's official guest, there was nothing to stop them from going there again.

Jamie drew back and held Tessa's gaze. "Go get comfortable, love. We'll have dinner and then. . . whatever we want."

"I like the sound of that," Tessa said with a smile.

She left, making sure there was an extra sway to her hips as she walked. She knew Jamie noticed when she heard a deep sigh. Jamie was a sucker for women in skirts. And Tessa had worn one that hugged her ass in a way she knew drove Jamie crazy. It did to Jamie what seeing Jamie in bike shorts did to Tessa.

She jogged up the stairs and made her way to Jamie's bedroom. Jamie had stacked Tessa's bags in a neat pile in the corner of the room. The oddest thing was that Tessa didn't see any trace of Jamie in the room. The furniture was basic, the bedding was a neutral beige, everything had its place. There were no photographs in the entire room, not even on the walls. It was so bland, it might have been mistaken for a hotel room if she didn't know she was in Jamie's house.

But Jamie had been that way last time too. Despite being at Arsenal for years, she had never truly settled in her flat in that part of London. Tessa assumed it was the same when she lived in Manchester. Mainly because Jamie always said she preferred it that way. As a footballer, things could always change. Tessa wondered if perhaps Stanmore was the club Jamie might finally call home.

She changed into joggers and a tank top, letting out a groan of relief at finally shedding her bra after wearing it all day. After donning some fuzzy socks, she made her way back to the kitchen. It did not surprise her to find Jamie once again watching film of herself.

Tessa cleared her throat and Jamie glanced up. She grinned.

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“You look cute,” she said.

“Thanks,” Tessa replied. “Cute enough to close your laptop?”

“Can you give me like, ten more minutes? Then I’m all yours, Tess, I swear.”

She sat up a little and her jacket rode up, revealing her sculpted abs. Tessa’s mouth watered at the sight. An idea came to her, and she smirked.

“Oh, no, babe, you keep watching,” she said. “Don’t mind me.”

Jamie raised an eyebrow. “You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. I’ll. . . re-do your plaits. Looks like they came loose during your jog.”

“Alright, thanks,” Jamie agreed, and turned her gaze back to her screen.

Tessa stood behind her and tugged the elastic off the ends of Jamie’s dark brown braids. She worked them loose with swift fingers. Jamie muttered something under her breath, backed up the video, and watched herself take a diving header, only to miss the goal by inches. It skipped past the post.

“My form is shit here,” she said. “I should have gone earlier and put my body left. It’d have been a goal.”

“You made a snap decision,” Tessa replied. “Of course it’s clearer in hindsight.”

“I’ve got to be better.”

Jamie’s hair flowed in waves over her shoulders. Tessa let her fingers dance over Jamie’s skin, exposed by her jacket hanging off her arms. She moved as if she was gathering Jamie’s hair up to do it into one plait, but she took her time. Gooseflesh followed her touch.

She didn’t quite have Jamie’s undivided attention yet. So, she started a scalp massage. Jamie’s eyes fluttered, and Tessa knew her plan was working.

“That’s not plaiting,” Jamie said.

Tessa shrugged. “Call it an added bonus.”

“Well. . . it does feel nice.”

Tessa smiled to herself. She let her hands wander south, toward the nape of Jamie’s neck, which she knew was sensitive. She brushed the pads of her fingers across Jamie’s hairline, adding the slightest pressure to give it the massage sensation. When that failed to get a reaction, Tessa pulled out the big guns. Her mouth.

She bent down and placed a feather-light kiss on Jamie’s neck. Jamie’s muscles visibly relaxed at the contact, so Tessa pushed her luck. She pressed her lips behind Jamie’s ear. She trailed down her neck to her shoulder, but stopped when she heard a rumble of laughter from Jamie’s chest.

“I believe you’re trying to distract me,” Jamie said.

“Is it working?” Tessa asked.

“Somewhat,” Jamie chuckled. “But Tessa, I don’t know if I can make love tonight.

The doctor warned me about exerting myself too much, and I've already exercised."

"Is that all?"

Tessa stepped around the chair to stand in front of Jamie and reached for the zipper of Jamie's hoodie. Jamie's eyes darkened as she looked at Tessa.

"What if I do all the exerting tonight?" Tessa said. "You stay right there in that chair, and if I make you come before that video is over, you have to put it away and make dinner with me. Deal?"

"Deal," Jamie agreed, and yanked Tessa in close for a searing kiss.

Tessa moaned into her mouth, a fire that she'd thought long buried coursing through her body. It consumed her from the inside out. Her desire for Jamie overtook every thought, every doubt, every feeling she'd ever had. How had she lived the last three years without Jamie's sweet lips? It shouldn't have been possible to survive.

Her hands fumbled for Jamie's zipper and she tugged it down. Jamie's chest flushed pink beneath her black sports bra. It heaved with every panted breath. Tessa dragged her gaze back to Jamie's, finding their usual blue much darker. Molten, even.

Slowly and seductively, Tessa slid Jamie's jacket from her alabaster shoulders and let it drop to the kitchen floor. Jamie crossed her arms over herself and tugged her bra off. With her round, perfect breasts free, her pink nipples hardened as the fresh air hit them. Tessa only let a second go by before taking one in her mouth.

Jamie's head fell back, exposing the long column of her throat. She had two freckles between her shoulder and her jaw that Tessa loved to kiss. Knowing what she knew now, she wondered if the old wives tale that freckles indicated where a lover kissed you in a past life was true. Perhaps they marked where Rosie or Aisling or Verity had

peppered their affection before.

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Tessa flicked her tongue over Jamie's nipple and she keened. Her back arched away from the chair and her hips rocked toward Tessa as if demanding more contact. Tessa eased her back down, but continued to tease her.

Tessa let her hand wander over Jamie's washboard abs. Her fingers toyed with the waistband of Jamie's shorts. Jamie's breath hitched.

"Please," she whined. "Touch me, Tessa. It's been so long."

"What's the rush, now?" Tessa teased as she pressed a kiss to the valley between Jamie's breasts. "We've got plenty of time."

"I've waited three years to feel you like this," Jamie said on an exhale. "And. . . I haven't had anyone since you."

Tessa paused. She lifted her head to look Jamie in the eyes again.

"Catch yourself on," she said. "No one?"

Jamie shook her head. "No, Tessa. It's always been you."

For the first time, Tessa truly regretted her post-breakup slut phase. Knowing Jamie couldn't bring herself to be intimate with anyone else proved the kind of hurt she had carried from the moment she left London. Tessa had used it as an excuse to justify any and all behavior. She swallowed. Then she kissed Jamie again, hoping to show her how touching it was since she didn't have the proper words.

Jamie pawed at Tessa's top. She took hold of it and lifted it over Tessa's head so that they could press into each other, skin to skin. Tessa's soft, willowy frame molded to the contours of Jamie's lean body. Jamie braced Tessa against her with her hands. The contact sent a jolt of warmth right to Tessa's core. She trailed kisses down Jamie's neck again, nipping softly at the sensitive spots behind her ear and above her collarbone. Finding those freckles with her tongue.

When she reached for Jamie's shorts again, Jamie lifted her hips. She helped Tessa tug them down over her bum and thighs, along with her knickers. Tessa slid them past her ankles and tossed them away. She drew back to take in the glory that was Jamie's form.

Jamie was the perfect balance of curvy and muscular, with tanned, muscled arms and a perfect six-pack. But her breasts were full and round. Her thighs were thick and soft. Tessa knelt between them, skimming her palms up them and inching them further apart. Her mouth followed. Jamie sucked in a gasp as Tessa neared the apex.

Heat radiated from Jamie's core. Tessa could feel it as she got closer and closer to where Jamie needed her most. If her squirming hips were any indication, at least. A desperate moan fell from Jamie's mouth as she laced her fingers in Tessa's hair.

"Please, baby. . ." she sighed.

Tessa finally gave in and put her mouth on Jamie's clit. Jamie groaned with relief. She tugged lightly on Tessa's hair, urging her even closer. Tessa held back a laugh. She opened her mouth and worked Jamie's entire slit, running her tongue from opening to clit and back again. Jamie's hips rolled with Tessa's rhythm. Tessa knew she wanted release. But this was what she loved to do—take quiet, reserved, in-control Jamie and make her writhe. There was nothing sexier in the world.

Tessa teased Jamie's opening with her fingers, keeping her mouth locked on her clit,

swishing her tongue back and forth across the sensitive nub. Jamie's hips jumped forward at the new touch, and Tessa knew she had permission. Jamie was already slick. Tessa sank two fingers inside her. She felt the stretch of Jamie's pussy as it clenched around her fingers. Heat pooled in the pit of Tessa's center, but she pushed down her own desires. This was for Jamie.

"Fuck, Tessa!" Jamie cried, head falling back again. "Please, please."

Tessa pumped her fingers in and out. She crooked them when she reached deep inside Jamie to find her g-spot. It took her no time at all to find it. Jamie's body was as familiar as her own home. After all, they had had centuries to explore each other fully.

Jamie's thighs quivered. Her voice raised an octave on every exhale, with expletives and Tessa's name scattered between her breaths. Her grip on Tessa's hair tightened.

"M'close," Jamie whimpered.

Tessa maintained her speed and pressure. Consistency was key with Jamie. It had been three years since she'd seen Jamie have an orgasm and she wasn't about to miss out on the sight now. Finally, her walls fluttered around Tessa's fingers. Jamie choked on a cry and her whole body shuddered. Her hips rocked slower and slower with every pitch, easing herself down from her high. Tessa slowed her mouth and fingers before she pulled gently away.

Jamie slumped in the chair. She panted and swallowed hard. God, she was so hot like that—fucked out and walls down. She was a work of art.

Tessa pressed soft kisses up Jamie's body until she reached her mouth. Jamie's labored breathing prevented a full-on snog, but they exchanged tender pecks.

Jamie glanced at her computer screen. “You won the bet.”

“Fucking knew it,” Tessa returned and reached over to shut it.

Giggling, Jamie kissed her again. That one lasted longer, but Tessa was the first to pull away.

“How about you go get your lounge clothes on, and I’ll start on dinner,” she said. “Sound good?”

“Sounds perfect,” Jamie replied. “Now if only I can make my legs work.”

Tessa chuckled. “Take your time. Of course, you’re always welcome to stay naked and we can go for round two.”

“I’ll get dressed,” Jamie said, rolling her eyes. “Help me up, will you?”

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Tessa offered a hand and lifted Jamie to her feet. Jamie picked up their discarded clothes and tossed Tessa's tank top back to her.

"Might want to put that on before you start cooking," Jamie said.

"I would never risk my perfect tits by bringing them unclothed near a stove," Tessa joked.

Jamie laughed again and padded toward the stairs. Tessa watched her go, appreciating the sweet curve of her ass, before she tugged her shirt back on.

Everything felt like it did three years ago. The passionate sex, the teasing back and forth, and domesticity. But that thought alone made Tessa wonder if it might end the way it did three years ago.

She shook her head. Jamie was working on things. Tessa reminded herself of that as she pulled out the ingredients for dinner.

Chapter 19

Jamie tried not to feel out of place heading to the Stanmore dressing room when she knew she wouldn't be training. She already had on her leggings and sports bra that she would wear to the weight room, where the medical staff would monitor her, as they had all week. The following day would be the first match day where she wouldn't start—she wouldn't even be named in the squad. For the first time in her professional career.

But there were more pressing matters at hand. She had discussed it with Tessa, and rehearsed what she wanted to say. Though she would need to say it quickly, as Monika was already herding Mai and Sofia toward the exit. Bracing herself with a deep inhale, she faced her team and cleared her throat.

“Er, excuse me, everyone,” she said.

Quiet fell over the dressing room as all eyes turned on her. Her stomach swooped at the sudden attention, but she swallowed down her reservations. She needed to do this for Tessa. For herself.

“Before you all go to training, there’s something I want to share,” Jamie said. “Something that I’ve never shared publicly, and that I’ll hope will remain between us, as I’m not ready for the world to know it. Though I am quite ready to share it with you. My teammates.”

They all stared back at her expectantly. Zahra tilted her head, only to get poked beneath her chin by the pin that Kiri was helping her with. She swore under her breath in Arabic, but kept her watery eyes toward Jamie. Jamie offered a sympathetic smile. She imagined it looked more like a grimace, but it couldn’t be helped. Her stomach had turned itself into knots.

“I hope you all know how much I appreciate you welcoming me here. That’s what’s made me feel like I can share this part of myself. Some of you may have already guessed or speculated, but I think I need to—”

“Fuck’s sake, Jamie, out with it,” Paige cut across her.

A murmur of laughter went through the room. Jamie’s cheeks warmed, and she cut her gaze to the floor, but a smile formed on her lips. She was making this a much bigger deal than it needed to be, she realized. She lifted her head.

“I’m gay,” she said on an exhale.

And then it was out in the open. Shared with a room of people and she could not take it back. She briefly imagined trying to swallow the words down, but it was too late for that. She was over the line. One foot out of the closet.

Her teammates blinked at her for several agonizing moments before anyone said anything.

“Sorry. . . were we supposed to be shocked?” Paige said with a smirk.

Jamie’s shoulders deflated. “Aren’t you?”

Neriah chuckled and patted Jamie’s arm. “Jamie, we love you, and we’re happy you’re finally comfortable sharing, but. . . we all basically knew.”

More of them giggled. Jamie did too, in spite of herself. “Am I that obvious?”

“I knew when you said Hozier was your celebrity crush,” Neriah said. “I suspected it before, but that pretty much confirmed it.”

“Plus, we’ve seen how you look at Tessa,” Eliana added, slinging an arm over Neriah’s shoulders. “How did you say it, baby?”

“Y’all ain’t slick,” Neriah said.

Jamie laughed. “Alright, then I feel I should also share that Tessa and I are girlfriends. We dated once before, three years ago, and now. . . we’re back together.”

“Nowthat’s news,” Kiri said. “You should’ve led with that, it’d have gotten a much better reaction.”

“Yeah, now pay up, Paige,” Niamh demanded, holding her hand out toward Paige.

Paige rolled her eyes as the group burst into collective laughter while she handed over a couple paper bills. Then, Jamie was inundated with questions. Why had they broken up before? She said it hadn’t worked out. What brought them back together again? She told them the concussion had given her time to think, and that they talked. When could they all go out together again so they could ask Tessa more? She told them as soon as they’d like.

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Another first in her career—her teammates felt like her friends. Between all the questions and teasing, she received congratulations from every one of them. And they thanked her for trusting them. It made the decision all the more valid in her mind. More weight seemed to fall from her shoulders. She wasn't worried about this getting back to her father. She could trust.

“What’s going on out here?” Rebecca asked as she emerged from her office.

Niamh looked at Jamie with a raised brow. Jamie nodded to give her permission.

“Jamie’s a lesbian,” Niamh blurted.

“Okay, and?” Rebecca said.

“She’s dating my flatmate, Tessa Gallagher,” Niamh added.

“About time,” Rebecca replied.

“Hold on,” Paige said. “Niamh, did you know about this already?”

Niamh folded her arms over her chest with a confident smile. “Yep. Caught them snogging in the kitchen the day after Jamie’s injury.”

That sent the room into a fit of giggles, and a few demands to know why Jamie hadn’t told them as early as Monday morning. Jamie smiled and shrugged. She only knew she wanted to do it right.

Rebecca ushered everyone outside, leaving Jamie to head to the weight room. As she walked, she felt a lightness in her step she had never experienced before. Her teammates understood her now. She had successfully invited them in. Even if apparently some had had their ear to the door already. She too wondered why she had wasted so much time on a speech to make the ideal moment. While it wasn't what she had rehearsed or imagined, it was perfect in the end.

In their match against Aston Villa, Stanmore women left with a draw. The following day, the men's team played West Ham United at home, and the women's team were invited to attend. Ray Rogers had booked them a box to themselves, as he had for the men at the women's match. All in the effort to show the club's commitment to collaboration between the squads.

Jordan and his wife, Laci, had come. As had Osahar and his wife, Nadia. Hector, Kâmil, and Luka had attended as well. In support of the men, Jamie came with Tessa. Eliana and Neriah were there. Zahra, Mai, Kiri, and Niamh also came. They were all in their seats when Tessa and Jamie came down the steps to join them.

Jamie never got used to watching football from the stands. Film was one thing, but being there live, with no way to impact the game made her restless. Of course, it didn't matter at the men's game, but it was still an odd feeling.

"Please, Eliana," Zahra was begging. "It can't be that different. I need to practice."

"All Latin American Spanish is different from Spain Spanish," Eliana replied. "And Colombian Spanish is different from Ecuadorian Spanish or Argentinian Spanish or Venezue—"

"Can you at least help me with pronunciation?"

Eliana sighed. "I can try."

“Thank you!” Zahra squealed. “I’ve got flashcards ready. I really want to impress Hector next time we talk.”

Eliana picked up the first card. “You want to impress him by talking about—their word for car is carro?”

“That’s what this Colombian girl on TikTok says,” Zahra said with a shrug. “Why? What’s your word for it?”

“Coche,” Eliana said. She flipped through the next several cards. She muttered in Spanish as she checked each word.

“Wait, wait, you have to quiz me!” Zahra insisted.

Jamie chuckled as she watched. She turned to face Tessa. “Would you want me to learn Irish for you?”

“Ach, no, my Irish is shite,” Tessa replied. “I mean, I know a couple words here and there, but never enough to have a conversation or anything.”

Kiri plopped into the seat in front of them. “You shouldn’t let your roots get away from you, Tessa. My parents always used Maori at home so we wouldn’t lose it.”

“My parents aren’t fluent in Irish either,” Tessa explained. “My granda is, but he never taught it to my ma or me.”

“Hector’s taking classes in Arabic at a language school nearby,” Kiri said. “He said they teach loads of languages, and put a lot of focus on indigenous ones in an effort to keep them from dying out.”

“Do they now?”

Jamie loved the way Tessa perked up at the suggestion and made a mental note to look into it. Her schedule was packed, but maybe once the season was over, she could take some time and learn. Before she could suggest it, Zahra had raced over.

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“Did I hear you say that Hector is learning Arabic?” she demanded.

Kiri drew back with a smirk. “Yep. You two are like that weird couple in *Love Actually*.”

Zahra’s lips turned up into a radiant smile as her cheeks flushed pink. Jamie was sold on learning Irish now. If she could put that expression on Tessa’s face, she could die happy.

“God, they’re sweet enough to rot your teeth,” Tessa whispered to Jamie as Zahra floated back to her seat like a Disney princess after meeting her prince in the woods. “I wonder if they’re soulmates too.”

Jamie met her gaze. “They seemed to have a connection right away. Maybe they are.”

“I still think we have them beat,” Tessa teased.

She reached for Jamie’s hand. On instinct, Jamie drew it back, flinching away from Tessa’s touch. She instantly regretted it. So much for putting the Disney princess look on Tessa’s face. Her smile faltered, a wound behind her eyes as she put her hand back in her lap. Jamie wanted to reach over and grab it. She wanted that more than anything. But they were in public and there was a potential for photographs.

“Sorry,” she murmured. “But. . . not here. It’s too open.”

“Oh, aye, I understand,” Tessa replied, but her curt tone suggested otherwise. “Sorry for trying. I should have known better.”

Jamie slumped in her chair. Somehow, Tessa managed to make her feel about four inches tall with only a handful of words.

“Tessa, I want to, but you know I can’t. I don’t know when there might be cameras on us.”

“Got it,” Tessa replied shortly.

“I’m sorry.”

“Aye, so you are.”

“Tessa.”

Tessa heaved a sigh and shook her head. “I’m sorry. I know what I signed up for, and I promised you patience. That wasn’t holding up my end of the bargain, was it?”

The knot in Jamie’s chest came loose at Tessa’s words. She smiled. She understood the initial reaction, but she was glad Tessa was easing off. “It’s alright.”

“How’s the therapy going, by the way? Are you making progress?”

“Yeah, I am. I called my agent yesterday and told her that if she continued to report things back to my father that I’d find another agent. She must have listened. We’ve started talking about extending my Stanmore contract, and he hasn’t called me once about it.”

“Is that why you’ve been watching your phone like a wee hawk?”

“It is. It’s been nearly twenty-four hours. If he knew, he’d definitely have called by now. So you see? Progress.”

“Aye, I see, love,” Tessa said with a soft smile. “I’m proud of you.”

Something swelled inside Jamie’s heart at the words. Suddenly, she was the one desperate to take Tessa’s hand and squeeze it. She held herself back, though. The time would come when they would unashamedly clasp hands at matches and in bars and on the street. But there was still some work to be done.

Lila had suggested sharing what happened with Theo with Tessa, but Jamie wasn’t sure it was right. She wanted Tessa to know everything about her. To understand the reservations about her father. But she didn’t want Tessa to pity her. Or to feel manipulated into excusing Jamie’s behavior. She only ever wanted Tessa’s true feelings about things, even if they hurt in the moment. She knew that one day, she would tell Tessa, but for now, she only wanted to enjoy having found each other again.

Chapter 20

Tessa stuffed her Christmas jumper into her suitcase. It was already overflowing with clothes and presents for her family, but the jumper was a gift from her father, and she wore it every year for their Christmas dinner. Jamie reclined on the bed beside the suitcase. It should have been impossible for someone to be that hot in joggers and a t-shirt, but Jamie pulled it off. Tessa swallowed as she looked at her girlfriend.

“Are you sure you can’t come to Derry?” she asked. “Even for a few days?”

“I’m sorry, Tessa, but I’ve got a match on Boxing Day,” Jamie replied with a sigh. “I can’t miss anything more now that I’m back.”

“They’re hardly giving you any minutes,” Tessa argued.

“Because they want me to take it easy. I need to make use of those fewer minutes so I

don't lose my place as a starter. God, I'd never hear the end of it."

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Tessa inwardly cursed Dexter Hupp, but that wasn't unusual. For a moment, she wished she wasn't going home. Nelle had offered Tessa time and a half pay to work the holiday. But her family had made the effort to come to London, and she wanted to return the favor. She hadn't been back to Derry in a couple years. Besides, she didn't need the money now. Her cabinets were properly stocked, and she'd already paid rent.

"I understand," she said. She flopped down on the bed next to Jamie and pouted. "I'll miss you though."

"I'll miss you more." Jamie pecked her protruding lip.

Tessa giggled in surprise. "Do you want to bet on that? There's not much to do in Derry."

"I promise you, you'll have more fun without me," Jamie said. "I'm not sure your mum really liked me. Or us together."

"Come off it," Tessa scoffed.

"I'm serious! Last time I was there, I got the distinct impression she didn't approve." Jamie rolled onto her back and looked at the ceiling. "Are you sure she isn't a little homophobic? Because Eliana's parents are also Catholics, and apparently, they—"

"Okay, I'm gonna stop you right there, that's not it," Tessa said. "My ma is not homophobic. She didn't dislike you because you're a wee lesbian, Jamie. She dislikes you because you're English."

Jamie sat up, eyes narrowed. “What?”

“It’s the English thing. And you being gay isn’t enough to cancel that out, you know.”

“I can’t help that I’m English! I was born this way!”

Tessa pushed herself to her knees and put her hands on her hips. “Oh, and I suppose you were justbornProtestant too?”

Jamie blinked, bewildered. “Yes! I was!”

“That’s what they all say,” Tessa said, rolling her eyes. “Even so, my ma isn’t really prejudiced. She simply doesn’t approve of the lifestyle.”

“The lifestyle of. . . being English? Or Protestant?”

“English, mostly. The Protestant thing, she might have been able to see past had you been Irish.”

“But. . . I can’t help either of those things.”

“Aye, so you say.”

It was Jamie’s turn to roll her eyes. “I mean, I’m not exactly a practicing Protestant. I don’t consider myself religious at all. We didn’t go to church growing up, except for Easter and Christmas.”

“Sweet suffering Jesus, you’re one ofthose?”

“Oh, are you attending mass every Sunday?”

“Fuck, no. But don’t you dare tell my ma or she’ll lay me out.”

“Your secret is safe.” Jamie smiled. “Should I convert to Catholicism? Would that help my case?”

“Absolutely not. You’ve spared yourself religious trauma so far, no use picking it up now.”

A chuckle escaped Jamie’s throat. “I suppose there’s no winning her over then.”

Tessa frowned and tapped her chin. “There’s really nothing to be done about the English thing, is there?”

Jamie reached for a pillow and whacked Tessa’s arm with it. Tessa laughed, swatting it away before swinging one leg over to straddle Jamie’s hips. Jamie’s arms fell into place around Tessa’s waist. They held each other for a long moment until their foreheads came together. Tessa closed her eyes and let herself get lost in Jamie’s embrace.

Visions danced behind Tessa’s eyes of previous embraces in their centuries-long history. No one’s arms had ever felt more right warped around her. No place was safer than with her. She made life worth living. Again and again, apparently. They only needed to make it stick this time.

“I really will miss you,” Jamie whispered. “Our first Christmas back together, and we’ll be apart.”

“I know. But it’ll be alright. We’ll have some time to do that research we keep talking about.”

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Ever since discovering their past lives, they had discussed investigating who the women were. They had some basic information, such as first names and general locations, but they both wanted more. Tessa wasn't sure it would come as easily as it had to Billie and Ethan and Jordan and Laci. They were in direct connection with the places and things in their past lives. Billie and Ethan had Henry and Maggie's photographs and letters. Laci and Jordan had been at the estate where Caroline and Samuel had lived. Laci's parents owned the place. The only thing Tessa and Jamie had was the book of Emily Dickinson poems. A first edition, published by the author's sister. It was incredibly valuable. Tessa knew there was more out there if they only knew where to look.

A side effect of reuniting with your ex, though, was the desire to spend every moment they had wrapped up in each other. Especially with their busy schedules. Jamie was working extra hours at training, and Tessa had articles to catch up on since falling behind with the work for Stanmore. When they had a moment, neither were compelled to take a trip to the library or spend hours on the computer doing research.

Mostly, they made love and talked. It was bliss.

"Do you think we'll find anything interesting?" Jamie asked. "Maybe something that triggers more memories?"

"I hope so," Tessa said. "I don't want to stop looking into it just because we've found each other again."

"Me neither. I think the more we understand our past, the better we'll be able to navigate the future." Jamie reached out and toyed with the sleeve of Tessa's jumper.

“Is it like that for the others?”

“Billie and Ethan have their things framed from their past life,” Tessa said, enjoying the tingles Jamie’s touch sent up her arm. “Jordan and Laci have some artwork I think. They were all able to find out how their people lived and died. But neither of their pasts were as far back as ours.”

“True.”

“If there’s anything I’ve learned in the vintage community, it’s that the older the thing or the information, the harder it is to track it down.”

Jamie heaved a sigh. “That’s not exactly encouraging.”

“Let’s not think about it for now,” Tessa suggested and lowered her lips to Jamie’s. “Why don’t you show me how much you’ll miss me before I go?”

Jamie smirked. With one hand, she shoved Tessa’s suitcase off the bed. With the other, she flipped them to put Tessa on her back. Tessa yelped with surprise, but was quickly silenced by Jamie’s insistent kiss.

Tessa often didn’t realize how much she missed home until she was back in Derry. Especially at Christmas. Wreaths and trees in every window, mistletoe and holly hanging in doorways, the streets lit up with fairy lights. The best part was the massive tree in the town center. With a dusting of snowfall, it could have been a picture in a magazine.

She stopped to admire it for a long moment on her way to the library. Cold air filled her lungs on a deep inhale, and vapor appeared from her mouth on the exhale. She pushed her glasses up on her face before she continued walking.

The library was of course quiet when she arrived. The heat brought some feeling back to her numb fingers, which she rubbed together to speed up the process. A lone librarian sat behind the desk. She was a middle-aged woman, about in her forties if Tessa could venture a guess, with coppery red hair rolled into a bun at the nape of her neck. Her thick glasses sat low over her nose as she read the book lying flat in front of her. They were attached to a beaded chain around her neck. She pulled her red cardigan—adorned with a wreath brooch—tighter around her when the cold air from the doorway reached her. She looked up with round, hazel eyes.

“What about you, love?” she asked politely. She stuck a pencil between the pages to mark her place. “Looking for anything in particular?”

“Aye, I’m looking for some records that might be in the archives,” Tessa said.

“What sort of records?”

Tessa shifted on her feet. She wasn’t sure where to begin. She knew she wanted to start with Rosie, the most recent of the past lives, because it would be easiest to find something on her. However, she only knew that Rosie was Irish. Likely Northern Irish from her accent, but was it a leap to assume she was also from Derry?

She cleared her throat. She had to try if she wanted to know.

“About nurses from the First World War,” she said. “I’m looking for a record of someone who served.”

“A relative, perhaps?”

Tessa paused for a beat. “Aye, something like that.”

“Let’s see what we have in the wee system here.”

The librarian typed away on the computer, and Tessa got closer to the desk. Beneath the wreath brooch was a name tag which told her the librarian's name was Caoimhe. Caoimhe's eyes scanned over the screen. Tessa toyed with her scarf.

“There were many Irish nurses serving at the time,” Caoimhe said. “Have you got a name, perhaps?”

“Only a first name. Rosie, so it is.”

“Rosie was her given name or a nickname for Rose?”

Tessa blinked. She hadn't thought of that. “Could we try both?”

“Oh, aye. One moment.”

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Caoimhe typed some more. In the reflection from her glasses, Tessa saw the screen populating with dark lines she assumed was text.

“I’ve given Rose a go, and there are a few records,” Caoimhe said. “Do you know where she served by chance?”

“A hospital in France, I think,” Tessa told her.

Caoimhe clicked something, but the screen didn’t appear to change. “That doesn’t quite narrow it down. Let’s try Rosie.”

She typed again. Tessa turned her face toward the ceiling and prayed. Was there a saint for past lives? Whoever they were, she needed their help now.

“Oh, only one result,” Caoimhe said. “Rosie Horan, born here in Derry in 1894. She passed away in 1975, and her family left her things from the Great War here for preservation since she had no descendants. Would you like to take a look?”

Tessa’s heart leaped. “Very much.”

“Right this way, then.”

Caoimhe rose from her seat and beckoned Tessa to follow her. Tessa didn’t hesitate. She followed Caoimhe into a room behind the desk. She glanced around to see a small storeroom of boxes on shelves lining the walls. They were organized by date. Tessa’s eyes landed on the World War I box before Caoimhe reached it. A desk stood in the center of the room, where Caoimhe put the box down and opened it up. Some

dust plumed up from the disturbance. Tessa watched Caoimhe finger through file after file until she reached one.

“Ah, here it is,” she said, pulling it free and placing it on the desk. “Rosie Horan’s file.”

“May I?” Tessa asked as she approached.

“Certainly,” Caoimhe said. “I’m afraid I can’t let you check it out, but you can look through it.”

Tessa nodded, stepping up to stand beside the desk. With a trembling hand, she flipped open the manila file folder, browned with age, to reveal several documents, also dried and tinted from the years. First, she saw Rosie’s birth certificate. Then her records from the war where she signed up to serve. To know for sure if this was the Rosie, Tessa needed—

There it was. A photograph. Through the age, grain, and sepia tones, she recognized her own face. She looked rather grimly at the camera, her expression stern beneath the nurse’s cap. The photo wasn’t in color, but Tessa remembered the colors of the uniform—gray, white, and red crosses. She also remembered ending up with more red splattered across the apron before the day was done.

“Oh my, you’re certainly a relative,” Caoimhe said, peering over Tessa’s shoulder. “That’s quite the resemblance.”

“Aye, so it is,” Tessa said, her voice hoarse with emotion.

Her eyes welled up when she saw the nurse beside Rosie and found Jamie. Or Dinah, as she was called then. There it was, in black and white. Them together over a century ago. The things they remembered were not imagined. It was real. It was all

real.

“Could I take a picture?” Tessa asked. “To send to my ma?”

“Of course, love,” Caoimhe said, patting her shoulder. “Whatever you need.”

Tessa plucked her phone from her pocket and snapped a photo of the old picture. She texted Jamie.

Look at us!

Jamie first sent several mind-blown emoji.

Jamie

Holy shit! Where did you find that?

This magical place called the public library.

Incredible. D’you think we have one in London? lol

Can’t hurt to look

Seriously, Tess. What an amazing find. Thank you for sending it to me.

I wish I could bring it home, but alas, it’s library property now.

You mean they wouldn’t believe you if you said you’re the woman in the picture reincarnated? Bastards!

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That's the government for you.

I'm going to stare at this all night.

Me too.

She locked her phone and slipped it back into her coat pocket.

"Thank you for showing me this," she said, facing Caoimhe again. "D'you think you could point me in the direction of a couple books for some other research?"

"That's what I'm here for. Which subjects?"

"The tobacco wives for the colony of Jamestown and English aristocrats in the American South during the Revolution."

Niche as the subjects were, Caoimhe found a couple books on each and helped Tessa find them and got her checked out. Tessa couldn't wait to start reading. If she could find any references to herself and Jamie in those volumes, she could use their cited sources for further research. It would be a lot to wade through, but she was up to the task.

"Thanks again, Caoimhe," Tessa said on her way to the door, sticking the books in her tote bag.

"Slán," Caoimhe replied with a wave.

“Slán.”

Tessa braced herself against the cold when she stepped outside, but nothing to dampen her spirits. She had confirmation now, concrete evidence that she and Jamie were soulmates. She hoped it would strengthen Jamie’s resolve in her next confrontation with her father. For now, Tessa had to get started on the next part of her research.

“Tessa Gallagher, is that you?”

She whipped around at the sound of a somewhat familiar voice, though the face was unmistakable. Jet black hair, gray eyes, and strong jaw, the same as he had back when they were teenagers. Her first boyfriend, Dominic Keegan. She beamed at the sight of him.

“What about you, Dom?” she cried, laughing as she strode to embrace him.

“Grand,” he told her, hugging her in return. “And you?”

“Grand, so,” she replied.

“London life suits you, then?”

“Oh, aye. I love the rush and all the excitement. You’re still here with your ma and da?”

“I’ve got my own place now, but I’m only down the road from them.”

“I’m sure they love that.”

“Oh, aye. They can still be up my hole about getting married and giving them

grandchildren.”

Tessa chuckled, but inwardly thanked the heavens her parents were not the least bit concerned with any of that.

“Is that why you moved so far away?” he joked.

“Ach, no, but I can see why that might be a draw.”

He smiled softly at her. “Say, Tessa, would you join me at the pub for a pint later? I’d love to catch up some more. Perhaps get reacquainted. You, er, look good.”

“Oh.” Tessa let her gaze drop to the sidewalk. “Sorry, Dom, I’m away to the chippie to get dinner for my family, and then I’ve got to read these,” she paused to hold up the bag. “Before I fly back to London.”

He stepped back. “I see. Sorry I asked.”

“No, it’s fine, but I . . . I can’t.”

“Is there someone else? A boyfriend or girlfriend?”

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Tessa repressed a smile. Dom was one of the first people she told that she was bisexual. She thought he ought to know, being her boyfriend and all, and he'd taken it remarkably well. When she came out to everyone, he was hugely supportive. A notable feat considering they were seventeen years old. Oddly enough at thirty, she wasn't sure what to tell him. She and Jamie had not discussed what the story would be to others. Her mouth turned down. Would it be a betrayal to tell him she was involved? He might have follow-up questions. Would it be a worse betrayal to deny Jamie's role in her life altogether? What were the parameters?

"I . . . it's complicated," she told him. "That's all I can say."

"Well, if you ever need a break from your holiday homework, let me know," he said kindly. "A pint can just be a pint, if that's what you want."

"Aye, well, I might be able to do that."

He smiled. "Merry Christmas, Tessa."

"Merry Christmas."

She walked toward the chip shop again, her chest heavy. When she thought she had all the answers, she ended up with more questions. Her situation with Jamie wasn't nearly as clear-cut as she had hoped.

Chapter 21

The door to Jamie's childhood home in north London loomed before her like a great

abyss. Unlike the neighbors' doors, there was no indication that the holidays were upon them. No wreath, no cheesy sign, not even candles in the windows. The door was the same black color it had always been, with a big brass knocker at the top. Jamie found herself wishing she had gone to Derry, after all. Even Ma Gallagher's disapproval of her English origins would be easier to endure than an entirely un-festive Christmas dinner with Dexter Hupp.

It was too late for wishing, though. With a sigh, she knocked on the door. The maid, Katie, answered. She was a slender woman with graying brown hair tucked into a French twist at the back of her head. She always wore jeans and a jumper with comfortable trainers. Dexter did not insist on his maid being formal, only that she got the job done. Which she had. The house was spotless, as always.

"Ah, hello, Jamie," she said brightly. "Happy Christmas."

"Happy Christmas, Katie," Jamie returned.

"Let me take your coat, darling."

Jamie allowed it, but held out a bottle of wine she had tucked under her arm. "I brought this."

"Set it there," Katie said, nodding to the entryway table. "I'll take it to the kitchen."

Jamie did as she was told. Once Katie had the coat, she hung it on the rack in the corner. Unsurprisingly, there were no decorations inside or a Christmas tree. The Hupps had not celebrated Christmas since Theo's death. Jamie had dinner with her father, and that was the extent of his acknowledgment of the holiday. Jamie almost laughed as she recalled Tessa calling him a Grinch.

"Your father is in his office. I'll let him know you're here," Katie said as she led

Jamie to the kitchen and placed the wine in the refrigerator.

The kitchen smelled wonderful. Right away, Jamie knew what they were having—Cornish hens, green beans, and scalloped potatoes. The same meal they had every year.

“And then you’ll be off home?” Jamie asked. “Surely, Dad doesn’t make you work all day on Christmas.”

“No worries there,” Katie assured her. “I’ve got a few more things to get your dinner taken care of and then I will be on my way. He’s given me all of Boxing Day off.”

“Can I help?”

“Oh, no, darling, you sit and relax. Pour yourself a glass of wine. Your father will be right down.”

“And. . .” Jamie hesitated. “My mother?”

She normally didn’t ask, but she’d talked it over with Lila, and Jamie wanted to see her mother. To talk to her. To create a chance for a new relationship to form. Lila said it could be healing for both of them.

“Sorry, darling,” Katie said. “Mrs. Hupp is in no mood to come down.”

Jamie pressed her lips together. Even though she expected the answer, it hurt to hear. “Yeah, alright.”

“You might go up and see her after dinner, though. She asks after you.”

“Does she?”

“Oh, yes. It might raise her spirits to see you for a few minutes. It is Christmas, after all.”

“Right. Thank you, Katie.”

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Katie disappeared back to the entryway, and Jamie listened to her quiet footsteps as she made her way up the stairs. Jamie sent a quick text to Tessa, asking how her Christmas was, but knew she would likely not get an answer for hours. Tessa said at the Gallagher home, Christmas was a sacred day, spent with family, away from phones. After mass, they would all gather and play games, drink tea (or something stronger), and sing carols while her grandfather played piano. It was the kind of Christmas that Jamie longed for.

Her father's approaching steps made Jamie look up. It was the first time they had seen each other in person since he had triggered her panic attack. They had texted and called, but nothing more.

"Hello," he said stiffly. "Happy Christmas."

"Happy Christmas."

"Katie will be down to finish dinner in a moment. Would you like something to drink?"

"I brought a bottle of wine," Jamie said. "It's in the fridge."

"I suppose one glass won't hurt. But no more. You have a match tomorrow."

Jamie waited a moment to see if there was any concern about the recent concussion as well, but it didn't come. She only watched as her father retrieved two wine glasses from the cabinet. He poured a light portion into each glass before returning the bottle to the fridge. He picked up his glass to taste it, licked his lips, and set it back down.

“Not quite cold yet,” he said. “Ice?”

“Sure,” Jamie replied.

“Probably better to water it down, anyway.”

“Right.”

While he dropped two ice cubes into each glass, Katie made her way back in. She checked the oven.

“Looks like everything’s ready,” she said.

“Jamie, help her get the dishes out,” Dexter said.

Jamie nodded and obeyed. Katie thanked her as they placed everything on the stove top. The smells wafted toward Jamie’s nose and her stomach rumbled with anticipation. Katie was a damn good cook. She was the one saving grace about coming to Dexter’s house.

Katie insisted she could plate everything on her own and shooed Jamie and her father to the table to be seated. Once served, Katie wished them a good Christmas, and was gone. Leaving them in painfully awkward silence.

It was always like this. Quiet and cold. Katie’s food warmed Jamie’s belly, but there was no conversation. No lighthearted banter. Nothing to make it feel like a holiday. Dinner seemed to take years because of it.

When they finished, Jamie started to rinse the dishes.

“Leave them. Katie will get to them when she’s back,” Dexter said.

“She won’t be back until the day after tomorrow. You can’t leave them sitting out,”
Jamie replied. “I don’t mind cleaning up.”

It gave her something to do other than sit there with her father saying nothing.

He shrugged. “If you want.”

He picked up his wine, downed the remaining swallow that was in his glass, and brought that over to her too.

“Can these go in the dishwasher or are they real crystal?” Jamie asked.

“How should I know?”

“Weren’t these the ones from your wedding?”

“Yes, but that was thirty years ago. I can hardly be expected to remember that.”

“Never mind. I’ll hand wash them to be safe.”

“Fine by me.”

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He took a seat at the kitchen island and opened up his phone. Jamie got a washcloth good and soapy. It was good to be doing something with her hands.

“Oh, wow,” Dexter said suddenly.

“What?” Jamie asked.

“Manchester City women just fired one of their assistant coaches,” he said. “Do you remember Brett Cooke?”

Jamie froze. She remembered Brett very well. He was the one who had driven her to leave City in the first place. Another thing Lila had suggested was being truthful with Dexter about what happened there. Jamie had outright refused. She knew it was something her father could never understand. But perhaps this was a sign. The universe’s way of opening the door for that conversation.

“Yeah, I remember him,” she said, clearing her throat. “Did they say why he was sacked?”

“Apparently, several of the athletes complained about sexual harassment.”

If Jamie was still a person who believed in coincidences, she might have dismissed it. As it was, she knew that nothing was coincidental. Not even when she first met Tessa.

She turned off the water and faced her father. “Oh?”

“Yeah, it was nearly half the squad,” he said. He looked up and met her gaze, eyebrows raised. “Is that. . . did he do that to you too?”

Fear gripped at her heart, but she swallowed it down. “Yes, Dad. He did. He followed me home and tried to kiss me.”

“Jesus. Did you report him to the club?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I left the club.”

He frowned. “That’s why you left?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

He let his phone fall onto the counter and put his head in his hands. “Fucking hell, Jamie.”

Given that his face was hidden, she couldn’t tell whether it was sympathy or exasperation. Her heart pounded as she waited for him to say more and perhaps give her a hint one way or the other. When he looked at her again, she knew it was the latter.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” he demanded. “Clearly, you had other women on your side. They would have believed you all, and you could have stayed at a better club.”

Jamie blinked, but shock yielded quickly to rage. “What?”

“You threw away your contract over that? An issue that could have been resolved?”

She swallowed hard, seething. “Is that all that matters to you?”

His brow furrowed. “What are you getting at?”

“Never mind. I know the answer. Football has always been all that matters to you. Never mind that I might have been scared or hurt. Never mind that I had no idea it was happening to anyone else because in case you haven’t noticed, these things are nearly impossible to talk about.”

“Football is what has given this family everything. I wouldn’t be so harsh about prioritizing it. What else would you have me do?”

“I dunno, maybe just once, act like my father instead of my manager.”

Jamie could hardly believe what she was saying, but once she started, the words wouldn’t stop. Anger had given her the courage to speak up. She had tried to be vulnerable and honest with him, and he had made it—like everything else—about her footballing career. And she was disgusted by his frigid heart.

He glowered at her. “I am your father, Jamie. I manage your career because I care about you.”

“You care about my career because I am your daughter and a reflection on you. Not because of any affection.”

He got to his feet. “Don’t talk as if you know how I feel!”

“I know how I feel!” she shot back. “And I have never felt affection from you. No comfort, no kindness. Only harsh, lashing words, and always, always about football!”

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He reeled back as if she'd swung at him. "How can you say that? After all I have done for you?"

She schooled her face back to neutral, but anger still seethed beneath the surface. "What have you done for me that isn't about football, Dad?"

"I—" he stopped short. "You should be more grateful."

"You should learn some compassion."

With that, she swept from the room.

"Where are you going?" he demanded, following her.

Jamie trotted quickly up the stairs. "I'm going to visit my mother. Alone."

"Fine," he snapped, stopping at the bottom. "But don't go upsetting her. I don't know what's gotten into you today, but I won't have any disturbances in my house!"

She didn't answer. She only continued her flight up the stairs and retreated down the hall. She stopped at the door she knew to be her mother's. The main bedroom. Her parents slept separately now, as her father had taken to the guest room. Jamie raised her hand and rapped her knuckles against the wood.

"Come in, Katie," a weak voice called from the other side.

Jamie turned the knob and stepped through. "It's me, Mum. Sorry."

Natalie Hupp lifted her head. She was where Jamie got most of her looks. Her hair was the same chocolaty brown, though it had lost its former luster. Her eyes were a lighter shade of blue, but they were blank behind her irises. Jamie almost flinched at her mother's protruding cheekbones and gaunt face, but she resolved herself. She needed to have this conversation.

"Jamie?" Natalie croaked.

"Yeah. Is it alright if I visit with you?"

"Of course."

Jamie pulled up a wingback chair and sat at her mother's bedside. Up close, she could see more of Natalie's frailty. Her collarbones were visible through her nightgown. Enough pill bottles sat on the bedside table to supply a whole pharmacy. Jamie reached for the first bottle, but didn't recognize the medication.

"You're taking all of these, Mum?" she asked.

"Yes. They keep me safe."

Jamie set the bottle back down. "I suppose so. Are you alright?"

"As alright as I can be," Natalie sighed.

Every visit was like this. It was why Jamie avoided it. It seemed too cruel that her mother should grieve for this long. She wondered if what her mother needed was someone like Lila to help her through her grief. Maybe then she wouldn't be on a diet of whatever was coming out of the orange bottles. Not that Jamie was against medication, but her mother was once a vibrant woman. Medication was supposed to make her better, not sink her further into depression.

“How are you, Jamie?” Natalie asked.

“I’m alright,” Jamie answered. “Mostly training and matches. The usual.”

“Are you still with City? Or have they let you come home for a visit?”

It occurred to Jamie that she had not seen her mother at all during the three years she was in Manchester. Guilt gnawed through her belly.

“Oh, no, Mum, I’m back in London now. I’m playing for Stanmore,” she said.
“Sorry, I should have mentioned that sooner.”

“S’alright.”

It didn’t feel alright. And there was much more that Jamie wanted to talk about. Things a daughter should be able to discuss with her mother. Her relationship, her job, her progress in therapy. It didn’t seem right to burden Natalie with all of that, though. Not in this state.

“I thought Dad might have told you.”

“He hardly tells me anything anymore.”

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“Maybe he thinks football is a sore subject,” Jamie said. She swallowed hard. She’d already done one difficult thing today. What was one more? “Since. . .”

She trailed off. She couldn’t bring herself to say it. What if it sent her mother into a spiral? She didn’t want to cause unrest. Natalie slid her gaze sidelong to Jamie.

“Theo?”

Jamie nodded. “Sorry to bring him up.”

“You’ve apologized to me three times since you came in here. None of them were necessary.”

Jamie opened her mouth to apologize again but snapped it shut.

Natalie latched her gaze onto Jamie’s face. “He’s taken you too, hasn’t he?”

“W-what?” Jamie stammered. “How do you mean?”

“Your father. He’s got his claws into you.”

Jamie didn’t know what to say. Her father’s hold on her was strong, but she had taken some big strides only moments ago. The momentum was there for her to tear herself free. But then what would become of her mother?

“Dad’s. . . involved in my career, yes,” Jamie said. “But I’m fine.”

“That’s what Theo used to say,” her mother replied. “And your father still managed to take him from me. My first born. My baby.”

Her eyes welled up with fresh tears. Jamie snatched a tissue off the side table and placed it in her mother’s hand. Natalie dabbed at her cheeks.

“When you stopped visiting, I thought it was because you’d finally gotten away,” Natalie said, her voice catching in her throat. “But now you’re here and you’re telling me he’s still in control.”

The shock of such a statement hit Jamie full force. She leaned back, as if she could escape it, but it was there in the room. Expanding like a balloon. Perhaps about to burst.

“Jamie, you’ve got to get out from under him. Theo’s gone, and I’ve become this, all because of him. I can’t lose you too.”

“Mum. . .”

“This is what he does. You’ve lasted a long time because you’re strong, but the moment you fail to meet his expectations, he will destroy you too.”

Natalie choked on the last word. Her chin wobbled as more tears spilled down over her cheeks. A mist formed over Jamie’s eyes and her throat got tight. Had her father done this to his wife? He didn’t want the grieving mother, so he pushed pills down her throat to sedate her and hide her away? All signs pointed to it. She reached for her mother’s hand.

“I can’t lose you both, Jamie,” Natalie said.

“I’m not going anywhere, Mum.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because I’m working on making myself stronger,” Jamie said. “I’m in therapy. I’m learning how to manage all my relationships and my trauma. I’m healing. Getting better.”

Natalie sniffled. “You are?”

Jamie nodded. “I am. And. . . you could get better too, y’know. If you want.”

“I dunno. . .”

“You can. You’ve never been allowed to grieve for Theo. Dad packed it all away, every trace of him. But you couldn’t do that, could you? Compartmentalize and forget? Because you’re a good mum who loved her son.”

Natalie let out a sob, but covered her mouth with her free hand.

“If you found someone to talk to, you could process that grief and have a life again,” Jamie said, gripping her mother’s hand tighter. “I promise you, I’m not leaving you. Not that way. Can you promise me in return that you’ll try?”

Natalie nodded and let out a muffled whimper.

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“Sorry, didn’t catch that?” Jamie said, a light tease to her voice.

Natalie lowered her hand and swallowed hard. “I’ll try.”

“Thank you,” Jamie said. She smiled. “And Happy Christmas, Mum.”

“Happy Christmas, darling.”

Jamie was glad she had taken Lila’s advice. She had a small breakthrough with her father, but an even greater one with her mother. And she could be nothing but grateful for that.

Chapter 22

When Jamie saw Tessa again, relief overtook all other emotions. She was able to put the argument with her father and the heartbreaking conversation with her mother behind her. All that mattered was that Tessa was back. In her home. Kissing the absolute life out of her.

“I missed you,” Tessa murmured between kisses. “Fuck, Jamie, I missed you so much.”

“I missed you more,” Jamie sighed back, heat swirling in the pit of her stomach.

They had only been apart for a week, but that was more than enough time for longing to take hold. Jamie’s hands, aching for Tessa, dove into the latter’s hair, taking firm hold of the blonde braid. Tessa pawed at Jamie’s jumper. She pushed the hem up over

Jamie's abs and explored with abandon. Jamie's muscles jumped at the contact, her body eager for more.

They stumbled toward the stairs, shedding layers of clothing as they went. Even Tessa's glasses barely made it onto the dresser. By the time they reached Jamie's room, both were down to their underwear. Jamie pushed Tessa down onto the bed, a dizzying current racing through her. Tessa's lips parted as she watched Jamie slide her knickers down her legs. Jamie did the same with her own, tossing them both aside before crawling over Tessa's gorgeous body and kissing her again. Skin to skin, chest to chest, they were as one. The souls that had found each other time and again rejoiced in continued connection.

Tessa pushed her chest up, and Jamie took the hint. After trailing down Tessa's neck, Jamie wrapped her lips around a pebbled nipple, and toyed the other to life with her hand. A sultry moan fell from Tessa's lips, which only spurred Jamie to intensify her touch. She nipped lightly with her teeth. Tessa gasped. Her hands flew into Jamie's hair, holding her in place.

Jamie took pride in a lot of things—her appearance, her performance on the pitch, her trophies—but nothing made her heart swell like the sound of Tessa's pleasure. She drank in the sounds from deep in Tessa's throat. They made her want to do more. Give more.

Releasing her breast, Jamie kissed her way down Tessa's body, leaving a searing path until she reached her bellybutton. She flicked her tongue over it. Tessa shivered and Jamie smirked with satisfaction.

When she was about to reach Tessa's hot core, Jamie changed course. She peppered kisses to the insides of Tessa's thighs. Tessa whined and pulled her legs together, as if to push Jamie where she needed her most. But Jamie only latched on to the milky flesh and sucked hard, pulling Tessa's skin between her teeth to leave a distinct mark.

Tessa sucked in a sharp breath and hooked her knees over Jamie's shoulders.

With her index finger, Jamie teased Tessa's slit, already wet and wanting. Tessa's hips rolled toward her.

"You really did miss me, huh?" Jamie teased.

"Are you gonna talk all night or are you gonna put that mouth to good use?" Tessa shot back.

"So demanding!" Jamie chided. "If I didn't want to taste you so fucking badly, I might punish you."

"If you don't, I'll take care of it myself."

Tessa brought her hand toward her center, but Jamie swatted it away.

"You've taken care of yourself all week," she said. "My turn now."

She bent between Tessa's thighs and licked a stripe up her soaking cunt. Tessa whined, arching her back and pushing her hips to get Jamie closer. Jamie worked Tessa's clit with her tongue, flicking and swirling until it was swollen, and Tessa's voice grew hoarse with her desperate cries of Jamie's name.

Jamie's own body heated with desire. There was nothing more arousing to her than seeing Tessa twist and writhe. She teased Tessa's entrance with a finger, coating it in Tessa's arousal before slipping it inside her. Tessa groaned, loud and long, and rocked her hips. Jamie matched her rhythm with her finger. She added a second and Tessa gasped, but did not stop. Working with her mouth and hands in tandem, Jamie brought Tessa closer and closer to the edge. Tessa clenched around her fingers. She could hear the dawn of an orgasm in Tessa's voice.

“Christ, Jamie, I’m nearly there,” she panted. “Oh, please, faster.”

Jamie ratcheted up her pace until Tessa was no longer able to form words except for the occasional “fuck” and Jamie’s name. Jamie pressed her thighs together to ease the ache in her own center. Tessa had never been hotter.

Tessa peaked, her legs trembling, her hips jerking, her hands gripping tight to Jamie’s hair. As she rode out her orgasm, everything relaxed. Jamie eased her back down before pulling away. Her lips found their way instinctively back to Tessa’s. The kisses were short and breathless.

“Your turn,” Tessa said. “But I’m not sure I can move. You’re gonna have to sit on my face.”

“Are you threatening me with a good time?” Jamie teased.

“Get up here, you,” Tessa said through a smile, pulling Jamie forward.

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Jamie got onto her knees and helped Tessa get situated beneath her. Once she was comfortable on the pillows, Jamie crawled up her body until her thighs were on either side of Tessa's head. Tessa licked her lips.

“Bring that sweet cunt here, baby,” she said.

Biting her lip and gripping the headboard, Jamie lowered her hips until her center came into contact with Tessa's mouth. She moaned as her knees went weak. Tessa's own passionate sounds sent a shiver up Jamie's spine. Tessa wrapped her arms around Jamie's thighs and held her to her mouth. Using the headboard for leverage, Jamie ground down.

Tessa devoured her. Jamie's voice reached an octave she'd never heard before. Pressure built in her lower belly as Tessa worked her clit. Her racing heartbeat pounded in her ears. She lost control of the rock of her hips as she wildly chased her pleasure on Tessa's lips. Tessa, with surprising strength, held her steady.

“Tessa,” she whined. “Oh, God, Tessa.”

Tessa moaned against her, sending a thrilling vibration through her. Her whole body fluttered from her chest to her core. For a fleeting moment, she felt a little pathetic. Tessa had barely touched her and already she was on the brink of climax. But she was not ashamed to crave Tessa. She loved Tessa. She always had. She always would.

Her thighs quivered, and Jamie feared she would not be able to hold herself up. Her knuckles were white from holding the headboard so tightly.

“Tessa,” she sighed. “We can change positions. I don’t want to crush you.”

“If I go out between your legs, I go out a happy woman indeed.”

“But I—oh, fuck!”

Tessa shook her head and proceeded, her pace unrelenting.

Tessa’s expert mouth cleared Jamie’s mind of any other concerns. Nothing existed beyond the two of them, souls and bodies intertwined in exquisite harmony with one another. White exploded behind Jamie’s eyes. Waves of ecstasy rolled through her limbs and she shuddered through her peak. She murmured Tessa’s name as softly as a prayer, slowing her body down.

When she was utterly spent, she fell onto her side next to Tessa, who shot her a satisfied smirk. Jamie was too tired to even try to rebuke her for being cocky. How could she when Tessa was clearly skilled at what she did?

Catching her breath, she curled into Tessa’s side and rested her head on her girlfriend’s chest. Tessa wrapped her arm around Jamie’s shoulders and held her close. Jamie closed her eyes and listened to Tessa’s heartbeat. Contentment and peace flowed between them until they were breathing in time with one another.

Laying in the afterglow, a comfortable warmth spread through Jamie. The same she always felt being in Tessa’s arms. Tessa’s fingers lazily stroked Jamie’s shoulder, and her eyelids grew heavy. But now that Tessa was beside her, Jamie had some things she wanted to say.

“Tess?”

“Hm?”

“Can I tell you something?”

Tessa propped her head up with her elbow beneath her hand. “What about?”

“Back at your housewarming, you asked if something happened that made me want to leave Man City. I wasn’t completely honest with you.”

Tessa smirked and rolled her eyes. “Shocking.”

“Shut up,” Jamie replied with a teasing shove, earning a giggle from Tessa. “Seriously. I’m trying to be vulnerable here, which you know I’m not good at.”

Tessa stifled a giggle. “Alright, I’m listening.”

Jamie linked her fingers with Tessa’s free hand. “Did you see the news that they sacked their assistant coach for sexual harassment?”

The serene expression disappeared from Tessa’s face. “Aye.”

“I was one of the women it happened to,” Jamie said, swallowing hard. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. But now that we’re together and the information is out there, I’m more comfortable saying it.”

Tessa squeezed Jamie’s hand. “I’m so sorry that happened to you, Jamie.”

“It’s alright,” Jamie said with a shrug. “I think some good came of it.”

“Do you now?”

“It gave me the push I needed to come back to London. Back to you.”

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Tessa's mouth twisted into a half-frown. "I still don't like that it happened."

"I was thinking of coming back anyway once my contract was up because I knew I wanted to get another chance with you," Jamie explained. "But when all that happened, I got out early. In the end, I'm glad I did."

"I'm buzzing that you're here," Tessa said, a smile slowly returning to her lips. "Raging about the asshole at Man City. Glad they sacked him."

"Me too," Jamie agreed. "My only real regret is not confiding in my teammates. I could have helped get rid of him sooner."

"There's no guarantee it would have happened any faster. But you would have been around people who understood."

"They certainly would have been more understanding than my father."

Tessa narrowed her eyes. "What happened?"

"I told him about this, and he only admonished me for not speaking up, when I might have been believed and I could have stayed with his idea of a better club."

"Sweet suffering Jesus." Tessa cupped Jamie's face in her palm. "He was way out of order saying that to you, Jamie. You deserve sympathy and care when you're sharing something that serious."

Jamie turned her face to press her lips to Tessa's fingers. "I know where I can find

that now.” She leaned forward and claimed Tessa’s mouth in a light kiss. “Some good came of that, too, though. I finally stood up to him.”

Tessa perked up. “You did?”

“Yep. I told him I wished he would act more like my father and less like my manager.”

“Jamie!” Tessa cried, sitting up fully and pulling a giggling Jamie with her. “I’m so proud of you! How did he take it?”

“He was angry, but I got the last word.”

She told Tessa everything, the words they exchanged in her father’s kitchen before she left the room to see her mother. Which brought Jamie to the other thing she wanted to tell Tessa about. Theo’s story.

Lila encouraged it again in their last session. Telling Tessa about Theo so that she might be more understanding when Jamie took as much time as she would likely need in order to fully come out. An act which her father would consider defiance and disgrace. But the moment arrived, and Jamie found her heart locked up.

For the time being, she only wanted them to be happy. Not caught up in the past. And Tessa was being understanding. She was giving Jamie a chance to get comfortable. To start slow and build up her courage. It was all Jamie could want from her.

The last thing she wanted was to erase the radiant, proud smile from Tessa’s face with the tragedy of Theo’s story. Another time, she told herself. I’ll tell her when the time is right, after I’ve talked about it more in therapy. They had been through so much. She wanted to keep it light and fun while she could.

Tessa pulled Jamie in for another kiss. “I really am proud of you. You are making significant strides, and. . . I’m hopeful, Jamie. Hopeful for our future.”

“Thank you, Tessa. I’m hopeful too. For the first time in a long time.”

They kissed once more before letting themselves succumb to the kind of satisfied sleep only lovers knew.

Chapter 23

“And. . . action!” the director called.

Tessa watched as Jamie transformed into her spokesperson persona—back straight, chin up, plastered smile. They had dressed her in a generic, all white football training kit, bereft of the brands or crests she would normally have donned in actual training or warm-ups. She had a classic, black and white ball tucked under one arm as she turned to follow the camera.

“Whether I’m on the pitch or out with my teammates, only one brand makes me feel secure,” Jamie said in that sing-song advertisement voice. She held up a tiny purple tube next to her face to get it in the shot. “Luxora. The athlete’s choice in tampons.”

That explains the white shorts, Tessa thought with a smirk.

The director called cut, and they moved Jamie over to the next part of the set up studio, which had a miniature pitch and goal set up. It was similar to the ones used in training. Tessa was not surprised when Jamie took her first shot and made it seconds after the clapboard moved out of the way of the camera.

The director watched the clip a few times, and some production assistants swarmed around Jamie to touch up her makeup. She met Tessa’s gaze over one of their heads

and shot her a wink. Tessa wiggled her fingers in return. When they finished, Jamie walked over to get some water, which one assistant warned she had to drink through a straw in order to preserve her lipstick. Tessa could think of a few better ways to ruin that lipstick, but pushed those thoughts to the back of her mind. She would have their Valentine's Day celebrations that night to act on every filthy thought she could come up with.

“Alright, have a break, Jamie,” the director said, drawing Tessa back into the studio. “We're going to put together a rough cut and see if we need more takes.”

Jamie nodded and relaxed. “Dave, have you met Tessa?”

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The director shook his head and came over with his hand extended. Tessa shook it. Dave was a generically handsome man—dark hair and eyes, a strong angular jaw with some stubble across it, and a crooked smile.

“Hello, Tessa,” he said. “Dave Dixon, nice to meet you.”

“Tessa Gallagher,” she replied. “You as well.”

“How do you know Jamie?”

“We’re—”

“Good friends,” Jamie cut in. “Tessa works for the club, running the social media page for the women’s team. I invited her to come along and get some content. I hope that’s alright.”

“Certainly,” Dave said. “You’ll tag the product, won’t you?”

Tessa hardly heard a word. Her mind stopped comprehending anything past Jamie’s interjection and “good friends.” Did she think Tessa was about to say they were girlfriends to this stranger? What compelled her to interrupt so harshly? Tessa stared at Jamie for what could have been hours, willing her to divert from this conversation and explain herself.

“Tess?” Jamie said. “Will you tag Luxora in any posts?”

Tessa shook her head to clear it. “Oh. Sure. Of course.”

“Excellent,” Dave said. “I’m off to watch the rough cut. Hang tight, Jamie.”

“Sure thing,” Jamie replied with a nod. Once Dave was out of earshot, she rounded on Tessa. “Are you okay?”

“Are you?” Tessa retorted.

“What are you on about?”

“Did you hear yourself? Jumping in before I could answer to say I’m a good friend before further reducing me to an employee.”

Jamie blinked and lowered her voice. “Tessa, you agreed that we’d only be out with my teammates.”

“Don’t spit in my face and call me gorgeous,” Tessa snapped. “I know what I agreed to.”

“Keep your voice down,” Jamie hissed.

Tessa scowled and folded her arms over her chest. “You don’t trust me, do you?”

“What?” Jamie reeled back. “How can you say that? I’m trusting you with everything.”

“Then why didn’t you let me answer Dave? And why are you reminding me of things like keeping my voice down?”

“Because I thought you were about to start shouting!” Jamie shot back. A few heads turned in their direction and her face flushed. Tessa lifted a smug eyebrow before Jamie whispered again. “I’m sorry about interrupting you with Dave. It’s an impulse I

have. I feel like I have to control the narrative at all times.”

“What did you think I was going to say, Jamie?”

“I don’t know. I think that’s why I interrupted.”

Tessa sighed. “It makes me feel like on some level, you don’t trust me to keep your secret. Our secret.”

“It’s not personal, Tessa. I often feel like I can’t trust anyone.”

The balloon of anger in Tessa’s chest burst, leaving in its wake a deep and cutting hurt. She had expected Jamie to deny it. To insist she trusted Tessa because their relationship was above any others in her life. By her own admission, Tessa was lumped in with everyone else. Despite the year they were together keeping her secret. Three years apart, keeping her secret. And the months since November, keeping her secret.

A lump formed in her throat and hot tears sprang to her eyes. Jamie startled and reached for Tessa, but stopped herself. Tessa sucked in a shaky breath. If the words were a knife in her heart, Jamie’s refusal to even touch her twisted it.

“I’m sorry,” Jamie said. “I didn’t mean that. It’s only—”

“No, I don’t think you should say anything else,” Tessa stopped her. “I think you’ve done enough damage as it is.”

“Tessa—”

“Jamie, I only want to be in this with you if you’re certain. About me, about us. You said you were hopeful, but I need the trust too.”

“I do trust you!”

“I wish I could believe that right now.”

“Please, I didn’t mean it like that, let me explain—”

“No,” Tessa swallowed and shook her head. “I need some time. I’m going to go home for the day and I’ll see you later, alright?”

“Tessa!”

“Jamie!” Dave called. “We need to do another take, I want to try a different angle on the goal. Are you ready?”

“You’re needed elsewhere,” Tessa said. “Go on, then.”

She turned to go and Jamie followed. “Tessa, wait.”

Tessa didn’t stop. She made a beeline for the door and strode through it. When she didn’t hear it open again behind her, she knew Jamie hadn’t continued her pursuit.

Well, Tessa thought as she made her way to the tube station. So much for Valentine’s

Day.

With the sting of Jamie's words threatening to overwhelm her, Tessa went home and took a much needed nap. Sleep dulled the pain some. A cup of tea soothed it even more. But it lingered like a sore muscle in her chest. She kept replaying the moment over and over, and found it just as sharp every time.

Again, she wondered what hold Dexter Hupp had over his daughter that made her distrust even those closest to her. It was true that in the past, he had her agent and doctors reporting to him, but Jamie assured Tessa that was over. Lila had not revealed anything they spoke about in therapy, and her agent was shutting Dexter out too. All he'd done was send a few nasty texts and emails.

Tessa knew it would take time. She understood trauma made people reactive. But did that make her own feelings invalid? She didn't think so. They were doing so much to protect Jamie's heart but what about Tessa's? Didn't she deserve some consideration as well? The longer Jamie took, the more she hurt.

She found herself wondering if she had given in to her feelings too quickly when she agreed that Jamie coming out to—or inviting in, as she put it—the team would be enough. At the time, she thought it would be. But they were barely three months in, and she was struggling to be patient. It was hard when every time Jamie pulled back, it stung like a rejection.

She rolled over in bed and stared at the window. The curtains were drawn, so she couldn't see outside. Not that she wanted to. She wasn't sure what she wanted to do. Reading and television didn't appeal to her. The thought of scrolling on her phone was even less desirable. So she stared at the wall. Contemplating if she would be able to survive another breakup with Jamie.

It wasn't what she wanted. The thought of it made bile rise up in her throat. No doubt

the effects of carrying centuries of pain brought on by Jamie's decisions in the past. It hadn't been any easier when Tessa was the one who walked away when they broke up three years prior. Her heart was shattered. Could she go through it again?

No, she thought. I made a promise to try, and that's what I'll do.

There was no way it was going to be easy. But dammit, she loved Jamie. Despite the angst and old wounds, there was love there.

She sat up and reached for her tea.

"Damn, it's gone cold," she muttered to herself.

With a groan, she pushed herself to get out of bed. Sliding her feet into her slippers, she padded back out to the kitchen to put the kettle on once more.

She heard the lock turn and the front door swing open with its familiar squeak.

"I'm in the kitchen, Niamh," Tessa called. "Fancy a cuppa?"

Jamie appeared from around the corner. Tessa gasped and jumped, her hand landing on her chest.

"Fuck's sake, Jamie, can you stop scaring me in my own fucking kitchen?"

Jamie's mouth threatened a smile, but she forced them back to neutral. "Sorry. You gave me a key, though, remember?"

"Aye, so I did, but that's no excuse to not announce yourself," Tessa replied.

"Sorry," Jamie said again. "I only wanted. . . I dunno."

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She had changed into jeans and a button up blouse, but her makeup was gone. No doubt she had taken it off before training in the afternoon.

“Best tell me what you’re doing here,” Tessa said.

“I wanted to apologize for what happened at the shoot,” Jamie told her. “Tessa, I am so, so sorry I jumped in that way. You have never betrayed me, even when we were broken up. I have absolutely no reason not to trust you. I gave in to a knee-jerk reaction, and it was totally unfair to you. I promise I’ll do better going forward.”

The kettle clicked off, and Tessa poured the boiling water over the fresh tea bag waiting in her cup. She watched the steam for a moment before facing Jamie again.

“I’m sorry too,” she said. “I should be more understanding.”

“No,” Jamie said with a shake of her head. “My trauma is not an excuse for treating you poorly. If I do something that hurts your feelings, I want you to tell me.”

“You weren’t treating me poorly, it’s just. . . a result of your upbringing.”

“Exactly. A reason. Not an excuse. You have every right to hold me accountable.”

“And you, me,” Tessa said. “If I need to give you more time or more space, you let me know.”

“I don’t want that right now,” Jamie said. “Right now, I want to give you your Valentine’s Day gift.”

“We don’t have to—”

“I want to.”

Jamie reached into her tote bag and pulled out a small, rectangular gift box, wrapped in blue paper with purple and pink ribbon.

Tessa arched an eyebrow, but her smile betrayed how pleased she was. “The bisexual colors?”

“Of course,” Jamie said, grinning back.

It was a thoughtful touch, Tessa had to give her that. She pulled the ribbons loose and unwrapped the paper. The velvet box beneath told Tessa it was some kind of jewelry. After one last glance at Jamie, who watched expectantly, Tessa popped it open. Inside was a beautiful silver necklace. The pendant shaped like—

“Is this County Derry?” she gasped.

Jamie nodded. “So you can carry a bit of home with you wherever you go.”

Tears welled up in Tessa’s eyes again, but this time with gratitude. There was a star engraved where the city of Derry was located, too. It was the sweetest gift she had ever received.

“Turn it over,” Jamie said.

Tessa flipped it without question. On the back was another engraving. In a neat script, the word “eternity.”

“Oh!” Tessa gasped as it dawned on her. “Is this—the Emily Dickinson poem?”

“Yeah,” Jamie replied. “She helped me understand my feelings more than anything these past few months, and texting you that poem felt like the first step towards us being together again.”

“Jamie, this is. . .” Tessa took a deep breath. “This is beautiful. Thank you so much.”

“Of course, Tess. I love you.”

Tessa let the words percolate through her. They hadn’t said it to each other yet this time, even if they felt it. It was nice to hear.

“I love you, too.”

Jamie’s cheeks flushed pink as she cut her gaze to the floor. Tessa strode over and claimed her mouth in a deep kiss. She didn’t have the words to convey how much it meant to her to receive such a sweet gift. She hoped the kiss would do the trick.

When they parted, Jamie’s face had gone from pink to red. She swallowed and reached for the necklace. “Can I put it on you?”

“Of course!”

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Tessa gently pulled it out of the box, holding it up for a moment to let it gleam in the light, before handing it over to Jamie. Jamie stood behind Tessa and draped it around Tessa's neck. It cooled her skin when it settled into place on her chest. She held back a shiver, which might have been from the necklace or Jamie's touch. When she turned back around, Jamie toyed with the hem of her t-shirt.

"Tessa, I want to make you come wearing this," she said, her eyes flicking between Tessa's face and the necklace. "Wearing only this."

Tessa smirked. "Did you just Titanic me?"

"Is it working?"

"Aye. Take my shirt off."

Chuckling, Jamie tugged the shirt over Tessa's head and backed her into the cabinets with a kiss. Arms around Jamie's neck, Tessa held on tight while Jamie lifted her, and she wrapped her legs around Jame's waist. Jamie held her securely all the way to the bedroom, before tossing her, giggling, onto the bed and shutting the door.

Chapter 24

"Billie and her sister both live in Chelsea?" Jamie asked as they drove through the streets of the borough.

Tessa nodded. "Oh, aye. Stevie's lived here for ages though. Ever since she got married."

“And Billie followed suit?”

“She did. But I think if Ethan had stayed at Stanmore, they’d still live in that area.”

“Oh, right. I keep forgetting he played for Stanmore.”

“He got them to Europe. He loved the club, but Chelsea was his dream club.”

“As an Arsenal legacy, I feel as if I’m walking into enemy territory.”

Tessa chuckled. “It’s neutral territory. Billie only supports whatever club Ethan plays for, and Stevie and her husband aren’t even into football. Wives and girlfriends from several clubs will be around.”

“I see. That does ease my mind.”

Tessa gazed out the window at the passing restaurants and shopping, feeling better herself. After learning that Billie was pregnant, she wondered if she should have offered to throw Billie’s shower, but Stevie volunteered, getting Tessa off the hook. It was a relief. Tessa didn’t know the first thing about throwing a baby shower. And with her money, Stevie was sure to put together the classy party Billie deserved.

Tessa glanced at the gifts in the back seat. One, she got from Billie’s registry—a bassinet and sheet set with little footballs on it. The other was the Winnie the Pooh book she’d picked up in the vintage store. Before she ever thought that she and Jamie could be together again. When she had tried using someone else to distract herself.

It was funny how so much time passed, and yet it also seemed as though it was hardly any at all. So much had changed. Tessa was coming to Billie’s baby shower with Jamie as her date. She and Jamie were on the same page about being soulmates, and had even found evidence of their past lives together. Tessa smiled, pleased at how

everything was working out.

Jamie slowed to find a parking spot on Stevie's street. They ended up having to turn around and park across the street from the house, but still several doors down.

"See, this is why I don't even bother having a car in London," Tessa said. "It's much easier to get on the tube and walk. You end up walking anyway."

"Footballers can't use the tube if they don't want to be bombarded," Jamie reminded her, cutting the engine.

"Wear a balaclava or something," Tessa said with a shrug.

"Oh, yeah, fantastic idea. In the middle of March, no one would bat an eye."

"There's still a good chill in the air in the middle of March!"

Tessa giggled as she opened the door and walked around to the backseat to get the book. Jamie joined her to carry the bassinets since it was heavy. Together, they strode up the pavement toward Stevie's front door.

"Have you been to Billie's sister's before?" Jamie asked.

"Once, for Billie's bridal shower," Tessa answered. "As maid of honor, I planned the hen do. Stevie's rich, so she does all this classy shite."

Jamie chuckled. "How did they end up being called Billie and Stevie?"

"Stevie is named after Stevie Nicks, and Billie is named after the Michael Jackson song, Billie Jean. Though she's dropped Jean since getting married and is now Billie Axton Knight."

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“When we get married, do you want to keep our names or hyphenate?” Jamie asked.

Tessa halted. Had she heard that right? Jamie, speaking in absolutes about marriage? That was the most public acknowledgment of a relationship humanly possible. Not to mention legally binding.

Jamie turned and looked at her, pink rising to her cheeks. “Sorry, was that too soon? I thought since we’re soulmates and everything, we’ll be getting there, eventually. Was I wrong to assume?”

Tessa shook her head, a small smile spreading over her lips. “No, but. . . I had no idea you thought about those things.”

“Well, yeah. I mean, we’re together now, we know our history, and I’m finally getting to a place where I feel like I can eventually come out. But honestly, Tessa, I’ve thought about marrying you since the day I met you.”

Tessa’s heart sang with delight. She made it to Jamie in two strides, leaning in for a kiss. Only, Jamie dodged her and went for a hug instead. The bubble of joy burst and Tessa’s shoulders sagged.

“Sorry,” Jamie said. “It’s just. . . we’re outside.”

Tessa gestured to the empty street. “Who’s watching us?”

“You never know, Tess,” Jamie said. “People could be hiding or looking out their windows. . .”

“Right.” Tessa’s lips tightened into a frown, but she nodded. She kept walking toward the house. Jamie followed behind. “Is this how it’s going to be for the whole party?”

Jamie didn’t answer for several moments, even as they climbed the three steps of the stoop.

“Tessa, I don’t know these people.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“I’m trying to say that I trust you and Billie, but everyone else is a potential leak.”

“Ach, well, when we get married, I’ll keep my name so I don’t risk being a leak.”

“Tessa, we’ve talked about this. You agreed to me coming out to the team, who I know I can trust.”

“And how many times have we been around them since this agreement?” Tessa challenged.

Jamie went silent. She didn’t have an answer, Tessa knew. They had only been around the team in training and before and after matches. Neither of which gave Jamie and Tessa any real opportunity to share a kiss or even hold hands. Otherwise, they could only outwardly be a couple in their respective homes. Tessa was beginning to feel she hadn’t had the full scope of what she had agreed to.

Jamie set the bassinet down on the stoop. She pulled her phone from her pocket, already typing something. Tessa rolled her eyes and rang the bell. Jamie nudged her arm, showing Tessa the screen.

“Party at mine after our match against Birmingham City next weekend,” Jamie said.

“Half of them have already agreed to come. You’ll be free to plant as many kisses on me as you want.”

Tessa resisted the urge to roll her eyes. To Jamie’s credit, she was always quick to address Tessa’s concerns. It eased the sting of the rejections. But each one was a chip away at Tessa’s belief. While it was better than last time, it still didn’t feel like enough.

She didn’t get to answer before the door swung open, and Stevie appeared, a big, welcoming smile on her face. Tessa grinned back. Stevie and Billie looked remarkably alike. They had the same dark, wavy hair, rounded face, and clear blue eyes. Stevie’s eight years on Billie showed in the lines around her mouth and eyes, but she was equally as beautiful.

“Tessa, hello!” she said cheerfully.

She pulled Tessa into a hug and kissed her cheek.

“How are you, Stevie?” Tessa replied.

“Wonderful, thank you,” Stevie said. “And this must be Jamie.”

She pulled a surprised Jamie into a hug as well as she introduced herself.

“Billie told me about your situation,” Stevie said, lowering her voice. “No one other than Billie and I know, but you don’t need to worry about anyone here, I promise.”

“Thank you,” Tessa said.

“Of course,” Stevie replied. “Please, come in. Gift table is to the right in the dining room, and we’re all in the back sitting room.”

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Stevie's house was the definition of classic elegance and modern charm. The structure of the house showed its age, as well as some features such as the crown molding. But the wallpaper had a modern, green floral design, and the furniture had trendy shapes and fabrics. To Tessa's pleasure, there was plenty of color—mostly forest greens and golds. It made all the blue present wrappings stand out from their place atop the oak dining table. Jamie and Tessa added their gifts to the overflowing pile before following Stevie to where the rest of the party was.

Billie sat on a white and gold couch, in a flowy, powder blue dress that draped over her protruding baby bump. Her hands rested on it, cradling the boy inside her, due within a month. Her skin glowed as she smiled at her guests. A smile which impossibly widened when she clapped eyes on Tessa.

“Tess!” she gasped.

“Don't get up!” Tessa insisted. She made her way through the crowd to embrace her best friend. “You look wonderful.”

“Thank you,” Billie said through a sigh. “I feel like a planet, but I'm surprisingly thrilled about it.”

Tessa laughed and stepped away to let Jamie say hello. Billie was graceful and warm when greeting her. Tessa never told Jamie about Billie's reservations about them, and given how sweet Billie was being, no one could have ever guessed. But it made Tessa happy to see them getting along. Watching them, an ache formed in her heart with how strongly she wanted Jamie to be in her life. To grow close to Billie, and Tessa's family as well. But to be ingrained, they would need to be out in the open.

Tessa forced herself to look away and went to say hello to Laci. Her blonde hair was wrapped into a French twist at the back of her head, and she was one of the few people in a pink dress. Blue wasn't part of the dress code, but since the baby was a boy, most of the women must have assumed it was the more appropriate color.

“What about you, Laci?” Tessa asked.

“I'm doing well. How about you?” she replied.

“I'm grand. Pure buzzing for Billie and Ethan.”

“Oh, me too. They're going to be such wonderful parents.”

“Aye, so they are. And a wee fella, too. He'll be a sweet one.”

“Absolutely.”

“Are you and Jordan planning to have a wain of your own?”

“Someday, yeah,” Laci said with a wistful smile. “Jordan says he's ready whenever I am, but you should see him with his teammates' children. That man is all daddy energy.”

Tessa snorted. “In more ways than one, aye?”

Laci winked. “You bet.”

“How's work otherwise?”

“Good!”

Laci launched into a few of the campaigns she had recently shot for, mostly lingerie, swim suit, and makeup brands, and a few projects she had coming up. Tessa admired Laci, and the representation for plus size bodies she brought to the modeling world. She was a force to be reckoned with in the industry. Jordan had not been exaggerating when he said that she was more famous than him. Tessa wondered how they ever had time for each other with jobs as time-consuming as theirs, but being soulmates, they made it work. Maybe she and Jamie could do the same.

As if summoned by the thought of her, Jamie arrived. She carried a glass of wine in one hand, which she offered to Tessa.

“Thanks,” Tessa said, accepting it.

“Hi, Laci,” Jamie said.

“Hello, Jamie,” Laci returned. “Season going alright?”

“As good as it can be. We’re not on the verge of relegation, but I know most of us would prefer to be higher up the table.”

“If you win your next two, you should jump West Ham, right?”

“Yeah, but one of those is Tottenham, who we lost to before.”

Tessa enjoyed her wine while they chatted about football. Again, she was hit with that desire for Jamie to be more ingrained in her life. She wanted to take Jamie’s hand while she talked, but they hadn’t discussed if Laci was okay to invite in to their situation. But Tessa didn’t want to think about that. She wanted to be able to take Jamie’s hand, kiss Jamie’s cheek, and claim Jamie’s heart whenever and wherever she wanted.

Patience, she told herself. She just needs more time.

She had agreed to give Jamie time. Maybe the shower was an opportunity to ease their way into sharing with people outside of the club.

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She didn't have time to pitch the idea before Stevie came in and herded everyone back to where Billie sat for the present opening. They all trooped in. Billie asked Tessa to sit beside her, with Stevie on the other side.

Presents seemed to go on forever. There were several that were too large, so Tessa or Stevie got up to open them for Billie. Those were the crib, stroller, and car seat. There were endless clothes and blankets and stuffed animals. Plenty of books as well. But when Billie unwrapped the vintage Winnie the Pooh from Tessa, she gasped, and her eyes watered as she looked at her best friend.

"Tessa, it's gorgeous," she sighed. "I love it."

"I got it days after you learned you were pregnant," Tessa said. "I wrote you a note inside."

Billie blinked, but opened the book, where Tessa had taped the personal note inside.

"You can read it out loud," Tessa said, as Billie opened her mouth to no doubt ask that question. Her smile told Tessa that was correct.

"Billie," Billie began. "I can't believe the drunk girl I rescued from some rando at a party became my best mate. I find it even more amazing that all these years later, heading into our thirties, we are still best mates. I am beyond happy that you found Ethan, your forever partner, your soulmate. You two deserve the happiness you found in each other, and I know you will be the most incredible parents to your wee fella. Most people would call this your happily ever after. But I know better. You are only at the beginning of your biggest adventure. I hope to be at your side for the whole

journey, until we're little old ladies in rocking chairs, reading this very book to your grandchildren. I love you, Tessa."

Billie choked on a sob as she read the last sentence, and she yanked Tessa into her arms through a chorus of awwwws from the other guests. Tessa's own eyes misted over. She meant every word. No matter what happened with Jamie, Tessa would always have Billie, a soulmate of a different kind.

"Thank you," Billie whispered. "I love you too."

Tessa gave her a gentle squeeze. "You're going to be amazing."

Billie sniffled, and then Stevie was handing her the next present.

Once all were opened, Jamie and Tessa helped Stevie clean up. They made a game out of it. Stevie held open the bin bag, while Tessa balled up wrapping paper and tossed it to Jamie, who kicked it into the bin bag. The way she would chip a ball into the net at training.

"Rebecca will be pleased to know I'm still getting target practice in on my day off," she joked.

"Gotta keep you match fit," Tessa said.

Stevie chuckled. "Anything to help."

She tied up the bin bag and carried it into the kitchen, where most of the guests had retreated to finish off the food and drinks. Jamie approached Tessa and took her hand. For the first time all day.

"That was a sweet gift," Jamie said. "I got choked up watching you two."

“Billie’s my best mate,” Tessa replied. “I’d do anything for her, and I am genuinely excited to be an auntie to her wains.”

“You’ve got such a big heart, Tessa. It’s one of the things I love most about you.”

Tessa opened her mouth to reply, but the sound of footsteps caused Jamie to yank her hand away. For nothing, it turned out, since it was only Billie.

“We’ve got loads of food. Do either of you want to take any home?” she asked.

Tessa swallowed the hurt once again and looked at Billie. “Sure. Thanks.”

“No problem. Jamie?”

“I’m alright, but thank you for offering,” Jamie said.

Billie disappeared back into the kitchen, and Tessa heaved a sigh. She wasn’t sure how much more she could take.

Chapter 25

Jamie hadn’t sat down for her entire therapy appointment. She paced back and forth across Lila’s office, the expression on Tessa’s face when she’d pulled her hand away still etched in her brain. It would haunt her for years. Especially if it cost her Tessa.

“I keep letting her down,” Jamie said. “I keep hurting her. I know we had an agreement for being back together this time, but I know I can’t keep hurting her or it’ll be over. Why can’t I get there?”

Lila peered at Jamie from over her glasses. “How has it been with your father since you pushed back with him at Christmas?”

“Fine, I suppose,” Jamie said. “He has sort of backed off. Not completely, and he’s still on my case about mistakes, but nothing I can’t handle. Or ignore.”

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“That’s progress. Have you shared that with Tessa?”

“Yeah. I think it helps, but those steps forward don’t count if we keep taking three steps back. I didn’t need to be weird at the baby shower. It wasn’t public. I should have held her fucking hand. God, I’m so stupid!”

Jamie buried her face in her hands and stopped walking. She wanted to scream or cry or rip out her hair. Anything other than endure the crushing weight of being a disappointment.

“I can’t win,” she said, dropping her hands back to her sides. “I either disappoint my father or I disappoint the love of my life.”

“You can’t please everyone, Jamie. What you’re after takes time.”

“And in that time, I am deeply hurting someone I love. Maybe we jumped the gun on being together.”

“Do you want to break up?”

“No, never! But I’m not sure what else will spare her feelings while I work through this.”

“It’s interesting you aren’t considering drastic action such as going no contact with your father,” Lila pointed out. “Any particular reason for that?”

“I don’t see the point, honestly,” Jamie explained. “He’d just show up at my house

and berate me there.”

“So call the police.”

“I don’t want him arrested. Then he’d really let me have it.”

“Have you considered a restraining order? There are legal protections from harassment, which, as a therapist, is what I would call what your father does to you.”

“No, if I take legal action, it’ll be in the papers, and I don’t want them in my family’s business. Besides, he’s the only link to my mother.”

“I see. And have you spoken to her since your conversation at Christmas? I thought she made it clear she wanted you to get away.”

“She implied that, but I don’t want to lose her. Not if I can help it. She shouldn’t have to grieve for another child, even if I’m not dead or anything.”

All these thoughts had been swirling around in Jamie’s head in the days since the baby shower. Watching Tessa and Billie share such an emotional moment had nearly brought Jamie to tears. She had no one in her life she was that close to, except for Tessa. And Tessa was the one she was pushing away. With every falter, she put more distance between them. And eventually, Tessa would once again be out of her reach.

“Jamie, you are going through this considering everyone’s feelings except the most important person’s,” Lila said.

“Who’s that?” Jamie asked.

Perhaps Lila could tell her who to choose between her mother, father, or girlfriend.

“It’s you,” Lila said. “Your feelings.”

Jamie sat down. “Oh.”

She hadn’t even considered herself. Which she realized was Lila’s point. But her own feelings were difficult to discern. She loved Tessa. She feared her father. She pitied her mother. Her love for Tessa was easily the strongest, but acting on it had the most consequences.

“Jamie, you need to consider, before anyone else, what you want,” Lila said. “If that’s being with Tessa, we can come up with ways to say what you need to say to your father. If that’s focusing on yourself, we can also work together on what to say to Tessa if you need to take a break.”

“I can’t take a break from her, we’ve already broken up once,” Jamie said. “I won’t get another chance. She’s not like that.”

“Never say never.”

“No, I can confidently say it. We’ve already had four chances at this, and I’ve fucked it up every time.”

“Four chances?”

Jamie froze. She hadn’t told Lila about discovering her connection to Tessa in their past lives. But she remembered seeing that Lila had some spiritual practices on her website. Maybe this wasn’t the worst slip up.

“We’re soulmates, you see,” Jamie said. “From past lives.”

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Lila pushed her glasses up her nose. “Are you now?”

“Yeah. You’re a psychic, too, right? You believe in all that?”

“I’m not a psychic, but I do believe in past lives,” Lila said. “I’m a past life regressionist.”

“Exactly. Tessa actually saw a past life regressionist, so she already knew, but for me to see it, I had to get a boot to the head—”

“Hold on a moment, Jamie. Is your girlfriend Tessa Gallagher by any chance?”

Jamie’s eyes blew wide. “No way.”

Lila nodded, a smile parting her lips. “My, my. The universe certainly has a way of working out. Tessa was my client last summer. Your first therapy session was only a few weeks later.”

“Shut up!” Jamie gasped. “That’s unbelievable!”

“And yet, here we are.”

“Wait, are you allowed to tell me that?”

“Certainly. Past life regression isn’t officially recognized as a medical practice. I’m not beholden to the same rules that would protect you from my telling her that you are my therapy client.”

“Interesting.” Jamie got to her feet again. “There’s no way that’s a coincidence, though. This has to be a sign, right? Do you believe in signs?”

“I believe few things are purely coincidental,” Lila said. “I can’t say for sure what is or isn’t a sign, but it’s clear that you and Tessa are continually linked to one another.”

“I’ll say,” Jamie agreed. “That book you let me borrow, the Emily Dickinson one, it was mine in a past life. A gift from her, actually. It triggered some feelings for me when I first held it.”

“Well then, I’ll allow you to keep it,” Lila said. “It’s rightfully yours.”

“Are you sure? It’s a first edition, it’s incredibly valuable.”

“Do you want to keep it?” Lila asked. “Be honest with me, and with yourself.”

Jamie didn’t need a moment to think. The answer came bursting out of her. “Yes. I want to keep it.”

“Then it’s yours.” Lila grinned. “And what a wonderful exercise in expressing a direct desire.”

“But that’s so small. Of course how I feel about a book is simple. Everything else is complicated.”

“When you first kicked a ball, did you get it in the back of the net?” Lila asked.

“No.”

“Exactly. Like all things, setting boundaries and expressing your needs and wants takes practice. You practice in here with me, the same way you do at training. Then

apply it when you go out and take on your relationships, the way you do at a match.”

Jamie blinked, taking her seat again. “Wow. Thank you, Lila. I’m sorry I thought you were a kook when I saw that on your website.”

“I know I’m your therapist, Jamie, but some things can remain inside thoughts,” Lila said, though the corner of her mouth ticked up, betraying her amusement.

“Right,” Jamie said on an exhale, heat rising in her cheeks. “Sorry.”

“Love the honesty. Let’s work on timing, shall we?”

“Yes, let’s.”

“Wonderful. But first, I want you to answer this next question without thinking about it. There’s no right or wrong answer, but what you say will be where we put our focus in the next few sessions.”

Jamie nodded. “Got it.”

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“Which relationship in your life do you feel is the most important?”

“Tessa,” Jamie answered.

In her heart, she knew it was the right one.

“Excellent,” Lila said. “Let’s begin, then.”

Tessa considered blowing off Jamie’s invitation to come over and stay the night. She might have been more compelled to follow through if Jamie hadn’t said there was a surprise waiting for her. Tessa was a sucker for a good surprise. At least, one she knew was coming. Not the kind where she nearly pissed herself in her kitchen because footballers were surprisingly quiet about the house. She had threatened to put a bell on both Niamh and Jamie more than once.

Her curiosity got the better of her, and she made her way to Jamie’s row house in her posh little neighborhood. They had exchanged keys ages ago, so Tessa let herself in upon arrival. A heavenly smell wafted from the kitchen—something buttery and garlicky, if she had to guess. Her stomach rumbled.

“Jamie?” she called as she came into the kitchen.

The lights were low, with two candles lit on the table. They stood between two place settings, with wine glasses and china plates and more than enough silverware. It was no wonder Jamie had told her to dress up. Tessa was glad she’d gone with a floral wrap dress and kitten heels.

She spotted Jamie at the stove, looking like a proper ride in her form-hugging trousers, and tank top. She wore some chunky boots, which the trousers draped over perfectly. Of course, everything was tailored, but her ass was particularly perky in the trousers. She'd wrapped her hair into a slick bun at the nape of her neck. Tessa noticed the tan lines at the spot where her training shirt stopped.

"You look hot," Tessa said, setting her purse down on the island.

"Thank you," Jamie replied.

She turned the burner down before walking over to kiss Tessa hello. The kiss was brief, but promising. Tessa held back a whimper when it ended.

"What's all this about?" she asked, glancing around.

"I want to show you how much I love you," Jamie told her. "With a steak dinner."

Tessa swallowed down a reply that they could get a steak dinner and show off how sexy they looked if they went out instead of staying home. These gestures had a pattern. After Jamie hurt Tessa by pulling away, she did something akin to this to reel Tessa back in. And dammit, it worked. The sting of the baby shower slipped away, replaced by the soothing warmth of a candlelit dinner. Even if it was at home.

Tessa helped Jamie at the stove, where she seared their steaks for a few minutes on each side in a cast-iron skillet. The oven was already heated, so Jamie slid the whole thing inside once the meat was ready. In a second pot on the stove, she put a lid over the mashed potatoes.

Before Tessa could push for more about the dinner, Jamie picked up her phone and tapped the screen. A speaker on the island lit up and "Always on My Mind" by Willie Nelson played. Jamie held out her hand. Smiling, Tessa took it.

She let Jamie encircle her arms around her waist, while she coiled her own around Jamie's neck. Pressed together, they swayed to the slow beat of the music.

“When we were apart, I used to listen to this song and miss you so much, it would physically hurt,” Jamie murmured into Tessa's hair. “Little did I know it was centuries of missing you on top of the last three years.”

Tessa wanted to remind her whose fault that was, but even more than that, she didn't want to spoil the moment.

“I missed you too, Jamie,” she said. “But we're together now. That's what matters.”

Jamie drew back to look Tessa in the eyes. “I agree. And I hope you know how dedicated I am to being with you, Tess. I know I've been fucking that up lately, but I promise, I'll do better.”

“You haven't been fucking it up,” Tessa said, though she only half-believed the words. “I think maybe we should talk more about our expectations and how we might go about expanding our circle. But we can do that.”

“Of course. I want it to work this time. I don't know what I'd do if I lost you again.”

Tessa smirked. “Probably listen to Willie Nelson and be a sad sack.”

A low chuckle rumbled in Jamie's chest. “Yeah, probably. What did you do when we broke up, then?”

Tessa's cheeks heated up. She wasn't exactly proud of her behavior after her breakup. And she wasn't sure how Jamie might react to hearing it.

“I, er. . . I was sad too,” she said. “Listening to sad music and the like. The same,

really.”

Jamie hoisted an eyebrow. “Tessa. You don’t have to lie to me. I can handle it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Quite sure.”

“Promise you won’t get mad.”

“I promise.”

“Okay.” Tessa took a deep breath to ready herself. “I fucked around. A lot. Anyone who was willing, I went home with. I did a massive disservice to the bisexual community by being a walking stereotype.”

Jamie stared at her, silent for so long, that Tessa feared she had short-circuited Jamie’s brain. Her expression was difficult to discern. She supposed that even after three lifetimes together, it wasn’t unreasonable to learn that your partner had a better poker face than you ever thought. Tessa tentatively poked Jamie’s shoulder.

“Jamie?”

Jamie answered with a crushing kiss. Tessa moaned and surrendered to the passion of it, letting Jamie push her into the island. Jamie’s mouth was urgent against Tessa’s, even as she lifted Tessa to set her on the countertop. Through the skirt of the dress, the contrast of the chilly, hard quartz to the heat of her skin made her shiver.

Jamie’s lips descended into the pulsing hollow of Tessa’s throat, brushing the tender skin there with her teeth. Tessa gasped and arched her back to press herself further into Jamie.

“If I’d known the idea of me fucking other people got you going like this, I’d have

mentioned it sooner,” Tessa teased.

“Oh, baby, you misunderstand,” Jamie replied. “I’m going to make you forget you’ve ever been with anyone else.”

A shudder ran down Tessa’s back at the darkness in Jamie’s tone. She was never particularly dominant in bed, but apparently, Tessa could bring out something possessive. She liked it. She liked it so much, her core pulsed in response. Fire licked in her lower belly, begging for release.

Jamie yanked Tessa’s skirt up her thighs as she claimed her mouth in another blistering kiss. Tessa moaned into her mouth. Her legs fell open to allow Jamie to step between them. Tessa hooked her knees on Jamie’s hips, holding her in place.

Jamie clearly had no intentions of going anywhere. She slid her hand up Tessa’s thigh, inching toward her center, where Tessa’s knickers were damp. Damn, Jamie had an effect on her. In seconds, she was wet and panting.

Jamie’s fingers danced along the elastic of Tessa’s panties. Tessa whined and rocked her hips forward, too desperate for more of Jamie’s touch to even be embarrassed. Luckily, Jamie wasn’t holding back. She lowered her hand inside and found Tessa’s clit with her middle finger as if they were magnetic. Tessa keened, gripping Jamie’s shoulders like her life depended on it. If she were any stronger, she’d leave a bruise.

With quick, back and forth motions, Jamie teased Tessa’s clit swollen, until Tessa was begging for pressure to get her closer to her peak. The fire had spread to her bloodstream. She was ready to combust.

When she thought she couldn’t stand it a moment longer, Jamie sank two fingers into Tessa’s aching pussy. A groan tore from Tessa’s throat at the relief, especially when Jamie pressed the heel of her hand against Tessa’s clit. The delicious pressure fogged

her mind. She forgot she was in the middle of Jamie's kitchen.

As Jamie thrust her fingers and rolled her wrist, Tessa lost herself in the reverie. She was Tessa and Verity and Aisling and Rosie. Filled with love and desire for the woman before her. The woman her soul sought throughout time. Only that woman could give her the blinding, blissful, breathtaking physical experience of her love. Under Jamie's hand, it was as if no one else had ever touched her.

Stars in her eyes and Jamie's name on her lips, she burst into flame at last. Her limbs trembled as she chased the remnants of her high, still clinging to Jamie as her support. She swallowed, and it pricked her throat. She hadn't realized how dry it had gotten as she cried out. Once she could hear again, Jamie's voice came in clearly.

"That's it, baby," she said gently.

"Jesus. . ." Tessa panted.

Jamie slowly removed her hand, but pressed a tender kiss to Tessa's temple. Tessa closed her eyes to the contact, but opened them when cool air hit her thighs. Jamie dried her fingers with a paper towel. When Tessa was going to offer to clean them off, the oven beeped.

"Ah, steak's done," Jamie chirped.

"I'm familiar with the feeling," Tessa said through a sigh.

Jamie laughed as she pulled on her oven mitts to pull the cast-iron back out. The smell enticed Tessa enough to remember she was hungry. Yet, she wasn't sure she had the strength to leave the island.

Thankfully, Jamie offered to help her down once the steak was resting. She poured

them each a glass of wine and handed Tessa to hers with a knowing smirk.

“Don’t look so smug,” Tessa said. “I thought of a few other people during all that.”

Jamie blanched. “What? Who?”

“Abigail and Kitty and Dinah.”

Jamie rolled her eyes, but smiled. “They’re alright, I suppose.”

Tessa giggled and pulled her in by her waistband to kiss her. For moments such as these, there was a lot she could endure. Even if she was hurt sometimes, wasn’t this worth it? She wanted to believe it was.

Chapter 26

For reasons inexplicable to Tessa, she woke up at four in the morning. As much as she fought it, her eyes flew open and took in her dark bedroom. Jamie slept soundly by her side. They had a solid month since the baby shower. Jamie made good on her promise to socialize more with the team so that she and Tessa could outwardly be a couple somewhere besides their houses. They had also had a triple date with Billie and Ethan and Jordan and Laci. So why was Tessa awake at an ungodly hour with a pit in her stomach?

She picked up Jamie's arm to wrap it around herself. Jamie stirred enough to pull Tessa in close, but she didn't wake up. Tessa figured physical contact would lull her back to sleep. She closed her eyes once more and slowed her breathing. She tried to match it to Jamie's, but couldn't get the rhythm right, so she gave that up and counted the beats of each breath. Four beats in, four beats out. Supposedly, that would make her sleepy.

Yet sleep eluded her.

She tried the age old counting sheep method. Only she couldn't decide if she wanted to count sheep or cows, so she abandoned the idea altogether. With a heavy sigh, she snuggled closer to Jamie. The woman had given her four orgasms only hours ago. She should be sleeping like a baby.

But she couldn't keep her eyes closed.

Jamie woke, and with a groggy voice, asked, "What's the matter, Tess?"

“Ach, I dunno,” Tessa replied. “I can’t sleep.”

“Something wrong?”

“No, just a bad feeling. I think perhaps I had a bad dream.”

It seemed like a logical explanation, though she couldn’t recall whether she had been dreaming or not.

Jamie lifted her head. “Anything I can do?”

“Thank you, but no,” Tessa said. “I think I’ll make a cuppa.”

“D’you mind if I go back to sleep?”

“Go on, love.”

She kissed Jamie’s cheek and got to her feet. Once she had her dressing gown and slippers on, she padded out to the kitchen. She remembered Billie telling her that there was no better cure for a troubled mind than a cup of tea. They had shared several in their years as flatmates. Nearly two years ago, they had sat at that very table while Billie shared a dream she had. One that pointed to Ethan and her soul connection.

But that was certainly not the explanation for Tessa. She had clarity about her dreams now—on the nights she did have them. And she and Jamie were together and happy. They had fallen into a routine together. It was finally working.

While the water boiled, Tessa checked her phone. Sometimes an Instagram or TikTok scroll could clear her mind. Maybe she could find a good ASMR video to put her out. Only as she opened the app, her phone rang, and Ethan’s name flashed across her

screen. She picked up on the first ring.

“Hello?”

“Tessa, hey!” he said, and for some reason, he sounded winded. “I’m sorry to call you so early, but Billie’s going into labor.”

“What?” Tessa cried, nearly dropping her phone. Collecting herself, she brought it to her ear. “How is she? Is everything alright?”

“Yeah, everything is fine, but the contractions are just the right amount apart, and we were advised to come in. I know you said you wanted to be around, so I wanted to give you a heads-up. Stevie is already on the way.”

“Of course, I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Tessa said. “Tell Billie I love her and good luck.”

“Thanks, Tessa,” Ethan said gently.

They hung up. Tessa flicked off the kettle switch and hurtled back to her bedroom. Jamie started and sat up at the sound of the door, but Tessa paid her no mind as she scrambled to find some clothes.

“What’s going on?” Jamie asked through a yawn.

“I’m away to the hospital,” Tessa replied. “Billie’s having her baby.”

“Now?”

“No, in another week or so—yes, now!”

Jamie leaned over to switch the lamp on, rubbing her eyes. “Do you want me to come?”

“You’ve got training.”

“Technically, so do you.”

“I’ll write Nelle an email on the tube.”

“The tube isn’t running for another hour,” Jamie said. “I’ll drive you.”

Tessa’s mind was too jumbled to argue, so she tossed Jamie her phone. “Ethan texted me the name of the hospital.”

Jamie scanned the screen and nodded. “I know where that is.”

She yanked the duvet off her legs and got dressed too. Tessa picked some joggers and a tank top. She knew that births, especially the first baby, could take hours, sometimes even days. She made a mental note to ask Niamh to bring her a bag of things if it came to that. For the moment, Tessa tossed a book, her phone, a charger, and her wallet into a tote bag and called it a day. She threw a cardigan over her shoulders to keep the April morning chill at bay, but she was so excited, it already felt too warm.

The crisp air cooled her skin on the way to Jamie’s car. The leather of the seat even chilled Tessa’s legs enough to put goosebumps over her skin. But she hardly noticed. Billie was having a baby. Her best friend had created a life and would be bringing it into the world.

Tessa recalled the feeling she had when she woke up. Was that why the universe had

disturbed her sleep? So that she would be ready for that phone call? Or was it a warning? Was Billie about to be in danger? Her heart dropped at the thought.

“Hey,” Jamie said, her voice drawing Tessa out of her thoughts. When had they started driving? “Are you okay?”

“It’s not me we should be worried about,” Tessa replied.

“Who then? Billie?”

“Aye.”

“Why?”

“Childbirth is dangerous,” Tessa said. “It’s the number one killer of women.”

“I don’t think that’s true anymore,” Jamie said gently.

“Women still die, though. There’s a lot that could go wrong. What if he’s breeched? She’d need to have a C-section, and—”

“You don’t need to overthink it. Billie has access to some of the best care in the world. And you said yourself that her pregnancy has been healthy.”

“What if something happens to the wain then? What if he’s stillborn and my poor friend went through all this for nothing?”

“Tessa,” Jamie said firmly. “You’re getting yourself worked up over nothing. Women have been giving birth forever, and hospitals are equipped to deal with any and all issues that may arise. However rare they may be.”

Tessa couldn't shake it. "I dunno. I've got this feeling that something horrible is going to happen tonight."

"That sounds like anxiety talking."

"Wise up, Jamie. You and I both know there's no such thing as a coincidence."

"Sure, when it comes to soulmates. But this isn't that."

"How do you know? How can you be sure?"

"Because this is Billie and Ethan's happily ever after," Jamie said firmly. "This time, it's all working out for them."

Oddly, the tightness in Tessa's chest loosened. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly through her mouth. She could admit she was overthinking it. And that there was some anxiety about her best friend taking such a big leap in life. One that would ultimately take priority over Tessa. But she couldn't find it in her heart to be sad. Not when the idea of being in this child's life made joy bubble up inside her.

The whirlwind of emotions was liable to make her vomit. She reached for Jamie's hand to steady herself.

"You're right, it's their time," Tessa said.

Jamie squeezed her hand. "It's ours too. At long last."

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Tessa nodded. “Stop being so cheesy or I’ll boke.”

“Don’t you dare. I just had my car detailed.”

Laughing, they drove on. Tessa’s muscles relaxed. It was going to be okay.

They reached the hospital and Jamie pulled right up to the door. Tessa gathered up her things and faced her girlfriend one more time.

“Keep me updated,” Jamie said. “I’ll come back after training to wait with you for a while if need be.”

“Perfect,” Tessa said. “I’ll see you later.”

She leaned over the console to give Jamie a kiss, but Jamie drew back. Tessa saw the immediate regret on her face as she tried to regroup.

“Sorry. Habit.” She leaned forward and pecked Tessa’s lips. “I love you, and I’ll see you soon.”

“Right,” Tessa said, still a bit stung. “Love you too.”

She didn’t give Jamie the opportunity to say anything more before stepping out of the car.

A nurse at the front desk directed her to the lift and told her that labor and delivery was on the fourth floor. Tessa pressed the button, and as the lift doors closed, she

tried to shake off what happened in the car. Jamie had corrected, but why was she still struggling when there were no people around?

All thoughts of Jamie fled her mind when she arrived on the ward, where she met up with Ethan's grandmother, Betty. Ethan got a lot of his looks from Betty. The soft blonde hair, green eyes, wide forehead. Tessa had met Betty several times, most recently for Billie and Ethan's wedding. Betty hadn't been able to make it to the shower. She extended a red nail polished hand to Tessa.

"What about you, Betty?" Tessa asked.

"I'm doing just fine," Betty replied. Ethan got his sweet Southern accent from her too. "Ready for my great-grandbaby to get here already!"

"Did you fly over from North Carolina just now?" Tessa joked.

Betty grinned. "I would have. But I flew in a week ago so I could help Billie out while Ethan is at practice."

"That's kind of you."

"Well, we all know the schedules of athletes unfortunately don't stop for babies."

"Quite true. Are they in a room already?"

"Yep, they took Billie back a few minutes ago. Her sister and Ethan are with her."

Tessa let out a relieved puff of air. Billie had offered to have Tessa in the room while she gave birth, but Tessa politely declined. Billie didn't seem to mind. Tessa thought Stevie might be a better presence anyway, since she had two kids of her own, and could ease any anxiety Billie might have.

“How long do you suppose it’ll be?” Tessa wondered.

“Could be days with a first baby,” Betty said. She reached into her purse and pulled out a couple decks of cards. “Wanna pass the time with some canasta?”

“I’ve never played.”

“I’ll teach you. Believe me, we’ve got time.”

Betty was right. The sun shone through the window as dawn arrived, and Tessa had finally gotten a grip on the game of canasta. They talked about how excited they were for Billie and Ethan. Betty mused about being a great-grandmother. Though Tessa assured her she didn’t look the part.

And it was true. Betty was already young to be Ethan’s grandmother. Billie told Tessa some of the back story. Betty was eighteen years old when she had Ethan’s mother, Laura. And Laura was twenty-one when she had Ethan. Ten years later, she passed away from a drug overdose, and Betty took over raising Ethan. Tessa was amazed at how Ethan turned out so kind after such a harsh childhood. But Billie said it only made Ethan want to be the best father possible, and his child would want for nothing. Tessa had no doubt he would be an incredible dad.

Hours passed. And then more hours. Tessa napped on the waiting room couch. While she slept, she found herself dreaming of her life as Rosie, only this time, she was back in Derry, heartbroken and crying in her house. When she woke, she needed a distraction, so she read her book and played more cards with Betty until the sun went back down.

Ethan finally entered the lobby. Bags under his eyes, his hair and clothes ruffled, sweat stains under his arms—and yet, Tessa had never seen him happier. His green eyes were misted over, but glowing. The smile on his lips accentuated his dimples.

His body gave no signs of weariness. He was the definition of elated.

“He’s here,” he said in his deep drawl, and his voice cracked over the last word. “My son is here.”

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Before anyone could congratulate him, he collapsed into his grandmother's arms and wept. Betty held him upright as he sagged against her, his body shaking with sobs. She rubbed her hand up and down his back, soothing him the way a mother would with a child.

"He's here," Ethan blubbered.

"He is here, honey," Betty replied. "You have a little baby boy. You're going to be the most wonderful father, I know it."

Ethan squeezed his eyes shut and fresh tears rolled over his cheeks.

A lump formed in Tessa's throat. She turned away, feeling as if she were intruding on something private. Questions burned in her mind about how Billie was, but she held them off to give Ethan a moment with the woman who raised him.

A small flash of light caught her eye. From across the lobby, a young woman had her phone aimed directly at Ethan. Then she pointed to him and showed the surrounding people while they all snickered. Anger simmered in Tessa's belly. The nerve of people! To intrude on someone's most vulnerable moment just because he was a famous footballer! Tessa had to warn him.

He had finally stepped back from Betty when she looked again, but still rested a hand on her shoulder. Betty squeezed his arm while he wiped at his face with his free hand.

"Billie did so great," he said. "She's resting now, but she worked so hard. She was truly incredible. God, I can't believe I'm this lucky."

Tessa's heart warmed. She hated to break up such a beautiful moment, but she had to let him know.

"Ethan, I'm sorry to tell you this, but the woman on the couch behind us took your picture, and I'm pretty sure she's tweeting it out to the world," she said.

Ethan blinked. "What?"

Tessa nodded in the direction of the woman. "I saw her take your picture while you were crying."

Betty narrowed her eyes, bristling. "You just say the word, Ethan, and I'll snatch the phone right out of that nosy heifer's hands."

"Oh, aye, you get her, Betty," Tessa encouraged.

Betty took one step in the direction of the other couch, but Ethan grabbed her arm.

"Don't worry about it," he said. "It's not worth it."

"Are you sure?" Betty asked.

He nodded. "Thanks, but I'm sure. I love my wife and my son more than anything in the world. I ain't ashamed of that, not one bit. I don't care who knows it."

"But. . . she's going to post it online or send it to the press!" Tessa cried. "They'll eat you alive!"

"I don't care," he said with a shake of his head. "Nothing could make me care about what strangers online or journalists say more than I care about my family. It just. . . doesn't matter."

The ominous feeling that woke Tessa suddenly slammed into her chest. She understood it now. The bad thing she felt was coming did not have to do with Billie and Ethan. They were simply the catalyst for showing her what she needed.

She needed to be with someone ready to love her as shamelessly as Ethan loved Billie. Someone who felt she mattered more than the online trolls and the press and the fucked up family. And that person was not Jamie. Not now. Not this time.

“Y’all wanna come and see him?” Ethan asked.

“Oh, hell yes!” Betty cried.

Tessa glanced at her phone and saw a text from Jamie, letting her know that she was parking and about to head inside.

“I’ll give you a moment first, Betty, my girlfriend’s here,” Tessa said.

“Alright, when you want a turn, you know the room number,” Ethan said.

Tessa nodded, fighting back the wobble of her chin and the tears in her eyes. She made her way to the lift, her heart already breaking.

In a haze, she made it to the main floor. She hardly remembered the lift doors opening or walking past the nurse’s station. The pleasant spring evening air couldn’t penetrate her sorrow. She didn’t hear the traffic or the birds. She saw only Jamie walking up the pavement, an unsuspecting smile on her face. A smile that dropped the moment she took in Tessa’s expression.

“What’s happened?” she asked. “Is Billie alright? Is it the baby?”

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“No,” Tessa said, steeling herself against the hurt she knew she was about to inflict on them both. “It’s us, Jamie.”

Jamie lifted a brow. “Us? How do you mean?”

“This isn’t working.”

She held Jamie’s gaze, willing her to understand, but found only bewilderment behind those gorgeous blue eyes. She was going to miss them for the rest of her life.

“Jamie, I can’t keep chipping away at my own heart to protect you,” she said. “It’s been months, and the progress with your father is minimal. At this rate, we’ll be in our fifties before anything truly changes, and I’m not willing to carry on this way.”

Jamie frowned, her brow furrowing. “If this is about not kissing you in the car—”

“It’s about that and every other time I’ve felt like a secret around you,” Tessa said. “I just watched a man publicly weep for the love of his wife and baby. And I realized that’s what I want too.”

“I . . . Tessa, I’m working on it,” Jamie said, her lip quivering. “I can get there.”

“I need someone who is there,” Tessa replied. Her throat closed up around the words, as if all her past lives were begging her not to say them. To fight for this. But the fight had gone out of her. “I know you’re working on things, but I still feel like I’m on a roller coaster. Where we have a good moment, then I get hurt, and you make it better with sex or a grand gesture. I’ve got to get off the ride, Jamie, or I’ll go mad.”

“It’s not going to be forever.”

“It’s not going to be right now, either.”

Jamie opened and closed her mouth a few times and sniffled before speaking again. “But we’re soulmates. We’ve found each other across the centuries! We’re meant to be together!”

“Aye, I know. Maybe in the next life.”

Jamie sucked in a soft gasp as a tear ran down her cheek. Tessa turned away. She wouldn’t be able to stand it if she saw Jamie break down. When she got into the lift, she burst into tears. She let herself fall apart in the time it would take to get back to the labor and delivery floor and Billie’s room. She had to condense those centuries of ache into a few short minutes. She would have more time to truly grieve later. For the moment, there was new life to celebrate. Even though it felt like hers was ending.

Chapter 27

While Tessa enjoyed Derry at Christmas, she especially loved her hometown in the spring. And it was most comforting in the wake of her recent heartbreak.

After visiting with Billie and the baby—Henry, they named him—Tessa booked the first available flight back to Northern Ireland. She would only stay a few days, as she would need to be back at work after missing a match. But she needed to get away. She needed her family. She needed to be reminded of life outside of her circle in London.

The first day, she laid in bed and slept. When she wasn’t sleeping, she was crying. Her mother brought her tea and food, but she didn’t touch it. It was as if a part of her had died. And she supposed it had. She was suffocating the part of herself that would

always love Jamie and choosing a life of contentment without her. She expected to feel the weight of her past lives railing against the choice, but she didn't dream of them. She wondered if her choice had severed the connection.

But if that were true, why did it hurt so much?

The raw agony settled into a dull ache after that brutal first day, and she managed to get herself out of bed to have breakfast with her family. To her immense relief, they didn't ask her about Jamie or anything that happened. They carried on as if life were completely normal. Tessa might have cried with gratitude if she hadn't spent all her tears on Jamie.

"Tessa, love, can you go and get dinner from the chippie?" her mother asked. "White fish all around, and five bags of chips."

"Doesn't Granda usually get a burger, Mammy?" Tessa asked.

"Aye, so he does, but the doctor's told us to cut down on red meat because of his heart. So it'll be fish for him."

"Won't he be cut up?"

"He'll be grand. If he gives you any cheek, you send him straight to me."

Tessa shrugged. She considered arguing that deep-fried fish was probably not much better on someone's heart than red meat. Not to mention the chips. But she wouldn't contradict her mother.

"Right, I'm away then," she said, getting to her feet.

She slipped her trainers on and shoved her arms through the sleeves of her jacket. As

she grabbed her purse off the hook, a hand wrapped around her arm above the elbow. Stifling a gasp, she whipped around to come face to face with her grandfather.

“I’ll give you twenty quid to get me a burger,” he whispered.

“But, Granda, your heart.”

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“My heart’s fine. That doctor’s a dose. Get me a burger.”

“Ma will have a cack attack.”

“She won’t know a thing. I’ll eat it before she knows it’s even come in the house.”

Tessa lifted an eyebrow. “You’re gonna eat an entire burger before I get the order to the kitchen?”

“Oh, aye. Don’t you believe in your old granda, love?”

She shook her head. “If you pull that off, I’ll give you your twenty quid back.”

“That’s a good girl,” her granda chuckled, and handed her the bill. “Off you get, then.”

She walked the familiar path to the chippie with an amused grin. It was her first smile in nearly forty-eight hours. It solidified her choice in coming home. Home would heal her.

The chippie was rammed with the usual Friday night crowd. As Tessa pushed her way to the front to place her order, she brushed shoulders with a familiar form. Dominic.

“Tessa?” he said with a grin. “Back already? Or have you finally wised up and come home for good?”

She playfully smacked his arm. "I'm just visiting, dicko."

He chuckled as they moved a few steps up the line.

"What about you, then?" he asked.

"I'm. . ." she trailed off, unsure what to say. Similar to last time, she didn't have the words to explain what was going on in her life. "I'm grand. Grand, so."

He searched her face, as if he didn't quite believe her, but he didn't press. "How many bags of chips is it for you, then?"

"Five for us," she told him. "You?"

"Six."

She gaped at him. "Six? For three people?"

"No word of a lie, my da eats three on his own. Ma and I have to split whatever's left."

"Jesus, but that's incredible."

They shared a laugh, and they finally reached the counter. Dominic placed his order, and Tessa watched him. It wasn't difficult to remember what she found charming about him when they were teenagers. He was good looking, of course. The hottest ride in Derry at the time. But he was sweet, too. Gentle teasing and good natured. He was thoughtful and considerate when they had sex for the first time. It was the first time for them both, and she remembered it fondly.

"Gallagher!" the woman behind the counter barked. Her name was Majella, and she'd

been at the chippie as long as Tessa could remember. Majella's commanding voice snapped Tessa out of her wandering thoughts. "What's yours?"

"Sorry, that'll be three white fish, one hamburger, and five bags of chips, please," Tessa said.

They stepped aside and waited for their orders.

"Say, Dom," Tessa said. "Does that offer for a pint still stand?"

"Of course," he replied, smiling wide.

"Not anything romantic like, but. . . I could use a friend right now. A friend who doesn't have a newborn wain and doesn't. . . know who I know."

His gaze softened. "Of course, Tessa. I'd like that a lot, actually."

She made sure she had his correct number and promised to text him after dinner so they could go to the pub.

When she got home, her grandfather waited in the foyer with a darkly expectant expression on his face. She glanced over his shoulder to make sure the coast was clear before she fished the burger out of the bag and handed it off.

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He unwrapped it and took a deep breath.

“Granda, don’t waste time,” Tessa hissed. “You’ve got to—”

Before she could finish speaking, her grandfather had polished off the burger in three massive, swift bites. Tessa watched in wide-eyed awe as he pocketed the wrapper and held his hand out.

“Sweet, suffering Jesus,” she said under her breath, and handed him back his cash.

Dominic was easy to spot among the tables of pub-goers. A few of Tessa’s schoolmates said hello as she side-stepped between the tables. When she reached Dom, there was already a pint waiting for her. Tessa didn’t normally drink beer, but at a pub, there hardly seemed to be another choice.

After sharing initial sips and greetings, Tessa met Dominic’s gaze. “So, what’s the craic?”

“With me?” he said. “Not much. I’m working for my father.”

“That’s nice. D’you enjoy the work?”

He shrugged. “It’s fine. What about you? What are you doing for work these days?”

“I’m still writing for the paper,” Tessa said. “But I also work for the Stanmore FC women’s team doing their social media.”

Even mentioning Stanmore made a pang shoot through Tessa's chest. It was a reminder of Jamie. She pushed it down with another swig of beer.

"How d'you like it?" he asked.

"The pay is great," she replied, and it was true. If only her soulmate being there wasn't going to ruin her life. "Not that football is exactly my passion, but living in London isn't cheap."

"No doubt," he said with a chuckle. "I still can't believe you live there. It seems so busy."

"Oh, aye, it is. But I love the diversity of the city. I love how much there is to do. I don't even mind the tourists."

"No?"

"I'm rarely in central London where they tend to be. But when I am, I don't mind. I just love living somewhere with so much life."

"Perhaps I'll have to visit you sometime and see what all the fuss is about."

"You should! It'll be grand. I'll show you all the restaurants that are actually good."

"Ach, you sure know the way to my heart."

He smiled as he sipped his beer, and for a moment, Tessa let herself imagine what it would be like to show him around London. He certainly wouldn't shy away from holding her hand while they explored. He wouldn't jerk away if she leaned in for a kiss. He might even put an arm around her. Her heart cracked inside her chest.

She picked up her pint glass and downed it.

Dominic blinked. “Woah. There’s, er, no need to rush, Tessa.”

She slammed the glass back down on the table. “Another round?”

His eyes bounced between his nearly full glass and her face. “I’m alright.”

“I’ll just help myself then.”

She pushed herself to her feet and headed to the bar to order another. She also ordered a shot of whiskey, which she took before carrying the beer back to her table. Dominic pinned her with a look.

“Are you alright, Tessa?” he asked. “Seriously.”

Tessa heaved a sigh. “No, I’m not. I broke up with my girlfriend. I’m cut up about it, but I can’t talk to my best friend because she’s just had a baby. I can’t talk to my parents about it because they’ll just tell me some gobshite about how I’m better off because she’s English.”

“Christ, you were with an English girl?”

“English and Protestant.”

“Oof,” Dominic winced. “Double whammy.”

“I know. Usually I have better taste.”

He chuckled. “You must have loved her a lot.”

Tessa swallowed through the sudden tightness in her throat. If only he could understand the true depths of the love that existed between her and Jamie. It was impossible for most. Even if she could explain it, she didn’t want to. If she started, she was sure she would burst into tears right there in the middle of the pub. And while that wouldn’t be the most embarrassing thing she’d ever done, she wasn’t eager to let it happen. And yet, her bottom lip trembled.

“Aye,” she said quietly. “So I did.”

Hearing herself put it in the past tense made her gulp down the rest of her second beer. Clearly, being sober was not going to get Jamie out of her mind.

“If I get super drunk, would you be able to see me home?” she asked him.

The corner of his mouth ticked up into a sad smile. “Is that what you want?”

“It really is.”

“Alright. I’m here for you.”

“God bless you, Dominic Keegan.”

The lights reflecting on the wet street blurred in Tessa’s vision as she stumbled, catching herself on Dominic’s arm. He kept her upright with a giggle. She took a big step leaning against him.

“D’you believe in soulmates, Dom?” she asked, slurring her words.

“I suppose,” he replied. “Do you?”

“Oh, aye. I don’t have a choice but to believe in them. The girl I just broke up with was mine. Which is why I think I’ll need to be steaming like this for the rest of my life if I’m going to live it in peace.”

“You’re drunk right now, and still thinking about her,” he pointed out. “I’m not sure that’s the solution.”

“Ach, that’s a good point, so it is. But I still think it makes it easier. I don’t want to cry right now, and that’s better than usual.”

“If she’s your soulmate and you’re this cut up about losing her, why did you break up?”

“Because she’s not out, and it’s a massive secret,” she said through a sigh. “If I was with her right now instead of you, I wouldn’t even be able to do this.” She shook his arm to clarify. “And we aren’t even having sex or anything.”

“Aye, so we aren’t,” he chuckled.

“See, it’s stuff that wasn’t even inherently romantic, but she was so scared of being out, she pulled away every time. And maybe I’m sensitive, but it hurt me.”

“Ach, no, I don’t think so. It’d be hard for anyone to be with someone they felt as if they were hiding from the world. I know I wouldn’t put up with that either.”

“And we’ve tried dating before. Had the same problem. But I gave in to her wanting to try again because of the stupid soulmate thing. And it is stupid. Fucking soulmates. Bunch of gobshite, so it is.”

“Soulmate or not, everyone deserves to be loved without shame.”

Tessa blinked and nodded. “Absolutely.”

“I’m sorry you’re hurting, though.”

She hummed and rested her head on his shoulder. “Thanks.”

They continued in silence until they reached the Gallagher’s front door. Dominic went to ring the bell.

“Stall the ball, you!” Tessa gasped, swatting his hand down with a slap.

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“Ow!” he cried and shook out his hand. “What’s the matter?”

“Don’t ring the bell, I don’t need my ma seeing me like this.” She patted her pockets in search of her phone and handed it to him. “Text my granda. I got him his burger, he’ll help me get past my ma.”

She told him the passcode. He opened up her texts and typed. Within minutes, her grandfather was at the door, offering her a hand over the threshold.

“Thanks for the pints and sympathy, Dom,” Tessa said softly.

“Anytime,” he replied. “I hope you heal soon, Tessa.”

She smiled and leaned into her grandfather. As she watched Dominic leave, she wished she could have been with someone like him. It would have been so simple, so easy. And yet, she knew she never could. Not while Jamie was on the same planet. Whenever they existed together, they held each other’s hearts. Tessa let her grandfather help her to bed with the worst case of existential dread. Even drunk, she realized that her fears from the moment she discovered that Jamie was her soulmate were true. She would never be happy—truly happy—unless she and Jamie were together. And she had torn them apart once again.

Chapter 28

Jamie stared at the tenth unanswered text she’d sent to Tessa. She knew it was useless, but she wanted—no, she needed to try. She had taken all these steps to get the chance to be with Tessa again, and somehow, had mucked it up. Seemingly

beyond repair. But giving up wasn't an option. Not when they had the soulmate connection. Not when Jamie was finally making strides.

Between texts to Tessa, she trained. Whether it was lifting weights, running, or doing some solo drills on the practice pitch, she occupied her mind with football. It was the one thing she always had going for her. Match day proved to be a blessing in disguise. At first, she worried that she wouldn't be able to focus with her painfully heavy heart. But with Tessa gone back to Derry for a few days, she wasn't fixated on her presence on the touchline.

Jamie assisted two of the three goals that won them the match. She celebrated with her teammates when they scored. The joy was hollow, though. It didn't reach all the way to her bones the way it did when she was with Tessa.

Even football couldn't fill the void Tessa had left behind. It was a distraction, nothing more.

On Monday, Jamie arrived early to training. She hid out in the weight room for over an hour, warming her muscles up. Letting her mind transfer its focus from the ache in her heart to the strength of her body.

She cooled down with a walk on the treadmill. While she caught her breath, Zahra appeared on the treadmill beside her. She was wearing a large sweatshirt with the hood up over her hair, which was her standard until she put on her hijab when they went outside.

"Good morning!" she said cheerfully.

"Morning," Jamie replied, without even half of Zahra's enthusiasm.

She hopped onto the treadmill and immediately tripped. Jamie's hand shot out and

caught Zahra before she could fall.

“Thank you,” she said, a hand to her chest. “Inshallah, I’ll stay upright once the machine is actually on.”

Jamie cast a sidelong glance at her teammate. Zahra was clumsy and accident-prone off the pitch, but nothing seemed to scare her. Somehow, she was able to shrug off a near wipe out on the treadmill, smile, and hum as she began her walk. Jamie would have taken that as a sign she shouldn’t attempt the treadmill that day and done stationary bike or something.

“How are you, Jamie?” Zahra asked.

“I’m alright,” Jamie lied.

“You were, like, insanely good at the match. And so serious. I thought you were angry at West Ham for some reason.”

“Perhaps it’s just. . . general feminine rage.”

“Well, keep channeling that and we might end up at the top of the table.”

Jamie shrugged. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Where was Tessa, by the way?” Zahra asked. “It’s not that I mind Nelle, but Tessa is so much fun.”

Jamie stiffened. For the first time, she regretted sharing her relationship with the team. She had never anticipated having to tell them about a breakup as well. She and Tessa had not discussed what to tell people or how they would navigate working together going forward.

“She, er, is visiting her parents,” she said. “I’m sure she’ll be back soon.”

“You don’t know?”

Jamie blinked back a fresh mist in her eyes. She had cried her eyes out in the car at the hospital the night Tessa officially broke up with her and had cried in bed every night since. But she had been able to hold herself together at training. Zahra’s sweet, concerned gaze made Jamie want to be honest. So she was.

“We broke up.”

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It was the first time she had said the words out loud. Somehow, that made it more real. It hit her as strong as a punch to the gut. Tessa was gone. This was going to be her new reality.

“Oh, Jamie, I’m so sorry,” Zahra said.

She pressed the buttons on the treadmill until she slowed to a stop, and Jamie did the same. Her legs had gone numb.

“Are you alright?” Zahra asked.

Jamie shook her head. “I feel awful. It was all my fault. I was too much of a coward to love her openly, the way she deserves, and I lost her.”

“Are you sure it’s really over? Maybe you two could talk, and see if there’s something you can do to salvage the relationship. You seemed so good together.”

“Honestly, I’d been wondering if we had jumped the gun on getting back together in the first place. We have this. . . deep connection you see. That goes back further than most. And I thought that would be enough to keep us together, but until I’m ready to come out, there’s no hope.”

“What’s keeping you from coming out then?”

“I have a rather. . . complicated situation with my father, and if I came out, he would lose his mind. He doesn’t approve of being gay. And it would destroy our family.”

Zahra took Jamie's hand and led her off the treadmill to one of the benches a few feet away. They sat down together. Zahra did not release Jamie's hand though.

"Jamie, you have another family, you know," Zahra said. "We would all be here for you if you wanted to come out and get away from your father. And a lot of the team gets it. Eliana and Neriah keep everything low-key. Though I suppose they're lucky that her parents aren't on social media or anything."

"My dad watches my every move," Jamie explained. "He comes to my house and berates me any time I screw up. I hear his voice in my head constantly. More than my own most of the time. It's maddening."

"It sounds like he's pretty frightening."

"More than you know."

"That's where courage comes in."

"That's easier said than done." Jamie hated how defeated she sounded. "How do you do it? Live life so unafraid?"

Zahra sat up straighter. "My parents inspire me to be brave every day. Even in the little things."

"How so?"

"They've been pretty open with me about leaving Palestine, our homeland," Zahra said. "They've never shied away from telling me how scared they were to uproot their entire lives, with no guarantees they would ever be able to come back. But my mother was pregnant with me, and she wanted the best opportunities for her child. My father had come to England for university, and he told her all his stories about life

here in London. England didn't sound bad to her. But I think the most important thing was that neither my mother nor my father did it alone. They had each other through it all, and it made them that much stronger as a couple. And I've admired them for their bravery from the moment I was born."

Jamie listened intently. She never knew that Zahra's family had taken such a chance.

"There's a lot that they miss about Palestine," Zahra continued. "But they assure me all the time that they have never regretted their decision. London isn't perfect, but because we are here, I am able to play football at one of the highest levels in the world. My mother was able to get an outstanding education like my father. We've formed a community with friends and neighbors. And for the most part, we're safe here."

"Wow," Jamie said. "That's. . . incredible, honestly."

"Yeah," Zahra replied with a smile. "I think so too. Especially because it instilled in me the value of courage. Of not letting fear overtake my desire for the things I want out of life. Because that's what courage truly is. Being afraid and doing it, anyway."

Jamie looked at the treadmill and realized how deeply Zahra held that truth. Her knee-jerk reaction was to face the challenge. To try again when she hit the ground. It made her a great athlete, and an even better person.

"Thank you, Zahra," Jamie said. "I can hardly think of anything more inspirational."

"Any time," Zahra said. "I'm always proud to talk about my people and their resilience. And thank you for sharing with me. I think this is like, the realest conversation we've ever had. I feel like we're proper friends now."

"We weren't before?"

“I mean, we were teammates, but I hardly knew anything about you other than your football and your sexuality—after you came out to us, of course. I never assumed anything.”

Jamie smiled for the first time in days. “You’re right, I suppose. I guess I know you better now, too.”

“I’m pretty much an open book,” Zahra said. “D’you know what? We should have a sleepover sometime.”

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“A sleepover?” Jamie wrinkled her nose. “I thought that was for little girls.”

“Um, sleepovers are for everyone. It’s not about age, it’s about vibes.”

Jamie chuckled. “You’re right, I’m sorry. I would love to have a sleepover sometime.”

“Perfect!”

Zahra finally released Jamie’s hand to clap excitedly. The heavy grief in Jamie’s chest lightened, as if Zahra had picked up one end of it.

In the dressing room with the rest of the team, Jamie helped Zahra with her pin. They stretched together before jogging out to the practice pitch. Jamie warmed up with a buoyancy she hadn’t had in the days since her breakup. She didn’t lack any power when they conducted their passing drills. For a few blissful moments, she could put her sorrow away.

Until a blonde-haired, bespectacled, Irish woman walked onto the pitch. Tessa was back. And the mere sight of her was enough to send Jamie’s heart into a tailspin.

Tessa made her way onto the pitch, greeting Rebecca and Nelle, and a few of the other staff members. She was gorgeous in the partial sunlight. It shone on her hair and face, making her glow. Her smile was wide and warm. Jamie ached at seeing it directed at anyone but herself.

Tessa turned her head and her gaze found Jamie’s across the pitch. Jamie’s heart

leaped to her throat. Her mouth went dry and her eyes stung with fresh tears. Time suspended, and the rest of the pitch faded away. They were the only two people in the world for the seconds they locked eyes.

The anguish of the centuries between them pressed into Jamie's chest. She wanted to run, but whether it was toward or away from Tessa, she couldn't decide. What would Tessa do if Jamie jogged over and kissed her? Would it change her mind? Would it be enough? Jamie wasn't sure. Grand gestures were not what Tessa wanted. Not if they were empty.

Tessa was the first to look away. Without saying anything. Jamie bit her bottom lip to keep it from trembling. She swallowed hard, through impossible tightness. She tried to inhale, but the air stuttered in her chest.

She wasn't sure which was worse. Tessa dumping her or seeing Tessa after getting dumped by her. Both were excruciating. The breakup had blindsided her, but she had anticipated this, and it didn't make things any easier.

Without a word to anyone, Jamie retreated back to the dressing room. She needed a moment to breathe. To get her footing when the earth beneath her, her whole world, was off balance.

She sat on the bench outside her locker. On a sob, she buried her face in her hands, and let herself cry. A deep, shoulder shaking, gut wrenching cry. She released everything inside of her. The grief, the fear, the despair. The dam broke.

"Jamie?" Zahra's soft voice called.

Jamie glanced up through swollen, red eyes. Zahra said nothing more. She only sat beside Jamie and pulled her into her arms. Jamie rested her head on Zahra's shoulder and wept some more. Falling apart against a friend, leaning on her, gave Jamie the

answer to one question. This was easier. At least now, someone else supported her.

When Jamie's breathing returned to normal, Zahra nudged her upright. She wiped some of Jamie's tears from her cheeks.

"Do you want to have our sleepover tonight?" Zahra asked.

"Yeah," Jamie croaked out. "I don't want to be alone."

Zahra wrapped her arms around Jamie again. "You won't be."

Chapter 29

Match day, on the pitch, was where Jamie could thrive again. She couldn't control Tessa or her father or the press. But she could control the game. And she had excellent command in their match against Sunderland. Fortunately, so did her teammates, as they had played Sunderland last season, before they were both promoted to the WSL. The Stanmore women were controlling possession and timing their passes perfectly. Monika had already gotten two shots off—one hit the crossbar and the other was blocked by the keeper.

As the Sunderland keeper made her way up to the end of the box, Jamie and the rest of the Stanmore side retreated back to their end of the pitch. Jamie paused once she reached her position in the formation, and waited to see what the keeper would do.

She rolled it out to one of her defenders. Jamie waited where she was, since the ball wasn't on her side of the pitch. The Sunderland defender got past Monika with a nutmeg, then passed it to another player on the back line. She received it and passed again. The last defender at the back looked away for one moment, and Jamie saw an opportunity. She raced forward and picked the pocket of the defender before taking off down the pitch.

“Shit!” she heard the defender cry, but Jamie was already putting yards between them.

She glanced up. Acres of space stretched before her toward the goal. She knew she could make a run and attempt to score by herself. But the goalkeeper was waiting.

None of her Stanmore teammates had made a run yet. Monika sprinted up the middle, so Jamie slowed down a hair to give her striker time. Before she could pass, a Sunderland defender was upon her again, and she had to tuck her shoulder and get around her. Jamie glanced up again, but Monika was offside. She couldn't pass yet. Zahra huffed it up the pitch for support, but she had two women marking her and Jamie didn't want to lose possession if they could create an opportunity instead. She paid them back with a nutmeg of her own and continued down the pitch toward the penalty box.

Once she was close enough, Monika was in a perfect position for a header. Jamie had the goalkeeper's attention. One good cross, and they would have the opening goal. She planted her foot and swung the other back to cross it.

Her back foot never reached the ball. A Sunderland defender came in with a sliding tackle, studs up, and aimed right for Jamie's ankle. A blinding pain shot up Jamie's leg. She crumpled with a scream onto the pitch.

When she hit the ground, she screamed again, clutching at her leg. The pain was excruciating. Not the normal sting and throb from a tackle. This was the kind of pain that knocked the breath out of her. Cold sweat beaded at her hairline. Her vision darkened in the corners of her eyes. She squeezed her eyes shut and sobbed.

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She barely heard the frantic cries for a medic from her teammates over the sound of her blood pounding in her ears. She wanted to chop her ankle off. Surely that would be less painful than the hammering ache.

Slowly, she forced her eyes open and looked at her foot. The angle it was in made her stomach turn. Bile rose up in her throat. She knew she was going to vomit seconds before it happened. She turned on her side and let her dinner come back up and drop to the grass.

Her throat burned, but it was nothing compared to her ankle. She had never been in so much pain in all her life. She could hear shouting all around her. Where was the stretcher? The medical staff?

As if summoned by her thoughts of them, they were suddenly around her. A pair of gloved hands picked up her leg, sending a fresh stab of fire through her.

“Fuck!” she screamed. “Fuck, that hurts!”

“We’ve got to get it in a splint, Jamie,” Ruby said gently. “Grit your teeth or something, this won’t feel nice.”

She also offered her hand, which Jamie took. Eyes stinging, she braced herself. She swallowed another scream as they handled her leg, but she couldn’t watch it. She laid back and covered her eyes with her arm.

“Jamie!” Zahra’s panicked voice called.

Jamie peeked at her from behind her elbow. Zahra took her free hand. “Do you want anyone to come with you to hospital?” She glanced at Ruby. “That is where she’s going, right?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely,” Ruby said.

“You all have to finish the match,” Jamie said. “I can’t ask you to—”

“Do you want someone with you?” Zahra repeated, firmer this time.

The only person Jamie wanted at her side when she was that frightened was Tessa. She let her gaze slide to the touchline. Tessa’s hand covered her mouth. Jamie didn’t try to catch her eye. She knew what the answer would be.

Zahra, however, caught the look.

“I’ll ask her,” she said, and was off before Jamie could protest.

To Jamie’s shock, Tessa followed Zahra out onto the pitch. Jamie was in too much pain to feel awkward. She only reached for Tessa’s hand, and to her relief, Tessa took it.

“Is it broken?” Tessa asked, glancing between the physios.

“We won’t know for sure until there’s an x-ray, but, in my professional opinion, yes, it’s broken,” Ruby said. “All an x-ray will tell you is where the break is.”

Tessa scowled. “That bitch deserved that red card. And if there were any justice, she’d get worse.”

Tessa’s quick defense of her made Jamie’s chest warm. Which was in contrast to the

rest of her body which had gone cold and clammy.

Broken.

The word hit Jamie like a second tackle. A broken bone meant the end of her season. If it was bad enough, it could mean the end of her career. Even if she did play again, she might never be the same. Her father was going to lose his mind.

She couldn't think about him right now. All she wanted was to get to the hospital and get some fucking pain medication because if she didn't get something soon, she would gnaw off her own leg. She squeezed Tessa's hand while they got her onto the bright orange stretcher. She continued to hold Tessa's hand as they walked her off the pitch. She waved to the fans with her free hand, and they clapped for her. She would have been touched if she could have processed anything beyond the ache.

Once they were in the back of the ambulance van and headed to A&E, Tessa pulled out her phone.

"Texting Nelle?" Jamie asked.

She hoped some conversation might be a good distraction.

"No, I'm texting my ma," Tessa said. "I'm telling her where to meet us."

"Your mother is here?"

"Aye, she came back with me to visit. Thought I could use the support since I was only drinking heavily and sleeping after. . . you know."

"Yeah. I know."

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Jamie went quiet for a moment. Once they had given her some painkillers, her mind cleared enough to think about her breakup again. It was oddly nice to know that Tessa had been suffering too. Not that Jamie didn't think it hurt for them both, but usually being dumped was more painful than doing the dumping. It was less wounding to the ego to be the one who made the decision. But drinking and sleeping? It sounded as if Tessa was as upset about it as Jamie was.

“One wee positive came from your injury,” Tessa said with a smirk. “You finally held my hand in a stadium full of people.”

A chuckle fell from Jamie's lips. “Sweet, suffering Jesus.”

Tessa feigned offense. “Hey, now, that's my line!”

They shared a laugh. Tessa interlocked her fingers with Jamie's.

“You're gonna be alright, Jamie,” Tessa said. “I promise.”

Jamie hoped it was true. Upon arrival at the hospital, they rushed her into a back room for an x-ray. Then, they took her to a private room to wait for her results. Where they also gave her an IV to help with the pain.

Mrs. Gallagher arrived, appearing exactly as Jamie remembered her—in a kitten themed jumper and mum jeans, sensible trainers, and glasses. Her face had little color as she glanced between Jamie and her daughter. She locked eyes with Jamie.

“Are you alright, love?” she asked, a little breathless. “Is it broken? Tessa said it's

probably broken.”

“I’m okay right now, thank you,” Jamie said. The concern was nice. “We’re waiting to see the x-ray.”

“Ach, well, you just rest then,” Mary Ann said, patting Jamie’s arm. “I’m sure it’ll all be fine.”

She reached into her tote bag and pulled out a knit blanket, which she draped over Jamie’s legs.

“Can’t have you getting cold, now,” she muttered.

“A blanket, Ma?” Tessa questioned.

“We can’t have her getting sick on top of having a broken leg, Tessa!” Mary Ann shot back. “Christ, are you trying to kill her?”

Tessa only rolled her eyes. Jamie held back a giggle.

Her smile disappeared when the doctor arrived, and her father was hot on his heels.

The doctor, a middle-aged, balding white man with big, round glasses and absurd bow tie, breezed into the room. He immediately put some distance between himself and Dexter, who had not even looked at Jamie yet.

“Doctor, I—”

“Mr. Hupp, I have heard your concerns, but your daughter is my patient, not you,” he said, cutting across Dexter. He met Jamie’s gaze. The gray eyes behind the glasses were kind. “Hello, Jamie. I’m Dr. Watson.”

“Like from Sherlock Holmes?” Mary Ann blurted out.

He smirked at her. “I get that all the time.”

“I’m sure you do, being English and all,” she said.

He turned his attention back to Jamie. “Jamie, I’m sorry to tell you this, but your ankle is broken. Badly broken.”

Jamie opened her mouth to ask what that meant, but her father jumped in instead.

“How badly?” he demanded. “When is she going to be match fit again?”

Dr. Watson shot an annoyed glare at Dexter, but answered anyway. “This sort of break will require surgery, followed by rest and recovery, and then physical therapy. It’s difficult to estimate now, but it could be a year before she is playing at the level she was before.”

The blood drained from Dexter’s face as he shook his head. “No. No, this can’t be. She’s got to get better sooner than that. Do you know how quickly athletes lose their relevance? A year? Are you sure?”

The doctor answered, but Jamie didn’t hear. Panic rose in her chest, clawing at her ribcage. Her father had not even looked at her. Had not asked if she was okay. Had made no effort to comfort her. Her mother’s words echoed in her mind.

He’s taken you too, hasn’t he?

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The blurred image of Theo's face flashed in her mind. The clear memory of his body under a sheet, one hand dangling out swam into her view. He would let her hurt—he would let her die—for football. Icy fear slid into her gut.

“Oh my God,” she whispered. “Oh my God.”

“Jamie?” Tessa questioned, her eyes searching Jamie's face.

Jamie struggled to inhale. “Tessa—he's—I can't—he's going to kill me.”

“Jamie, it's alright,” Tessa said. She sandwiched Jamie's hand between hers. “You're having a panic attack, but it's alright. You're in good care now.”

Dexter finally looked at Jamie, a scowl pulling down on his mouth. “What are you on about?”

Jamie didn't address him. “He's going to kill me, Tessa. I can't do this, I can't let him!”

“Jamie, what are you—”

Tessa didn't get to finish her question. Dexter interrupted.

“You're being ridiculous, Jamie! What am I paying that therapist for if you're still acting like this, eh? Jesus fucking Christ, pull yourself together!”

“Hold on, that's your wain!” Mary Ann protested. “Your own flesh and blood! You

can't be talking to her that way when she's this low."

"She's my daughter, I can talk to her however I see fit."

He reached for Jamie, but Mary Ann stood between them and pushed him back.

"Oh, no you don't!" she warned. "That girl is my wain now! And you best not be putting your hands on one of mine, you old English prick!"

"How dare you!" Dexter cried.

He raised himself up to his full height, no doubt to say more, but Jamie would not be letting him. Now was the time.

"I won't let you do to me what you did to my brother!" Jamie shouted.

Tears streamed down her face. Her whole body trembled. She was terrified. But she was going to do this, anyway. For herself, and everyone who loved her.

Dexter paled. "How dare you bring up my son!"

"How dare you call yourself his father!" Jamie retorted. "You were never a father to either of us! Theo died because of you! And the hatred in your heart!"

"What do you—"

"I know that Theo was gay. And I know you made him feel bad enough about it to take his own life. Well, I won't let you take mine!"

She pulled a stunned Tessa closer to her.

“This woman, here?” she said. “This is Tessa Gallagher. She is the love of my life. My soulmate. And after today, the whole world will know it.”

His lips quivered with rage. He opened his mouth, but Jamie had heard enough from him. Enough for a lifetime.

“Get out of this room and get out of my life,” she ordered. “Permanently. Do not call, do not text, do not come to my home. Ever again.”

And with that, Dexter Hupp, Jamie’s father, walked away from her. He didn’t yell. He didn’t threaten her. He said nothing at all. At her command, he was gone, leaving an astounded silence in his wake.

Until Dr. Watson cleared his throat.

“Well,” he said. “I suppose you all have some things to discuss. I need to speak with some surgeons and your club physician. I’ll be back in a little while to check on you and let you know what we’ve come up with as far as a treatment plan.”

“Thank you,” Jamie said. “Sorry you had to see all that.”

“Quite alright,” he assured her.

Then he too was gone. Mrs. Gallagher followed after him, whispering something about giving them a moment, but Jamie wasn’t listening. The room had condensed down to her and Tessa.

Once they were alone, Tessa rounded on Jamie. “Is that true? You had a brother who—who died that way?”

Jamie swallowed. “Yes. I’m sorry I never told you, Tessa. I’m sorry for everything. I’m sorry I let myself live in fear of him for so long that it cost me our relationship. Twice. I meant what I said. I love you and I’m ready now to tell the world.”

Tessa’s watery eyes were filled with joy. “Oh, Jamie. . . ”

She claimed Jamie’s lips in a tender kiss. Jamie’s heart soared. She had finally broken the chains her father had placed on her, and she was free. Free to recover from her injury. Free to love Tessa. Free to be her most authentic self.

Most importantly, she was grateful. She knew that she could never have faced her father alone. Her true family was at her side all along.

Chapter 30

“I can’t believe our final match is against City, and I’m missing it,” Jamie complained. “Again.”

Tessa chuckled. Jamie had already been frustrated that the first time they played Manchester City was when she had her concussion. Somehow, the concussion also coincided with their first match against Arsenal, so she didn't get to play against either of her former clubs. The second match against Arsenal had gone fine. But there was a lot of public speculation about Manchester City and her reasons for leaving it. Jamie had been looking forward to playing that match and proving to everyone there was no bad blood there.

“No one can hold your injuries against you,” Tessa pointed out, trying to sound encouraging.

“I know, it just looks unbelievably convenient,” Jamie said. “Although, Rebecca did say she'd allow me to sit on the bench instead of in the stands. As long as my crutches don't get in the way, she said it's fine.”

“That's great! Plus, you'll be closer to me.”

Tessa kissed Jamie's cheek. Even though they were back together, it somehow made Jamie blush. Tessa loved it.

Since her confrontation with her father, Jamie had made good on all her promises. She posted a whole slideshow of photos to Instagram to announce her and Tessa's relationship to the world. Before she went in for her operation, she posted them together at the hospital. And even allowed Tessa to share a clip from after she woke, where she couldn't stop giggling every time Tessa reminded her that they were girlfriends.

They posted to their stories while making dinner, watching television, or lying together on the couch. And the response had been overwhelming.

Support came in droves. Not only from the public, but other footballers as well. They

had even come up with the couple name, “Jessa.” Tessa was overflowing with gratitude at seeing Jamie so happy.

Tessa’s mother had also come to stay with Jamie and help care for her during recovery, and it had done wonders for getting Mary Ann to like Jamie. In fact, there were a few times Tessa suspected her mother loved Jamie even more than her. Mary Ann would only roll her eyes, but Tessa maintained her theory. The pair were adoring of one another.

Her mother’s presence also freed Tessa up to enjoy simply being with Jamie as opposed to being a full-time caretaker. It gave them time to talk. To do more research into their past lives. They had finally discovered some records through online archives of their experiences as tobacco wives. On a manifest record from the Virginia Company, they found Verity and Abigail. And through property records, they found Jamie’s life as Kitty, the wife of the British aristocrat who lived in Georgia and fled before the American Revolution.

Even though they knew in their hearts it was real, seeing physical evidence solidified it for them.

“I wonder how many people are searching for their soulmate,” Jamie had said as they sat in front of her laptop. “D’you think everyone has one?”

“Oh, aye,” Tessa replied. “I think it depends on if it’s your first go at life.”

“I suppose if you found your happily ever after the first time, you wouldn’t need to come back at all.”

“Probably not.”

“I’m glad we’re finally getting it right.”

“Christ, I am as well.”

They had kissed to confirm their agreement.

Because Jamie was recovering from surgery, it meant that they couldn't go out in public the way they would have liked now that they were out. However, Tessa was enjoying the intimacy for the time being. Because that was what it was. Intimacy, not secrecy. And that made it all the sweeter.

Even when Jamie was complaining about missing the last match.

“This might be silly, but I had this vision of scoring the winning goal tomorrow night and then running over and kissing you in front of everyone,” Jamie said with a frown. “Now that's been spoiled.”

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Tessa melted. “Ach, you’re so sweet. You’ll rot my teeth if you’re not careful.”

“And I’d still kiss you.”

Tessa wrinkled her nose. “Okay, there’s love and there’s being disgusting.”

“Shut up!” Jamie laughed and swatted her arm.

Tessa grabbed Jamie’s hand and pulled her into a cuddle on the couch, making sure to keep her injured foot elevated on the stack of pillows they had arranged on one end. Jamie was sleeping on the couch full-time to spare her from navigating the stairs on crutches. Tessa ended up sleeping there too mostnights. Now that they were together, she never wanted to be apart again. Even one night was too long.

Jamie nestled her face into the crook of Tessa’s neck. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Tessa replied, kissing Jamie’s forehead.

Mary Ann bustled into the living room and picked her purse up off the coffee table.

“Okay, girls, what do we want for dinner?” she asked.

Jamie popped her head up. “Oh, will you make that creamy lemon chicken dish you made the other night? I loved that.”

“Of course, love.”

“With some rice and veg?”

“Oh, aye.”

“You’re the best, Mrs. Gallagher.”

“Hold on, don’t I get a say in dinner?” Tessa protested.

“Are you the one with the broken ankle, Tessa?” Mary Ann countered.

“Well, no—”

“Then I can’t be doing with your opinion now, can I?”

Tessa’s mouth fell open while Jamie snickered behind her hand.

“I’m away to the shops now,” Mary Ann said casually. “Behave yourselves, girls. Tessa, your Jamie is to want for nothing, do you understand?”

“Ma, she’s fine—”

“Actually,” Jamie cut in. “I would love some water and a pain pill.”

“Alright, shift it, Tessa,” Mary Ann ordered. “Up you get.”

Tessa groaned and rolled her eyes, but did as she was told. Mary Ann bid them farewell as Tessa returned with Jamie’s requested water and one of her prescribed pain pills.

“Turning my ma against me is diabolical,” she said. “If I weren’t so happy, I’d be raging.”

“You know what? If it took getting a broken ankle for your mother to forgive me for being English and Protestant, I’d say it’s well worth it.”

“Aye, those were two big hurdles to overcome, for sure.”

“She told me she prays to Saint Raphael for me every night doing her rosaries,” Jamie said. “I am truly touched.”

Tessa smiled. “Hopefully, he’s listening.”

Jamie finished the water and set it on the end table closest to her. Tessa, though aware her mother was not in the house, but somehow felt her presence, fluffed Jamie’s pillows and got her comfortable under a blanket before joining her.

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“Want to watch something?”

“This pill is going to knock me out pretty soon,” Jamie said. “Can we just hold each other and sleep?”

“Of course.”

They settled back into the couch. Jamie was out within minutes. Tessa scrolled on her phone for a while until she got a text from Billie. It was a picture of Billie on her own couch, her son on her chest, his little face all peaceful in sleep.

Billie

He’s so tiny but I’m trapped until he wakes up. Who knew a sleeping baby was this powerful?

Tessa stifled a laugh as she snuck a photo of Jamie sleeping on her chest.

I know the feeling. Though my baby is much bigger than yours. I really am trapped until she wakes up.

Billie replied with a laughing emoji.

Will you two come see us sometime this week? Henry misses his Auntie Tessa.

Mummy misses Auntie Tessa too.

Tessa grinned.

Of course! Auntie Tessa misses the whole Knight family. How's dinner on Tuesday sound?

Perfect!

Tessa locked her phone. Billie becoming a mother had meant they saw less of each other, but they spoke almost every day, via text or phone call. Tessa had offered to come by and help, but Billie assured her Betty was all the help she needed. What she wanted was Tessa's company.

Jamie had yet to meet baby Henry, and Tessa realized she had something to look forward to with her. It would be another way Jamie could become ingrained, like she had wanted so badly at the baby shower. Finally, it was all happening for them. It was their time.

Jamie felt a bit out of place in the dressing room since she could only watch her teammates get ready for the match. She remained in her joggers and hoodie, though the joggers were pulled up over her cast. They all took turns signing it, wishing Jamie luck heading into the off season of healing.

Rebecca signed it last before she faced the team.

"Alright, ladies," she said. "I want to start tonight by wishing you all good luck. We've had a solid season since getting promoted. Everyone thought we were headed straight back to relegation. But thanks to all of your efforts and working as a real team, we're finishing in the middle of the table. Lower than the ideal, but higher than anyone expected of us. Tonight, we play one of the top clubs in the league for the second time. They won last time, but I think tonight, as it's our last night of the season, and we're here at home, we have the ability to beat them. I want to go out on

a high note. How about you?"

A murmur of agreement went through them.

"Good to hear," she said. "But no matter what the outcome is, I hope you all know that I'm proud of each and every one of you. Now, let's go kick some ass!"

They cheered, Jamie along with them, wishing more than ever that she could be a part of it. She rubbed her chest to ease the ache in it.

Next season, she told herself. You'll be out there with them.

She could hardly believe how attached she had become to the club. Stanmore was only supposed to be a stepping stone back to Tessa. And yet, she had found a team that became more like family. She knew every woman in the room could be trusted, counted on. As they all high-fived her before leaving the dressing room, that bond surged between them. They included her, even when she couldn't be with them on the pitch. They had sent her flowers at the hospital when she had her surgery. And after, they had all made the effort to visit her when they had some time.

Sometimes, she felt embarrassed that it had taken her so long to realize her father had no real place in her life. That he could not have offered even half the support she received from Tessa, Mrs. Gallagher, and her club teammates. But she didn't let herself wallow in those feelings. She called Lila when she felt really low. Or talked it through with Tessa or Zahra.

While her father was blocked, she had kept in contact with her mother. She had gotten her in touch with Lila, who recommended an excellent grief counselor and therapist. Natalie was getting the help she needed, and had confided in Jamie that she planned to divorce Dexter within a year. Jamie looked forward to that day. She promised to support her mother in every way she could.

Despite the broken bone, she had never felt so at peace. It was as if Abigail, Kitty, and Dinah were all resting in contentment within her now that she had overcome her fear. Jamie had discussed with Lila, and realized her father was the physical manifestation of what she had failed to conquer in her past lives. She had finally vanquished it, and with that, came the deep-seated joy that promised a happily ever after.

Jamie smiled at the person who made that ending so happy as she hobbled through the tunnel on her crutches. Tessa stood on the touchline, snapping photos of the team doing their warm-ups. Tessa looked back, meeting Jamie's gaze and grinning.

The match started off rough. Manchester City attacked with precision, catching the Stanmore defense out several times. One of which resulted in a goal. Monika got an equalizer right before halftime. During the second half, Stanmore kept up their defense. They weren't able to play their usual possession based football because City was so dominant, but they had several good breaks on the counterattack.

One in particular had Jamie's heart pounding. Zahra intercepted a pass by a City player and took off in the other direction. City recovered quickly. They pursued with breakneck speed. Jamie got to her feet, crutches under her arms, and went to the touchline to watch. She had to hold Tessa's hand to prevent chewing off her whole thumbnail.

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Zahra kept her pace and remained out of reach of the City defense. She slipped past the goalkeeper and chipped it into the back of the net. The Hive roared. Jamie had never wished she could jump up and down more than she did in that moment. She had a death grip on Tessa's arm. Zahra leaped into the air and pumped her fist before her teammates pounced on her.

Jamie glanced at the clock. There was still five minutes to go. That was enough for a team like Manchester City. If Stanmore could hold on through the remainder plus stoppage, they would end their season on a win. On the promise of doing better going forward.

A hush fell over the stadium on the restart. Everyone, collectively, held their breath as the seconds ticked by. Eighty-six minutes. Manchester City broke through and tried to shoot, but Eliana made herself big and stopped it. Eighty-eight minutes. They earned a corner kick. Paige sent it nearly back to midfield. Ninety minutes. The referee indicated three minutes of stoppage.

“Sweet, suffering Jesus,” Tessa muttered.

“Tell me about it,” Jamie replied on an exhale.

Three minutes passed in what felt like three years. Manchester City threw everything they had at the Stanmore defense, only to break against the wall. The women were sweaty and tired, but determined. This match was theirs to win.

And they did. The Hive erupted.

Jamie screamed with delight. Her fists flew into the air, letting her crutches fall into the grass. She hugged Rebecca. Tessa scrambled to pick up the crutches and help Jamie get balanced on them again so she could reach her team.

The pitch was pandemonium. The players were hugging and jumping on each other—though they were careful with Jamie. The Manchester City players came over to congratulate them. And Jamie’s heart was ready to burst. There was one thing she had to do. On the pitch, in front of the crowd.

Tessa was at her side, taking photos and videos of the celebrations. Jamie tapped on her shoulder.

“You alright, Jamie?” she asked.

Jamie kissed her in reply.

Their past lives were not tucked away or forgotten. They lived again with every shared glance, every touch, every profession of love. Finally, for all the world to see, they were together. Proud.

Epilogue

Ten years later. . .

A small crowd held their breath and then released a collective groan as the clang of a ball against a crossbar rang out over the field. Sympathetic applause followed. None of the parents wanted to display poor sportsmanship to the children running off the pitch. A whistle blew, indicating half time, and Jamie called her squad around her.

“Sorry, Coach,” Daphne Frawley said with a shake of her head. Her dark curls inherited from her father were secured in a long plait down her back. “That was a

sitter, I should have had it. I promise I won't be shit in the second half."

The other girls burst into a fit of giggles. Jamie rolled her eyes.

"Daphne, don't say shit," Jamie warned.

"Why not?"

"Because you're eight."

"So? I'm a footballer, aren't I?"

"Swearing is for professional footballers," Jamie said sternly. "That's why your dad is allowed and not you."

Daphne huffed. "Fine."

"Now, listen up, girls," Jamie said, and she squatted down to be on their level. "You're all playing so well. I'm really proud of you. But I think if we communicate better, we might be able to get an equalizer in the second half. Daphne, don't be afraid to call for the ball before you make a run. That way Laura can get it to you with better timing and you're less likely to miss."

Laura Knight cut her green-eyed gaze to the ground. "It's my fault, Coach. I could have looked up sooner. . ."

"No, Laura, it's not your fault," Jamie said gently. She moved one of the girl's blonde pigtails off her shoulder to give it an encouraging squeeze. "The nice thing about football is that it doesn't have to be perfect. It can just be fun."

"Anybody want some orange slices?" a familiar, Northern Irish voice called.

Jamie smiled as her wife approached, rolling a large cooler behind her. Tessa waved to the kids. The whole team screamed with excitement, but none more than Laura, who bounced on the balls of her feet and grinned.

“Auntie Tessa!” she squealed, and darted over to wrap her arms around Tessa’s legs.

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“Hello, love,” Tessa replied, stroking the girl’s head. “How’s the match going?”

“We’re losing,” Daphne grumbled.

Tessa rolled the cooler up and set it in the middle of the group. She flipped the top open and handed out orange slices and miniature bottles of some sports drink out to the girls.

“Losing by how much?” she asked.

“One-nil,” Laura told her. “We’re gonna do better though.”

“You’ll be brilliant, I’m sure,” Tessa said.

“But even if we don’t win, it’s like Coach Jamie says, as long as we do our best and have fun, we don’t really lose,” Laura said.

“Coach Jamie is a wise woman,” Tessa replied. “That’s why I love her.”

With that, Tessa finally gave Jamie a hello kiss. Jamie smiled through it and kept it brief. Otherwise she risked the girls making gagging sounds like they did whenever their parents kissed.

“I’ve got to finish my pep talk,” Jamie said.

“By all means. I’m away to sit with Billie and Ethan.” She peered through her glasses at the parents all lined up along the touchline. “Oh, Jordan and Laci are here too.”

She pecked Jamie's lips one last time before walking over to join them. Jamie, a smile lingering, faced her team once more.

"As Laura said, it's about doing your best and having fun, not about winning or losing," she said. "If we win, what will we do?"

"Be good sports," they echoed back.

"If we lose, what will we do?"

"Be proud of ourselves."

"And most importantly?"

"We are more than football."

"That's right," Jamie said. "Now let's get back out there and give them the best of Stanmore under nine girls."

"Yes, coach!" they all cried.

She high-fived or fist-bumped or hugged them all as they walked back out to midfield. It depended on what each child was comfortable with. Henry Knight stopped his little sister, Laura on her way out, and Jamie heard him wish her luck before giving her a hug around the neck. Laura hugged him back, her eyes squeezed shut by the size of her smile.

Jamie watched the second half unfold and gratitude threatened to overwhelm her. She never regretted retiring before she was forty, but she knew she wanted to do something meaningful with her time. She didn't want to be a pundit or manage a professional team. She wanted to impact the culture of football from the early stages.

It was Tessa who had suggested coaching a local, youth team. Jamie had been endlessly happy ever since.

Coaching her friends' children only made the job more rewarding. Though she and Tessa did not have their own, they were happy to support their friends who chose parenthood. Billie and Ethan with Henry and Laura; Jordan and Laci with Daphne; and Hector and Zahra had a little girl that was turning three. Auntie Tessa and Auntie Jamie were always the requested babysitters. According to the kids, they were the most fun and always had treats for them. What was not to like?

Ultimately, Jamie enjoyed seeing everyone around her building their lives together. Billie and Ethan and Jordan and Laci especially, since they were getting to live the dreams destroyed by the tragedies of their past lives. Jamie and Tessa were getting their turn too. And they never took it for granted.

In the ten years since that fateful day in the hospital, Jamie's ankle had healed, and so had her self-worth. Through sessions with Lila, she connected even deeper into her past self, worked through the grief of losing her brother, and discovered how to be the best partner possible to Tessa. She also formed a new relationship with her mother once she was divorced.

Dexter had not reached out since Jamie dismissed him. Not a phone call, text, email, or even a letter. He wasn't missed. She dodged any and all questions about him from reporters, and eventually they stopped asking. When she announced her retirement from football, he didn't come up. She did think of him that day, but only once, and then she let him go again.

These days, she only thought of him when she considered her words as she addressed her squad. She never wanted to make them feel even a small portion of what her father made her feel. She centered her coaching on boosting confidence, both on and off the pitch, and being your true, authentic self.

The match ended in a one-one draw. Daphne scored the equalizer, and Jordan leaped from his chair when he cheered, drawing more than a few stares from the other parents. Not to mention the people walking through the park.

After the girls all shook hands and congratulated each other, Jamie joined Tessa who stood with Billie and Ethan and Henry. Henry wrapped his sister up in a hug.

“Well done, Laura!” he said.

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“Thank you!” she replied through a giggle.

Jordan scooped Daphne into his arms and spun her around until she shrieked with mirth.

“Careful, Jordan, you’ll make her sick!” Laci gently scolded.

“Can’t help it, I’m proud of my girl,” Jordan replied. He dropped a kiss on Laci’s head. “I’m proud of both my girls.”

“Would everyone like to go out for pizza?” Ethan said, checking his watch. “It’s a little early for dinner, but it’d save us all from cooking.”

“If I don’t have to cook, I’m all in,” Billie said.

“Come off it, Ethan does the cooking,” Tessa teased. “But I could go for pizza now that you mention it.”

“Aye, us too,” Jordan said, setting Daphne back on her feet.

“Pizza it is!” Jamie said.

They picked a place and headed to their cars. Jamie and Tessa retrieved their cooler and lifted it into the boot. Sliding into the driver’s seat, Jamie reached over and took Tessa’s hand.

“Happy?” Tessa asked.

“So happy,” Jamie said, and she wasn’t just talking about the pizza.

They kissed. The same way they kissed a million times before. The same way they would kiss until they were wrinkled and gray. The same way they would kiss when their lives slowed to a stop and they were at peace together at last.