



Life After

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Category: Erotic, Romance, New Adult, Lesbian Romance

Description: They seem destined for happiness—but the truth can't be left behind for long.

Jen Fletcher is grateful to have a job. Any job. Even the boring, daily grind as a courier. Except for Thursdays, when her regular route swings through the swanky side of town, and she gets to flirt with Suzanne Dixon. A dark-haired beauty who dazzles in everything from sweats to business suits. Whose briefest touch sends heat racing through Jen's body.

For those few precious minutes, Jen can forget she's an ex-schoolteacher. And an ex-con.

Three years into widowhood, and Suzanne is finally ready to move on. No one is more surprised than she is that it's a mild-mannered courier who jump-starts her mind—and libido. Confident, sexy, a little masculine, Jen is an oasis in Suzanne's otherwise dreary week.

When Suzanne boldly asks Jen out, Jen can't bring herself to reveal her past right off the bat. But she didn't expect their relationship to become so perfect, so fast. Inevitably, the truth comes out. By the time they realize they're falling for each other, the rift between them may be too great to repair...

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Chapter 1

Same crap,different day!

Jen sat up and stretched, aware that another mindless day was about to commence. She had a job, and she was grateful for that, but Jesus Christ, it was mind-numbing. You're lucky anyone wants to employ you!

As Jen checked her phone, she realised it was Thursday. For the last four weeks, Thursday had become her favourite day. It meant Jen would see Mrs Dixon on her delivery round. It meant something would make her smile today.

Mrs Dixon lived on the nicer side of town. Belmont. She wasn't fond of that particular area—the wealth dripping from its tenants was enough to make her gag—but Mrs Dixon certainly made Jen's day memorable. The first time she had delivered there, she wore a sweater and yoga pants. The second time, the smile was far more stunning as she answered the door in a racerback, and last week? Well, Jen had almost tripped over her own feet as she had taken the steps to the front door. Mrs Dixon wore a navy blue pinstriped business suit tailored to her curvy figure. Jen hadn't expected the reaction she had, nor had she expected Mrs Dixon to appear so...sexy and in control, but Jen had lived with the very image in her head from that day on.

She knew it was a mistake, but Jen found herself flirting right back with the woman standing in the doorway of the very fancy home. She was married, probably to some CEO, but Jen hadn't come across him yet. She hoped she never would. It would only shatter the idea she had of the woman in her head. While it was just the two of them harmlessly flirting, Jen was more than happy to play along.

“Jen, love?” Jen’s mum called out from the bottom of the stairs. “Made you a cuppa.”

“Thanks, Mum.” Jen threw back the cover and planted her feet on the floor. If she could just focus on this afternoon—seeing Mrs Dixon again—her day would run smoothly, and it would be over before she’d had time to think.

She took her hoodie from the single chair in the corner of her bedroom and pulled it on. Her mum had been setting the heating to come on at six each morning since Jen had been accepted with the courier firm she was working for. But her mum had always been great like that. No matter Jen’s issues in the past, Denise Fletcher had always looked after her kids as best as she could. Even now, with Jen thirty years old, that hadn’t changed.

Jen took the stairs slowly, stifling a yawn as she reached the hallway. It was ridiculous to start work at seven-thirty in the morning—no matter the season—but again, Jen was just happy to be bringing in a wage for the time being. She didn’t know if or when her circumstances would change, but she knew she’d never have the chance to use her university degree to its full potential any time soon. Or...at all. Ever again.

“Morning, love.” Jen’s mum kissed her on the cheek as she came out of the kitchen. “Cuppa is on the side. Let me know if you’d like some breakfast.”

“Thanks, Mum. I think I’ll pass on breakfast again. I find it hard to be hungry when it’s not even light outside yet.”

“Then I’ll pack you a snack for when you’re feeling hungry.” Denise winked as she moved through into the living room, the morning news already playing on the TV. “Do you have time to sit down with your cuppa?”

“Oh, yeah.” Jen smiled as she grabbed her cup of tea from the kitchen counter and

followed her mum into the living room. “So, any plans today?”

“I think I’m going shopping with Grace and Toby.”

Jen wished she could do that with her sister and baby nephew. No chance any time soon. “That’ll be nice if the weather doesn’t turn like it did yesterday.”

“Oh, it’s just a bit of rain. We won’t melt.” Denise sat in her usual seat, legs crossed as she watched the news. “I hope you drive carefully when the weather is bad, Jen. I worry about you enough as it is.”

“I’m fine. I don’t drive like an idiot. I never have.”

“No, I know.” Denise eyed Jen and smiled. “Are you on your own every day, or do you sometimes have a colleague with you?”

“Nope. Just me.” Jen puffed out her cheeks and sat back. “Which I guess I don’t mind, but it is a boring job.” Jen cleared her throat as she looked over at her mum. “I know it’s not really good enough, but I will try to find something better. I promise you.”

“I’m just glad you’re back here with me, love. You know I’ll give you a hand where I can.”

And that was exactly what Jen didn’t want. Her mum had done enough for her over the last few years. She was lucky to have her. Anyone else would have disowned Jen, given the last five years of her life. “I appreciate that, but I have to stand on my own two feet.”

“So long as you come home each evening and eat the dinner I’ve put out for you, that’s all I care about. Something so bloody normal shouldn’t still make me feel so

emotional.” Denise waved a hand in front of her and sniffled. “I’ll make your favourite tonight. You’ll be shattered by the time you finish.”

Yeah. Jen would. With usually one hundred or so parcels to deliver, she couldn’t wait to fall through the door each night. “I’m happy with whatever you’re making for dinner. And I don’t know, maybe I could treat you to a meal out somewhere when I get paid.”

“That would be lovely,” Denise said. “But you should spend your money on you, Jen. Treat yourself to something nice.”

Jen didn’t have anything nice in mind. She was just happy to be breathing fresh air again. Even the cup of tea in her hand tasted amazing when it shouldn’t taste like anything other than a simple cup of tea. “Taking you out for dinner is something nice to me.”

“Okay, well, let’s play it by ear.”

Jen glanced at the time in the corner of the TV screen. She should probably get ready to leave for the depot. “Right, I’d love to sit around and chat, but you know, work and that.”

“I’ll get that snack ready for you, love.” Denise got to her feet and took Jen’s empty cup from her as she passed her by. Jen wanted to reach out and hug her mum, to thank her for being so amazing recently, but she wasn’t sure what emotional state she would be in after it. “And Jen?”

Jen looked up at her. “Yeah?”

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“Things will get better. I just know it.”

Jen smiled. She really wished she had her mum’s optimism. It was refreshing, even if it didn’t feel possible. “I know.”

“And Ruby would be proud of the recovery you’ve made. You and I both know it.”

Jen scoffed. Ruby would be devastated before she was proud. “If Ruby hadn’t died, none of this would have happened.”

“No, I know.”

“Not that I’m using it as an excuse. Being sent to prison was on me and nobody else. Regardless of why my life changed, why...I changed, I’m to blame for the past.”

“You did your time, Jen. Now, we move forward together. You’ve got a heart of gold, and I’m proud to call you my daughter.”

Jen ran a hand through her short, cropped hair and regarded her mum with the smallest smile. “Thanks, Mum. I just...I have changed. It was a rough time in my life, but it’s not what defines me.”

“Never, love.”

“I’ll jump in the shower and get ready for work. Make sure you give Toby a cuddle for me, okay?”

“I’m sure Toby would love a cuddle from his Aunt Jen. I’ll speak to Grace today about bringing him over for a few hours this weekend.”

“That would be nice. It just depends what Dan thinks about it. You know?” Jen’s voice almost betrayed her, but she kept her composure. “If he says no, that’s okay. I get it.”

“Well, I bloody don’t. Toby is my grandson, and if I want him in this house, I’ll make sure that happens. Don’t worry.”

Jen nodded and left the living room. It was hard not to worry when she wasn’t even allowed to see her only nephew. Toby’s dad didn’t know Jen, she had already alienated herself from everyone when Grace met him, but the whole ‘convicted criminal’ had put a stop to all contact with Toby once Jen was released from prison. Still, she hoped that Dan would come around to the idea one day.

But for now, she had a shitty job to get to.

And a little flirting to partake in.

Jen sat in a lay-by off the motorway, forcing her chicken pasta down her throat as quickly as she could. The sooner she finished delivering her load, the sooner she could go home and contemplate where she went from here. The only thing she knew right now was that she wasn’t enjoying herself. Not in the slightest. The hours were ridiculous—depending on how fast you worked—the pay was terrible, and the job itself was just...not for Jen.

Her mind required far more stimulation than it was currently getting. She was intelligent, and she’d had plans, so to be sitting here on a drizzly Thursday afternoon just didn’t feel right. Jen didn’t feel right. Then again, nothing had felt right for the last five years.

Ruby.

Jen smiled, even though her chest ached. Ruby Mulligan had been the greatest friend in the world. From the day they'd met at primary school, both aged six, Jen and Ruby had been inseparable. She didn't know exactly why they'd taken a liking to each other, but they did everything together. Within days of meeting, they were walking to school with one another, Denise and Ruby's mum, Lyn, a little further back so they felt 'grown up.'

Jen laughed to herself. They'd begged their mums to pretend they were walking alone. Ruby had always used a fancy handbag style bag for school, and she would strut down the pavement as though she was walking the catwalk at London Fashion Week. As they'd grown up, Ruby hadn't changed. She was obsessed with all things glamour, design, and trendy.

And then it had all come crashing down.

Jen stared through the windscreen, repeatedly swallowing down the lump of emotion in her throat. "Fuck." Her bottom lip trembled, her eyes burned, and her heart... Well, that had broken a long time ago. Over the years, it didn't feel as though it would ever heal.

The call Jen received would always stick firm in her mind. It was impossible to forget it. As Lyn had cried down the phone, barely able to form a sentence, Jen knew something was terribly wrong. What she hadn't expected was to be told that her best friend of almost twenty years hadn't woken up that morning. Ruby had passed away in her sleep from Sudden Adult Death Syndrome.

Jen's plan after Ruby's death had been to focus all of her time and attention on fundraising and whatnot, but instead, she'd fallen apart. Instead of reminding herself of what Ruby had brought to her life, she chose to hit rock bottom. And boy did she

hit it with one hell of a thud. Hard. Almost to the point of no return.

You're not at that place anymore.

Jen pushed those months and years from her mind and brought her phone up from the console in her van. A picture of Toby sat on the screen, but it was the only picture Jen had ever had the chance to take. It was when he was a few weeks old, and her sister, Grace, had snuck him into the house without Dan knowing. Toby was welcome at Nanna Denise's whenever they wanted to bring him...provided Jen wasn't home.

She lowered her phone to the console again and started the engine. She only had another twenty deliveries to make, and then she would be out of this van and changing into something comfortable.

As she took the first exit off the motorway, her phone started to ring via her hands-free.

"Hey, sis. Everything okay?"

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“Yeah. Mum said you want me to bring Toby over at the weekend.”

“I’d love to see him. He’s what? Four months now?” Grace gave birth to Toby a few weeks before Jen was released from prison. “So...could I see him?”

“I’ll tell Dan I’m going over to see one of the girls.”

Jen sighed. She didn’t want her sister to lie to the man she would marry next year. Another thing Jen wouldn’t be a part of, more than likely. “If it’s going to be too much trouble for you, don’t worry about it.”

“I... No. It’s not too much trouble. Dan won’t know where I am.”

“But I don’t like the idea of you lying to him, Grace. He’s your fiancé and your baby’s dad. I don’t want him to hate me any more than he already does when he finds out you’ve been sneaking to Mum’s.”

“That’s the best I can do right now, Jen. He’s not having a great time at work, so I really don’t want to mention it to him and put him on the spot.”

Huh. Put him on the spot?Perhaps Grace could have her back instead and explain that Jen wasn’t some evil ex-con who couldn’t be trusted around children. Fuck, she’d been a primary school teacher before everything happened! “You know what, don’t worry about it. I don’t want to cause any friction in your relationship.” Jen sighed. “Just...I opened a savings account for Toby a few weeks after I was released. There isn’t much in it, but I’ll keep adding to it as and when I can. Maybe he’ll know I love him when he’s old enough to understand and know the truth.” Jen cleared her throat,

determined to have a day without tears. “I am sorry everyone hates me. If it helps, I hate me, too.”

“Jen,” Grace paused, and then Jen heard Toby crying in the background. “Nobody hates you.”

“Look, I should go. I’m still working.” Jen shook her head slightly and turned onto Mrs Dixon’s road. It was lined with huge oak trees and Edwardian houses that sat back off the street. “I’ve reached the fancy part of town, and it’s a narrow road. I’d better concentrate so I don’t get myself into any more trouble.”

“Fine, okay. I’ll talk to you soon. Love you.”

Jen smiled. “Yeah. Love you, too.”

She cut the call and the engine, then exited her van. One more package down and a mile or so closer to home. Once she’d rummaged around for the package she needed, she locked the van up and approached the front of the gorgeous house she desperately wanted to see the inside of. It had to be spectacular. The privacy hedges were trimmed to perfection, not a leaf out of place, and the front of the house looked as though it had been freshly painted since last week. Probably the husband.

Before she had taken on this job, it had been a long time since Jen had ventured over this side of town. If she had to guess, she would say it was back when she was still working in her teaching position. Ruby’s mum only lived a few streets away, so this area had been familiar to Jen once upon a time.

What do you have in store for me today? Jen grinned as she pushed through the garden gate, eyeing the brand new Range Rover Sport that sat on the drive. It was definitely Mrs Dixon’s car. Jen could tell by how pristine it looked. A little like the owner, only the owner was far more beautiful than any luxury car.

Jen's lips parted as she heard the lock disengage on the back of the door, but she chose to focus on the package in her hand. She needed to get the important stuff out of the way before they locked eyes. Jen lost her train of thought when that dark and intense stare landed on her. "Package for Mrs Dixon," Jen said as she scanned the box in her hand. "Just the same as usual. A signature and I'll be out of your way."

She did look up this time, her smile widening when Mrs Dixon gazed back at her, that gorgeous dark hair flowing over her shoulders.

"Nice to see you again." Mrs Dixon rested against the doorframe, folding her arms across her chest and revealing her cleavage a little more. Today, she wore a sheer white blouse with several top buttons open.

"Y-yeah." Jen cleared her throat, wishing she was wearing sunglasses right now. It was hard not to look at the obvious, but she suspected this woman knew what she was doing. "Always a pleasure delivering to you."

Mrs Dixon cocked her head, those huge brown eyes gazing back at Jen. "Am I on your round permanently now?"

"Looks like you're stuck with me, yes."

"Perhaps I should put in an extra order each week." Mrs Dixon pushed off the doorframe and reached towards the package Jen held. Their fingers brushed, and if Jen wasn't mistaken, Mrs Dixon appeared to be lingering longer than usual.

Jen's palms grew clammy. This was a new development. Still, she had to remember that this woman was married. "I'm sure I could drop any package you need whenever you need it."

"Is that so?" Mrs Dixon smirked, both of them still holding onto the package. It

seemed Jen was frozen where she stood. “I had no idea couriers around here were becoming so...accommodating.”

Heat crept up Jen’s neck and onto her cheeks. She had to admit that this felt pretty good. It had been a long time since she’d flirted. Jen was surprised she remembered how. Knowing that this woman had no idea who Jen was or where she had been recently, it certainly made her feel better about herself. Even if only for a few minutes. She would take it, and maybe she would bite back, too. “I had no idea some of the houses I’d be delivering to could be so charming.”

“Since you’re going to be here weekly, I should know your name.”

Jen held out a hand and smiled as Mrs Dixon took it. “I’m Jen.”

“Suzanne.” And there it was. A name to put to a beautiful face. “Forgive me if this seems very strange, but you seem like the kind of person who knows what they’re doing when it comes to tech.”

“I’m sorry?” Jen’s brows drew together. Had Mrs Dixon just flirted with Jen to get some sort of assistance with her computer? She was impressed if that was the case. Though Jen wasn’t sure how much use she would be. Technology hadn’t exactly been something she’d had much experience with over the last few years. “Tech?”

“Mm. My internet is giving me the runaround today. I’d be very grateful if you could take a look at it.”

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“I know...a bit about broadband.”

“Wonderful.” Suzanne inched to the side a little, offering Jen access to her property.

As Jen rubbed the back of her neck and glanced over at her van, she had to consider her next step. She was still working, and technically, she was on a clock. “Is it urgent?”

“It could be if that would encourage you to come inside.” Suzanne winked, that playful smile still present. God, this woman was out of this world...and her mind, to be flirting with Jen. The differences between them were obvious for anyone to see.

Stall. Then decide what to do. Jen threw a thumb over her shoulder. “I’m on a bit of a tight schedule but I’d be happy to come back once I’ve finished the last of my deliveries.” Jen had no idea why she was humouring this woman, they didn’t know a thing about one another, but she could take a look at Suzanne’s internet if she really had nobody else. “Would that work for you?”

Suzanne nodded. “That would work for me.”

“Great. Um, I’ll probably be around an hour or so.” Jen swallowed, aware that she would absolutely be playing with fire if she came back here. The woman was married, for fuck’s sake.

“I’ll look forward to it.”

Jen backed away and smiled. If nothing else, maybe Suzanne would leave her a great

review for her service today. She lifted her hand and offered a small wave. “I’ll see you in a little while.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

Chapter 2

Suzanne stood in the living room, looking out through the window at the garden gate. The moment she had met her new courier several weeks ago, her mind had gone into overdrive. She couldn’t say what had possessed her to flirt with the lovely Jen, but over the last few months, Suzanne had found the strength to move on with her life. It may have taken three years and several failed attempts at ‘getting back on the horse’, so to speak, but there was something captivating about Jen. Perhaps it had been her cool, calm demeanour. Maybe it had been her appearance as she had stood so boldly in Suzanne’s garden. Confident, sexy...a little more on the masculine side.

Oh, you know exactly what it was.

Jen reminded Suzanne of the few relationships she’d had prior to her marriage.

Relationships with women.

The years before she’d laid eyes on her husband, the life she had before they’d met and fallen hopelessly in love, a different time. Another existence. Suzanne smiled, looking back on her past with fondness. She couldn’t change how her life had unfolded with John Dixon, and she couldn’t bring him back. But after a lot of therapy, Suzanne knew what she wanted. For fifteen years, she had dedicated her life to John and their work with one another, and now Suzanne was ready to try her hand at dating women again. She didn’t know what that looked like anymore, and yes, she felt unprepared, but Jen had caught her eye the moment she’d arrived on her doorstep...and Suzanne found herself waiting—impatiently at times—for each

Thursday to arrive.

Jen.

Women like Jen had always been on Suzanne's radar back in the day. Before John, she'd had a five-year-long relationship with Jay. Before that, a two-year relationship with Kat. Suzanne had always loved women—she had always been open and honest about that—and that would never change.

She cleared her throat as she looked over her shoulder and towards her office in the corner of the huge living room. Jen would be coming over soon, and Suzanne had to question whether she was making a mistake or not. Yes, harmless flirting had been something Suzanne enjoyed a long time ago, but the bravery she'd found as she stood out on her front step each time they met was unexpected.

Jen seemed lovely; she had to be to offer to come back after work. But mostly, Suzanne was focused on just how attractive she found Jen. Perhaps that was why Suzanne was now having second thoughts. Jen was likely to be involved, and Suzanne knew better than to assume she wouldn't be. She'd done that before and only ended up disappointed. She thinks you're married! Still, Jen had flirted back with Suzanne, so there was something between them. Suzanne now had to decide if that something was worth looking into. Perhaps via a drink or dinner.

It wouldn't hurt to ask...

Suzanne briefly reminded herself of the terrible date she'd subjected herself to recently. God, dating these days was painful. That's over and done with. Suzanne focused back on courier Jen. Handsome Jen. Muscular Jen. She bit her lip as she smiled, fully aware of what was happening here. Suzanne couldn't backtrack now.

Are you sure that's what you want to do?

Yes. She was sure. Still, Suzanne would get some advice from her best friend. She took her phone from the arm of the couch and pressed the call button.

The call connected quickly, surprising Suzanne. “I was just about to call you.”

Suzanne’s brows rose. “Oh. Is everything okay?”

“Of course. I was thinking about coming over after my shift. Maybe with a bottle of wine?” Suzanne would love to have her best friend Tracy over, but she was hoping to be unavailable before the end of the day. “Unless you had plans?”

“I may have plans, actually.” Suzanne’s hands grew clammy when she saw Jen’s van pull up across the road. “I may be out having a drink with someone.”

“I’m sorry, w-what?” Tracy asked, confused. “This is a new development.”

“It’s not a definite, but I’m hoping it’ll happen when I ask her.” Suzanne was aware of just how ridiculous she sounded. In a matter of a few months, she had gone from never wanting to find love again to it being all she thought about. But Tracy had been her friend for a long time. She could be entirely honest with her about anything.

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“You have a date? Suzanne, that’s great news.”

“No, I don’t. Not yet, anyway.” Suzanne smiled when she peered out of the window again and at Jen’s van. “It’s my new courier.”

“Hang on. How the hell have you managed to get the attention of someone who literally drops a package off and then runs?”

Suzanne had to wonder the same thing. “I don’t know. But she’s been coming here for a month now, and every time we see one another, it feels as though there is something there. She’s...coming over soon to take a look at my internet.”

“Your internet? Is that a euphemism?”

Suzanne laughed at that. Tracy found a joke in everything. “No. My internet really is playing up.”

“So, call your broadband provider, Suzanne. This courier could be anyone, and you’re inviting her into your home.” Tracy sighed. “Just because she’s a woman, it doesn’t mean she isn’t dangerous.”

“I know that, but she seems really nice.”

Suzanne’s heart rate spiked when Jen left her vehicle. She no longer wore her high-visibility jacket, just a plain white T-shirt and a pair of jeans. If Suzanne recalled their previous encounter as well as she believed, then Jen had also fixed her hair a little. Though, Suzanne didn’t know why. She loved the unkempt look.

“I’d better go. She’s about to walk through my garden gate any second now.”

“Suzanne, please be careful. And if you get the chance, call me when she leaves, okay?”

Suzanne left the living room and stopped for a moment in the hallway. “I will. Talk to you later.” She ended the call and slipped her phone into the back pocket of her jeans. She took a breath, turned to the mirror on the wall, and stared back at herself. Suzanne reassured she was ready to live her life. She had done the right thing by focusing on herself and where her life was at prior to today. She had waited until she was in the right headspace, refusing to put her emotional state on anyone else. Now she was ready. It was time to live again.

Suzanne puffed out her cheeks and gripped the door handle. She opened the door, smiling back at Jen who looked like a deer caught in headlights. Still, that attraction she felt every time they met was only far more intense than before. Seemed that was a common theme whenever this woman was standing in her front garden.

Jen raked a hand through her short, light brown hair as a blush settled on her cheeks. “Hey. Did you still need a hand with that internet?”

“Mmhmm.” Suzanne grinned, genuinely surprised that Jen had come back here at all. She could have driven straight home, but she hadn’t. That meant one of two things in Suzanne’s mind. Either Jen had enjoyed the flirting on the doorstep lately, or she just had a heart of gold. Perhaps Suzanne would get lucky, and both of those things would apply to Jen. “I would really appreciate the help.”

“Sure.” Jen stepped inside when Suzanne silently invited her in, then shoved her hands in her pockets, where she stopped and stood in the hallway. “Did you call your provider?”

No, she hadn't. Even though it had been the logical and sensible thing to do, Suzanne had taken one look at Jen this afternoon and decided she specifically wanted her help. Not some engineer. "I didn't. I thought maybe it could be something I've done wrong."

"Okay, well, if you just show me to it, I'll see if I can figure it out."

Suzanne nodded and held out an arm towards the living room door. She felt Jen following behind her, but Suzanne chose not to glance back. The longer she admired that strong physique, the sooner she would be spewing out words she wasn't quite ready to verbalise. "The modem is on the floor beneath my desk. Other than that, I couldn't tell you the first thing about where anything else is."

Jen removed her boots before she walked onto the cream carpet, then got to her knees beneath Suzanne's desk. Oh, I'd like to see her on her knees for other reasons. "Gorgeous house, by the way."

Suzanne stared down at Jen, at her impressive backside, and cocked her head. "Thank you."

"Are you some kind of interior designer? It looks like something out of one of those home and living magazines you see at the doctors."

"I am, actually," Suzanne said, pulling the corner of her bottom lip between her teeth. "But this place in particular was all my husband's doing."

Jen sat back on her knees, holding onto a wire. "Maybe you should have asked him to take a look at this." She glanced over her shoulder at Suzanne. "The power wire was disconnected."

"O-oh." Suzanne instantly felt ridiculous. Would Jen think that she had purposely

removed the power cable to get her attention? “I’m so sorry.”

Jen dipped her head under the desk again and reconnected it. As she got to her feet and turned to Suzanne, that handsome smile beamed back at her. “I’m not. It means your internet is back, and you don’t have to wait for an engineer.”

“Thank you, Jen. I do appreciate you coming back after work.”

While Suzanne had intended to continue flirting, she was too mortified to bother right now. She knew exactly what had happened. During lunch, she had knocked over her cup of pens, resulting in a spillage down the back of her desk. They must have dislodged the power cable.

Jen lifted a shoulder. “It’s no problem, really. I was only going home.” She cleared her throat as she stepped past Suzanne and moved towards the hallway. When Jen turned back to Suzanne, she wore that soft smile Suzanne had been drawn to on a few occasions now. “So, I guess I’ll see you next time I have a package for you. It was nice to put a name to a face, Suzanne.”

“Could I...buy you a drink to say thank you?”

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Jen's cheeks reddened. "You really don't have to do that. It was no trouble at all, and I had to head back this way to get home anyway."

"I'd like to..."

Come on, Jen. Let's have a little fun. Suzanne wanted to say that out loud, but she wouldn't. Jen probably wasn't interested, and she was likely involved already. While getting carried away with herself, Suzanne hadn't stopped to contemplate that for a moment. Well, she had, but she still found herself flirting regardless.

"Unless you're not single?"

Jen narrowed her eyes at Suzanne. "I am single, but you're not."

"Widowed," Suzanne said quietly. "I'm widowed."

Jen winced, then held up her hands. "O-oh, I'm sorry. That'll teach me to assume."

"I can see why you did assume. No harm done."

Jen looked down at her feet as she nodded slowly. "Then, yeah, I could go for a drink with you. If you're sure you want to?"

Suzanne smirked. "Oh, I want to."

"Why, though?" Jen was entitled to ask that question. It likely wasn't every day that another woman flirted with her on the doorstep. "You don't know the first thing

about me.”

“Well, no. But isn’t that the point of getting a drink together? To learn more?”

“I mean, yeah. I guess.” Jen suddenly seemed flustered. Perhaps a little hesitant.

Okay, be bold again. Suzanne cleared her throat. “And as for the why. Well, I was attracted to you the first time you came here. Surely you picked up on that, no?”

Jen blushed further as she wrapped her hand around the back of her neck and puffed out her cheeks. “Kinda hoped that’s what was happening.” Jen looked back up at Suzanne, those hazel eyes soft and inviting. “All I know right now is that I’d be a fool to turn down that drink with you.”

“Are you free tonight?”

Jen snorted. “I’m free every night. But, yeah, tonight is good. I don’t work Friday so won’t have to call it a night early.”

“Perfect.” Suzanne reached for a scrap of paper on her desk, jotted her number down, and handed it over to Jen. “Text me your number, and I’ll let you know the plans. Does that sound okay?”

Jen looked down at the paper in her hand, then back up at Suzanne. “Y-yeah. Sounds great.”

“Then I’ll...see you this evening.”

Jen looked back down at the paper again, seemingly shocked. Suzanne couldn’t fathom why, though. She definitely wanted to get to know Jen. And maybe it would all turn out to be a mistake—this was an unexpected meeting of two people, after all.

But what if it turned out to be great? Suzanne was at a point in her life where she was willing to take that risk. She had nothing to lose at all.

“This...” Jen held up the paper in front of her. “You’re not joking about tonight, are you? Like, you really want to get a drink together?”

Suzanne frowned. “No, I’m serious.”

“R-right. Okay. Then, I’ll text you once I’m home.”

Jen stopped in the hallway at home, trying to get her head around the fact that someone had just asked her out for a drink. She could be way off the mark, and Suzanne may simply be thanking her for today, but it didn’t feel that way. Suzanne had continued to flirt, just as she had whenever Jen was working.

Maybe women are just like that these days...

“Is that you, love?” Denise called out from behind the closed living room door. “Jen?”

“Yeah, it’s me, Mum.” Jen scrubbed a hand down her face, dumbfounded by the turn of events today. “I’ll be in now.” She kicked off her boots and gave herself another moment or two to understand what was happening here. While she was thrilled that Suzanne had shown an interest in her—she was gorgeous, after all—Jen wasn’t sure how much her past was going to interfere with anything that may progress. Because it would, one way or another.

Maybe her mum could give her some direction about all of this. She always had been the one in the family who spoke sense. Quite frankly, her mum was the only one who seemed to care about Jen and her life since her release from prison.

She walked through into the living room, the warmth hitting her immediately. She may have only spent thirteen months behind bars, but she'd missed her home comforts, and she was still getting used to them since her release. "Hey, Mum."

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“How was work, love?” Denise came out of the kitchen, drying her hands on a towel as she stopped in the back living room. “Same as usual?”

“Well, I thought it was going to be the same as usual, but it turns out it was potentially better than I expected.” If Jen had to push through each day knowing she would see Suzanne more often, she could live with that.

Denise lifted a brow. “Oh?”

“I...think someone asked me out on a date this evening.”

“You think?” Denise laughed. “I know you’ve been away, Jen, but you must know if they asked you out on a date or not.”

“I’ve been delivering packages to a woman each week for about a month now. She’s always been a little bit flirty, you know? But today she asked me to take a look at her internet. Then she asked if she could buy me a drink to say thank you.” Jen rubbed at her jawline, utterly confused. “It probably is just a thank you drink, but it seemed like she was flirting with me. She said she’s interested in me, but I don’t know how she can be. We don’t even know one another.”

“Well, then. I guess you won’t know more about one another unless you go for that drink, love.” Denise pulled out a chair at the dining table. “Have a seat. Dinner is ready.”

Jen decided to relax and have dinner before she thought any more about Suzanne and her offer. The problem was that she was finding it hard to think about anything else.

Since Ruby's death and then the demise of Jen's relationship at the time, she hadn't looked another woman's way. She'd had a few dates; usually when she was completely out of it on whatever substance she chose to use, and there was a small handful of women she had slept with. For someone like Suzanne to just take a sudden shine to Jen...it felt very unusual.

"Hey, Mum?" Jen looked up at Denise as she placed her plate down. Fillet steak would always go down as a winner in this house. "Oh, this looks great. Thanks."

"I enjoy cooking for you now that you're home. It's something I took for granted in the past." Denise sat facing Jen and smiled as she eyed the various side dishes already set out on the table. "So, you wanted to ask me something?"

"Yeah, um." Jen looked down at her food and cleared her throat. "Do I tell her about the past? Where I've been until recently?"

"I don't think that's something you have to worry about for now, Jen. Meet with her and see how the evening goes."

Jen nodded. "Yeah, that's what I was thinking. But down the line, if something did come of it...what then?"

Denise's brows rose. "Well, I'm not sure. I don't believe the tough time you've had lately has any bearing on who you are. Perhaps it's not something you need to tell her. Would you expect to know something like that if it was you in her position?"

Huh. Would Jen want to know? "I think it would depend on why they were behind bars. Obviously, some things would be a deal breaker." Jen pushed her food around her plate, sighing as she looked up at her mum briefly. "I don't know what to do."

"Nothing you did could be considered a deal breaker, love. Part of me is happy you

were sent to prison because it took you out of that terrible situation you were in, but then the rest of me just wishes I could have healed you myself.”

“I only had myself to blame. I didn’t want help from anyone. That’s all on me.”

Denise lowered her cutlery and lifted her glass of water. “Perhaps, but you needed help more than anything.”

“Life is different now. I’ll never go back to the place I was in. I’m just really conflicted about this woman. I’d never want anyone to think I was lying to them or deceiving them, but I also don’t want to go there tonight and start off by telling her I have a criminal record. She’ll probably walk out on me.”

“Love, you need to take it slow and relax. If something comes of it with this woman you’re meeting, we can face it when the time comes. But for tonight, just bloody enjoy yourself. It’s about time life started to look up for you.”

Jen could only smile. Her mum was right. There was no point worrying about anything until things developed. And that was highly unlikely, given who Jen was and who Suzanne was. She probably just wanted to blow off some steam and let go for the night. Whatever the reason for the invite, Jen was going to make the most of it. She didn’t know the next time another woman would look in her direction. If Suzanne wanted to have fun, then Jen—foolishly—was on board with that. Moving forward, she may not be entitled to anything more...no matter who she was with. “Thanks, Mum.”

Chapter 3

Jen stopped outside the bar where she was meeting Suzanne, mindful that she wasn’t the same person she used to be. That meant no alcohol. It meant no going back to those bad habits for the sake of fitting in and having a good night. Jen had spent

sixteen months sober now, and she wouldn't ruin that for anyone. She didn't care what friendship groups developed over the coming years; Jen couldn't slip back into anything remotely familiar to the past.

This was her first night out since before she was arrested and ultimately sent down for the ridiculous decisions she'd made. It was the first time she would be alone with another woman in far longer than that. So long as Jen made the most of it and enjoyed herself, nothing else mattered. If she could just be herself and not think about the past, Suzanne may just like what she saw. Lizzie had loved everything about her...until Jen fucked it all up. A six-year relationship thrown away because she couldn't deal with life any longer.

Okay, focus on tonight. Nothing else.

Jen straightened out her shirt and checked her hair in the window of a closed shop. Suzanne knew nothing about her, so she had no reason to feel anxious about her mistakes. Suzanne would only know the things Jen chose to reveal. Number one on the 'no go' list tonight was prison. That was the only thing Jen was certain of right now.

With a strange sense of accomplishment working its way through her, Jen stepped inside the bar close to where Suzanne lived and scanned the room. She spotted Suzanne immediately, once again drawn to the beauty of her. She was older, that was quite clear to anyone who would see them sitting together, but she was stunning. Dark hair, breathtaking dark eyes, and curves in all the places Jen loved them to be. She had always been a sucker for a woman with some meat on her bones, and even now, more than three years on from her last relationship ending, that hadn't changed.

Jen smiled when Suzanne lifted a hand and waved in her direction. It was hard not to notice her cleavage again, but Jen was certain it was all a part of Suzanne's plan. If this woman wanted Jen to want her, she was already there. She approached Suzanne's

table, and Suzanne's smile sent Jen's own even wider than before. "Hi."

Suzanne leaned in, kissing Jen on the cheek. "Hi."

"You, uh...you been here long?" Jen suddenly felt flustered. That seemed to be the common reaction around Suzanne Dixon. Jen was generally smooth and confident when it came to women and dates, but she was out of practice.

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Oh, you're far more than out of practice.

"A few minutes. I thought I'd wait for you before I ordered."

Jen nodded as she sat down and caught a server's attention. "I'll get this round. What are you having?"

"I invited you out for a drink, Jen."

Suzanne looked back at her with a sexy brow quirked. Fuck, she was also a sucker for women like Suzanne. Older, experienced, confident. Jen had only been in one relationship with an older woman prior to Lizzie, but she would say it had been more of a fling. Perhaps that was what Suzanne was looking for here. Especially if she was a widow. Maybe Suzanne was simply testing the water when it came to moving on with her life.

"I know you did, but I'd like to buy you a drink." Jen smiled as the server stopped at their table. "Can I get a 0% beer, please?"

He nodded as he tapped away on his iPad, then turned his attention to Suzanne. "Oh, I'll have a gin and tonic, please."

Once he'd taken their order and left the table, Jen turned to catch Suzanne watching her. "So, thanks for inviting me out tonight."

"I'm surprised you agreed. Today has certainly been...interesting, shall we say?"

Jen laughed as she ruffled her hair a little. “Yeah, you can say that again. I didn’t expect you to even invite me into your place, let alone here for a drink.”

“As I said to you earlier, I was attracted to you the moment we met.” Suzanne smiled as she watched Jen intently. “I mentioned I was widowed. It’s only been very recently that I realised I’m in the right place to date again. Life has been...a lot to handle. I wouldn’t dream of dating if my heart wasn’t ready. But it is.”

God, Suzanne’s honesty and confidence were sexy.

But Jen was thrown by the mention of dating. Is that what this was supposed to be? Perhaps it would be best if Jen just came out and asked that. At least then, she would know what was going on here. “Is this a date?”

Suzanne smiled as she shifted a little closer. “Would you run a mile if I told you I’d like it to be? And if not now, perhaps in the future?”

Wow. What the hell was going on today?

Don’t get carried away. She’ll hate you once she knows the truth.

“I mean, sure. It can be a date.” Jen sat back against her seat and rested her ankle on her knee. The first thing she noticed this evening was that she didn’t feel an ounce of nerves around Suzanne Dixon. That said a lot, considering Jen didn’t know what dating looked like anymore. “I can’t promise I’ll be any good at it, it’s been a long time since I went on a date, but I’d like that.”

“How long?”

Jen cleared her throat. She wouldn’t mention the fooling around she’d done since Lizzie left her. Suzanne didn’t need to know about the one-night stands. “Three years

since my last relationship ended, so...nine years since I went on a first date.”

Suzanne may have tried to hide the look on her face, but Jen recognised the surprise right away. All she could pray for now was that Suzanne didn’t throw a tonne of questions at her. Jen may be a convicted criminal, but she wasn’t a liar.

“I’m quite surprised by that,” Suzanne said as the server arrived with their drinks. They thanked him, and then Jen’s attention was back on Suzanne in an instant. Honestly, she found it difficult to concentrate on anything else. Suzanne suddenly narrowed her eyes. “Are you sure you’re not fresh out of a relationship?”

“I’m sure.” Jen lifted her drink and sipped. “I just haven’t been in a position to date lately. I’ve also had some things—challenges—to contend with.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Suzanne said, laying a hand over Jen’s where it rested on her thigh. “I hope things are better now.”

“Oh, yeah. Much better.” Jen gazed into Suzanne’s eyes. “Can’t complain, can I? I’m sitting here with you.”

Suzanne blushed, surprising Jen. Just this afternoon, Suzanne had freely flirted, but the first hint of Jen doing the same and she was flustered. Huh. Maybe Suzanne wasn’t as confident as Jen thought after all. “You’re very sweet.”

“Honest. I’m very honest.”

“Even better. A woman’s honesty is incredibly sexy.” Suzanne dipped her eyes to Jen’s lips, then focused on her gin and tonic. “So, tell me a little about you. How did you end up being my courier?”

“Just lucky.” Jen lifted a shoulder, aware that Suzanne’s hand was still resting on her

thigh. “I guess we’ll see more of one another regardless of what happens here tonight.”

“I’m very happy to hear that.” Suzanne palmed towards Jen’s knee, then placed her hand back in her own lap. “Do you live local?”

“I don’t. I’m not too far away, but my best friend’s mum lives a few streets away from you.” Jen should really call in to visit Lyn, but there had been no communication with one another since she went to prison. Jen had tried to reach out, and she had hoped Lyn would perhaps respond to one of the letters she’d sent, but nothing had come of it. Jen couldn’t blame people if they distanced themselves from her, but it still hurt. Especially when Lyn had been considered another mum to her at one time. “I...don’t visit, though.”

“Why?”

“She died,” Jen said, wearing that emotionless mask she found worked best in these situations. “Five years ago. My best friend, not her mum.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Suzanne offered Jen a supportive squeeze of the hand. “That must have been hard to deal with.”

“Mmhmm.” Jen looked away briefly, keeping herself in check. “So, yeah. I haven’t spoken to her mum in a few years now.”

“That’s a shame that you drifted apart. Perhaps you should reach out to her one day. She could be waiting for you to do exactly that.”

“I did. Several times.” Jen smiled weakly as she stared down at her lap. “As I said, life has been challenging recently. I guess maybe people just need space, you know?”

Suzanne nodded, those soft eyes comforting Jen. “Mm. I know what you mean.”

“But this is lovely. Being here with you.” Jen relaxed into the evening, ready and waiting for whatever came of this with Suzanne. She lifted her bottle and tipped it towards her date. “To new beginnings.”

Suzanne lifted her glass and clinked it with Jen’s bottle. The smile she wore had the hairs on the back of Jen’s neck standing to attention, her dark eyes pulling Jen into a world she wasn’t sure she deserved. “To new beginnings.”

Suzanne brought another round of drinks to the table, thoroughly enjoying her evening so far with Jen. She hadn't known what to expect, but their conversation so far had only shown Suzanne that she had done the right thing in being bold. They'd both found themselves dealing with grief and as she sat back down at the table, Suzanne felt far less alone than she had since John's death.

Jen looked up at Suzanne and smiled. "I've had a great evening with you. I'd love to do it again."

"I'd like that, too." Suzanne wasn't very good at judging people, but Jen was so easy to be around. Their conversation flowed freely, and Suzanne didn't get the impression that Jen would shy away from anything she may bring up in discussion. "I'd invite you back to mine for a nightcap, but I don't have anything alcohol-free in."

"Oh, that's okay. I can only drink so many of these beers before they taste like shit." Jen looked to Suzanne, those handsome features alluring. "I'd be happy with a glass of water at this point."

"Can I ask why you don't drink? Is it just a preference?" Suzanne didn't often question people's reasons for being sober, but Jen was young, so she wanted to ask. If Jen had specific reasons, Suzanne didn't want to do anything to compromise her sobriety.

Jen picked at the label on her bottle, smiling weakly. "I'm just not ready to go down the path of casual drinking yet. When Ruby died, I kinda came to rely on it too much, you know? I'd like to think that down the line, I could enjoy one or two at the weekend, but I'm not ready for that yet. This stuff does the job."

"That's a good decision to make if you were reliant on it during the grieving process. I think a lot of people do that, but it's recognising when it becomes a problem that makes a huge difference."

“I can’t say I did recognise when it became a problem, but I certainly feel better for stopping alcohol completely.” Jen wrinkled her nose as she opened her mouth to speak again. “Would that bother you if we went on another date? That I don’t drink?”

“Not at all.” Suzanne wasn’t a heavy drinker. The only reason she had suggested this was because it was generally what people did on a first date. “I’d be happy to avoid bars next time.”

“Oh, we don’t have to do that. I’m sure you enjoy a few at the end of the week.”

Suzanne pushed her empty glass away. “I can take or leave alcohol. I prefer a long walk with endless conversation.” John had always liked a drink, often not knowing when to stop. In the end, it was basically what had killed him. “Would you...like to come back to mine for coffee?”

Jen nodded, her eyes bright and appreciative of the company this evening. “You know what, I’d love to.”

“Perfect. I’ll just use the bathroom, and then we’ll head off, okay?”

“Sounds good to me.”

Suzanne left the table, taking her clutch bag with her. She pushed through the bathroom door and focused on herself through the mirror. She didn’t know where the rest of this night would lead, but she was absolutely hoping she would get the chance to taste Jen’s lips. God, she’d struggled to take her eyes off them all night.

She quickly took her phone from her bag and opened her messages with Tracy.

Headed home from the bar with my date. She’s great. I think you’ll like her.

Suzanne chose not to wait for a reply and shoved her phone back into her bag. Jen was outside, and Suzanne had no reason to hide in the bathroom talking to her best friend. No, she would rather get back to her place so she could learn more about courier Jen. After all, it was barely nine o'clock. Surely they could give one another a few more hours before they went their separate ways.

With a spring in her step, courtesy of a wonderful night with Jen so far, Suzanne left the bathroom and made a beeline for their table. Jen sat there, watching people as they passed by, a beautiful smile resting on her lips. Suzanne could tell a lot by a woman's smile. And Jen's was striking.

“Ready?”

Jen shot to her feet and took her wallet and phone from the table. “Sure. I'm ready if you are.”

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As they left the bar, Jen lay a hand against the small of Suzanne's back. A smile twitched at the corners of Suzanne's mouth, the idea of life moving forward quite pleasant this evening. Suzanne couldn't say she would always feel that way, so confident and prepared, but she had a feeling Jen was going to make it very easy to enjoy herself as she looked to a different future.

"So, which way? I don't really have my bearings around this area." Jen stopped them on the pavement and turned to Suzanne. "And in case I forget to say it later, thank you for the perfect night." Jen leaned in to kiss Suzanne's cheek, but Suzanne turned her head and captured her lips. Jen didn't pull away. Instead, her hand settled on Suzanne's hip as she smiled against her mouth. When they did break apart, Jen's beautiful eyes were a little darker than they had been before. "You've just turned perfect into exceptional."

Suzanne reached out a hand and wiped her red lipstick from below Jen's bottom lip. They studied one another, quite clearly a connection between them, and then Suzanne drew her hand back. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

Chapter 4

Jen embraced the warmth of Suzanne's house as she stepped over the threshold, appreciative of the amazing night she'd had. When she'd walked out of prison, Jen had no idea where her life would go, but this? Sitting in a beautiful woman's home? No, no way. This hadn't been anything close to her expectations whatsoever. Honestly, she was waiting for it to crash and burn before this night ended.

"Tea or coffee?"

Jen slid her boots off and turned to Suzanne. “Tea, please.”

She followed her into the kitchen—even more impressed than she had been when she’d arrived this afternoon—and rested against the huge counter along the back wall. Suzanne’s husband had certainly had taste. Though if Jen was being honest, every home looked incredible after the concrete cell she’d spent thirteen months confined to.

“So, do you only deliver for certain companies?” Suzanne glanced over her shoulder as she prepared their drinks.

“It depends on which courier the company chooses to use. Sometimes, it’s the same parcels for the same people; sometimes, it’s a new area altogether.”

“Do you enjoy it?”

Jen didn’t, but she couldn’t tell Suzanne why she was even working as a courier just yet. It would only ruin this night, and Jen really wanted to leave here tonight feeling positive about the future. It wouldn’t last, she would have to be honest eventually, but for now...she really needed this. Everything in her life had felt so hopeless since her release, and this was the first time she had felt remotely good about herself or...anythingfor that matter. “Yeah, I guess. It’s a job, and that’s the way I choose to look at it.”

“Fair enough.”

“So, you’re an interior designer.”

Suzanne turned with two cups and motioned towards the living room. Jen followed, briefly checking out her arse. “I am. Freelance.”

“Why freelance? Do you prefer the freedom and setting your own hours?” Jen quite fancied something similar in the future. So many people lived to work these days, but Jen... She wanted to grab life. Live it to the fullest. If this went further with Suzanne, she hoped she could be in a similar position one day.

“When John died, I decided to step away from working full time. I love what I do, but it wasn’t the same without him. So, freelance is where I decided to head. It’s...less intense, shall we say?”

“Can I ask what happened to your husband?” Jen didn’t want to push, but if they were going to have at least another date, she didn’t suppose it hurt to ask. “You can tell me to mind my own business, of course.”

Suzanne lowered herself to the couch, offering Jen the seat beside her. “John...liked a drink. He wasn’t an alcoholic, but he didn’t know when to stop at the end of a night out.” Suzanne lowered her eyes. “He’d been on a day out with friends to one of the horse racing meets down the road. I was at my brother’s when he got home. He called me to say he was going to take a shower, have something to eat, and sober himself up before I got home. He knew I didn’t enjoy seeing him drunk.”

Jen nodded slowly. “I see.”

“I came home to find him dead at the bottom of the stairs.”

Jen hadn’t known what to expect, but it wasn’t that. “Oh, God. I’m so sorry.”

“He’d fallen down them and broken his neck,” Suzanne explained, her voice void of any emotion. “I wondered if things would have been different had I been here, but they said he would have died instantly. That’s the only comfort I take from any of it. That he didn’t lie there suffering.”

“Fuck, Suzanne. That’s... I don’t know what to say.”

“You see why I can take or leave alcohol?”

Yeah, Jen could absolutely understand why Suzanne wasn’t fond of the stuff. It just ruined lives. Jen was all too familiar with that. It had ruined her own at one time. God, she hoped she could recover from her mistakes so she could do everything right the second time around. “Yeah.”

“It’s taken me a few years to come to terms with everything, but I am in an entirely different place now. You know, in case you wondered if I still struggled.”

“I think it’s only normal for grief to hit us unexpectedly. I don’t believe there is any timescale for coming to terms with something so dreadful. I’m also not scared of emotions.” Jen sipped her tea and smiled back at Suzanne. “We all handle things differently. I’m almost certain you probably handled your husband’s death far better than I handled my best friend’s.”

“There was a reason I felt a pull towards you, and I have to wonder if it’s because we’ve had similar experiences. I wouldn’t ever flirt with someone on my doorstep, but I found myself doing it without realising. Then I found that I couldn’t stop because, in my mind, you enjoyed it just as much.” Suzanne palmed Jen’s thigh, sincerity in her eyes. “I could be entirely wrong, but I don’t think that I am.”

“Oh, you’re absolutely right. I did enjoy it. You’re gorgeous.” Jen smiled, lowering her hand to Suzanne’s. “And as for the similarities in grief, I feel the same way now that I know about your husband.”

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“May I ask what happened to your best friend?”

Jen lowered her eyes and chewed her lip. She hated talking about it. It always caught her unexpectedly when it came to emotion. Jen didn’t need that tonight. Not when she wanted Suzanne to show an interest in her. “Sudden Adult Death Syndrome.”

“Oh, Jen. I’m so sorry.”

Jen could only offer a wry smile. She still found it hard to believe Ruby was gone at times. Just the thought of hearing her voice kept Jen awake at night. But it was also Ruby’s voice that kept Jen going while she was inside. “Best friends since the age of six...and she just died on me without a goodbye.” Jen rubbed at the handle of her cup, determined to keep herself in check. “Went to sleep one night and never woke up again.”

“It’s no surprise you struggled to deal with it. Anyone with a heart would have a hard time understanding something like that.” Suzanne shifted closer and placed a hand on Jen’s shoulder. It only made everything feel worse, though. “Did you have people around for you?”

“To a point, yes.” Jen cleared her throat. “Most of the time, I didn’t want any help. I didn’t want to be around people. But that’s in the past now, and I’m ready for whatever comes next.” Jen didn’t want to talk about the demons she’d faced. If she did, she would end up coming clean right here, right now. She wanted to know Suzanne before she kicked her out of the house, never to see one another again.

“I like your attitude.” Suzanne looked at Jen with such softness that she almost

melted into the couch.

“Can I ask what it is you’re looking for?” Jen sat forward and lowered her empty cup to the coffee table. “Dating? A fling?”

“I’m willing to take whatever I can get at this point in my life. I’m fifty and a widow. Some people would say I had my happy ending when I met John, but I believe I should be given the chance to find love again.”

“I love that. I really do.” Jen shifted closer to Suzanne, hoping she wasn’t being too forward here. She lifted a hand and brought it to Suzanne’s cheek. “And I think you’re right. You should be given the chance to find love again.”

“What about you?” Suzanne leaned into Jen’s touch, smiling as her eyes closed. “How do you feel about potentially dating a fifty-year-old widow?”

“Oh, I’m ready. If that’s what’s happening here. If it’s something you’d like to explore. Us...dating.” Jen ached to lean in and kiss Suzanne. She wanted to show her that being fifty meant nothing to her. Jen couldn’t give a fuck about this woman’s age. She just wanted to kiss her. “Is that what’s happening here, Suzanne?”

Suzanne drew Jen in, their lips on one another’s in an instant. Suzanne moaned when Jen’s tongue ventured into her mouth, and then Jen heard a light gasp when she palmed Suzanne’s bare thigh. Fuck, she had the softest skin. And her moans? Oh, Jen had missed that very sound from a woman. Honestly, she wasn’t sure how long she’d last when she did eventually get Suzanne naked.

When they pulled apart, Jen’s hand beneath Suzanne’s dress, she stared deep into Jen’s eyes. “Yes. That’s precisely what’s happening here.”

“Then I’m ready if you are.” Jen knew there would likely be days when Suzanne

reminisced about the past, about her marriage, but equally, Jen would have days when Ruby's death hit her harder than others. Then there came the matter of her decision to open up about prison. Because as she sat there and looked back at this woman, a woman who had made Jen feel grateful for life right now, she couldn't do it. Her mum was right. Thirteen months inside didn't define who Jen was. She wasn't a rapist or a murderer or an abuser. She hadn't hurt anyone other than herself. Suzanne didn't need to know.

Suzanne narrowed her eyes slightly. "I lost you for a moment then."

"Just in my own head," Jen said as she cast her gaze on the tiny space between them. But all she saw was Suzanne's thighs. Fuck! "Can't believe I'm here, to be honest."

"Is there a reason why you don't believe you should be here?"

"N-no. Just not usually that lucky." Jen lifted a shoulder as she inched towards Suzanne again, her hand slipping higher. "An evening out with a gorgeous woman? Nah, those things don't usually happen to me."

"Well, I can safely say that this is happening." Suzanne trailed the tip of her tongue along Jen's bottom lip.

That one movement had Jen soaked beyond comprehension. Suzanne was either going to make her insanely happy or break her heart. In this moment, she didn't care which. She just knew she wanted to be here. Jen dragged her nails down Suzanne's thigh, knowing she had to slow down. "The day I get you naked, I'm going to lose my fucking mind. I hope you know that."

Suzanne's hand fell to Jen's knee, and then she squeezed as she whispered, "I can't wait."

Chapter 5

With a spring in her step, Jen took the stairs quickly and rushed into the living room. Today, she was feeling alive. Today, she was hopeful of life after prison. God, Suzanne had really been amazing last night, and Jen couldn't wait until the next time they saw one another. She wouldn't push a second date, but she was definitely ready for one. They'd hit it off far too well for any other outcome.

"Morning, love." Jen's mum crept up behind her and kissed her on the cheek. "How was last night?"

"It was great, Mum." Jen knew she was wearing a ridiculously huge smile, but she didn't care. She hadn't had much to smile about for a long time. "She...wants to see me again."

"Of course she does. I'd expect nothing less." Denise busied herself in the kitchen, pottering about as she usually did first thing in the morning. "You have the day off, don't you?"

"Yeah. Not sure what I'm going to do with myself yet. I thought I might go for a run." Jen rested back against the counter, smiling when her mum handed her a cup of tea. "Thanks."

"I'll be leaving for work around midday. I'll be home by nine, though." Denise worked at a local restaurant. It was something to keep her busy since Jen's dad had died ten years ago. "Maybe you could come in, and I'll treat you to your dinner."

"Oh, that's okay. I'll sort myself out here. I thought maybe a quiet night in with the TV would be good for me. It's been a busy week, and I'm back at work tomorrow. Only half day, but still."

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“That sounds like a wonderful evening. Wish I could join you.” Denise patted Jen’s cheek as she passed her by and moved into the living room.

“Hey, Mum?” Jen followed, clearing her throat as Denise turned to her. “Could I borrow some cash? I’ll pay you back when I get paid next week.”

“Jen.” Denise gave her a knowing look. “You don’t need to borrow cash from me. The money from your dad is still there. I haven’t touched it.”

Jen shook her head. “I told you that’s yours. After everything I put you through, I don’t deserve it.”

“Are you alive and healthy? Are you in a better place than you were?” Jen nodded in response. “Then you do deserve it. You lost your way, you’ve done your time, and now you’re home. The money is there. It belongs to you. He left it to you.”

When Jen’s dad had passed away, he’d left them all a chunk of money each via his life insurance policy and will. When Jen hit the bottom, her mum convinced her to transfer it out of her account. The twenty-five grand still sat in one of Denise’s savings accounts five years on.

“I probably owe you more than what’s even in the account. I told you to keep it for yourself. It’s all I can offer you.”

“I’d rather you used it to set up your future. I’d rather you spent it on yourself.” Denise motioned for Jen to sit down on the couch beside her. “Punishing yourself forever isn’t going to help you move on, Jen. Treat yourself to a new wardrobe. Buy

yourself a little runaround car. Go on bloody holiday. Do something with it, please.”

“It wouldn’t feel right.” Jen cast her gaze on the carpet. “I don’t feel like I deserve it.”

“Okay. What did you want to borrow money for?”

Jen wasn’t sure if it would be too much, but she wanted to thank Suzanne in some way for last night. “I wanted to send my date some flowers.”

“Well then, I’m going to transfer some of your own money to you. Maybe you could arrange dinner with her sometime. Treat her and yourself. You do deserve it, Jen. You’re picking yourself back up. Don’t deprive yourself of happiness.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without you.” Jen leaned in and hugged her mum. Deep down, Jen knew she would have to allow herself some happiness eventually. Her punishment had been and gone. Jen just wanted to live again. “And if you’re sure, I’ll accept the money.”

“No need to accept it, love. It’s yours, and it always was.”

Jen nodded as she sat back and sipped her cuppa. Maybe if she could show Suzanne that she was financially stable-ish, then when the truth came to light, it wouldn’t be so bad. “Any idea if or when I should tell her yet?”

“Just enjoy yourself with her. I wouldn’t be hasty in any decisions right now. Be yourself, and I’m sure she’ll love everything she sees.”

Jen was capable of finding love. She was capable of being the perfect partner for someone. That would never change, no matter what her past involved. She had always been a romantic at heart, and if she had her way, she was going to romance Suzanne hard. “I do really like her. She’s older, but maybe that’s exactly what I need.

Someone who isn't going to lead me astray, you know?"

"If you're happy, I'm happy." Denise squeezed Jen's knee and then rose to her feet. "I'll take care of that bank transfer while you pick some gorgeous flowers."

As Denise left the room, Jen sighed. Was that a hint of contentment she felt? Huh.

While she didn't need someone else to complete her, Jen would admit to feeling on top of the world today. Wasn't life a funny thing? Just yesterday, Jen couldn't be bothered to leave her bed. But this morning? Oh, this morning, she felt like an entirely different person.

As she sighed contentedly, her phone buzzed in the middle pocket of her hoodie. It wasn't often her phone alerted her to anything. Not many people had her new number.

Thank you for the perfect date. I'd love to see you again x

Jen grinned to herself as she reread the message over and over again. Suzanne had initiated contact, and now, Jen didn't know how to respond. Maybe she would take those flowers over there herself instead of sending them.

Thank you for being the perfect date. You let me know when you want that second date. Dinner is on me x

With the strangest sense of peace, Jen lowered her phone to her knee and rested her head back on the couch. Maybe she would rejoin the gym and get herself back in shape. If she was going to use the money her dad had left her, she should use it for her wellbeing first and foremost.

Suzanne lowered her pruning shears to the floor and took a seat on the doorstep. She

hadn't expected such good weather today, but it was certainly helping her garden early this year. Spring seemed to have appeared out of the blue. Your focus has been elsewhere. Suzanne smiled. She should have been doing this at the weekend, today was supposed to be a working day, but she couldn't focus on work. Whenever she sat down at her desk, all she could think about was Jen's hand high up on her thigh. Those delicate fingers stroking her skin. Jen's lips as they reminded Suzanne of happier times. Jesus, that woman could kiss.

She sipped from her water bottle and allowed herself a moment to feel content. Everything seemed brighter today. Life was certainly looking up. She hoped Jen felt the same way. It was unusual for Suzanne to find a connection so suddenly, but she meant what she'd said to Jen last night. She deserved to find love again. It always helped when the woman you were on a date with was so easy to be around. Suzanne wasn't the type to become anxious at the idea of a date, but she hadn't known it could be so easy. She also hadn't imagined that Jen would be looking for something a little more serious than a fling.

She's not fling material, and neither are you.

Suzanne knew that without a doubt. There was something about Jen that made Suzanne want to sit up and listen. When she gave over her attention, Suzanne found it hard to look away from Jen. Tracy may suggest that Suzanne needed to explore and date for a while, but she knew what she wanted. And it was Jen. Why deprive herself of that? Why push down the feeling she had around her when it was so good? No, it was time to focus on what she wanted. Not everyone else.

Suzanne took her phone from her pocket and brought up Jen's response from earlier. Was tonight too soon for those dinner plans? Probably.

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I can be available to spend the evening with you whenever you want x

She hoped she didn't come across as desperate, but Suzanne doubted Jen would think that of her. They'd both gone further than expected last night, so Jen was clearly eager to get this show on the road just as much as Suzanne was.

While she stared down at her phone, waiting for a response, her garden gate creaked open. When Suzanne looked up, her breath caught in her throat. "Hi."

Jen stared back at her from the edge of the garden path, holding an arrangement of flowers. "Hey. I just wanted to drop by with these for you."

Suzanne got to her feet and approached Jen. My goodness. It was one hell of a bouquet. "These are for me?" Jen nodded. "But why?"

"A thank you for being the perfect date. But mostly because you seem like the kind of woman who deserves flowers on a whim."

"That's incredibly sweet. Thank you." Suzanne took them from Jen's arm and kissed her on the cheek. "I wasn't expecting this at all."

Jen shrugged. "I can be romantic when I want to be."

Suzanne sighed. "God, it's been so long since I had any romance in my life."

"Me too." Jen nudged her shoulder as she smiled back at Suzanne. "You feeling okay today?"

“Me? Of course. Why?”

“Just checking in. I think last night was unexpected...in more ways than one. So, I wanted to ask.”

How in the name of God had Suzanne found the courage to flirt with this woman...and come away with a date? Jen was adorable. “I’m feeling very good. Today feels...different. I feel different.”

“Different, how?”

“I don’t quite know how to explain it, but when I find the right words, I’ll be sure to let you know.” Suzanne hiked a thumb over her shoulder. “Did you want to come in?”

Jen held up her hands. “No, that’s okay. I’m not here to gate-crash your day. I just wanted to drop the flowers off and say hi.”

Suzanne really wished Jen would have agreed to come inside. It was refreshing to find someone who took an interest in her and how she was feeling. It was even more refreshing that it was someone twenty years younger than her. So far, things were looking good with Jen. “I don’t have any plans. I decided to work in the garden while the weather was cooperating. If you wanted to stay for lunch, we could move things to the back garden...”

Jen hesitated, but only briefly. And then she smiled as she nodded. “Okay. That would be lovely.”

“Come on in.” Suzanne stepped through the door, closing it once Jen was safely inside. “Let me put these gorgeous flowers in water, and then I’ll make lunch.”

Jen followed Suzanne through to the kitchen. Suzanne felt Jen's eyes on her, a tingle working its way up her spine. These were the things she had missed. Someone who watched her every move. Someone who wanted her. Judging by last night, Jen definitely wanted her.

"No plans for your day off?" Suzanne glanced over her shoulder and smiled in Jen's direction. "Or do you just prefer to rest since you've been driving around all week?"

"I'm not very good at sitting still. I prefer to keep busy. I'm thinking of getting back into the gym. It's good for my mental health."

Oh, my. Suzanne could only imagine how ripped Jen was going to be. She already had an impressive physique, and that was with clothes on. "I enjoy running. Some yoga too."

"You know, I've never really given yoga a go. Ruby was obsessed with it, but I've never felt as though it was for me. Maybe I should give it a try."

"You're welcome to join me whenever you like." Suzanne meant that, but it was mostly the idea of seeing Jen in some interesting positions that had her extending the invitation. "No pressure, obviously."

Jen wrapped a hand around the back of her neck and smirked as she dipped her head. "I'm not sure that's a good idea. Not yet."

Suzanne frowned as she turned to face Jen fully. "No?"

"It was a struggle keeping my hands to myself last night. The thought of seeing you in your yoga pants is not something I could contend with. I'd cave within seconds."

A thrill rushed through Suzanne at that. Jen really was interested, huh? "Maybe that's

my plan.” Suzanne stalked towards Jen, noting the look in her eyes as she did so. Jen was already conjuring up the image in her mind. “But I don’t know. I think you have good self-control. You seem like that kind of person.”

Jen’s cheeks reddened, but she still reached forward and took Suzanne by the hand. “I did have an amazing night with you last night. I hope you know that.” She pulled Suzanne in, their bodies pressed together, and drew her into a kiss. One hand settled on Suzanne’s waist, the other gently gripping her jaw. Fuck, she hadn’t been kissed like this in what felt like forever. Jen pulled back a little and licked her lips. “I don’t really know what’s happening here, I just know that I want to see more of you whenever I can.”

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Suzanne touched her forehead to Jen's, admiring those hazel eyes. "I also don't know what's happening, but I'm not scared of where this is going. I don't plan to slow down or stop and think. Life is too short to spend more time worrying and less time having fun."

"You're exactly my kind of woman." Jen stole another kiss, nipping at Suzanne's bottom lip. "Life is absolutely too short, and I think you and I know that all too well."

Suzanne grinned. Her days with Jen in her life were about to become very interesting. "So, yoga sometime then?"

"Seems it's time to test out my self-control."

Chapter 6

Jen frowned as she scoured through the packages in the back of her van. It was Thursday, so why couldn't she find Suzanne's usual delivery? Fuck! She'd hoped to have an excuse to see her today. They hadn't seen one another since the weekend, and Jen was missing her. Which was surprising given the fact they'd had one date. Sure, they'd shamelessly flirted all night, almost went too far, then proceeded to keep up that teasing the following day, but Jen shouldn't be at the stage of missing this woman. Not yet. Okay, maybe she wasn't quite missing her, but she did love spending time with Suzanne.

She checked through the packages again, still unable to find anything with Suzanne's name on it. Maybe it was delayed. Or maybe Suzanne had stopped ordering from the company she usually used, meaning Jen may not see her as often. Once a week

wasn't really that often, but it was better than nothing.

Jen took her phone from the side pocket in her cargo pants and pulled up her messages with Suzanne.

I don't have a package for you today.

She signed off with a sad face, hoping Suzanne would find the humour in it.

My usual supplies were sold out. I'm also deeply saddened by this development.

Jen grinned as she sat down on the edge of the back of her van. Could she just sit here all day going back and forth with Suzanne? No, because then she wouldn't get paid. Just because her mum had released her money back to her, it didn't mean she had any plans to slack when it came to work. Working was the one thing that kept Jen sane most of the time.

I was hoping I'd see your beautiful face today. It always brightens up my week!

Jen could just show up there, but she didn't like to disturb Suzanne. Especially now that she knew more about her and that she worked from home. She wasn't just some sexy stay-at-home wife as Jen had once suspected. Though, that was incredibly hot when she thought about it.

Should I unplug my internet to get your attention again?

Oh, this woman was fun and it was just what Jen needed in her life.

I could always just show up and hope you answer the door to me.

Jen recalled those first few weeks. The way Suzanne arrived at the door with a

twinkle in her eye, looking far sexier with each and every outfit. Could she ask her about that someday? Would Suzanne admit to luring Jen in?

Then I should change...

Fuck. What did that even mean? Jen tugged her bottom lip between her teeth, aware that she should really start her deliveries.

Why? What are you wearing?

Jen's spine tingled. If she wasn't careful, she would be sexting with Suzanne before the morning was over.

Too much.

Oh, Suzanne was too much. Jen was sure of that. First, the flirting when they were talking about yoga, and now this. Jen was sure they would both explode the moment they touched one another.

It is a gorgeous day outside. Maybe you should get rid of a layer.

Okay, it was time to stop. Jen had a job to do, as did Suzanne. She couldn't afford to sit around here making herself wetter and wetter at the thought of getting her naked.

She got to her feet, closed the back of her van, and made her way to the front. As she slid into the driver's seat and connected her phone to the dashboard, it started to ring. "Hi, Mum. You okay?"

"You didn't make your lunch this morning, love. Do you have cash on you to pick something up?"

“Um, yeah. I have my bank card.” Jen pulled out of the depot and made her way towards the first delivery of the day.

“Or I could make it, and you could drop in for it if that would save you some money?”

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“I’m sure you have your own things to be doing, Mum. Don’t worry about me. I can grab something while I’m out.”

“Well, if anything changes, let me know.” Denise clanged pots and pans in the background. “You’ll be home for dinner tonight, won’t you?”

“I...think so. I’m not too sure yet. I might be seeing Suzanne.”

“Oh, lovely. Well, again, you let me know so I can sort out what we’re having.” Jen felt bad whenever she wasn’t home with her mum to eat dinner; she’d spent long enough eating dinner alone. “But please, take the opportunity if it arises. Live a little.”

Jen smiled. “I will, Mum. I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Bye, love. Safe day at work.”

The call cut out, and Jen was only left with her filthy thoughts again. Thoughts of Suzanne naked beneath her. Thoughts of Jen walking in there and claiming Suzanne, pinning her to the wall. God, she didn’t know how long they would dance around one another, but she got the impression that Suzanne was raring to go, too. Part of Jen was wary about how she was suddenly feeling; she hadn’t expected Suzanne Dixon in her life, but she was tired of always second-guessing herself lately. All she wanted was a woman who enjoyed being with her as much as Jen enjoyed being with them. It seemed to Jen that Suzanne was that woman.

As she stopped at traffic lights, the rush hour traffic ridiculously busy, a new message

popped up on her dashboard.

I think you should definitely show up. You know I'll always answer my door to you. I'll be waiting...

Jen squeezed her thighs together and groaned as she flopped back in her seat. She had a feeling Suzanne knew her way around when it came to sex, but Jen couldn't contain that feeling of being shown a thing or two. Suzanne Dixon absolutely knew what women liked. She'd already shown Jen that unknowingly.

Get your morning done in record time, and then you can afford yourself a little fun.

Suzanne stood in front of the mirror, aware that Jen could show up at any moment. She smiled as she looked back at herself through the reflective glass. Jen had brought this side of her out. The side that wanted something more. The side that wanted to answer the door and tease her way through the day. But only with Jen. No other courier and no other woman would do. Just Jen Fletcher.

She ran a hand through her hair, applying a little more lipstick before she made her way back downstairs. Suzanne wore a robe, but beneath that robe was sexy lace lingerie. She had an idea of what Jen liked—she'd kind of hinted at it last week. So here Suzanne stood, ready to get Jen's heart racing once again.

As Suzanne took the stairs, her phone started to ring on the dining table. She reached it in time, smiling as she answered it. "Hi, Jeff."

"Long time, no speak." Suzanne's brother, Jeff, lived down in London with his wife and daughter. Unless Suzanne took time off work, or Jeff did, they didn't get the chance to see one another as often as they'd like. "Elsie was wondering when she's going to see her Aunt Suzanne."

“Elsie is welcome to visit me whenever you and Josie allow it, Jeff. We’re long overdue a catch-up with one another.”

“I’ll be up north for a meeting next week. It’s half term, so she wondered if she could visit and maybe stay the night with you rather than at the hotel with Josie and I.”

“I’d love to have her over for the night.” Elsie had meant so much to Suzanne in the weeks and months after John’s death. If it hadn’t been for her niece, now ten years old, Suzanne wasn’t sure how she would have gotten through each day. “Just send me the details of when she’ll be arriving, and I’ll make sure her room is ready for her.”

“That’s great. Thanks, Suzanne.”

“I hope Josie will be visiting with you when you drop Elsie here to me.” Suzanne and Josie had always been close. They were more like good friends than sisters-in-law. “I haven’t spoken to her in a while now.”

“Josie will be with us. Don’t worry. She’s been slammed with work, so this trip is coming at the right time. She needs a break, even if we’re only away overnight.”

Suzanne’s doorbell rang, the hairs on the back of her neck standing upright at the mere thought of who was on the other side of the door. “Sorry, Jeff. Could I call you back later? Someone is at the door.”

“Of course. I’ll chat with you later. Bye, Suze.”

Suzanne rolled her lips inward as she quickly eyed the hallway mirror. Jen was waiting, and Suzanne didn’t want her to wait a second longer. She pulled the door open, overcome with arousal when Jen gazed back at her. “Hi.”

“F-fuck. You were being serious.” Jen hooked her fingers around the neck of her T-

shirt, her eyes almost wide as she took her bottom lip between her teeth. When Jen's gaze swept up Suzanne's body, Suzanne's knees trembled. It felt like a lifetime ago since someone had looked at her like that. "You...I don't even know what to say."

Suzanne lifted a brow. "Do you have much time?"

Jen sighed. "Not really. I was hoping if I could get my round finished earlier, we could maybe go on that second date if you don't have plans already?"

If Suzanne had plans, she was about to cancel them. "I'd love to have that second date with you."

"Yeah?" Jen's smile widened. "Tonight? You're sure?"

Suzanne was far more than sure. She reached out a hand, dragging Jen closer when she took it. Suzanne managed to encourage her over the threshold, her lips on Jen's before she'd even shut the door. Jen pressed her to the wall in the hallway, smiling against her mouth.

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“You could have just said yes or no,” Jen whispered against Suzanne’s lips. “Or was this the plan? Make me soaking wet for you and then kick me out the door?”

Suzanne gripped Jen’s jaw, the idea of this woman inside her too much to take. “Trust me. Kicking you out is the last thing I want to do.”

Jen’s lips trailed along Suzanne’s neck until she reached her ear. “I’m dying to touch you.”

Suzanne took the hand hanging limp at Jen’s side and brought it between her legs. She gasped, aware that she was only going to torture herself for the rest of the day, but Suzanne really needed Jen to know what she planned for tonight. Dinner, yes. Then a whole lot of sex if she had her way. “Do you think you can wait until tonight?”

Jen moaned when she pressed Suzanne’s lace underwear between her lips. “Fuck. I don’t know.”

“Then I guess this is another one of those self-control moments for you.” Suzanne couldn’t help but smirk. Jen was frustrated, and they both knew it.

“I just need the smallest taste.” Jen pushed Suzanne’s underwear to one side and stroked two fingers through her wetness. Then she brought those fingers to her lips and slid them into her mouth. “Fuck.”

Suzanne could only watch on, her entire body trembling. Jen’s touch was unbelievably gentle, but things would become far racier before too long. They both

had it in them. Without a doubt. “Jen.” Suzanne pressed her hands to Jen’s shoulders, her mouth agape when Jen repeated the movement. “O-oh, fuck.” She clenched her jaw, her nails digging into Jen’s shoulders. “Y-you have to stop that.”

“And you have to stop teasing me.” Jen placed wet kisses down Suzanne’s chest, forcing her robe open so she could access Suzanne’s hardened nipples. But then Jen suddenly stepped back and appraised Suzanne as she said, “Is this all mine tonight?”

“Do you want me to be all yours tonight?”

Jen nodded as she bit her lip. “Mm. Damn fucking right I do. If...it’s not too soon for you.”

“I’ll make sure I wear something that really gets you going.” Suzanne drew Jen in. She needed one last heated kiss before she had to let Jen go again. “Any requests?”

“All of you gets me going. Trust me.” Jen brushed the back of her hand up Suzanne’s stomach, smiling when it rippled and shuddered. “Fuck, you’re so beautiful.”

Suzanne blushed. She hadn’t expected Jen to say something so...perfect. “Thank you.”

“Can’t believe you even want to date me,” Jen said, slipping her arm around Suzanne’s waist beneath her robe. She pulled their bodies together, that look in her eyes not going unnoticed by Suzanne. Jen wanted her, and she wanted Jen. If only one of them didn’t have to work right now. “But I’m going to do everything I can to give you a night to remember.”

Oh, when Jen said things like that. Suzanne could sink to her knees and drink everything this woman had to offer. Suzanne reached out and touched Jen’s face lightly. “I can’t wait.”

“Where do you want to do dinner? Anywhere in mind that you like?”

Suzanne narrowed her eyes. She wasn't sure she would last the entirety of dinner out in public. “How about you come over here, and I'll cook. At least then, we don't have to worry about where the nearest hard surface is.”

Jen grinned. “Only if you promise to lock the door behind me and ask me to stay the night.”

Suzanne would love for Jen to stay the night. They may only have one date under their belts, but Suzanne stood by what she'd said that first night. Life was far too short to hold back. And right now, Suzanne didn't know how she was managing to do exactly that. “I promise you.”

Jen drew Suzanne in, stroking a thumb across her bottom lip before she kissed her. “I'll be here. Seven. Not a moment later.”

Chapter 7

“Jen, what the bloody hell are you doing?” Denise opened Jen's bedroom door, her brows drawn together. “I thought you were going over to Suzanne's this evening?”

“I am. I'm just getting ready.”

Denise stepped into Jen's bedroom. “Ready for what? To sit on a couch?”

“It's a second date,” Jen explained as she picked up two different shirts. Did she go for the white one or the black with the fancy cufflinks? It didn't really matter, in all honesty. It would be on Suzanne's bedroom floor eventually. “I suggested going out for dinner, but Suzanne said she would cook instead. Just want to look nice for her, you know?”

“She’s a very lucky woman.”

“No, Mum. I’m the lucky one. Wait until you meet her.” Jen’s mind wandered to all thoughts of Suzanne. She could only smile. “She’s just...we get one another. We understand grief and what it takes from us. I’ve never met anyone like her before. She’s funny, she’s sweet, she’s...” Hot as fuck, Jen wanted to add but didn’t. “She’s special. That’s all I can really say about her.”

“Special, huh?” Denise sat on the edge of Jen’s bed, a brow quirked. “Then I look forward to meeting her one day.”

Jen was also looking forward to that. It just wasn’t the right time yet. She needed many more uninterrupted hours with Suzanne before Jen even contemplated asking her to meet Denise. “It’ll happen. I know it will. I feel so good about this, Mum.”

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“I’m glad you’re doing something for yourself, Jen. It’s important that you put the past behind you.”

“You know, I haven’t really thought much about it in the last week. I guess I’ve had other things on my mind since meeting Suzanne.” Suzanne was probably the only person who had the ability to make Jen forget lately. Then again, she only had to flutter her eyelashes, and Jen was putty in her hands. “I think Ruby would have liked her.”

“You do?”

“Oh, yeah. Even if they only sat around talking about fashion, they’d have been right at home with one another.”

“Well, I know she’s looking down on you and cheering you on.”

Jen sat beside her mum and took her hand. “You think so? Because I always have it in my head that the day I also arrive up there, she’ll tell me she’s not speaking to me for being such a dick down here.”

Denise laughed from deep within her belly. “She probably would say that to you, but I know deep down she’ll be beside herself with happiness. She always did want the very best for you.”

“We were like sisters. We always said we’d been separated at birth because no one mother could handle us both.”

Denise patted Jen's cheek and smiled. "Well, I can promise you right now that only one baby came out. And it was you. And even now, you're as beautiful as you were the day I laid eyes on you for the first time."

Jen wrapped her mum up in a strong embrace, willing her tears to remain at bay. "I missed you so much when I was away."

"I know, love. I missed you, too."

"Good days are coming, Mum. I just know they are."

Denise held Jen against her, squeezing her tight. "I'm so proud of you, Jen. Even though you don't believe me, I am. I'm proud of you for facing everything you had to face and coming out of it on the other side."

"I'd hit the bottom. The only way was right back up again." Jen soothed a palm down Denise's back and sighed as she pulled away. "I'd better get ready for my hot date. I'm due there at seven."

"Let me drop you off there."

Jen lifted a brow. "You wouldn't mind?"

"Of course not. Just let me know when you're ready, and we'll head off."

Suzanne opened the front door, taken aback by the sheer beauty Jen possessed. She'd dressed up, as had Suzanne, and that honestly meant a lot. It meant Jen cared about whatever was happening here. Of course, she would have dressed up if they'd been going to a restaurant, but Suzanne had wondered if casual would have been better. Right now, she was glad she had spent the last hour or so applying makeup. She wanted Jen to know she was trying, too.

“You look...” Jen puffed out her cheeks and shook her head. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Then say nothing and get yourself inside.” Suzanne encouraged Jen through the door, closing it the moment she was over the threshold. “You look amazing, Jen.”

“Thank you.” Jen stepped closer and pulled Suzanne in. When their lips met, Suzanne gripped the front of Jen’s shirt. Quite frankly, she wasn’t sure they’d make it to dinner. It seemed far more necessary to take Jen upstairs right now. When they broke apart, Jen’s eyes practically agreed. “You smell so good.” Jen held onto Suzanne’s waist, her eyes dipping as she smiled. “And you look remarkable.”

“I wanted to make the effort.” Suzanne guided Jen into the dining area. “And I’m glad I did since you really turned up.” Suzanne looked back at Jen, her gaze sweeping up her body. “You and black shirts go very well together.”

“I will admit that it took me a few hours to decide what to wear.” Jen lifted a shoulder, clearly not caring about too much honesty. But Suzanne loved that. It meant Jen felt comfortable with her. “My mum thought we were being burgled.”

“Oh, you’re one of those people? Empties the entire wardrobe until you’re satisfied?”

Jen held up her hands and laughed. “Guilty.”

“Me too. I’m terrible for it.” Suzanne moved through into the kitchen and took a 0% beer from the fridge. She handed it to Jen, then lifted the 0% gin and tonic she’d poured just before Jen had arrived. “Cheers to a second date.”

Jen checked the label before she clinked her beer bottle to Suzanne’s glass. “Cheers to you being so thoughtful.”

“Thoughtful?”

“Yeah. The beer. Most people wouldn’t bother to accommodate someone who didn’t drink alcohol.” Jen rested back against the edge of the dining table, holding out a hand to Suzanne. “But you? I think I’m beginning to understand that you’re kinda perfect.”

“Me? Oh, I’m not perfect. I never will be. But I do want you to feel comfortable here. I want you to enjoy the time we spend together. A few bottles of alcohol-free beer just seemed logical to me.” Suzanne came to stand between Jen’s legs. “And I’m drinking alcohol-free gin. It’s actually pretty good.”

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“Suzanne, you don’t have to do that.” Suzanne knew Jen wouldn’t scold her for enjoying alcohol, but that was the thing. She didn’t enjoy alcohol, not really. While she was getting to know Jen, Suzanne wanted to be entirely coherent. “But I appreciate you. So much.”

Suzanne lowered her gin glass to the table and pressed her palms to the wood on either side of Jen’s body. She smiled into a kiss, knowing full well what Jen’s lips did to her body. Over the last week, Suzanne couldn’t recall a single time she’d felt so sure about something. Or so aroused. This woman had the ability to change Suzanne’s life, and she hoped Jen thought the very same thing in return. “I just want to know you, Jen. A week ago, when I found the courage to ask you out for a drink, I didn’t expect anything to come of it, but I’m finding that I want to spend more time with you whenever I can.”

“Yeah?” Jen lay her hands on Suzanne’s waist. Suzanne knew the dress she wore was beautiful, but she would prefer to be out of it before this night was over. “You really mean that?”

“Does it seem to you that I wouldn’t mean it?” Suzanne was surprised by Jen’s shock. Hadn’t it been obvious so far that something was absolutely happening here between them? “Do I have to do more to show you I’m genuinely interested in you?”

“N-no. Not at all.” Jen smiled as she stroked her thumb against the material of Suzanne’s dress. It only had every nerve ending firing up, her body requiring something more. “The last thing I expected was this. You. But I have no plans to do anything other than date you and hopefully return the feeling that you make me feel.”

“And what feeling is that?”

“Well, there’s several, but mostly that feeling that someone actually wants you.” Jen dipped her head as she said that, unable to look Suzanne in the eye. “Because that’s what it’s like whenever I’m with you, and it’s been so long since I’ve felt wanted by anyone.”

Suzanne brought a hand to Jen’s jaw and looked her dead in the eye. “Oh, I want you. Make no mistake about that.”

“I know. I do feel it. It’s pretty intense, to be honest.”

Suzanne narrowed her eyes. “Intense good or intense bad?”

“Good. Always good.” Jen slid her hand to Suzanne’s arse as she pushed off the edge of the dining table. “But if you think this is moving too fast at any point, you tell me, and we can slow down. Just...not yet. Not tonight. Whatever you’re cooking smells fucking amazing.”

“It’s a good job you said that. I’ve been panicking for the last couple of hours that you wouldn’t like what I was serving up tonight.”

“Can you tell me, or is it a surprise?”

Suzanne stole a quick kiss and then backed away. “I can tell you. Your surprise comes later.”

“My surprise?” Jen lifted a brow, that went only intensifying as she stared back at Suzanne. “What surprise?”

“Well, it wouldn’t be a surprise if I told you.” Suzanne moved back into the kitchen

and checked on dinner. “As for what we’re having...it’s prosciutto-wrapped chicken with glazed vegetables. Dauphinoise potatoes, too.”

Jen puffed out her cheeks. “Landed on my feet here, haven’t I?”

Suzanne draped herself against the arch separating the kitchen from the dining area. “I was thinking the very same thing.”

Jen took a step closer and reached for Suzanne’s hand. When she brought it to her lips and kissed her skin, Suzanne’s stomach fluttered. “I feel incredibly lucky to be here with you. Thank you.”

Jen sat back in her seat, her eyes rarely leaving Suzanne’s for the entirety of dinner. There was just something about being here, sitting across from this woman, that had Jen feeling as though life really was picking up. She knew she had to take the leap and make that happen herself, but she truly hadn’t expected Suzanne. Not even a similar version of Suzanne.

“Tell me something about yourself,” Suzanne said, sipping the small glass of wine she’d poured with dinner. “Family life. That sort of thing.”

Oh, this was serious. Suzanne genuinely didn’t just want to fuck Jen. While Jen would be happy with the intimacy, she also felt better knowing Suzanne was taking an interest in her life. Well, the parts Jen chose to discuss, anyway. “It’s just me, my mum, and my sister. We lost Dad ten years ago. My sister, Grace, had a little boy recently. Toby is a few months old now.”

“Ah. Baby nephews. Adorable.”

Jen wished she could say more about Toby. About his little quirks. But she couldn’t because she barely knew anything about him. “He is adorable.”

“I have a niece. She’s ten now. Elsie. Named after our mother.”

“That’s a really sweet name,” Jen said, enjoying these moments. When she was dating, she wanted to know everything there was to know about the woman in her life. “Do you see her often?”

“I used to see her practically every day when they lived closer, but they moved down south for Jeff’s job, so it’s not quite the same anymore. She is visiting next week, though.”

“Oh, that’ll be nice. Will she be here for long? If I’ve got my dates right, it’s half term, isn’t it?”

Suzanne nodded. “It is. She’ll be here for one night, and then they have to get back. Jeff has a business meeting.”

“What does he do? If you don’t mind me asking.” Jen didn’t suspect Suzanne had anything to hide at all. Family included.

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“He’s an architect, too,” Suzanne said. “He keeps asking if he can take this place off my hands because he wants to revamp it, but I love it here. I couldn’t imagine being anywhere else.”

“Yeah. I can see why. It really is a gorgeous home. But I think it’s the owner that makes it what it is.”

Suzanne’s cheeks reddened a little as she dipped her head. “It’s nice to share my evenings here with someone again. I don’t believe I could have picked anyone better.”

Jen chose not to comment on that. She was almost certain Suzanne wouldn’t feel that way when she learnt about some other aspects of Jen’s life. “You’ll have to take me for a spin in your Range Rover. It looks like it’s never been driven.”

Suzanne barked a laugh. “Oh, it’s been driven plenty. I just don’t really have anywhere to go in it these days. But yes, I’d love to take you out in it. Maybe that could be our next date? Out of the city for the day.”

“Sounds perfect.” Jen slid her hand across the table, feeling so content that she was quickly forgetting life prior to Suzanne. “I wish I could swap my workdays, but at the moment, I can’t. I’m still on the probation period, so I don’t want to do anything to piss them off, you know?”

“You have the weekends off, right?”

“Kind of. I usually have Friday off and work half a day on Saturdays. But Sundays

are my own every week. I'm also not willing to give that up if they need a change on the shift."

"How about this Sunday?" Suzanne looked up with excitement in her dark eyes. "If you don't have any plans?"

"It's a date." Jen's heart rate picked up a little, knowing she would see Suzanne again sooner than she thought she would. "Maybe lunch somewhere? It's on me, of course."

"I know some lovely places we can drive out to. I'll make a list and decide which is the best option."

"Then I will leave that up to you." Jen pushed her seat back and got to her feet. "I'll take care of the dishes. You head into the living room and finish your wine. Relax."

"Jen," Suzanne said, placing a hand on her wrist. "You don't have to do that. You're a guest."

"You're right, I am. But I also like to pull my weight. You've cooked an amazing dinner, so the least I can do is clear up." Jen didn't know what the issue was. The kitchen was already pristine. You'd never know Suzanne had cooked a meal in it. All Jen had to do was load the dishwasher with their plates and cutlery, and then she could spend what was left of this night in front of the fire with Suzanne. "Go on. It'll only take me five minutes."

Suzanne eventually agreed, giving Jen the perfect opportunity to check out her arse as she walked away and into the living room. God, she was stunning, but it was her personality and her outlook on life that Jen was most attracted to.

Jen quickly cleared the table and got busy in the kitchen. She wanted to be with

Suzanne, not out here, where she could think about things she didn't need to think about. Jen had been trying so hard to push the memories of the past away, but when she realised how incredibly lucky she was to be on a second date with Suzanne, it was hard to quiet those voices that told her she wasn't good enough.

She knew she was. Jen had always been good enough for the women she dated. But her brain had a great way of telling her the opposite since she was released from prison.

“Jen?”

Jen popped her head around the wall. “Yeah?”

“I thought you'd got lost. Are you almost done?”

Jen grinned. “Yeah, gorgeous. I'm almost done.”

Slotting the last of the plates into the dishwasher, Jen took a tablet from the clear jar on the countertop and turned it on. She would help herself to another alcohol-free beer, and then she would settle down with Suzanne until she kicked her out the door. Though she hoped Suzanne had remembered her offer earlier. Staying the night was heavily on Jen's mind right now.

Just enjoy this. It's everything you've ever wanted.

Chapter 8

Suzanne mindlessly toyed with Jen's fingers where they rested on her thigh. Silence may have surrounded them, but Suzanne felt entirely content this evening. She never had needed much in life to feel appreciative, but Jen continued to surprise her with how at ease they seemed to feel around one another. That only proved to Suzanne that

her choice to ask Jen out had been the right one. Though, she didn't need any sort of confirmation. She had known the moment she laid eyes on Jen that she wanted to explore her feelings.

And now, as they sat here, Suzanne only wanted to know more. To learn more. Maybe in time...be more. While she knew what she wanted to come of this newfound budding...relationship? Suzanne also knew that exploring one another for the time being, while not labelling this, was a sensible approach. They both had baggage; it was wise to understand what was happening here before Suzanne even dared to bring a discussion about commitment to the table. Besides, what was the harm in some fun?

“So, tonight has been even more amazing than that first date,” Jen said as she turned her head and looked in Suzanne's direction. But all Suzanne saw were Jen's delicious lips moving. She wanted to taste them again. She wanted that mouth to familiarise itself with different areas of Suzanne's body. Fuck, she wanted Jen to stop talking. “And I know the mention of staying over was something we brought up earlier, but I kinda don't want to assume?—”

Suzanne leaned in and kissed Jen, cutting her off from wherever this conversation was about to go. She wanted Jen in her bed tonight. Without a doubt. She drew back breathlessly, gazing into Jen's eyes. “Stay over. Please.”

A smirk spread on Jen's mouth, the hand on Suzanne's thigh moving a little higher. Jen was a tease—Suzanne was beginning to realise that—but this night was certainly heading in the right direction. “Are you sure?”

“Do I look unsure?” Suzanne asked, brow quirked. If this wasn't all self-explanatory enough, then Suzanne had to try harder. Or maybe she just needed to take the lead here. After all, the look in Jen's eyes told her exactly how her date was feeling. Jen was absolutely hot under the collar in this moment.

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“N-no. I just...you’re not fucking with me here, right?” Jen sighed and shook her head. “You genuinely are interested in me?”

Yeah, Suzanne would need to take control of this situation.

She palmed a hand up Jen’s denim-clad thigh, not stopping until she reached the button on her jeans. “What do you think?” She popped the button, then lowered herself to the floor and rested on her knees between Jen’s legs. “Because as far as I was concerned, it was pretty obvious how I feel about you, Jen.”

Jen stared down at Suzanne, her bottom lip between her teeth. She lifted her hips when Suzanne curled her fingers around the waistband of her jeans, allowing the material to be removed. The moment Suzanne was met with the smooth skin of Jen’s thighs, it took everything within her not to moan. Could she savour every sensation tonight, or would there be so many more of these moments that Suzanne could just let go and enjoy whatever came next? God, she wanted to believe that Jen would want to see more of her, but the uncertainty Suzanne had lived with since John had died was threatening to put a spanner in the works. Not in this moment—one way or another...Suzanne would have this woman naked tonight—but would she still be here in the morning when Suzanne woke up?

You won’t know until tomorrow arrives.

Choosing to get out of her head for the rest of the night, Suzanne threw Jen’s jeans to the floor and inched her way back towards her underwear. “May I?”

With a huge smile plastered on her mouth, Jen nodded. “Fuck, yeah. I wish you

would.” Once Jen’s underwear had joined her jeans on the floor, Jen sat forward, brought her lips to Suzanne’s, and started to unbutton the shirt she wore. The very shirt Suzanne had been dying to get off Jen since she walked through the door. As Jen pulled back, she smoothed her thumb against Suzanne’s cheek. “Whenever I kiss you, my heart starts racing.”

“Mine is racing for a number of reasons right now.” Suzanne gently pushed on Jen’s shoulder, delighting in the image before her. Jen rested back on the couch, shirt hanging open, almost shaking with anticipation. Suzanne drew her fingers up Jen’s stomach, teasing them over Jen’s bra, and then she lowered her head and kissed her way up Jen’s thigh. “God, I’ve been thinking about this moment all day.”

Jen arched her back, the sound of her breath catching only turning Suzanne on further. Was she wet for this woman? Suzanne was certain she had been since Jen left earlier today. The very brief encounter they’d had out in the hallway simply hadn’t been enough. Honestly, Suzanne wasn’t sure she would ever get enough.

Just the feel of Jen beneath her fingertips reminded her of everything she adored about women. That soft skin, the light moans, the taste she knew would tilt her world on its axis in mere moments. As Suzanne looked up at Jen with hooded eyes, the flames from the open fire danced in Jen’s. Had she always been so strikingly gorgeous?

Oh, you know she has. It’s the very reason you’re on your knees right now.

Suzanne lowered her hands to Jen’s legs and spread them. If she could just taste her, delight in Jen’s fingers tangled in her hair, Suzanne would be far more than content. She wrapped her hands around Jen’s thighs and pulled her towards the edge of the couch. When her legs spread further, Suzanne salivated. “Fuck, you’re so beautiful.” Suzanne pressed her thumb between Jen’s lips, applying light pressure to her clit.

“S-shit.” Jen tried to fist her hands in the leather couch, moaning as she jerked her hips. “Yes. Fuck, that feels so good.”

Suzanne smiled as she looked up at Jen. “Imagine the fun I’m having.”

Jen shot forward and took Suzanne’s chin in her hand. “I need you naked, Suzanne. Right now.”

Suzanne sat back on her knees, brought her hands to the hem of her dress, and lifted it from her body. She tried to gauge the reaction to her sexy lingerie, but before she’d had time to think, Jen was also on her knees and guiding Suzanne back towards the fire.

“My God. I don’t think I’ve seen a woman more beautiful than you.” She urged Suzanne down on her back, then sat back on her knees as she admired her. The look in Jen’s eyes gave her away. The spark between them was absolutely there. Neither of them could deny it. Jen crawled between Suzanne’s legs, lowered her head, and slowly traced the tip of her tongue up Suzanne’s stomach. When she reached Suzanne’s neck, she whispered, “You don’t know how much I’m looking forward to exploring every last inch of your skin.”

Suzanne’s heart fluttered at those words, but she chose to concentrate on the throb between her legs. The further Jen moved up Suzanne’s body, the harder she pressed against Suzanne’s pussy. “Oh, God.” Suzanne found herself purposely shifting against Jen, needing that friction. “Jen, please...”

Jen drew back, this time taking Suzanne’s underwear with her. She brushed the back of her hand against Suzanne’s soaked lips, and then she gathered her wetness on the tips of her fingers, easing inside Suzanne suddenly.

Suzanne forced herself against Jen’s fingers, moaning into her mouth when Jen

braced herself over Suzanne. “Oh, Jen—” Jen pushed deeper, silencing Suzanne immediately. The burn low in her stomach was intensifying, and as the heel of Jen’s hand pressed against her clit, it took everything within Suzanne not to come. “Y-yes. Oh, fuck.”

Suzanne reached out, slowly teasing between Jen’s thighs, that want in the air palpable. Jen...was soaking. She brought her hand higher, probing through Jen’s wetness, and plunged inside her. The arm holding Jen up started to shake, but she didn’t falter. “Suzanne, fuck.” Jen touched her forehead to Suzanne’s, staring deep into her eyes. “You feel so fucking good inside me.” Suzanne felt Jen tighten, her own walls throbbing around Jen’s fingers, but neither of them wanted to let go. In this moment, Suzanne wanted to get lost in everything Jen was. She suspected that would only grow with each passing day. “Shit, I’m close.”

Jen’s admission had Suzanne teetering on the edge, the sound of each movement they made floating through the quietness of Suzanne’s living room. The crackle of the fire reminded her of where they were, but as Jen pressed the heel of her hand harder to Suzanne’s clit, she lost all sense of, well...everything. All she felt was Jen, their breath mingled together as they both surged towards the peak. “Yes, just like that.” Suzanne matched every move Jen made, and as they both picked up their pace, fucking each another harder and faster, they released around one another’s fingers. “O-oh!”

Jen’s arm gave out, but Suzanne didn’t care. It meant she now had that strong, supple body pinning her to the floor. Quite frankly, Suzanne would be more than happy to remain in this position for the rest of her life.

“Suzanne,” Jen said, panting as she dropped a kiss on her neck. “Fucking hell.”

“Don’t get too comfortable there. It’s time to show me what else you’re capable of upstairs.”

Jen lifted her head, that sexy smile wide on her lips. “Oh, it would be my pleasure.”

Jen woke to Suzanne stroking her fingers against the side of her head. She wanted to turn around and make eye contact with her, but she couldn't. Everything was too snugly and comfortable to move from this position. Suzanne's naked body pressed against Jen's back, her gentle fingertips almost lulling her back to sleep, so no...she couldn't possibly turn around just yet.

“That feels amazing.”

Suzanne pressed her lips to Jen's bare shoulder and smiled against her skin. “Good morning. It's nice of you to finally join me.”

Jen could only smile while trying not to moan. It seemed whenever she did so, Suzanne took matters into her own hands. Just like last night. God, it had been mind-blowing. Partly because Jen hadn't been touched by another woman since long before her prison sentence, but mostly just because it was Suzanne doing that touching. “You wore me out. I'm blaming you.”

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“And I will happily take that blame.” Suzanne rested her chin on Jen’s shoulder and sighed. “Do I have to let you go yet?”

Jen eyed the alarm clock, double-checking that it was Friday. Thankfully, she wasn’t dreaming. “No. I have nowhere to be today.”

Suzanne wrapped an arm around Jen’s waist and shifted closer. Jen didn’t know how she managed to do that; it felt as though they lay in this bed as one person. “Perfect. That means I can cook us breakfast, and neither of us has to rush around.”

“Don’t you have to work?” Jen did turn around this time. She wanted Suzanne’s mysterious dark eyes to greet her. When their gazes locked, Jen felt a blush work its way up her neck. “Or do I have the pleasure of just taking this day as it comes with you?”

“No work. I hadn’t planned to once I knew we were having dinner together last night.”

“Ah. So, what you’re saying is that you hoped I’d wake up here this morning?” Jen smirked as she brushed her knuckles against Suzanne’s cheek. “Which, by the way, feels really good.”

“Maybe I did.” Suzanne propped her head up in her hand, stroking her fingers along Jen’s collarbone. “Thank you for not disappointing me by leaving last night.”

“Yeah, I’m not that kind of woman. Unless someone asks me to leave, I’m always going to be here the next morning.” Jen would never leave a woman thinking she had

been a one-night stand. It just didn't feel right to her. "So, thank you for not asking me to leave."

"I don't think I was capable of much once the night was over." Suzanne grinned, but Jen completely understood. She ached, but God, it felt good. "How are you feeling this morning? No regrets, I hope..."

Jen stared deep into Suzanne's eyes. "I could never regret spending the night with you. Right now, I only hope there are many more nights in the future."

"I'd like that."

"Yeah? No regrets from you either?" Jen had wondered very briefly, but last night had ended so perfectly that Jen would have found it hard to believe if Suzanne said she didn't want to see her again. "You're not already going through different excuses as to why you can't see me anymore?"

"There would have to be one hell of a reason to never want to see you again, Jen."

Jen kept her facial expression neutral, but inside, she was crumbling a little bit. Should she come right out with the whole prison thing right now? Selfishly, she couldn't bring herself to do it. This morning was just continued happiness from last night, and it was absolutely all that Jen needed right now. Perhaps if she had the happiness of a relationship, things like a new career would come next. Something meaningful and something Jen could be proud of. Something more than the bare minimum she'd had lately.

"Did I say something I shouldn't have?" Suzanne asked, a slight frown present.

"God, no. I was just thinking about how much I want to see you again. And again. And again." While Jen may have been lying about that in this particular moment,

shedidoften think about exactly that. The next time she would see Suzanne. The next time she would kiss her. The next opportunity she would have to admire this woman. Fuck, it was all she wanted to do. “Last night was great. All of it.”

“Then we should do it again sometime.” Suzanne rolled away from Jen, her naked body on display as she rose to her feet. Jen could only watch on, her bottom lip between her teeth to keep her from moaning her approval of her view this morning. Suzanne’s curves would never not satisfy Jen. “If you’d like to?”

“Oh, I’d like to.” Jen turned on her side and propped her head in her hand, taking in every last inch of skin. “Is tonight too soon?”

Suzanne turned as she slid her arms into her robe and smiled. “Not for me. But you have to work in the morning, don’t you?”

Jen lifted a shoulder, aware that the sheet around her had fallen away and Suzanne was now the one staring. “I can just be tired tomorrow. That’s no problem for me.”

“And...tonight wouldn’t cancel out our plans for Sunday?” Suzanne asked, brow quirked. “Because I have my heart set on Sunday now.”

Jen almost laughed out loud. Suzanne wanted to see her so often? Jen was one lucky bastard. “If I’m here tonight, it doesn’t change anything for Sunday.”

“Then, yes. I’d like to see you tonight, too.” Suzanne leaned over the bed and kissed Jen softly. “Give me ten minutes to sort breakfast out, and then I’m all yours again.”

Fuck. Me. Jen’s eyes closed when Suzanne drew back. “Okay.”

Chapter 9

Jen smoothed her hands over the leather dashboard of Suzanne's car, whistling as she nodded her head. She knew the interior would be just as pristine as the exterior, but the white leather with tan stitching was truly something to be admired. Jen had always been a fan of cars, but this was on another level. Throw in the panoramic sunroof, and Jen felt as though she was dripping in wealth, along with the residents on Suzanne's street. "Impressive. Very impressive."

"It's just a car," Suzanne said, smiling as she exited the motorway.

Jen knew it was just a car. Still, it was a very fancy and very expensive car. The kind she wasn't used to being invited inside.

"A car that looks so much better with you sitting in the passenger seat."

Jen side-eyed Suzanne, smirking as she studied her profile. "You throw me off when you say things like that to me."

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” Jen lifted a shoulder. “It’s just not something I’m used to. Compliments, you know?”

“I understand.” Suzanne regarded Jen with a smile as they reached a red light. “Before I met John, it wasn’t often I came across it either.”

Jen turned in her seat a little, wanting to know everything she possibly could about Suzanne. While it was possible, she wanted to remain intrigued by Suzanne Dixon. It was hard not to be, given how they’d met. “How did you meet him?”

“Honestly?” Suzanne lifted a brow, then laughed. “At the fresh meat counter at a local supermarket. Only once we went on a date did I realise he knew my brother, Jeff. They’d worked together on a few projects over the years.”

Jen smiled. “Sometimes those are the life-changing moments, and we don’t realise it until many years later.”

“I was picking up a piece of fillet steak. John was the next in line. He made a joke about how he wished someone would show him how to cook a good steak correctly.” Jen caught Suzanne’s faraway look, but she understood. It also wasn’t an issue for Jen when Suzanne reminisced. He’d been her husband; of course she was entitled to these moments. “I tried to explain it to him, and he came right out with it and asked if I’d cook with him.”

“That’s kinda sweet, actually.”

“I thought so, too.” Suzanne’s shoulders relaxed as she continued their drive towards the coast. “I wasn’t even looking when I met John. I’d only been out of my previous relationship for a few months, so meeting someone was the last thing on my mind.”

“That says a lot about John if he caught you at a moment in your life when you weren’t thinking about a relationship.”

“You’re right.”

Jen gazed out of the window, sighing inwardly. “I think the same kind of thing happened with us. And I know there isn’t really an ‘us’ yet—I don’t think—but I certainly wasn’t looking when you asked me out for that drink.” Jen reached a hand over the console and squeezed Suzanne’s thigh.

Suzanne looked at Jen briefly. “I always wonder if I’d been too forward that day. Sometimes I still can’t believe I asked you.”

“I’m glad you did. I wouldn’t have had the balls to ask you out for a drink.”

“Oh, I don’t know. You don’t strike me as the quiet or shy type, Jen.”

Jen wasn’t. At least, she never used to be. But from the moment she had come home, Jen had decided she would keep her head down and focus on just living. She didn’t want any attention on her because it inevitably turned into bad attention at some point. Just existing in this world had been Jen’s focus. “I never used to be, but with everything that’s happened over the last few years, I just want to live a content life. That may sound boring, and I really hope it doesn’t turn you off me, but it’s true.”

“It doesn’t turn me off you at all. I think calm and content is where I’m also headed. We only have one life, Jen. How you choose to live it is entirely your own decision.” Suzanne cleared her throat. “That’s not to say I never want to have fun anymore, but I

don't know...losing John just made me realise that life is incredibly special, and nobody has the right to dictate how anyone lives theirs. If a quiet, gentle existence is what you want, then that's okay. Everyone is so used to acting on impulse or forcing themselves through a situation they'd rather not be in. If you can learn to say no, as I have when something doesn't suit me, then your life will be far better for it."

Jen couldn't agree more. "I'm guessing there was a lot of excitement in your marriage, and now you want to slow down?"

"John was always making plans and telling me about them at the last minute. If that was dinner, then okay, but when he chose to come home from work and tell me we were flying out of the country the following morning...it wasn't ideal."

"I feel like we're kinda on the same path," Jen said as she looked out of the window again. "I'm not sure what mine is right now, but our wavelength is definitely similar. At least, that's how it feels to me."

Suzanne took Jen's hand. "I feel the same way. I'm not looking for some huge adventure, but I am looking for someone who makes me feel as though there is a second chance at love."

Could Jen be that for Suzanne? God, she hoped so. "There's always a second chance. Not only at love but most things in life." Jen was speaking purely from experience when she said that. Perhaps her love life would never come to be anything meaningful ever again, but she'd already been given a second chance to make her life something more than it had been since Ruby died. Jen would love to imagine a world where she and Suzanne took this further, but she had to prepare herself for the likelihood of that happening. Those odds were very low, and to consider anything else would be a mistake. "We've only known one another for a few weeks, but I think you're great. You're...I don't know. Probably one of the most positive people I've met in a long time," Jen said. "And gorgeous. Ridiculously gorgeous."

Suzanne pulled up in a parking space close to the beach and turned in her seat. “Please believe me when I tell you that I’mveryhappy I met you.”

Jen could only smile and appreciate Suzanne’s honesty. “Me too.”

“Now, let’s go for that beach walk. There’s a lovely little restaurant at the end of the prom. I’d like to take you for lunch.”

“I’ll...take you for lunch. You drove here.” If these were the moments Jen could have with Suzanne when she wasn’t working, then Jen was going to do everything she could to enjoy their time together. “Come on. Let’s get some fresh air.”

With her handsecurely in Jen’s, Suzanne stared out at the water, strolling so peacefully along the sand. Jen had stopped at a nearby refreshment van along the prom and picked up coffee for them, the restaurant Suzanne had spoken about almost visible in the distance. This stretch of beach was the quieter area along the coast, but there could have been hundreds of people milling around them, and Suzanne likely wouldn’t have noticed. She often found herself in her own head when she was alone with Jen.

Thankfully, for the first time in several years, being in her head wasn’t so daunting. In the months leading on from John’s death, Suzanne had spent so long wondering where her life was going, but now that Jen was planting herself firmly in it, Suzanne was just taking each day as it came. She didn’t worry about what may or may not happen; Jen was very good at putting her at ease.

“I haven’t been to the beach since Ruby died,” Jen spoke quietly, her hand tightening around Suzanne’s. “We spent a lot of time here together growing up, and then when one of us was having a crisis as we sailed into our twenties, we would always find ourselves here.”

Ah. Suzanne probably should have checked with Jen that she was happy to come to the beach today. She hadn't realised it could be a moment she didn't want to relive. "I'm sorry. I should have asked."

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“Why would you even think to ask?” Jen smiled as she eyed Suzanne. “And don’t apologise. It’s nice to be back here.”

“We can go somewhere else if you’d rather do that.” Suzanne stopped them on the sand and turned to Jen. “I don’t want to upset you, Jen.”

“You know what, I actually feel pretty relaxed here.” Jen leaned in and kissed Suzanne. “I’m turning it into a different experience. It doesn’t have to be sad forever, right?”

Oh, Jen. Suzanne brought a hand to Jen’s cheek and cupped it. “You’re right.”

Jen angled her head towards a bench close to the steps leading away from the sand. “Sit with me for a few?”

“I’d love to.” Suzanne guided Jen across the sand and took the steep steps slowly. Once they were situated next to one another, subconsciously shifting closer, Suzanne turned to Jen. “I admire your strength, by the way.”

“My strength?” Jen asked, her brows lifted. “Oh, I’m not strong at all. Trust me. This—what you see now—took a lot of work. A lot.”

“I don’t doubt that, but you did work on it and look at the outcome.” Suzanne could only comment on what she knew about Jen so far. She liked everything she saw, in all honesty. “You don’t shy away from anything. You’re an open book, and that’s one of the most important qualities in anyone to me.”

Jen smiled weakly as she cast her gaze on her lap. “I just want you to see me for who I am, that’s all. Ruby always told me how important it was to be myself, and it’s something I try to live by each day. And if that makes all of this a failure down the line, then so be it. I just...can’t be anything other than myself.”

“A failure?” Suzanne’s brows drew together.

“I’m well aware that to the outside world, you and I couldn’t be any more different. Class, intelligence, personality. We’re not compatible on paper, I’d guess.” Suzanne opened her mouth to respond, but Jen held up a hand. “But inside, it feels like we’re compatible. I don’t know how that happened or why we met when we did, but I need to see where this goes. You’re the first person in a very long time to give me the time of day, Suzanne. I have to pursue this, even if I know where it ultimately leads.”

“I don’t see it leading anywhere negative, Jen. I’ve adored spending my time with you lately, and I meant it when I said I want to see more of you. Like you, I also need to see where this goes.”

“Perfect.” Jen stole a kiss before she looked out at the receding tide. “All of you is perfect so far.”

Suzanne chuckled, wishing she could be considered perfect. “Tell me more about your friendship with Ruby.”

“God, I wouldn’t even know where to begin.” The smile Jen wore made Suzanne’s heart sing. It wasn’t often that she beamed from ear to ear, but when it did happen, it stole Suzanne’s breath. “We were those friends who were so close that if one was told off by their mum, the other was, too.”

Suzanne laughed. “Yes, I know what you mean.”

“But as for Ruby, she was just such a good friend. I could call her any time, and she would pick up. She would drive over if either of us needed to talk, and she wouldn’t leave until we’d figured things out together. Considering she was into fashion and was really girly, the total opposite of me, we were like sisters. Actually, I was closer to Ruby than I was with my actual sister.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever really had a friendship like that. I’m very close with my own best friend, but at times...things can seem one-sided. Still, we’re older now. Life is life, and we see one another when we’re able to.”

“Friendship is an odd thing, isn’t it? Sometimes, we don’t see friends for a while, but we still know they’d be there for us at the drop of a hat. At least, that’s what my friendship was like with Ruby.”

“I’m glad you experienced that unconditional love with a friend. We all deserve to have a ride or die in life.”

Jen stared out at the water, a tear gathering at her jawline. “She was going to be famous. I alwaystold her that. She was exceptional when it came to fashion design, and I just know she would have gone on to conquer some pretty big things.”

Suzanne felt the sadness in the air as Jen spoke about Ruby. While it was heartbreaking, it was also incredibly heartwarming to hear of such a special friendship. These days, those types of friendships were rare.

“She used to tell me that when we were billionaires, we would buy one another a yacht for Christmas and sail around the world together. We’d meet up on, say...the French Riviera and have lunch on one of our yachts.” Jen quickly brushed another tear from her cheek. “That we would interview the best chefs from around the world and decide on which one we would like to be our personal chef on board.”

“It sounds to me like you both had it all figured out.”

“Oh, we did. Most days, Ruby would tell me what our itinerary was. She had it all organised for weekends or whenever we were both off work at the same time. She just...” Jen puffed out her cheeks. “Life isn’t the same without her here. That’s all I can really say.”

Suzanne followed Jen’s line of sight as she turned and looked out at the water, too. She wrapped an arm around her shoulder and sighed. “Grief is something I don’t believe ever goes away. We adjust...of course we do. But someone who meant so much to you cannot just be erased from existence. Even if they’re not here, they’re in our memories.”

“I have so many of them with Ruby. I think that’s what kept me going most days. Even though I initially thought it was making things worse. Something would remind me of her, and I’d just continue on that downward spiral because it only made me miss her more, you know?”

“Mm. I do know. I went through the very same stage when John passed away.”

“Did you cope better than me?” Jen asked, then scoffed and shook her head. “Most of my days were a blur.”

“Most of mine were, too. And no, I didn’t cope very well at all. Some days, it seemed easier to stay in bed and ignore anyone who knocked on the door. Other days, I wanted to just sit and drink wine in the dark. I don’t know at what point I snapped out of it, but I’m glad I did. Feeling so alone even though you have a lot of people around for you is not something I ever wish to feel again.”

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“Yeah, I get that. That was the weirdest feeling. But I just wanted to be angry at the world. I wanted to wallow and refuse to shower. I wanted to hate everyone else for being alive when she wasn’t.”

“That’s why it was important for me to fix myself before I even thought about dating again. I couldn’t put how I felt on anyone else. That would have been unfair and, quite frankly, stupid.”

Jen nodded and smiled. “You’re exactly right.”

“But I believe that we met when we were supposed to. It’s hard for me to come to any other conclusion when everything feels so great for me right now.” Suzanne reached out a hand and stroked her knuckles against Jen’s cheek. “And maybe you don’t feel quite the same, maybe life is still heavy on the sadness, but I hope things improve for you when they’re meant to, Jen. You have a heart of gold, and I’m truly grateful to have you in my life.”

“I’m going to be honest with you.” Jen sat up straight and cleared her throat. “Until the day you asked me out for that drink, I was wondering what the point of my life was anymore. I was existing and working, then coming home to sleep to do it all over again the following day. Meeting you has given me a reason to be hopeful. You’re the only reason I smile lately. I can never thank you enough for pulling me out of that headspace.”

“I’m sorry you’ve felt that way.” Suzanne wrapped Jen up in a strong embrace, holding her own emotions at bay. She hated knowing Jen was unsure of her future because of her grief. “But while we’re being brutally honest, you’ve given me the

very same thing. A lot of my happiness is because of you lately, Jen.”

Jen drew back. “Really?”

“Really. I’m very good at putting on a front. It seems easier than sitting down and boring my friends with how I’m feeling.”

Jen frowned. “I hope you never feel as though you have to do that with me, Suzanne.”

Suzanne held her tongue. She didn’t consider Jen a friend. Oh, no. She was so much more than that. “And I hope that one day you won’t see yourself as one of my friends, but rather...something more.” Suzanne chanced a kiss, smiling against Jen’s lips when Jen fisted her hand in Suzanne’s jacket and held her in place.

“I’m really hoping for that, too.” Jen touched her forehead to Suzanne’s and smiled. “How about that lunch we mentioned earlier? All I want to do right now is sit across a table from you and look at your beautiful face.”

The reaction Suzanne’s body had to that was probably something she should worry about, but it was hard to worry about anything when Jen was sitting next to her and saying everything she’d wanted to hear lately. “That sounds like something I could never refuse.”

Chapter 10

“I can’t believe you actually managed to get the whole week off. The last time that happened was...well, never. Not that I can recall, anyway.” Suzanne lowered two cups of coffee to the table outside on her patio. Tracy had shown up unannounced, but they were forever guilty of doing that to one another so Suzanne wouldn’t complain. “Do you think it’ll last, or are you likely to be called in at some point?”

“I’ve told the boss I’m going on holiday. That way, nobody will call me to cover a shift.” Tracy winked as she took her coffee in her hands and smiled against the rim of the cup. “You’ve been quiet lately. Is everything okay?”

Suzanne looked out at her expansive, pristine garden and smiled. “Everything is perfect. For the first time in a long time, everything is just...coming together.”

Tracy narrowed her eyes over the top of her cup. “And this is all because of the courier woman you’re dating?”

“Yes. Jen. She’s...great.” Suzanne sat back against the rattan furniture and sighed. “I think because she came into my life so unexpectedly, I’m in a little bit of shock about it all.” Suzanne wouldn’t dream of showing that side of her to Jen, but she could admit it to her best friend. “She’s good for me. It all feels right, you know?”

Tracy leaned forward and squeezed Suzanne’s knee. “I’m happy for you, love. It’s about time you got back out there and lived your life. You know John would only want the best for you.”

John. Suzanne could only smile whenever she was reminded of her late husband. They’d created a beautiful home together and so many incredible memories, but this was a new life now. It was a fresh start. A second chance. “I know. And Jen knows about him, too. She’s been really great about it all whenever we discuss it.”

“Good. I’m happy to hear that. We don’t need another Rosie situation.”

Suzanne’s brows rose as she fell silent. Last year, their good friend Rosie had started dating again after losing her fiancé in a work accident. She’d met what they all thought was a wonderful guy, only to later find out that he would criticise her and question what he meant to her whenever Rosie mentioned her late fiancé in a conversation. Thank God Rosie wasn’t dating him anymore.

“You’re right. That was a dreadful period of time for Rosie.” Suzanne shook her head lightly. “You know how it feels? A little like John has sent Jen to me for a reason.”

Tracy cocked her head as she regarded Suzanne with an understanding smile. “If that’s how it feels to you, then run with it, love.”

“Oh, I will. I’m not backing out of this. I’m not giving myself the opportunity to talk myself out of anything at all. I just want to enjoy Jen. All of her. Anything she can offer.”

“It sounds to me as though that’s already happening, Suzanne,” Tracy said, sipping her coffee. “And I’d usually ask that you slow down and be sure this is what you want, but I can see how happy she makes you. Your eyes light up, and that hasn’t happened for a long time now.”

“I know it’s only been two weeks since we went on our first date, but I feel as though I’m already at that stage of missing her when she’s not here.” Suzanne felt a little bit needy as she said that. While she didn’t want to slow down, she had wondered if she should. Just a tiny bit. “Do you think that could become an issue?”

Tracy lifted a shoulder. “It’s hard to say. It seems to me that Jen wants the same as you. Unless she’s hinted at maybe taking a step back, I wouldn’t worry about it too much.”

“Quite the opposite, actually.” A shiver worked its way down Suzanne’s spine when she thought back on the weekend. It was Wednesday now, but the three days apart hadn’t done anything to shake those thoughts from Suzanne’s mind. “Jen is fully here when we’re together. She doesn’t hold back her affection. I think that’s what I like about her most. How forthcoming she is about her feelings and what she expects.”

“And are you equally as forthcoming?”

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Suzanne dipped her head as she grinned. “Yes. It seems so effortless in the moment when it happens.”

“I don’t want to jinx any of this, but it sounds like you were supposed to ask her out for that drink. And yes, I was wary when you told me about her that day, but you didn’t really give me a lot to go on. Nor did I expect you to tell me you were going on a date.”

Tracy didn’t need to explain herself. Suzanne completely understood her reason for questioning it. It wasn’t every day she stopped couriers on her doorstep to flirt with them. But thank God she had on that particular occasion. “I understand. I think I would have had the same reaction if it was the other way around.”

Tracy relaxed in her seat. Or slouching, as Suzanne called it. She was forever slouching. “So, when do I get to meet Jen?”

“Oh. Not for a while yet. I’d prefer to enjoy her and keep her to myself for a while longer. This is my favourite stage of dating, and I’d like it to continue for as long as possible.”

“You mean...you think meeting me would change her in some way?”

Suzanne laughed and shook her head. “No, that’s not what I’m saying. But while it’s just the two of us having a lot of fun, there is less pressure on the relationship. Well, potential relationship.”

“That’s fair. I can see why you want to do that.” Tracy had always been supportive

and understanding. It was one of the reasons they got along so well. “So long as you enjoy yourself, I can’t really ask for anything more.”

“Trust me,” Suzanne said, her mind wandering back to Jen. “There is plenty of enjoyment going on lately.”

Tracy barked a laugh and drained her coffee cup. “Well, it’s good to know one of us is happy.”

“Nothing on the dating apps?” Suzanne asked, her nose wrinkled as Tracy shook her head. Tracy had been single for just over a year now. Suzanne had insisted she wouldn’t be alone for long back when Tracy had split with her ex-girlfriend, but it just didn’t seem to be happening for her right now. “Well, maybe things will start to look up for you soon.”

“It doesn’t help that we’re understaffed, and I rarely get the time off to enjoy dating. It had worked so well with Clare, but I can’t blame her for calling it quits. People deserve love and commitment. While I can offer that, it’s not enough when you only get to see someone for a few hours a week.”

Tracy was right. Suzanne couldn’t imagine only giving Jen a few hours of her time a week. The beauty of working from home meant that Suzanne didn’t have to worry about that. And being freelance certainly helped. “Things will change for you. I promise you.”

“When, Suzanne?”

Suzanne puffed out her cheeks, knowing Tracy wouldn’t like her answer. “Maybe when you’re working less?”

Tracy threw up her hands and scoffed. “Great. So, when I retire then!”

Jen stopped in the middle of the public gardens, still shocked by how well-maintained this area of the city was. She'd always known the people around here had money, but this public garden was still public and city council-run. Why did the kids around here get to have the nice shiny play area, but the kids in Jen's area didn't? It hardly seemed fair, but then again, life always was about the postcode lottery when it came to who deserved what in this country.

"Are you okay?" Suzanne turned to Jen when she realised she wasn't moving. "Jen?"

"Oh, yeah. I was just admiring your fancy area." Jen resumed her walk, feeling content when Suzanne lowered her hand and took Jen's. Even in this mostly conservative area, Suzanne didn't care that they were holding hands. "It's a shame my area doesn't have this sort of thing."

"Which sort of thing?"

"Manicured lawns. Well-kept play areas for the children. Picnic tables and fountains."

Suzanne nodded slowly. "Yes. It's one of the things I don't like about living around here."

Jen hadn't wanted to ask before now, but she had noticed that Suzanne didn't have the accent most around here did. She didn't sound 'posh' at all. "When I look at you, it seems as though you fit right in around here. But now that I know you, you're not the same as these people." Even Ruby's mum walked around thinking she was better than most people. She turned her nose up at anyone who was remotely different. Thankfully, Ruby hadn't been the same as Lyn. "You're not from around here, is what I'm saying."

"I'm not. I'm from a little village in West Lancashire. My accent tends to come out a

lot more when I'm drunk, but I mastered toning it down when I met John. I guess the accent has just stuck at this point."

Jen smiled. "Oh, I don't know. I catch a bit of northern every now and then."

"Sorry." Suzanne shook her head. "It just threatens every once in a while."

"Don't ever apologise for being who you are. I knew it the moment we went on our first date that you were nothing like the snobs around here. You may have the car and the house to fall into line with these people, but you have a good heart, a great personality, an amazingsmile...and one hell of an arse." Jen winked, lightening the mood. "I had my own ideas about you before you asked me out for a drink."

"Oh?" Suzanne guided Jen towards a bench that looked out onto the rose garden.

"Nothing terrible. But I did think you were one of those. Snooty. Up her own arse. Self-centred." Jen cleared her throat as they sat beside one another. "I used to walk up your garden path and sneer to myself. I thought you were probably married to some big CEO while you sat at home doing nothing but getting everything you wanted. I couldn't have been more wrong."

"I think we're all guilty of assuming we know people. I'm fairly sure I've done the very same thing in the past." Suzanne lay her hand on Jen's thigh and squeezed. "I didn't grow up with wealth. None whatsoever. My dad was a miner, my mum was a seamstress, and my brother was a pain in the arse. He still is, but don't tell him I told you that."

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Jen smiled in Suzanne's direction when she winked back at her. "Sounds very working class to me."

"My life was very working class. I never forget where I came from. But John also didn't put me where I am now. I did that all by myself." Suzanne straightened her shoulders as she said that. Jen could see the pride bursting from her eyes, but she understood. She had also been proud to make something of herself once upon a time.

"Can I ask you something?" Jen turned to Suzanne, holding her hands in her lap.

"You can ask me anything."

"Why me?" Jen didn't know why she was asking that question. Suzanne saw something in her, and that was what counted. "I know what I'm capable of when it comes to relationships, but still...why me?"

"Why not you?" Suzanne frowned, clearly confused by Jen's question. "I don't understand why you would even ask that question."

"I guess we're just from completely different worlds—even knowing where you came from—and I'm naturally curious as to why you gravitated towards me." That was the truth. Even if Jen didn't have the past she did, she would still wonder why Suzanne was sitting on this park bench with her. They were entirely opposite. In most things, anyway. "You're clearly very successful, and I'm a courier."

"A very special courier to me." Suzanne gave Jen a knowing look. "And to answer you, I don't particularly care about someone's background. So long as they're a good

person, someone who will treat me right, then I'm not sure what social class has to do with it. I know some very wealthy people that I wouldn't even give the time of day to. I also know some people who had a very unfortunate upbringing who are some of the most wonderful people I know." Suzanne turned her attention back to the rose garden. "My best friend was raised in foster care. She was passed around from a very young age, didn't know if she was coming or going, but she's one of the greatest friends I have. She barely lives comfortably, she falls behind on paying bills, but she would give you the shirt off her back."

"That's my kind of person. The people who've had it hard are often the most generous."

"You're right." Suzanne crossed her legs and sighed. "She knows about you, by the way. We had a long conversation this morning."

"O-oh." Jen was taken aback by that. She hadn't anticipated people knowing about her and Suzanne dating. Not from Suzanne's side of this, anyway. "Well, I hope I'll get the chance to meet her one day."

"She said the very same thing. I'd love to introduce you to one another when the time is right."

Jen lay her head on Suzanne's shoulder, feeling far more than content this evening. "I kinda like us how we are right now. No pressure to be perfect. Still learning about one another. Just...having fun."

"That's what I told her," Suzanne said, wrapping her arm around Jen's shoulder. "Neither of us need to pressure any of this. Some days it goes fast, others a little slower. But I like that pace. I like not knowing what's going to happen from one day to the next. So long as we can spend time together when your schedule allows for it, then I'm perfectly happy with that."

“Me too.”

“Like this evening. I didn’t expect you to contact me to go for a walk and a chat. I thought Thursday and the weekend was what I was allowed. So, this has been a lovely surprise.”

Could Jen admit to Suzanne that she wanted to see her every evening if it was possible? After all, she only went home from work and retreated to her bedroom most of the time. Surely spending time with Suzanne was the logical thing to do here. “I’m available pretty much every evening.” Now that I no longer have to check in with my probation officer, Jen wanted to add but wouldn’t dream of it. “I’d like to see more of you if that’s something you’re also thinking about?”

“I’d like that.” Suzanne turned her head and kissed Jen’s hair. “How about some coffee before we go our separate ways for the night?”

Jen tilted her head back and looked up at Suzanne. “Sounds perfect. Let’s do it.”

Chapter 11

Eagerly bouncing on the balls of her feet, Jen held Suzanne’s package under her arm and waited for the door to open. Their usual Thursday brief encounter felt entirely different this week, but Jen knew why. Because they’d seen one another naked by now. No matter what Jen had imagined prior to that, nothing could ever compare to the real thing.

But right now, in this moment, Jen just wanted to see Suzanne. They hadn’t had a chance to spend any time together since Sunday, but Jen could spare her lunch hour if it meant she could be with Suzanne for a little while.

The door swung open, and as always, Jen was met with Suzanne’s sexy smile.

“Package for...” Jen squinted at the label. “Suzanne ‘hot as fuck’ Dixon.” She looked back up at Suzanne, knowing exactly what Suzanne was thinking. She didn’t have a very good poker face at all.

“That...must be me?” Suzanne splayed a hand across her chest and grinned. “Could you bring it inside?”

Jen shrugged. “Sure. Anything I can do to help.”

The moment the front door slammed shut, Jen turned to Suzanne and pushed her against it. She reached out towards the side table and placed the package down before making light work of the button on Suzanne’s pants.

“You don’t know how much I’ve wanted to see you this week,” Jen whispered against Suzanne’s lips. “I’ve lay in bed every fucking night thinking about you.”

Suzanne moaned when Jen took her earlobe between her teeth.

“I should have been here before now. All of me aches for you, babe.”

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Suzanne took Jen's hand and slid it down the front of her pants. When Jen's fingertips gathered Suzanne's wetness, it was Jen's turn to moan. "I've been thinking about you too."

"Y-yeah?" Jen nipped at Suzanne's bottom lip, releasing it slowly when she pressed two fingers to her clit. "Is that why you're fucking soaking?"

"Oh, it's the only reason why." Suzanne gasped when Jen pressed a little harder. "Fuck."

"Maybe I should just come back later..."

Suzanne gripped Jen's wrist, holding it in place as she rocked against her fingers. "N-no. You've done that before, and you're not doing it again." Suzanne pressed the back of her head to the door and whimpered. Her lips parted, and her eyes closed, but Jen could only watch the delight dancing across Suzanne's face. "I-I've spent the whole morning waiting for you."

"Seems to me like you've been waiting for far more than just me." Jen forced Suzanne's pants down her legs with her free hand, bent her knees a little, and eased two fingers inside Suzanne. "Shit, babe. You've been thinking about me fucking you, haven't you?"

"Y-yes." Suzanne wrapped a hand around the back of Jen's neck and touched their foreheads. "I've been sitting around wondering when I'd have the pleasure of feeling your hands on me again."

“And I’ve spent all day wondering if I could be lucky enough to touch you.” Jen pressed the heel of her hand to Suzanne’s clit as she curled her fingers inside her. “Being inside you is a dream. You feel so fucking good.”

“J-Jen,” Suzanne whispered, her legs shaking. “I-I?—”

“You...what?”

Suzanne drew Jen into a passionate and fiery kiss. A kiss that had Jen’s own legs shaking. And then Suzanne looked her dead in the eye when she drew back a little. “Fuck me harder.”

God, there was nothing greater in life than a woman who could verbalise what she wanted. Dirty talk really got Jen going. “You want it harder...or you want more?”

“Oh, fuck. Both.”

“Step out of your pants.” Jen eyed them where they pooled at Suzanne’s feet. She had never seen someone so frantic before. Once Suzanne was out of them, her underwear also on the floor, Jen guided her towards the stairs and whispered, “Turn around and bend over.”

Suzanne’s eyes darkened at that. Jen knew what Suzanne wanted, and she would do everything in her power to give her exactly that. The moment Suzanne was bent at the hip, braced against the stairs, Jen entered her from behind. Three fingers...so deep...exquisitely tight.

Suzanne forced herself back against Jen’s hand, her head low on her shoulders. In this moment, Jen never wanted to leave. Seeing Suzanne give herself over so freely to Jen was incredibly hot. Jen couldn’t have bagged a better woman to restart life with. “Y-yes. Right there.”

“You like that.” It wasn’t a question. Jen knew it from the way Suzanne’s body trembled. And then Suzanne brought a hand between her legs and lashed her fingers against her clit. She tightened again, making it difficult for Jen to move inside her. “You need to come, babe?”

“Fuck, yes.”

Jen sunk deeper, impressed by just how wet Suzanne was for her. Maybe the lack of attention from one another through the week would only make the end of the week far more satisfying. Even if it was something for Jen to consider, she wasn’t sure how much longer she could last only seeing Suzanne when the working week was coming to an end. They’d spoken about more evenings together, but it hadn’t quite happened yet. “Fuck, you’re so beautiful.”

“Oh, Jen.” Suzanne’s voice trembled. “I-I’m coming.”

“Mmhmm.” Jen could only smirk. There was nothing greater in life than giving another woman pleasure. At one time, Jen believed it was what she was born to do. Make women feel good. “Let me feel you, babe.”

“S-shit!” Suzanne’s legs almost gave out, but Jen quickly wrapped an arm around her waist and held her up. Her body shot forward, quivering as Jen coaxed everything she could from her, her breath ragged. “Oh, God.”

Giving Suzanne a moment to get her bearings, Jen slid out of her and dropped to her knees. She took a long, slow lick between her lips, moaning when that sweetness coated her tongue. “Fuck, you taste good.”

Suzanne slowly lowered herself to the stairs, resting forward on her knees. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

Honestly, Jen hadn't been expecting it either. But life was full of surprises. She helped Suzanne to her feet, wrapping her arms around her waist as she held her close. "Always expectsomethingfrom me."

Suzanne lifted a hand and cupped Jen's cheek. "Can I see you tonight?"

"You know you can." Jen dipped her head and drew Suzanne into a slow, lingering kiss. "Just let me know the plans, and I'll be here. Just for you.Always." Whoa! Jen hadn't expected that to leave her mouth. But did she mean it? Absolutely.

"When you say things like that..." Suzanne fell silent, shaking her head lightly as she smiled.

"When I say things like that, what?"

Suzanne looked up into Jen's eyes, searching them as she chewed her lip. "I...it makes me not want to let you go."

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Jen turned her watch towards herself. “I have two hours left. That’ll be over before we know it.” She pressed her forehead to Suzanne’s and sighed. “But I feel the same way.”

“Tonight, you’re all mine, okay?”

Every inch of Jen ached at that. Just weeks ago, she didn’t imagine she would be anyone’s ever again. But now, here she stood, feeling incredibly blessed. “Perfectly okay.”

After her unexpected activities with Jen earlier, Suzanne couldn’t wait until she was back here this evening. Thursday had become their day, and it was something Suzanne didn’t plan to change at any point in the near future. Although, knowing Jen wanted to spend more evenings with her only had Suzanne wishing that was already a plan in motion. Perhaps they could discuss it with one another this evening.

Depends if you can keep your hands to yourself for long enough.

As that thought floated through her mind, the doorbell rang. It would be Jen, and as usual, she was right on time. Suzanne approached the hallway, anticipating where this evening could go. She pulled the front door open and grinned back at Jen. “Hi.”

“Hi, gorgeous.” Jen stepped inside, placing a kiss on Suzanne’s lips before she strolled off down the hallway. Shoes removed, the door locked, and Suzanne was joining Jen in the dining area. “Have you eaten yet?”

Suzanne shook her head. “I wasn’t sure what you felt like, and I’m fresh out of ideas.

It's been a long day."

"So, takeout? My treat?"

Suzanne smiled. "Yes. Let's do takeout and eat it at the coffee table. Slouch, you know?"

Jen drew Suzanne in with an arm around the waist. "All I want is to slouch with you. I swear I had double the number of packages today."

"Then I want you to rest and relax." Suzanne cupped her cheek as Jen rested back against the edge of the dining table. "Get comfortable, take a nap, whatever you want to do."

"Nap? When I have the opportunity to be with you all night? Oh, I don't think so."

Suzanne grinned as her cheeks reddened. "You're such a charmer."

"I have a gorgeous woman in my life. Napping is for when I'm lonely and miserable." Jen pulled Suzanne in a little closer. She stood between Jen's legs, her heart fluttering when she gazed into those hazel eyes. "I'm really hoping that's not going to be something I have to deal with, though."

"Crazy. I was hoping the very same thing." Suzanne touched her forehead to Jen's, enjoying those strong arms around her waist. "I wanted to ask you something. I won't be offended by your response."

Jen frowned. "What is it?"

"You know I mentioned my niece? That she would be visiting..."

“Mmhmm.”

Suzanne cleared her throat. She didn't know why she felt so nervous all of a sudden. This was Jen she was speaking to. “Well, she's coming over tomorrow.”

Jen held up her hands. “Say no more. I know Friday is my day off, and we've been spending it together for the last few weeks, but I understand. Elsie means so much to you, and I'd never expect you to choose me over her. No way.”

While Suzanne appreciated that, it wasn't what she was trying to say. “I... No. It's just that I wondered if you'd like to meet her?”

Jen's brows rose. “You wantmeto meet your niece?”

“I realise it's probably too soon. I know it's only been a few weeks for us, but you're firmly in my life now, Jen. I don't want you to leave when I have Elsie coming over to visit. I want us all to enjoy spending time with one another.”

“You're sure about this?” Jen asked as she took Suzanne's hand. “I mean, you're sure enough about me and us to the point that you're happy to bring me into Elsie's life?”

Suzanne brought Jen's hand up to her chest and held it there. “I'm so sure about us, Jen. I love spending time with you—you mean a lot to me. I want people to know that I'm finally finding my new happiness.”

“Well...” Jen cleared her throat. “I don't really know what to say to that.”

“Say you'll think about it. That's all I ask.” Suzanne knew Jen would never lead her on or do anything for the sake of it. If Jen chose to meet Elsie, then she was serious about it. “And if it doesn't happen this time around—I know it's short notice—then I ask that you consider it for next time.”

“I don’t need to consider it, babe. I’d love to meet your niece.” Suzanne’s heart settled when Jen said that. “And I’d offer to introduce you to my nephew, but he just babbles and drools all over you at this point.”

“I think he would hold an excellent conversation.”

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Jen puffed out her cheeks suddenly. “Wow. This is all really happening, isn’t it?”

“Only if you’re ready, Jen. I have no issue waiting until further down the line if that’s what you want?”

Jen held Suzanne’s chin in her fingers and smiled into a kiss. “I’m ready. I promise you.”

Chapter 12

Oh, this is quite the sight.

Suzanne rested against the doorframe that led to the dining area, smiling as she watched the interaction between Jen and Elsie. It was clear that Jen was fond of children, her smile wouldn’t be so wide as she explained Elsie’s homework to her otherwise, but Suzanne hadn’t imagined she would be this at ease during their first meeting. Of course she still had a lot to learn when it came to Jen, and she also understood that Jen had a lot to learn about Suzanne, too, but this afternoon felt almost perfect.

“Okay, now spell it out loud exactly how you see it.” Jen pointed towards the workbook in front of Elsie, her voice gentle and patient. “The more you practice, the more confident you’ll feel using these words in sentences.”

“You remind me of my teacher,” Elsie said. “But way cooler.”

Jen side-eyed Elsie and smiled. “Well, I’m sure we’re both cool in our own way.

Kinda like you and your friends at school. I'll bet you're all brilliant and intelligent in your own way."

Elsie lifted a shoulder. "Dunno. Sadie always tells me I'm stupid."

Oh, Suzanne's heart ached hearing that. While she wanted to interject, it seemed Jen had it covered all by herself.

"Nobody is stupid. It's just not possible. We're all talented in some way, and I'm really impressed by your spellings. Did you know that you haven't got a single one mixed up yet? And out of the twenty so far, that's super clever."

Elsie straightened her back where she rested up on her knees on a dining chair. "Really?"

"Really." Jen nodded as she scooted closer to Elsie. "And don't listen to those people who say things like that to you. It's always better to be kind."

"I always try to be kind. Auntie Suzanne is really kind, and I'd like to be like her when I'm older."

Suzanne's eyes filled with tears as she listened on, both of them oblivious to the fact she had been standing there for the last ten minutes. Elsie was her everything; she had been from the moment she was born. But to hear her niece say something so lovely, Suzanne was taken aback.

"She is. She's really kind." Jen nudged Elsie a little as she leaned in and lowered her voice. "I have an idea. In the morning, I'll come over early, and we could surprise her by making breakfast. What do you think?"

Elsie nodded enthusiastically. "Yes! I think she would like that."

“Great. But we have to keep it a secret. It’ll be a surprise for her, okay?”

“Okay. A secret.” Elsie held out a hand. “We have to shake hands for it to be a secret.”

Jen took Elsie’s hand and shook, offering her a single nod as she did so. “Now, are you okay filling out the rest of your spellings, and I’ll check them when you’re finished?”

“Yep.” Elsie focused on her workbook again, briefly glancing up at Jen as she left the table. “Jen?”

Jen spun around as she neared the kitchen. “Yeah?”

“I wish you were my teacher.”

Jen’s features changed suddenly. She didn’t appear so happy and carefree as Elsie’s words sunk in. But then she cleared her throat and smiled. “That would be nice.” And then Jen was gone, leaving a smiling Elsie sitting at the dining table with her homework.

Suzanne walked into the room and dipped her head, placing a kiss on Elsie’s hair. “Your homework looks great, sweetheart.”

“Auntie Suzanne?” Elsie looked up at her. “Is Jen your best friend?”

“She’s...a very special friend, yes.” One day, Suzanne would sit Elsie down and explain who Jen was and what she meant to her, but right now, it wasn’t something hugely important. Elsie had only ever known Suzanne to be with John. She needed to prepare herself for that sort of conversation.

“I like her. She’s fun. And she really helped me a lot with my homework.” Elsie sat back on her knees and sighed. “Wish she was my teacher.”

“Maybe you can have the best of both worlds. You have your teacher at school, but then you have Jen here to help when you need it.”

Elsie grinned and nodded. “Yeah. That sounds fun.”

“Okay, well, I’m going to help Jen clear up the kitchen. If you need anything, just shout, and I’ll be right in.” Suzanne ruffled Elsie’s hair as she stepped away and focused on Jen’s back through the archway to the kitchen. She could be entirely wrong, but it looked as though Jen’s shoulders were shaking. “Jen?”

Jen suddenly cleared her throat and turned around. “Yeah?”

“Is everything okay?”

“Of course, yeah.” Jen brushed the back of her hand against her cheek and smiled, but Suzanne saw through it immediately. “Just clearing up. It’s one less thing for you to do then.”

Suzanne wouldn’t question Jen’s sudden dip in mood. They could discuss it later. Maybe once Elsie had gone to bed, if Jen was still here. “I appreciate that, but I’ll give you a hand.”

“This is the least I can do.” Jen rested against the counter and pulled Suzanne against her. “I’ve had a really lovely afternoon with you and Elsie. Thank you for inviting me over.”

“Thank you for being so open to the idea. I hadn’t expected to introduce anyone to one of the most important people in my life. But now that I have, I’m very happy that you were that person.”

“Me too, gorgeous.” Jen sighed as her shoulders slumped. “I, um...I managed to get a swap tomorrow. I’m not working in the morning now, just the afternoon.”

“You don’t seem very happy about that.” Suzanne dipped her head and locked eyes with Jen. “Is everything okay?”

“Oh, yeah. I’m happy I got it off. It’s just...I wondered if I could come over in the morning? Maybe spend some more time with you and Elsie before she goes back home.”

Suzanne loosely hung her arms over Jen’s shoulders and leaned in for a kiss. It was tame—Elsie was sitting just feet away from them—but it was enough. Jen’s lips would always be enough. “How about I go one better and just invite you to stay the night?”

“I’d love to, but I don’t want to get in the way of your precious time with Elsie. You should spend uninterrupted time with her. I know you don’t get to see her as often as you’d like.”

“I’d...like you to stay.” Suzanne grazed her nails against the back of Jen’s neck. “I think Elsie would like it, too.”

“You think?” Jen smiled, the brightness of her eyes putting Suzanne at ease.

“Of course. She’s already told me that she would like you to be her teacher. Bless her.” Suzanne laughed, but Jen had that unfamiliar look on her face again. As though the word ‘teacher’ seemed to trigger something inside of her. “Are you okay?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Maybe we should just see how the rest of the evening plays out. If you don’t want to

stay over, that's okay. But maybe we could all enjoy some TV together before you leave?"

"TV sounds nice." Jen offered Suzanne a chaste kiss and then turned out of Suzanne's arms. "I'll finish up in here, and then I'll be with you."

Sensing that Jen wanted to be alone for a while, Suzanne chose to take a step back and rejoined Elsie in the dining room. Whatever was going on in Jen's mind, Suzanne hoped to get to the bottom of it. She didn't enjoy seeing that look in Jen's eyes. A look of apprehension...perhaps even fear.

"Right. It's almost time to put your homework away. You have the rest of the weekend to finish it with Mum and Dad."

"Yay!"

"I'm veryhappy you decided to stay the night." Suzanne sunk down into the mattress, cosying up to Jen the moment she pulled the cover over them. "Today has been perfect. It really has."

Jen wrapped an arm around Suzanne and pressed a kiss to her hair. "I don't know what I expected, but Elsie is lovely. I guess I shouldn't be surprised, though, given who her auntie is."

Suzanne placed a hand against Jen's chest and smiled. She adored these moments. Moments when they could relax and just be. Moments that Suzanne hoped would last many years. Jen's arms felt...homely. They felt right. They felt...incredibly strong and sexy. In this moment, Suzanne knew she could talk about anything at all with Jen. "Can I ask you something?"

Jen sunk further down into the bed and turned her head to Suzanne. "Sure."

“Earlier, when you were helping Elsie with her homework,” Suzanne said, pausing briefly. She didn’t want to bring anything painful up, but she did want Jen to know that she could be open and honest if something was playing on her mind. “The atmosphere changed when she mentioned wanting you to be her teacher.”

Jen turned her face away and looked straight ahead of her. “Just...a dream of mine. That’s all.”

“To be a teacher?”

Jen chewed her lip. “Mmhmm.”

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“Then you should pursue that dream.” Suzanne couldn’t fathom why Jen hadn’t gone on to be a teacher. If it was something she desired, then Suzanne would support her in any way she could. It didn’t matter if their relationship was in the very early stages; she would always want to see the women around her thrive. “I saw how happy you were doing her homework with her.”

“That was just me feeling appreciative of the fact you’d included me in your plans, babe.”

Jen could stick with that, but Suzanne didn’t believe her. Something was playing on Jen’s mind, and Suzanne desperately wished she would talk it through. “I understand that, but it felt like something more.”

“You weren’t even in the room with us. How can you possibly know what it was or wasn’t?”

Suzanne pulled away a little, noting how Jen had just winced. She didn’t enjoy being spoken to with an attitude, so she would forget about this conversation and settle in for what was left of this night. “R-right. Okay.”

Jen sat up in bed and turned to Suzanne. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to speak to you like that. I just... The teacher thing isn’t a possibility for me. I’d rather not talk about it.”

Suzanne held up her hands and shifted to her own side of the bed. “You’ve got it. No more discussion.”

“Hey, no. I am. I’m sorry.” Jen inched closer, hesitating where she rested on her knees in the middle of the bed. “It’s just not a good conversation for me to have.” She chanced a hand, relaxing her shoulders when Suzanne took it. “It was really nice helping Elsie out with her homework, but that’s all it was. Homework. I don’t crave the idea of being a teacher anymore, and I don’t want to discuss it only to end up wishing things could have been different all over again.”

Suzanne sighed. “But you hate the courier job, Jen.”

“Actually, I don’t.” Jen smirked as she crawled towards Suzanne. “Without that job, I never would have met you.”

“I know that, but it doesn’t change the fact that you would be happier elsewhere.”

Jen lifted a shoulder, seemingly unbothered as she got comfortable next to Suzanne again. “Maybe one day I’ll try something else, but for now, it works for me. I get to see you every evening, I have every Friday off, and I only work a half day on a Saturday. That’s not a bad rota for me at all.”

Okay, Suzanne could understand that side of things. She just imagined Jen in a much more fulfilling job. “I guess you’re right.”

Suzanne didn’t need to work at all. John had left her everything he had—which was a substantial amount—but she did it for her own sanity. Sitting around watching TV all day had never appealed to Suzanne. She needed something to keep her busy.

“I’m happy with my life the way it is. That’s all you need to remember.” Jen leaned in and kissed Suzanne’s cheek. “This, with you, is perfect.”

Suzanne melted a little at that. How could she wish for something more for Jen when Jen was happy here like this? Perhaps rocking the boat wasn’t the way to go here. If

Jen was satisfied with her life, then who was Suzanne to try to change that? “I feel the same way.”

“Finding you is kind of the same way I describe unplanned nights out.”

“I’m sorry?” Suzanne frowned, utterly confused.

“You came along unexpectedly, and it’s just been amazing. It feels as though we haven’t even really needed to try hard at this. You know?” Suzanne nodded, hoping Jen would continue to elaborate. “It’s the same as a night out that hasn’t been planned. Those nights are always the best nights.”

“Ah. You mean like a night out that’s been planned for months in advance, but it’s just a flop? Nothing fun happens?”

“Exactly!” Jen laughed. “But those nights when one of your friends calls to tell you to get ready when you’re lying on the couch bored to tears... They end up being the greatest.”

Suzanne lay back and took Jen’s hand. She allowed the silence to envelop them for a moment or two, and then Suzanne turned her face to Jen. “Our unplanned night out turned into something beautiful, didn’t it?”

Jen turned her face to Suzanne and grinned. “God, it really did.”

Jen busied herself in Suzanne’s kitchen, turning the volume up on the radio a little. Considering Elsie had wanted to make breakfast this morning, she was currently sitting on the couch reading a book. But Jen couldn’t complain. It wasn’t often she came across a young child willingly reading a book these days.

She set a bowl of fresh fruit down on the counter while Elsie’s choice of porridge sat

cooking on the stove. Jen couldn't recall ever doing this for someone, and especially not a relative of the woman she was dating. But mornings like this only reminded her that she had made it out the other side. At one time, she would have been eyeing a room full of women in a prison, wondering which one of them would snap that day...and if it would be aimed at Jen. It didn't happen often, but when a convict suddenly turned, anyone was fair game. Jen was no stranger to that.

“Jen?”

Jen jumped when Elsie appeared behind her, pulling herself up onto a stool at the kitchen island.

“Yeah?”

“Did you know Uncle John?”

Jen lowered the stove and crossed the room. “I didn't. Unfortunately.”

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“He’s in heaven now,” Elsie said, sighing. “Auntie Suzanne was really sad when he went to heaven.”

Jen regarded Elsie with an understanding smile. “It’s very sad when people go to heaven.”

“Do you know anyone there?”

Jen frowned ever so slightly. “In heaven?”

“Yeah.” Elsie nodded and then fisted a hand under her chin. She had a lot of similar mannerisms as Suzanne. “And did it make you sad, too?”

“I do know people in heaven, and yes, it made me very sad when they went there.” Jen wasn’t sure she wanted to have this conversation with Elsie, but she appreciated that Elsie felt comfortable talking about this kind of thing with her. “Why do you ask?”

“Auntie Suzanne isn’t sad anymore.” Elsie beckoned Jen closer as though she was about to reveal a secret. She lowered her voice as she said, “She used to read to me at night and then wait for me to go to sleep. When she thought I was sleeping, I used to hear her crying.”

Oh, that broke Jen’s heart.

“But I gave her a cuddle, and it made her feel better.”

“I’ll bet it did.” Jen squeezed Elsie’s shoulder gently. “And I bet you made her feel better a lot of the time.” Jen leaned in and whispered, “Don’t tell her I told you this, but you’re her favourite, you know?”

Elsie frowned. “Her favourite what?”

“Her favourite person in the world.” Jen shrugged. “Best friends.”

“Auntie Suzanne says you’re her special friend.”

Jen froze at that. She knew exactly what a ‘special friend’ was, and right now, she didn’t want to put her foot in it. It wasn’t Jen’s place to out them to Suzanne’s niece. “We’re very good friends.” Okay, end this here. Get on with breakfast. “Your porridge is almost ready. Anything you want added to it?”

“Please may I have jam?”

Jen smiled at Elsie’s wonderful manners. “You may.”

“I saw Auntie Suzanne kiss you last night.”

As Jen turned to Elsie, her cheeks likely bright red with embarrassment, she cleared her throat. “You did?” What the hell else was she supposed to say to that? She couldn’t exactly call the kid a liar, nor would she ever do that.

“Mmhmm.” Elsie nodded. “Hattie has two mums.”

Fucking hell. Where was Suzanne? Jen was beginning to wish she hadn’t brought this idea up yesterday while Elsie was doing her homework. She was just being lumbered with questions she didn’t know the answers to.

“And Joshua has two dads.”

“That’s pretty cool,” Jen said, relaxing a little when she heard Suzanne coming down the stairs. “Don’t you think?”

“So, do I have two aunties?” It appeared Elsie was trying to work out Jen and Suzanne’s relationship in her head. “That would be way cool.”

Jen looked at Suzanne as she walked into the kitchen, mouthing ‘help’ as she poured Suzanne a coffee. “Morning. I’m just taking care of breakfast.”

“Mm. The smell woke me up. Now I’m starving.” Suzanne inconspicuously lay a hand on Jen’s hip and squeezed. “Everything okay?”

“Yep. Elsie was just telling me that Hattie has two mums and Joshua has two dads.” She gave Suzanne a knowing look, eyeing Elsie as she turned them both away and guided Suzanne out of earshot. “She saw us kissing last night. I think she’s a bit confused about what it means for us.”

Suzanne sipped her coffee, her brows drawn. “Confused?”

“She’s just asked me if she has two aunties because of the situation with the kids at her school.”

“O-oh! Right!”

“Auntie Suzanne?”

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Suzanne spun around and smiled. “Yes, sweetheart?”

“Is Jen my auntie now too?”

Suzanne glanced back at Jen for some kind of assistance, but Jen had nothing to offer. This was Suzanne’s family. Jen refused to give her input on something she didn’t have the answer to herself. “Sorry, babe. You’re on your own with this one.”

“Jen.”

“Whatever you decide when it comes to a response, I’m more than fine with it.” Jen didn’t want Suzanne to think there was a right or wrong answer. She just wanted Suzanne to do whatever was best for her and her family. “Maybe you need to discuss this with your brother first. I haven’t been around for long, and I don’t want people to wonder what the hell is going on.” Jen didn’t know if Suzanne had even told her brother about their relationship. She probably hadn’t, but a conversation about this was probably the wise choice to make here.

“I, um...” Suzanne crossed the kitchen and sat facing Elsie. “Would you like that?”

“Oh my goodness, yes! Jen is so cool.” Elsie shot down from her stool and rushed up to Jen, wrapping her arms around her. “I like it when you’re here.”

Jen looked down at the body moulded around her, fully aware of the panicked look on her face as she glanced up at Suzanne. “I like being here, too.”

“Can we go to the park before Dad picks me up?”

“Sure. Of course.” Jen watched Elsie rush back towards Suzanne, her mind going over everything that had happened since Elsie arrived yesterday afternoon.

While she loved this, the dynamic was pretty great, Jen still had the small matter of her past to contend with. Once Suzanne found out, Jen would likely never see Elsie again. She would also receive the backlash of not being honest with Suzanne while her niece was in the house. It sounded ridiculous, but she couldn’t even spend time with her own nephew because of what people thought of her. Eventually, this would crumble and fall apart, too. It was inevitable.

Then there was the whole ‘lying about being a teacher’ last night. Jen could have opened up to Suzanne and explained everything, but it was never that simple. Jen knew better than to assume it would be. So, for now, she would just take this one day at a time...and then, she would retreat back into herself the moment the truth was revealed.

“Right, breakfast is ready. I hope everyone is hungry.”

Chapter 13

Jen pushed her plate away, stuffed from the huge dinner her mum had put down in front of her the moment she walked through the door. Work had been busy again, and her load seemed to be increasing weekly, but Jen couldn’t complain. Before Suzanne, she came home and wallowed around the house, but now... Now she had something to look forward to each night.

“How was dinner, love?”

Jen beamed a smile as she looked up from her plate. “It was great, Mum. It always is.”

“I was surprised when you told me you’d be home tonight.” Denise finished the last of her food and sat back in her seat at the dining table. “You haven’t been home for dinner in almost a week.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Jen reached a hand across the table and lay it over her mum’s. “I promise to be home more often.”

“Oh, Jen. I don’t want you to do that. So long as I hear your voice each day and I know that you’re safe, that’s all I can ask for.” Jen appreciated that, but she should still make an effort to be here for dinner. “Life is changing for you, and for once, it’s for the better.”

“It really is, Mum.” Jen couldn’t believe it had been six weeks since her first date with Suzanne. She’d lost count of how many dates there had been now, but that didn’t matter. They had so many more to come that she was happy to lose count. “Life is kind of crazy at the minute.”

Denise frowned as she clasped her hands under her chin and sat forward. “Why?”

“Just with meeting Suzanne and stuff.” Jen lifted a shoulder, knowing she could be vulnerable around her mum. “You know I met her niece a few weeks ago? Well, she keeps calling Suzanne to ask when she can come and stay with us again.Us, Mum. Not Suzanne.Us.”

“And what does Suzanne think of that?”

“Honestly, I don’t think she cares. She hasn’t tried to correct Elsie, and she hasn’t brought up any kind of conversation about it with me.”

“Then I wouldn’t worry about it. If you’re happy for her niece to see you as a couple and whatnot, then let it happen, Jen. Unless, of course, you’re worried about how fast

this is moving.”

“It’s not that I’m worried about any of that, but Suzanne still doesn’t know where I spent part of this year and a lot of last year.”

“I think the time has been and gone when it comes to telling Suzanne about prison, my love. It’s not important anymore. Actually, I don’t believe it’s ever been important.”

“You’re not serious. I can’t keep it from her forever.” Jen wished she could keep it locked away, but it wasn’t possible. The longer they were together, the more likely it was that someone somewhere would blow it all up.

“Why not? Suzanne knows the real you. The very daughter I raised to be wonderful, loving, and kind. Isn’t that the only thing that matters here?”

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Jen scoffed. “I wish it was the only thing that mattered.”

Denise studied Jen. “You’re going to tell her, aren’t you?”

“I...am. I think I have to, Mum. I know what I want, and I know Suzanne is serious about us being together, so to me, the sensible thing to do is come clean. We know far more about one another now than we did in the early days. If I was in Suzanne’s position, I’d appreciate knowing what had happened last year.”

“Would it change anything for you if Suzanne came to you to explain she’d spent time in prison?”

Jen pondered that for a moment, chewing her lip as she did so. “You know what, it wouldn’t change anything. Certainly not how I felt about her, anyway. I’d have questions, of course I would, but it’s not something I would let come between us. I’m too invested in her now, Mum. Being honest is always better than holding something in. You surely understand where I’m coming from.”

“I do, love. I understand completely.” Denise squeezed Jen’s hand and smiled. “I just think it’s important that you prepare yourself for the possibility of her not taking it very well. She may be angry and upset, so you need to prepare for that.”

“I know. I’m not expecting her to give me a round of applause, that’s for sure.” Jen didn’t want this to rest on her shoulders anymore. While they were together, prison wasn’t something that even hinted at crossing her mind. But the moment Jen was alone in her work van, it crept back in. The guilt, the idea of being dishonest, the need to be forthcoming with the truth. “I feel as though we’re at a place where she’s less

likely to react really badly to it. I guess now I just have to hope that I'm not wrong."

"I can't tell you what the right thing to do is. I wish I knew the answers, and I wish this wasn't something you even had to deal with, but you're sensible, and you'll know when the time is right."

"I have to do this tonight. I need it out of my life." Jen lowered her head to her hands, anxiety beginning to creep in. "So long as I don't talk myself out of it by the time I get there, then it's happening tonight."

Denise nodded and rose to her feet, gathering the plates on the table. "And if you do talk yourself out of it, that's okay. This is a huge decision."

Jen looked up at her mum. "Is it, though? Does it really have to be something huge?"

"Unfortunately, things like this usually are, Jen. But I think you're right. I think Suzanne is going to take it far better than you likely realise." Denise approached Jen and placed a hand on her shoulder. "You're inseparable at the moment. That's not going to end."

Jen lay a hand on her mum's where it rested on her shoulder and smiled. "I hope you're right. And if not, if this goes terribly wrong, then at least I came clean before we could really break one another's hearts." Jen eyed her phone when it buzzed on the table, grinning at Suzanne's name. "Speak of the devil."

"I'll let you deal with that. Cuppa before you leave?"

Jen nodded. She could do with a brew while she got her head around the sudden decision she'd made tonight. "Yes, please. That sounds lovely."

I hope you know I'm missing you terribly.

Jen felt her cheeks heat as she read the message repeatedly. Whenever Suzanne said things like that to her, it did encourage Jen to talk herself out of what needed to be done. The mere thought of Suzanne turning her back on Jen was one that had kept her awake once or twice. Still, this was important. It was imperative if Jen truly wanted to move on with her life.

She puffed out her cheeks and responded to Suzanne.

Not for much longer, babe. I'll be heading over soon.

With a mildly shaking hand, Jen lowered her phone to the table again and gave herself a few minutes to understand the severity of what could potentially happen tonight. Either she would remain in a relationship, or she would be coming back here with a heart that had been ripped from her chest. Because that would be the outcome if Suzanne turned her back on Jen. She would be truly devastated.

Just do the right thing. You'll feel better for it.

Suzanne turned her watch towards herself, checking everything was as it should be. Tonight she was making things official, and the sooner Jen arrived, the sooner Suzanne could say what she needed to say. Even though Suzanne was almost certain Jen knew where they stood with one another, she wanted to say it out loud and officially make Jen hers. For a long time to come, if Suzanne had things her way.

The doorbell sounded, shocking her out of the wonderful thoughts drifting through her mind. All relating to Jen, all thoughts she would act upon once she knew it was safe to do so. Right now, Suzanne's only hope was that Jen was on the same page as her. That she did want to be exclusive. It had always been an unspoken rule of Suzanne's, but perhaps Jen was waiting for them to discuss it.

With a huge smile plastered on her mouth, Suzanne rushed out into the hallway and

opened the front door. “Hi. Come in.”

Jen stepped inside, offering Suzanne a kiss on the cheek as she always did. “Sorry, I hoped to be here sooner. I got caught up talking to Mum.”

Suzanne held Jen’s wrist as she tried to step past her, choosing to help herself to another kiss before they locked up for the evening. “Never apologise for spending time with your mum. I’m fully aware that I’ve practically stolen you from her over the last several weeks.”

Jen shrugged. “I don’t mind, and neither does she.”

Suzanne smiled against Jen’s lips, grateful for all of the time Jen had given to her since they’d met. “Then I guess that’s that.”

Jen drew back a little and searched Suzanne’s eyes. “I guess it is. Come on, it’s cold out in the hallway.” She took Suzanne’s hand, kicking off her shoes before she stepped onto the carpet, and then tugged her inside the back living room. “Could we...talk about something tonight?”

Suzanne frowned. “Yes. But I think I know where this is going, so I’d like to say a few things first if that would be okay?”

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Jen slid her jacket off and hung it over the back of a dining chair. “Sure. Go for it.”

“Could we maybe sit down first and I don’t know...breathe?”

Jen laughed and nodded. “Yeah, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ambush you as I walked through the door.” Jen cocked her head towards the closed folding doors that led to the living room. “Let’s get comfy in there.” Suzanne inconspicuously drew in a deep breath as Jen turned her back and opened the doors. As Suzanne’s romantic little setup came into view, Jen glanced over her shoulder, brows raised. “What’s this for, babe?”

“Don’t worry. I’m not asking you to sign your life away to me. Nothing dramatic, even though I now realise I’ve made it look exactly like that.” Suzanne wrung her hands and puffed out her cheeks. “Just...go through. I’ll explain when I can think of a sentence I’m capable of speaking out loud.”

God, Suzanne had never been the nervous type. She’d also never shied away from her feelings or what she expected of someone she was dating. Yet here she was, terrified that Jen may not feel the same way.

“Hey,” Jen reached out a hand as she sat down on the couch. “Come here. You look terrified, and I don’t know why.” Jen cast her gaze on the mass of pillows and blankets strewn all over the living room floor between the couch and fireplace. Candles flickered and gave the room a soft glow, the fire roaring and heating the place to the perfect temperature. “Suzanne?”

Suzanne shook her head. “Sorry, what?”

“Come and sit down. Talk to me. Stop looking so scared.”

On shaky legs, Suzanne moved towards the couch and sat down beside Jen. This was a ridiculous reaction to have. This woman had been nothing short of perfect since they’d met. God, she’d even met Suzanne’s niece. In fact, Suzanne’s niece loved Jen more than she loved Suzanne. But that wasn’t hard. Jen was everything Suzanne loved in a person. “I don’t know what I’m worrying about.”

“Me neither. So why don’t you tell me what’s going on and we can figure it out together.”

Suzanne smiled. “Nothing is going on, exactly. I just...wanted to check in with you, I guess.”

“Check in?” Jen eyed the decorations around the living room once again. “What exactly does all of this have to do with checking in, Suzanne?”

Oh, for the love of God. Just open your mouth and speak!

Suzanne took a breath as she turned to face Jen fully. “I want us to be exclusive. I don’t want us to date anyone else or look at anyone else.”

“R-right.” Jen took Suzanne’s hand. “Forgive me, but I kind of assumed we were already exclusive.”

Suzanne placed her other hand on her chest. “Oh, thank God.”

“Did you think that we weren’t?” Jen seemed genuinely shocked and confused. Suzanne had worked herself up for no reason at all. “Babe?”

“It wasn’t something we’d spoken about, so I didn’t want to assume.” Suzanne ran a

hand through her hair, the tension falling from her shoulders immediately. “I hoped we’d be on the same page, but again...I didn’t want to assume.”

Jen lifted a hand and drew her thumb across Suzanne’s bottom lip. “You’re quite adorable, you know.”

“I’m ridiculous,” Suzanne said, scoffing. “But thank you for putting my mind at rest instead of letting me ramble on about it. I appreciate that.”

“Look, Suzanne.” Jen shifted a little closer. “When I’m dating someone, I’m dating only them. Even if we haven’t had the conversation, I would never dream of going on a date with or even looking at someone else. It’s all about you, okay? In my mind, we’ve been exclusive since the first time we slept together.”

As Jen said that, something in her tone had Suzanne frowning ever so slightly. Jen was saying the right things, but her demeanour didn’t quite fit in with her words.

“I don’t know how long this will last. I don’t know what length of time you can put up with me for. I just know that I really don’t want it to end.” Jen ran her thumb across Suzanne’s knuckles as she brought them to her lips and kissed them. “I don’t see anyone else in my future. Not for as long as you’re in my life, anyway.”

“Okay.” Suzanne cupped Jen’s cheek and smiled into a kiss. “As for all of this, I just wanted to do something nice and romantic for us. To show you that I appreciate you being here with me. It’s nothing much, just some candles and some 0% gin and tonic, but I enjoyed doing this for us tonight.”

“It looks gorgeous, babe.” Jen touched her forehead to Suzanne’s. “Not quite as gorgeous as you, but couple them together, and it’s perfect.”

Instead of thinking about what Jen had just said—Suzanne was close to telling her

something far more important—she reached for the two drinks on the table and handed one over to Jen. It's too soon to tell her you're falling. "To us?"

That bright white smile of Jen's made an appearance as they clinked their glasses. "Always to us."

"Now, what did you want to talk to me about?" Suzanne relaxed back on the couch and brought her drink to her lips. "This space now belongs to you."

Jen waved a hand between them. "Oh. Nothing important. Don't worry about it."

Jen mindlessly grazed her fingers through Suzanne's hair where she sat curled up against her on the blankets covering the floor. While she had loved everything that had happened this evening, hearing about Suzanne's desire to be exclusive, a heaviness sat in her chest. Tonight was supposed to be the night that she came clean, but after Suzanne's heartfelt speech and all the trouble she had gone to in order to make this night perfect for them, Jen couldn't utter the words.

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She knew she had to, it wasn't an option to keep it to herself for much longer, but tonight couldn't be that night. Jen didn't have the heart to ruin everything while the very woman she was wholly attached to rested against her, stroking her knee. Whilst withholding parts of her past didn't sit well with Jen, it didn't seem fair to unleash the truth right now. Suzanne had been an anxious mess when Jen arrived; she didn't need to upset her on the very same night.

"Tonight has been lovely."

Suzanne tilted her head up and smiled. "It has."

"I can't believe you thought I wouldn't feel the same way as you." Jen laughed and squeezed Suzanne against her.

"Yes, I'm...sorry about that."

"Do you think John would approve?" Jen asked, shifting to a more comfortable position. She propped herself up with an extra couple of cushions, the warmth of the fire reminding her just how good this life could be. Winters with Suzanne would be blissful, judging by how Jen felt so far. Maybe she could even look forward to Christmas for the first time in many years. "Ruby would absolutely approve of you, I know she would."

"John would want me to be happy. He wouldn't care who it was with so long as I was taken care of."

"Looks like you came to the right person then." Jen winked when Suzanne eyed her.

“Because I will, you know. I’ll take care of you.”

Suzanne splayed a hand across Jen’s chest as she leaned up and drew her into a kiss. “I don’t doubt that, baby. You’ve already shown me the kind of relationship we’ll have. I couldn’t ask for anything more.”

I hope you still believe that when I ultimately shatter your image of me.

Jen swallowed, fighting back the urge to blurt everything out right here, right now. She lay her head back, stared up at the ceiling, and sighed inwardly. She didn’t know what else to say, so she would say the first thing that came to mind and directly from her heart. “You mean the world to me. I need you to always remember that.”

Suzanne sighed and rested her head back on Jen’s chest. “Right back at you.”

Chapter 14

Suzanne moaned when Jen pressed her up against the wall in the hallway, only mildly disappointed that they didn’t have time for a little fun. Jen had called in during her lunch, but with the weather playing havoc with her delivery route today, she had decided she would head back on the road earlier than usual. That way, she could be back here to have dinner with Suzanne.

“You should go. I don’t want you rushing around to get finished on time.” Suzanne cupped Jen’s face, stealing a kiss and then another. “Stay over tonight.”

Jen drew back with a smile plastered on her face. “Consider it done. I’ll shoot home first for some clothes, and then I’ll be back.”

“Perfect.” Suzanne didn’t want to let Jen go. She didn’t want to open the door and watch her leave. She wanted to snuggle on the couch while the rain pelted the

windows. To gaze at the fire while Jen held her on the couch with meaningless TV playing low in the background. “Text me when you get a moment to yourself.”

“Okay. I’ll see you in a few hours.” Jen opened the front door and stepped out, taking her scanner from the side pocket of her cargo pants. She turned back briefly, those divine eyes melting Suzanne. “If anything changes, let me know.”

“Nothing will change. I’ll be here waiting for you, and that’s that.” Suzanne rested against the doorframe, her brows lifting when she saw Tracy pull up outside. “Bye, gorgeous. Drive carefully.”

Jen froze when Tracy got out of her car. They acknowledged one another, and then Tracy turned and watched Jen get into her van and drive off suddenly.

“Stop looking! She’s mine!”

Tracy eyed Suzanne as she came up the drive, her work bag hanging at her side. “You’re...dating her? That’s Jen?”

“Mmhmm. Gorgeous, isn’t she?” Suzanne cocked her head towards the hallway, inviting Tracy inside. She followed, but she didn’t respond. She just stared at Suzanne as though she’d grown a second head. “Is everything okay?”

“Is that who you’re dating? Seriously?”

Suzanne frowned. Tracy had never been judgemental in all the years they’d known one another, but tonight, that seemed to be exactly what she was doing. Judging. “Why the face? Jen is lovely. Is it because she’s butch?”

“You think I care that she’s butch?” Tracy laughed and shook her head. “I thought you knew me better than that.”

“Then what’s the problem?” Perhaps they should sit down so Tracy could explain what was going on in her head. There seemed to be an issue, but as far as Suzanne was concerned, there was no issue. Jen was perfection personified. “Come through. I’ll put the kettle on.”

Tracy followed, but that silence remained. Suzanne hated silence. She glanced back over her shoulder and eyed Tracy, but she just rested against the edge of the dining table, chewing on her lip.

“Okay, what’s going on?” Suzanne folded her arms across her chest, choosing to bypass the kettle right now. She wanted answers. “Trace?”

“What do you know about her?” Tracy looked back at Suzanne with what could only be described as fear in her eyes.

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“About Jen?” Suzanne’s brows drew together. “I know a lot about her. We’ve been together now for what? God, it must be coming up to two months.” Suzanne couldn’t believe so much time had passed. But wasn’t that a testament to how at ease they were around one another? It felt that way to Suzanne.

“And you’re okay with who she is? Where she’s been recently?”

Suzanne was lost. She had no idea what Tracy was talking about. “I’m sorry?”

“Jen. The woman you’re dating. She’s an ex-con.”

Suzanne’s world slowed as those words filtered into her brain. Jen, the woman she had fallen in love with, was a convicted criminal? No. Tracy had to be wrong. It simply wasn’t possible. “You’re lying.”

“Trust me, after the way you speak about her, I wish I was lying. I really wish I was wrong.” Tracy ran a hand down her face. “She used to be on my wing, Suzanne.”

“She would have told me. She’s been very open with everything.”

“Would she, though? I mean, would you tell the woman you’re dating that you’d been in prison?”

Suzanne swallowed. Was that what Jen had been talking about when she told Suzanne that she’d had a rough time lately? God, she hoped not. “Are you sure about this?”

“I’m sure,” Tracy said as she pushed off the edge of the dining table and crossed the room. “I’m sorry, but I’m definitely sure.”

Tears brimmed in Suzanne’s eyes. She didn’t know what to do with any of this information. All she knew was that it would take some time to process. “W-what am I supposed to do now?”

“Well, I think you and I both know what you have to do. Cut it off before it’s too late.”

Suzanne’s knees weakened. She needed to sit down before she fell down. On shaky legs, she walked into the living room and lowered herself to the couch. The very spot she had just spent twenty minutes kissing Jen in. “Tracy. It’s already too late.” Suzanne looked up at her best friend, a tear slipping down her cheek as she blinked it away. “I-I...I’m in love with her.”

Tracy sat down beside Suzanne and wrapped an arm around her shoulder. “Oh, Suzanne. I’m sure you’re not. I know you’re fond of her, but she is an ex-con. No matter how you look at it, that’s what she is.”

“Why didn’t I see it? If she’s this dreadful person, why is she so different with me?”

“I didn’t say she was a dreadful person. I actually felt sorry for her when she was inside. But that doesn’t change the fact that you’re dating someone with a criminal record.”

“What did she do?” Suzanne asked, unsure if she wanted to know about Jen’s crimes. It just didn’t seem possible that the woman she’d been sleeping with was responsible for any crimes. This was Jen they were talking about. Jen, the sweetest woman Suzanne had ever come across. “Please, Tracy. I need to know what she did.”

“That’s not something I can disclose. If you want answers, you should speak to Jen.”

Suzanne couldn’t do that. She couldn’t bring herself to imagine looking into Jen’s eyes, only for her girlfriend to confirm everything Tracy was saying. “I don’t think I can.”

Tracy got to her feet and squeezed Suzanne’s shoulder. “Let me make us some coffee while you try to process all of this.”

Process it? Suzanne couldn’t begin to process anything this day had thrown at her. Just a short while ago, she was making plans with Jen for this evening. Before Tracy pulled up outside the house, life was really something beautiful.

And now it wasn’t.

Fuck!

Jen calmed herself as the taxi approached Suzanne’s road. She had left here this afternoon knowing that her old prison guard was friends with Suzanne, and she didn’t know how to feel about it. Part of her knew that Tracy would come clean to Suzanne, but there was the tiniest bit of hope that she wouldn’t have. Suzanne hadn’t been in touch to tell her not to come over, and she hadn’t called to demand answers. Could Jen walk inside Suzanne’s this evening, and life would be just as it had been this afternoon? As the taxi came to a stop, she guessed she was about to find out.

She checked the meter and handed over a twenty-pound note. “Thanks. Keep the change.” Jen nervously climbed from the taxi, mindful of what could be waiting for her when she knocked on the door. It’s my job to tell her the truth. Nobody else’s.

As she approached the front door, it opened, but Suzanne wasn’t waiting for her with that killer smile. No, she simply turned and walked down the hallway. Jen cleared her

throat as she closed the door. “Hey. Sorry I’m late. The traffic was terrible.” Jen followed Suzanne further into the house, but Suzanne just kept her back to Jen. “Everything okay?”

You know it’s not! Jen just didn’t want to put her foot in it if Tracy hadn’t said anything.

“Babe?”

“Don’t.” Suzanne spun around this time, her eyes red and swollen. “Don’t you dare come here and pretend that this means anything to you.”

“I-I’m sorry?” Of course this meant something to Jen. Fuck, it meant everything.

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“You lied to me.” Suzanne stepped closer and pointed her finger in Jen’s face. The fury in her eyes hadn’t gone unnoticed. Not at all. “You came into my home, you shared my bed, and you befriended my niece...while fucking lying to me!”

Jen hung her head, her shoulders slumped as she forced down the lump in her throat. “She told you.”

“She told me something that you should have told me the day we met.” Suzanne’s voice broke as she said that, her inability to look Jen in the eye only breaking her heart. “I’ve packed up anything of yours that you’d left here. A hoodie or two. Some shorts. T-shirts.” Suzanne lifted the plastic carrier bag from the floor and dropped it onto the dining table between them. “I’m sure you’re used to your clothes being in plastic bags since you’ve spent time behind bars.”

Fuck, that hurt. The pain in Jen’s chest confirmed it. “I wanted to tell you.”

“Yet you didn’t.” Suzanne scoffed. “So, you can leave now.”

“C-can we talk? Please?”

Suzanne’s brows rose as she laughed. “Oh, now you want to talk and come clean? I don’t think so.”

Jen wanted to explain. She wanted to try to convince Suzanne that she was worth a shot, but was she? No, Jen wasn’t. This was the very end she knew would come at some point. It just hadn’t happened as quickly as she thought it would. The longer their relationship went on, the less Jen felt as though she had to disclose her past. It

didn't seem relevant anymore. But Suzanne wasn't interested, so Jen nodded and lifted the bag from the table. "I'm sorry. That's all I can say to you."

"You're sorry I found out the truth." The look of disgust Suzanne gave her as she said that tore Jen in two. Just a few hours ago, Suzanne had looked at Jen as though she meant the world. But now? Well, Jen didn't want to know what Suzanne thought of her.

She stood in the middle of the room, feeling more vulnerable than ever. It didn't matter what she said to Suzanne; all she saw now was Jen...the criminal. "I wish we could have sat down and talked about this, but I respect that you don't want to see me again or hear my excuses."

Suzanne nodded towards the open living room door. "As I've already said, you can leave now."

Jen backed up towards the door, the ache in her chest intensifying with each breath she took. She looked up at Suzanne, saddened by how this was ending. Jen wanted to believe that the tear Suzanne had just brushed from her cheek meant she was sad too, but it was anger, plain and simple. "She died, and I lost my head. That doesn't excuse anything, but I'm not a bad person. I made a few mistakes, and they ruined my life. I lost everything. Most of my family included. I think I've been punished enough at this point. I don't need to be punished by you, too."

"Plenty of people have to deal with death, Jen. It doesn't mean they end up in prison because of it."

"I know." Jen was well aware of that. She also agreed wholeheartedly with Suzanne. "I realise there is no point in me standing here trying to reason with you. From the moment I walked through the door tonight, it was quite clear what you thought of me."

“I don’t even know you!”

“Except you do. This is me. I’ve been nothing other than genuine with you.” Jen had never felt so at peace as she had recently. Now, she just had to remain focused on her mental health and pray that it didn’t go downhill again. She couldn’t go back to those days; she wouldn’t survive them. “I did want to tell you. The only reason I didn’t in the end was because you were the only person in my life who didn’t treat me as though I’d messed up in the past. You didn’t look down your nose at me. You...liked what you saw.”

“I did...but you fucked it up completely.”

Jen chewed her lip as she lowered her eyes. “If I’d told you in the beginning, what would have happened?”

Suzanne snorted. “I certainly wouldn’t have asked you on a second date.”

“I see.” Jen nodded as she took a step back into the hallway. “Then I’m sorry you were ever unfortunate enough to cross paths with me.”

God, there was so much Jen wanted to say to Suzanne. There were so many things she wanted to thank her for. With Suzanne, Jen had felt like nothing more than an ordinary human being. For the first time since Ruby’s death, Jen felt as though her life was piecing itself back together.

“I’ll...see you.” Jen puffed out her cheeks and turned for the front door. She wasn’t sure where she was going or what she would do, but the greatest time of her life recently was now officially over.

“Jen?”

Suzanne's soft voice reached her ears. Jen turned, her heart in her mouth. "Yeah?"

"I wish you could have been honest with me from the start." Suzanne looked back at her, her arms wrapped around herself.

"Me too." Jen smiled weakly. "Because it would have saved you the hassle of wasting your time on me, and it would have saved me from a broken heart."

"You'll be just fine." Suzanne managed the smallest smile, but Jen wasn't convinced by it. This woman hated her, and she could try to hide it all she wanted, but she was failing. "Best of luck, okay?"

Best of luck. Suzanne had been her luck, and it had just run out once and for all.

"You know, before all of this? I had a great job, a place of my own, and a family who loved me. I was a primary school teacher and community fundraiser. I was a well-thought-of sister, a friend who people loved to have around, and now... Now I have nothing." Jen swallowed as Suzanne stared through her. "Even my baby nephew doesn't know who I am. His dad won't let me see him." Jen held up the pathetic bag of her belongings, her back pressed to Suzanne's front door. "This is all my life will ever be now. This is what I'm reduced to. A shopping bag with my shit in it." God, Jen wanted to hug this woman one last time. She wouldn't dare, though. "You came into my life when I thought I had no hope. You opened the door to me with no idea who I'd turned into before I was sent down. Which, by the way, was the best thing that could have happened to me. If I hadn't been arrested, I'd be dead now."

"We have to live with the consequences of our actions."

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“And I do. Every single day.” This was a waste of time. Suzanne didn’t care about anything Jen was saying. “Before I leave and we go our separate ways, I wanted to thank you. For seeing me for me. For enjoying being with me. For...giving me hope for the future. Because that’s exactly what I felt with you. Hopeful.” Jen laughed and shook her head. “But I think I’m done now. What’s the point in trying to get my life back on track when people won’t give me the chance to do that?”

“I’m sure a lot of people will give you that chance.”

Jen’s bottom lip trembled as she stared back at Suzanne. The distance felt greater than anything she could tackle. “But not you. The only person I really care about lately.”

She opened the door and stepped out onto the garden path. Suzanne didn’t follow, but Jen hadn’t expected her to. It was quite clear there was no coming back from this. Closing the door softly, Jen swallowed down the lump in her throat, but it was no use. The tears slid down her face at a speed she couldn’t comprehend.

Face it. You’ve fucked your entire life up.

Three hours. That’s how long Jen had spent walking the streets in the rain. She hadn’t stopped off anywhere, she hadn’t looked another person in the eye, she had just walked. Until she couldn’t walk anymore. The idea of going inside and telling her mum it was over with Suzanne was putting her off opening the front door. The sympathetic look she knew was coming just wasn’t what Jen needed right now.

Could Jen leave and start fresh somewhere else? Could she maybe set herself up in

Europe amongst the ex-pats, hoping she didn't bump into anyone she knew? Jen didn't know what her next step would be, but it wouldn't include Suzanne. That woman had washed her hands of Jen the moment Tracy set foot inside that house.

Shivering from her damp coat, Jen slid her key into the lock and quietly made her way inside. She wasn't sure she wanted to see her mum right now, so she would creep up the stairs and hope Denise forgot she existed for the rest of the night. Because that's how Jen felt right now. As though she may as well not exist. Life was pointless if she couldn't move on.

"Jen?" The living room door opened as she tried to close the front door quietly. "What are you doing home? I thought you were staying at Suzanne's tonight?"

"Yeah, um...change of plans."

"Oh, well, I've just put a film on if you wanted to join me?"

Jen briefly looked in her mum's direction as she walked down the small hallway. "I think I'm just going to call it a night." Her voice broke unexpectedly, but she hoped her mum didn't catch it. "Goodnight, Mum."

"Jen, love. What's going on?"

"N-nothing. Absolutely nothing at all." Jen lifted a shoulder as a tear slid down her face and gathered at her jawline. "You have a nice night, okay?"

"Something happened, didn't it?" Denise regarded Jen with an understanding smile. "Between you and Suzanne."

"It's over, if that's what you're asking."

Denise sighed and took Jen's hand. "Come on in here. Talk to me."

"I don't really know what to say, Mum. I'm not sure there's anything to say." Jen's entire body felt heavy. Her joints ached, her eyes burned, and she had a raging headache. "Suzanne knows I was sent down, and now I'm back here..."

Denise tugged Jen into the living room and closed the door. She took the bag from her hand, removed her coat, and guided Jen towards the couch. "Sit down and breathe for five minutes. Take a moment to gather your thoughts."

Jen had spent the last three hours with her thoughts. She didn't need to gather them. She needed them to fuck off and leave her alone. "It turns out that Suzanne's best friend is one of the prison guards from my wing."

"Oh, love. That's unfortunate," Denise said as she sat beside Jen. "What happened this evening?"

"Not a lot, really. I went over there, and Suzanne asked me to leave. She said some...hurtful things, but that's understandable. I lied to her. Well, maybe I didn't lie, but I wasn't forthcoming with the truth, either. She has every right to hate me."

"I'm sure she doesn't hate you, love. You've spoken about her so much to me, and I got the impression that things were going very well."

Jen smiled as she stared down at her lap. "They were. I was so close to telling her I was falling in love with her. But I can't blame her for feeling how she does now. She thinks I deceived her, but it wasn't like that. I just wanted to love her, Mum. That's all I've wanted from the moment I knew it was serious. To love her, and hopefully, one day, be loved in return."

Denise wrapped her arms around Jen and held her close. "Give her some time. She

needs to process and then the two of you can meet and talk through it all.”

“No. She’s done. She hates me. I hate me. Even you probably hate me, but you’re too much of a good person to show it.” Jen scoffed as she brushed the back of her hand against her cheek. “I don’t know what the point is anymore, Mum. The point of me. I just...I bring nothing to anyone’s life.”

“Don’t you dare, Jen. You bring so much to a lot of people’s lives.”

“Well, where are these people? Who gives a shit about me other than you? Even Grace has stopped calling me because of Dan. My own sister. The kid I used to stand up for against the bullies.”

“You leave Grace and Dan to me.”

Jen pulled back and looked at her mum. “I always wish it was me, you know. Instead of Ruby. She had so much going for her, so much to do with her life, and I just... I wish it had been me and not her.”

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Denise closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I think you need to get some rest, love. Sleep this day away and start again tomorrow. Because no matter what, tomorrow is a fresh start.”

“Yeah.” Jen could only smile. Her mum didn’t need all of this bullshit again. She’d been through enough with Jen. “You’re right. I’ll get myself off to bed.” Jen ran her hands down her thighs and then got to her feet. “Love you, Mum.”

“I love you, too.”

Chapter 15

Suzanne dragged a shopping bag inside the house, throwing it down in the hallway as she turned back to lock her car. Tracy was due over any minute now, but she wasn’t sure she had the energy for visitors this evening. It had been a week since she’d watched Jen walk out the door, and she was beginning to regret letting her go. Truthfully, she’d regretted it the moment she climbed the stairs to bed that night.

Suzanne’s main concern was that Jen was in a dark place again. No matter what happened between them moving forward, Suzanne still cared about her. Yeah, because she walked away believing that.

Suzanne scoffed. Her attitude towards Jen had been appalling. Honestly, Suzanne hadn’t known she had that attitude in her. And to use it against Jen, of all people, regardless of the fact she hadn’t been honest with her... Suzanne felt terrible about it.

The doorbell rang as she carried the bag through to the kitchen. All she wanted to do

this evening was get into bed with a book and a cup of tea. She didn't want Tracy here asking questions that Suzanne didn't have the answers to. She just...wanted to be left alone. Still, she answered the door with her best smile. "Hi. Come in. I'm just putting the shopping away."

Tracy closed the door and carried a bottle of wine through to the kitchen. "Is that your weekly shop?" Tracy looked down at the one lonely shopping bag in the middle of the kitchen floor.

Suzanne frowned. "Yes, why?"

"You've barely got anything."

"Well, there's only me again now. What's the point in buying too much food that I'll never get through alone?" Before Tracy had shown up here last week, Suzanne's life was changing, and it was for the better. But a week on, she was feeling lonelier than she ever had. Jen had been here, she'd spent endless time with Suzanne, and she'd been the very image of what Suzanne was beginning to see in her future. "How's work?"

"Same shit, different day." Tracy took two wine glasses from the cupboard and poured them each a glass. "Been up to much?"

"No."

Suzanne had very little conversation in her lately. In fact, she'd actively avoided seeing Tracy since she'd revealed the truth about Jen.

"I probably should have called you this morning and told you not to come over. I'm not great company at the moment." With the mood Suzanne was in, she couldn't be sure she'd ever be good company again.

“All the more reason for me to be here.” Tracy took the empty bag from Suzanne and handed her a glass of wine instead. “John’s anniversary is coming up.”

“Mm. I’m well aware.” Suzanne kicked off her shoes and dragged herself into the living room. “I had plans, but they’re no longer going ahead.”

“Plans?”

“John is buried at the same cemetery as Jen’s best friend. We were going to visit their graves together, and then she was taking me out for dinner.” Suzanne caught the tremble in her voice. Her biggest regret today was not reaching out to Jen.

“Did you want me to come with you?”

Suzanne looked up at Tracy, a hint of disdain for her best friend. If she’d never told Suzanne who Jen was, she could have spent this week making those solid plans with her. “No, thanks. It was something Jen and I wanted to do together.”

“Okay, but Jen has been around for a couple of months, Suzanne. I’ve been here for the best part of twenty years.”

“And you’re also the reason I’ve spent this entire week feeling incredibly miserable.” Suzanne lowered her wine glass to the side table. “Don’t bring wine over anymore. Jen doesn’t drink, and I was quite enjoying being sober with her. I don’t even want the glass you’ve just poured me.”

“I know it’s shitty, but don’t take it out on me. I was only telling you, my best friend, the truth. Something the woman you supposedly love wasn’t capable of doing!”

“I was so angry that I packed up her belongings and asked her to leave. I didn’t even give her the chance to explain.” Suzanne’s stomach flipped at the mere reminder of

the way she'd spoken to Jen that night. She could see how devastated Jen had been, but Suzanne just had to kick her while she was already down. Cruel. That's what she'd been. Entirely cruel.

"She spent thirteen months behind bars. I'm not sure what there is to explain." Tracy scoffed as she lowered herself to the opposite couch. "I know you're ready to move on, but you can do better."

"Why? Because you say so?" Suzanne had spent most of her friendship with Tracy being told what to do and when to do it. When John died, it only got worse. Considering Suzanne was older than Tracy by three years, she certainly enjoyed mothering her. "This may be hard for you to understand, but Jen made me happy. There were times when it felt as though we'd known one another for years, not just a couple of months. And the way she held me. God, I didn't even feel that much comfort with John."

"Considering you felt this way about her, you kicked her out the door quick enough."

"Because I was angry. More so with you than anything else. You just landed it on me and then told me to ask her for answers. I mean, how bad was it?"

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“Suzanne, I’m really not in a position to say. If you want answers, you should speak to Jen.”

“I can’t. The way I spoke to her last week, I’ll never see her again. She’ll never come here again.” Suzanne’s stomach roiled at that. The look in Jen’s eyes as she left this house was something she never wanted to see again. “I just wish it could have been different. Because no matter what her past involves, it doesn’t change the fact that she made me incredibly happy.”

“I’m sorry. I could have eased it into the conversation better. But I don’t regret telling you. You have every right to know if someone has a criminal record, Suzanne.”

“John had a criminal record.” Suzanne snorted.

“He did?” Tracy seemed shocked by that, but it wasn’t something Suzanne had ever shared with anyone. Because it wasn’t anyone else’s business.

“Fraud. He did five years inside before we met.”

“I...never knew that.” Tracy frowned. “Why didn’t I know that?”

“Because it didn’t change anything. John was John. He was my husband. I was the one sleeping with him, not anybody else.”

“Well, if it makes you feel better, Jen’s sentence was far less worrying than something like fraud.” Tracy regarded Suzanne with a partial smile. She knew her best friend felt terrible for recent events, but Suzanne wasn’t sure she could change

anything at this point. “I promise you.”

“I’m worried about her,” Suzanne said, her bottom lip trembling. “That she may do something to hurt herself.”

“Jen left prison with all the tools she needed to thrive on the outside. She took on anything that was given to her. Courses, classes, rehabilitation. Shewantedto be better.”

“Did you know it all stemmed from her losing her best friend? Sudden death.”

“Yes, I was aware of her file.” Tracy sat back and crossed her legs. “I shouldn’t tell you this, but she actually stopped me from being attacked by another inmate one day.”

“She did?”

“Mm.” Tracy sipped her wine. “She’d had it in for me from the day she was sent down. She had a shiv made up and ready, hidden in her sock. Jen overheard the plan and came to me. Told me about it. They sent in guards to search her cell, and she had the shiv hidden on her, just as Jen had told me.”

Suzanne smiled at that. She knew deep down that Jen was a good person. It was just a shame Suzanne had reacted the way she did. Perhaps they could have sat down, as Jen had suggested that night. But Suzanne’s stubbornness had prevented that from happening. In that moment, she chose to focus on what she wanted to focus on. Hurting Jen for not being upfront with her.

“She’s not a bad person, Suzanne. Yes, she’s a convicted criminal, and yes, I’d prefer it if you found someone who wasn’t one drink away from repeating the past, but shedoeshave a good heart.”

“It was a heart that was almost mine,” Suzanne said, staring down at the floor. “I miss her.”

“Do you think it’s something you can put behind you? Can you forgive her?”

Suzanne looked up at Tracy, her brows drawn. “I think I’m the one who should be asking for forgiveness. She didn’t deserve my reaction. I don’t know the Jen from the past. All I know is the woman I met recently and fell in love with.”

Tracy cleared her throat. “Does she know? That you’re in love with her?”

“No.” Suzanne chewed her lip to keep it from trembling again. “I was scared to tell her in case she didn’t feel the same way.”

“Maybe you should visit. Explain that you were shocked. Blame me if you have to.”

Suzanne sniffled as her emotions weighed heavier with each second that passed. “I don’t even know where she lives.”

“You’ve not been to her place?”

“No. She was living with her mum, and now it makes sense as to why. And the courier job. She has that job because nobody else will employ her, doesn’t she?”

Tracy nodded slowly. “Probably. Yeah.”

“That’s really sad.” Suzanne shook her head, disappointed that Jen had come out of this the way she had. How was anyone supposed to move on with their life and better themselves if nobody would give them that chance? Suzanne inwardly chastised herself. She’d also refused to give Jen a second chance, so she was no better! “Wherever she is, I hope she can find some peace and move forward.”

“And you?” Tracy asked, a brow lifted. “Will you find peace and move forward?”

Suzanne didn't know what her life looked like in the coming weeks and months. But she knew she didn't want to date. It had all gone so well, and then it had fallen apart. The only thing Suzanne knew right now was that it would take her some time to fall out of love with Jen. “I'll...remain as I was. Single and focused on work.”

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“Suzanne—”

“Don’t, Tracy. I had the chance to be happy, and I blew it. All because I listened to you instead of my heart.”

“I just wanted to be upfront with you. I’m sorry that it led to this.” Tracy sighed, then drained her wine glass. “If I hadn’t told you and you found out I knew, it would have been far worse.”

Suzanne lifted her glass full of wine from the table and moved into the kitchen. She emptied the contents down the sink, turning around when she felt Tracy’s eyes on her. “I think I’d like to be alone now. I have a headache, and I just want to soak in the bath.”

“Please don’t push me away, Suzanne.”

Suzanne nodded slowly as she rested back against the counter. “I’ll call you. When I’m ready to.”

Chapter 16

Jen brushed the blades of grass from the base of Ruby’s headstone, kneeling down so she could give her picture a wipe-over. She loved the picture Lyn had chosen for her daughter’s grave. It showed the real Ruby. The fun-loving Ruby. The Ruby that Jen would always remember. Laughing and smiling, her eyes bright. Jen had actually been the one to take this particular picture while they were on holiday together in Greece. It was the very same one she had framed in her bedroom and the very same

one she had stuck to the wall in her prison cell. This picture was the picture that had kept Jen going for all these years. When Jen looked at it, she felt as though Ruby was still with her.

She sighed, wishing she could find the words to describe the pain she felt whenever she visited Ruby's grave. It had been five and a half years since her death, and Jen still struggled to understand. She always would, but she'd made peace with that. It wasn't something her brain was able to comprehend, so she chose to block it out while remembering Ruby for all of the amazing memories she had given to her.

"You won't believe what I did recently," Jen said, sitting on the grass and crossing her legs. "Fell in love with a gorgeous woman...and then I fucked it up."

Jen knew Ruby would be rolling her eyes. At one time, she was notorious for getting it wrong with women. Ruby had been there for her on so many occasions, but then Jen met Lizzie, and her life fell into place. She had a woman she loved and her best friend. She didn't need anything else. Only Jen had gone on to lose Lizzie, too. Her fiancée couldn't handle Jen at her worst, and Jen didn't blame her for that. Two years after Ruby's death and two years before Jen was arrested, Lizzie had chosen to call it a day. As far as Jen was aware, Lizzie was now married, and her wife was pregnant.

And Jen...well, she was just existing.

"I should have been honest with her from the start, and I know that, but being with her just felt so great that I didn't want to risk her knowing the truth. She was so good for me, Rubes. It was like we just understood one another. She's been through shit too, and I don't know." Jen rubbed a hand down her face. "I made another mistake, I guess. Story of my life lately."

Jen could only apologise to everyone she had hurt over the years, but apologies were never enough. Ruby would have forgiven her without a second thought, but everyone

else? No. Not in this lifetime.

“You would have loved Suzanne, and I think she would have loved you, too.”

“Jen?”

Jen frowned as she looked over her shoulder. It was Ruby’s mum. She scrambled to her feet, brushing any grass from her backside. “Hi, Lyn. Good to see you.”

“I didn’t know you were coming here today.”

Why would she? Lyn didn’t accept Jen’s calls or any other form of contact these days. “I had the afternoon off from work, and I just wanted to chat with her. But I can go. I’ll come back another time.”

Lyn didn’t respond. She just looked at Ruby’s grave and cleared her throat.

“So, um...it was nice seeing you. I hope you’re doing okay.”

“Yes. Fine.” Lyn looked down at the roses in her hand. “Take care, Jen.”

“Lyn, have I done something to upset you? It’s just that I sent letters and tried to call, but I haven’t heard anything back from you.”

“Upset me?” Lyn laughed and shook her head. “I can’t believe you’d even ask me that.”

Jen’s brows drew together. “I...I don’t?—”

“My daughter lost her life. And you? You chose to ruin yours.” Lyn scoffed as she blinked back tears. “I can’t forgive you for that. You had the chance to make

something of yourself. To grow and live a life she couldn't. But no. It had to be all about you and your fuck ups once she died."

Jen cast her gaze on the grass. "Y-yeah. I get that."

"So, yes. I am upset with you, Jen. I wish you well, and I hope you can recover from the shit you put your family through, but I don't want to associate with you anymore. I don't want to remember your mistakes every time I look at you. I don't want to hear your name in the same sentence as my daughter's. You had so much potential. You had so much to look forward to." Lyn frowned. "You even told me you'd help me when it came to raising funds that could help with research into SADS, but you didn't. Because you only thought about yourself."

"I am sorry. For everything. If I could go back and do things differently, I would. In a heartbeat. But I can't change what I did. I can only live with the consequences and hope that one day, people can find it inside themselves to forgive me."

"Well, you'll be waiting a very long time for any forgiveness from me." Lyn stepped past Jen and lay the roses at the foot of Ruby's headstone. "I'd like to be alone with my daughter now."

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Jen didn't respond. She shoved her hands in her pockets and walked away as quickly as she could. She thought coming here today would bring her some peace; it was usually the only place where she felt calm. But now, she just had another name to add to the list of people who loathed her.

Another day of fucking misery.

Jen climbed into her mum's car—fully insured this time— and decided she would sit and calm down for a moment. No matter how many times she apologised, it was becoming clear that it would never be enough. Even if she knew deep down it would never be enough, someone somewhere had to give her the benefit of the doubt. The entire world couldn't be against her.

Maybe it was time to leave. Maybe it was time to disappear off the face of the earth and give people the opportunity to just get on with their lives.

Jen shut the front door, kicking off her shoes and leaving them in the hallway. She was tired of this. She was sick of everyone avoiding her. God, anyone would think she was a serial killer for the way she was being treated, but Jen did partly understand.

She stepped into the living room and froze when she saw Grace sitting on the couch with Toby. Jen shouldn't be here. She wouldn't have come home yet if she'd known her sister and nephew were visiting. "Sorry. I'll go out for a bit." Jen turned to leave, stopped by a hand on her shoulder. "Mum, it's okay. I could do with another walk, to be honest."

“Toby is here to see you. And Grace.”

Jen snorted. She found that very hard to believe. “Dan will be fuming if he finds out about this.”

Grace got to her feet, bouncing Toby in her arms. “Dan isn’t speaking to me, so I don’t really care.”

“What? Why?” Dan and Grace were insanely in love with one another. Jen couldn’t believe they weren’t speaking. “Is this because of me?”

“No. It’s because I’m sick of his attitude whenever I mention your name. I told him as much last night, and he left for work this morning without even saying goodbye.”

“Grace, don’t fall out with him because of me. I’m not worth it.”

“You’re my sister. Of course you’re worth it.” Grace held Toby out, smiling when Jen took him from her. “Who else is going to teach Toby about football? Dan is a rugby guy, and I don’t know the first thing about it.”

Tears brimmed on Jen’s eyelids as Toby smiled up at her. “Hi, little man.” He held onto Jen’s jacket, those beautiful blue eyes inquisitive as he wore a tiny frown. “You have no idea who I am, but I’m the one who is going to spoil you rotten, okay? Anything you need, you come to Auntie Jen. If your mum tells you that no sweets are allowed, I’ll sneak you some. And I’ll buy you your first pint.”

Jen’s mum placed a hand on her back, urging her further into the living room. “Go and sit down, love. I’ll put the kettle on.”

Jen studied Toby’s face, smiling as she turned her attention to Grace. They sat next to one another on the couch, Jen’s knee bouncing up and down gently. “He’s starting to

look more and more like you.”

Grace sighed. “Poor thing.”

“Hey! Don’t talk about yourself like that. You got the looks, and I got the gay. Remember?”

“Yes. I remember.” Grace placed her hand on Jen’s wrist. “I’m sorry I stopped calling. I hated knowing Dan wouldn’t let me bring Toby over, so I just avoided it all.”

“I get it, don’t worry.” Jen regarded her sister with an understanding smile. “You and Dan will be okay.”

“He needs to take his head out of his arse. Half of his family are drug dealers or drug users. He has no right to judge you or anyone else. His own cousin was arrested in Spain the other month and got ten years for being part of a drug gang over there.”

“Maybe that’s why he’s so protective of his son.”

“Tough. I’m not putting up with it anymore. Maybe if he actually bothered to get to know you, he’d realise you’re not your past. He’s just being a tit.”

Jen covered Toby’s ears. “Language!”

“I’ve missed you, sis.” Grace’s voice broke as she shook her head. “I hated knowing you were stuck in a cell. You didn’t deserve to be there with all the hardened criminals.”

“I messed up. I did deserve it.” Jen would always own up to her misgivings. What was the point in blaming anyone else when she had made the choices she had?

“Mum was saying you’ve met someone.” Grace grinned as she nudged Jen’s shoulder. “She said it’s all a bit up in the air at the minute, but it can be salvaged, right?”

Jen’s heart soared when Toby latched onto her little finger. “Yeah, I met someone. Fell in love with her, too. We’d been seeing one another about two months. Then the usual happened, and she asked me to leave.”

“The usual?” Grace asked, frowning.

“She found out about prison. Her best friend is a prison guard. Only I could be so unlucky, right?”

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Grace sighed as she flopped back on the couch. “You never did have much luck, kid. But I’m sure she’ll come ‘round eventually.”

“It’s been like two weeks, Grace. She’s done with me, and that’s okay.” Jen cleared her throat as she turned and faced Grace better. “I, um...I’m actually thinking of leaving. Going abroad.”

“No, you can’t do that.” Grace shook her head. “What am I supposed to do without you?”

“Have a better relationship with Dan?” Jen quirked a brow. She understood that Grace and their mum wouldn’t want Jen to leave, but she was so close to making it a done deal. She couldn’t face being shunned by anyone else she came across here. “Look, I just need to move on with my life. I can’t do that here when people stare at me in the street.”

“Who stares at you in the street?”

Jen propped Toby up on the mass of cushions between them, his little eyelids fluttering closed as he yawned. “A few people have. But it’s not even those people I care about. People used to stare at me anyway just because of the way I present myself.” They lived in a small village where anything considered non-conforming got people’s backs up. “But this is different. Anyone I know...avoids me. They don’t want to speak to me or be seen with me. I went to Ruby’s grave today, and Lyn was there. She told me she could never forgive me for ruining my life.”

“Lyn is still grieving. I’m sure she didn’t mean it.”

“Oh, she meant it, Grace. I tried to contact her during most of my sentence. She didn’t write back, and she wouldn’t accept the calls.” Jen ran her hands down her thighs. “I’m no use to anybody here. I thought life was changing when I met Suzanne, and for a brief time, it did change.” Jen paused, wishing she could make things right with Suzanne before she left the country. “But she can’t date an ex-con, and I’d never expect her to.”

“Why didn’t you tell her when you met her?”

“Because then I never would have had the chance to experience happiness for a little while. Because when I was with her, she didn’t see any of my mistakes. Because I just wanted to be me. Normal.”

“If she can’t see the person you are, regardless of what’s happened in the past, then maybe she was never the right person for you.”

Maybe Grace was right. Jen hadn’t considered that. No, she had just continued beating herself up about something she couldn’t change. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“If you want to leave because it’s something you’ve considered for a while, then okay. But don’t let the people around here win. You have me and Mum and Toby. You have family, Jen. We are your family.” Grace squeezed Jen’s hand. “Please think about it first. That’s all I’m asking.”

Jen looked down at Toby. He was sleeping soundly, safe and loved. “I will.”

Chapter 17

Frustrated, Suzanne turned off her computer screen and sat back in her seat. She couldn’t concentrate on work at all today. Actually, she hadn’t been able to concentrate for almost two weeks. No matter what she did, nothing seemed to help.

She was sleeping better with the help of sleeping pills, but that was only masking the problem. It wasn't helping, not by a long shot. She knew what she had to do. She had to find Jen. Even if it came to nothing and Jen didn't want to see her, Suzanne knew she had to try.

Lifting her phone from her desk, she brought up Tracy's number and called it. She'd tried calling the number she had for Jen on multiple occasions now, but there was never any answer. The number wasn't in use anymore. That partly worried Suzanne, but she also had to understand that she'd hurt Jen, and Jen had likely blocked her number.

"Hi, love. Everything okay?"

No, it wasn't. "Are you at work today?"

"I am. Just on my lunch break. You caught me at the right time. What's up?"

Suzanne pinched the bridge of her nose and prayed that Tracy would help her out.

"I'm still trying to get a hold of Jen. Could you...w-would you see if her address is on file?"

"First of all, I don't have access to that sort of thing. And secondly, I'd be fired if I even dared to do something like that."

"R-right. Yes. I'm sorry I even asked." Suzanne was going to lose her mind if she didn't find Jen soon. "Do you know where I could look for that information?"

"Have you tried using one of those websites that grabs information from the electoral roll?"

"Yes. The house is listed ex-directory. It doesn't show the address."

“I’m sorry, Suzanne. I can’t help you with this one. I guess she’ll be found when she wants to be found.”

Suzanne felt a swell of emotion rise up her throat. She was tired of this. She just wanted to see Jen. She needed this. “I feel fucking hopeless.”

“Look, maybe this is for the best. I know you want to make things right, and that’s just one of the things I love about you, but maybe you should let it lie.”

“I...can’t. I need to see her, Trace.” Suzanne knew that people wouldn’t understand, but she couldn’t just leave this alone. Jen meant a lot to her; they’d already made memories with one another. Just the mere thought of Jen had tears sitting on Suzanne’s eyelids. If someone could make her cry after everything she’d dealt with herself, then she had to fix it. Suzanne had to make it right. “I’ll let you finish lunch. I’ll call you next week.”

“Do you want me to come over tonight? Maybe we could order in and figure out how to get you out of this mess.”

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“No, thank you. I’ll probably be working late.” Suzanne wouldn’t be working late, but Tracy didn’t know that. She just didn’t want to see people right now. “I’ll call you, okay?”

“Okay. I’ll wait to hear from you.”

Suzanne lowered her phone to her desk and rocked back in her office chair. Just a few weeks ago, she’d had a lot of fun in this chair with Jen. Those memories, the unexpected intimacy she felt with her far sooner than either of them anticipated...she could never forget Jen no matter how hard she tried. Nor did she want to.

Coffee. Coffee fixes everything.

Suzanne forced herself out of her chair and busied herself at the coffee machine. Maybe she could join one of those dating apps and hope she came across Jen’s name. Surely, she would be using those sorts of opportunities when it came to dating again. Suzanne didn’t know the first thing about them, but Jen seemed to know her stuff.

As the beans finished grinding, the doorbell rang.

Suzanne frowned. She wasn’t expecting anything. She’d already had her packages delivered this morning, and not by Jen...sadly. She lowered the cup in her hand and approached the front door. When she opened it, she couldn’t believe what she found.

“Package for Dixon,” Jen said, keeping her head down as she input information on her handheld scanner. “Just a signature, please.”

Suzanne reached out a shaking hand and signed her name, and then she took the package from Jen. “I...I’m not expecting a package.”

Jen, still refusing to make eye contact, checked the device in her hand. “This is package two of two.”

“Ah. I see. I wondered why the box was so small this morning.” Suzanne willed Jen to look up at her, but she didn’t. She just backed away.

“Glad I could clear that up for you. Have a nice day. Bye.”

Suzanne swallowed as Jen turned and stepped out of her garden gate. Did she speak up, or did she let her go? Suzanne had been craving to see her. She knew what she had to do. “Jen, wait!”

Jen turned around, the look in her eyes just as heartbreaking as it had been almost two weeks ago. “Yeah? Is something wrong?”

“Everything is wrong.”

Jen frowned. “Do you need me to take the package back?”

“N-no.” God, Suzanne didn’t feel prepared for this. Even though she had spent thirteen days going over everything in her head, she didn’t know where to begin. “I...would you like to come in?”

“Me?” Jen laughed as she pointed a finger at her own chest. “You want the convict inside your home?”

“Jen.”

“Look, this isn’t necessary. You’ve made it clear how you feel about this, about me, so we really don’t need to pretend that it can be worked out. I know it can’t be. You don’t owe me anything at all, Suzanne.”

Suzanne regarded Jen with a wry smile. “I owe you an apology.”

“You really don’t.” Jen held up a hand. “I should have been upfront with you. I wasn’t. And I lost you. There is no apology to be made here other than from me.” Jen closed the gate and threw a thumb over her shoulder. “I should go. I still have seventy-odd parcels to deliver.”

“You wanted to talk...”

“I did. I wanted to explain so you didn’t walk away from this thinking the very worst of me.” Jen turned her watch towards herself and sighed. “I should really go. Take care of yourself, Suzanne. It was good seeing you.”

Suzanne rushed down the garden path and stopped at the gate as Jen crossed the street. They had to fix this. There were no two ways about it. “Come over when you finish work. I would like to talk, Jen.”

Jen glanced back at Suzanne as she opened the door of the van. She didn’t agree or disagree; Jen just climbed inside and closed the door. All Suzanne could do now was hope that Jen showed up here whenever she was ready to have that conversation. The very conversation Suzanne should have agreed to the night she broke it off with her.

Come on, Jen. I miss you.

Jen looked up at Suzanne’s house, the darkness around her comforting as she exhaled a deep breath. Suzanne had asked for answers, to talk, so here Jen was. Willing to lay everything out before she put another fucked up stage of her life behind her. Jen

wasn't here to grovel, and she wasn't here to ask Suzanne to take her back. All she wanted was for Suzanne to walk away from this with the truth. With the knowledge that Jen was who she thought she was...just a little broken at one time.

Jen never wanted Suzanne to hate her. She'd never wanted to withhold anything from the very woman she was in love with. But she had come to terms with the fact that Suzanne and likely any other woman in the future wouldn't want a relationship with Jen. Who would? Sometimes, life just fell that way.

She pushed the gate open, pulled her shoulders back as she took the steps, and rang the doorbell. This evening would see the very end of this, and that was okay. It had to be okay. Perhaps in time, life would pick up again, but Jen was taking things one step at a time. There was no point in looking forward to the future. She only ended up bitterly disappointed.

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When the door opened, Suzanne looked back at her with surprise written all over her face. “J-Jen. I...didn’t think you’d come back.”

“You may have refused me the opportunity to talk, but I’m not like that, so here I am.”

“C-come in. Please.” Suzanne stepped aside, still shocked by Jen’s arrival. When Jen nervously stepped over the threshold, she could only give Suzanne the smallest smile. “Go through to the living room.”

Jen did so, her usual routine of removing her shoes before she stepped onto the carpet taking place. It was something so normal—meaningless—but it reminded Jen of the moments they’d shared here. A routine, if you will. A routine she had been really growing to love.

“Can I get you anything? Tea, coffee, water? Anything?” For the first time since they’d met, Suzanne seemed extremely anxious. It was clear in her voice and the way her hands trembled.

While Jen appreciated that Suzanne was trying to be hospitable, it wasn’t necessary. “No, thanks. I won’t stay long.”

“I’ve been trying to call you.”

Jen couldn’t fathom why. The night she left here some two weeks ago had certainly been a rough time. Suzanne didn’t seem like she’d ever want to face Jen again. “I took out a contract and got rid of my pay-as-you-go phone. Decided to just keep the

new number.”

“R-right.” Suzanne stood in the middle of the room with her arms wrapped around herself. “Well, it’s nice to see you again.”

Jen exhaled a deep breath. “What was it you wanted to know? I’m happy to tell you anything so long as we can keep this amicable. I don’t need the confrontation of a fortnight ago. That’s not who I am.” Jen lowered herself to the couch and clasped her hands in her lap. “So…”

“Jen, I’m so sorry for the things I said to you.” Suzanne’s voice broke as she stared back at Jen with tears in her eyes. “And for asking you to leave.”

“You had every right to ask me to leave. I hadn’t told you about my past. Looking back, I know I should have told you the night we went for a drink, but I can’t change the way I handled any of it. All I can do is learn from it, and then maybe one day, I’ll find someone who can accept that I’m not perfect. That I made a terrible mistake, but it’s not who I am.”

“Tracy shocked me when she explained how she knew you. You’d just left here, we’d had such an amazing weekend together, and… I didn’t expect it.” Suzanne hesitated but eventually sat beside Jen. At a distance, but still. “I shouldn’t have reacted the way I did.”

“Look, it’s fine. I’m used to it now.”

“That doesn’t make it right.” Suzanne lay a hand on Jen’s, but Jen pulled away. “Jen. Please.”

“I’m here to give you the answers you want. Then I’ll leave.”

Suzanne visibly swallowed. “I don’t want you to leave.”

“I’m not here to try again, Suzanne. I’m tired of always being the bad guy. And I know most people have every right to hate me, to cross the street when they see me, but you were different. I’ve never done anything to hurt you other than withhold information to protect myself so I could be with you. You may see me as a liar because of that, but that’s your choice to feel that way. I did it for the right reasons in my mind. I did it so that here, with you, was a safe space for me.” It was important that Jen said anything she needed to say. Moving on without being totally upfront would only haunt her. “But I saw the way you looked at me as you asked me to leave. I recognised the disgust because it’s the very same look everyone else has for me.” Jen reached out a hand and caught a tear as it worked its way down Suzanne’s cheek. “Don’t be upset. I’m not worth anyone’s tears.”

“I regret everything I said to you that night. I knew it the moment you closed the door.”

Jen didn’t want Suzanne to have any regrets. Because when she left here tonight, it would be all Suzanne remembered her for. Jen would prefer Suzanne to remember her for the laughter and the numerous nights they’d lay on this very couch with one another. Butneverthe regret. “You felt the way you did, and that’s all there is to it. Have those feelings. You’re entitled to them.”

“I’d like to make things right.” Suzanne placed two fingers under Jen’s chin when she lowered her gaze. “And I know that cannot possibly happen overnight, but I do, Jen. I want to make things right between us.”

“Everything is okay. You know about the past now. You know that I’m a convicted criminal. Even thoughIknow I’m a good person, I don’t expect everyone else to agree. That’s just the way life is, and I’ve never not understood that.”

Suzanne sniffled as she managed a tight smile. “But you understood me. More than anyone else has since John died.”

“Grief is...I don’t know. It’s easy to discuss the pain I still feel on the daily when I’m with you because you feel it, too. That connection was everything to me as I was adjusting to life on the outside again. You made me feel as though I had a purpose. Even if that was only being here for you, I felt as though my life was worth something.”

“Oh, Jen. You’re worth so much.”

Jen puffed out her cheeks. “I... It’s time for me to leave England. Once I’ve figured some things out and convinced my mum that I’ll be okay away from here, I’m gone.”

“N-no! You can’t leave. This is your home.”

“Do something for me.” Jen gazed deep into Suzanne’s eyes. “Please?”

“Anything.” Suzanne shifted again, but Jen needed her to not move any closer. She was trying to let her go, for the love of God!

“Imagine walking around your hometown while people snarl at you. Imagine your own mother trying to defend you to people while you’re banged up.” Jen smiled weakly. “Then imagine the woman you were falling in love with calling you a liar while looking at you as though she doesn’t know the first thing about you.”

“Jen.”

“Just...imagine it. Please.” Jen needed Suzanne to understand. It would make all of this far easier. “No family. No friends. Very limited job opportunities.” Jen swallowed down the emotion in her throat and continued. “Then you meet someone, and she gives you a reason to fall back in love with life. Her smile is the first thing you think about when you wake up, and her laugh reminds you that no matter what, everything is okay. But then she drops your bag of belongings in front of you, tells you she never would have dated you if she’d known from the outset, and asks you to leave.”

“I know the things I said to you were terrible, but I never meant them.” Suzanne visibly swallowed. “You may find that hard to believe, but I didn’t.”

“I think you did,” Jen said, nodding slowly. “I think you felt hurt by what Tracy had told you, and you wanted to hurt me in return. Which you did, by the way.”

“You surely understand the shock I was in.” Suzanne frowned as she sighed. “I’d just been told that my girlfriend had recently been released from prison. I’m bound to have some kind of reaction to it.”

“Oh, I agree. I absolutely agree.”

“Then—”

“Then you told me you never would have asked me on a second date if you’d known from the start.” It crushed Jen when she reminded herself of that. They’d spent so

much time together, made a lot of memories in those months, and Suzanne had still said that. From that point on, everything Jen had allowed herself to dream about was dead and buried...along with her heart. “Did she paint me in some terrible light?”

“No, she didn’t.” Suzanne ran a hand through her dark hair and sat back against the couch. She stared at the fireplace, her hands clasped in her lap. “She told me you stopped her from getting hurt one day, though.”

“I heard what was happening, and I spoke up.” Jen scoffed. “Then I got a beating for it.”

“You what?” Suzanne’s head snapped around in Jen’s direction.

Jen smiled weakly. “They never knew. The guards. The other inmates preferred to inflict pain where they wouldn’t see it. I had broken ribs for sure. The bruising was pretty impressive.”

“Why didn’t you go to Tracy?”

“Because Suzanne...prison doesn’t work like that. If I’d gone to someone about it, it would have happened again and again. While not everyone was terrible inside, I was housed with women who had no issue beating someone to within an inch of their life. I wasn’t willing to risk that. Though, sometimes, I wonder if it would have been easier.”

“What would have been easier?”

Jen sat back and mirrored Suzanne’s position. “To not be here.”

“Jen, I don’t ever want to hear you say that again.” Suzanne took Jen’s hand, holding

it tighter when Jen tried to pull away again. “But I do want to hear about how it happened. I want to better understand the headspace you were in and what led to prison.”

Jen didn’t often talk about the reasons why she hit rock bottom. It had taken almost six months before she opened up to the prison counsellor. But she would open up for Suzanne. She deserved answers, if nothing else. “When Ruby died, I had all these plans I wanted to put in place. I wanted to find out why it happened to her and why it happens to other people. People so young dying so suddenly... There had to be a reason why.” Jen sighed. “I guess that’s why they call it Sudden Adult Death Syndrome, though.”

Suzanne nodded. “It has to be incredibly difficult to understand something like that.”

“But within a few months of her death, I started to get angry. At Ruby, at the world, at anyone who looked at me. I found the best way to cope was with mild drugs and alcohol. Sometimes one or the other, other times both.” Jen couldn’t imagine putting another drug in her body ever again. Before Ruby’s death, she rarely drank. To go from one extreme to the other, Jen still struggled to understand the how or why. “I couldn’t function at my job, so I took time off. They understood, and they were great with me about when I’d return. Offered me support and everything else.”

“But you didn’t take it.”

“Nope. I just wanted to be alone, drinking until I saw the bottom of the bottle and medicating in any way I could to get me through the miserable days and nights.”

“That’s understandable. You’d just lost your best friend.”

“The prison sentence was a culmination of everything, really. Shoplifting. Drug and alcohol-related behaviours. Criminal damage when I put my fist through a bar

window.” Jen looked down at the faint scars on her right hand and shook her head. “Stupid things that only turned into one huge thing eventually.”

“How do you mean?” Suzanne asked, genuinely listening to every last word Jen spoke.

“Mental health services are terrible around here. They have a small team to help with a huge problem. It’s just not enough.” Jen wanted to believe that things had changed over the last year or so, but the mental health crisis in this country was only growing bigger. At an alarming rate, too. “I guess you’d know what I mean since you mentioned therapy when John died.”

Suzanne smiled weakly. “I paid for a private therapist.”

Of course Suzanne had. It explained why she’d come out of this with her head still in one piece. “Yeah. That makes sense.”

“But I am aware of the mental health crisis in this country. I’m sorry you fell into the void when it came to finding help.”

“It all ended when I took my mum’s car. I wasn’t drunk or under the influence of drugs, but I wasn’t insured. Add in the other court appearances I’d had for drunk and disorderly, the shoplifting too, and they decided to make an example out of me.”

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Suzanne's features changed as Jen divulged that information. She was looking at Jen the way she used to. "That's it?"

"I'm sorry?" Jen frowned. "That's bad enough."

"No, I mean...it was petty things that snowballed?"

Jen had to wonder what the hell Suzanne thought she had done. It seemed she was expecting something truly dreadful. "Yeah. I guess you could look at it that way."

"Jen, I am sorry."

Jen rose to her feet and exhaled a deep breath. "Don't be. I just wanted to come here and put the truth out there so you can move on, maybe hating me a little less." Jen's shoulders slumped. She was still incredibly sad that Suzanne had broken up with her. But it would make her stronger. It had to. "Thanks for hearing me out. And thanks for being so welcoming and that when we met. Maybe I'll see you around for a while, but once I sort out a place to live abroad, I'll be leaving the courier company. Life surely has to get better for me and everyone else when I leave."

Suzanne got to her feet and stepped towards Jen. "Please, don't leave."

"We're not together anymore, Suzanne." Jen took her hand and brought it to her lips. "I'm sorry I tested your trust. I wish things could have been different, but you know now. You can move on and find the right person for you." Jen could only smile as she gazed back at Suzanne. She was going to make someone incredibly happy one day, but it wouldn't be Jen. "You have nothing to worry about when it comes to living

your life and dating again. I had the most amazing time with you, and whoever you meet is incredibly lucky to have you in their life. Just...be brave. Be you.” Jen leaned in and kissed Suzanne on the cheek, lingering even though she knew she shouldn’t. “Bye, Suzanne.”

Suzanne gripped Jen’s hand as she turned to leave. Jen sighed, not wanting to do this whole long goodbye thing with her. She just wanted to leave so she could cry in her bedroom. Just the way she had for the last two weeks. “Jen, you can’t leave.”

“I can. It’s for the best.”

“No, you don’t understand. You...can’t leave because I’m in love with you. I can’t change that; I can’t switch off how I feel about you.” Suzanne’s voice broke, the tears in her eyes making Jen feel terrible for putting her through this. If she’d just been honest from the start... “I made a mistake when I kicked you out of here, and even if it takes a year for you to forgive me, just know that I’m deeply sorry, and I’m so in love with you.”

Jen wasn’t quite sure what to do with that speech. She had come here with the intention of never seeing Suzanne again. To learn that Suzanne was in love with her, well...it certainly blew her mind. “Suzanne.”

“You can leave right now, and you don’t have to say anything else, but I needed you to know that I love you.” Suzanne took a breath as tears slid down her face. “It would mean so much to me if you would consider coming back again. I...know that’s not going to happen, but I couldn’t let you walk away without laying it out first.”

Jen had a lot of thoughts to work through this evening, but she couldn’t do that in the comfort of Suzanne’s home. She needed to be alone to figure all of this out. “I appreciate that, but I need to leave. Sort my head out. Figure out where the fuck I go from here.” Jen wanted to tell Suzanne she would see her soon, but she couldn’t do

that. It was something she potentially couldn't stick to, and Suzanne deserved more than a maybe. "I, um...thank you. For everything."

Jen turned out of the living room and inhaled a deep breath as she stopped in the hallway. Just the scent of this home comforted her. But then, the reminder of standing out here two weeks ago while Suzanne belittled her floated into her mind. It was a conversation she never wanted to have with anyone again. Potential love interests or not, nobody would have the satisfaction of humiliating Jen ever again.

"Jen?" Suzanne followed her out into the hallway.

Jen quickly wiped away the tears slipping down her cheeks, cleared her throat, and turned around. "Yeah?"

"If you can forgive me, please call me."

Jen simply smiled. It was all she could offer right now. Whether this ever became something again was anyone's guess. Jen just knew she needed to be alone tonight. "Take care of yourself, Suzanne."

Chapter 18

Jen sat staring at the TV. It was nothing more than background noise this evening, just something to keep her from going insane. Suzanne loved her...but how? And why? What the hell had Jen done to make Suzanne fall in love with her? Nothing she could recall. As she flicked through the channels for the fifth time in probably ten minutes, her mum came down from upstairs.

"Hi, Mum. No work tonight?"

Denise sat down on the couch and sighed. "No. I have the night off."

“That’s nice.” Jen watched her mum as Denise watched the TV. “No plans with friends?”

“Oh, no. Nothing planned with anyone. They’re all working or busy. We don’t really get the chance to catch up these days.” Denise smiled as she toyed with the necklace she wore. “Family, grandkids, that sort of thing.”

Jen knew that was a lie. Denise had always had a lot of friends. “All of them? Every last one?” Jen sat forward and stared at Denise until she looked her way. “You used to have at least five different friend groups. And not a single one of them is available?”

Denise simply shrugged. “Seems not.”

No. Jen was done with all of this bullshit. If people had an issue with her, that was more than okay. But to alienate her mum from this community? No, she wasn’t standing for it. She wouldn’t have before being sent down, and she certainly wouldn’t now. “It’s because of me, isn’t it?”

“Don’t be daft.”

Even as Denise said that, she didn’t sound very convincing. “Mum, I need you to be honest with me. My head is already up my arse with all this Suzanne shit, and I don’t need to be worrying about you at the same time.”

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“You have no reason to worry about me, Jen. I’m just fine.”

“Except you’re not. Your friends have cut you off because of me, haven’t they?”

Denise sat forward this time and looked Jen square in the eye. “My friends haven’t cut me off. Julie is on holiday, Marg is looking after the little ones until Christina is back off a cruise with her fiancé, and Rose is not coping very well with menopause. Everyone else is not close enough to me to consider calling.”

Jen had to smile at that. They were very alike when it came to who they considered friends and who they didn’t. Denise had never been one to follow the ‘gang,’ so to speak. She preferred deep and meaningful connections. As did Jen.

“I have the night off work because I’ve just worked four straight shifts when it should have been three, with a day off in between. Stop blaming anything that happens on yourself, Jen.”

“You’re telling me the truth? You promise me?”

Denise reached out a hand and squeezed Jen’s shoulder. “I’m telling you the truth.”

“Right. Okay.” Jen relaxed back on the couch and nodded slowly. Even if her mum was lying, Jen couldn’t exactly force it out of her.

“Anyway, what’s this about Suzanne?”

Jen frowned. “Pardon?”

“You said you have enough to deal with. The Suzanne shit.”

“Yeah, um...I went over there last night after work. I had a package for her, and she asked if we could talk when I finished.” Jen ran a hand through her cropped hair. “I wasn’t going to go back, but I owed it to both of us to be upfront about prison and that.”

“Right, well, that’s a development.” Denise sat up straight and gave her full attention to Jen. “And how did it go?”

“I don’t really know. She’s sorry for the way she reacted, and she seemed pretty chilled out about it all once I’d explained everything, but then she told me she was in love with me, and I just wasn’t expecting it, Mum. I didn’t think for one second that she would tell me that. I mean, why would I?”

Denise frowned. “But this is good news, Jen. It’s great news. You’ve already told me you were falling in love with her, and now you know she feels the same way. It’s surely a good thing.”

“I know that. I just feel a little bit up in the air about it. The last time I saw her before yesterday, she was mocking me for having my belongings in a plastic bag. She called me a liar and told me she never would have asked me out for a drink if she’d known the truth. How am I supposed to just let that go and walk back into her life?”

“Well, it’s not about letting it go. It’s about forgiving her when the time feels right to you. Not Suzanne or anyone else, but you.”

“I hated seeing her upset. She’s always so happy and full of life.” Jen lowered her eyes and sighed. “Maybe getting involved with me again would just mess everything up. Once her friends and family find out about me—and they will—then she’s going to be going through what you did. People avoiding you because of your bastard

daughter.” Jen just wanted people to live their lives. “I don’t want anyone feeling that way because of me.”

“I think that decision is Suzanne’s and hers alone. If she wants to be with you, if she wants to love you, then you can’t stop that.”

“Everything felt so good with her, Mum. Like, I didn’t think I’d have the opportunity to fall in love when I was released. But I did, and then it turned to shit. I can’t help but feel as though she either feels sorry for me...or she’s going to always wonder if I’m capable of hitting rock bottom again.” Jen knew anyone was capable of it, but she had put so much work into herself while she was inside. She had taken every opportunity she could to learn something in there, often spending most of her time in the library. At least if she was reading, it was keeping her mind ticking over. “I don’t know what to do for the best.”

Denise took Jen’s hands as she turned side on and faced her. “Do you love her?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“Then I think you owe it to yourself to try again with her. Maybe it won’t be perfect at first, and maybe you’ll question what she’s thinking of you, but maybe those things won’t happen. You won’t know that unless you give it a chance, my love.”

Jen wanted to give it a chance. Right now, she wanted to be with Suzanne while they got to know one another all over again. Jen’s mind just wanted to punish her a while longer first. “You know, when my release date was set, I did everything I could in the weeks leading up to it to find the right headspace. I knew what coming out would look like for me, and for the most part, it’s been absolutely true. I’ve lost a lot of people who meant so much to me. I’ve lost precious time with Toby because his dad wants to protect him.” Jen squeezed her mum’s hand. “As it stands, you’re the only person I really have who has stood by me and believed I could be the better version

of myself again. You're the only person who has recognised the work I put in to be better. But Suzanne never knew the old me. She only knowsthisme. The person Iwantto be." Jen scoffed. "Sure, I'd like a better job and a friend or two, but what I had with her the first time around was so good that I'm worried we won't have it again."

"She made you happy, Jen."

"She made me far more than happy, Mum. She made me feel as though I had a life. She made me realise that I did deserve a second chance to make things right. Todoright." Jen looked up at the ceiling and blinked away tears. "I don't want to be a charity case, and I fear that's exactly what will happen if I go back over there and agree to try again."

"So, have this conversation with her. Tell her what you expect moving forward. I can guarantee she's worried too and probably doesn't want you to feel the way you're feeling now."

"Maybe. I don't know."

Denise dipped her head and smiled. "Do the right thing, love. Go and be bloody happy."

"You think I can be?" Jen knew she could, but she wanted her mum to confirm it. "You really think I can make something of myself this time and have a meaningful relationship with Suzanne?"

“I know you can.”

Jen sunk back into the couch and mulled over everything going on in her head. Her mum was right. She should go and be happy. Now, Jen just had to understand that for herself, and she could be at Suzanne’s place enjoying life all over again. “Maybe I’ll take a shower and call over there.”

Suzanne felt Tracy’s eyes on her, but she didn’t know what to say to her best friend. She could pretend everything was okay, but Tracy would see right through it. She often did. She would also claim that Suzanne had every right to her reaction, but Suzanne knew deep down that she didn’t. Of course there would be a reaction, but hers was entirely unjust. Suzanne had never been the type of woman who would fly off the handle, so why had it happened with Jen’s situation?

Perhaps it was the idea of the woman she loved not being upfront. Maybe it was the shock of it. Jen just didn’t present as the type of person who had ever put a foot wrong, let alone spent time in prison. So, shock it was. That was Suzanne’s excuse for all of this.

She cleared her throat, ready to hash everything out with Tracy. “Jen came over last night.”

Tracy sat forward in her seat, her brows lifting. “Oh! That’s good news.”

“Not really. She left once she had explained everything to me.” Suzanne smiled weakly as she cast her gaze on the carpet. She held a glass of wine against her knee, but she’d only taken a sip since she’d sat down with it forty minutes ago. “I don’t

know what I expected from her, but I thought she may have called me by now.”

“Judging by everything you’ve told me, I think it may take a minute longer than usual.”

“I told her I love her,” Suzanne said, mindlessly rubbing her thumb against the stem of her glass. “I shouldn’t have done that. She probably wasn’t ready to hear it.” Perhaps Jen would never be ready to hear it, but Suzanne couldn’t hold it in. If it made any difference to whether she stayed or went, then Suzanne had to be entirely honest about what she felt for Jen. “I know I’ve lost her. There are no two ways about it. But she did make me incredibly happy, Trace.” Suzanne sniffled and shook her head. “Even the way she looked at me was enough to turn me into a complete mess on the spot. It’s been a long time since anyone made me feel that way.”

“I know she means a lot to you, it’s quite obvious, but give her some time. Let her come around to the idea. She had a rough time before and while she was inside.” Tracy probably knew far more about Jen than Suzanne ever would. “Looking back, I wish I hadn’t told you.”

That surprised Suzanne. Until today, Tracy had maintained that telling her was the right thing to do. “Whydido you tell me?”

“Because I believe it’s important. Because I was shocked to see her walking out of your door. Because you’re my best friend, and I’d never withhold information like that...even if it’s not what you want to hear. You should know who you’re dating.”

Suzanne couldn’t help but feel as though she already knew who she was dating. The only version of Jen she’d ever known. And God, she’d really loved all of it. “When she was here last night, she told me she withheld the truth to protect herself so she could be with me.”

Tracy regarded her with a wry smile. “And I went and put my foot right in it, didn’t I?”

“Part of me understands why you told me, but the rest of me wishes I’d never known. The last two weeks have been dreadful, Tracy. Knowing what I know doesn’t change a thing, and so now I have to wonder if I ever really needed to know.”

“Things will work out. Jen is a good person who took the wrong turn. Out of everyone on my wing, I can safely say she was the one I had high hopes for. And I think having you by her side...it’s only going to enrich her life and keep her on the straight and narrow.”

Suzanne didn’t particularly want to be the person who kept Jen straight, but she understood what Tracy was saying. With hope, happiness, and love, Jen really couldn’t go wrong when it came to her future. Suzanne could only hope that she would feature in it at some point.

It’s all a waiting game now...

“I wish I could call her or send a text.”

Tracy frowned. “Why can’t you? Even if it’s just to let her know that you’re thinking about her.”

“She changed her number. I don’t have the new one.” Suzanne puffed out her cheeks. “It’s kind of how I know that this isn’t going to lead to anything. She didn’t offer her new number to me.”

“I’m sure she just forgot, love. Don’t read too much into it.”

“Maybe, but it doesn’t feel that way to me.” The one thing they strongly believed in

was communication. And now Jen had zero to offer her. “I’m just using the bathroom.” Suzanne sighed as she got to her feet and took her mostly full wine glass into the kitchen. She just couldn’t be bothered. “Help yourself to another glass.”

She left the living room and stopped in the hallway and take a couple of breaths. Suzanne could feel herself becoming emotional whenever she thought about Jen, and she didn’t want to be that person when she had company. Tracy would understand, she would likely encourage whatever emotion Suzanne was feeling, but she feared they wouldn’t stop once the tears started.

Too late. Several were already slipping down her cheeks.

She gripped the banister, only to stop when the doorbell rang. She was in no fit state to answer the door, and she didn’t want to have to deal with whoever it was, but that didn’t change the fact that someone was at the door.

I really wish people would leave me alone.

Suzanne took the few steps towards the door and opened it. Her heart practically shot up into her throat when Jen stared back at her. “Hi. I hope it’s okay to just show up here.”

“A-always. It’ll always be okay for you to just show up.”

Jen smiled as she cast her gaze on the steps separating them. Seemed she didn’t know what to say, but Suzanne kind of felt the same way. “I won’t stay long. I just...wanted to clear the air about last night. I’m sorry I just left.” Jen looked back up at Suzanne with tears in her eyes. “I didn’t know what to say.”

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“Can we do this inside rather than on the doorstep?” Suzanne stepped aside, only to frown when Jen stood frozen in place in the garden. “What is it?” Suzanne followed her line of sight. Tracy was standing at the far end of the hallway. “Ah.”

“I’ll come back some other time,” Jen said, half turning. “I didn’t realise you had company. Sorry.” Suzanne watched, mouth agape, as Jen turned away and walked down the path.

“Jen Fletcher. Get your arse inside this house now.” Tracy’s voice boomed through the air.

When Jen stopped in her tracks and hung her head, Suzanne rushed outside and took her by the hand. When she turned Jen around to face her, Suzanne brought her other hand up to her jawline. “Please don’t leave. I can’t bear to watch you walk away again.”

“I-I was going to come back. Just when it was more convenient.”

“Now is convenient.” Suzanne gave Jen a pleading look. If she had to show how desperate she was, then she would do that. Suzanne wasn’t fucking about here. She wanted Jen back. “Come inside.”

“I really don’t think it’s a good idea while Tracy is here. As lovely as she is, I don’t want to sit around feeling as though she’s watching my every move.”

“She won’t. I’ll ask her to leave.”

Jen sighed and shook her head. “No, don’t do that. She’s your best friend. I can come back another time. It’s fine, really.”

Suzanne held onto Jen’s hand, refusing to let go. There was no way Jen was leaving right now. Suzanne hadn’t slept last night, wondering if she would eventually show. Now that she had, she was staying. That was that. “I really need you to stay, Jen. Please.”

Jen slowly nodded as she chewed her lip. “Okay, but we really can just do this another time.”

“We can’t.” Suzanne guided Jen back up the garden path. “Another time isn’t an option. I miss you too much.”

Breathing a sigh of relief as Jen stepped inside the house and closed the door, Suzanne gave Tracy a knowing look and waited for her to go back into the living room. Suzanne turned back to Jen when she knew they were alone and pressed her to the back of the door.

“I know I don’t deserve another chance, but I’m begging you for one, Jen. I need another chance with you if it’s the last thing I ever do.” She feathered her fingertips across Jen’s cheek and smiled. “I know this isn’t going to just go away suddenly, but I want to work at getting us back to that place we were in.”

“I...want that, too.”

Suzanne’s entire body relaxed at that confirmation. She hadn’t known just how much she needed to hear it. “Thank you.”

“I can’t promise I won’t lose my head in the coming days or whatever, but I think it’s important that we at least have a serious conversation about everything.”

Suzanne could work with that for the time being. But for now, she just wanted to look at Jen and appreciate her. She just wanted to sit in the silence with her hand in Jen's. Anything simple was all she needed right now. "We can do that." Suzanne pulled Jen away from the door and smiled. "Come on. This place has been too quiet without you."

Jen managed a tight smile, but Suzanne knew she was going to need far more convincing. As they both landed in the living room, Tracy was putting her jacket on. Jen and Tracy watched each other, but it was Jen who spoke up first.

"Don't leave because I'm here."

Tracy grabbed her bag and smiled. "Trust me. I know I won't be welcome here in the next five minutes. I'm saving Suzanne the pleasure of kicking me out."

Suzanne laughed. "You know me so well."

"And, uh," Tracy paused as she looked at Jen. "I'm sorry that I kinda caused all of this between you."

"You didn't. I should have been upfront with Suzanne from the moment we met. The past always comes back to bite you otherwise." Jen dragged a hand through her hair and then removed her coat. "It's good to see you, though. Hope work isn't too...you know."

"Rough?" Tracy asked, brow quirked. "It's as rough as ever, Jen. I don't have anyone to chat to anymore now that you're gone."

Jen puffed out her cheeks. "Well, I'd offer to come back to keep you company, but I'd rather stick hot pins in my eyes."

Tracy nodded as she laughed. “Figured that would be your response.” She stepped towards Suzanne and kissed her on the cheek. “Enjoy your night. Sort all of this out, and then call me when you want to get dinner together.”

“I will. And thanks for understanding.” That was the beauty of this friendship. Suzanne didn’t even have to ask Tracy to leave. They just knew what was required of one another.

Tracy turned to Jen. “You look great, Jen. Keep up whatever it is you’re doing, and I’ll see you soon. Preferably with Suzanne.”

“Thanks, Tracy.” Jen’s smile was a little wider than when she arrived. It only sent Suzanne’s heart rate soaring. Her smile always did. “Take care.”

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Suzanne excused herself for a moment and walked Tracy to the door. She didn't need to explain why she wanted to be alone with Jen; her best friend would understand. "I'll call you, okay?"

Tracy nodded as she stepped out of the house. "I know you will. I just hope you can both work everything out. You deserve to be happy, love."

Suzanne leant against the doorframe as she watched Tracy leave. She sighed, wrapped her arms around herself, and braced herself for whatever was going to come next. But mostly, she would remind herself that Jen had come back...and that had to mean something.

Jen exhaled a calming breath as she took a seat on the couch and figured out everything she wanted to say in her head. Things weren't okay, not really, but she hoped they would be in the near future. She hoped that Suzanne would forget about the information she had learned recently and continue to see the Jen she had known from day one. Whether that was possible remained to be seen, but Jen felt slightly positive about it. Tracy seemed happy enough to bump into her, so that was something.

"Did you want something to eat?" Suzanne asked as she came into the living room, her nerves showing once again. "You probably haven't eaten since you finished work."

"I've eaten. Mum has a habit of making sure dinner is on the table the moment I put my key in the door." Jen had enjoyed a chicken casserole tonight. Just what she needed while her life felt uncertain again. Comfort food. "It's something she's been

doing since I came home.”

“Your mum sounds very sweet.” Suzanne hesitated between the kitchen and the living room. “Can I get you anything at all?”

“Come and sit down. You look as though you’re about to either run out the door...or have a breakdown.” Jen didn’t want either of them to feel hesitant moving forward. She hated seeing Suzanne so vulnerable in her own home. Jen never wanted that.

Suzanne wrung her hands as she smiled weakly and moved further into the living room. “I’m sorry. I’m worried I’m going to do or say the wrong thing to make you leave again.”

Jen took Suzanne’s hand and pulled her down beside her. “That’s not going to happen. In fact, I’m almost certain none of this would have happened if we’d talked about it the day you found out.”

“I take full responsibility for that.” Suzanne shook her head as she cast her gaze on their hands in Jen’s lap. “I’ve been so fucking stupid.”

“You were looking out for yourself. That’s not stupid. It’s sensible.”

Suzanne scoffed. “But I lost you because of it.”

Jen didn’t want to dwell on the last couple of weeks. Sure, she had things she wanted to say and some questions she wanted to ask, but ultimately, the past was gone now. Suzanne knew the truth, Jen didn’t feel so caught up in trying to keep it to herself, and now she hoped her life would start to change all over again. “Things happen, okay? What’s important is that we’re here having this conversation now.”

Suzanne gazed back at Jen, the smallest smile visible on her lips. “I can’t believe

you're here. I didn't think for one moment that you would come back once you'd processed the things I said to you last night."

"You told me you're in love with me, Suzanne. Unless you didn't mean it, I'd be a fool to not come back." Jen squeezed Suzanne's hands and smiled. "In those weeks leading up to you finding out the truth, I was going over it all in my head. You know, when would be the right moment to tell you I was falling for you? The day I came here...when Tracy was leaving, it had been on my mind all morning. We'd spent the weekend together, we'd had a lot of fun, and it just...felt like the right time for me. That night...I was going to tell you."

Suzanne rolled her lips inward and exhaled a deep breath. "I wish you had."

"I couldn't. You'd just opened the door to me and turned your back. No matter how much I wanted you to know how I felt about you, I couldn't do it. I didn't want you to think I was saying it to win you over. When the time was right, I wanted you to believe me wholeheartedly."

Suzanne nodded slowly. "I understand that. I probably would have kept it to myself, too."

"I...do love you. I'm...in love with you." Jen studied Suzanne's face as she said that. If there was a hint of her not believing Jen, if there was even a doubt in Suzanne's mind as to who Jen was, then Jen needed to know. She needed to be sure that this would be right the second time around. Only as she stared back at Suzanne, Jen couldn't read her. Not even a little. "I just don't know if you believe me."

"I do believe you." Suzanne shifted closer and brought a hand to Jen's cheek. "I have so much making up to do, so many ways I need to change, but I do believe you."

Jen frowned. "Change?"

“The way I spoke to you...treated you that night,” Suzanne said, pausing. “That’s not me, Jen. I didn’t recognise the woman making snarky comments at you.”

“Can we move on from that night? From the things Tracy told you? Can we...just be us again?” Jen couldn’t believe just how much Suzanne had changed her life in the months they’d spent together. Every morning actually felt like a new day rather than the same shit rolled over. That was all Jen needed if this was to continue. For nothing to change between them. “I don’t want to keep going over it. I’m sick of it ruling my life.”

“I’m sorry.” Suzanne squeezed Jen’s hand.

“It’s okay. I’m just ready to put it out of my mind now. I’ve spent so long feeling terrible about not telling you that it seems as though it’s aged me ten years.”

“I admire you for protecting yourself. I really do.”

“Had it been anyone else, I probably would have just come clean there and then. But it wasn’t just anyone else. It was you, and I couldn’t risk losing you. I couldn’t bear the thought of never seeing you again because of stupid mistakes I’d made in the past. I warred with myself almost daily in the beginning, but after a couple of weeks, you made me forget what I’d gone through last year. I didn’t feel like Jen Fletcher...ex-prisoner. I just felt like myself. Before I lost Ruby, and everything fell apart.”

“I-I made you feel that way?” Suzanne’s brows rose.

“You did.” No matter what happened from this moment on, Jen would always appreciate what Suzanne had done for her. Even without her knowing it. “I left as you’d asked me to so I didn’t lose those eight weeks of memories with you. Instead of reminding myself of how much you hated me that night, I chose to remember how happy you’d made me feel. The laughter we’d shared. The dinners and the walks in

the park. Just...everything other than that night.”

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“That was my first thought when you left. The memories. They all outweigh what I’ve come to learn recently.”

“That’s good. It means this could potentially be salvaged.”

Suzanne lowered her eyes and sniffled. “I’d like to think so.”

“Please don’t be upset, babe.” Jen leaned in and wrapped Suzanne up in her arms. “I don’t know where we go from here, but please, don’t be upset. Everything is going to be okay.”

She felt Suzanne smile against her hair, and then she sighed as she dipped her head towards Jen’s ear. “I have to make this right with you.”

Jen drew back, brushing a thumb beneath Suzanne’s eye. “Let’s just take it one day at a time, okay?”

With her eyes closed as she leant into Jen’s touch, Suzanne simply smiled. “Okay.”

Chapter 19

Suzanne waved Jen over as she walked through the main doors of the restaurant. In the last several days, things between them had been slow and steady. Suzanne had thrown herself into her work, making up for the lack of it in recent weeks, and Jen was equally as busy. Whenever Suzanne contacted her, their exchanges were pleasant, but it was clear that Jen was holding back a little. Understandable but hopefully short-lived.

“Hi.” Jen leaned down and kissed Suzanne on the cheek, smiling down at her as she drew back. “I didn’t think you’d be here already.”

“I only arrived a few minutes ago. They asked if I wanted to wait at the bar, but I decided to take our table instead.” Suzanne looked back at Jen, admiring that gentle smile playing on her lips. “Busy day?”

“Steady, actually. I’m definitely looking forward to the day off tomorrow, though. I’m sure they’ve added someone else’s round onto mine. It’s been a hellish week.”

Now that Suzanne knew Jen was originally a primary school teacher, she could imagine how mind-numbing her current job must be. “Is it something you plan to continue doing?”

“The job I’m in?” Jen asked as she took a seat facing Suzanne and looked around the restaurant. “I hope not if these are the kinds of places we’re going to be eating. Looks very fancy.” Jen puffed out her cheeks as she lifted the menu. In Suzanne’s mind, the prices were reasonable in here. Especially with inflation at the moment. “Food looks good, though.”

“We can go somewhere else if you’re not comfortable here...”

“I’m comfortable.” Jen smiled. “And before we go any further, I’m not on the bones of my arse. I do have money.”

Oh, God. That wasn’t what Suzanne was saying at all. “I’m sure you do. That wasn’t what I was getting at.”

“No, I know. But you probably think I’m taking out loans and stuff to get myself back on my feet, but I’m not. When my dad died, he left us all a significant amount of money. Mum took mine off me when I went off the rails...and now that I’m back and

doing better, she's returned it to me."

"She helped you through a lot, didn't she?" Suzanne clasped her hands under her chin, wanting to know more.

"My mum? I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for her." Jen lifted a shoulder and took her glass of water from the table. "And I know everyone says that, but it's true. She saved me."

"I'm glad you have her. A good support system is the most important thing in life, regardless of who is going through what." Suzanne had been lucky to have a great support system of her own. Without her family, she didn't know how she would have worked through John's death. "I'd...like to meet her one day."

Jen smiled and lowered her eyes.

"If that's something you want too, of course." Suzanne couldn't quite put her finger on Jen's mood, but she didn't seem overly enthusiastic about the idea of Suzanne meeting her mum. That had Suzanne wondering if this was going anywhere the second time around. Jen had been excited to meet Elsie all those weeks ago, but when it came to this...not so much. "Jen?"

"Y-yeah?"

Suzanne dipped her head. Their eyes eventually met. "Is that something you would want to do?"

"Eventually, yeah."

Suzanne exhaled a deep breath. "Okay. Eventually is good enough for me."

“I’m sorry. I’m just trying to get back into the swing of this. Us, you know?” Jen sipped her water only to almost spit it back into the glass as her eyes widened. “Is that...” She squinted over Suzanne’s shoulder. And then the biggest smile spread on Jen’s mouth when Suzanne heard a gasp behind her.

“Jen?”

Jen shot up from her seat and embraced a woman who came rushing towards her from behind Suzanne. She watched their interaction, how they held onto one another, and then she slumped back in her seat. Suzanne didn’t know why she felt so off about all of this, but she had expected more from tonight. Sure, the night was only just beginning, but Jen wasn’t feeling it. That much was clear.

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“I can’t believe you’re here!” The woman squealed as she hugged Jen again. “Chloe and Mel are over on my table.” She drew back and held Jen at arm’s length. “You look amazing. How are you?”

Jen cast her gaze on the floor. Was she...blushing?Suzanne couldn’t quite tell. “You know what, I’m great. You guys all doing okay?”

“Oh, yeah. Same old, you know.” The woman who Suzanne was yet to be introduced to flicked her hair and nudged Jen’s shoulder. “I bumped into your Grace last week. She was saying you were out and that you were back in work and stuff.”

“I’ve been back in work since a couple of weeks after my release,” Jen explained to the nameless woman. “Had to wear an ankle tag for a couple of months and see my probation officer, but yeah... Life is kinda falling back into place now. I’m feeling good about the future.”

“Oh, that’s brilliant. It’s so good to see you, Jen.”

Jen cleared her throat and turned to Suzanne. “Hey, Lizzie. This is Suzanne, my...date.”

Lizzie.

Huh.

“Hi.” Suzanne sat up straight in her seat and smiled back atLizzie. She was trying to ignore the fact that Jen had just referred to Suzanne as her date. It felt unusual to hear

it, given the place they were once at with one another. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too.” Lizzie wore a beaming smile as she wrapped an arm around Jen’s shoulders. “You’ve struck lucky here with this one.”

Suzanne simply nodded and offered a smile of her own, wishing this woman would leave their table. This was supposed to be a date. The first one they’d had in...three weeks now.

“Stop it.” Jen laughed and shook her head. “Don’t make her run.”

Oh, Suzanne wasn’t planning to run anywhere.

“Look, I should get back to the girls. I’ll let them know I’ve seen you, and I don’t know, maybe you could come over for a cuppa one day when you’re not busy?”

Jen lifted a brow. “The wife wouldn’t mind?”

“What wife?” Lizzie seemed deeply confused. “I don’t have a wife. I’d need a girlfriend first before I can make someone a wife.”

“But...I bumped into Reece a couple of weeks after my release. He said you’d met someone practically right away, you were married, and she was pregnant.”

“Oh! Her! No, that didn’t last. And she was pregnant because of the guy she was fucking behind my back. Turns out he’s only her husband and she was having an affair with me.”

Ouch. Suzanne inwardly grimaced at that. What a dreadful thing to do to someone.

“We were never married, though. You know what our Reece can be like. He loves to

make up stories to make it all sound better in his head.”

“Tell you what, let’s exchange numbers before you leave with the girls. Once I have an afternoon to myself, I’ll call you, and we can all get together. Then I can hear all the gossip that I’ve missed. I’m sure there’s plenty of it.”

“Only if we get the prison gossip,” Lizzie whispered, but Suzanne heard her.

“Sure. We can trade.” Jen hugged Lizzie again and then hiked a thumb over her shoulder. “I should really have a look at the menu so we can order. Suzanne has been waiting on me long enough now.”

Lizzie held up her hands. “Of course. Sorry for disturbing your date. It was lovely to meet you, Suzanne.”

Suzanne smiled, praying it appeared genuine to both Lizzie and Jen. “It was lovely to meet you, too.”

As Jen returned to her seat and lifted the menu, Suzanne watched her from the other side of the table. God, she really hoped that Jen was back to her usual self sooner rather than later. This half-arsed conversation was torturous.

“So, what are you feeling like?” Jen looked over the top of her menu, her eyes a little brighter now that she’d had a heart-to-heart with an old friend. “I can’t decide between about ten different dishes.”

“Mm. That’s where I’m struggling, too.”

Jen smiled as she side-eyed Suzanne, walking hand in hand with one another through the park. If Jen was being honest with herself, she hadn’t thought this night would be possible. Before they’d sat down and given one another the opportunity to say what

needed to be said, Jen felt entirely hopeless about her relationship with Suzanne. It didn't seem as though she'd have the pleasure of holding her hand ever again. But here they were, making a go of it. "Dinner was amazing, thank you."

Suzanne offered a single nod, keeping her focus ahead of her. "You're welcome."

“Next time it’s on me, okay?”

“Next time,” Suzanne said, managing the smallest smile. “I wasn’t sure if there would be a next time.”

Jen stopped on the pathway, halting Suzanne, too. “I’m sorry? Why wouldn’t there be a next time?”

“I don’t know. Tonight feels different.” Suzanne guided Jen towards a bench nearby. Once they’d taken a seat, she waited with bated breath for more from Suzanne. “You feel distant.”

Fuck. Jen hadn’t meant to come across that way. She was just trying to get back into the right mindset. She wanted to be entirely here and not in her own head, but it was hard. Suzanne knew who she was now, and even though Jen didn’t want it to...it did change everything. “I’m trying to just be me. The me you know anyway. But that’s not who I am to you anymore, and I understand that.”

“You’ve lost me, Jen. I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

Jen turned side-on and took Suzanne’s hand. “I just want us to be the way we were before everything changed. I thought that was how I would feel when we got back together, but I have it in my head that you probably think differently of me now.”

“I don’t think differently of you. To me, you’re still just you.”

Jen wanted to believe that, but it was a struggle. “It’s just taking me a moment longer

than I thought it would, that's all. But I do definitely want another date. I want so many more, Suzanne."

"Is that all I am to you now? Just your date..."

Jen's brows drew together. Suzanne was so much more than that. "Just my date? No, babe. Of course not."

"That's how you introduced me to your friend." Suzanne crossed her legs and looked out at the darkened park. "And if that's the way it has to be, I understand. I just wasn't expecting it."

"Shit. I didn't even realise I'd done that." Jen scrubbed a hand down her face. "I'm fucking this up a bit tonight, aren't I?"

"Not at all. Dinner with you was great. Tonight just feels a little odd to me."

Jen got that. It had felt odd to her, too. Especially when she had spotted Lizzie at the restaurant. Part of Jen wanted to just ignore her and smile, but Lizzie had done nothing wrong when it came to her past with Jen. "Yeah, I know. I was shocked to see Lizzie, and I think that just threw me a bit."

"But her reaction to seeing you was a good sign, right? You said you've lost all of your friends and most of your family, but she seemed happy to bump into you. She surely wouldn't have invited you to get together for a catch-up if she didn't want to remain friends with you."

Jen grimaced ever so slightly. Suzanne was already wary of how this night had played out. How would she react to finding out who Lizzie was? Jen briefly thought about not telling her, but look where that had got her last time! "Lizzie is my ex."

“O-oh.”

“My ex-fiancée, to be specific.”

Suzanne shifted uncomfortably on the bench as she cleared her throat. “Well, then, I guess it’s nice that you’re still amicable with one another. She certainly looked happy to see you.”

“I was quite surprised that she came over to me. It wasn’t the expected reaction, that’s for sure.”

“Ended badly?” Suzanne asked. She seemed distracted, perhaps in her head a little, but she had nothing to worry about. Jen and Lizzie had been a long time ago now.

“It ended better than it should have.” Jen laughed, but Suzanne didn’t join in. She just glared at Jen. “Lizzie and I were together for six years. We had a house together, a great life with one another, and then everything happened with Ruby. A couple of years into my fuck ups, she left me. She couldn’t handle me anymore, but I never would have expected her to.”

“I see.” Suzanne rolled her lips inwards. “So, you didn’t break up because you didn’t love one another anymore?”

“Lizzie didn’t love me anymore. It’s why she left. I’d made her life hell for two years.” Jen would never forget the look in Lizzie’s eyes as she kicked Jen out the door and changed the locks. “As for me, I’m not sure I loved anyone at that point in my life. I hated everything I’d become. I couldn’t look after myself, let alone love another person.”

“She seemed very fond of you.” Suzanne’s dark eyes clouded over as Jen looked back at her. Was Suzanne questioning whether it could be going somewhere with

Lizzie again? Absolutely not. “And she most definitely wants to get together when you’re available.”

“Lizzie and I were friends for a long time before we started a relationship. Ruby and I had gone through school with Lizzie. She spent most of her late teens and early twenties in the closet, but then one thing led to another, and we started dating. She was another best friend to me, even though she was my fiancée.”

“Yet she left you to fend for yourself when you needed help.”

Ouch. Jen didn’t like Suzanne’s tone as she spoke that out loud.

“I think she had to walk away for her own sanity. I’d already pushed her away within a few months of Ruby dying. I’m surprised she stayed as long as she did.” Jen toyed with the frayed denim on the knee of her jeans. “Lizzie has a good heart. I was the one who ruined our relationship, and I admit that.”

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“Could it be worked out?” Suzanne asked, brow quirked.

“As friends, I’d love to work it out. We’ve known one another for so long. But relationship-wise, that part of my life is over. Who I was when Ruby died...died with her.” Jen hadn’t known how powerful that one sentence would be, but her chest ached as she allowed it to sink in. “That includes my relationship with Lizzie.”

“I think she may surprise you.” Suzanne slid her hand from Jen’s and placed it in her own lap. “The connection is still there. Even I felt...somethingas I watched you both.”

“There was life before and life after.” Jen shifted closer to Suzanne, shrugging her blazer off and resting it around Suzanne’s shoulders when she shivered. “Youare that life after. Not Lizzie or anyone else. Just you, babe.” Jen dipped her head and brought her lips to Suzanne’s ear. “It’syouthat I want. It’syouthat I love.”

Suzanne pressed her cheek to Jen’s as she said that, the tension in the air slowly falling away. “I’ve never been insecure, but I don’t know. There’s something about losing you again that terrifies me.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” Jen drew back and brushed Suzanne’s hair from her face. “God, you’re so beautiful.”

Suzanne blushed, but she didn’t take her eyes off Jen.

“You ready to head back? I’ll walk you home.”

Suzanne searched Jen's eyes as she took her hand. "Stay the night."

"You're sure?" Jen had no issues staying over at Suzanne's, but she wanted Suzanne to be absolutely sure before they reconnected. Jen couldn't deal with another fallout any time soon. She wanted this to work, of course she did, but she needed one hundred percent certainty from Suzanne. "You're absolutely sure I'm the right person for you?"

"I think I'm more sure now than I was the first time around."

Jen grinned as she guided Suzanne to her feet. She pressed their bodies together, one arm around Suzanne's waist, and kissed her softly. "Then, yes. I'll stay the night."

Chapter 20

Suzanne lay sprawled out on her bed, naked, wondering what the hell Jen was doing in the bathroom. Was she having some kind of performance anxiety because of recent events...was she backing out of this? God, Suzanne hoped not. Walking back from the restaurant with Jen only had Suzanne anticipating what the rest of their evening together would involve. Did she want to reconnect with Jen? More than anything in the world right now. But if Jen was having second thoughts, she needed her to communicate that.

In this moment, Suzanne craved her touch.

The bathroom door opened, and Jen wore an oversized hoodie that came down to the middle of her thighs. It certainly hadn't been what she wore to dinner. Why had she changed? "So, um...before we broke up, I kinda left some things here that I hadn't mentioned to you before."

Suzanne sat up on her elbows, her brows drawn. "What things?"

“Fun things.” Jen simpered as she crossed the room and crawled across the bed. When she settled between Suzanne’s legs, Suzanne sat up and draped her arms over Jen’s shoulders. “You may not be into it, and that’s absolutely fine, but?—”

Suzanne silenced Jen with a kiss. One that hopefully reminded Jen of what they’d shared prior to the messy weeks they spent without one another. When Jen moaned into Suzanne’s mouth, her hand fisted in Suzanne’s hair, her heart settled. Jen wasn’t backing out of anything tonight. That much was clear.

Jen drew back and touched her forehead to Suzanne’s. They gazed back at one another, Jen’s thumb stroking Suzanne’s cheek, her warm breath tickling Suzanne’s lips. “Those weeks without you were tough for me. I never want us to be in that position again.” Jen stole another kiss. “This is the position I’d rather be in with you. Right here, okay?”

Suzanne nodded as she smiled. “This is where I want to be, too.”

“About those things I mentioned,” Jen said as she shifted back a little. She took the hem of the hoodie in her hands and lifted it over her head to expose the strap-on she wore. “Is it something you could be into?”

Every last emotion Suzanne possessed tore through her at the speed of light. Just seeing Jen like this, entirely naked except for the harness around her waist... Oh, she was into it. She was into everything Jen threw at her. “Oh, my.” Jen visibly swallowed when Suzanne took hold of the length, her other hand sitting on Jen’s thigh. “I have a feeling you know exactly what you’re doing with this.”

“Maybe.” Jen took her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Then you should show me the fun I’ve been missing.” Suzanne lay back and allowed her legs to fall open. Jen ghosted the back of her hand over Suzanne’s pussy,

her back arching from the bed when she moaned. “Oh, Jen.”

Jen made herself comfortable between Suzanne’s thighs, spreading her lips as she dipped her head and stroked the flat of her tongue over Suzanne’s clit.

Suzanne lifted her hips, aware that she was already wet, needing more from Jen. When Jen sucked her clit into her mouth, it took everything within Suzanne not to fuck her face. God, she loved to experience new things with this woman. “S-shit, baby.” Suzanne did reach out this time, gripping the back of Jen’s head when she sucked harder. “Oh, fuck. Yes.”

“I’ve missed tasting you,” Jen whispered as she drew back and replaced her tongue with her thumb. “You’re so beautiful.”

Now wasn’t the time for blushing, but Suzanne felt her cheeks heat regardless. Jen always had a way of making Suzanne feel as though she was the very centre of her universe. She hoped that would never change.

“And I just...I need to be inside you, babe.” Jen slid a finger inside Suzanne, her stare pinning Suzanne to the bed as she looked back at her. And then Jen smirked when Suzanne tightened around the second finger she added. “You’re close.”

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“I’ve been thinking about you since the moment we sat down at dinner.”

Jen cocked her head. “Well, you should have said. I’d have left dessert and the walk and brought you right back here the moment we were done.”

Suzanne lowered her hand and spread her lips further. “Am I wet enough for you, baby?”

Jen lowered her gaze and moaned. “Fuck, yes. You’re soaking.” That was only confirmed when Jen sunk deeper, and the sound of Suzanne’s wetness floated around the silence of the room. “You feel incredible.”

Suzanne buried her head in the pillow beneath her, two fingertips rolling over her clit while Jen took care of everything else. “Give me more.”

Jen eased a third finger inside, urging Suzanne towards her first orgasm. Jen had that look in her eyes that reminded Suzanne of the kind of night they were in for. When she dipped her head again, taking over from Suzanne and replacing her fingers with her tongue, Suzanne buried the heels of her feet into the bed. “That’s it, babe. Come for me.”

Those words hurried Suzanne towards the peak. She tugged at one of her taut nipples, relaxed her body, and came against Jen’s tongue. Jen slowed, but she didn’t stop. She coaxed everything she could from Suzanne, moaning and lapping up her arousal. “F-fuck, Jen.” Suzanne brought a hand to her forehead and came down from the high she felt coursing through her body, excitement building all over again when she felt the bed dip between her legs. She looked up when Jen positioned herself, coating the toy

with Suzanne's wetness as she teased it between her lips. "Oh, God."

"It's always far more intense if I fuck you after you've just come."

Jen's confidence, the way she said that as she locked eyes with Suzanne, yeah...she needed this woman back inside her right now. She didn't want to come down from what she was feeling. Sheer bliss.

As Jen braced herself on either side of Suzanne, she took a nipple into her mouth, allowing the toy to tease her clit. Between the sensation of Jen's mouth on her, and the toy shifting lower and towards her entrance, Suzanne was just about ready to lose her mind. Jen looked back at Suzanne with hooded eyes, her breath washing over her nipple, and said, "Are you ready for me?"

Suzanne could only nod. The intensity of Jen's gaze was too much to take.

Jen brought one hand between them and took a hold of the toy. When she pushed the tip inside Suzanne, Suzanne's mouth fell open, and her breath caught in her throat.

"Feeling okay?"

Suzanne wrapped a hand around the back of Jen's neck and brought that delicious mouth closer. "Oh, I'm feeling far more than okay." She drew Jen into a kiss and slid her tongue into her mouth when Jen eased further inside her. Fuck, Suzanne couldn't describe the way she was feeling. All she knew was that these were the moments she would always remember. No matter what. "Y-yes. More."

Jen pulled back a little, only to push deeper as she thrust her hips. Mm, that's more like it. Suzanne grinned when she took the entire length of the toy, her hands wrapped around the muscles in Jen's arms. "Suzanne, fuck!"

“Fuck me harder.” Suzanne met every thrust from Jen. She understood that Jen was likely wary about hurting her, but she could handle her. Oh, she could handle so much more. Suzanne brought her lips to Jen’s ear and whispered, “Go on. Show me what you’ve really got.”

Jen’s arms wobbled at that, something flickering in her eyes as she looked down at Suzanne. She lifted a brow and smiled. “You’re fucking filthy.”

“You wouldn’t have me any other way.” Suzanne flipped them suddenly, straddling Jen and enjoying that feeling of being full. She lifted, then sunk down onto the toy. Jen lay there, mesmerised, her own throaty moan mingled with Suzanne’s panting as Suzanne reached out and teased her nipples. She threw her head back and rode Jen, scratching her nails down Jen’s stomach. “Oh, baby. That feels so fucking good.”

As Jen’s breath hitched, Suzanne knew the base of the toy was rubbing against her clit. Her face contorted as Jen gripped the cover beneath them. It was important to Suzanne that Jen also got the most out of this moment. “B-babe.”

“You really thought I’d be the one having all the fun?” Suzanne angled her head when Jen looked back at her. She rocked back and forth, her orgasm fiercely approaching, unable to comprehend being in this position with anyone else. Jen was it for her. No doubt about it. “Are you close?”

“S-so fucking close.”

Suzanne lowered her hand, pressed her fingers to her clit, and rode Jen harder and faster. “T-together, okay?”

Jen held onto Suzanne’s hips, forcing her harder against her, and cried out into the room. “C-coming. Shit, babe. Oh, fuck, I’m coming.”

Suzanne toppled over the edge, whimpering as she continued to enjoy the toy buried inside her. She had no idea Jen had this kind of evening up her sleeve, but she expected so many more of them. “Oh, Jen.” She slowed, slumped forward, pressed her body to Jen’s, and buried her face in the crook of Jen’s neck. “Baby, that was?—”

“Just the beginning.” Jen flipped them again, eased out of Suzanne, and crawled back on the bed. “Turn around. I want to fuck you from behind.”

It was in that moment that Suzannetrulyknew she could never risk losing Jen again. This life they were building together simplyhadto be their future. Nothing else was acceptable.

Jen crept up behind Suzanne, where she stood at the kitchen island, wrapping her arms around her waist as she did so. Suzanne always felt soft and warm in the morning, her unblemished skin just begging for Jen’s lips. She smiled against the back of her neck, dropping slow, wet kisses along her shoulder as Jen pulled her silk robe away from her skin. “Mm. Morning, babe.”

Suzanne arched her back when Jen slid a hand inside her robe and dragged her nails along her stomach. “You just don’t know when to stop, do you?” Suzanne moaned when Jen dipped lower. “Fuck, I’ve missed you.”

“Not as much as I’ve missed you.” Jen took her bottom lip between her teeth as she rested her chin on Suzanne’s shoulder. Her hand wandered between Suzanne’s thighs, spreading her lips without a second thought. There was something incredibly rewarding about teasing this woman. “Because I did. I missed you so fucking much.”

The knife Suzanne had been cutting fruit with clattered to the counter, and then she turned in Jen’s arms, those beautiful eyes so soft this morning. “Never again, okay? I never want to imagine a single day without you again, let alone weeks.”

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“After last night, you’re stuck with me forever.” Jen smirked as she trailed her tongue across Suzanne’s bottom lip. “Who knew you could take a strap so fucking well?” Thank God she’d had what she needed to hand last night. The result had been fucking mind-blowing!

“Only because you were the one giving it to me,” Suzanne whispered against Jen’s lips. “And I expect more of it.”

“Anytime, babe. It would be my pleasure.” Jen wanted to continue their antics into this morning, but she was starving. They’d both crashed in the end last night, meaning no snacks had been consumed. Jen was quite partial to a snack when she’d rocked another woman’s world. “What’s for breakfast?”

“You, hopefully.” Suzanne nipped at Jen’s bottom lip. “I didn’t get enough of you last night.”

“Can we eat first? I swear my stomach is going to get angry in the next thirty seconds.” Jen felt it rumble, but thankfully, it was silent for the time being. “It’s just given me a warning.”

“Someone worked up quite the appetite.” Suzanne tweaked Jen’s nose as she turned her back and finished making breakfast. “Sit down. I’ll bring it over.”

“Nah. Let me help.” Jen stepped up beside Suzanne and awaited further instruction. “Where do you want me?”

“Out of my kitchen and at the dining table,” Suzanne said as she side-eyed Jen. “I’m

sorry, but I can't concentrate when you're standing so close to me."

Jen nodded, turning her back and puffing out her chest with pride. She made Suzanne weak in the knees, and that was absolutely fine by Jen. It meant the hot and steamy moments were far more exciting. "Coffee?"

"It's on the table. Help yourself."

As Jen scanned the table, bits and pieces already sitting in place, her phone started to ring on the coffee table in the living room. "Sorry, babe. I'll just get that. It's probably Mum."

Jen lifted her phone, frowning when she didn't recognise the number on the screen. "Hello?"

"Jen! Hey!"

"Um, hi. Who is this?"

"It's Lizzie."

Oh, shit. She had completely forgotten to add Lizzie's number to her phone last night. Jen was planning to text her once she knew she had a spare few hours. Though, judging by last night, she planned to use all those spare hours watching Suzanne beneath her. "Oh, hey. How are you?"

"Great! It was so good seeing you at the restaurant. Chloe and Mel said you look great." Lizzie cleared her throat. "So, I was wondering about that catch-up we mentioned last night."

"Yeah, uh..." Jen scratched at the back of her neck, looking over her shoulder and

towards the kitchen. “I’m not really sure when I’m going to be available at the moment. I’m kinda tied up with Suzanne.”

“O-oh. Right, yeah.”

“It’s all kinda new and exciting. You know what I mean?”

Lizzie laughed. “What you mean is, you’re getting fucked left, right, and centre. Got it!”

Jen winced. Lizzie didn’t need to word it like that. “Well, no. I just meant that we’re spending a lot of time with one another, and with me working all week, I prefer to be with her. While I can, you know.”

“I get that. It would be nice to catch up, though. Even just for a quick coffee.”

Jen could afford Lizzie that. Actually, it was the least she could do after everything she’d put her through. “You’re right. Let’s arrange something. Find out when Mel and Chloe are available and send me a text.”

“Perfect. I’ll be in touch, okay?”

“Sure. Take it easy, Lizzie. Good talking to you again.” Jen ended the call and threw her phone onto the couch. When she turned around, Suzanne was watching her from the dining table. “That was just Lizzie.”

“That’s nice.” Suzanne smiled, but Jen knew it was fake. Lizzie being around bothered Suzanne, but Jen didn’t want it to be that way. Everyone would have to learn to live in harmony down the line. “So, are you ready for breakfast or did you need to leave?”

“Leave?” Jen snorted as she stalked towards Suzanne. “You think I’ve got any plans to leave?”

Suzanne busied herself as she placed various foods down on the dining table, but Jen took her hand and turned Suzanne to her. “Jen.”

“Do I have to bend you over this table right now and show you what you do to me?” Jen felt Suzanne tremble as she sat a hand on her hip. “Do I need to drop to my knees and taste you while you enjoy breakfast?”

“J-Jen.”

“No. We’re not doing this whole jealousy thing. Lizzie was a different lifetime for me. She was part of a past I never want to remember or relive. This, right now...my life right now, is about you. Us. That’s not going to change.”

Suzanne nodded slowly as she took a step back and motioned towards the table. “Breakfast is ready.” Then she cleared her throat. “And for the record, I’m not jealous.”

Jen sighed as she followed Suzanne to the table. She wasn’t convinced that Suzanne was okay with Lizzie being around, but she also didn’t know how to show or how to promise Suzanne that there was nothing still there for Lizzie in her heart. God, she couldn’t even remember the last time she’d thought about her ex. Probably while she was in prison, and likely only because Jen was punishing herself about those she’d hurt in the process. Other than that, she rarely thought about Lizzie or any other exes for that matter.

Silently placing different items of food onto her plate, Jen glanced up at Suzanne. “No matter what happens, I don’t plan to have a full-blown friendship with her.”

“If you believe a friendship would be beneficial, then please, don’t let me stop you.” Suzanne tucked into breakfast. “So long as I still get to spend some time with you, then you should see friends. It’s important that you reconnect with people.”

That was the thing, though. Jen didn’t want to reconnect with people from the past. As a friendly face in the street, sure, but that was the extent of those friendships. When

she was ready to, Jen would find new friends. People who hadn't seen her at her worst. "You know I love you, right?"

Suzanne looked up at Jen and frowned. "I know."

"But do you? Because we've both said it, but it was said potentially in the heat of the moment." Jen didn't need to prove anything to anyone, but she did need Suzanne to understand what she was saying. "It was said when we weren't even together anymore."

"I still meant it."

"And so did I." Jen dipped her head and smiled back at Suzanne. "I'm finding that I mean it a whole lot more this morning, though."

"Why?"

"Because we had the perfect night with one another. Dinner was amazing; you were exceptional. I have everything I could need now that we're back together, babe. Everything."

"That means a lot to hear you say that." Suzanne regarded Jen with the most astonishing smile. "I just want to make you happy, Jen."

Jen shifted her seat closer and stroked the back of her hand against Suzanne's cheek as she smiled. "You do. Believe me." Jen turned her attention back to the delicious food on her plate. "Now, eat up. Because I'm going to spend all morning making love to you...and then I'm taking you out for a late lunch."

"You...are?"

“Mmhmm. Today is all about us. Tonight, too.” Jen shoved a forkful of scrambled eggs into her mouth and winked. “You make the best breakfast.”

“I love you,” Suzanne said, her voice breaking as she gazed back at Jen. “And I’m going to make sure you know it every single day.”

“I love you too, babe.”

Chapter 21

Suzanne quietly exited her car and locked it when Jen climbed from the passenger seat. She enjoyed these moments again, travelling around town with Jen. Life didn’t feel so lonely anymore. No, it felt exciting and hopeful. It felt...incredibly beautiful to be loved by Jen.

“Ready, babe?”

Suzanne smiled, feeling a little anxious about lunch. Jen had suggested a favourite restaurant of hers, then dropped the bomb that her mother worked there. “Yes. I’m ready.”

Jen quirked a brow, a slight smirk present. “You sure? You don’t look it.”

“Really, I’m sure.” Suzanne held out a hand when Jen rounded the front of her car, satisfied when she latched onto it. They’d been out together on so many occasions now, but this time felt different. Suzanne didn’t quite know why, but she was going to enjoy this afternoon since Jen had specifically dedicated it to them. “Does your mum know we’re coming here today?”

“Nope. Thought I’d surprise her. Although she’s likely to wring my neck the next time I see her for introducing you to one another while she’s not in her Sunday best.”

Suzanne laughed as they turned for the restaurant entrance. “Don’t worry. My mum was the same.”

“I think it’s funny, but she’ll still be mortified.” Jen winked as she tightened her grip on Suzanne’s hand. “But she’s going to love you. I know she is.”

Suzanne exhaled a deep breath. The anxiety swirling in her belly had just intensified. “Then I hope I don’t disappoint.”

“Nah. You couldn’t disappoint anyone if you tried.” Jen let go of Suzanne’s hand and instead placed her hand on the small of Suzanne’s back. “Come on. Let’s get some food. I’m starving now. Any fuel I gave myself this morning was quickly depleted.”

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“Sorry about that.” Suzanne regarded Jen with a filthy smile. It was her fault that Jen was hungry all over again, but Suzanne wasn’t really sorry. If Jen needed refuelling, then Suzanne was clearly doing something right. “We had a lovely morning, though.”

“What can I say?” Jen lifted a shoulder as they entered the restaurant and waited to be seated. She nipped at Suzanne’s earlobe and whispered, “Making you come is my favourite activity.”

Oh, God. Suzanne shivered, gripping the wooden table that held the menus. “You have to stop that. Especially here when I’m about to meet your mother.”

“Maybe it’s time to test your self-control.” Suzanne was finding it painfully hard to concentrate now that Jen’s hand had slid to her backside. “Or maybe I’ll just tie you up tonight and see how long it takes you to beg me for more.”

Oh, my...

“I’ll see how I’m feeling later. Depends what I’m in the mood for.”

Suzanne lifted a brow as she looked over her shoulder at Jen. “You do realise I’ll punish you in return, don’t you?”

“Oh, I wasn’t planning to punish you,” Jen said, frowning. “But now that I know I’ll be punished, maybe I’ll tease a little longer.”

Suzanne cleared her throat when a server approached them. “Hi. Reservation for Dixon. Two people.”

“Perfect. If you’d like to follow me.” The server picked up several menus and walked away.

Suzanne and Jen followed, the atmosphere in here just perfect for a spontaneous lunch. Suzanne loved trying new places, and with Jen by her side, she loved it even more. As they took a seat, she watched Jen from across the table. “Gorgeous place.”

“Italian. Mum has worked here since Dad died, so over ten years now. She doesn’t need the work, but it keeps her busy, and I think she enjoys waiting on people. She’s forever doing it with me.”

Suzanne lay a hand over Jen’s. “I think that’s different, baby. You’re her daughter.”

Jen fisted a hand under her chin and gazed back at Suzanne. When Jen looked at her that way—an incredible amount of love pouring from her eyes—Suzanne could promise her forever. “She’s just that type of person. She wants to do everything for everyone.”

“Then she clearly has a good heart. Just like her daughter.”

“Aw. Thanks, babe. That’s a lovely thing to say.”

“It’s true. I’ve never met anyone who is so switched on. Even though you’ve been through a lot, you still see the positives in the world. It takes a strong character to put everything else aside and just live. At least, I believe it does.”

“I think coming out of prison taught me that I have a whole entire life ahead of me. Ruby doesn’t have that chance, but I do. I have to make the most of life for us both. It’s only right.”

“She would be proud of you.”

Jen lifted a shoulder. “She wouldn’t. She’d kick my arse. But all I can do now is move forward and do what I can to be a better person. Not that her mum would agree.”

Suzanne frowned. What did that mean? “Her mum? I remember you telling me that you’d tried to reach out, but it came to nothing.”

“Yeah. When you and I were...not together, I went to Ruby’s grave. Lyn turned up and basically told me what she thought of me. Said I’d ruined my life.” Jen cleared her throat. “She wasn’t wrong.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“I could have done with someone to talk to about it, but I only really have myself to blame.”

Suzanne regarded Jen with a sympathetic smile. She couldn’t imagine what Jen had gone through when Ruby passed away, but she equally knew it must have been hard for Ruby’s mother to see Jen ruining her life in some way. “I’m sorry. I do hope you can work it out in the future.”

“I’m kinda hoping that Lizzie and the girls will have some thoughts on it. We were all really close before Ruby died. I’m sure they still see or speak to Lyn. I just want to know if it can ever be salvaged. Lyn was another mother to me until I fucked it all up.”

Suzanne nodded, hoping Jen would consider her friendship group again. Knowing Jendidhave friends out there who still cared about her warmed Suzanne. As for Suzanne’s brief worry when it came to Lizzie, well...Jen had reminded her of what they had this morning. She had no reason to be concerned. Not really. “I hope they can give you the advice you need.”

“Would you feel better if I didn’t see them?”

“What? No.” Suzanne needed Jen to do whatever she thought was best for her. “Why would you think that?”

“Honestly?” Jen lifted a brow. “I think it makes you feel uncomfortable when I mention Lizzie, and I don’t want you to feel that way. I’ll say hi in passing, but that’s all. I don’t want to do anything to harm what we have here. We’re only just getting it back, and I’m not prepared to risk it.”

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“Baby, I have no problems with you seeing any of them. Lizzie included.” Suzanne lay a hand over Jen’s, disappointed if she’d given off that impression to Jen. “Hey, I love you, and I trust you. Why wouldn’t I?”

“I just want to make sure you’re okay with it. Even though Lizzie is my friend, I understand if you’re wary because we were together at one time.”

“You’ve done nothing whatsoever for me to question your loyalty to me.” Suzanne squeezed Jen’s hand and then drew back. Her own stomach was beginning to rumble now. “If I had an issue, I’d tell you, okay?”

“Okay. Let’s enjoy lunch, yeah?” Jen picked up the menu and perused it. “The arancini is to die for, by the way.”

Noted. Suzanne loved all things Italian, and arancini was certainly right up her street.

And then she heard a gasp from the side of her. She looked up and to her left, instantly aware that Jen’s mum was about to join them. There was no denying the similarities.

“Jen! I didn’t know you were coming in today!”

Jen got to her feet and hugged her mum. “Hi, Mum. Thought I’d surprise you.”

“Well, you could have bloody warned me!”

Jen rolled her eyes as she turned to Suzanne. “Babe, this is my mum, Denise. Mum,

this is Suzanne.”

“The woman my daughter is besotted with.” Denise leaned in and hugged Suzanne as she stood up. It was one of those strong embraces. Sometimes, you enjoyed it; other times, it felt as though the life was being squeezed right out of you. Denise’s was a bit of both, but it warmed Suzanne inside. “So lovely to meet you, Suzanne.”

“Likewise.” They pulled apart, but Denise still held Suzanne at arm’s length. “I was as surprised as you. Jen dropped it on us both.”

“Mm. She likes to do that sort of thing.” Denise eyed Jen, but then she winked. “Bagged yourself a bloody beauty here, didn’t you, love?”

“Mum.” Jen slid down in her seat. “Leave Suzanne alone and just take our order. You can tell me all about what you think the next time I’m home.”

“The next time you’re home?” Denise scoffed. “Does that mean I’m not going to see you for a few days?”

“Not sure yet. But you definitely won’t see me tonight. We’re having a night in with the TV and snacks.”

Were they? That was news to Suzanne. Still, it sounded perfect. Suzanne could take or leave nights out. She could enjoy a movie at the cinema, or she was equally as happy in the comfort of her own home. Right now, her heart was swelling purely because Jen wanted to have a night in with her. This day was certainly a huge improvement on dinner last night. Everything felt...normal.

“Well, that sounds perfect.” Denise took her pen and notepad from her jeans pocket and smiled. “What can I get you? I wouldn’t want to keep you too long.”

“We’re in no rush, Mum. I purposely decided to come at this time so we could all have coffee together when we’ve finished lunch.”

Denise grinned. “Wonderful. I’ll take your order, and then we can get this show on the road.”

Braced for whatever conversation was about to happen, Jen smiled at her mum as she took a seat at their table. Lunch had been great. Suzanne had repeatedly moaned as she took a forkful of food into her mouth, and now she couldn’t wait to get Suzanne alone. She had a feeling Suzanne knew exactly what she was doing—she had spent ten minutes erotically licking the tiramisu from her spoon, her eyes locked on Jen—but she could handle it. Suzanne was a whole lot of woman, but Jen was a whole lot of lesbian who would devour her the moment it was possible.

“How was lunch?” Denise asked as she kept her attention on Suzanne. “No problems?”

“None whatsoever. Lunch was great.”

Jen watched their interaction, not surprised by how easy Suzanne and Denise found it to strike up a conversation. Her mum had always been easy-going, and Suzanne was hardly introverted.

“Jen says you live over in the Belmont area.” Denise added sugar to her coffee, then sipped. “Must be very fancy over there. It was back in the day.”

“It’s...a home. I don’t pay much attention to the area or my neighbours. Some of them can be a little intense, as I found out when I foolishly added myself to the neighbourhood group chat.”

“Mm. I can imagine.” Denise turned her attention to Jen. “I hope you don’t try to be

someone else when you're over that side of town, my love. You're perfect as you are."

"Me? Be someone else? I don't think I could do that even if I tried." Jen had always maintained that someone's personality and compassion made them who they were. It didn't matter what car you drove or how much you had in your bank account. Everyone went into the same ground when the time came to depart this sometimes dreadful earth. "And anyway, I'm used to being over that side. I spent enough time there when I was a kid with Ruby."

"That's a fair point." Denise nodded. "So, what plans do you have now? Doreen texted me while I was working earlier. She's invited me out tonight for a meal with some of her friends from work."

"I hope you said yes." Jen gave her mum a knowing look.

“I did, actually.”

Thank God for that. It meant Jen wouldn’t spend the evening at Suzanne’s feeling guilty because her mum was home alone. “Good. Maybe even live a little and take a cab. Have a few glasses of wine and enjoy yourself.”

“Maybe I will.” Denise laughed and eyed Suzanne. “You’d think she was the mother sometimes, I swear.”

“I think you equally look out for one another. Jen has told me about the support you’ve given her recently. It’s admirable.” Suzanne topped up hers and Jen’s glasses of water. “These days, parents can be quick to cut their child off if they lose their way.”

“She’s my blood. I carried her for what felt like an eternity. I don’t have it in me to turn my back on someone so kind-hearted and beautiful.” Denise reached out and stroked Jen’s cheek. “You’re thriving now, my love.”

Feeling a ball of emotion swell in her throat, Jen quickly cleared it away and smiled. “Yep. Course I am.”

“And I don’t worry about you anymore. Not since you met Suzanne.” Jen knew how much her mum had worried since her release from prison, but she felt better knowing that worry wasn’t there anymore. She knew Denise would always wonder where she was and what she was doing, that was just the mother in her, but hearing her say what she just had meant that she trusted Suzanne. That mattered a lot to Jen. “You look...healthy. Happy, too.”

“I am. Stupidly happy.” God, she was happier than she had been in a long time. “You know, we should all go out for dinner one evening, Mum. My treat...since I owe you a million of them already.”

Denise rolled her eyes and tutted. “I don’t know how many times I have to tell her that she owes me nothing at all.”

“I think that’s just who Jen is as a person,” Suzanne explained. “She’s forever doing something really lovely.”

“Oh, yes?”

“Mm. I’ve lost count of the number of times she’s brought me flowers when she’s over at my place. And she knows how to pick them, too.”

“Oh, don’t get me started on the flowers. She’s always had an eye for the beautiful things in life.” Denise nodded towards Suzanne. “Case in point.”

As Jen looked to Suzanne, she caught her blushing. “She’s not wrong, babe.”

Suzanne shook her head. “Oh, stop it.”

“I’m serious.” Jen lifted a shoulder. “When it comes to people, I have an eye for beauty.”

Suzanne gave Jen a look that said, ‘keep talking, and it’s going to be your lucky night’. But she hadn’t complimented Suzanne for any reason other than because she simply wanted to.

Denise turned her watch towards herself and sighed. “Damn it. I only have a few minutes left on my break. I really don’t want to cut this short.”

“Don’t worry, Mum. We came here unexpectedly, and I know you have to get back to work.” Jen knew they had all the time in the world for Denise and Suzanne to really get to know one another. She sure as hell had no plans to introduce anyone else to her mum in the future. “We can always come and see you when you’re not working and have a brew. Maybe some lunch at home.”

“That would be lovely. I’d really like that.”

“Then it’s a plan. I don’t know when, but it’s definitely a plan.”

Denise got to her feet and smiled down at Suzanne. “It’s been wonderful meeting you.”

Suzanne also rose to her feet. She stepped around her chair and embraced Denise, melting Jen’s heart as she did so. “We will definitely see you again soon.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” Denise drew back and eyed Jen. “I mean it.”

“You’ll be sick of the sight of us before long.”

Denise tutted as she took her coffee cup from the table and stepped back. “Not possible, my love. I missed your face so much when you were away that it’s going to take the rest of my life to fill that gap.” Denise leaned down and kissed Jen on the cheek. “I love you. Be safe.”

“I love you, too. I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?”

“I know you will. You always do.”

Denise turned and walked away, leaving Jen sitting there with a chest bursting full of love. Just months ago, she was wondering if she would ever recover from her past,

and now here she was...deeply in love with Suzanne and with a mother who cared a great deal about her.

“It’s beautiful to see,” Suzanne said, breaking Jen out of her thoughts. “Seeing the bond you two have...it’s truly beautiful.”

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“Thanks, babe. For being here with me, for being you, for...everything, really.”

Suzanne sighed contentedly as she sat back in her seat. “Trust me, I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.”

Chapter 22

With her back to the entrance of the coffee shop, Jen tapped her bank card against the contactless reader and smiled at the barista. This place was new, and the smell of coffee coming from it had enticed Jen from the moment she turned the corner onto the high street. Judging by the food orders coming out from the kitchen, it looked like a good place to try for lunch with Suzanne.

Jen had a rare afternoon off today. She hadn’t known anything about it until she’d got into work this morning, and the manager of her depot had asked if anyone wanted to finish early. Jen had been the first to raise her hand, knowing where she would rather be right now. Curled up in Suzanne’s living room while her girlfriend enjoyed reading a book. Jen was more than happy to sit in the quietness of Suzanne’s home. It gave her the perfect opportunity to watch the woman she was so in love with. When Suzanne had told Jen she’d felt distant at dinner, she genuinely hadn’t intended to come across that way. Jen wouldn’t make that mistake again. She never wanted Suzanne to feel any distance.

You couldn’t distance yourself if you tried.

Jen took her takeout coffee cup as they called her name and left the coffee shop before she could convince herself to sit down and have lunch. Ideally, she would

surprise Suzanne in the next hour or so, and then they could have lunch together. She stopped outside the coffee shop and took her phone from her pocket. Maybe she should see if Suzanne was even available today.

Hey! How's your day going so far?

Jen locked her phone and crossed the street, keeping the device in her hand. The moment it buzzed, she lifted it again.

My day would have been better if you were here. Can I see you tonight?

There wasn't a single scenario that would keep Jen from being with Suzanne tonight. Still, she was sticking with the idea of turning up at Suzanne's and surprising her.

Of course you can. Hopefully I'll get off work on time. I'll text you later.

As Jen stopped at the entrance to one of the local parks, she heard someone calling her name. That wasn't common around here anymore. People preferred to avoid her rather than draw attention to the fact they wanted to speak to Jen.

She turned and scanned the street, smiling when Lizzie rushed across the road. "Hey, how's it going?"

"Not bad. It's lovely to see you again." Lizzie blew out a breath as she stopped in front of Jen. "Going anywhere nice?"

"Just thought I'd cut through the park to head back to Mum's. Got plans and need to grab some stuff. You on your lunch break?" Jen didn't know if Lizzie even had the same job anymore. "Are you still working at the bank?"

"I am. Today is my day off. If I'd known you'd be around the area, I would have

called to meet up with you.” Lizzie bumped shoulders with Jen. “Maybe I could join you on your walk.”

Jen shrugged and sipped her coffee. “I mean, I won’t be walking for long or very far...”

“That’ll do me. I’ve already done ninety minutes in the gym this morning.”

“Okay. Let’s go.” She cleared her throat as they landed on the path that circled around the park, side-eyeing Lizzie. “How’ve you been?”

“Yeah, not bad, I guess.” Lizzie held onto the strap of the satchel resting across her body. “Life is pretty much the same as usual, you know? I work, go home to an empty flat, eat, sleep...and do it all over again the next day.”

Jen shoved her free hand in her pocket and shook her head. She knew Lizzie didn’t live at the house they’d shared together anymore. She’d let it go within a few months of splitting up with Jen. “I can’t believe you’re not married. Your Reecedefinitelytold a few people that you were married and pregnant.”

“As you can see, I’m definitely not pregnant. She was. And yes, therewastalk of us getting engaged, but you know when something just doesn’t feel right in your gut? Well, my gut feeling was right on the money.”

“I’m sorry she fucked you over, Lizzie. You didn’t deserve that. After everything I put you through, I really hoped you’d gone on to find someone ten times better.” Jen could never fault Lizzie when it came to their relationship. Until Jen lost her head, and even during those moments, for the most part, they’d had the most amazing relationship with one another. Lizzie really was the dream partner.

Lizzie linked an arm through Jen’s, surprising her. “I don’t think it’s possible to find

someone better than you. Yes, you had a rough time, and I couldn't be what you needed, but it was never about not wanting you anymore. I hope you believe me when I say that." Lizzie squeezed Jen's bicep. "I had to walk away so you could find the help you needed. God knew you didn't want it from me."

Lizzie wasn't wrong. Not at all. "You'd think losing you would have kicked me up the arse, but nope. Good old me just kept on spiralling."

"I know." Lizzie held onto Jen's arm and guided her towards a park bench. Jen turned to her, her brows drawn once they'd sat down. She couldn't put her finger on Lizzie's mood or the reason she'd sat Jen down, but the least Jen could do was give Lizzie the space she needed to talk. There certainly hadn't been any talking back when she left. Jen was out of it most of the time. "I am sorry for leaving you to fend for yourself."

"Honestly, it was the best thing you could have done. I was a waste of space, and you deserved so much more than that. But look, I'm out of it on the other side now, and all I can do is move on and live my life."

"You...look great, Jen." Lizzie lay a hand on Jen's knee.

Jen narrowed her eyes ever so slightly. Was Lizzie flirting with her? No, she couldn't be. This woman had left Jen years ago now. "I had a lot of time to work on myself during prison and after it. I'm back at the gym, I don't drink anymore, and on the whole, my life is looking pretty good."

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“I’m happy to hear that.” Lizzie crossed her legs and sighed. “How was your date that night? Suzanne, wasn’t it?”

Jen’s heart beat a little harder at the mention of Suzanne’s name. She couldn’t recall a time that had ever happened in past relationships. Even though they’d been great together, Jen couldn’t say she’d even felt it with Lizzie. “Yeah, Suzanne. And it was great. I didn’t realise I’d done it at first, but I shouldn’t have introduced her to you as my date.” Jen reminded herself of the conversation they’d had after they’d left the restaurant. She never meant to refer to Suzanne as just her date. “She wasn’t really my date.”

“Oh, thank God. The next day, when I called and you were with her, my heart sank. I assumed you were together, you know...in a relationship.” Lizzie held a hand to her chest as she shifted closer. “I know we haven’t seen one another for a while, but I was talking to Chloe and Mel recently, and I kinda came clean about how I was feeling.”

“How you were feeling? About what?”

“You and me. The life we had before everything went wrong.”

Jen was taken aback by what Lizzie was saying. She hadn’t imagined her ex would ever want to think about the life they’d had and ultimately lost. “Right. Okay.”

“And I think seeing you today has just confirmed it for me. Now that I know nothing is going on with you and Suzanne, I need you to know that I want you to come home, Jen. Come back to me.”

Jen slowly lifted her coffee cup to her lips, wanting to give herself the opportunity to process what Lizzie had just said before she responded. She was shocked, but she wouldn't show it. If Lizzie needed to get this out of her system, then so be it.

"I know it's probably a surprise, but I want to try again with you, Jen. We were so happy, and I want us to have that again. I want to carry on building what we were building back then. I-if you can forgive me for walking away, at least."

Jen lowered her coffee cup to the space between them and took Lizzie's hands into her lap. "In terms of you leaving, there is nothing to forgive. You did what was best for you, and I can never blame you for that. I was an awful person who didn't deserve someone like you standing beside me."

"I should have, though."

"No, you shouldn't. And I'm glad you didn't. In the end, I only dragged down everyone I came across. I didn't want you to become a victim of that, too. If you'd stayed and forced yourself to keep loving me, then that would have happened. You were the only person who didn't resent me, and I couldn't risk that changing. It's why I didn't bother to fight for us. I couldn't even fight for myself."

"I never once had to force myself to love you, babe. I've always loved you, and to this day, I still do. I just...didn't know how to give you what you needed. The pain you were in, I couldn't help you. I didn't see an end to the behaviours, and I couldn't stand to watch it any longer."

"Hey," Jen said as she lifted a hand and cupped Lizzie's cheek. "You did the right thing, okay?"

"A-and now? Do you think we could give it another go?"

Jen had never felt so in demand all of a sudden. She was so used to people turning their back on her that the idea two different women could love her seemed like one hell of a stretch. As she looked back at Lizzie, the turmoil in her eyes was visible. God, Jen didn't want to hurt this woman by turning her down, but getting back together just wasn't going to happen. Jen was in love with Suzanne. "That's not possible, Lizzie."

"Please, Jen." Lizzie blinked away tears. "I know it's going to take time to rebuild, but I really need another chance with you."

"Lizzie, I'm in a relationship." Jen lowered her hand from Lizzie's cheek and ran her palm down her own thigh. "When I told you that Suzanne wasn't my date, I meant that she's my girlfriend. We've been seeing one another now for almost three months." Jen chose not to mention the weeks they were broken up. It wasn't important to the story.

"I...what?" Lizzie's brows rose as she stared back at Jen. "You're together?"

"We are, yes." Jen regarded Lizzie with a small smile, knowing she probably felt embarrassed right now. But there was no harm done. She had made her feelings about Jen known, and now Jen could avoid anything resembling this in the future.

"But we were engaged. We had a home together."

Jen straightened her shoulders. She didn't want this conflict to become anything she would have to contend with. That wasn't her life anymore. "That part of me doesn't exist anymore, Lizzie. It hasn't since the moment they slapped handcuffs on me, and I realised the terrible mistakes I'd made. Suzanne and I are happy. We're in love. She's...my fresh start."

Lizzie lowered her gaze to her hands in her lap. "I see."

“This may hurt when I say this, but I had to remove anything I had when Ruby was alive from my life. Friends, memories. Anything that reminded me of the one important thing I lost. Rubes. Going back to anything that reminds me of that time is a slippery slope for me. I’m sure you can understand that.”

“I-I don’t understand it. Not really.”

“You and I were great together, we always had been, but our relationship reminds me of a time that I don’t want to remember. The loss we all suffered, then the turmoil I brought to people’s lives, it’s just not something I want to be faced with on the daily. It’s not something I can handle going back to.”

“You’re telling me I remind you of one of the most painful times of your life?” Lizzie pulled a face at that, but Jen had to be brutally honest here.

Jen nodded slowly. “Yes, in a way.”

“Well, you really know how to make a girl feel special.” Lizzie scoffed. “And for the record, I remind you of that time in your life because you fucked it all up. So, really, you only have yourself to blame when it comes to feeling that way about me.”

“I know that. I also accept it.” Jen rose to her feet and lifted her coffee cup from the bench. “I don’t want to fall out with you all over again because I didn’t want to come back to you. Either we go our separate ways entirely, or we figure out how to be friends.” Jen looked down at Lizzie, hoping for the latter. She needed all the friends she could get around here. “I know which I’d prefer.”

“It’s serious between you and her?”

Jen nodded. “Very serious.”

Lizzie stood and wrapped her hand around Jen’s. “If it ever doesn’t work out, find me, okay? I don’t know about you, but I feel as though we’re not done yet.” Lizzie leaned in and kissed Jen’s cheek. “I will always love you, Jen. We lost what we had, but you’re back, and you’re like a different person. I just...I hope you do the right thing and come back to me.”

Jen stood open-mouthed as Lizzie turned and walked away. As far as she was concerned, Lizzie had been done with her a long time ago. Still, her admission didn’t change anything for Jen. Her life was with Suzanne now, and it was a life she looked forward to every morning when she woke up.

Chapter 23

Excited to surprise Suzanne, Jen curled her hand into a fist and knocked loudly on the front door. She had rushed home to change, pick up some fresh clothes for tomorrow, and now she wanted to be safely inside Suzanne’s gorgeous, cosy home. It had taken everything within Jen not to tell Suzanne she was coming over; she just prayed she was actually home. When the lock on the back of the door disengaged, Jen breathed a sigh of relief.

The door opened, and Suzanne stared back at her with a frown. “What are you doing here?” Her gaze swept up Jen’s body. “Have you even been to work?”

“I have. The boss gave me the afternoon off. Quiet day today.” Jen shrugged. “Well, quieter than it’s been in a while, at least.”

Suzanne grinned, fisted her hand in Jen’s jacket, and dragged her through the door. “Does that mean I get to spend the rest of the day with you?”

“No, I only called in for a sec. Got somewhere to be.”

Suzanne’s smile quickly faded, but Jen was only playing. “Oh. Well, I guess a few minutes is better than nothing. But I hope you know I hate it when you leave.”

“Babe, I’m joking. Lock the door.”

Suzanne reached around Jen and flicked the lock. She took her hold-all from her, shoved it halfway up the stairs, and guided Jen into the back living room. “I’ve been bored out of my mind without you here.”

“I’m notthatexciting.” Jen snorted. “But I’ll take it.”

Suzanne sighed as she rested back against the edge of the dining table and pulled Jen between her legs. “I can’t believe you got the afternoon off, and now you’re here.”

“Where else would I be?” Jen leaned in and kissed Suzanne slowly. “I can’t believe you think I wouldn’t come here.”

“And you brought a bag.” Suzanne wiggled her eyebrows.

Jen burst out laughing. It wasn’t often Suzanne did those quirky things, but when she did, Jen found it adorable. “You make it sound like I’m rarely here. I spend more time in this place than I do at home.”

“And you don’t know how grateful I am for that,” Suzanne said, wrapping her arms around Jen’s waist. “Anything exciting happen while you were working this morning?”

Jen knew she would have to have the Lizzie conversation with Suzanne, and this would be the perfect time to have it. “Nope. But I was in town picking coffee up and bumped into Lizzie.”

“Is she okay?”

“I...think so. I’m not quite sure.” Jen hadn’t enjoyed turning Lizzie down, but she couldn’t change how she felt in her heart. “Could we talk? It won’t take long.”

Suzanne visibly swallowed as her arms loosened around Jen’s waist. “Sure.”

“Please don’t worry. There is nothing to worry about.” Jen took Suzanne’s hand and guided her into the living room. They both fell down with an oomph, the fire dwindling in front of them. She turned to Suzanne. “Are you okay?”

“I hope I will be.” Suzanne puffed out her cheeks and shook her head. “So?”

Jen held onto Suzanne’s hand, hoping Suzanne could feel how calm she was. “Okay, I’m just going to come right out and say it, and then we can move on with our lives, yeah?”

Suzanne nodded as she chewed her lip. “Mmhmm.”

“She...asked me to go back to her.”

The thumb stroking Jen’s knuckles suddenly stilled. “I’m sorry?”

“Lizzie,” Jen began. “She asked for another chance with me now that I’ve turned my life around.”

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Suzanne smiled weakly. “I see.”

Regardless of whether Jen was with Suzanne or not, she wouldn’t go back to Lizzie. That wasn’t a reflection on her ex, not at all, but as Jen had explained to Lizzie...her life was different now. “And I obviously told her no.”

Suzanne sniffled as her bottom lip quivered. “You don’t want to see if it can be salvaged with her?”

“What? No.” Jen frowned. “There’s nothing to salvage, babe. Nothing at all. This is where I want to be. You are who I want to be with.” Jen was shocked by Suzanne’s response. As she looked back at her, the Suzanne she was accustomed to had almost disappeared. In place was a woman who looked nervous. Terrified, even. Jen shifted closer and brought a hand to Suzanne’s cheek. “I don’t know where that strong, sexy, confident woman has suddenly gone, but I do hope you find her again soon.”

“I don’t know where she’s gone either.”

“I’m not telling you about it because it means anything to me. I’m telling you so that it doesn’t come back to bite me one day. That’s all.” She dipped her head and found Suzanne’s eyes. “Babe, where did that question even come from?” Jen decided to make the space more comfortable again by removing her jacket. If Suzanne needed to talk, she was one hundred percent here and listening. She focused back on Suzanne and smiled. “Hey, I want you to communicate with me. No matter how you’re feeling, I want to know what’s going on in your head. It’s important to me.”

“I think that maybe I’m coming to terms with what this is. Even though I was ready

to date again, I never expected to meet someone who I really, deeply connected with. I expected a date or two, perhaps a little fun, but this? What I feel with you? I didn't think I'd ever have that again. Losing it isn't an option for me."

"But you do, babe. We both do." Jen did understand where Suzanne was coming from. She was surprised by their sudden relationship several times a day herself. "And we have to grab it with both hands."

"I know. I intend to."

"I understand that finding out I had a fiancée at one time has thrown you a bit, but I swear to you that there is nothing there for Lizzie. I promise you that."

"God, I know. There has never been a moment when I've questioned whether you want to be with me, not really, but...you know?"

"No, gorgeous. I don't know."

Suzanne lifted Jen's hand and pressed her lips to it. "I didn't think I'd fall so hard for you. Then, to know you were engaged in the past, I find it hard to understand that you'd rather be with me than with a woman you'd dedicated six years of your life to. A...woman who is still in love with you."

Jen's palms tingled at that. "You really think I expected you to fall for me? Fuck, I can't believe I'm sitting here with you most of the time."

"I love you. So much."

"I know you do. I feel it in here." Jen guided Suzanne's hand to her chest and pressed it against her jacket. "Every single day."

Suzanne drew Jen into a kiss. It didn't feel as hesitant as Jen thought it would.

"Lizzie is my past, okay? She knows that my life is with you now."

Suzanne seemed confused as she stared back at Jen. "You spent a long time together. Are you sure you don't want to give it another shot? And that's not me being insecure—it's me offering you whatever time you need to figure out where you want to be. That's all."

"We did spend a long time together. You're right." Even though they'd spent six years loving one another, Jen felt as though her relationship with Lizzie had been a million years ago. "But it's you, okay?"

Suzanne blinked away tears as she smiled. "Thank you for surprising me today. You're always doing something sweet like that for me."

"I do get it, you know? That feeling of wondering how the hell your life changed so suddenly. It's a feeling I've had for most of the time that I've known you." Jen may have spent a lot of time riddled with guilt for not telling Suzanne the truth, but a huge weight had been lifted since Tracy had spoken up. "But I'm at the stage now of just wanting to live my life. To enjoy what I have. And...love you. That's far more than I ever could have hoped for."

"It's been quite the whirlwind, don't you think?"

"Whirlwind?" Jen laughed as she lifted a brow. "That's an understatement."

Suzanne laughed gently with her, making Jen's heart sing.

"I also wanted you to know that I'd rather hear that gorgeous laugh than ever see tears in your eyes." Jen palmed Suzanne's thigh, squeezing her knee when she lowered her

hand. “It makes me sad when I see you upset.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re transitioning into a new life, Suzanne. You have to give yourself leeway and time to understand what’s happening. All I ask is that you come to me when you’re feeling a bit unsure so I can put your mind at rest.”

“And I ask that you do the very same thing, okay?”

Jen leaned in and kissed Suzanne, lingering and savouring the moment. “It’s a deal, babe.”

Chapter 24

Staring out the kitchen window, Suzanne held her coffee cup in both hands, waiting for the fire in the living room to heat the lower level of her house. Jen was showering—she had to be at work in the next hour or so—so Suzanne had decided to wake early too and spend the day working. She had received an offer for some consultation work late last night, and as she stood here this morning, she knew it would help her to get back into some kind of routine. Since the fallout with Jen, Suzanne had turned down several job offers, but today she was ready. For something normal. Something she was used to doing most days. With Jen working, it just made sense to use her time properly.

“Hey,” Jen said as she came into the kitchen. “I’m so sorry if I woke you.”

Jen didn’t often stay over when she had to work the next morning, she had already explained to Suzanne that her morning routine began before the birds started to sing, but Suzanne didn’t mind. She preferred early mornings. They meant her day ended far more productively. “You didn’t. I was already awake.”

Jen narrowed her eyes as she took the coffee Suzanne held out. “Why don’t I believe you? I mean, who the hell wants to be up and out of bed before it’s even seven?”

Suzanne watched Jen’s back as she moved through from the kitchen to the dining table. She took a seat, sipped her coffee, then looked back up at Suzanne.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Suzanne said as she turned to the fridge. “But I made you some lunch.”

Jen grinned as she shook her head. “Thanks, babe. You didn’t have to do that, but I appreciate it.”

“I know you don’t have a very long lunch break, so I thought I’d make it easier for you by preparing it.” Suzanne took a seat at the table facing Jen. “I quite enjoyed making lunch for someone again. It’s been a number of years since I had the chance to do it.”

“Well, this someone thinks it’s very sweet that you made lunch.” Jen reached a hand across the table and took Suzanne’s. “And you’re right. It does make things easier for me. If I don’t have to stop off to buy lunch, I can get my round finished quicker.”

Suzanne searched Jen’s eyes as she squeezed her hand. “You’re so wasted in that job.”

“It is what it is.” Jen lifted a shoulder and focused on her coffee cup. “Having a criminal record means job opportunities are pretty limited.”

“No chance at all of your old job taking you back?” Suzanne knew it was unlikely, but she had heard of people who had gone back into education, even with a criminal record. “Is it something you asked about at all?”

“No, it’s not something I’ve even thought about. I can’t bear to imagine what my old colleagues think of me.”

“Perhaps they understand the situation you were in.”

Jen cleared her throat. “Would you want someone with a criminal record teaching Elsie? Honestly?”

Suzanne pondered that for a moment. Didn’t everything depend on circumstances? “I

guess it would depend entirely on why they were in prison.”

“I’m not sure primary school parents see it that way, but I wish it was that simple. If one word about me got out, and it would around here, then I’d be dealing with the humiliation of it all over again.”

“I’m sorry.” Suzanne sighed, wishing she could help Jen to get herself back into a decent, meaningful career. Being a courier was just not what Suzanne believed Jen wanted. “I wish I knew what to do...or to say, at least.”

“I came to terms with what kind of career options I’d likely have long before I was released from prison. While I could try to get my teaching position back, I’d rather focus on something entirely different. It’s just easier for everyone involved.” Jen seemed torn, but Suzanne expected that. She’d had a wonderful job and the world at her feet, but now it was gone. “The problem I have now is that I don’t know where to look or what career change I feel like.”

Even though Suzanne believed Jen deserved the chance to redeem herself where her teaching career was involved, she wouldn’t push. If Jen didn’t see it in her future, then that was her decision. “Maybe it’s something to think about down the line. You know, when you’re ready to find something that really works for you.” Suzanne took her empty coffee cup from the table and moved into the kitchen. “You know you have my support whatever you decide.”

Jen rose to her feet and stretched her back out. She followed Suzanne and placed her cup in the dishwasher, then turned around. “I do miss the kids. I’d always wanted to be a teacher. But for now, I think it’s important that I just get my life back on track. Once I’m confident in that department, who knows what the future will hold. I’m sure the right job will come along for me when it’s supposed to.”

Suzanne liked that attitude. It certainly beat thinking so negatively about the future.

Suzanne had been there already. When John died, the first thing Suzanne did was end the career she had at the time. It didn't feel right to continue something without him. They'd spent so long working together and bouncing ideas around each night as they sat down for dinner...and then it was gone. Suzanne was alone. She couldn't even look at an interior design magazine. But now her life was falling back into place again. When Jen was ready to take the next step and find something that suited her, Suzanne would be right by her side. And maybe, just maybe, Suzanne would find herself wanting to go back to her own full-time position in the near future. "Your positivity is very refreshing."

"I'm lucky to be here at all." Jen wrapped her arms around Suzanne's waist and lifted up on her tiptoes. She kissed her nose and smiled. "I should really get ready to leave. The quicker I get my round going, the sooner I'll be finished for the day."

Suzanne nodded slowly as she smiled. "Will I see you this evening?"

"If you'd like to see me this evening, then yes, I'll be here." Jen brushed her knuckles gently against Suzanne's cheek. "Maybe we could meet up in town and go for a walk? Have some dinner while we're out..."

Suzanne relaxed against the counter and gazed into Jen's loving eyes. This woman, well...she was perfect. "That sounds like a wonderful idea."

Jen leaned in and kissed Suzanne, pressing her to the counter. "Then I'll look forward to finishing work. I'll text you when I get the chance, okay?"

Suzanne stroked a hand around the back of Jen's neck and grazed her nails against her skin. "I'll be waiting."

Rushing across the street as quickly as she could, Jen slipped inside the coffee shop before the door closed. She was making excellent time so far today, so a quick

caffeine stop was in order before she tackled the last of her afternoon round. Suzanne's lunch had been exceptional, Jen hadn't been given something so healthy yet delicious before, but she wouldn't dare divulge that to her mother. The last thing she needed was a war on lunches between Denise and Suzanne.

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She quickly placed her order and moved to the other end of the counter. Suzanne had texted her some fifteen minutes ago, but Jen had been driving, so she hadn't picked it up yet. She took her phone from the Velcro top pocket in her high-vis jacket and brought up Suzanne's message.

I've booked a table at a gorgeous little restaurant on the high street. My treat x

Jen smiled as she read the message. These moments were exactly what she'd missed when her last relationship ended. The spontaneity. The excitement of not knowing what was coming next.

Babe, you didn't have to do that. Dinner was my idea. I should be the one paying x

Jen took her coffee when her name was called, added one brown sugar sachet to it, and headed back outside towards her van. Only as she reached the passenger side door, she spotted Grace's boyfriend outside the shop next door to the coffee place. Did she acknowledge him—he had Toby in the pram—or did she avoid any sort of confrontation?

He has your nephew with him. Just say hello.

Jen hesitated as she took a step forward. She didn't want there to be any kind of animosity, but she did want to see Toby. Surely Dan would afford her that. She cleared her throat as she pulled her shoulders back, trying to channel some of that confidence Suzanne always seemed to exude. "Hi, Dan."

Dan turned around, his knuckles white where he held the handle of the pram. "Yeah,

uh...hi.”

“How’s the little guy doing?” Jen peered inside his pram, her heart swelling when he gazed back at her with huge, inquisitive blue eyes. “Hi, gorgeous boy.”

“Um.” Dan moved the pram away from Jen, then turned it so she couldn’t see Toby any longer. “Why are you harassing me in the street?”

Jen’s brows rose. “Harassing you? Really?”

“You can’t just walk up to people and start looking at their kid. It’s weird.”

“I mean, it’s not just some random kid. Toby is my nephew, Dan.”

Dan scoffed and shook his head. “Not if I have anything to do with it.”

Jen should probably turn around and walk away, but she was just about done with Dan and his bullshit. On her initial release from prison, Jen hadn’t wanted to rock the boat, but now? Now, she believed it was time to live her life. A life that included her only nephew. “Look, I understand that you don’t know me, that you only know about my past, but do I look like a monster who will lead your kid astray?”

“You’re a junkie.” Dan gave Jen probably the most disgusted look she’d ever received in her life. “I’m not bringing my kid up in that environment.”

“And I’m not bringing your kid up in that environment, either.” Jen sipped from her takeout coffee cup and took a step back. She held up her hand, aware that now wasn’t the time or place. “You may think you know all there is to know about me, but just remember that I know even more about your family. The Pritchards are on everyone’s watch list around here.”

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t use language like that around my nephew,” Jen said, shoving her hand in her pocket and taking her keys out. “And as for what it means... Well, you don’t come from the most highly thought of family, do you, Dan?”

“Just because I’m a Pritchard, it doesn’t mean I’m anything like my family!”

“And just because I made a mistake, it doesn’t define who I am.” Jen turned and walked to the back of her van, opening the doors and checking which route she needed to take next. Satisfied that she was in the right area, she closed the back doors and eyed Dan. “Think of all the nights out you and Grace have missed out on because you didn’t want Auntie Jen, the junkie, to babysit for you.”

“What? In your trap house? Don’t make me laugh!”

“Trap house?” Jen laughed, deciding she would tell a tiny white lie just to piss Dan off. “I actually live over on Belmont now. You know, where the millionaires are at. Is that ‘junkie’ enough for you?”

Dan’s brows drew together, his mouth opening and closing. Jen waited for a beat or two, mentally patting herself on the back when Dan didn’t respond.

“Thought that might be your reaction.” Jen took her scanner from the cargo pocket in her pants and logged back on. “Oh, and just a little bit of information for you.” She stepped towards him, now toe-to-toe. “When I was arrested and the police asked me where I was getting my supply of drugs from, you’ll be pleased to know I kept your brother’s name out of it.”

“Our Dean doesn’t deal.” Dan’s face reddened as he said that, practically spitting out the words.

“Trust me, he does. Usually on your dad’s say-so. Imagine how our Grace would feel knowing your family was the reason I could get a hold of drugs.” Jen wasn’t blaming anyone else for her drug-taking, she’d made that decision all by herself, but if it took Dan down a notch or two, she would use it against him just this once. “You’d do well to remember that you and your family are far less squeaky clean than I’ll ever be, Dan.”

“Are you threatening me?” He snorted. “Once a criminal, always a criminal.”

“To be honest with you, I couldn’t give a toss what you think about me. I’ll always be ten times the person most of your family are—ex-con or not. But this is only going to push Grace away. Have a think about whether you’re willing to risk that. You won’t find anyone better than her.”

Jen turned and climbed into her van, firing up the engine the moment the key was in the ignition. Right now, she had work to finish. And then, she would be on her way to another date night with Suzanne Dixon. As Jen pulled away from her parking space, she realised that these were the moments when she was thankful to have Suzanne in her life. While people like Dan pointed the finger, Suzanne knew a different side to Jen. The most important side. The...real, honest, broken side.

Chapter 25

Sitting herewith Suzanne was a stark contrast to how Jen had left town earlier today. Dan's words had been playing on repeat in Jen's mind, the look on his face as she approached Toby in his pram stuck at the forefront. She hadn't wanted to dwell on it, but now Jen was waiting for a call from Grace that would likely end in a fight. Even though Grace and Dan hadn't been speaking the last time she brought Toby over, it didn't mean she would be happy about Jen 'ambushing' Dan today. Because yes, that would be the story, if Dan had things his way.

"How was work?" Suzanne asked, sitting forward in her seat as she took her coffee cup from its saucer. "As busy as usual?"

"Today was...steady. Now that I know most of my routes, I have a good knowledge of the areas I need to head to. I've been ahead of schedule the last few shifts."

"I guess it becomes second nature eventually."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. Though, to be honest, it's not exactly a hard job to get the hang of." Jen grinned as she lifted her own coffee. She watched Suzanne. That confidence Jen was so fond of was beginning to return. She just carried herself differently when she wasn't in her own head. "It puts money in my account, and that's what matters."

"Can I ask which primary school you worked at?"

Ah. Reminiscing. Just what Jen needed this evening after getting it in the neck by

Dan. “Longmere,” Jen said, twisting her cup on the table. “Loved the place. And the kids. The parents I could take or leave, though.”

“Parents can be intense.”

“Intense is one way of putting it. But I get it. Their kids are their life, right? They want the best for them no matter what.” Even though Jen hadn’t been fond of some parents, she would still take their attitude above everything else she had to face these days. “I’m sure they don’t miss me.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I think I would miss you if you were my child’s teacher.” Suzanne smirked as she eyed Jen across the table. “And I know Elsie thinks a lot of you, so I’m sure the kids missed you when you left.”

“Maybe, I don’t know.” Jen relaxed into her seat and sighed, glad that another day of work was over and done with. Suzanne didn’t work herself silly, but she knew her girlfriend had been working today. “How was your day?”

“More work than I thought it would be.” Suzanne stifled a yawn. “I was planning to ease myself into it this morning, but it ended up being a busy day.”

“Maybe an early night for you? I really didn’t expect you to be up and about this morning when I got out of the shower. You must be shattered by now.” Jen may not have expected it, but she was sure as hell happy to see Suzanne’s smiling face first thing this morning. Jen was sure it had set her up for the day.

“I’m fine,” Suzanne said, taking Jen’s hand where it rested on the table. “I’ve been looking forward to dinner since you mentioned it this morning.”

“Me too, babe.” It had been the one thing keeping Jen going today. That and the idea of relaxing with Suzanne by the fire. “Did you want to bypass the walk after this and

just head home? I don't mind."

"You know what...no. Let's do the walk. I enjoy walking with you." Suzanne softened as the server brought their food. The smell of delicious Moroccan dishes had Jen's already growling stomach making much louder noises. "Thank you." Suzanne smiled up at the server, then returned her gaze to Jen. "If you're happy to walk still?"

"Not sure I care what we do after this, so long as I'm with you." It was important to Jen that Suzanne knew exactly how she felt. Given what had happened when she brought up the fact that Lizzie wanted her back, Jen didn't plan to hold her feelings in at all. If Suzanne needed reassurance—God knew Jen would need it at times, too—then she was happy to remind her. "I know I don't usually stay over when I have to work the next day, but this morning was lovely, and I was kind of hoping the same could happen tomorrow."

"It was my lunch, wasn't it? Made you weak at the knees."

Jen spluttered the water she'd just sipped and shook her head. "Don't do that when I'm drinking."

"Sorry." Suzanne blushed.

"But to answer your question, I've been weak at the knees for a while now. The lunch was delicious, though. And very thoughtful." Suzanne hadn't just thrown a load of different snacks into a Tupperware. No, she'd taken the time to actually make Jen a chicken salad wrap, as well as prepare and cut fruit for her. But Jen was mostly impressed with the freshly squeezed orange juice Suzanne had sent her out the door with. "Honestly, babe. It was a really lovely thing you did for me. I appreciate it."

"I like to take care of people. The people I love, more so."

“Well, I’m very grateful.” Jen stood up and rounded the table, landing a kiss on Suzanne’s lips as she held her jaw gently. “Seriously, you’re amazing.”

Suzanne gripped the nearest belt loop she could and held Jen in place. She looked up at her with hooded eyes, dark and intense. “Your appreciation is very sexy, Jen.”

Jen grinned. “What can I say? I do try.”

“Now sit down before I drag you to the bathroom.” Suzanne inconspicuously brushed her hand down the front of Jen’s thigh, smirking when Jen took her bottom lip between her teeth. “Go on. Tame yourself.”

Fuck. The temperature had just really cranked up in this restaurant.

On shaky legs, Jen returned to her seat and slowly picked up her cutlery. The plan was to devour the lamb shoulder she’d ordered...before she took Suzanne home and devoured her, too.

Suzanne strolled along the high street, her hand wrapped around Jen’s bicep as she snuggled a little closer. The temperature had dropped significantly tonight, but Jen was keeping Suzanne perfectly warm. She had the warmest hands; Suzanne could feel them through her own leather-gloved hand. But it was Jen’s subtle perfume that Suzanne found herself repeatedly inhaling. God, everything about Jen was intoxicating.

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“I, uh...I bumped into my sister’s boyfriend earlier while I was working.”

Suzanne lifted her head from Jen’s shoulder and eyed her. “Oh.” She wasn’t sure where this conversation was going, but something flickered in Jen’s eyes as she gazed back at Suzanne and leant in for a brief kiss. “How...was that?” Suzanne would gauge Jen’s mood before anything else. She recalled Jen mentioning that her family didn’t really speak to her anymore. “Amicable, or?”

“Dreadful.” Jen snorted as she focused on the pavement with each step she took. “Called me a junkie today.”

Suzanne’s chest ached. She had no idea what people’s problem was with Jen, but Suzanne found her to be truly wonderful. What a sad life it must be for those who had chosen to remove Jen from it. “Well, we both know you’re not.”

“Maybe I am, I don’t know.” They crossed the street and headed for the entrance to the park. “He had my nephew with him. The moment he realised it was me, he turned Toby away.”

Oh, no. That was an awful thing to do to someone. “What exactly is his problem with you?”

“I’ve been to prison, and he doesn’t want his son around someone like that. The thing is, though...Dan doesn’t even know me.”

Jen said that with so much ease that it felt as though she believed what she was saying. That maybe he was correct, and Jen had no right to question it.

“I get it, sort of. I shouldn’t be so hurt by his reaction to me if you basically had the same reaction, you know? Maybe I am the problem, and I should just accept what people think of me. It’s just...I’d really love to see Toby more often. I’ve only seen him a handful of times since my release. He’s never going to know who I am if I’m not there for his earlier years.”

Suzanne didn’t like the idea that someone could withhold a relationship from Jen purely because of something that happened in the past. Someone who didn’t even know Jen or the joy she brought to people’s lives. None of this felt right. And yes, Suzanne had been less than welcoming when she found out, but she’d realised the mistake she’d made the moment Jen had walked out of the door. “There must be something you can do. He can’t just stop you from seeing your nephew.”

Jen sniffled and regarded Suzanne with a wry smile. “He’s getting so big.”

“I hope he changes his mind.” Suzanne stopped Jen on the path around the park. “And I know I hurt you deeply when I initially found out, but please don’t think for one moment that I agree with him. I do not. Not at all.” Suzanne lifted a hand and cupped Jen’s cheek. “I don’t know what I’d do without you in my life.”

“I’m sure you’d be just fine.” Jen smiled as she leant into Suzanne’s touch. “But I’d prefer it if we didn’t have to live separate lives.”

“I’m by your side, okay?” Suzanne gave Jen a knowing look, hoping she could feel the sincerity in her words. “Whatever you need, you have me. One hundred percent.”

“Thanks, babe. I appreciate that.”

“Come on. Let’s keep walking.” Suzanne turned and took Jen’s hand again. They strolled without a care in the world—their breaths misting in the cool air—the crispness reminding Suzanne that even though spring was here, they had many cold

nights ahead of them. She side-eyed Jen, her heart warm as the cold attacked her soft cheeks. There was something about Jen's rosy cheeks that had Suzanne imagining a long future with her. It just didn't seem possible that they could one day be without one another. "You're cold."

Jen glanced in Suzanne's direction. "I'm okay. I have my hat in my pocket if I need it."

Oh, well, now Suzanne wanted to see Jen in her hat. "I'm going to need you to put that on so I can see how cute you look."

Jen rolled her eyes playfully and tugged a bobble hat from her pocket. It was a woollen rainbow hat with a bright pink bobble atop it. She pulled it on and glared at Suzanne. "There we go. Cute or whatever."

The smile Suzanne was already wearing spread wider. "So adorable."

"Can we not call me adorable? I already look like a teenage boy wearing this. It's not exactly sexy, is it?" Jen sighed and squeezed Suzanne's hand. "You probably look sexy in a woolly hat. You look sexy wearing everything else."

"And how do you know that having a cute girlfriend doesn't turn me on?" The hand that was initially in Jen's was now resting on her arse, and Suzanne couldn't help but palm it...then squeeze. Jen had an exceptional arse. "Never assume, Jen."

"Mm, I doubt seeing me wearing this hat turns you on, babe." Jen's red cheeks were no longer associated with the cold. No, she was fully blushing. "But you," Jen said as she turned and wrapped her arms around Suzanne's waist, "I'm finding it really hard to keep my hands to myself tonight. Really hard."

"I guess you should definitely stay over then."

Jen gazed back at Suzanne with an unusual look in her eyes.

“What is it?” She held Jen at arm’s length, frowning. “Jen?”

“I wish I had a place of my own that I could take you back to. Something that’s mine and something I could make ours.” Jen shook her head lightly. “I know you have your place, and it’s absolutely gorgeous, but I still wish we had the option of you telling me you’re coming over to my place, you know?”

Suzanne nodded. “I know. But it’s not something you have to worry about. So long as I can be with you whenever I want to be, I don’t care where you live.”

“Oh, absolutely. Life just kind of took a lot of steps back for me. I had a detached house in a decent area. Now I’m back in my childhood bedroom, which was supposed to be for Toby when he stays over at my mum’s. It just feels like I’ve lost a lot of what I gained over the years.”

“You told me last night that I’m transitioning into a new life. That I should allow myself the leeway I need to understand that. Give yourself the same grace and stop being so hard on yourself.”

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“I’m notoriously good at being hard on myself. I’m an expert at it.” Jen flicked imaginary hair from her shoulder and laughed. “Stick with me. I’ll teach you all you need to know.”

“I don’t want either of us to be experts at it. I want us to be happy and fulfilled and content with what we have.”

Jen smiled. “You’re right. I know you are. Because even though I’ve lost so much over the last few years, I’ve gained probably the greatest thing in the world. You. I can’t ask for anything else. I feel rich just for having you in my life.”

Oh, Suzanne hadn’t expected Jen to say any of that. “You are...” Suzanne paused as she sighed. “I don’t know how to explain it. I don’t even know how to process any of it. I just know that I’m incredibly happy with you. I’m so grateful that we met.”

“For me, I’m just going with this. I don’t care what happens over the rest of this year; I’m just happy to be on the outside with someone like you. When I left those prison gates with nothing but a bag of my belongings, I wondered if I’d even find a shitty job that could pay a mobile phone contract, but what I came to find—you and this life I’m now a part of... I can never repay whoever is looking over me.”

“Ruby,” Suzanne said, smiling as she stroked her knuckles against Jen’s cheek. “I think this is all Ruby’s doing.”

“You...do?”

“I really do. She was your best friend, and she would only want you to be happy.

Perhaps she had to let you go through the pain of hitting rock bottom so you could come out of it on the other side.”

Jen laughed. “She was a bit of a tit like that. You know, letting me get into trouble. So, yeah. You’re probably right.”

“Of course I’m right. It’s why you’re even dating me in the first place.”

Jen drew Suzanne in, her cold nose brushing Suzanne’s. “Oh, I have a long list of reasons why I’m dating you. A long list.”

“Maybe you can read it out to me one day. Preferably when we’re both naked in bed.” Suzanne knew she was wearing one of her smirks that had Jen’s knees quaking. “Are you available?”

“Naked in bed with you? Fuck, I’m available every minute of the day.”

With a sense of peace sitting in Suzanne’s chest, she tugged on Jen’s hand and led her out of the park. It would take them twenty minutes or so to get back to Suzanne’s, so why not head there right now? To the warmth and relaxation they’d both become so accustomed to lately.

Chapter 26

With her mouth agape, Jen sat in her van, staring down at the next parcel on her list of addresses. Did she really have to be the one to deliver to this house in particular? Fuck, she wished this wasn’t on her route today. As she shook her head and looked up at the house in front of her, Jen’s stomach somersaulted. She had a parcel for Ruby’s mum. The very woman who hated the sight of her.

What if she puts in a complaint about me?

No, Lyn would never do something like that. At least, Jen hoped she still knew this woman as well as she once had. She really didn't need anything to go wrong with this job. Sure, it was mostly shit and painfully boring, but it was still a job. A job Jen couldn't afford to lose. Not in the near future anyway.

She chewed her lip as she glared at the front of the house. The very home where she had spent ninety percent of her childhood. The place where she would knock each morning after traipsing across town to meet Ruby for school. This...really wasn't ideal. Still, she had a parcel in her hand that wasn't going to disappear into thin air no matter how long she held onto it.

Just do your job, smile, and then leave.

Jen climbed from her van, the parcel tucked under one arm and her scanner in hand. Maybe she would get lucky, and nobody would be at home. Leaving it in Lyn's safe place seemed far easier right now. Jen pushed the front gate open, the garden as immaculate as it had always been, and knocked on the front door. She would give it a minute, and then she was gone. After their last encounter, Jen really didn't have the balls to face Lyn again. It seemed easier not to exist in her best friend's mum's world. She was certain Lyn would agree.

Jen heard the lock on the back of the door, and then it opened wide. The smile Lyn wore quickly faded, but Jen hadn't expected anything else. Now she just had to hope Lyn didn't close the door in her face before she'd handed the parcel over. "Hi, Lyn. I have a parcel for you."

Lyn held out her hand, looking over Jen's shoulder instead of making eye contact. "Thanks."

Jen handed it over, but she wasn't quite done yet. "I just need a signature." She held her scanner out and popped the pen from the top of it. "Just in the box, please."

Lyn squiggled her name across the screen and cleared her throat. “Done?”

“Yes, thank you.” Jen slotted the pen back in place and hesitated between the front door and the garden gate. It didn’t feel right to just walk away, but it also felt awkward the longer she stood here. “Nice to see you’re still in love with your garden.” Jen threw a thumb over her shoulder. “Looks great.”

“I have very little else to do with my time,” Lyn said, placing the package down inside the hallway. “How come you’ve delivered my parcel?”

“I, uh...” Jen wrapped a hand around the back of her neck. “It was just on my route today. I don’t get to pick and choose who I deliver to.”

“R-right.”

“Look, if it’s an issue, I can see if someone else on my shift can deliver any other parcels to you in the future. I don’t know how often I’ll manage to get the swap, but I can ask.” While Jen knew Lyn didn’t have the time of day for her any longer, she hoped dropping a parcel wouldn’t be the end of the world. “I can speak to my supervisor when I finish my shift later if you’d like me to do that?”

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Lyn didn't respond. She just stared through Jen.

Jen guessed that was her cue to shut up and leave. She nodded and puffed out her cheeks. "I'll just go. Take care, Lyn." Jen turned for the garden gate, disappointed by this meeting almost as much as the last one.

"I miss her."

Jen's hand froze where it rested on top of the gate. She looked back at Lyn, wondering whether she hoped for a response from Jen. It was hard to tell. "Me, too."

"I forget she's gone most days." Lyn wrapped her arms around herself as she shook her head lightly. "Do you ever think about her?"

"Me?" Jen asked, brows lifted. "Several times a day."

"I think she'd have kids by now. Probably...two or three." Lyn smiled, but her eyes had glazed over. Jen couldn't read what was going to come next. "She'd be faffing around with school uniforms and whatnot while you and I just rolled our eyes at her."

"Yeah, that sounds about right." Jen laughed. "She'd have me up the wall with a babysitting schedule. Or I'd be added to some kind of smart planner through her phone that she could use to bark orders at me."

"I still find it hard to talk about her." Lyn stepped out onto the garden path and approached Jen. She couldn't put her finger on what Ruby's mum was feeling right now; Jen just hoped she wouldn't punch her square in the face. That wouldn't be a

good look. “And see her face.”

“Everyone kept telling me it would get easier over time, but here I am...five years later,” Jen said as she sniffled. “And I still cry whenever I think about her.”

Lyn wrapped her arms around Jen suddenly, almost squeezing the life out of her. “You’re the closest thing to her that I have left.” Jen reached blindly behind her and placed her scanner down on the garden wall, then wrapped her arms around Lyn. “You always came as a pair. You were another daughter to me. And then I had nothing. You’d both gone.”

“I’m sorry.” Jen sobbed into Lyn’s shoulder, her eyes tightly shut.

“She would hate me for the way I spoke to you at the cemetery.”

Jen pulled back, tears streaming down her face. “She wouldn’t. She’d understand.”

Lyn shook her head. “I never once thought about how it affected you, Jen. I didn’t stop and pull myself out of my own misery for long enough to check on you. I’m sorry.”

“I’m an adult. I was back then, too. I made my own decisions, and I hold my hand up to them.” The one thing Jen had never wanted out of this was sympathy. “I made the choices I did, and I cannot change it.”

“You were so bloody stupid getting caught up in the drink and the drugs. I wanted to throttle the bleedin’ life out of you.” Lyn drew back and shook her head. “What the hell were you thinking, Jen?”

“Well, I wasn’t thinking. That was the problem.” Jen picked her scanner back up, not wanting to leave it and ultimately lose it. “But if it helps at all, I’m doing much better

now. I'm settled, I have a partner, and someone gave me a job...as you can see."

"You shouldn't have needed a job. You had a brilliant job before you went off the rails." Lyn could chastise Jen all she wanted. Jen was just happy to be standing here right now. Even if it pained her every time she glanced inside Lyn's home, a world of memories flooding back. "I need you to promise me you'll never do something like that again. You had your mother's nerves shot. And mine."

"I'm in a different place now, Lyn. Life is...looking up for me, dare I say it."

Lyn's brows drew together. "This partner. Who is she? Would Ruby approve?"

Jen grinned. "Oh, Ruby would absolutely approve. I think they'd probably sit around talking about the latest fashion trends. Suzanne knows her labels, that's for sure."

"Then I approve, too."

Jen quickly checked her watch, wishing she didn't have to cut this short. But she did. She was still on the clock. "That means a lot to me." She cleared her throat and brushed away a tear as it landed on her cheek. "I should really get going. I'm still working, and I have quite a bit to get through."

Lyn nodded. "Sorry. Go. I don't want to hold you up."

"It was nice seeing you again, Lyn." Jen wanted to ask if she could come back when she wasn't working, but she wasn't sure Lyn was quite at that place yet. To be honest, it didn't feel as though Lyn would ever be at that place with Jen again. "Maybe when we bump into one another again, we could be amicable? I understand if you'd rather I cross the street, but I'd like to keep in touch."

"Come over for some tea tomorrow." Lyn stepped back and returned to the warmth of

her house. “If you don’t have any plans, that is.”

“I...don’t.” Jen didn’t have anything set in stone, and she was sure Suzanne would understand. “I’ll come over around six, okay? When I’ve finished my shift.”

“I’ll have the kettle on waiting.”

Jen left Lyn’s garden, stopping and smiling back at her as she closed the gate.

“Thanks for inviting me back over, Lyn. I appreciate it.”

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“Get going before you have your pay docked.” Lyn waved Jen away, smiling as she closed the front door.

This could only be the greatest outcome for Jen, even if it hadn’t felt positive as she walked up the garden path a few minutes ago. But it was another second chance in Jen’s life, and it was one she wouldn’t let go of. No matter what.

As Suzanne filled the dishwasher, she paused, narrowing her eyes when she heard Jen whistling in the dining room. She couldn’t say she’d ever heard Jen whistling before, but she had noticed that Jen was very chipper this evening. She was usually quiet and tired when she came here straight from work, so something must have brought her mood up.

She slotted the last plate into the rack and put the dishwasher on. As Suzanne turned and rested back against the counter, drying her hands on a towel as she did so. She watched Jen through the archway and smiled. Yes, her girlfriend was definitely in a good mood this evening.

“Hey, babe?” Jen appeared in front of Suzanne with a gorgeous smile.

“Mm?”

“Have you spoken to Elsie lately? I was wondering when she’s going to be visiting again.” Jen wrapped her arms around Suzanne’s waist as she stepped nearer. “She’s such a lovely kid. It would be nice to see her again.”

“I’ll give my brother a call at the weekend and see what business plans he has coming

up. Elsie usually only stays with me nowadays if they need someone to look after her.”

“You said they’re down south now, yeah?”

Suzanne nodded. “Yes. They moved there about two years ago now. It’s not ideal, I miss them terribly, but we try to see one another whenever we can.”

Jen lifted a shoulder. “Maybe we could drive down and spend the day with her one weekend. Then you’re not worrying about the next time you’ll see Elsie. We can go to them. Maybe...get a hotel room for the night.”

Suzanne loved that idea. She didn’t know why the suggestion had surprised her; Jen was always up for random plans. “I’d like that.”

“Yeah?” Jen’s eyes brightened. “It’s something we could do?”

“Of course. You just let me know which weekend is best for you, and I’ll make the rest happen. Elsie will be thrilled that we’re visiting. She’s always asking me when I’ll be there to see her, but I hate the thought of that long drive alone.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about driving long distance on your own anymore, babe. Because I will be sitting right next to you.”

Suzanne’s insides ached as Jen gazed back at her. God, she would always be grateful for these moments. “Don’t take this the wrong way—I love our evenings together. But you seem particularly happy tonight. Has something happened?”

“Actually, yes.” Jen took Suzanne’s hand and dragged her away from the counter. Once they were sitting comfortably in the living room, she turned to Suzanne with the biggest smile on her face. “I had to deliver a parcel to Ruby’s mum this afternoon.”

“Oh.” Suzanne’s brows rose. She hoped this story had a good ending. “How was that?”

“It went far better than I thought it would,” Jen said, her eyes wide. “I think we could potentially repair our relationship.” The smile Jen wore had Suzanne’s heart pounding. God, she had a beautiful smile. “She’s invited me over for a brew tomorrow when I finish work.”

“Oh, Jen. This is brilliant news.”

“We don’t have any plans tomorrow evening, do we?” Jen chewed her lip as she pulled both of Suzanne’s hands into her lap and held on tight. “I love being here with you when I finish work, but I really need to do this.”

“Even if we did have plans, which we don’t, I would be happy to cancel them if it means you get this moment with Ruby’s mum. I see how important this relationship is to you, and I’d only encourage you to go over there.”

“You’re sure you don’t mind?”

Suzanne frowned. Why would Jen think for one second that she would mind? This was huge. Any sort of normal relationship was exactly what Jen needed. “How could I ever mind?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t want you to think I’m blowing you off. You know I love spending my evenings with you, and I will be here as soon as I’ve been to see Lyn, but I wanted to check with you anyway.”

“Jen, I want you to do this. And if that means I don’t see you at all tomorrow evening, then so be it.” Suzanne drew Jen in and kissed her slowly. “Your life is piecing itself back together. If you can have a relationship with Ruby’s mum, then I couldn’t ask

for anything more. What's important to you is important to me, too, baby."

Jen nodded slowly. "Thank you. For understanding."

"Hey," Suzanne said, lifting Jen's chin with two fingers. "I'm happy for you."

"God, I can't wait for you to meet one another. She already knows about you. I told her I was involved today. And that Ruby would approve of you."

Suzanne's heart burst as Jen admitted that. In the brief moment Jen had spent with Lyn today, she'd mentioned Suzanne? That meant so much. "I'm glad you think she would."

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“No, I know she would.” Jen gave Suzanne a knowing look. “You’d one hundred percent be the perfect pick for me if Ruby had things her way. She would have match made, then told me off for dragging my feet, then cheered me on when we eventually got together. She knew me better than I know myself.”

“I’m glad you had that friendship.” Suzanne often saw the pain in Jen’s eyes when she spoke about Ruby, but tonight, that pain wasn’t there. It seemed more of an...appreciation for ever having Ruby in her life. That, to Suzanne, was one hell of a special bond. “And that you still remember everything so fondly about her.”

“She had her faults, but to me, she was perfect. She couldn’t do any wrong in my eyes.”

“That’s all we can ask for in a best friend.”

“You’re right.” Jen exhaled a deep breath. “Now, what’s the plan?”

Suzanne kissed Jen, then got to her feet. “I’m going to finish clearing away from dinner, and then I’d like to enjoy a long hot shower...preferably with you.”

“You can count me in.” Jen smirked. “Hey, what will you do tomorrow while I’m not here?”

“I think I’ll invite Tracy over. We haven’t seen much of one another lately.” Suzanne would admit that she’d been giving Tracy a wide berth. To a point, anyway. While she was getting life back on track with Jen, Suzanne just felt it best to avoid any kind of situation that involved Tracy. She wasn’t quite sure how Jen felt about her being

here. “I should try harder with her than I have lately.”

“You still blame her for coming clean about me, don’t you?”

“I wouldn’t say I blame her. I just wish she hadn’t come right out with it.” Suzanne carded a hand through her hair.

“I don’t think it’s her fault. Not at all. Tracy wouldn’t have felt as though she needed to come clean about anything if I’d spoken up when I should have.”

“Maybe not, but I still don’t like the way she dropped it on me. I’m almost certain that’s why I reacted the way I did.” Suzanne shouldn’t blame Tracy for her reaction, but it was true. If Tracy or Jen had come to her and explained everything calmly and from the beginning, then Suzanne wouldn’t have felt so betrayed by Jen’s lack of conversation surrounding it. “But it’s done now.”

Jen rose to her feet and followed Suzanne back into the kitchen. “I thought it was touch and go for a moment when Lizzie came back onto the scene, but you didn’t let it come between us, and that only makes me love you more.”

“I know what we have here. Reacting negatively would have been useless.” Suzanne turned to Jen. “And I’m sorry if you ever thought it was an issue. I promise you, it’s not.”

Jen tugged on Suzanne’s hand and pulled her closer. “This has been a whirlwind for both of us. And even though I’ve often wondered where I’m headed—it’s hard not to given where I was this time last year—I’ve never been uncertain about you. I’ve never once thought I couldn’t make you happy.”

“You make me very happy, Jen.”

“We got it right, okay?” Jen stroked the back of her hand along Suzanne’s jawline. “It may have been quick, and it may have come out of the blue, but we got it so right, babe.”

Suzanne leaned into Jen’s touch and closed her eyes. “We really did, didn’t we?”

Jen drew Suzanne in, their bodies pressed together as she captured her lips. These moments with Jen could have easily been lost forever just weeks ago, but they were here, and they were happier than before. Suzanne was sure of it.

“Jen,” Suzanne whispered against her lips. “Can you give me five minutes to finish up in the kitchen?”

Jen nodded as she took her bottom lip between her teeth. Suzanne could feel the fire building between them. She wanted to fan those flames until it was roaring out of control. Jen clearly felt it too, judging by the way she shifted uncomfortably, her eyes dark and intense. “If I must.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll be rewarded.” Suzanne drew her thumb across Jen’s bottom lip. “Maybe you could head up and turn the shower on.”

“I...wasn’t planning to shower just yet.”

Suzanne cocked her head and simpered. “Not even if I’m going to be in there with you?”

Jen released the arm around Suzanne’s waist, letting her go once she’d slid a hand to Suzanne’s arse and squeezed. “Better get to it, hadn’t I?”

“Mm. I think you’d better.”

Chapter 27

With a bunch of Ruby's favourite flowers cradled in one arm—rich, colourful tulips—Jen knocked on Lyn's front door and waited with bated breath. Even though Lyn had invited her over here, she'd also had time to sleep on the idea since, and Jen had to prepare herself for the possibility that she might be turned away. If that did happen, she would slowly slip off down the street, but Jen was hoping Lyn had meant it when she'd been here yesterday. If this came to something—and Jen desperately prayed it would—then she only had Dan left to contend with.

The front door opened, and Lyn smiled back at her. "Hi, Jen. Come on in."

"Good to see you again, Lyn." Jen stepped inside and pushed the familiar scent of her second home from her mind. Because that's what this place had been. A second home where Jen had grown up feeling safe and loved. Her home life with her parents had been equally as amazing, but Jen had spent a lot of time here growing up. Potentially more so than with her mum and dad. She turned back as Lyn closed the door. "I...brought you some flowers. I hope you don't mind."

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“Rube’s favourites.” Lyn smiled as Jen thrust them towards her, admiring the bright petals. “Thank you, Jen. They’re lovely.”

“I wasn’t sure what else to bring. I thought about nipping to the shop for wine, but Angela who works there would probably be on the phone to my mum within seconds.”

Lyn frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“Oh...I’m sober. Have been since I was arrested. When I got out, I decided that drinking hadn’t done me any favours, so I cut it out completely.”

Lyn cocked her head towards the door that led to the living room. “That’s not the worst idea you’ve ever had. I’m glad you recognised your relationship with alcohol wasn’t a good one.”

“Do any of us really have a good relationship with the stuff? It’s poison, yet we’re encouraged to neck it in copious amounts for a good night out.”

“You’re right. When Ruby was alive, you rarely drank.”

That was true. Jen had always chosen to remain as sober as possible so she could take care of Ruby on a night out. It wasn’t that Ruby ended the night legless, not at all, but she was known for being tipsy one drink in. It didn’t matter what she drank; she just couldn’t tolerate her alcohol the way a lot of their friends could. “Had to be on the ball. You know what she was like.”

“You carried her up the stairs many a time.” Lyn lowered Jen’s flowers to the dining table in her open-plan living room, then followed Jen towards the couch. “Thank God for that. I’d have a broken back by now.”

“Yeah, she liked to do the whole ‘dead weight’ thing once she fell out of the cab.” Jen laughed, smiling back at Lyn when she also chuckled. It was nice to be here without the dreadful atmosphere of late. “How have you been, Lyn?”

“Not too bad. Life is quiet; it has been for some time now. But...yeah. You know what she’d say if she saw me moping around.”

“Mm. The same thing she’d say to me.” Jen cast her gaze on Lyn’s plush black carpet. “Still working?”

“Oh, yes. I don’t know what I’d do with myself if I didn’t have work to go to,” Lyn said as she sat back on the couch. “There was a long period where people just stared at me, probably because they didn’t know what to say, but work keeps me going. My friends there keep me sane.”

“It’s always good to have friends around you.”

Lyn gazed back at Jen, an unusual look in her eyes. “Did you have that? Friends and people to support you?”

“They...tried. Everyone around me tried to do the best they could for me.” Jen could never repay her friends and family for those months after Ruby’s death. She also couldn’t apologise enough for pushing them all away. “If I’d taken the help and support everyone was offering, we wouldn’t only just be catching up after thirteen months of me in prison.”

Lyn shook her head and closed her eyes. “I hate thinking about you in prison.”

“It was the best place for me. Trust me.”

“Still, you should have been here with all of us. Where we could look after one another. It’s what Ruby would have wanted.”

Jen hadn’t known what to do with herself once she’d hit the bottom. It hadn’t taken her long to tumble her way down there, but getting back out seemed too much like hard work. It had been easier to wallow alone, to drink herself into oblivion, to medicate with whatever drugs she could get her hands on. Her only saving grace was that she’d avoided the harder stuff. “I couldn’t look you in the eye. I know that makes me a coward, but I couldn’t bring myself to even knock on your door. On those days when I’d wake up and want help, I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t ask.”

“You know I would have done anything I could for you, Jen. It was always you and Ruby. We didn’t see one without the other.”

“I know. But you were grieving. We all were. I just didn’t handle it the way other people did. I chose to ruin everything because, in my mind, I’d lost the one thing that mattered to me, and that was Ruby. Without her, I didn’t see the point. I couldn’t focus on anything at all, I couldn’t sleep, I just...couldn’t function without her.” Jen sniffled as tears welled in her eyes. “I didn’t want to function without her.”

“Believe me, I didn’t either.” Lyn took Jen’s hands and held them tight. “Do you promise me you’ll never go back to that place again?”

Jen didn’t like to make promises, but this was one that she could keep. She also believed it was something Lyn needed to hear. “I promise you.”

“And you’ll start coming over to visit me? Maybe have your dinner while you’re here?”

Jen's heart swelled. Lyn had always been one of those mothers who would feed the entire street if it was required of her. "Of course. I see Suzanne every night, but I can have dinner with you. That's no problem. She's really happy I'm here this evening."

"And you don't have dinner plans tonight already?"

Jen's brows drew together. "No. Not that I'm aware of."

"Good. I made you your favourite." Lyn winked as she got to her feet. "Come on. Let's eat."

Jen followed Lyn. She surely hadn't made Jen what she hoped it was, had she?

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Lyn took two plates out of the oven, dinner ready and waiting on them. “I hope it’s still your favourite anyway.”

Jen’s mouth watered as she stared at the food Lyn held in her oven-gloved hands. “Oh, my God! I haven’t had this in years.” Jen’s voice trembled as she said that, but she didn’t care if she was emotional. This had just brought a world of memories flooding back. “Ham, cabbage, and mashed potato.”

Lyn nodded with a smile. “With extra double cream in the mash.” Once she’d set them down on the table, steam rising from the cabbage with black pepper sprinkled over it, she turned to Jen. “Enjoy.”

Jen threw her arms around Lyn and squeezed her to within an inch of her life. “Thank you so much.”

“Like I said,” Lyn started as she pulled back and cupped Jen’s cheek. “You were another daughter to me. Now that you’re here and we’re okay, I plan for that to continue.”

“I wouldn’t want any other second mum.”

Lyn pulled out a chair. Once they were both seated and Jen was already devouring her dinner—burning the roof of her mouth—Lyn cleared her throat. “Now, tell me all about Suzanne.”

Jen grinned as she brought a hand to her mouth and mumbled around her food, “Where to begin...”

With a small glass of rose in her hand, Suzanne joined Tracy in the living room, sighing as she lowered herself to the couch. She had spent most of the day cleaning to keep herself busy while Jen was working, and now it was time to unwind. And for the first time in several weeks, Suzanne didn't need advice or a shoulder. Everything was just...beautiful in her life.

"No Jen tonight?" Tracy twisted her wine glass where it rested on her knee. "Thought you two couldn't get enough of one another."

"We can't. Trust me." Suzanne tried to suppress a smirk, her mind cast back to last night in the shower. Had they even washed at any point during it? Suzanne couldn't remember. But she did remember Jen sinking to her knees and then coming in Jen's mouth. Oh, what a fine night last night had turned out to be.

"Ahem." Tracy kicked the bottom of the couch and shocked Suzanne out of her filthy thoughts. "Honestly, I don't need to sit here while you reminisce."

Suzanne scoffed, feigning offence as she splayed a hand across her chest. Tracy saw through it, though. Likely because of the smirk Suzanne hadn't managed to hide. "I would never."

"Mmhmm."

Suzanne waved a hand between them. "Anyway, Jen is visiting her best friend's mum this evening. They haven't had a relationship since Ruby died, but they bumped into one another yesterday, and Jen turned up here so happy. God love her."

Tracy regarded Suzanne with a genuine smile. "I know all about Ruby. She was the only person Jen spoke about when she was inside. That girl had a rough time when Ruby died."

“I can imagine. The way she talks about Ruby, I’m surprised she recovered from it at all.” Suzanne had never met anyone who spoke so highly or so frequently about another person. That just reminded Suzanne of how amazing their friendship must have been. She always found herself wanting to know more, to learn about Ruby and what she meant to Jen, but she didn’t want to do or say anything to upset Jen. It was still very raw, even all these years on. “How do you think we would have managed if one of us died so young?”

Tracy blew out a breath. “I really don’t know. It’s one of those situations that you can’t imagine until you’re thrown into it.”

Suzanne stared down at her wine glass and nodded slowly. “You’re right. I guess we should count ourselves lucky.”

“It’s something I do every day now.” Tracy stared back at Suzanne, managing a small smile. “More so since you and I fell out.”

“Look, we don’t need to go over it again. You had my best interests at heart. Nobody is to blame. We just learn from it instead.”

Tracy’s smile grew. “I know. And I want you to know that I am happy for you, Suzanne. I really am.”

“I think I’ve reached a point in my life where I don’t particularly care if people are supportive of me or not,” Suzanne said as she crossed her legs. “But it means a lot to hear you say that.”

“Jen is...good for you.”

Suzanne’s brows rose with surprise. She didn’t know why; it was clear Tracy had no issue with Jen and Suzanne being together. But those initial weeks after Tracy had

come clean often sat at the back of Suzanne's mind. She nodded slowly. "She is."

"You seem much happier. And I know you had your reasons for not being so happy over the last few years, John was your life for a long time, but you do. It's written all over your face."

Suzanne ran a hand through her dark hair. "I don't quite know how to describe the way she makes me feel."

"So long as you know in your heart, then you don't have to explain to anyone. Me included."

Suzanne appreciated that. Tracy had never been one to demand her thoughts or her feelings from her. It was one of the reasons they'd got along so well for over twenty years. But in time, Suzanne would find the words to describe what Jen meant to her. "All I can say right now is that I'm madly in love with her."

"I know." Tracy smiled.

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“And stupidly happy.” Suzanne laughed as she shook her head. “I feel like a teenager sometimes. It’s just...the way she looks at me. God, I could melt over and over again.”

“I won’t lie. I am jealous of you.”

Suzanne wished Tracy could have the happiness she had. She wished they could both have the most beautiful happy ending. And one day, Tracy would have that. Suzanne was just impatient and wanted it all right this second. “I know you work long hours, but you do need to find time for yourself, Trace. It’s not healthy to work yourself into the ground and go home to an empty house every night. You need some excitement.” Tracy opened her mouth to respond, most likely to defend herself, but Suzanne held up a hand. “And I don’t mean the excitement that comes with your job. Breaking up fights is not exciting. It’s dangerous, and I worry about you every bloody day!”

“It’s the only excitement I can find, but you’re right. I don’t enjoy seeing the women fighting with one another. I’d prefer them all to live in harmony. Or, better yet, never find themselves in prison in the first place.”

“Well, yes. Living on the outside is always a much nicer way of life.” Suzanne smiled as she leaned forward and squeezed Tracy’s knee. “Please, try to find time for yourself. It’s important to me to know that you have what I have.”

Tracy settled a hand over Suzanne’s. “Maybe one day, I don’t know.”

“I do. I can feel it.” Suzanne’s phone buzzed on the coffee table, a sudden wave of nerves hitting her deep in her belly as she reached for it and placed it in her lap. She

wasn't sure she wanted to open the message for fear of it being the opposite of what Suzanne had hoped for. All she wanted was for Jen to reconnect in the best way possible with those from her past. "It's Jen. I really hope everything is going okay with her and...Lyn, I think it is."

"It is." Tracy cleared her throat. "She really did cut Jen off completely when she was inside. The number of times I waited by the phone with her while she tried to contact Ruby's mum... Well, it was several times a week."

"I wish she'd had support while she was inside. And I know she did from her mum, but just more support, you know?" Suzanne couldn't bear to think about the year or so Jen served in prison. To feel so alone, after already hitting rock bottom... Part of Suzanne wished she'd known Jen back then so she could have been a friend to her at least. "But I'm proud of the way she's turned her life around. I know I'm probably not entitled to feel proud of her, but I am. I feel so blessed to have her in my life."

"Of course you're entitled to be proud of her. Regardless of when you met, she is your girlfriend, love."

"I know." Suzanne eyed the device in her lap and lifted it. "I'll just make sure everything is going well."

Suzanne braced herself as she opened the message but immediately breathed a sigh of relief.

Hi, gorgeous. Just dropping in to say I miss you and I'll be over in a couple of hours. Lyn made dinner for us and now we're watching some old videos of me and Ruby when we were kids. Say hi to Tracy for me. I love you x

Suzanne's heart swelled as she reread the message. Jen's evening was going perfectly well, so she would allow her anxiety surrounding the situation to settle and fully

enjoy her own night with Tracy.

I'm so happy it's working out for you, baby. Don't rush back. I'll be here waiting and there is no need to cut the night short with Lyn. You have a lot of time to make up for with one another. I love you, too x

Suzanne exhaled a deep breath and looked up at Tracy. "It's going well."

"Ah, brilliant. I'm really happy they've reconnected."

"Me too." Suzanne narrowed her eyes when she spied her laptop on the shelf beneath the coffee table. "So, since I'm free for the time being, I think it's about time we got you on some dating sites." Suzanne reached for her laptop and opened the lid. "Get your best picture up and send it over to me. We need to find you a woman."

"Suzanne."

"No! I'm not listening to it. Best picture. Let's get this show on the road."

Chapter 28

Another Friday.

Another glorious day spent with Jen.

Suzanne watched her as Jen brought two drinks out into the garden, that devilish smile bright. They hadn't done much today, they'd mostly lazed around and taken things at their own pace, but the sun had made an appearance late this afternoon, and Suzanne had known where she wanted to spend the remainder of the light. Here, on the outside furniture, mulling over her future.

The only certainty right now was that Jen would be in it. But when it came to work and where she saw herself moving forward, Suzanne was ready to throw herself back into what she'd always loved. Interior design...within John's company. Well, her company, but she would leave the big stuff to the architects John had employed long before his passing. If it hadn't been for them, Suzanne would have probably sold it off and moved to a remote island far away.

"I know you insist on not drinking when I'm here, but I've poured you a G&T." Jen lowered Suzanne's glass to the table and took a seat facing her. She sipped her own drink and smiled. "I'm really impressed by this alcohol-free gin. Remind me to pick another bottle up next time we're at the supermarket."

Suzanne nodded and enjoyed a sip of her drink. "I've had a lovely day with you."

"Back at you, babe. What do you feel like for dinner?" Jen got comfortable, her ankle resting on her knee as she sat back in her seat. "Since the weather is gorgeous, I'm thinking maybe a chicken salad. But if you want something a bit more filling, say the word, and I'll pop out to the shops."

"A chicken salad sounds perfect. Nothing too heavy."

Suzanne felt Jen's eyes on her as she picked up the romance novel she'd been reading before she came out into the garden. "You okay? I know we've been relaxing today, but you seem...in your head a bit."

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“I’m fine. Really good, actually.” Suzanne lowered her book to her lap again and gazed back at Jen. “I’ve been thinking about my career.”

Jen groaned. “Please, no talk of work. I can’t be arsed going in tomorrow. Days like this with you just remind me that I hate working weekends. I feel like I don’t get to see you as much as I wish I could.”

Suzanne smiled. She hoped she could remedy that at some point in the near future. “I’m going back to work. My real work. At the company.”

“The...company? What company?” Jen’s brows drew together. Suzanne had never mentioned that John had left the company to her when he passed away. It had never seemed important when they’d met. It wasn’t as though Suzanne was heavily involved with it all.

“John’s company. Well, my company.”

“You have a company?” Jen’s brows rose as she sat forward, her elbows resting on her knees. “Since when?”

“Well, I worked with him when he was alive. He took care of the architecture, and I worked on the interior design. When he died, I chose to hand over the reins to the people who knew what they were doing.”

“Wow. I had no idea you had your own company.” Jen smiled. “I’m impressed.”

“I had to step away. I couldn’t be there without him. Even though it’s my company

now, John was the one who made it what it is. He was the brains behind the whole thing. After around fifteen months out of work, I chose to take on a consultancy role for other companies. I was still doing what I loved. I just didn't have to be reminded of John's loss when I saw his friends or spoke to regular contractors and clients."

Jen nodded slowly. "I think it's great that you're ready to go back. It means you're moving forward. I'm proud of you."

Suzanne crossed her legs and cleared her throat. "Would you like to come and work with me?"

Jen drew back a little, confusion etched on her face. "Me?"

"Yes. You."

"I don't know anything about architecture or interior design, babe. I should probably stay in my lane, even though I hate the place."

Suzanne reached forward and took Jen's hand. "I'd show you what you needed to know. I'd guide you and find a role for you within the company."

Jen chewed her lip as she stroked her thumb across Suzanne's knuckles. "I'd probably be terrible at it. I wouldn't want to let you down."

"Can I at least ask you to consider it? I won't be offended if you decide not to take me up on the offer, but I would like you to think about it." Suzanne desperately hoped Jen would choose to join her at the company, but she understood her reasons for being unsure. If Jen had thrown Suzanne into a school setting, she would have the very same response.

"Of course I'll think about it." Jen grinned and kissed the back of Suzanne's hand.

“Anything for you.”

“I just...want more for us, you know? Something we enjoy. A place we can be together. Weekends off, absolutely.”

“I mean, I can paint,” Jen said, hesitation in her tone. “And like...build stuff. You know, furniture and that.”

“You had me at painting, baby.” Suzanne’s smile matched Jen’s. “I usually hire independently if it’s not a huge project. Which could be perfect for you. But let’s not put you in one particular box just yet.” Suzanne tweaked Jen’s nose before sitting back and lifting her G&T. “What I will say for now, though, is that you could probably take fewer shifts at the courier firm. Give yourself more time to relax.”

“And what? Live on fresh air?”

“Don’t worry yourself about that. Everything will be perfectly fine.” Suzanne lifted her book again. “If you want weekends together, take them. We have everything we need, whether you have a job or not right now.”

Jen’s eyes widened. “You want me to live off you?”

“No. That’s not what I’m saying.” Suzanne waved a hand between them and laughed. “But you spend most of your time here, and I’m more than happy to take care of the shopping and whatnot. This place has no mortgage. John made sure of that long before he died.”

“Suzanne, I?—”

“Workless, livemore.”

Jen slumped back in her seat and sighed. Suzanne had no idea what she was thinking, but she did want Jen to mull over everything she had just put to her. It was important that Jen was happy in life, more so now that she was finding her new normal.

“What would Ruby tell you to do?”

Jen regarded Suzanne with a small smile. “She’d tell me to quit my job, have you pay my way for me, and buy designer labels.”

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Suzanne winked. “I think Ruby and I would have been good friends.”

Listening up the stairs, Jen heard the shower running as she stared down at her phone in her hand. Suzanne had thrown her today with the whole company thing, along with offering her a job at said company, and now she needed advice. Her mum would know what to do; she usually did. Jen took herself back into the living room and sat down on the couch. While she didn’t expect Suzanne to tell her every last detail of her life—they had plenty of time for that—she did think she may have mentioned her company sooner. Perhaps Suzanne was just making sure Jen was the one for her before she dropped that huge piece of information.

Jen exhaled a deep breath and called her mum. When the call connected, Denise calmed Jen immediately. “Hello, my love.”

“Hi, Mum. You doing okay?” Jen lay back on the couch and stared up at the ceiling. “Been out with the girls at all this week?”

“I went for lunch with Maria yesterday. Lovely meal in the Indian on the high street.”

“Oh, nice. I haven’t had an Indian takeout in a while.” Jen frowned. Did Suzanne like Indian food? “Everything good, yeah?”

“Fine, love. I have the weekend off work, so I’m planning to spend it in the garden if the weather keeps up.”

Jen had thoroughly enjoyed spending the day in the sunshine today. She hadn’t managed it last year. What with being banged up and all. “It’s been a gorgeous day.

That's actually why I've called. I needed your advice."

"Okay, I'm listening."

Jen heard her mum sip what was likely to be a cup of tea.

"So, um...we also spent the afternoon in the garden." Jen ran a hand down her face, still shocked that Suzanne had offered her a job. "Suzanne was telling me that she's going back to the company she owns. I didn't know anything about it, but it's great that she's thinking of doing something different. Or...going back to what she does best, you know?"

"Mmhmm."

"Anyway, she offered me a job with her. At her company. I wouldn't have to work at the courier firm anymore."

Denise gasped. "Oh, that's fantastic news, love. She must really see potential in you if she's offered you a job."

"Yeah, I guess so." Jen knew the potential she had. It just wasn't possible to fulfil that potential in the area she wished she could. Trying to get her job back in education just wasn't an option for her. She couldn't deal with the rejection. Why put herself through it when she was happy as she was? "I don't really know what I'd be doing, but Suzanne is definitely keen to get me on board."

"Well, you and I both know that you're not happy working where you currently are."

"I know that, but it doesn't mean I'd be any good at the job Suzanne gave me. She's an interior designer, Mum. I don't know the first thing about any of that stuff."

“Oh, I don’t know. You decorated most of this house for me.” Denise paused. “Okay, it may have been a while ago, but you do have an eye for detail.”

“It’s one thing painting and decorating your house, but this is serious business. Like...I think the company is worth a lot. Bringing me in could jeopardise that, and I’d never forgive myself.” Jen only had to look around Suzanne’s place to know she had expensive taste. Her company was likely exactly the same. “I just don’t know what to do.”

“You could always give it a go instead of dismissing the idea completely.”

Yeah, Jen supposed she could do that. “That’s not a bad idea.”

“I think you should take her up on the offer, my love. You don’t grow unless you put yourself in those situations.” Denise had always had sound advice for Jen. She was the first person she always turned to when she needed a pep talk. “And if it doesn’t work out for you or you hate it, then it’s not the end of the world.”

“No, I know.” Jen pressed her palm to her forehead. Why did she feel so conflicted about this? Really, it was a no-brainer. “So, I should accept?”

“I think so, but ultimately, this is your life, Jen. Only you know what the right thing to do is. You’ve always been the kind of person who tries out new things, and that hasn’t changed. Live a little and enjoy something new.”

“Thanks, Mum. I appreciate the advice.”

“Always, my love. It’s what I’m here for.” Jen felt her mum smiling down the phone. “Now, can I interest you and Suzanne in Sunday dinner this weekend?”

“I... Let me speak to her. We’re hoping to visit her niece down south, and this

weekend may be the only time I can do since I'll be working through the week."

"Okay, well, you just let me know," Denise said. "And don't forget to hand in your notice at your job if Suzanne is planning to hire you soon."

"Oh, I don't know when it'll happen." Jen would continue working in her current job until she knew more. She could never do what Suzanne had suggested and cut it loose without something else in the pipeline. While she greatly appreciated that Suzanne was willing to foot the bill for most things for the foreseeable, she just didn't have it in her to accept something like that. Jen had always paid her own way, and that wasn't going to change. "I'll speak to her tonight and let you know."

"Okay. I'll wait to hear from you."

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“Love you, Mum. I’ll talk to you soon.” As Jen ended the call, Suzanne came strolling into the living room. “Hi, babe. I was just on a call with my mum.”

“Is she okay?”

“Yeah, she’s fine. She’s invited us over for Sunday dinner this weekend, but I wasn’t sure if we were seeing Elsie or not.”

“Jeff isn’t around this weekend, and Josie is visiting family in Spain with Elsie. Her sister lives in Valencia. She’s been there a couple of years now.”

“Oh, lovely. I’m sure Elsie will enjoy herself.”

Suzanne smiled. “Yes. They fly out tonight and get back late Sunday night.”

“Okay, well, we can arrange to see her some other time. She seems like the type of kid to have a lot of friends, so we’ll work around whatever Elsie has planned.”

“You think a lot of my niece, don’t you?” Suzanne lay down beside Jen, her palm splayed against Jen’s stomach.

“I do. She’s great.”

“She thinks a lot of you, too. As do I...which I’m sure you know already.” Suzanne smirked as she lifted up onto her elbow and drew Jen into a kiss. “Mm. You taste delicious.”

Jen grinned when she wrapped her hand around the back of Suzanne's neck, pulling her down for a much more heated kiss. She would never get enough of the taste of this woman on her lips. Stars exploding behind her eyes was an understatement. "Hey," Jen whispered as she drew back a little. "Are you sure you want me to work with you?"

Suzanne took her bottom lip between her teeth as she nodded. "Mmhmm."

"Then I'm in. If you think it'll work, I'd love to join you."

Instead of responding, Suzanne rolled on top of Jen, the weight of her body a constant comfort. She brushed her thumb across Jen's eyebrow, searched her eyes, and beamed the most beautiful smile. "It would be an honour to have you at the company."

Chapter 29

With a cloth in one hand and her other pressed to the bonnet, Suzanne washed the exterior of her car, the sun shining down and drying it before she could remember which parts she had already tackled. Today marked the fourth week since Jen had reconnected with Lyn, but Suzanne had Jen all to herself today. She had done as Suzanne had suggested and taken on two fewer shifts a week at the courier firm, and now they spent every weekend together, plus an extra day through the week. Right now, life was blissful.

As she threw the cloth into the bucket of soapy water, Suzanne dragged her hair from her face and pulled it up into a loose bun instead. She hadn't anticipated how warm it would be today, but she was looking forward to better weather with Jen. Strolls around the country, lazy days relaxing in the garden. Suzanne, for the first time since John's death, could actually imagine those moments. They didn't seem so blurred in her mind anymore. Actually, as she stood here today, her rose bush blooming so

beautifully, she could see the future vividly.

The sound of a crying baby had Suzanne leaning over her front gate, the hedges obscuring her view from where she was positioned in the garden. A guy was pushing the pram, and he looked truly destroyed from a lack of sleep, his eyes red and puffy.

Suzanne smiled as their eyes met. “You’ve got a very lively one there.”

“Tell me about it. We only got an hour in the night. I’ve never been so used to seeing the sunrise at a ridiculous hour before.” He tried to stifle a yawn, but it wasn’t to be.

“Mm. I can imagine.” Suzanne opened the front gate when he stopped outside her house. She peered inside the pram, her heart aching for the little guy who was red-faced and screaming at the top of his lungs. “Is this a new development?”

“No, not really. He has colic, and for the life of us, we cannot shift it.” The guy ran a hand down his face. “I wish I knew how to take his pain away.”

Suzanne folded her arms across her chest and smiled back at him. “My niece struggled with colic for a while. I’m happy to say it does come to an end.”

“Any idea when?”

“Unfortunately not.”

“Babe?” Jen’s voice bellowed from the front door. “Where are you? Have we taken up nursery duties or something?”

Suzanne stepped back into the garden and eyed Jen. “We have a little one here who wants to make sure everyone knows he’s around.”

“Oh, bless him.” Jen took the steps down to the garden path, then joined Suzanne at the gate. She frowned suddenly. “O-oh. Dan.”

“You two know one another?” Suzanne asked, confused.

Jen lowered her eyes as she shoved her hands in the pockets of her jeans. “Yeah, um...I know the gorgeous little boy in the pram. But his dad... Not so much.”

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Okay, Suzanne was going to need more here. How did Jen know this baby but not the father of said baby? “Care to elaborate?” As she looked back at...Dan, he was fixing the blanket covering the baby. He started to walk away, but Suzanne cleared her throat. “Dan?”

“I need to get back. I shouldn’t even be over this side of the town. I just started walking with no destination in mind.”

Jen sighed. “Dan...”

“No. I’m not doing this. I haven’t come here looking for you. I didn’t even believe you when you told me you were living here. Why would I? You’re a fucking ex-con, so you’re probably a liar, too.”

Oh, no. Suzanne wouldn’t have anyone speaking to Jen like that. “Excuse me?”

“And you can stay out of it. You don’t even know us.” He snarled at Suzanne, shocking her with the sudden switch in his demeanour. The guy she’d initially met seemed lovely and cared a great deal about his son. But now? Suzanne couldn’t understand the swift change. “What is this? A half-way house? Is she paying you rent?”

“Jen...is my partner.”

“Well, I’d keep your expensive possessions close by. She’ll need to sell them to buy her next bag of drugs.” He scoffed and shook his head, and then that piercing gaze landed on Jen again. “And stop fucking calling Grace to see Toby. Neither of us

wants anything to do with you.”

Jen’s shoulders slumped when Suzanne looked back at her. “Yeah, I know. You keep saying.”

“Then why can’t you respect that and leave us all alone?”

Suzanne held up a hand. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but you chose to walk past this house. No matter what Jen did or didn’t do in the past, it doesn’t give you the right to speak to her like that, nor does it give you the right to throw your weight around by using your child against her.”

“Who the fuck asked you?” Dan looked Suzanne up and down. “You’re old enough to be her mother.”

“Such a charming father, aren’t you?” Suzanne wrapped an arm around Jen’s waist. “I hope to God your beautiful little boy doesn’t grow up with an attitude to match yours.”

“Beats him growing up with someone like that in his life.” He glared at Jen, disgust written all over his face. “Maybe I’ll find out who to call. You know, explain that you’re harassing us and trying to gain access to a child.”

Suzanne felt rage building from deep within her, but she would never cause a scene in the street. Especially not with a child present. “I suggest you walk away before I call the relevant people to tell them you are the one harassing Jen.”

Dan snorted. “Whatever. The pair of you can go fuck yourselves.”

Jen turned and walked away, and Suzanne heard the snuffle as she did so. Jen was her priority, she always would be, but Suzanne would make sure Dan knew that Suzanne

was firmly in her life—and she wouldn't take shit from anyone who tried to hurt Jen.

She stepped closer to him and smiled. "Once I've spoken to Jen, I'll be making it my mission to see that she has access to her nephew. You may get away with your bully behaviour around other people, but I'm not other people, Dan."

"And what do you think you can do about it?"

"Let's just say that I have a lot of friends in high places. Places you'll wish I didn't have those friends." She cocked her head. "Maybe you should go home and think about that before you ruin it not only for everyone else but for yourself, too."

"Is that a threat?"

Suzanne calmly took a step back and regarded Dan with a dazzling smile. "No, Dan. It's a promise."

She turned and walked back up the path, leaving the bucket of water next to her car as she rushed inside the house to find Jen. She didn't imagine her girlfriend would be feeling great right now, but it was important to Suzanne that Jen knew she had her support. It had been lacking from most people since Jen's release, but Suzanne was here for her. Anything she could do to make things better, she would.

"Jen?" She entered the kitchen, sighing when she found Jen braced against the counter. "Baby, are you okay?"

Jen didn't respond. She just turned and wiped the back of her hand across her cheeks while her bottom lip quivered.

"Come here." Suzanne opened her arms to Jen, holding her close the moment Jen fell into them. She soothed a hand up and down Jen's back, kissing the top of her head.

“Don’t listen to a word he says. He’s a disgusting human being.”

“Is he, though?” Jen asked, her face buried in Suzanne’s chest. “He’s looking after his family. That’s all.”

“By denying you access to your nephew? That’s not looking after his family. That’s being a prick who thinks he can lord himself over people.”

Jen drew back and shook her head. “I don’t think I have the fight in me anymore, Suzanne. I just...I feel so drained by it all.”

Suzanne reached out and brushed her knuckles gently against Jen’s cheek. “I’ll put the kettle on. You go and make yourself comfortable in the living room, and I’ll be right there, okay?”

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“Babe, you don’t need to do this. This is what my life looks like outside of your gorgeous home. It’s my normal now.”

“Go, Jen.” Suzanne gave her a knowing look. “A cuppa solves a lot of things.”

Sighing, Jen nodded slowly and walked away. Suzanne didn’t know where this conversation would go, but she would always create space for the woman she loved to be open and honest about how she was feeling.

With a shaking hand, Jen reached out for the cup of tea Suzanne was offering her, deflated beyond comprehension right now. This day had started out so well, they’d spent the morning enjoying breakfast and just doing their own thing, and now it had turned to shit. God, Jen had even been fearful of sneaking a look at her nephew. That’s what this had all come to. Jen being scared to breathe the same air as him.

“I know what’s just happened must be incredibly hard for you to take in, but I am here for you. I hope you know that.”

Jen swallowed as she looked up at Suzanne. “I know. I just don’t know what to do anymore.”

“Regardless of your past, you shouldn’t be penalised because of it. You did your time, you have a heartsobeautiful, and you should be given the chance to have a relationship with your nephew.”

“Dan doesn’t want me around, and there’s nothing I can do about that. Not really.” Jen sighed. “Even though I know I deserve the chance, it doesn’t mean he’ll give me

that.”

“How long have Dan and your sister been together?”

Jen puffed out her cheeks and set her tea down on the table to cool. She relaxed against the couch, her ankle resting on her knee. “They met about six months before I was arrested. Obviously, I wasn’t around to get to know him, so he only knows the shitty version of me. Not the real me.”

“And your sister? Doesn’t she try to make him see sense?”

“She’s secretly met up with me several times now. Or Mum invites her and Toby over when I’m there so I can spend some time with him. I’ve been busy with work and being here with you lately, so I haven’t had the chance to meet up with her.”

Suzanne lifted a brow. “You shouldn’t have to secretly meet up.”

“I know. I said the same thing. When she first started doing it, I used to avoid going home because I didn’t want Dan to get wind of it and fall out with Grace. It just didn’t seem worth it. Now, I realise I have no choice but to do it that way. It’s the only time I get to see Toby.”

“There has to be another way, Jen.”

Jen hoped that in time Dan would come to understand her need for a relationship with Toby, but every time they came across one another, it seemed less and less likely. She didn’t want to fight with people. She didn’t want anyone to withhold their children from her. She just wanted to live. How hard could it be? “Mum is furious about it all. I don’t think she gets along with Dan very well, but I wasn’t around, so I don’t know if they’ve had a run-in with one another, you know?”

“Maybe it’s something you should ask her about. She seems to be on your side no matter what, so what harm could it do?”

Oh, Jen knew exactly the harm it could do. “Because if I find out he’s spoken out of turn to her at all, it won’t be pleasant. I don’t care what he says about me, fuck him, but my mum? Nah, I’m not having that.”

“And rightfully so.”

Jen smiled when Suzanne took her hand and brought it into her lap. The warmth and softness of Suzanne’s skin reminded her that everything within these four walls was just fine. “About what he said before,” Jen started. “When he mentioned that I was living here...”

Suzanne frowned. “What about it?”

“I shouldn’t have told him I was living here. I just wanted him to see me as worth more than I really am. I hoped that if he knew I was bettering myself and a woman like you could want to date me, that maybe he’d reconsider everything.”

Suzanne gave Jen a questioning look. “A woman like me?”

“You live in the nicest part of town. You have a beautiful home, a car worth more than I’ll ever make in a year, and you’re intelligent. You’re not the kind of woman I’ve ever found attracted to me, Suzanne. But I will set the record straight. I know I shouldn’t have lied to him, but he caught me off guard that day when I bumped into him during my shift, and he belittled me in front of anyone who could hear him. It was the first thing that came to mind, but I really am sorry.”

“Hey,” Suzanne said, cupping Jen’s chin. “Don’t ever worry about something so small. I don’t care where you told him you live. And as for your worth.” Suzanne

inhaled a deep breath. “You’re worth more than every last person that lives on this street.”

“I appreciate that, but we both know it’s not true.” Jen smiled weakly as she dipped her gaze. “Before all of this, I had an amazing life. Now it’s just continuously turning to shit at every opportunity.” Jen looked up at Suzanne again. “You are the only positive thing in my life. Without you, I don’t know where I’d be right now.”

“You’d be thriving. I can see it in your eyes. You want to enjoy your life, love the people who mean the most to you, and be content with what you have.”

Suzanne had just read Jen perfectly. Still, it didn’t mean she would ever have those things. “You’re right. But Dan is making it painfully hard at any given moment.”

“Dan will see sense. I have a feeling if he doesn’t, he’s going to lose far more than you have to date. I don’t imagine your sister will put up with his attitude for much longer. You’ve always given me the impression that you’re close with one another.”

“It’s always been me and Grace. We’re only a few years apart in age, and I always looked out for her. She has a lot going on with raising Toby and working, but I do wish she’d look out for me a little more these days.” Jen wasn’t sure that was fair to her sister, but it was how she felt. For so long, Grace had stood behind Jen while she protected her from one thing or another, but when it came to Jen needing that same support and protection, Grace was missing. “People have lives to deal with, and I completely understand that, but I’ve bitten my tongue for long enough now. There are things Grace doesn’t know, things I never want to tell her, but if the time comes...I’ll have to. If it’s the deciding factor between me or Dan, then I’m protecting myself. I don’t give a fuck about him.”

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“What things, Jen?”

“Dan’s family are...undesirable, shall we say?” Jen shook her head and sighed. “And I don’t want it to come down to it, but I have a horrible feeling it’s going to.”

“Undesirable in what way?”

“His dad and his brother are dealers. They used to supply me before I was sent down. Grace doesn’t know about it, and I still hold my hands up and admit that the drug use was solely on me, but she would hit the roof if she knew. For Dan to come across as all high and mighty, it just doesn’t sit right with me.”

“Nor me.” Jen noted how Suzanne’s jaw clenched, but she didn’t want her girlfriend to be angry. She also didn’t want her involved in this. “How dare he!”

“Babe, don’t. I don’t want to see you worked up about any of it. I bought those drugs, and that’s that.”

“I know, and I admire you for taking responsibility for it, but he has no right to say the things he does to you when his own family is in the business of drugs.” Suzanne shook her head. “This needs to change. You should be able to see Toby whenever you like.”

“Grace knows about Dan’s family in general—everyone knows about them—but selling drugs to me? No, she doesn’t know about that. I hope she’ll never know.”

“Perhaps she should know. Or Dan should know that exposing the truth is potentially

on the table, at least.” Suzanne sat back and sighed. “I don’t like any of this. I...don’t know how else to approach it. I know a lot of people in the local council and various services around here, and I also may have threatened Dan with it, but I’d never do anything to hurt your family in any way. If it spooks him, however, I am willing to use it as a tactic in conversation.”

“I appreciate you having my back. Nobody has ever done that for me. Well, not since Ruby...”

“I’ll always have your back. I love you.” Suzanne shifted closer and rested against Jen. When their eyes met, Jen felt the love Suzanne had for her. “And as for telling him you live here, you will one day, so it’s not really a lie.”

Jen’s heart jumped at that. While she was loving every moment she spent with Suzanne, living here wasn’t something she’d allowed herself any headspace. “You don’t have to say things like that. I’d never expect you to even offer.”

“Then I’m sorry you feel that way. Once I know the time is right, I will be asking you to move in with me. It just...makes sense. You’re already here every moment you can be, so it seems normal to ask you.”

“But this was your home with John.” Jen’s brows drew together. “You built a life here with him.”

“You’re right, I did.” Suzanne nodded. “And now I want to build a new life here...with you.”

Jen’s chest swelled, her palms clammy as she brought a hand to Suzanne’s hair and grazed her nails against her scalp. “I don’t know what I ever did to deserve you, but we’re going to be happy. I know we are.”

“I love you, and no matter what, it’s always going to be you and I.”

“Right back at you, babe.” Jen dipped her head and kissed Suzanne’s temple as she whispered, “I’m incredibly lucky to have you in my life.”

Chapter 30

Jen shook her hands at her sides, waiting impatiently for her mum to open the front door. She had been so nervous leaving Suzanne’s place forty minutes ago that she had forgotten her key. Denise had called her this morning asking Jen to come over for a specific time, but she wouldn’t say what it was about. Jen didn’t like not knowing what was going on, so here she was, anxiously sweating on her mum’s doorstep.

“Jen, are you okay?” Suzanne placed a hand on the small of Jen’s back. “Are you sure she didn’t say what it was about, and are you sure you want me here with you? She didn’t invite me, baby.”

“We come as a pair. She doesn’t need to invite you.” Jen side-eyed Suzanne and regarded her with a fake smile. Not because that was a lie—Suzanne would always be welcome here—but because she had a bad feeling about this. “And no, I have no idea what this is about. Unless someone has upset her in the street. It wouldn’t be the first time it’s happened to her.”

“Did she sound upset or concerned?”

Jen shrugged. “No. She just sounded like Mum.”

“Right, then I’d say not to worry. If something had happened, I’m sure she would have given you a heads-up in some way. She probably hasn’t even realised the way it came across to you on the phone.”

Jen relaxed a little. Not much, but a tiny bit. “You’re right. If something had happened, she would have told me. I know she would.”

As Jen took Suzanne’s hand, the front door opened, and Denise smiled back at them both. “Oh, lovely! I’m glad you brought Suzanne with you!”

“I didn’t think it needed to be said,” Jen explained as she stepped inside and guided Suzanne in with her. “But now, what’s going on? I’ve been panicking since you called me this morning.”

Denise switched her gaze between Jen and Suzanne repeatedly. “Why?”

“I don’t know. You don’t usually summon me here.” Jen’s mum had summoned her many times between Ruby dying and prison calling. The difference this time was that Jen had actually shown up. She would have just turned off her phone and opened another bottle of vodka in the past. “Is everything okay?”

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“Everything is fine, love.” Denise leaned in and kissed Jen on the cheek, then turned her attention to Suzanne and drew her into a hug. “It’s lovely to see you, Suzanne.”

“Likewise.”

“Come on. Follow me.” Denise angled her head towards the closed back living room door. “No use standing out here in the hall when all the fun is happening in there.”

Jen frowned. What fun? Since when did her mum have fun in the middle of the day...and invite people over for said fun? “Come on, babe. Mum must have been drinking.” Jen winked and headed for the living room. She didn’t let go of Suzanne’s hand. Right now, it was the one safety she felt. Even though Denise had told her not to worry, that meant she was going to worry a whole lot more. As Jen stepped into the back living room, Grace was sitting at the dining table. “Oh, hey.”

Grace smiled, just about, and then it dawned on Jen. Dan had probably gone back home after they’d bumped into him outside Suzanne’s and proceeded to tell a pack of lies about her. She wouldn’t be at all surprised if he’d had something to say about Suzanne, too.

“Is...everything okay?” Jen asked, realising there was nothing to suggest Toby was here. “Is the baby okay?”

Grace smiled. “Of course. He’s fast asleep on the couch. Mum has been dancing around the living room with him for the last hour. Poor thing couldn’t keep his eyes open.” Grace pushed her chair away from the table and rose to her feet. “I didn’t want to tell you I was coming because I know you don’t like it when you think I’m

sneaking around.”

“Mm. I have no other option, though, do I? Your wanker fiancé has made it perfectly clear what he thinks of me.”

“Jen!” Denise chastised.

“No, Mum. Jen is right.” Grace rounded the table and took Jen in her arms. “He is a wanker. I’m so sorry about the things he said, Jen.”

“H-how do you know about that?” Jen drew back but held onto Grace’s arms. “I mean, there’s no way he came home and told you himself.”

“Beryl from the newsagents. She overheard him in the street weeks ago, but I only found out about it a few days ago. He came clean when I challenged him, and then he said he’d seen you last week over on Belmont.” Grace eyed Suzanne and smiled. “You must be the woman my sister never stops talking about.”

“And you must be Grace. The sister Jen talks about often.” Suzanne smiled. “Suzanne. Lovely to meet you.”

“Let’s not stand around. Make yourselves comfortable.” Denise ushered the three of them into the living room, turning the TV off as Jen and Suzanne situated themselves on the opposite couch to Toby. He was spread out like a starfish with a cushion preventing him from rolling over the side. “He’ll be awake soon. He’s due to be fed.”

Jen smiled at her mum, then gave her attention to Grace once more. “So, what’s going on? Why have I been brought here? If Dan finds out?—”

Grace held up a hand. “Dan knows.”

“He does?” Jen was surprised by that. If Dan knew, he surely wanted to be here with Grace and Toby in case Jen decided to kidnap him and feed him drugs. She shouldn’t see the funny side of it, but it was all she had left where her sister’s fiancé was concerned. If she didn’t laugh, she’d cry. “Where is he?”

“He’ll be here soon. I’ve told him he has to be here.”

Jen shook her head. “I’m not sitting here, in my childhood home, while a guy I don’t even know snarls at me from across the room. He can shove it up his arse for all I care.”

Suzanne lay a supportive hand on Jen’s knee. “If you don’t feel comfortable with him around, we can leave. Whenever you want, just say the word.”

Jen had just fallen in love with Suzanne all over again. “I appreciate the support.”

“I just don’t want you to feel uncomfortable. You shouldn’t have to feel that way in your own home. I won’t stand for it.” Suzanne leaned in and kissed Jen on the cheek. “But I could murder a cuppa if anyone else fancies one?” She turned her attention to Denise. “If you could show me to the kitchen, I’ll take care of them.”

Denise grinned. “Of course. Follow me.”

Jen watched Suzanne as she got to her feet. She was purposely removing herself from the room so Jen could be alone with Grace. “Thanks, babe. I’ll have a coffee.”

“Coffee. Got it.” Suzanne turned to Grace. “Grace?”

“Could I have a tea, please?”

Suzanne nodded and smiled, then followed Jen’s mum into the kitchen. The kitchen

door closed behind her, so Jen watched Grace across the room. “He’s lucky I didn’t punch his lights out, Grace. I don’t care who he is...nobody speaks to me like that in the street.”

“Trust me, he knows. I’ve made sure he knows what’s going to happen moving forward.”

Jen rested her ankle on her knee and sighed. “I don’t even know what that means.”

“I told him this morning that he seriously needs to decide what he wants here. It’s either me and my whole family or him on his own. I’m done with his bullshit. I don’t know who he thinks he is.”

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“I understood at first,” Jen said, sitting forward and resting her elbows on her knees. “I thought he was just being protective of Toby. But now? He belittles me and slates me whenever he gets the chance. He spoke to Suzanne like a piece of shit the other day, and I’m not having it. I don’t care who he is to you or Toby; I won’t have him speaking to Suzanne like that. The next time he does it, it’ll be the last thing he ever does. Trust me. I’m not fucking about with him anymore.”

“Oh, God.” Grace groaned as she sunk down in her seat and placed her head in her hands. “I’m so sorry, Jen. To both of you.”

“Why are you apologising? He’s the one with the disgusting attitude. As it stands, I’d be ashamed to call him my brother-in-law.”

“If he doesn’t change that attitude, you won’t have a brother-in-law. I’m sick to death of it, Jen. It stops now.” Grace’s face reddened as she sat forward and clenched her fists. “He’s coming over. He has a lot of apologising to do.”

“Look, I don’t need to be best friends with him. I know he doesn’t like me, and quite frankly, I don’t like him either. But I do expect to be able to spend time with my nephew when I want to. Dan can feel the way he feels; I don’t care. So long as you don’t feel the same way, he can keep his opinions. It’s no skin off my nose.”

“I’ve never felt the way he does, Jen.”

Jen nodded. “I know.”

“I’ll give Toby another twenty minutes and then wake him up. I told him he was

seeing Auntie Jen and Auntie Suzanne today.”

Jen’s bottom lip quivered. Grace had included Suzanne, and that meant a huge deal.

“Thanks, Grace. For believing in me.”

“Always.”

“I did mean it when I said I’d take care of the tea and coffee.” Suzanne stepped forward, but Denise held up her hands. “Denise, please. I don’t want to be a spare part here.”

“You’re not. You’re a guest.”

“Well, I appreciate that.” Suzanne hadn’t really wanted a cuppa, but she did want to give Jen and Grace some time alone before Dan showed up. She just felt it would be better all around if she made herself scarce with Denise for a few moments. “How do you think today will go when Dan turns up?”

“There will be no shouting or belittling in my house. I don’t care if he’s my only grandchild’s dad.”

“Have you ever had a run-in with him? Not necessarily about Jen, but just in general.” Suzanne rested against the kitchen counter, smiling when Denise fussed about at the kitchen sink. “I don’t know why I get a bad feeling from him. Perhaps it’s just because of the things Jen has told me.”

“I...don’t like him. There’s no use lying.” Denise sighed as she turned and dried her hands on a towel. “He wouldn’t have been who I’d have picked for my Grace.”

“Unfortunately, nobody gets to decide other than Grace on that front.”

“Oh, I know. But I think my Mark would have run him down the street if he were still alive. He would have put a stop to the relationship, no matter what anyone thought about it.” Denise lifted a shoulder and then took a plate from the cupboard. “Biscuits?”

Suzanne smiled. “Sure.”

This was only the third time visiting Jen’s home with her mum, but every time she stepped through the door, she got the warmest feeling. It was clearly a home that held a lot of memories for Jen and her family. Framed photographs scattered the walls and shelving units, and pictures Jen and Grace had painted when they were far younger still hung in places. It reminded Suzanne a lot of her own childhood home.

“I...know Jen told you about the time when we split up.” Suzanne didn’t know why she was having this conversation, but she wanted Denise to know Jen was safe and looked after over at her place. “The reasons why it happened.”

“That’s partially my fault. She was forever asking me if you needed to know about her past, and I kept telling her to let it lie until the moment was right. Upon reflection, I don’t think there could have been a right moment.”

“Nothing has changed for me. I don’t think it ever really did. From then until now, she’s still the wonderful person who turned up on my doorstep some...five months ago now?”

“Has it been that long really?” Denise blew out a breath.

Five months didn’t seem a long time to Suzanne, but looking back, it did feel as though her and Jen had been together for far longer than that. “I know. It’s hard to believe the place we’re at now. I certainly didn’t expect her.”

Denise stepped towards Suzanne and took her hand. “Believe me, she didn’t expect you, either.”

“We are happy,” Suzanne said when Denise squeezed her hand. “Sometimes, I think I’m happier than when I was married to John. He was a wonderful husband, and I wouldn’t change that time in my life for the world, but Jen just gets me. We...get one another on a different level.”

“You’ve both been through a lot. I think that’s where the connection comes from. When two people meet who have spent a significant amount of time grieving, it has that effect. But she loves you—I know it for a fact. This Jen...is happier than when she was with Lizzie.”

Suzanne swallowed. Had Jen told her mum about Lizzie wanting her back? It was possible. They were certainly close enough for that to be the case. “That means a lot to know that.”

The doorbell rang, startling Suzanne a little. It could only be one person, and as Suzanne stood here, she hoped and prayed that this gathering would be far more positive than any previous encounters with one another.

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“Are you ready to help me bung him out the door if that mouth starts to run away with itself?”

Suzanne laughed and straightened her shoulders. “I’ve been waiting for a moment like this all my life.”

“Oh, I like you,” Denise said as she winked. “I like you a lot.”

They both moved towards the kitchen door, listening carefully for any signs of aggravation. But it never came. As far as Suzanne could tell, Jen, Grace, and Dan were speaking without the usual hostility. “This seems promising.”

“Oh, I’m not surprised at all,” Denise said quietly. “Before you and Jen arrived, Grace told me that if Dan had refused to come here today, she was leaving him.”

Suzanne’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“Mmhhh. She’s had enough of him. Jen was away for thirteen months, and Grace hasn’t really had the chance to reconnect with her because of Dan.” Denise shook her head. “Those girls are my life, and they always have been. To know they’ve not spent much time together breaks my heart.”

That saddened Suzanne. “Me, too.”

“But you’re right. This is promising. And now I suppose I should see if my wonderful son-in-law would like a cuppa, too.” Denise rolled her eyes and opened the kitchen door. “Dan, hi! Lovely to see you as always.”

Suzanne almost burst out laughing at the sheer sarcasm laced through Denise's tone, but she knew better than to do that. This was a volatile situation for Jen and Dan, Grace too, so she would remain silent until spoken to.

"Hi, Mrs Fletcher. Nice to see you."

Suzanne watched Dan from the other side of the room, the unease in the air noticeable. Dan was clearly here under duress, but maybe that was what he needed. If it had been left up to him, he would have continued to dismiss Jen at every turn.

"And you." He eyed Suzanne. "Nice to see you."

Suzanne stepped forward and held out a hand. "Suzanne. Since I didn't get the chance to introduce myself the last time around."

"Yeah, uh..." Dan wrapped a hand around the back of his neck and grimaced. He eventually took the hand offered to him by Suzanne and shook it. "I'm sorry about that. Really sorry."

"Mm." Suzanne drew her hand away and managed a smile. She joined Jen at her side, pressing a kiss to her lips as the atmosphere started to fall away. "You okay, baby?"

"Yeah, I'm good. Just waiting for Toby to wake up so I can spend some time with him."

"Well, we have no plans for the rest of the day, so there's no rush to leave. We can stay here all day if you like."

Jen's gorgeous hazel eyes brightened. "Really?"

"Sure. I have all kinds to talk about with your mum. We were putting the world to

rights in the kitchen.”

Jen turned her back on her family and placed both palms on Suzanne’s stomach. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too.” Suzanne smiled back at Jen, aching for this day to turn out the way she hoped it would with Jen back in touchfullywith her family.

As they stood silently, just gazing into one another’s eyes, Toby started to stir on the couch. Jen’s eyes lit up as she peeked around Suzanne, the smile she wore surely hurting her face. “He’s awake. I can’t wait to cuddle him.”

“And I bet he can’t wait for a cuddle from you.”

Chapter 31

Don’t let anything go wrong this afternoon.

Suzanne puffed out her cheeks where she stood on the decked terrace, her hands wrapped around a cup of coffee. The weather was glorious today, only requiring a patio heater later this evening as the sun began to fade. Suzanne had been keeping an eye on the weather and average temperature all morning, and it seemed summer had fully arrived. The heat was set to soar next week.

“Babe?” Jen startled her when she came out onto the terrace. “What the hell have you been doing out here?”

Jen cast her gaze on the yurts sat in place on the lawn, the neutral pastel colours matching various outdoor rugs and blankets. Lanterns sat in two of the corners, throw cushions and small tables also precisely positioned in Suzanne’s preferred spots. “Just...trying something out.” Suzanne felt terrible for lying, but it would all be

worth it in the end. “Think of it as a sort of vision board type of thing.”

“But you deal with interior design, not exterior.” Jen took Suzanne’s coffee cup from her and sipped. It was something she’d started doing recently, and Suzanne had added it to her never-ending list of things she loved about her girlfriend. “Are you branching out now that you’re going back?”

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Suzanne lifted a shoulder. “Maybe.”

“Well,” Jen paused as she handed Suzanne her coffee back. “It looks great. But I’m not surprised. I’ve been looking at that portfolio you left out for me, and your work is sensational. You really have an eye for detail.”

Suzanne appreciated that. “I’m looking forward to going back.”

“And I’m looking forward to joining you.” Jen hip-checked Suzanne and grinned. “Emailed my notice over to work just before I came out here.”

Suzanne’s eyes widened, but it was her thumping heart that she focused on. Jen...was really going to work with her? Suzanne had spent each day since Jen agreed wondering if she would back out. But no. This was happening. Oh, God. “Y-you did?”

“Mmhmm. Looks like I’ll be working with you in the not-too-distant future.”

“Oh, Jen.” Suzanne lowered her coffee cup to the table and turned, taking Jen in her arms. “I’m so glad you didn’t change your mind. And I’m proud of you for stepping into the unknown.”

“You’re not the unknown, so I have nothing to worry about.” Jen drew Suzanne in and planted a kiss on her lips. “I think if I want to be happy in my job, then I have to try something new.”

“I love you,” Suzanne whispered against Jen’s lips, squeezing her hip as she pulled

Jen in against her. “God, I love you like I didn’t know it was possible.”

Jen placed her hands on Suzanne’s chest. “We make a good team. So long as you’re sure I can dosomethingto benefit your company, then I’m going to trust you on this.”

“Oh, I’m certain you can bringa lotto my company. Don’t you worry about that.” As Suzanne contemplated whether they had time to get naked, the doorbell rang.Nope. You’ll have to save it for later. “Sorry, I’ll just get the door.”

“That better not be a new courier that’s going to seduce you!” Jen called out, laughing as Suzanne spun around and glared at her. “Babe, I’m joking. Iknowyou only have eyes for me.”

Suzanne rushed inside and stopped in the hallway. She had taken matters into her own hands, and now a whole load of people were about to arrive for a picnic in the garden. Jen had no idea anyone was coming. As far as she was aware, they were spending the day enjoying the sun alone. Suzanne just hoped it would all go as planned. She opened the front door and briefly placed a finger to her lips. “She still has no idea. Go through...quietly.”

Denise winked as she stepped over the threshold and whispered, “Gorgeous house, Suzanne. Very nice indeed.”

“Thank you.” She smiled as she looked out onto the street, then frowned. “No Grace?”

“Yes. She’s just getting Toby’s pram out of the boot. Dan is here, too.”

Suzanne bristled but only slightly. She had purposely invited Grace and Dan, hoping everyone could start to make amends. “Great. You go out into the garden, and then it can be a double surprise when I bring the others through. Jen is already out there,

blissfully unaware.”

“Perfect. And thank you for inviting us over.” Denise turned and quietly made her way through the house.

Suzanne waited a beat or two, and then she heard Jen asking her mum why she was here. Before she could give herself the opportunity to listen in, Grace, Dan, and Toby came strolling up the garden path. “Hi. Come on in.”

“Could you take him for a moment? I’ve got a rucksack full of stuff, and Dan has the pram. I don’t know how a nine-month-old can need so many things, but my back is breaking.”

Suzanne reached out and took Toby from Grace, instantly warmed when he smiled back at her. “Hi, cutie.” She held the door open with her foot, motioning for Grace and Dan to come inside. “Jen doesn’t know you’re coming over.”

“Oh, God. She’s going to kill you for surprising her.”

Suzanne’s face instantly fell. “Y-you’re joking.”

“Of course I am. But you’ll get used to one of us always playing a joke on someone the longer you know us.” Grace placed a hand on Suzanne’s shoulder and smiled. “The problem is, you just never know when it’s going to happen.”

“Then I will always be prepared.”

“Not possible with us Fletcher girls. We’re like ninjas when we want to be.” Grace helped Dan carry Toby’s pram over the top step, leaving it to one side until Toby required it later.

“I’ve laid out some blankets and yurts so he can play around on the lawn safely. I was worried about the heat and the sun being directly on him, but it should do the job.” Suzanne wanted to make sure everyone had everything they needed while they were here today. She hated something being amiss when she had guests over. Or...potential family. “Treat the place like your own. If you can’t find something, just let me know.”

“Thanks, Suzanne.” Dan smiled at her as he stopped in the doorway. “This is a great idea.”

“It’s nice to see you again, Dan.” Suzanne could only be genuine when it came to Jen’s family. Even though they’d had their differences, Dan had apologised to them both, and now life could move on. Why hold onto something when everyone could live in harmony? At the end of the day, what mattered was Jen’s relationship with Toby. If that meant Suzanne had to be overly nice to get Dan on board, then so be it. “Beers are in the fridge if you’d like one.”

“Oh, brilliant. Thanks.”

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Suzanne was waiting on the arrival of her own family, Tracy included, but for the time being, she would head back out into the garden. After all, the woman of her dreams was out there. As she started to close the door, the garden gate opened again and caught her attention. Ruby's mum stood on the garden path, smiling back at her.

“Am I on time?”

“Absolutely.” Suzanne switched Toby from one arm to the other. The little guy was weighty, that was for sure. “Jen and Denise are out in the garden. Grace and her fiancé have just gone through, too.”

Lyn stepped inside the hallway and turned to Suzanne. “Thank you for inviting me over. I wasn't sure what Jen had told you about me, so when Denise called about this surprise, I was shocked I'd been invited.”

“Jen told me that you're another mum to her. It's important that you're here.” Suzanne did close the front door this time, guiding Lyn through into the kitchen. She watched Jen through the window, hugging Grace as though the world was about to end, and then their eyes locked on one another's. The biggest smile Jen had ever worn settled on her face when Lyn stepped out into the garden, and they embraced. Suzanne sighed. “Just the reaction I hoped for.”

“Babe?” Jen let go of Lyn and rushed inside, tears in her eyes when she focused on Toby. “W-what the hell is going on here?”

“These are your people. They love and support you.” Suzanne handed Toby off to Jen and watched on as Jen squeezed him against her. “Your family. Those that matter.”

“You...didn’t create ‘some kind’ of vision board, did you?” Jen blinked away tears. “This was all planned, wasn’t it? For me?”

Suzanne nodded slowly. “Mmhmm.”

“You’re unbelievable. I love you.” Jen stepped closer, one arm wrapped around Suzanne’s waist, and leaned in to kiss her. “I don’t know what I did to deserve any of this but thank you. It’s amazing.”

“New start. New life. New love.” Suzanne touched her forehead to Jen’s. “This is what we have now, okay?”

“Okay.” Jen took Suzanne’s hand and guided her out into the garden. “Hey, everyone!”

They all turned around and focused on Jen and Suzanne.

“While this gorgeous woman is surprising me, I thought I’d surprise all of you and let you know that I have a new job. Well, I will soon. Today I handed in my notice at work.”

Denise gasped. “You’re doing it? That’s brilliant, my love.”

“Doing what?” Grace cut in.

“Joining Suzanne and her late husband’s company.” Jen beamed a smile that had Suzanne’s heart racing. “Architecture and interior design.”

Grace’s eyes widened. “Wow. That’s amazing, sis.”

Suzanne’s chest swelled. It meant so much that Jen had never once tried to erase John

or Suzanne's marriage to him. She wrapped an arm around Jen's waist and dipped her head towards her ear. "If you make me cry, I swear to God!"

"No tears. We've had plenty of those over the last few years. It's time to have fun and just enjoy life." Jen settled a hand on Suzanne's where it rested on her hip. "New start. New life." Jen turned and gazed back at Suzanne, holding Toby securely against her as he wriggled about in her arms. "The most amazing love."

Suzanne cleared her throat, aware that she was close to tears whether it was appropriate or not. "Right. Drinks. Who wants what?"

"Hey," Jen said, her voice low. "I mean it. I'm so in love with you, babe."

Suzanne touched Jen's cheek lightly and smiled. "Then I couldn't ask for anything more."

Jen stood back and watched life unfolding in front of her. Suzanne had really gone to some lengths today to make everything perfect for those she'd invited over. She wasn't surprised, Suzanne was always making things beautiful around this place, but Jen was still appreciative. She was still in awe of the woman she loved. Nobody had ever done something like this for her before, and that only made it all the more special. In years when she looked back on this day, Jen knew it would be with fondness. Not only had her own family shown up for her, but Suzanne's family had, too—and Tracy.

God, you don't know just how lucky you are.

"Hey, Jen?"

Jen didn't mean to, but she still tensed at the sound of Dan's voice. "Yeah?"

“Do you have a minute? I know we’ve all been invited over for a nice day together and stuff, but I wanted to just clear the air if you had a couple of minutes.”

Jen turned to Dan fully, her arms folded across her chest. “Sure.”

“Iamsorry. I know we haven’t really had the chance to speak much since we were all over at your mum’s place, but I am really sorry for the way I’ve treated you.”

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Jen was grateful for Dan's apology, it meant life wouldn't be so awkward now, but she wasn't sure she could truly forgive him just yet. She wasn't convinced that he didn't hate her anymore. It had been so severe as it was happening that she found it hard to believe he wasn't just doing this for the sake of Grace. "Yeah, thanks."

"I've, uh...I've cut them off." Dan looked down at his boots as he wrapped a hand around the back of his neck. "It was for the best."

Jen's brows drew together. "Cut who off?"

"The family. My dad and brother."

"Why?" Jen knew why, but she was also almost certain that Dan knew who his brother and father were long before Jen told him. Most of the town did, so how could he be so oblivious?

"I don't want Toby in that environment. I don't want him to grow up being known as a Pritchard."

"Well, that's going to be difficult given the fact he has your surname, Dan." He clearly hadn't thought about that, but really, none of this was Jen's business. So long as Toby was happy and healthy, that was her sole concern. "And not all of the Pritchard family are terrible people. I mean, you're not."

Dan laughed. "Didn't think I'd hear that coming from you."

"I may not quite like you yet, but I do have to admire the fact that you wanted to

protect your son. It means you have a good heart. Your opinion of me may be bullshit, and I don't like that you've kept my nephew from me for all this time, but I plan to make up for that."

"I went too far, I realise that." Dan held up his hands, a genuine look of remorse in his eyes. "I'm surprised Grace even wanted me here today. Or you and Suzanne."

"This was Suzanne's idea. It's her home, and who she chooses to invite into it is entirely up to her." Jen probably would have suggested Dan stay at home if she'd had things her way, but Suzanne had asked her to try, to see how Jen and Dan shared a space with one another, and so far...she didn't hate it. "And like I said, I plan to make up for the time I've lost with Toby. That starts right here, right now."

Dan smiled. "I know. And I won't stop that from happening. I swear to you, I won't."

"I know you won't." Even if Dan tried to, Jen was so over him dictating their lives. She wasn't putting up with it any longer. She had a woman she loved by her side, a mother who had kept her going, and a sister who wanted everyone to get along. If Dan thought for one second that he could stop that, he was sadly mistaken. Jen may have been playing the game up until now—keeping everyone happy except for herself—but no more. Andneveragain.

"I would like it if we could try to be cool with one another, though. You know, for Grace and that."

"So, not becauseyouwant us to be cool with one another?"

Dan scrubbed a hand down his face. "No, that's not what I meant. But like...for now. Until you're feeling more comfortable with me."

Jen narrowed her eyes as she stared back at Dan. She knew Grace had given him an

ultimatum before they'd all met at Denise's, but had she been on his back since then, too? Huh. Maybe her sister was finally coming through for her. "That works for me."

"Good. That's good." Dan nodded as he hitched a thumb towards the throws and cushions on the grass. "I'll get back over there. Take it easy, Jen."

As Dan turned, Jen cleared her throat. "Hey, Dan?"

"Yeah?" Dan looked back over his shoulder.

"Just for the record. I would have been cool with you from the moment I came home. I've never had an issue with you. So, maybe you should tell yourself the very same thing you've just told me because, honestly, you don't look like you wanted to say anything of the kind."

"No, I did want to say it. I just feel a bit shit about it all, to be honest. Ashamed." Dan sighed as his shoulders slumped. "Grace is still being really off with me since she found out about our thing in the street. I'm hoping she can forgive me at some point, but I know she's hurt. You're her sister, though, and I get it. I really do."

Jen extended a hand. All she wanted was peace and quiet. Was that too much to ask for? "Quits, okay?"

Dan eventually smiled when he took Jen's hand and shook it. "Definitely. Quits."

"Auntie Jen?" Suzanne's gentle voice pierced the air as Dan turned and walked away. He briefly stopped in front of Suzanne, and then he was gone. Suzanne watched Jen from the edge of the decking, studying her. "Everything okay, baby?"

"Yeah, fine. Dan was just apologising for everything that happened."

“He...didn’t apologise when he came to your mum’s that day?” Suzanne frowned, bouncing Toby in her arms as she approached Jen. “I thought he had.”

“He sort of did. This one was a little more heartfelt...I think.” Jen waved a hand. “Anyway, enough about him. How are you two getting on?”

“Oh, perfect. We’re best friends.” Suzanne grinned when she dipped her head and kissed Toby’s hair. “He’s adorable, and now that I’ve spent some uninterrupted time with him, I see that he looks a lot like you.”

Jen pushed out her bottom lip. “Poor child.”

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“Hey, you’re beautiful.” Suzanne leaned in and whispered, “And you’re all mine.”

“How’s Elsie doing? Is she having fun?” Jen peered over the other side of the garden. Tracy was hunched inside one of the tiny yurts Suzanne had hired for the day, nodding enthusiastically to whatever Elsie was saying to her. “I mean, she looks like she is. Can’t say the same for Tracy, though.”

“Tracy’s one of those friends who will always get stuck in with the kids. If it means we can sit around chatting, then she’s all for it.” Suzanne glanced back over her shoulder and sighed. “I think she wishes she’d had a family of her own.”

“That is a shame. She seems to be great with kids.” Jen guided Suzanne into the kitchen and out of earshot of the open bi-folding doors. “I just wanted to say thanks for today. I think everyone is really enjoying themselves, and I’ve had the chance to be with Toby all day.”

Suzanne quirked a brow. “Why do you think I did this?”

“So we could all hang out since the weather is great?”

Suzanne smiled but shook her head. “I did it so you could have the chance to be with Toby all day. This is all for you, Jen. Nobody else.”

A sudden lump of emotion lodged itself in Jen’s throat. She felt her eyes beginning to burn, and her bottom lip threatened to tremble, but she didn’t care. Everything this woman did for Jen was done with complete love. “Thank you.”

“Hey,” Suzanne said, bringing a hand to Jen’s cheek. “I told you that you’d always have my support. I meant it.” As Suzanne drew back, she held Toby out, and Jen took him from her. “Now, this little one needs changing. Since Auntie Jen has missed so many opportunities to take care of that, you can do so now.”

“Thanks!” Jen wrinkled her nose when she got a waft of whatever Toby had digested recently. “And there I was, thinking you’d do anything for me.”

“Oh, I would do anything for you. But I have a barbecue to take care of in the next ten minutes, and I don’t think people would like me to handle food after dealing with whatever is going on in that little guy’s pants.”

Jen laughed. “Fair play, babe. I’ll see you in a few minutes, okay?”

Suzanne blew Jen a kiss as she backed away. “I’ll be waiting.”

Chapter 32

Jen sat at Suzanne’s dining table with her laptop open as she scoured the internet for fundraising ideas. Ruby’s birthday was just five months away, and she wanted to mark it somehow. Maybe now that Lyn was back in her life, Jen could do something she used to love doing. Raising money for charity. And what better way than to do it in Ruby’s name. Her best friend had always loved a good party, and that was the avenue Jen was considering going down as she sat here with a stone-cold cup of coffee.

She lifted her phone and called Lyn’s number.

“Hi, Jen. Lovely to hear from you.”

Jen smiled and sat back in her seat. “Are you free to talk for a few minutes?”

“Of course. I’m just about to tuck into my lunch. What’s up?”

Jen didn’t want to disturb Lyn’s lunch break. Anything she wanted to talk about could wait for a more suitable time. “I can call you back later if that’s better. Maybe this evening?”

“Now is fine, love. Talk to me. What’s going on?”

“Well, um...I was thinking that with Ruby’s birthday coming up in a few months, I could do something for it. I’ve been looking on the internet all morning for some fundraising ideas, and I think she would have loved a charity karaoke night.”

“You want to do that fundraising you mentioned when she died?” Lyn sounded surprised, but Jen would always want to be involved in that kind of thing. More so now when she was fully fit and no longer a danger to herself or anyone around her. “That’s a wonderful idea.”

“You think?” Jen grinned.

“Absolutely.” Lyn cleared her throat. “I actually went to one a long time ago. If I remember right, the people who came to the event—ticketed, of course—paid to sing. Only a couple of pounds a song, but you’d be surprised how much it raised for the chosen charity.”

“I like that. Ticket sales and payment to sing. It’s nothing too drastic in terms of setting up the event, and it sounds like a pretty chilled but fun night.” Jen felt positive about the idea. It would be highly unlikely that they wouldn’t sell all of the tickets, and with it being in Ruby’s name, more people were sure to get involved. “I know it’ll be a sad night for us, but I want to turn her birthday into something positive. Something that will keep us occupied while remembering the fun Ruby brought to our lives.”

Lyn sniffled down the line. “Oh, Jen.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You haven’t. I’m okay.” Lyn paused. “But I think you’re right. It’s time we started to remember Ruby with a smile...rather than tears.”

Jen allowed the tension to fall from her shoulders, inwardly sighing at what Lyn had just said. Jen couldn’t have put it better herself. Itwastime. “I think that’s a good idea. You and I both know she wouldn’t want us to miss her for too long.”

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“You know what she’d say, don’t you?” Lyn laughed.

“Yep.” Jen inhaled a deep breath. Ruby’s voice was firmly stuck in her mind. It always would be. “Oh, my God! What’s with the face? Crack a smile. You could be dead tomorrow.”

Lyn laughed harder. “Oh, wow. You sounded just like her.”

These moments would always be bittersweet. Jen didn’t want to sound like Ruby. She wanted Ruby right beside her, saying those things herself. “I want to get to the bottom of what happened to her.”

“I...know what happened to her,” Lyn said quietly.

“I know we technically know. SADS. But I mean...the why.” The one thing Jen had never been able to get her head around was the fact that her healthy best friend could just die in the night. “I think it would help to give me some closure if it’s even possible to find out the truth about the disease.”

“Again, I know why.”

“O-oh.” Jen frowned. “I didn’t know that.”

“You know how I always told you and Ruby to look after yourselves once Lee died?”

Jen didn’t have a lot of memories with Lee, Ruby’s dad. He had died when they were both young. “Yep. No fatty foods. Plenty of exercise. No smoking.”

“Well, Lee was a big guy. We all know he took no notice of keeping himself healthy. I don’t think I ever saw him exercise in the years we were married...and his gut? Well, let’s just say cuddles in bed were difficult since it always got in the way.” Lyn sighed. “Anyway, SADS, or the heart complications associated with it, are usually passed on from one of the parents. As much as a fifty percent chance. Even though I cannot prove it, given the fact Lee has been gone a long time now, it ties in with Ruby’s death. Even though her dad turned his nose up at a lettuce leaf, we came to the conclusion that maybe he did have a heart condition, and it was passed down to Ruby. We never knew about it, and testing may not have shown anything for Rubes, but it does make sense.”

“It...was hereditary?” It didn’t change the fact her best friend was gone, so Jen didn’t know why, but she felt a strange sense of calm wash over her.

“We believe so, yes.”

“H-how do you feel about that?”

“It depends on the day. Sometimes, I wish Lee had just been an unhealthy bastard, and that was what caused his heart attack. Other times, I wish we’d known if he had a heart condition, and then I could have been more proactive when it came to Ruby. I don’t think anything that happened to Lee could have been different, I’m certain he died young because of his lifestyle, and I was forever telling him he was killing himself, but I don’t know. I’ll always wish we’d had concrete answers.”

Jen mulled over the information for a moment or two, understanding where Lyn was coming from. She just hoped Lyn didn’t blame herself for what happened to Ruby. Nobody could have known she wouldn’t wake up on that hot, sunny Tuesday morning. “You know what I think is important to remember?”

“What’s that, love?”

“That Ruby lived her life to the fullest, was an amazing person for the time we had her, and laughed at anything life threw at her. We can’t go back, and we can’t bring her back, but we can remember everything she brought to our lives. We can go on and do the things she couldn’t but always wanted to do. We can talk about her and laugh about all the stupid shit she did, and we don’t have to feel sad about it all the time. That...it’s okay to have a good life even without her. She wouldn’t hold it against us.”

Lyn chuckled, but Jen heard the pain laced through it. “You’re right.”

“Makes a change. I’m usually doing everything wrong.”

“You let me know what you need from me when it comes to this fundraiser, and I’ll be right by your side, Jen.”

Jen raked her fingers through her hair and smiled. “I will. And Lyn?”

“Yes?”

“She would want you to laugh the way you used to. She always told me she could hear you before she saw you. I hope you find that laughter again one day, if not for yourself...for Ruby.” It was no surprise that Lyn found it hard to enjoy life after such a tragic loss, but Jen was going to do everything in her power to be the best friend she could be to Ruby and look after Lyn. “We’ve got this, you know? Life and all that.”

“I know.”

“I’m sorry for all the ways I let you down, but I’m here for you. Always. No matter what. Me and my family.” Jen caught a tear as it dropped down her cheek. “And now, I have a birthday bash to sort out and a lot of bad karaoke singers to find. You know she loved the worst ones around.”

“Mmhmm. And now I have a meeting with the boss about a potential promotion.”

Jen beamed a smile. “That’s amazing. Good luck, Lyn. Even though you don’t need it. Ruby will be with you, and that’s worth more than all the luck in the world.”

“Bye, love. I’ll see you Sunday for dinner with Suzanne and Denise.”

As the call ended, Jen slowly lowered her phone to the dining table and rested her elbows on the table. Tears spilled from her eyes at a rate she couldn’t comprehend, but it wasn’t necessarily sadness. It was a relief. An...understanding regarding Ruby’s death. An appreciation that Jen had rekindled those relationships that meant so much to her.

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“Jen?” Suzanne’s soft, gentle voice filtered through the air. And then a supportive hand rested on her shoulder. “Baby, are you okay?”

“Y-yeah.” Jen quickly brushed her hands against her cheeks and turned, looking up at Suzanne. “Just been on a call with Lyn.”

“I know. I heard everything. I didn’t want to disturb you.”

“Do you, by any chance, fancy getting involved in a birthday fundraiser for Ruby with me?”

Suzanne took Jen’s hand and guided her to her feet. She cupped Jen’s cheek and smiled. “It would be an honour.”

Lazily stroking her fingers along Jen’s collarbone, Suzanne watched her profile, the air around them different tonight. Jen had seemed looser, less in her own mind. She hadn’t sat and chewed her lip all night, and she hadn’t continuously picked at any piece of fabric on her hoodie. Suzanne didn’t make it a habit to watch those things, but she had noticed the lack of it this evening—specifically since her call with Lyn had ended.

“Tell me what you’re thinking...” Suzanne shifted closer, their naked bodies pressed together as she draped her leg over Jen’s.

“Right now,” Jen said, turning her face to Suzanne. “I’m not thinking about anything at all. Which is weird for me because I’m usually always thinking.”

“You’re not even thinking about the fundraiser?” Suzanne grazed her fingertips down between Jen’s breasts, only for her palm to settle against Jen’s stomach.

“Nope. Nothing at all.” Jen smiled as she shuddered. “Though, if you move that hand any lower, I know exactly what I’ll be thinking then.”

“Oh, I bet you do.” Suzanne sat up on her elbow and leaned down into a kiss. They had spent the last two hours enjoying one another, but she couldn’t get enough of Jen Fletcher. “It’s probably along the lines of what I’m already thinking.”

“And what’s that?”

Suzanne stared down at Jen, searching those heavenly eyes. “That I can’t wait until I’m back in my office at work and we’re alone together.”

“Will you be wearing one of those suits you opened the door to me wearing that time?” Jen’s eyes clouded over a little. Suzanne knew what was running through her mind. “You look fucking hot in suits, by the way.”

“Will it encourage you to lock my office door and take me against my desk?”

Jen guided Suzanne’s hand between her legs. “What do you think?”

Fuck. Jen was soaking all over again. Would they ever actually learn to keep their hands to themselves? Suzanne hoped not. “Mm, you should have told me about the suit thing long before now if this is what it does to you.” Suzanne eased two fingers inside Jen and moaned when she tightened around them. “Maybe I’ll even throw in some sexy lingerie, too.”

“B-babe.” Jen dug her heels into the bed and buried her head in her pillow. “Fuck.”

“Oh, the idea of me in a suit is something you like a lot, huh?” Suzanne took one of Jen’s nipples into her mouth and sucked gently. “That’s something I must remember.”

“S-Suzanne, I don’t give a fuck what you wear. I want to rip it off you, regardless.”

Suzanne pushed deeper and sucked a little harder. Jen’s mouth fell open, but Suzanne saw the slight smirk she wore. Jen was close, and Suzanne could barely contain her own arousal as she watched Jen’s face contort, her hands fisted in the sheet. “Need a little more, baby?”

“Y-yes.” Jen just about managed to nod, her hips lifting with every thrust of Suzanne’s fingers.

Suzanne quickly slid down the bed and situated herself between Jen’s legs. There was nothing greater than the taste of Jen on her lips, and as she watched her soaked fingers ease in and out of Jen, Suzanne found herself grinding against the bed. But right now, this was Jen’s moment. Suzanne’s sole focus was on her pleasure. She dipped her head and sucked Jen’s clit into her mouth. The sexiest moan drifted around the room, and Jen’s hand found the back of Suzanne’s head, her back arching when Suzanne chanced a look up at her.

“Babe, shit!” Jen clenched her jaw when Suzanne probed her tongue through her wetness. “Ah, fuck. I-I can’t hold on.”

Suzanne drew back, breathless, and said, “Then don’t. Come in my mouth.”

Jen rode Suzanne’s face, releasing around her fingers and against her tongue as she roared her approval around the room. Suzanne couldn’t help but smile. Knowing what she did to this woman would always make her smile.

“Mm.” Suzanne brought her fingers to her lips and sucked them. “You taste delicious.”

Jen panted as she placed her hand on her forehead and laughed. “And you’re fucking insanely amazing.”

“Insanely amazing? That’s quite the description.”

Jen urged Suzanne back up the bed and rolled on top of her. “I mean it. You’re amazing, and I love you more than anything in this world.” She brought a hand to Suzanne’s face and brushed her hair back. “I don’t know how we made it to this point, but I do. I love you so much.”

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“I love you, too.” Suzanne regarded Jen with an understanding smile. At one time, the slightest thing could have broken them in those weeks leading on from their breakup, but Suzanne would be forever grateful to Jen for giving her another chance. A final chance. Because Suzanne sure as hell wouldn’t mess it up again. “Your call earlier,” she said, searching Jen’s eyes. “Did you get the closure you were seeking?”

“I...yes.” Jen rolled off Suzanne and cuddled into her. “It’s something I’ve been waiting a long time for.”

“I know it doesn’t change anything in terms of Ruby’s loss, but I’m glad you got that closure.” Suzanne turned in bed, almost nose to nose with Jen. She reached for the cover and brought it up over them. “You seem different tonight.”

“I know. Ifeeldifferent. Less anxious about things.” Jen brushed her nose against Suzanne’s, smiling as they gazed at one another. “I think that I had to go through everything I went through to see the good in life again.”

“Maybe.”

“Well, if I hadn’t lost everything, I wouldn’t have worked the job I did and then met you. If I was still at Longmere Primary, I’d have no reason to be over this side of town...and I wouldn’t have knocked on your door.”

Suzanne draped an arm over Jen’s hip and stroked her fingers across the small of her back. Tonight, she wanted to stay in this position. Uninterrupted and incredibly in love. “It’s hard to believe we’re here like this, just from that simple knock at the door.”

“I think taking the courier job was the best decision of my life.” It meant a lot to Suzanne to know Jen felt that way. But more than anything, Suzanne was incredibly proud of how Jen had picked herself up and kept her head. “I thought I had it all when I was with Lizzie. And yes, I had the house and the job and those things we all desire growing up, but here with you...this is having it all. Having you is more than anything else I could ask for in this world.”

Suzanne swallowed down the emotion in her throat. When she looked at Jen, she still saw the youthfulness. But deep down, Jen had been through so much that not having everything in terms of the tangible meant very little to her. Love was what she wanted, and between them, they had it in bucketloads. “You have a beautiful heart, and I feel privileged to be the one who holds it.”

“And it’ll never belong to anyone else, babe. It’s all yours.” Jen kissed the tip of Suzanne’s nose and sighed. “Life is good. Don’t you think?”

“Oh, life is very good.” Suzanne squeezed Jen’s hip and closed her eyes. She just needed a few minutes, and then she should probably start dinner. “But you are even better.”

Epilogue

Jen stopped dead as she walked through the door to the room Suzanne had hired for Ruby’s charity event. Even though Jen had agreed that Suzanne could decide on the venue and decorate it, she hadn’t expected...this. Thank God she was on her own right now because she was sure her eyes were bulging out of her head. Suzanne had gone above and beyond.

She moved further into the enormous room and slowly spun around, taking in every detail. The intricacy was impressive, but Jen knew Suzanne would likely pull out all the stops when it came to the design. Jen had expected something minimal yet

beautiful, and that's what she had, only it was so much more. The neutral pastel colours complemented each other, while the huge sheer drapes hanging from the ceiling and gathered in each corner gave the room a little more sophistication.

Oh, this is incredible.

Jen relaxed her shoulders and smiled as she approached the centrepiece of the night. A portrait of Ruby. It sat amongst a mass of white roses and gypsy grass, her bright white smile beaming back at Jen. She didn't cry when she saw pictures of Ruby anymore, and that was down to the wonderful support she had received from Suzanne over the last several months. Jen was in therapy—Suzanne had put her in touch with her grief counsellor—and her headspace was so drastically different now that she found it hard to do anything other than smile when she thought about her best friend.

As she inhaled a deep breath and turned away from Ruby's picture, Suzanne was standing in the doorway wearing the most incredible white gown. Jesus Christ. Jen's palms became clammy as she smiled back at her girlfriend, the idea that this was her life now quite startling. "Babe, this is stunning. You look stunning."

Suzanne crossed the room and took Jen's hand. They gazed into one another's eyes for a moment or two, and then Suzanne pulled Jen against her. "I wanted it to be perfect. It had to be perfect. For you and for Ruby."

"She'd love this. She really would." Jen hung her arms loosely around Suzanne's neck and grazed her nails against her skin. "No matter what you'd done here, it was always going to turn out perfect."

"Thank you for putting your trust in me. I know how much this event means to you." Suzanne touched her forehead to Jen's and smiled. "Everything is ready. You don't need to stress about anything at all."

“Seriously?” Jen’s brows rose as she drew back a little. “Everything?”

“Mmhmm. Everything.”

“I can’t believe you’ve done all of this for me. I know I asked you to get involved, but you’ve taken care of it all and I don’t know how to thank you.”

“No thanks needed. I love you and I wanted to do this.” Suzanne dipped her head and kissed the tip of Jen’s nose. “And may I say, you look very dapper this evening.”

Jen had opted for a tailor-made suit for the event. She’d snuck off one afternoon when Suzanne was at the office and had her fitting, and now here she was...revealing it to her. “Thanks. This is the first time I’ve really looked forward to a night out like this. I wanted to treat myself and look good with you.”

Suzanne’s brows drew together. “Baby, you always look good.”

“Not this good.” Jen smirked as she lowered her arms from around Suzanne’s neck and snaked one around her waist instead. “And tonight is the night when ninety percent of the people I know will meet you for the first time.”

“Then I hope I do you proud.”

Jen’s heart swelled at that. She had been proud of Suzanne from the moment they’d got together. “I’m not worried. Neither of us have anything to prove to anyone. That in itself makes me proud to be with you.” Jen glanced around again. “Lyn is going to be beside herself when she sees what you’ve done here.”

“Catering will be here and set up by nine.”

Jen drew back a little. “Set up?”

“Mmhmm.”

What did that mean? Jen narrowed her eyes. “What are they setting up? It’s just a buffet, isn’t it?”

“Not...quite,” Suzanne said, hesitantly. “I thought a buffet was too predictable.”

“Right.”

“So, we have a hog roast with all the bells and whistles, a pizza company who will make them to order, an ice cream van, and a Korean street food van.”

Completely shocked, Jen stared at Suzanne, unsure what her hands were capable of if she dared to touch her right now. This woman was so amazing that Jen wanted to push her up against the nearest wall and lavish her skin for the rest of the night. In this moment, that wasn’t ideal. People were due to walk through the door in the next thirty minutes or so.

Right on cue, the DJ strolled into the venue, his equipment already set up prior to Jen arriving. He regarded them both with a nod in acknowledgement and walked towards the area he would be working from tonight.

Jen took that as her opportunity to guide Suzanne out of the room and towards a separate empty bar area. “Babe, I don’t know what to say. You’ve done so much here, and I can never repay you for that.”

“Are you happy with the outcome of it all?”

Jen smiled. “Of course I am.”

“Then that is repayment enough.” Suzanne glanced at her watch. “Now we wait.” She pulled out a chair and sat down, then offered Jen the one next to her. “I hope you’ll dance with me later.”

Jen rested her elbows on her knees as she took Suzanne’s hands and held them tight. “I’m going to spend the rest of my life dancing with you.” Jen lowered her head and kissed Suzanne’s knuckles. “But most of all, I’m going to spend the rest of my life loving you unconditionally.”

Suzanne gazed lovingly into Jen’s eyes, but it seemed she had something on her mind.

“What is it?”

Suzanne smiled as she looked down at their hands. “I...want more for us.”

“More?” Jen had been content with what they had so far. She was working within Suzanne’s business, she was earning one hell of a wage, and she spent practically every hour of the day with her. “Are you not happy, babe?”

“Oh, I’m far more than happy, Jen. I’ve been happy with you since the moment you walked back through my door all those months ago. I just...” Suzanne paused and shook her head. “I want you to move in with me.”

Jen’s brows rose. She wasn’t necessarily surprised; Suzanne had mentioned in the past that she saw them living together one day. Jen just hadn’t thought it would be one day soon. “You think you could tolerate me and my stuff there?”

“I’ve never once felt as though I was tolerating you.” Suzanne cocked her head and smiled. “For someone who has been in the position you have in the past, you’re the least problematic person I know. Please, don’t ever think I’m tolerating you.”

“I’m just worried that I’ll agree and move in, and then you’ll wish you’d never asked me.” Jen was fully on board with the whole ‘if it ain’t broke don’t fix it’, but she would have to come to terms with what her life was now at some point in the future. Why not here and now, in this moment with Suzanne? “If you’re sure that you’re ready for something so big, then okay.”

“I’ve wanted you to be at my place permanently for some time now, baby.”

Jen allowed the smile that was quickly spreading on her mouth. “You really think about the day when I move in?”

“Lately, it’s all I think about.”

Then it was decided. Jen would pack up her life and move it into Suzanne’s. It seemed silly to wait a moment longer if Suzanne was sure she wanted this. Jen, well, she’d never turn down such an offer given how incredible life had been lately. For the last three months, she enjoyed waking up and going to work. She enjoyed knowing that she was doing something that Suzanne was proud of her for. While Suzanne would never judge Jen for her career choices, it did feel good splurging and enjoying the finer things in life now that she was bringing in a decent and respectable wage. “When do you want me there?”

“Not tonight,” Suzanne said.

“Oh. I thought I was coming back with you when this has finished?”

Suzanne shook her head. “No. I have one more surprise for you.”

Jen wasn't sure she could handle any more surprises. She was already overwhelmed by everything Suzanne had done so far. "Another surprise?"

"We're staying here tonight. In the main suite."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 1:13 pm

“You’re joking!” Jen had seen pictures of the main suite when Suzanne had suggested this hotel as one of the potential venues for the charity event. The hotel itself was already astonishing, but the suite...well, Jen had fantasised about the potentials of being inside it. Basically, it involved a very naked Suzanne. As she searched Suzanne’s eyes, Jen knew she wasn’t joking at all. “Fuck. You’ve really booked it, haven’t you?”

“Would I ever lie to you?” Suzanne reached out a hand and stroked her knuckles softly against Jen’s cheek. “Mm?”

“No, babe. Never.”

The sudden thump of music broke them from their heart-to-heart, reminding them that now wasn’t the time for sitting around. They had guests to entertain, money to raise, and a brilliant night ahead that was sure to create a lot of memories. “Come on. We can discuss everything another time. There’s no immediate rush.”

As they rose to their feet and Suzanne turned for the door, Jen reached out and took her hand. “Hey.” She turned Suzanne back to her and grinned. “I am ready. Once this weekend is over, I’ll be at home with you, okay?”

“At home.” Suzanne’s voice caught, but she wore the most beautiful smile. “Our home.”

“Our home.”

With the charity event in full swing, Suzanne stood back and admired the smile on

Jen's face. She had been introduced to everyone as they came through the door, and now Suzanne needed a moment to stop and breathe. It had been a long time since she'd taken on something so mammoth, and honestly, party prep wasn't really her area of expertise. Still, she was impressed by what she'd somehow created, and if the business ever took a nosedive, Suzanne had the option of branching out into event planning.

As she cast her gaze around the room, everyone seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves. Especially the woman currently on the karaoke, annihilating her rendition of Meatloaf's Bat out of Hell. Suzanne had no choice but to enjoy it. Wasn't that what this night was all about? Letting go and having fun, while remembering Ruby. People had certainly taken the point of the event to heart, and now everyone was going full throttle into the night.

"Oh, Suzanne." Jen's mum lay a hand on Suzanne's shoulder as she breathlessly stopped beside her. "What a bloody brilliant night! You've done a wonderful job here."

"Thank you. I'm glad you're enjoying yourself."

Denise winced. "Shouldn't have suffered through new heels, though. I'm in agony."

Ah. Suzanne hadn't made that mistake. Not tonight. She looked down at Denise's heels and guessed they were likely a similar size. "I have a pair of flats up in our room if you wanted to borrow them?"

Denise stepped out of her heels and exhaled a sigh of relief. "You know what, I may just take you up on that offer. I don't know how much longer I'll last in these bloody things." She tutted and shook her head. "Jen warned me not to wear new heels. I should have listened."

“She told me the very same thing.” Suzanne laughed as she gently nudged Denise’s shoulder. “Just let me know if you want them and I’ll go up for them.”

“Thanks.” Denise eyed Jen across the room then turned her attention back to Suzanne. “Don’t you think Jen seems different tonight? I can’t put my finger on why, but there’s just something about her. She’s...glowing.”

Suzanne had a feeling that was down to the conversation they’d had a while ago. Tonight just seemed like the right night to ask Jen to officially move in with her. It felt right. “She’s in a good place right now.”

“She’s been in a good place since she met you,” Denise said, regarding Suzanne with an appreciative smile. “You complement one another very well.”

“Thank you.” Suzanne knew they did but hearing it from the most important person in Jen’s life made Suzanne warm inside. “For saying that and for raising such a wonderful daughter.”

“When you found out the truth, I thought I was going to lose her all over again. Only this time...for good.” Denise smiled wryly and looked away from Suzanne. “When she walked through the door, saturated from the rain, I had no idea what the coming days meant. She just seemed defeated once and for all.”

Suzanne swallowed down the emotion in her throat and held her composure. “I never should have reacted the way I did. I was falling in love with her one moment and asking her to leave the next.”

“I...don’t worry about her for a single second anymore. I’d actually go so far as to say that she’s happier than she’s ever been. Yes, she would be even happier if Ruby was still here, but other than that, I’ve never seen my daughter smile and laugh the way she’s doing right now.”

Suzanne followed Denise's line of sight. Jen was speaking animatedly to Lizzie and a few other friends. As she watched on, her heart pounding that little bit harder, she noticed the glow Denise had spoken of. "She makes me ridiculously happy."

Denise took Suzanne's hand and squeezed it. "I'm so very happy you found one another. It's a pleasure to know you're a part of my family now."

Oh, God. If Denise said anything similar to that in the next thirty seconds, Suzanne was going to be an emotional wreck. She cleared her throat and composed herself. "And the same goes for you, Denise."

"MUM!" Jen waved Denise over when the DJ called both of their names. Had...Jen put her name down for karaoke? Oh, this was going to be great if she had. Suzanne couldn't say she'd ever heard her girlfriend singing, other than when she hummed along to the radio making dinner.

"Sorry, duty calls." Denise picked up her heels and trotted barefoot across the room.

They took to the stage, accompanied by the sound of cheers and clapping. All Suzanne could do was take a seat on the nearest empty chair, while enjoying whatever was about to happen. The DJ introduced the song—Lee Ann Womack's I Hope You Dance—and tears filled Suzanne's eyes. She didn't know why she felt emotional, but Suzanne suspected this song meant a lot to Jen.

Blown away by the beautiful sound of Jen's voice, Suzanne's brows rose with surprise, but that emotion in her throat wouldn't budge. No, it was staying for the duration. When Denise reached down for Ruby's portrait and handed it over to Jen, the floodgates opened. Suzanne brushed the back of her hand against her cheek and sniffled, feeling utterly ridiculous. Jen wasn't crying, so why was she? Suzanne knew exactly why. It had taken Jen so much strength to even live since Ruby's death, but here she was, living and in love with her life. It meant so much to Suzanne to know she

could be a part of this. She was honoured. Truly.

She fisted a hand under her chin, enamoured by the woman on the stage that she was privileged to call hers. This was probably the first time Suzanne had sat back and really taken stock of the life she had now. Jen couldn't do enough for her, that sentiment was always returned, and life was simply beautiful. To know that Jen was moving in with her only made this moment all the more special. Quite frankly, Suzanne couldn't wait to wrap Jen up in her arms and hold onto her.

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As the song came to an end, Jen kissed Ruby's picture and wrapped her mum up in a hug. They remained rooted to their spot for a moment or two, and then Denise drew back and cupped Jen's face. Jen wore a sad smile, but that was to be expected. It was only natural for her to feel emotional tonight. And if Suzanne was being honest, she preferred to see this side of Jen. The most human and most vulnerable side of her. It reminded Suzanne that no matter what, they could both let it all out together whenever they needed to.

Suzanne puffed out her cheeks and rose to her feet when Jen approached her. She reached out a hand and pulled Jen in, the warmth of her body radiating through Suzanne. "That was beautiful."

Jen simply smiled into a kiss. "Thanks, babe. I used to sing it with Ruby all the time."

"I had a feeling." Suzanne stroked a thumb against Jen's cheek, searching her eyes while she explored deep within herself for the right words. "I think Ruby would be very proud of you."

Jen lifted a shoulder. "It's just a song."

"Only it's not. It's your way of remembering the good times with her. It's your way of staying connected to that part of your past. But most of all, it's you...sharing a part of your friendship with Ruby with the rest of us."

"You're right." Jen squeezed Suzanne's hip and grinned. "I have so many parts of it to share down the line."

“Then I can’t wait to know more.” Suzanne entwined her fingers with Jen’s and guided her towards the dancefloor. She’d hinted at a dance earlier, and right now, she planned to make good on it.

Jen suddenly turned Suzanne to her and crushed their lips together. It stole her breath and turned her knees weak, but she didn’t care. They were madly in love, and neither of them were afraid to show it. “You ready for the rest of our lives together?”

Suzanne angled her head and regarded Jen with a soft smile. “I’m more than ready.”