



Love You However

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Description: This is a statement that I have always tolerated about myself. Except now... it seems to be getting harder.

My gender has never felt right, but I've been able to overlook it. I've always been okay with being Jean: retail worker, choir leader and wife of Petra. Our idyllic little life in Cornwall has given me the stability I've needed ever since my sister died, and everything's been ticking along just fine.

Up until now.

A blast of menopause hormones has brought my gender to the front of my mind. When Petra is suddenly hurled into the role of 'headteacher' at work, it becomes harder and harder to share it with her. With work taking over her life and gender taking over mine, how can we keep our marriage alive?

And can I realise my true identity before it's too late?

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Prologue

April 2022

If my sister could see us from up in Heaven, I think she'd have been proud of me. After all – from above, anyone looking down on our Oceanview Cottage in Miltree would have been greeted by an idyllic scene that Sunday.

My wife and I were in the kitchen making breakfast. Petra – statuesque, willowy, Greek and dark-haired – was standing by the coffee machine, listening to its low whirr and inhaling the bitter aroma. I – all of five-foot-five, grey-haired and contradictorily stocky – was standing by the toaster, staring into space and daydreaming. The sound of the bread popping out of the top made me jump, despite the emergence of our breakfast being completely expected, and it brought me promptly down to Earth. With my asbestos fingers, I quickly put the two pieces of toast on a plate and slid them down to my wife, who adorned them with jam and butter before toting them to the kitchen table behind us. It took all of thirty seconds for me to join her, latte in hand.

A small smile spread across my face as I sipped it. When she was alive, Lyndsey had always badgered me to find myself a life partner and settle down – and here I was now. Nearly seven years married to the deputy headteacher of our local primary school, who was also the nicest person in the world, and living in our own little house in rural Cornwall. I looked up at Petra, and my smile grew wider as butterflies fluttered in my chest.

Perhaps, looking back, I should have made the most of everything being perfect in

that moment.

Because there the idyllic scene turned... tense.

“I’m going to put more jam on mine,” I said, standing up. “Do you want some more?”

“Sorry?” Petra said, looking up from her phone.

“Jam. Do you want any more?”

“I’ve already got some.” Her gaze fell back to her phone.

“I know, but do you want any more?”

“No, thank you,” she murmured.

“Okay then!” I huffed.

My skin was bristling with irritation as I headed back to where I’d left the jam and added a little more to my toast. It shouldn’t have been – I was normally pretty easy-going, but today, this little crossed-wires exchange had gotten my goat. She hasn’t forgotten, I told myself. She just hasn’t mentioned it yet. After all, Petra was always on the go, and her occasional absent-mindedness didn’t bother me any more than my own did.

Even so, today her distractedness had riled me up. The more I thought of her blank stare as she looked up at me, and of the way she’d missed my point a second time, the more I seemed to itch with frustration. Although that may have been the menopause talking, I reminded myself. It was certainly bringing with it its fair share of hormones.

I took the four steps across the kitchen to the back door and opened it, hoping that the cool April air (and its sea breeze) would ease the signs of an impending hot flush. No such luck – my temperature sky-rocketed and I undid the belt of my dressing-gown before the fluffy material stuck to my front. I looked down and tutted to myself – I had somehow gotten jam on the pyjamas underneath. I was really in need of a new set. Or indeed a whole new wardrobe, given that clothes shopping was something I avoided like the plague. Out of the two of us, it was Petra who was the fashionista. Society was adamant that it was a woman's favourite pastime, but there was little I disliked more than trudging around Lygate shopping centre, turning red every time I darted to the men's sections to find clothes that were more my style.

“God, it's getting cold in here! I know you're overheating, but my feet feel like they're about to fall off! Can we shut the door yet?” Petra said from behind me. I heard the sound of her plate in the sink and my hackles rose again. Without a word, I stepped inside, shut the door and locked it. Do you really have nothing to say about today?

“Those look a bit worse for wear,” she said, motioning with her head towards my sleepwear. I looked down again – and they did look worse in the dimmer light of the kitchen. A blush rose in my cheeks and I stepped around her, heading back through the living room towards the stairs, as much as to get away from her gaze as to get dressed. I heard her footsteps behind me, though, and before my foot hit the first step I felt her hand on my arm through the dressing gown. I wrenched my arm away on instinct.

“Hey,” she said gently, and I froze. “What's the matter? Did I say something?”

Suddenly, randomly, tears rose in my eyes. I turned and looked up at her concerned expression, then back down again at her slim, negligee-clad frame. The contrasts between us couldn't have been more stark, and I shook my head, trying to blink away the tears.

“Jean,” she said, “talk to me. What did I do? What’s bothering you?”

I should have told her. I should have shared what was on my mind. Such communication is essential for a healthy relationship, I knew that.

But I couldn’t. I didn’t have the words – and never had – for the peculiar maelstrom of uncertainty that I’d always carried around with me, which manifested itself now and again, particularly on tough days like today. So I shook my head again.

“Nothing you can help with,” I mumbled, and strode away up the stairs.

I was just at the top and turning the corner towards our bedroom when I heard her sigh, barely audibly, “Why do I bother?”

That was the day I knew for definite that Petra and I were on rocky ground.

Chapter One

It had just started drizzling when I got out of the car, despite the sun shining throughout the ninety-minute drive. April showers indeed. Armed with a Guinness in one hand and a small bottle of pink Prosecco in the other, I must have made a strange sight to anyone passing by. A dumpy middle-aged woman with short purpley-grey hair and two different forms of alcohol on her person, walking through the graveyard in the rain, was not exactly an everyday sight.

That certainly wasn’t going to stop me, though. Not when it had been my parent’s wishes. That said, I’d never quite known how serious they were. The alcohol was all based on a conversation we’d had about a decade ago, back when the pair of them were still fighting fit and full of vigour. I had been in the early stages of my relationship with Petra, and had been enjoying a cup of tea with them on a rare visit up to Bude after they moved back. Somehow, the conversation had taken a morbid

turn, quite possibly fuelled by my sister's recent passing the year before.

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“Don’t you go bothering with flowers on the grave when I’m gone, girl,” Dad had chortled in his thick Scottish brogue. “Especially not when you’re so far away. You can pour a pint of Guinness on me on special occasions, but other than that, don’t waste your money. If you want to buy flowers, buy them for Lyndsey’s grave. Or your new lady friend, how about that? Ladies like flowers.”

“Same goes for me,” Mum had chimed in. “I’m not all that bothered about flowers. I’ll just as gladly have a pink Prosecco. I’m surprised you’re not going for whisky, Chris.”

“Ah well, you know me, full of surprises,” Dad had replied with a shrug and a smile. “A good Scotch whisky would break the bank for our lass. And I’ll not be having none of that cheap stuff, either. No, stick a pint of Guinness on me and call it a day.”

“But that’s Irish!” Mum protested, and so the conversation went on. Nearly ten years later, here I was, popping open the Guinness and pouring it on the top half of the gravestone – Dad’s bit – and then unscrewing the Prosecco and pouring it on the bottom half for Mum. Then I pulled a bottle of water out of my pocket and poured it over the whole thing, anxious that the various chemicals in the drinks would erode the glossy finish of the stone. Once the liquid had soaked into the slate chippings around it, I sat back on my heels, satisfied.

“Happy anniversary, Mum,” I said aloud, then stopped myself. “Happy anniversary? Is that the right thing to say, five years on?”

I imagined her waving her arm dismissively – she’d never been too hung-up on saying the right thing at the right time, not when it came to her at least. “Strong as an

ox, me,” she used to say. I shrugged, then wiped my eyes with the sleeve of my raincoat. It was a futile effort as by now it was soaked through by the drizzle, but it had the effect of stemming the flow of tears that were threatening to spill over.

Why hadn’t I brought Petra with me? She always knew how to keep me present and grounded instead of floating off into a black cloud, just like Lyndsey had done before she passed. She couldn’t have forgotten the significance of today, surely? She was just busy. Two of their year groups had exams coming up, and it seemed that everyone – bar impenetrable Victoria, the headteacher – was panicking. Frantic preparations were underway, placing Petra under unusual strain. That would explain today’s absent-mindedness.

But afterwards, the whole school had a week off for Whitsun, and then it was a heady gallop towards summer: six weeks off. My spirits lifted at the mere thought of warmth, sun and brightness, such a contrast to the steel grey clouds that occupied the skies right now. Having her home and seeing her relax would be a treat. The memories of the more chilled, laid-back Petra of summers past brought a smile back to my face, and I ran my fingers through the damp chippings absently before standing up to leave.

“That’s my girl,” I heard Mum say in my head. It was one of her trademark catchphrases whenever she was pleased with me, or whenever she’d given me one of her much-needed pep-talks. A shiver went down my spine involuntarily – although whether that was a raindrop or not, I couldn’t be sure.

Back in the car, I sat for another moment, listening to the increasing vigour with which the raindrops were beating on its white roof. Well, formerly white – the mud and sand had turned it more grey of late. When the weather got warmer, I’d get the hose on it. This nippy little Citroen was the first one Petra and I had bought together as a couple – but it was my little old Nissan Micra that had taken us on the momentous trip to the Cotswolds where I’d proposed to her. We hadn’t been back

since then, though; perhaps that could be our trip for the summer.

I started the car up, and soon was splashing my way through the hair-raising country lanes back home. It wasn't dark yet – it wasn't even dusk, with these new longer evenings we were getting – but the heavy grey sky gave the illusion of it. The thought of home brought a little flicker of hope, that I'd walk through the door and straight back into the life I'd had nearly seven years ago, with a newlywed wife and both parents alive and well.

What I did find as I walked through the door was the central heating on, and Petra in the kitchen chopping tomatoes with the same finesse with which she played the piano at the choir we ran together. As I got closer to her, I could see chopped parsley and feta on the side next to the sink behind her.

She met me in the middle as I was coming to her and wrapped her arms around me. I could smell tomatoes on her as well as her signature perfume and relaxed into her embrace.

"I'm making shrimps à la spetsiota," she said by way of greeting.

"My favourite," I said with a smile, even though it didn't need saying. We stood like that for a few moments, then I felt overcome by the need to hear her music. "Play me something?" I said almost shyly, extricating myself from her arms and linking my fingers in hers.

"On the piano?" she said, although it was a redundant question as it was the only instrument either of us played these days.

"Mm," I said, leading her upstairs and into our dedicated music room. "Anything. Anything at all. Everything feels different when you play it."

“Okay, okay,” she said, sitting down on the piano stool. I sat down on the other while she drew out one of our many ring-binders and flipped through the pieces. “There we go,” she said eventually, but held the paper to her chest. “Shut your eyes.”

I did, and heard the shuffle of paper being placed on the music rack. Then a hush descended over the two of us as she paused, took a deep breath and played some gentle opening chords.

I knew them as soon as she played them. The memory of walking down the aisle behind my mum’s coffin as this song played was etched on my memory. It was one of mine and my mum’s favourite songs: The Last Rose Of Summer.

She began to sing, and immediately goosebumps rose all over my body at her crystal-clear, melted-chocolate soprano vocals. The first trill, even though I knew it was coming, sent tiny electric signals down my spine, down every limb and into the furthest reaches of my being as she executed each movement perfectly. Her professional training and experience were evident as she floated through each stanza, and by the start of the third verse, tears were streaming down my cheeks.

We’re all right really, I thought. This was proof. This morning had just been a product of my emotions. The day I didn’t feel anything when Petra played – now that would be the day I knew our marriage was really over.

She finished, having reached right to the top of her vocal range for an emotional repetition of the last line, closed the song gently, then wrapped me back up in her arms again.

“Not bad considering I’d had no warm-up,” she said, and we both laughed. “Not something I’ll make a habit of, though. There’s easier songs to sing.”

“You remembered,” I said through my tears. “I knew you would.”

“Yes,” she said gently, but somehow I wasn’t convinced. I felt myself tense.

“You didn’t forget, did you?”

She hesitated for the briefest second. “Of course not,” she whispered, and I felt her kiss my hair.

Chapter Two

I finished cleaning the furthest of the self-service tills, then returned to the kiosk, discarding my roll of blue paper and bottle of spray as I went.

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It was quiet in the shop, even for a Monday morning. We'd had the first spurt of commuters just after we opened, shortly followed by the first spurt of regulars. But now it was nine o'clock, slap-bang in the middle of a lull, and I had taken the opportunity to step out from behind my till and give the other tills a wipe-down with some anti-bac.

The chair upon which I now perched had seen better days. It was a recycled office chair with five wheels – although two of them were long gone, so it was really three wheels and two empty spaces. The back didn't stay upright unless I propped it against the wall, and the fabric cover was torn, so you could see the yellow sponge coating on the seat beneath. Nonetheless, I parked my backside on it with a groan of relief that belied my fifty-two years, then sighed. I found this job mind-numbingly boring at the best of times, and as I quietly observed the two customers toting their spoils around the little convenience store, my mind wandered back to Petra.

I looked at the clock again: two minutes past nine. The prospect of a long Monday would still be stretching ahead for her. She turned up every day at seven-thirty and wouldn't get home until gone five – whoever said that teachers only work from nine until three was clearly never married to one. Mondays were her worst days as they were for so many people, and I felt a pang of sympathy for her. Monday was my worst day too – a nine-hour retail shift was nobody's idea of a picnic – and I knew we'd both be spent when we got home.

From there, I couldn't help reminiscing on the early days. Back when Petra had been 'just a teacher', if such a thing was possible. Even as 'just a teacher', it had never been her only job. At the best of times she had been a mentor, a first-aider, an invigilator, a stand-in mother. And now she was the deputy head teacher, the pressure

was ever higher. Not to mention the fact that we now ran the village choir too. Back then, however, nine years ago, Petra had been more relaxed. Romantic. Thoughtful. Well, she still was the latter two – although I still wasn't convinced that she'd initially remembered the anniversary of my mother's death yesterday – but I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen her truly relaxed. Probably during the first pandemic lockdown, when the whirling stress of the school year had just... stopped.

The core of her was still the same, though. She was still the same woman who'd helped me after I dropped my shopping nearly ten years ago. I'd been aware of an Enigmatic Newcomer to the village, floating around with the presence and beauty of a goddess, but I hadn't yet managed to get a glimpse of her. But on one memorable day, I dropped my armful of shopping as I stumbled on the step out of Mr Elliot's grocery shop, sending a cloud of oats puffing into the air and a fruit-salad's worth of oranges and raspberries rolling down the hill.

Chaos had ensued. I'd started coughing violently, having inhaled some oat dust, and had stumbled forward yet again, dropping the bottle of cream that had been the remainder of my shopping. All I could do was wheeze, but once I'd got my breath back, I'd been aware of the Enigmatic Newcomer walking up the hill holding two of my oranges. I'd felt my face go red as I started levering myself back up to my feet, trying to avoid the broken glass and scrabbling together what remained of my dignity before I faced her properly.

"Do these belong to you?" I'd heard a voice say from behind me, followed by a simple, understated... "Wow. That's quite a mess."

Customer service smile, I'd told myself.

"I only wanted to make cranachan-" I began to say, before losing my breath all over again as I looked up.

She was simply stunning. Late twenties, at a guess, with sun-kissed olive skin that, as clichéd as it sounded, glowed. Her hair cascaded from her head in a high ponytail, the colour of dark chocolate with all the lusciousness of the treat. Her red-lipstick-clad lips were slightly raised in a sympathetic smile, although I couldn't gauge its authenticity due to the huge sunglasses dominating her face. I had to look up to face her, and although tall women tended to intimidate me, something about this one drew me in. It was the first time a woman had ever rendered me speechless.

She was not my conventional type, and I had embarrassed myself in front of her. Plus, she looked super straight. Yet we'd ended up talking while she helped me clear up the mess I'd made, and she'd told me that she'd just moved down from Ipswich. She was a newly-qualified teacher, starting at the village school when the summer term began a few weeks later. "But I've not made a very good job of acquainting myself with the locals so far," she'd said, biting her lip.

"Well, I'm a local. Why not come to my place for dinner sometime?" I'd said without missing a beat.

From there, of course, we'd fallen in love. We'd discovered our mutual love of music at that first dinner, and I'd immediately invited her to the next choir practice. She'd umm-ed and aah-ed, but I'd reassured her that although our next concert was only a week away, nobody would be expecting her to actually perform. "Just see how you get on this week, and then maybe you can start attending properly next term."

"I'll give it a shot," she'd replied with a mysterious smile, and so I'd seen her at the choir's final pre-concert rehearsal that Tuesday. From all the way over at the very end of the alto section, I'd immediately been able to discern her euphonious voice. Without even blinking, she'd sight-read all the pieces and blended right in, leaving everyone around her stunned, and me staring like a lemon.

"I used to be a professional singer," I'd heard her say to the people around her. "Gave

it up to become a teacher. I didn't realise it would come in useful so soon!"

Then she'd looked over at me with the warmest, most heart-melting irresistible smile. As if she'd known I was staring at her. And it felt like a little piece of my heart had clicked into place.

My reverie was broken by the arrival of a customer. I switched on the smile and greeted him cheerily, although now my heart was pounding and my sinuses had that prickly feeling of impending tears. He didn't seem to notice, and the feeling soon went away as other customers continued to distract me with their various requests for cigarettes, scratch-cards and vape liquids. But my heart kept pounding, and when I sat down again I realised that I hadn't seen that genuine smile of hers in so long. Longer than I'd last seen her relaxed.

Is she happy? I suddenly asked myself.

Is she happy... with me?

Chapter Three

"Cake," was the first word out of Petra's mouth when she got home that evening.

"Cake?" I repeated quizzically, and she jerked her head back to the basket of deputy headteacher detritus she was towing through the door on wheels behind her.

"Cake," she agreed.

"You've got cake?"

"Gwendolyn brought it in for her birthday. I snagged you a piece while the staff room was empty. It's one of your favourites."

I then spotted the little napkin-wrapped package nestled in the top of the basket. I unwrapped it to find a square of coconut- and jam-topped sponge awaiting me.

“Ooh, cake!” I said approvingly, then smiled at her. “You beautiful Greek goddess, you. Come here.”

I embraced her, but she only bussed her lips over my cheek briefly before moving back to the front door to shut it.

“We need to finalise the songs we’re doing this term before tomorrow,” she said without even stopping. “I just had Katie Graythwaite stop me in the street to ask whether we’re binning off Ave Maria. I don’t think they’re responding well to it at all; I think it’s just a bit too technically challenging for our present lot. But what would we swap it out with? I’d like something classical, and we did that other arrangement last summer. I was looking online in between meetings, and there’s an SSA version of Ave Verum that looks beautiful, but once again it’s in Latin and three parts and...”

She went into the kitchen and her voice grew harder to hear as she went into the utility room. Eventually I heard her stop talking as she clearly finished whatever it was she was saying. I followed her into the kitchen, hearing the zipper of her trousers being undone and the crumple of the fabric as they hit the bottom of the washing basket. A couple of seconds later, she emerged out of the utility room, clad only in her matching black-and-gold underwear. This was her routine, to discard her work clothes and change into something more comfortable as soon as she got in, but I wasn’t always present for it due to my work shifts.

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When I was, however, it often had a predictable effect on me – as it did today. I put down the baking tray I was holding and pounced on her, wrapping her up in my arms and smooching her on the cheek. She squeaked.

“Jean!” she yelped. “Stop it! No... no funny business!”

“No?” I said, still holding her tight. “Playing hard to get, are we?”

“Jean-”

“Not even for five minutes while the oven heats up?”

“No!” she said again, wriggling from my grasp. My arms fell to my sides like a lead weight as she made for the door again.

“I’m just not feeling it tonight,” I heard as she walked up the stairs.

This was the first time she’d ever denied me, except for when one of us was ill. Her sex drive was higher than mine, and therefore whenever I’d instigated anything, she’d always jumped at the chance.

Until tonight.

Why does that bother me so much?

Chapter Four

The mystery was solved when she reappeared half an hour later and popped two headache tablets. Despite that, unease continued to needle at me. After dinner, Petra disappeared up to the music room (which doubled as her home office) to carry on with her work. I stayed downstairs in the living room flicking through one of several ring binders that contained all the musical arrangements our choir had done since we took it over six years ago. I was in the middle of singing the always-tricky alto line of one song when I heard Petra's voice from upstairs.

"Jean, could you keep it down, please? I'm trying to concentrate."

My voice cut out as if she'd severed my vocal cords with a knife. Anxiety flooded in, filling my veins with adrenaline and prickling at my skin. The first rejection I had just about swallowed, but she knew I'd always battled with insecurity over my singing voice. Running the choir had toned it down, but just like that, I was back in music class in Primary 2, standing up in front of an expectant class ready to sing a solo. Fear had paralysed me and I'd frozen up, run out of the classroom, then proceeded to hold all the tension inside me for the rest of the day until I got home. There, it had manifested in one hell of an argument with my older sister.

My temper had been a hot one when we were kids. Both my parents – and Lyndsey, for the most part – were always very easy-going, so it had been a mystery from where I'd inherited it. Mum had always joked that our village in the Scottish Highlands was so cold that my temper was needed to warm us all up, but that was really a way of skirting around an issue that caused quite a lot of problems. Now I cringed to think of the things I'd said and done, the stress I'd put them all under, and I was glad that my temper rarely flared any more. I'd even call myself easy-going, these days.

As we'd gotten older, Lyndsey had always known how to get me to release my emotions safely. Nobody had been able to do it but her – not even our mother – until Petra. Lyndsey had died the year before I met her, sending me into a tailspin, and I'd often wondered whether she'd sent Petra to look after me, to stop my emotions

becoming self-destructive as was their wont. I swallowed down the bitter taste in my mouth and forced myself to sit up, puffing out my chest and picking up the music again.

Half an hour later, I had decided on a new contender for Ave Maria's replacement and was just clearing up the scattered music when I heard Petra's footsteps padding down the stairs.

"Sorry I told you to keep it down," she said from behind me. "I just... really needed to think and I could do without that Beattie Bloom song stuck in my head."

"I didn't realise you could hear me. I thought you had the door shut."

"I don't know why I didn't just shut it. I'm sorry."

I turned around at that point, and was struck by how strained she looked.

"Jesus, Petra. You look exhausted. Sit down. Have you actually stopped working at all since we had dinner? It's twenty to nine now!"

"I was just... thinking. Not exactly working, although I was thinking about work."

"There's a problem, isn't there?"

"There's always a problem, Jean. I work with a boss who's about as warm as an ice sculpture, terrifies the living shit out of everyone without even trying and means that everybody comes to me with their issues. I swear I'm more like a therapist than a deputy headteacher. And I'm not even trained."

"You are good at it, though," I said, placing my hand on her back and guiding her towards the sofa. Once she sat down, I sat beside her. "You're so good with children.

And adults. And-”

“Mm. Too good,” she said. “Today I was handed a hysterical Year Six who wouldn’t tell anyone what was wrong.”

“Year Six, that’s... aged ten, right?”

“Yeah. I sat him in my office and gave him water and tissues, but I couldn’t get anything out of him for the longest time. I thought it was just a playground issue, but I eventually drew it out of him. He said he didn’t feel like a boy. But he didn’t feel like a girl either. He said he just felt like ‘a nothing’. Or both. I didn’t know what to say. I’m woefully uneducated in this stuff. For a queer person, I really know fuck-all about gender identity. And it means this little kid’s mental health is probably going to go out the window.”

“That’s not your sole responsibility, though. Can’t you refer him to the youth mental health service?”

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She nodded. “I can, but I’d need to notify the parents. He said his parents don’t like people who are ‘different’, which I’ve inferred to mean they’re exactly like mine.” Her lip curled. “If it’s not safe to tell them, my options are limited.”

“God, the poor kid,” I murmured, trying to ignore the odd churning in my stomach. “Is there anything I can do, Petra?”

“Not a thing. I probably shouldn’t have even told you that much, but it just came out. You can’t do anything. Just... please let me focus on my work. And don’t tell anyone, obviously.” She took a deep breath and recomposed herself. “Now, have you found something else we can sing instead of Ave Maria?”

I knew not to press, so I gamely took the bait. “I have: Ave Maria.”

“What, the other one?”

“The pop version that we did a few years ago.”

“I’d forgotten about that one.”

“It’s not too challenging, it’ll trick the audience into thinking it’s something choral but without the stress of learning too many harmonies. Mostly in unison with some harmony in the chorus. What’s not to like? Plus, it’ll save them some energy to channel into the Sea Shanty Medley.” I fought a smile at the thought of the choir singing my own arrangement. We’d sung songs I’d arranged before, but this was the most challenging, and it had taken me all winter to perfect.

Petra thought for a second, and nodded. “Fine. I’ll get some copies made.” She took the paper I held out to her. “But I think I’ll go to bed now. I can’t think any more. It feels like my brain’s sizzling.”

“You go on up, then.”

I opened my arms and gave her a hug, trying to inject some warmth into the coldness of her skin. She must have been sitting upstairs with the window open.

“You’re warm,” she murmured into my shoulder.

“Always,” I murmured back. “Even more so now I’m hitting the menopause.”

“My little Scotch bonnet.”

“My beautiful Greek goddess.”

“Why does everything have to be so complicated?”

I couldn’t answer that, so I just gave her a final squeeze before letting her go. I made sure she was all the way upstairs before placing my hand on my stomach in an effort to calm it.

‘He didn’t feel like a boy. But he didn’t feel like a girl either. He said he just felt like a ‘nothing’. Or both.’

Those words had struck a chord in me. Big time.

Right now, I didn’t have the energy to think about why.

Chapter Five

I spent an inordinately long time sorting things out downstairs. With a strange numbness, I did all the usual chores – tidying away and filing the music, emptying the dishwasher, straightening out the kitchen – and then sat down at the kitchen table with my laptop.

From there, I clicked onto one of the instant messaging apps, and from there onto a group chat. I didn't get to talk to these people as often as I'd like any more, so I sat there for a few minutes just catching up on the messages. They ranged from chit-chat to major updates as the fifteen of us pressed on with our individual lives, re-convening on a digital server now and again when we had time. I'd known these women for several years despite our LGBTQ+ online social group having shut down, and so it was to them I now typed, Hey peeps – anyone still awake?

For a long moment, I watched as everybody's activity indicators remained grey. Then – miracle of miracles! – one lit up green. Gemma was recently divorced from her second wife and in her latest update had shared that she hadn't been sleeping well, and so it made sense that she quickly responded – I am, Jean – what's up?

PM you, I replied, then switched to private messaging.

She beat me to the punch. What's up? You're up late.

I squinted at the clock, surprised to find that it was gone eleven. So I am. Just having a case of the emotional collywobbles and Petra's asleep so thought I'd come and chat to one of you lovely lot. You're the first to respond, so... uh, congratulations? I accompanied this with a laughing emoji so as to dial down the mock-hubris.

You always did have such a way with words, Jean, Gemma responded. Does anyone even say 'collywobbles' any more?

I do, I replied definitively.

A very old-fashioned word, she remarked.

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Call me old-fashioned then. But do I really have a way with words?

Oh yes. You have a way with everything! Gemma's sudden brutal honesty sent my eyebrows into my hairline.

Tell me more, I said flirtatiously with a wink emoji.

Honestly, you do! People, especially. Remember that time I surprised you at work?

How could I forget? I shot back. It had been a good ten years into the friendship and Gemma had been in Cornwall with her then-wife on holiday. Unbeknownst to me, they'd been in contact with Petra to track down the exact shop in which I worked, and had absolutely made my day by turning up to meet me in-person.

I observed you in that queue as I waited for you to notice me. You're a natural at customer service. You charm the socks off even the most uncommunicative people. They all leave with smiles on their faces. Smiles that you put there with your patter and wit.

More likely they're smiling at the prospect of consuming whatever they've just bought, I responded dryly.

No, I'm serious. It's a testament to what a good person you are. You can't fake goodness like that. I could see you genuinely cared for those people, even if you only saw them for thirty seconds at a time, and you shone a little sun-beam into their lives.

All these thoughts from a few minutes' observation? My acerbic tone was purely a

defence mechanism, so she wouldn't be able to tell how deeply her words were hitting. My stomach swirled: physical collywobbles returning to go with the emotional ones.

Yep, Gemma responded simply. Then, after a brief pause, And if Petra hasn't told you this already, then shame on her.

Whoa, whoa, whoa. My fingers were flying across the keyboard before I could even filter what they were typing. Less of the insults! How do you know she hasn't told me this?

Because if she had, I highly doubt you'd be blurting this out to someone on the Internet who you've only met twice, she retorted, and my fingers froze in the middle of the defensive paragraph they'd been typing. She clearly spotted my 'typing' icon disappear, because she then said, Gotcha?

That's not strictly true, I said, having erased the unsent paragraph. Petra's great.

I never said she wasn't, Gemma said. From what you've said, she's always been a beacon of light in your life, especially after what happened with your sister. But it's my impression today that you're seeking in me what she is failing to give you: support and positive affirmations.

You sound like a therapist, I bit back, but without much heart.

There's worse things to sound like, she replied with a laughing emoji.

I guess! I mirrored the emoji.

Then she began to type, and didn't stop for a long time. A minute passed, then two, and I rubbed my sleepy eyes as I contemplated what she could be saying to warrant

such a long message.

Then it pinged through.

Well, you certainly sound like you need reminding of your worth, so here goes. And all of this is true, despite it sounding like something I've lifted off a positivity Instagram account. Jean, your worth is infinite. Not just as a customer service lady, but as a human being. Take the choir. I watch the videos you send us. You conduct them with such ease and elegance, you'd think the stanzas had been injected into your arms, and the look of pride you have when you turn around and bow at the end of a performance would bolster the confidence of even the most timid person. You're always neat and professional and well-turned out, and you tie all the members of the choir together seamlessly. Obviously I've never been there in the flesh so I can't be completely sure, but I'm willing to bet that your wonderful personality has something to do with it. In the LEAST cringe-worthy way possible, you really do light up rooms. Especially online chatrooms! I'm always so delighted when you pop up in the chat because a) I'm invested in your life, as any friend should be, and b) you always brighten my day. It's why I jumped at the chance to chat to you tonight, even though I was half-asleep when I saw your message. So if any of these collywobbles are based in impostor syndrome or general lack of self-confidence, then collywobbles be gone, because they are very much not warranted.

Tears were stinging my eyes as I got to the end of her message. She sounded so, so like Petra – or Petra as she used to be, at least – that I was half-tempted to dash upstairs and see whether Petra had somehow hacked Gemma's account to message me. But I'd heard the mattress squeak long ago as she got into it and her laptop was down here, so that was pretty much out of the question. I read the message through again, then brushed away the tears roughly.

Thank you, I typed, then my hands stilled on the keyboard. I didn't know what else to say. Her message had sent so much emotion swirling through my body, but no words

would come. Not wanting her to think I'd run away or fallen asleep, I sent it as it was, as just two words.

Collywobbles gone? Gemma said with a wink emoji.

Collywobbles gone, I confirmed, but this wasn't strictly true as my body was now humming with adrenaline.

Get some sleep, she said. And screenshot that message. Print it out and carry it around with you. Heck, even tattoo it onto the backs of your eyelids if you have to – just BELIEVE IT!

I'll try. Thank you, I said, then followed her advice and took a picture of the message on my phone before closing my laptop. The light it had given out vanished completely, leaving me in the semi-darkness of the kitchen. On autopilot, I turned out the lights, checked the doors and windows were locked then crept upstairs.

As predicted, Petra was asleep. I quickly got ready for bed and slipped under the covers, then lay facing away from her, hugging my knees to my chest.

But it wasn't the eloquent, ego-stroking parts of Gemma's paragraph that was stuck at the forefront of my brain as I lay there. Rather, it was one simple phrase: customer service lady.

Specifically, lady.

As I drifted off to sleep, there was only one question in the forefront of my mind.

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Why doesn't that feel like it fits?

Chapter Six

“Do you want to go into Lygate on Saturday?” Petra asked later that week, not moving her eyes from the television.

“To Lygate, to do... what?” I asked, dread creeping its way into my body. It was a stupid question, really. Lygate was a shopping centre. There was only one activity you could really do in a shopping centre.

“Well, we established the other day that you need new pyjamas. I need a couple of new blouses for work for the summer. And there's a new café that I'm hearing good things about. They serve raw cookie dough like ice cream in tubs – think of that!”

“Do we have to?” I said mournfully. “Can't you get some new blouses from Martine's? Her boutique's only a couple of minutes' walk from the school, and I'm sure she's got some nice... stuff.”

“Yeah, she's got some nice stuff, but at astronomical prices. Boutique prices, you know?”

“You get paid well enough. You're the literal deputy headteacher!”

“Yes, but there are... other strains on our bank account too. There's a cost-of-living crisis just kicking off and I don't want to spend a hundred quid on two blouses when I could get them for fifty in Lygate.”

“That sort of thinking will make Martine’s shop go bust. Then where would that leave her?”

“You’re just pressing because you don’t want to go shopping.”

That shut me up. Busted. She knew me so well.

“You don’t have to come.” She smiled as she offered me the out. “I can go by myself, if you don’t mind not having the car for a bit.”

“No,” I stifled a groan. “I’ll come. I like the sound of cookie dough.”

“I knew that would convince you.” She winked.

So that Saturday morning saw Petra and I get into our little Citroen and drive the fifteen minutes into town. We reached the shopping centre and parked up in the multi-storey car park, before proceeding into the first department store. If you could call it that, since it had recently halved in size and moved downstairs. Petra made a beeline for the women’s clothes and I followed obediently, even though the clothes she was looking at were of little interest to me. While she ran her hand through some billowy-looking blouses, I lifted a monochrome polka dot polo shirt off the clearance rail and examined it. The collar had a little frill that looked more suited to a child than a fifty-something woman, so I put it back with a barely-stifled grimace.

“What do you think of these, Jean?”

I turned around to see Petra holding up two of those billowy blouses she’d been admiring. They looked fairly identical in shape, but one was blue and green and the other was pink and green. She held them up against herself.

“Do either of these clash with my hair?”

I narrowed my eyes and scrutinised them.

“You’re lucky. There isn’t a whole lot that does clash with your hair. They both look fine.”

“Fine?” she repeated, then looked at the blouses again. “Is that all? No more... descriptive words?”

“Um... beautiful. Which you are. You are beautiful!”

This time it was her turn to narrow her eyes.

“You sure about that? You don’t seem to be saying it with much heart.” A smile hovered around the corners of her mouth, but I couldn’t tell if she was teasing or just trying to gloss over her hurt.

“No, you are beautiful!” I said fervently. “And so are the blouses. No clash. All good. Get the blouses, they’re great. I’ll just...”

I dodged around her and headed for the men’s section. Over there – much less densely occupied than the women’s – I was able to hide for a moment under the pretence of looking at some shirts. My face felt like it was on fire and I cursed myself for my crappy phrasing. The last thing I ever wanted to do was to make my wife doubt herself. My discomfort in these settings wasn’t Petra’s fault, or her responsibility. I was just coming to that conclusion, gritting my teeth in the process, when I heard footsteps coming up behind me.

“You okay?” Petra said quietly. “What I said was meant to be a joke. It just didn’t land right.”

“Jokes are meant to be said with a smile, Petra,” I said with a sigh. “Or some sort of

indicator. I'm not a mind-reader."

"We've been married for nearly seven years, Jean. I'd have thought you knew a little about me and my sense of humour by now. But... okay. I'm sorry for... making a joke that landed wrong."

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“S’okay,” I said, turning to face her fully. “Are you getting those blouses?”

“No,” she replied, the edge remaining in her voice. “I actually want to look more than fine.”

Chapter Seven

Perhaps we were both hangry, I mused about an hour later. We’d had some cookie dough – Petra’s a huge dollop in a waffle cone, slathered with melted peanut butter, and mine a white chocolate and raspberry scoop in a tub – and the frosty atmosphere between us had melted away as we sat in the window of the café and commented on passers-by. As we left, Petra even raised her shoulder at me, in a sign I’d come to understand meant that she wanted me to take her arm.

We made our way to the next in Petra’s list of go-to shops, and I parked myself on a bench outside, alongside a couple of resigned-looking husbands, to wait for her. They both gave me sidelong glances, as if wondering who I was to permeate their masculine environment. I immediately felt my brighter mood retreating, my shoulders caving in and my head bobbing as I fished out my phone and scrolled through Instagram.

A hiss of “Jean! Jean!” brought me back to reality a few minutes later. Petra was waving frantically at me through the open doors of the shop, so I pocketed my phone and went to her.

“Can you hold my bag?” she said. “I want to try these trousers on.”

Obligingly, I held out my hand for her bag, and ended up also holding a dress that she'd already decided to buy. When we arrived at the changing room, the shop assistant on the door squinted at me, as if wondering why I was holding a dress. Then her expression cleared and – looking almost embarrassed – she waved me through. I hadn't intended to go in with Petra, but to save face I followed her down the corridor.

“Oh, hello,” she said, clearly having not expected me to be there. Her mouth twitched. “Are you planning on trying that on too?”

The thought of donning the figure-hugging frock brought a rush of adrenaline to my body. Not the good kind, not the dizzy-from-too-many-rollercoasters kind. The oh-Christ-I-think-I'm-about-to-die kind. Quite an extreme reaction to a dress, but I swallowed it down and laughed dryly instead, perching on the little stool while Petra sorted herself out. My mind wandered, and I covered my mouth with my free hand to hide a genuine smile, remembering what we had gotten up to in a deserted fitting room in Truro early on in our relationship. (It had been late at night, just before they closed for Christmas, and in our defence, we didn't go all the way...)

Nothing similar seemed to be on the cards here, however, as I ended up with Petra's discarded jeans on my lap while she tried on the new trousers. It immediately became clear that they were too big for her. “I think both of us could fit in here,” she said, flapping a hand in the space between her waist and the hem of the trousers. “And half the choir.”

“You must have lost weight,” I said. “You've had trousers in this size from here before, and they've been fine.”

“Not through actively trying,” she immediately said, somewhat tersely. I frowned, wondering what I'd said to warrant such a response, but she was already undoing the button of the trousers and reaching for her jeans.

“Do you want me to go and get you a size down?”

“Actually, that’s not a bad idea. Would you mind?”

“No, provided I can get up from underneath this mound of stuff you’ve loaded me with.” I smiled to show I was joking, and she immediately relieved me of the burden, gathering both dress and jeans back into her arms. “Okay, back in a second, Malinky.”

“Please don’t call me that,” she muttered. I froze.

“You don’t like being called Malinky?” It had been a light-hearted nickname that I used to use with regards to her slim frame, after the children’s song ‘Skinny Malinky Long Legs’, and she’d never minded before.

“No, I don’t. I never did. It was just something I put up with because I loved you.”

Without my mind having any conscious input, my feet took me away from her until I was outside the fitting rooms, heading blindly for the trousers. I doubted she’d even realised what she’d said, and doubted even more that she meant it that way. But she’d said ‘loved’. Loved as in... past tense.

Oh dear God, I thought as I stared at a rack of trousers without seeing them. What’s gone wrong?

Chapter Eight

But the day didn’t end there! It got worse.

Petra found me back outside the shop, sitting with the other resigned partners, who might have been the same or different ones, I didn’t know. I’d completely forgotten

about getting her the trousers until I saw her quizzical face peering out of the shop window at me. I pretended not to see her and focused on my phone – Twitter, this time. Truth be told, I wasn't even seeing the tweets as they slid across the screen, for my mind was racing, working overtime.

It was really my fault, the whole situation, I knew. Communication sat at the forefront of any relationship: it was crucial to know if something you were doing was hurting or negatively affecting your significant other, and likewise it was important for you to tell them if they were affecting you. What Petra had just said was simply her telling me that something I had said had had a negative impact on her, and I had no right to feel this way. It was now my responsibility to adjust my words and actions accordingly. The whole past-tense-of-love shite was, again, just me dwelling on it in my mind and making a mountain out of a molehill. The word 'loved' fit best in the sentence. That was it. I was being ridiculous.

A few minutes later, Petra appeared with one of her reusable bags in her hand, within which I could see the dress, but not the trousers. A part of me felt bad for probably putting her off the trousers, just like I had done with the other blouses earlier this morning – the part of me that didn't already feel bad for the whole situation, that was.

"One item of clothing acquired," she said with a little smile. "Thank you for doing this. I know it's not your favourite thing, shopping. Reckon you can hold out for another couple of shops? We still need to get your PJs, and I need a blouse or two, ideally."

"If I have to," I said with an embarrassed smile of my own. "Provided we can find a toilet at some point soon."

"Menopausal wee alert?" she chuckled.

"You could say that," I tried to chuckle back.

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As luck would have it, there was a public toilet nearby, and when in there I put my head in my hands for a minute and had a strong word with myself. It worked well enough – I sailed out past the queue of women with my head held high, even though I could feel their eyes boring into my back. Perhaps they thought I was a man due to my short grey hair, set jaw and stout figure – the shop assistant had certainly made that mistake. I shook off the shiver that gave me and met the waiting Petra with a smile. She returned it and then, to my surprise, took my hand.

“Nearly there,” she said, leading me into the next shop. Once again, we headed for the ladies’ department, and within that, a floor up, the sleepwear. There was nothing I wanted more than to park myself on a chair once again and let her pick something out, but suddenly I found myself not quite trusting her. Instead, I followed her cautiously as she made for a rack that had some baggy T-shirt-style nighties on it.

“I’ve never seen you in a nightie,” she said, taking one off the rail and holding it up against me. I squirmed out of the way and took it off her, grimacing at the picture of a cartoon duck that adorned the front.

“With good reason. They’re dreadful. They’re like a dress, but one you wear in bed.”

“That is what a nightie is, really. What’s wrong with this duck? It’s purple, which matches your hair. And it’s cute. I’ve never actually seen you wear a dress in the flesh.”

“Again, with good reason. Hang on, what do you mean in the flesh? You’ve never seen me wear one at all!”

“You were wearing them in that photo album I saw the other day. From 1991, was it? You were wearing some nice dresses in that – there was even one I wouldn’t be averse to wearing now!”

With no warning whatsoever, bile rose in my throat. I couldn’t stand the thought of Petra seeing that old, outdated version of myself, which I’d been socially obliged to dress up in feminine fripperies that now made my skin crawl. I quickly turned away, moving towards a set of pyjamas that were much more my style – tartan, to match my Scottish heritage, and boxy in shape.

“Here,” I said thickly, trying to swallow down the nausea. “These will do.”

“Size eighteen?” Petra said incredulously. “You’re not an eighteen. Look, let’s just get the correct size of these and go. I think this place is getting to you.”

It was, but not in the way she thought. She had no idea how I was really feeling.

Problem was, I wasn’t all that sure either.

I hadn’t exactly told her.

Chapter Nine

When we got home, Petra offered “to pick up where we left off on Monday”.

I stared at her, and her soft one-eyebrow-raised smile, with what I’m sure was an entirely bemused expression.

She took a few steps forward towards me, then straddled my lap where I sat on the sofa.

“That ‘funny business’ I declined you,” she murmured. “And for which you’ve waited so patiently all week. Are you still feeling it?”

“Not really,” I answered honestly, and I saw her face drop. Normally if I rejected her, she was an expert at schooling her features and hiding her disappointment, but today she looked entirely crestfallen, and that undid me. “But I’d be willing to give it a shot,” I whispered, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear as I leaned forward to give her a kiss.

She laughed into it, and started undoing the buttons on my polo shirt, never taking her lips off mine. She was just feathering her fingers around the hem when her phone started buzzing on the kitchen table.

“Ignore it,” she mumbled around the kiss. That had always been our policy, to ignore the outside world when it came to lovemaking, and sure enough, it stopped buzzing. Then it started again, making us both pause. I could almost hear both of our brains ticking over as we wondered who could be so desperate to get hold of Petra. Only one of her siblings had her number these days, and they rarely spoke anyway, so it could only be someone in the village.

“I’d better-” Petra began, then it stopped. We both breathed a sigh of relief, and were just turning back to each other when it started buzzing again.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Petra hissed as she got up from my lap and went into the kitchen. “Who the fuck- Victoria.”

I leaned forward so I could see into the kitchen, just in time to see her swiping frantically at the screen.

“Hello? Victoria? What’s...” A pause. “Oh my God.”

“What?” I followed her into the kitchen and pulled out a chair. She sank into it without even noticing.

“Where are you now?” A longer pause, but I couldn’t hear what her boss was saying. “No, it’s okay. We’ll work it out. Do you want me to come to you?”

Even I could hear the headteacher’s bark of “No!” but whatever she said next was unintelligible.

“Shh. It’s okay, we’ve talked about stuff like this.” Petra’s voice was soothing. “I’ll let everyone know. Will you let me know when you’re discharged? I’ll come and see you. And will you need any help...?” She winced. “Okay, okay, okay. Now, you’re not to lay there worrying. I have everything under control. You just focus on getting better, and we’ll see you back again hopefully in September.”

Ice flooded my veins.

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“...Good. Call me if you need anything.”

Petra hung up, then lowered her head until it rested on the table. She banged it, just once, then looked up at me, a haunted look in her eyes.

“I’ve never heard her like that before,” she murmured. “Victoria. She was in a car accident late last night, and she’s had to have emergency spinal surgery. She’s in a high dependency unit off her face on painkillers and all she can think about is what’s going to become of the school...”

“Jesus,” I murmured. “Spinal surgery? That’s big.”

“She’ll be out of action for a while until she recovers. So... we had a contingency plan, and we’ve activated it.”

“You’re now Acting Head,” I said numbly.

“Yeah.” She scrubbed at her eyes. “Well. I need to activate the procedures. Dear God, there’s so much to do. So much to organise.” Her voice dropped to a shellshocked murmur. “Fucking hell.”

“It’s okay,” I murmured, and tried to pull her in for a hug. But she struggled against it, and I immediately let her go.

“No. I’m going to have to go in. Can you make me a sandwich? I’m probably going to be in there for the rest of the day.”

“Of course,” I said, and she raced up the stairs. A sandwich seemed a Herculean task to me at that moment, but I knew it paled into insignificance compared to the task Petra had ahead of her.

Acting Head. This was an entirely new ball-game. She was now playing the role of Victoria Berry – the ice-queen who ruled her pupils and staff with a fist of iron. Who would play her role? I had no idea. I had no idea about any of it. All I knew, as I haphazardly threw some pulled pork from last night’s dinner in between two pieces of buttered brown bread, was that this was a mammoth task. We had discussed it briefly when she first became deputy head, and she had explicitly asked my agreement, but it had seemed like a far-flung concept that would never actually happen. Now it was our reality. And approaching the busiest half-term of the year?

I doubted I’d be seeing a whole lot of my wife over the next couple of months.

Chapter Ten

Having left the house just after two o’clock, Petra didn’t get back through the door until eleven that evening.

Fighting my own tiredness, I had forced myself to stay up and dressed. The house had never looked cleaner, as I’d found myself desperate for something to do, and eventually I’d found myself messaging Gemma again. Her words a few days previously, once I’d gotten over the initial weird anti-gendered-term reflex, had unleashed a bolt of dopamine in me. It was addictive, and I’d fought the urge all week, but this evening I’d sent her a bright and breezy message thanking her once again for her kind words and asking her how she was.

Missing Rebecca something fierce, she replied, but glad all the same that it’s over. Our marriage was dead in the water, a severe case of Lesbian Bed Death, we were really just vibing together without actually being present if that makes sense? Then

when it came about that she'd been cheating on me, I knew it was over.

Oh, that's awful, I'm so sorry, I replied.

It's karma. I cheated on Jen with Rebecca, so I really had it coming. And I can't blame her. The thrill of an affair is like nothing else, even if it does come with the awful crushing guilt. The excitement, when I realised I was still desirable, physically and emotionally, was like crack to me back then. Honestly, until recently I'd have recommended it to anyone in a dying marriage, until I realised what it was like to be on the receiving end. Now I wouldn't touch it with a bargepole.

What if you found The One and they were married? I typed back, more for curiosity's sake than anything else.

Then it would be on them, she said. I wouldn't make any moves unless they made them first. No matter how much I longed for them.

Then a pause, until she sent another message, and it felt almost wistful.

It is refreshing though.

Just as I was about to reply – with what, I didn't know yet – there came a knock at the door. I slammed the laptop shut and abandoned poor Gemma mid-conversation to let Petra in.

"I couldn't be bothered to fish for my keys," Petra said as she stepped through the door. "I was hoping you'd still be up."

"I'd never go to bed without you," I said, and made to give her a peck on the cheek, but she carried on moving through the house as if she hadn't noticed.

“I’m going straight back in tomorrow,” she said, turning to me in the middle of the living room and wringing her hands. “There’s still so much to do. All the staff know now, and I’ve composed a letter to parents, which will be emailed out first thing on Monday morning. We’re having an emergency governor’s meeting after school on Monday too. I texted Victoria to see if there was any more information on her state but I’ve had no reply; she’s probably asleep judging by the amount of-”

“Sit down, before you collapse,” I said, and she dropped onto the sofa where we’d been interrupted some nine hours before. While she continued to list all the things she’d done, I made her a cup of tea and let her talk. This was how she coped when things got busy: by ranting, and doing a verbal inventory of tasks she’d completed, remembering things she’d forgotten to do in the process. I handed her a pad and pen without her even asking, so she could write these forgotten ones down. By the time I emerged from the kitchen with a mug of tea and two chocolate biscuits for her, she’d finally run out of steam and her head had flopped back on the back of the sofa, eyes closed. Without a word, I pushed the mug into her hands, and she took it, half-opening her eyes to look up at me.

“Do you want anything else more substantial?” I asked softly, and she shook her head, bringing one hand up to cup her jaw. “Hurting?”

She nodded. “It is now. Tension, I think.”

“I’ll get you some biscuits.”

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“Thanks. You’re the best.” She tried to smile, then shut her eyes again. “I don’t think I can move from this sofa. I’ve never been more tired in all my life.”

“Come on,” I said, extending a hand to her. “Take your tea to bed.”

“It’s only going to get worse,” she said ominously as she obeyed.

Chapter Eleven

“Well, I did tell you,” she said forty-eight hours later.

“I know,” I sighed.

“It’s awful letting them down like that. But there isn’t an alternative right now.”

I nodded mutely. We had just sent our choir members a group text, announcing that the next day’s choir practice was cancelled. The last forty-eight hours had completely floored Petra – and by extension me – as she got to grips with her new role. She’d just spent a sixteen-hour day at work, putting everything in place, and couldn’t see it calming down until the end of the week, at which point exam week would begin. It simply wasn’t possible for her to get away tomorrow night, and since it also wasn’t possible for me to run the choir on my own, we had made the difficult decision to cancel tomorrow’s session. Text sent, I pocketed my phone and we shared a miserable look.

“I mean, it’s only the second time since we took it over,” I said, trying to sound upbeat. “Twice in six years isn’t bad going. And the first time was because we both

had the virus last year. They know what's happened; they won't blame us."

Sure enough, a string of supportive texts began pinging through on both of our phones. It surprised me that so many of our members were still awake at eleven o'clock on a Monday night, but here they were. As I read them, a private message came through from Cassandra Mulligan, who had briefly been a teaching assistant at the school a few years ago, and who (alongside her girlfriend Felicia) was now part of the alto section of the choir.

"Cassandra Mulligan says that if she can help you in any way, you only need to ask," I told Petra. "Although she recognises the delicacy of the situation."

"Bless her," Petra murmured, as if Cass were a child rather than less than a decade younger than her. "She always was a sweetheart."

"Time for bed now?" I said, taking in her exhausted slump.

"I don't know whether I can sleep," she said. "Last night was horrendous. Took me ages to get to sleep, then I kept waking up, and as soon as you got up at five, that was it."

"We didn't get to bed until midnight – a sixteen-hour day on five hours of sleep? At least I got to take a nap after work – you must be shattered."

"Oh, thank you for noticing," she said sarcastically. "Well done, Sherlock. Yes, I'm fucking exhausted, and being made to feel bad about cancelling tomorrow isn't fucking helping!"

I blinked. That was a sudden turnaround.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Who's making you feel bad?"

“You!” She stabbed a finger in my direction.

“Me? How?”

“That martyred expression on your face just now. When you were sending the text, and right afterwards. It’s not helping, Jean!”

“Okay, I get it.” I stood up and went into the kitchen to put some distance between us. “You’re tired. You’re exhausted, and you’re lashing out at me. Let’s go to bed. This time next week, everything will have settled and you’ll be feeling more like yourself again.”

“You’re right,” she said, with a truly miserable expression. I stepped back into the living room and leaned on the doorframe. “I’m sorry.” She massaged her temples, then waved away the hand I extended towards her. “I didn’t mean to take it out on you. I’ll get in the shower. I just need... sleep.”

Balls, I thought to myself. If we’re like this after two days... what is two months going to do?

Chapter Twelve

It was with the vibe of a harried businesswoman that Petra collapsed through the door that Friday evening.

“Good evening,” I said, meeting her halfway in the living room.

“Don’t start,” she snapped, dumping her bag on the sofa and pushing past me into the kitchen.

“Start what?” I said, bemused. “All I said was good evening. And it is evening.”

“I know it’s late, okay?” she snarled. “I know it’s nearly nine o’clock. I know you’ve been waiting to do the dinner. I just couldn’t get away. And I don’t need you being sarcastic about it.”

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The venom was taken out of her words by her voice. It cracked on the last sentence, but she marched into the utility room and shut the door to get changed into the comfortable clothes I'd started laying out for her. With the wind taken out of my sails, it was on autopilot that I began wordlessly throwing the various cheeses I had chopped into the fondue pot alongside a substantial glug of white wine.

It was just starting to amalgamate and melt down when the utility room door opened and Petra emerged again. Her eyes were red but she gave me a brave smile.

"Is that fondue?"

"It is."

"One of my favourites."

"I thought you deserved it, with the week you've had."

"I definitely need it. Is that wine?"

Without another word, I poured her a large glass and handed it to her.

"Thanks." She took a large gulp, then another.

"Bad day?" I said eventually.

"They're all bad at the moment, Jean," she said, not taking her eyes off the glass in front of her.

“I see.”

An awkward silence ensued, as I slaked some cornflour and water together and poured it into the bubbling cheese. I derived satisfaction from watching the mixture thicken into an unctuous river of golden goo, and within less than a minute I had the fondue pot on the set table alongside a crusty cob loaf from the bakery, some sliced bell peppers and – Petra’s favourite – even some grissini. She sat down opposite me and wasted no time in skewering a hunk of bread on her fondue fork. She gave a little moan of satisfaction as she covered it in cheese and stuffed it in her mouth.

That, and the sound of our forks occasionally colliding, was the only sound that could be heard in our house during the meal. It wasn’t dead silent – the clock was ticking, and I had the window open now that it was May, so we could hear the sea and the faint noise of the beach. I suspected that Petra had skipped lunch, from the way she was devouring her food, and she refused to meet my gaze as if she knew I knew.

I couldn’t help thinking of the first time we’d used this fondue set. It had been one of our very few wedding presents from one of Petra’s old university friends, who had clearly known about her love of fondue. We’d cracked it out a few days after getting back from our honeymoon. Within a few minutes of sitting down to eat from it, at the exact same table at which we were eating now, it had dissolved into a miniature fencing competition with the fondue forks. And from there, it had descended into a tickle match, until we realised we’d forgotten the fondue entirely. Drunk on love, I think the term was.

“I’m sorry,” Petra said, bursting into my reverie. She had put down her fork and was staring into the cheese pot, looking forlorn.

“Huh?” I managed around a mouthful of cheese.

“For being pissy. I was worried that you’d have a go at me for being late. I know I’ve

been working a lot this week. I thought you were being sarcastic when you said good evening.”

“No, I was being genuine,” I said, having swallowed my food finally. “I made this for you because I know how hard this week has been. To say congratulations for making it through. And, you know, to say that I’m proud of you. And I love you.”

Petra nodded and smiled, but her eyes were glassy. She looked up for a second and must have caught my concerned expression, because she wiped them roughly.

“Sorry. I’m just super tired, and the wine’s gone to my head. Maybe the alcohol didn’t burn all the way off, or something.”

“Can you have a rest day tomorrow?”

“Even if I could, you’re working, so what would be the point?”

“So I am. So much for quality time, then.”

“Yeah, we never did get that chance to finish off what we started, did we?” She eyed me through heavy lids and gave me an impish smile. “When Victoria phoned. Last Saturday. So rudely interrupting us.”

I shook my head, understanding the question buried within her words. “Not tonight.”

“Okay.” Her tone indicated that she had been wholeheartedly expecting my rejection, and wasn’t that bothered. She stood up. “Let’s wash up, then I think I’ll have a bath. Try and unwind a bit. I feel like a tightly wound coil.”

“You look like one, as well,” I said honestly, noting her hunched posture. I beckoned with my hands. “Let’s give you a little massage, shall we?”

“No.” She put me in mind of a firework, the way she suddenly rocketed out of her seat. “I’m desperately in need of a trip to the ladies’ room. That wine’s gone straight through me. You get started. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Okay,” I said to the empty air as she vanished back into the living room.

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As I settled into the monotony of scrubbing the dishes and utensils in soapy water, my mind strayed to that phrase. Ladies' room. It had always made me uncomfortable, and I didn't know why.

Before I could really think about it, however, Petra came back, and I immediately started coughing.

"That was quick. Bloody hell. Did you take a shower in perfume, or something?" I spluttered when I caught my breath again.

"I only spritzed a bit on my wrists while I was in the bedroom," she said. "I suddenly realised that I probably stink. This'll tide me over until I can get a proper wash in the bath. I thought you liked my perfume."

"I do, I love your perfume. But... not by the bottle."

"Noted," she said with a half-hearted laugh, and assumed her position to my right, drying up the dishes on the rack. The strength of her perfume would have made my eyes water if we hadn't been standing by an open window, but it was definitely an improvement from the metallic school-y scent with which she'd first arrived home. Spending more or less sixty hours in the building this week had left a mark on her already – even if it was only an olfactory one.

"Go and have your bath," I said once I'd washed all the dishes. "I'll finish up here."

"Thanks," she said, handing me the cloth and disappearing in a cloud of Jicky. It was her signature scent, and I hadn't been lying when I said I normally loved it, but

somehow it smelt wrong tonight.

Although to be fair, the whole evening had felt off. I looked at the calendar by the door.

One week down. God knows how many more to go.

Chapter Thirteen

The next evening, it was my turn to arrive home to a freshly cooked dinner by my wife. I had been on a middle shift, finishing at six, so by the time I got home twenty minutes later I was feeling peckish, and had picked up a chocolate brownie dessert that had been calling my name from the shelves all day.

The scent of onions and garlic hit me as soon as I opened the door, accompanied by a top note of... grass? Sweet hay? Then it pinged in my mind. Saffron.

Petra's saffron orzotto was something her mother had made. I had never met Maria Andino, as Petra had been no-contact with her since before she met me, and her recipes were the only things relating to her family that Petra allowed in her life. She rarely cooked it any more, but she knew that like the shrimps à la spetsiota she'd made the other week, I loved the saffron orzotto. Food was a love language we both shared, and I smiled to know that even though one of our other primary ones – physical touch – was taking a break right now, others still remained.

"I thought you were having a rest day," I said as I entered the kitchen, where Petra was stirring a pot on the stove.

"Oh, hello," she said, but not before I missed the flicker of sadness on her face. "No rest for the wicked, as they say."

“You’re not wicked,” I reproached.

“Well, according to my parents, I am, so I thought making this dinner would be fitting.” She shrugged, and smiled, but I immediately pinpointed this as the source of her despondency. She had down days now and again, normally on meaningful days, but today I found myself racking my brain.

“I suddenly remembered I’d missed May Day last Sunday,” she said, staring into the frying pan. “What with all the upheaval, it went out of my mind.”

The first day of May – Protomaya – was a much bigger celebration in Greece than it was here, and one that Petra’s family had always gone all-out in celebrating. Her dad, Georgio Sr, had always bought her mother flowers for Protomaya, and Petra had carried on the tradition with me.

“I don’t mind about the flowers, honestly,” I said, discomfort squirrelling in my gut. Truth be told, I didn’t particularly like receiving flowers. I knew Petra did, and I bought them for her now and again, but they’d always seemed rather an extravagance to me. Mostly it was my stereotypical parsimonious Scottishness, but I’d also disliked how innately feminine they were.

Not that I’d ever told Petra this.

“I know, but I do,” Petra said mournfully. “I know how much they mean to you. Papa never failed to deliver his flowers to Mama, and here I am forgetting.”

“There’s a world of difference between me and your Mama, Petra,” I tried to say comfortingly, but she shook her head.

“No, but you’re both women.”

The innocuous statement was like a punch to the stomach, and I had to force myself to keep listening to what she was saying.

“Women like flowers. I like flowers. They’re a token of love and appreciation, and God knows I don’t tell you enough that I appreciate you. That’s why I’m making this. I know you like this dish, and I thought it might... make up for it.”

She finally met my eye and stopped stirring, her expression one of abject misery. For my part, I knew I looked utterly flabbergasted. I felt flabbergasted. Not because of her outburst, but because of that simple, innocent statement she’d made. You’re both women.

“Jean?” Petra’s voice trembled. “Say something.”

“I...”

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The words wouldn't come. What I really wanted to say was 'I don't like being called a woman', but that thought was such a surprise to me, so out of the blue, I knew it would be an even bigger one to Petra.

"Oh, bollocks," she murmured. "I've fucked up, haven't I? I've really upset you. I... I can fix it. On Monday, I'll go to Anastasia in the florist and get you some flowers. I don't know when, but I'll go. Peonies are your favourite, aren't they? They're right in season – I'll get some on Monday, I promise. I'm so sorry, it was just-"

"Forget the fucking flowers!"

My expletive-ridden shout surprised the both of us. Petra's gabbling cut off mid-flow, leaving her mouth hanging open. Out of both of us, she was the shouter and the swearer. I rarely did either, contrary to my teenagehood, and so this uncharacteristic vociferation rung in the air, leaving us both speechless.

Face on fire, I scrabbled to collect myself.

"Really, Petra. It doesn't matter."

"It does to me," she sobbed, and fled the room.

I collapsed down onto one of the kitchen chairs, and my fingers stroked my wrist quite without conscious thought. It had been a long time, and I thought I'd left all that behind, but they both suddenly seemed to itch and tingle. I forced my hands into my lap, then sat on them for good measure, before exhaling a shaky breath.

“Okay,” I whispered to myself, and I could hear Lyndsey’s voice supplying me with words like when she gave me her famous pep talks. “Okay, okay, okay. Backtrack. What made you fly off the handle? Go through the scene again, and map out your emotions.”

Fatigue had been present right from the off – the consequence of eight hours at work on a busy Saturday. That, by its very nature, served to amp up emotions. Then, I had been surprised to learn that Petra was cooking orzotto, and after that, concerned by the lowness of her spirits.

The tension within me had gone from zero to one hundred by the declaration: “You’re both women.” I realised that now.

But why? It was a simple fact, wasn’t it? Her mother was a woman, and I was a woman.

My mouth went dry.

But what if you’re not? Somehow?

Chapter Fourteen

Having eventually stirred from my gender-related torpor at the kitchen table, I realised that the saffron orzotto was burning. By its very nature as a relative of risotto, the dish required water, and when that water boiled away, the dish burned. Petra’s disappearance, and my subsequent failure to take over the recipe, had left us with a gelatinous, charred lump of almost-unidentifiable substance. The only place for it was the bin.

Petra stayed upstairs the whole evening. Facing her again would have been difficult, so it suited me just fine. When I eventually did go upstairs later in the evening, she

was in bed, fast asleep. Try as I might, I couldn't bring myself to lay down next to her, so I quickly washed, brushed my teeth and returned downstairs. It was tempting to jump on my laptop and message Gemma – not for anything meaningful, just to be 'vibing together' as she put it – but I was too tired, and lay back down on the sofa.

It was the first time we had slept apart in our entire marriage.

I was awoken by a soft gasp, and Petra's concerned face above me.

"Jean," she whispered. "What are you doing there?"

"Sleeping," I mumbled, trying to flex my muscles but failing due to the cramped position. I also seriously needed the toilet. "Aargh."

"You shouldn't be sleeping on the sofa! Come on, let's go to bed."

"What time is it?"

"A quarter to three. I woke up, and realised you weren't there. I thought... I don't know what I thought."

I rubbed my eyes and scrambled to a sitting position, and she sat down in the space my legs had vacated. It was only then, in the dim light, that I noticed the pallor of her skin, the translucency of it. She looked like a ghost.

"I'm sorry for earlier," I said. "For my language, and my aggression. I shouldn't have gotten so frustrated."

"It's okay," she said. "You were tired, and I was emotional. I was just thinking about my parents. And my siblings."

“Have you heard from Nicholas recently?”

She shook her head. Her youngest brother was the only one of her five siblings with whom she had contact. They normally exchanged cards on birthdays and Christmases, but he'd missed her birthday two months ago and her calls to him had gone straight to voicemail. The voicemails had gone unanswered.

“I wonder if the rest of them have finally gotten to him,” she sighed. “There's only so much backbone one can have, even in the Andino family. It's entirely possible they've finally convinced him how much of an evil witch I am, and he's washed his hands of me.”

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She normally pretended not to be bothered about the way her family had cut her off, but I knew the truth. Up until her mid-twenties, she'd done everything they expected of her: attained excellent grades, attended the best conservatoire in the UK, then worked as a wedding singer in their events management company. Then she'd come out as gay, mortally offending their fundamentally Catholic beliefs, and they'd fired her. Cut her off and barricaded the door – literally. With no source of income, she'd lost her flat and had to move in with her then-girlfriend while she retrained as a primary school teacher, which had always been her real aspiration. Then at the end of the course, she and her girlfriend had split up, and she'd taken a job down here in Miltree.

“Shame on him, then,” I said, realising that neither of us had spoken for a solid minute and that it was on me to fill the silence.

It was the wrong thing to say.

“No, Jean.” She gritted her teeth. “Shame on them. The Andino clan. My parents passed on the vitriol to Adrienne, and then Georgio Jr and Theodore and Andrew. By the time I was born, and then Nicholas, the rot had set in. What hope did we have? If only one of the older ones had challenged them, and tried to set a more positive example for us younger ones, perhaps it all would have been different, and the family would have still been together. It's not Nicholas's fault. Don't blame him for giving in to their maelstrom of uber-religious bullshit.”

This time I had nothing to say. My brain was just waking up, and no words were appearing in my head. I knew she had always been closest to her youngest brother, but right now I thought she was babying him. He was thirty-one years old, for

Christ's sake. Old enough to recognise the toxicity in which he had been raised, and the wrongness with which they had treated his sister.

"Because how dare I fall in love with a woman?" Petra's face twisted in an uncharacteristic display of aggression and I leaned away involuntarily. She didn't even seem to notice. "How dare I marry a woman? Those two extra letters between 'man' and 'woman' made all the difference. For all their pious talk of behaving as Christ would, and protecting the world from sin and all that crap, they're full of it themselves. How fucking dare they tell me what I do is wrong? How I live is wrong? Just because you're a woman, Jean. Tell me what's wrong with that!"

"It's okay, it's okay," I murmured soothingly, and ran a hand down her arm, but she popped out of her chair like a jack-in-the-box, turning to face me with her eyes flashing.

"No, it's not okay." Her voice trembled now. "I'll fucking kill them. If they've turned my only sane sibling away from me, I will actually kill them. This is not what I need now." Her voice rose on a sob, and I rose to my feet slowly, trying not to spook her.

"Just because you're a woman, Jean." Now she really was sobbing. "I married a woman, and as far as they're concerned, my life ended."

"Come here," I whispered, and slowly put my arms around her. She froze, arms still by her sides with fists clenched, and the only movement were the little judders of her sobs. I held her for a moment, but it felt all wrong, so I let her go.

"I'm going back to bed," she said between sobs.

"I'll be up in a minute," I said, and watched her go, before sinking back down on the sofa.

You're a woman, you're a woman. Her words fluttered around my head, in her normal tone at first but then rising to almost resemble taunts. My hands balled into fists at my sides, and then almost unconsciously I began to rake my nails up and down my wrists.

"You're being ridiculous," I muttered to myself, making a deliberate choice to put my head in my hands so they'd be still. "You're too old for this. You're too old to have an identity crisis. You're fifty-chuffing-two, for crying out loud. And you look ten years older. Get a grip."

It's not what I'd have imagined Lyndsey or my mum saying in one of their famous pep-talks, but it worked. After another minute or two, my heart rate slowed to a more normal pace and I could feel my legs again. I'd promised Petra that I'd be upstairs, so with supreme effort I got to my feet and traipsed up. She was fast asleep, perhaps reassured by the thought of me being next to her as usual, but even so I stood looking at her for another minute after going to the toilet.

It was another supreme effort to draw back the covers and lay down next to her. Tension locked my joints as I lay on the edge of the bed, facing away, as far away from her as I could get without falling off. Every fibre of my being wanted to run downstairs back to the sanctity of the sofa: the first time I'd ever wanted to run away from her.

You don't deserve to lay here next to her. She deserves someone who's secure in themselves. The thoughts rattled around again.

They continued to rattle, until I at last fell into an uneasy slumber.

Chapter Fifteen

Having cancelled last week's choir practice, we both knew we had to make

significant progress with them this week. We still had to start our showstopper number, the Sea Shanty Medley I'd arranged over the winter, and with six shanties segueing into each other, changing time signatures and tempos at various points, it was quite a stretch. The choir members noticed this as we handed out the paper copies, with lots of eyebrow-raising as they leafed through.

“Okay, peeps!” I raised my voice to quell the chatter, and they all looked up at me. “This one’s acapella, and as you can see, it moves about quite a lot. So I’m going to need you to trust me on this one when I’m conducting. I’ve pre-recorded each individual part for you on the piano, and it’ll be uploaded on the group chat later this evening so those of you who can’t sight-read can start learning your part. For now, however, let’s start with the first shanty.”

“And we’ll need a soloist,” Petra put in. The whole choir looked at her incredulously, and I knew the expression on my face matched theirs.

“How come? Won’t you be doing it?” I said as neutrally as possible.

“I thought I’d give someone else a chance,” she said, smiling around at the group, although her eyes flickered towards me and I knew that wasn’t the only reason. But there would be time to press later.

“Okay then,” I said, turning back to the group. “Who’d like the solo? There’s a handful of lines across the whole thing, and a verse in The Wellerman... any takers?”

Silence from the group. As a rule, Petra normally took solos, so they were unused to having this opportunity. I saw various people exchange glances and shake their heads, and my heart sunk.

Then, from the back of the alto section... “Cass will!”

“Who said that?” I peered at the back row.

“Me – Felicia,” the voice replied. Now I spotted her, and her puce-coloured girlfriend, Petra’s former work colleague, Cassandra Mulligan. Felicia stood up, dragging Cass with her.

“Does Cass actually consent to this?” I chuckled. “This looks alarmingly like brute force going on here.”

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“Yes,” Cass said, sounding strangled. “I can sing. I’ve been meaning to take some lessons, but never got around to it. If nobody else wants the solo... I’ll do it.”

This was clearly a big thing for the young woman, who had seldom said a word in front of the choir before. I noticed a few surprised expressions, but fought to keep mine in its usual neutrality.

“Any other takers for the solo?” I looked around at the rest of the choir, noting the shakes of their heads. “Going once, going twice... sold! Cass, come find me at the end and we’ll organise a time to go over it in detail. In the meantime, as there’s no piano, Petra will sit next to you and give you a helping hand.”

Petra moved to sit between Cass and Felicia, and we cracked on with the rehearsal. I was buoyed to see that they all seemed to like the medley – particularly some of the juicier harmonies – and it made the hours of work I’d put into it over the winter worth it.

At the end of the two hours, we were able to stand up and sing the whole thing through. Shakily, yes, and with a number of uncertain or completely wrong notes, but I could tell they enjoyed it by the smiles on their faces.

“This one’s going to be a cracker, everyone!” I declared as they started packing up. “A proper showstopper! See you all next week!”

At that moment, I looked over at Petra and Cass. Together with Felicia, they had their heads together and were poring over Cass’s copy of the music. Petra had her ever-present pencil out and was annotating it, and as I looked she said something that

made the other two burst out laughing. I smiled, but couldn't go over there due to being interrupted by another member of the choir with a question.

The hall emptied fairly quickly compared to normal, with even the usual malingerers dashing outside to catch the last of the gorgeous sunset. Cass and Felicia were the last out, with Cass agreeing to go over the solo at home, calling one of us if she ran into any issues that couldn't wait until the following week.

"I've never seen Cass like that before," Petra commented as we finally got in the car and began to drive through the Cornish twilight. "So... animated. She was always quite flat when she worked at the school; I could never get much personality out of her. She seems much happier now."

"It's probably love," I suggested. "She found Felicia around that time, didn't she? Maybe Felicia loved her back to life, as it were."

"Like we did to each other," Petra said with a smile in her voice that I couldn't see in the dusk.

"Yeah," I murmured.

It was true. Even if the opposite seemed to be happening now.

Chapter Sixteen

To give her her due, Cass seemed admirably committed to her newly-acquired role as soloist. On my break at work the next day, I received a text from her, asking if we could meet to go over the solo privately. 'I'm having a crisis of confidence and need you to tell me it'll all be okay!' she wrote in her message, followed by a crying-laughing and a floods-of-tears emoji.

‘That sounds like something I can do!’ I wrote back. ‘I finish work at 3 and will be back home by half past. Come over any time after that and we’ll bash it out on the piano!’

I followed it with our address, and Cass said she’d be there as soon as she’d finished work at five. We rarely had people over these days, what with Petra being so busy all the time, so when I got home from work I immediately went into panicked-hostess mode. The house wasn’t dirty by any stretch of the imagination, but I whizzed around with the vacuum cleaner and the duster, before setting up the makings of a hot drink.

At five twenty-five, she knocked on the door, and we wasted no time in getting set up in the music room. Cass had brought her copy, and we spent a full five minutes laughing at Petra’s annotations, including one that simply said ‘RIP altos’ under one particularly deep, bass-y line.

“I will confess, I like to give the altos the most satisfying lines when I arrange music,” I said with a wry chuckle. “Because I’m naturally an alto, and when I was in the choir, we always got the weakest lines. I find that so many arrangements forget the lower parts. Audiences are so captivated by the dizzying heights the sopranos can reach, they forget about the altos who support them underneath. You may not always be able to hear the alto line, but take it away altogether and the piece is much weaker for it.”

“You were in the choir?” Cass said.

“Yep. I was in it right from the start, back in the nineties. Petra joined when she moved to the village ten years ago, and we took it over six years ago. Its songs have been the backing track of our love story, really.”

I tailed off, because a wave of desolation had just overtaken me. One of the songs we were singing this year was a break-up anthem. I didn’t like to think about that.

“Anyway...” I cleared my throat. “Not all of them. Not the sea shanty medley, obviously. We’re not pirates.” I tried to laugh.

Cass laughed obligingly, but her expression was serious too. “I didn’t like it when I first joined. The choir. You may not remember, I came for a trial run just after I moved here. I had... well, what I now recognise was a panic attack. Too many people, I think, and I wasn’t in a good place mentally. But I’m glad Heather convinced me to try it again.”

“Heather?” I said, running through the list of choir members in my head. “Heather Chappell left long before you arrived.”

“No... Heather, as in my girlfriend.”

I squinted at her. “Felicia? I don’t follow.”

“Felicia has a condition called Dissociative Identity Disorder. Her mind is essentially split into five separate alternate personalities, all of whom are their own identities. Heather is the one you know as Felicia, but Felicia is simply the body’s legal name.”

“Oh,” was all I could find to say while my mind absorbed the unexpected information. “I didn’t know that.”

“Not many people do,” Cass replied. “Just after we got together, the system decided to stop keeping it a secret, but it’s been easier said than done to actually tell people about it. I have their full consent to tell you this, by the way.”

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“Oh!” I said again. “Well... good. That must be... challenging. For you all.”

“It is,” Cass said honestly. “It’s not been plain sailing by any stretch of the imagination. There’s conflict between alters, between me and the alters, ups and downs like any other relationship. But I have separate relationships with them all – not all of them romantic – and we muddle along with the help of our therapists.”

“Therapy seems like a good shout,” I mused, thinking of Petra and I, before realising I’d said that aloud.

“It saved us.” Cass nodded, and then smiled shyly. “Anyway. This wasn’t the only purpose of me visiting you. Heather just thought it was a good idea to kill two birds with one stone, if you see what I mean. We’ve been meaning to tell you for a while.”

“Well... thank you for telling me. Do you mind if I tell Petra?”

Cass waved her assent, turning back to the sheets of music in front of us.

“And needless to say, we won’t tell anyone.” I followed her cue and turned back to the piano. “Now then. Shall we work through each line from the top and see how it comes together?”

An hour later, we had the solo parts nailed. Cass said she didn’t need help with her actual alto lines, so we were wrapping up when we heard the front door open and close.

“Evening, my love,” I called down the stairs, and heard a grunt of response. My heart

sunk, but I raised my eyebrows and smiled at Cass as if in mirth, as if this was normal.

“I’ll be going,” she said, picking up her bag. “Thank you so much, Jean. That’s really cleared things up for me.”

“Thank you for telling me what you did. Please extend our full support to Felicia. Heather. And all of the... alters.”

It was a clumsy way of putting it, but Cass did not take offence, so I must have said something right. In fact, she smiled again.

“We’re a team, all of us,” she said with a soft chuckle. “But all support gratefully received. So thank you. Again.”

“After you,” I motioned for her to go down the stairs before me. “A team is a good way of putting it. That’s how all great relationships-”

“Jesus fucking Christ!” Petra’s scream cut me off. I froze, Cass bumping into me from behind, as Petra dashed back into the kitchen, clad only in her underwear and a horror-stricken expression.

“Sorry,” I muttered, to Cass. “Did you see...?”

“I didn’t see anything,” she reassured me quickly. “Her dignity is intact. I’ll be taking my leave. Thank you once again.”

We reached the bottom of the stairs, and I opened the door to let her out. “See you tomorrow,” I murmured, but without any active thought, then shut the door behind her.

“Why didn’t you tell me we had company?”

Petra’s voice was ice cold, and her expression colder still when I turned around to see her behind me.

“It was a last-minute arrangement,” I whispered, frozen to the spot. She looked like Victoria in that moment, and I didn’t like it.

“You embarrassed me. Can’t you just...” Her mouth opened and closed while she seemed to search for the right words, but perhaps she couldn’t find them. “Can’t you just not do these things? At least while I’ve got this heavy workload on? I need a constant in my life. And right now you feel as slippery as a banana peel.”

The sheer bitterness in her voice took the wind right out of my sails. Without another word, she turned on her heel and ascended the stairs.

“Me slippery?” I followed her to the staircase and called up to her retreating figure. “You’re the one I can’t get a read of these days! What you just said makes no sense! Why are you being like this?” And then, the killer line. “What is wrong with you?”

“Work!” she barked without turning around. “Work is what’s wrong with me! Just... leave me alone, please. I just need five minutes to breathe.”

Chapter Seventeen

It ended up being fifteen minutes, but “I’m sorry,” came the voice from behind me, sure enough.

I turned around from the stove. Petra was wrapped in her dressing gown and she was leaning on the door frame, looking like a chastened schoolgirl.

“I am not your emotional punching bag, Petra.” My voice and movements were robotic as I turned back to the stove and continued to stir the ravioli.

“I know.” She sighed. “I know. I’m sorry. I don’t know why this keeps happening. I’m just... stretched thin. Tight as a piano wire. And it’s only Wednesday. It’s exam week.”

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“Yes, you’re under pressure. But you’re taking it out on me.” I kept my voice flat and even to avoid an argument escalating. “It’s not on, Petra. I’m not putting up with it.”

“I know. All I can do is apologise. I’ll try to do better.”

“What did you mean when you told me I was slippery?”

“I don’t know. I feel like you’re drifting away from me, and I really need you right now. Especially now my brother’s all but dumped me.”

There was nothing I could say to that, so I carried on making the dinner. Clearly noticing the smell of toast, Petra got the margarine out and spread the slices when they popped up. I split the ravioli between the two plates, and we sat down to eat dinner.

“So why was Cass here?” Petra asked when she was about halfway done and I was nearly finished.

“She was stressing about the solo, so we worked through it. Did you know about Felicia?”

“That she moved in with Cass?”

“That she has Dissociative Identity Disorder.”

“No?” Petra frowned. “Tell me more.”

I relayed what Cass had told me, and watched her frown deepen.

“Poor thing. I have heard of DID. It’s a type of PTSD. Stems from trauma in early childhood.”

“Really? Cass never mentioned that.”

“Makes life a million times harder for all of them, I expect. Makes our lives seem simple.”

“Yeah.”

For a moment, things felt normal. Like we were sharing the silence, rather than on two opposing sides of it. Then I fully took in what Petra had said: lives, plural, as opposed to the life we were supposed to be sharing. My eyes filled with tears that I pressed my lips hard together to keep at bay – luckily, Petra was standing up and clearing the plates away, so she didn’t notice.

Two and a half weeks until Whitsun. Then she’d have a week off, a nine-day break from this loop of exhaustion-anger-apologise-repeat in which we’d become entrenched. I just had to hang on to that.

In bed later that night, I thought back over what Petra had said, and told myself to stop being so pedantic. It was clear what Petra meant: that we were extremely privileged to have good mental health, and that we should be grateful for that fact. I had missed her point entirely and latched onto something that wasn’t even an issue. You’re a chump, I told myself sternly, rolling over onto my side and finally dropping off.

Chapter Eighteen

The following Tuesday, the hall filled up, and I distracted myself from fretting by greeting the singers as they entered. But the minutes ticked closer to seven o'clock, and there was still no sign of Petra. Where the hell is she?

Given that she worked in the school in which we had always rehearsed, it wasn't beyond the realms of imagination that Petra would be on time. She always was. She had a sense of duty that was almost superhuman in its strength, and she knew that on a Tuesday night, her duty was to be here, playing the piano and supporting the group of fifty-odd women who were filling the chairs. In return, they put their all into creating magical moments that, when they got it right, made the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. She had been so upset at cancelling the rehearsal two weeks ago... so how come she had gone AWOL now?

At one minute to seven, just as I was about to search for her, she appeared from her office. The stress was visible on her face as she entered the room, and I immediately chastised myself for thinking badly of her. However, that stress disappeared as if a switch had been flicked, replaced by her what-we-called 'performance mode' smile as people turned to greet her.

"Evening, ladies! Evening, my beautiful lady," she said, making her way to the front and giving me a peck on the cheek before sitting herself down on the piano stool. I'd set out tonight's pieces ready for her, and she picked up Ave Maria with a frown. "What's this, Jean?"

"The new song. Replacement for the old Ave Maria. We discussed this a couple of weeks ago, before everything kicked off."

"Yes, of course we did." She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes, and I recognised her not-often-seen embarrassment. I idled over to her while the rest of the ladies were still chatting.

“Long day?” I murmured.

“When are they ever short, now?” she responded, before turning a winning smile on the woman who had just approached me from behind.

“Petra, Jean, I’m sorry, but I had to bring my son tonight,” the woman said, clearly anticipating a bad reaction. “I promise he won’t be any trouble. His dad bailed last minute, and I couldn’t get a sitter, and I really didn’t want to miss tonight’s rehearsal...”

“That’s no problem, Estelle,” Petra said, standing up and beaming at the little boy who was standing beside her. He looked up with a tentative smile. “I know you, don’t I, little Atlas? You’re the star of Starling Class. Mrs Edwards has such a lot to say about you! Let me get you set up with some colouring while Mummy does her singing, hm? Follow me!”

I watched her lead the little boy away. He trotted off happily, not even looking back at his relieved-looking mother. I watched them for a moment – her whole aura, her whole being, changed when she was in performance mode. I often wondered which was closer to the real Petra: this warm, motherly, loving schoolteacher, or the uptight, stressed wife with whom I shared a home these days. I’d fallen in love with the former, but now seemed to be married to the latter.

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Before I could dwell on that, I realised the rest of the choir had gone quiet and were waiting to start. With a great deal of force, I dragged my attention back to them.

“Okay, ladies, let’s warm up!” I called out, fixing my own performance-mode smile to my face.

They gamely sung their way through three of our standard warm-ups while I accompanied them on the piano, giving pointers. Petra came back halfway through the third one and wandered around, listening to how it sounded from various points in the room and shouting out tips of her own. When I stood up from the last warm-up, she immediately sat down and lowered the stool.

As predicted, replacing one arrangement of Ave Maria with another garnered us a few bemused looks, but I handed out the copies anyway. They soon realised that the heavy, tongue-twisting Latin we’d dropped couldn’t have been further from this mainstream pop, and that all the two songs shared was a name. They were clearly much happier with this one, and I silently congratulated myself on picking the right song. We went through the entire thing, giving each of the three sections their lines and then combining them, and then finally taking the whole thing from the top, with piano accompaniment.

When I began conducting, Petra launched in with the piano introduction, but immediately there was a chorus of “Huh?” and other bemused sounds from the choir. I stopped conducting and looked over at her. She was leaning forward, almost scrutinising the page, screwing up her eyes as if she was having difficulty reading it. After a couple of bars she looked up, then realised we were all looking at her.

“What?” she said, the music cutting off mid-bar.

“Wrong key,” I said.

She took another look at the music.

“Oh yes, so it was,” she said quickly, before launching back into it, this time in the correct key. Some of the ladies chuckled before turning their attention back to me, and I tried to ignore the pang of worry that had just tweaked my heart. Petra was always so... on top of things.

We made it through the whole piece – not chill-worthy yet, but it would get there – and then got cracking on another. The two hours hurtled by as they always did, and then we fielded questions for a further fifteen minutes until everybody had left and we were finally alone.

I immediately turned to face her and held out my arms. “Come here.”

“No,” she said, her voice going strangled. She turned on her stiletto heel and made for one of the doors leading deeper into the building. “I just... left something in the office.”

She was gone so quickly, I didn’t even have time to protest that her office was in the other direction. The caretaker came into the room and jingled her keys pointedly, and I gave her an apologetic half-wave before scurrying to tidy up the music and put the piano away.

Petra reappeared just before I was going to go and search for her. She looked her usual serene work-self, but I wondered whether that was because the caretaker was present. Without a word she wheeled the last basket of music out to the car, then got in the passenger side while I thanked the caretaker and helped her lock up. When I

got in, she was scrolling through her Facebook.

“Did you eat today?” I said as I eased out of the car park. The drive was only a couple of minutes, but with the amount of stuff we had in the back on choir nights, using the car was more practical. I thought Petra wasn’t going to respond and that the drive would be conducted in silence, but eventually she clicked her phone off and shrugged.

“I had a sandwich. At lunchtime.”

“Petra, it’s half past nine! Did you not eat before choir?”

Another shrug. “I didn’t feel like it. I meant to go to the bakery after school ended, but I forgot.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to chastise her for not taking care of herself, but I knew that wouldn’t go down well. “I can make you some pasta when we get in?”

“That would be great,” Petra said, then the drive lapsed into silence again. It was just as well that our house was barely a two-minute drive from the school (hence why she normally walked).

“You go on inside,” I urged her, after seeing that she’d climbed out the car and was now standing there looking lost. “I’ll handle all this. Go and have a shower or something, and I’ll get the pasta on to boil.”

“Thanks,” she said absently, half-crawling inside. I heard her open the bedroom window, then a few seconds later the bathroom window next to it. I had just locked the front door for the night when the sound of water began from the bathroom, and I waited for Petra’s tuneful accompaniment. But there was nothing.

I quickly diced a couple of banana shallots and threw them in a hot pan to fry in oil, then added some fresh cherry tomatoes, allowing them to break down with the lid on. I was in the middle of mashing them up when Petra came down the stairs, clad in her fluffy red dressing gown and smelling of her fancy shower gel. Her face had been wiped clean of its makeup and she looked wan – as anyone would if they'd been running a school without food for nine hours.

“Voila, madame,” I said, pouring the sauce onto the plated pasta and placing it on the table. She sat down and picked up her knife and fork with a smile of thanks, then put the cutlery back down again to grind some salt and pepper. “I already seasoned it,” I said, and she glanced over at me again.

“Well, you probably did what you call seasoning,” she said. “But that’s what I call Scottish seasoning. Greek food has a bit more taste.”

“Ouch,” I said mildly, but didn’t rise to it. She was tired and hungry, of course she was snippy. Come to think of it, she’d been snippy the last few days. “Is your time of the month near?”

“You don’t know that? I always knew when yours was.”

“Should I know? I don’t exactly have a menstrual app any more, and it’s not like we really discuss it. Perhaps you should start marking it on the calendar like I did.” The very topic made me squirm, in fact, and I began to wish I hadn’t brought it up. “I just wondered if it was your hormones that were making you aggy, that’s all.”

“I’m not aggy!” She practically spat out her pasta. “I’m fucking exhausted! I’m tired, I’m overloaded, and I don’t need you being arsey about it!”

“Me being arsey?” I exclaimed. “I’m trying to be nice!”

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“Oh, yes, very nice,” she hissed. “Embarrassing me in front of the ladies earlier? Was that nice?”

“Sorry?”

“The whole wrong-key thing!”

“You were in the wrong key! There was no other way to correct you other than mention it! If we’d have started singing in the key you were playing, the soprano line at the end would have broken their bloody voices!”

“They’d have been fine,” she blustered. “It’s good for them to transpose occasionally. Keeps them on their toes.”

“What, so you did it on purpose?”

“Yes!”

“Yes?” I repeated incredulously. This wasn’t like her.

“No,” she deflated slightly, having been called out. “No, but that’s not the point! We could have pretended. We could have passed it off as deliberate. They listen to you – if you’d have just carried on conducting, they would have cracked on with it. As it was, you made me look like an idiot!”

“Well, I have to say you’re behaving like one now,” I snapped, feeling a blast of temper. This was how it worked with me: I’d take it for so long, then blow. “I think

you've been spending too much time with kids, and your maturity level is being pared down to theirs."

Immediately I knew I'd hit hard, because she flinched. After a moment, she picked up her fork and started eating again, her movements now robotic. I went to the back door and opened it to let in some air, as well as to put an end to the argument. Both of us felt strongly about airing our dirty laundry in public, and if there was a door or window open nearby we kept our disagreement volume to a minimum. I knew she was unlikely to retort – loudly at least – if the door was open.

After a moment, and a few calming breaths, I turned back to her.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly. "That was hurtful."

"It really was," she choked, before standing up with a screech of her chair and running upstairs.

This time, I spent the full night on the sofa.

Chapter Nineteen

As I ate lunch the next day, my mind wandered from its fretting to the multi-coloured photo albums stacked on the shelf next to the utility room. They had been a tradition of mine for several years now. Going through my parents' old photographs had been one of my favourite things to do with them, and later Petra. It had helped with the grief of losing my sister, and so I'd carried on doing it. At the end of every year, I'd have a selection of photographs from that year developed (from my camera at first but now our phones) and then write the context on the back, before sliding them into the album that Petra always bought me as part of my Christmas present.

The album I selected now was from 2015. We'd gotten married that July. The first

photo was from New Year's Day – a slightly drunken selfie Petra and I had taken in bed after waking up. We both looked rather the worse for wear, but deliriously happy. After all, we had been recently engaged, and it had felt as if the world was at our feet. I slid the photo out of its little plastic cover and flipped it over to read what I'd written on the back.

'The morning after the night before, NYD 2015. What a night!! [flame emoji]'

A few squiggles accompanied it. I chuckled. I'd been very into emojis at that time, peppering my texts with them in a habit picked up from Petra. Clearly I had been frustrated at my failed attempts to draw the flame emoji, hence the square brackets. I took a closer look at the photo again, and smiled at Petra's mussed hair and smudged makeup. Was that the year we'd been out with some choir friends and ended up singing Auld Lang Syne in the middle of the street just after midnight? I couldn't quite remember.

The next photo was from a couple of weeks later. Petra and I were on the beach just a few minutes' walk from our house, both bundled up like Michelin Men. There was an orange blob to the side of us which I immediately recognised as a finger, and from that I knew exactly who had taken the photo. Mum had never quite understood that camera lenses on phones were at the top and not the middle like a conventional camera, and thus her finger had appeared in many a photograph. A quick read of what I'd written on the back of the picture confirmed it. Mum took this on a visit down to Miltree, January 2015. Petra, me... and Mum's finger.

I skipped a few photos, and landed in summer. My hand immediately rested on a picture of Petra in a red wrap dress with a glass of white wine in her hand. It was a handful of weeks before our wedding, and the excitement was palpable in the way she was sitting up straight, chest pushed forward, an enormous smile splitting her face almost in two. Everything about that evening had stuck in my mind. We'd reenacted our third date, and had sat on the patio with our phones, listening to songs

that meant things to us, from our childhoods and our lives. Unlike on our third date, however, this time Petra had gone into depth about her childhood. The way she'd moulded herself into her very-Catholic parents' idea of a perfect daughter, training to be a singer and working for them in their wedding planning business, before coming out as gay and being cut off. It had been the first time she'd shared anything so deep with me, and I'd listened, comforted her when she started to cry, then brought her around by moving the topic onto our wedding. That was when I'd taken the picture.

I flipped the page, and my heart rose further into my throat. I'd forgotten all about this one. Petra and I were standing at the top of the steps that led down to the beach here in Miltree. We were both facing out towards the sea with our back to the camera, with an arm around each other. The sunset ahead of us was an incandescent blend of purples and pinks and reds and yellows. As if the sky had recognised that it was our one-month wedding anniversary and was doing its very best to pack as many colours in as possible before it turned dark for the night. I was nestled in to Petra's side and she had her head tilted to rest against the top of mine. We hadn't even known the picture was being taken, but I was very glad for it.

Now tears filled my eyes. I couldn't remember the last time we'd stood like that, just existing quietly in each other's space. We still had what society called intimacy – i.e. sex – but this type of intimacy was long gone. The easy touch and unconscious warmth between each other had faded. Seven years, almost... I wondered if this was what they meant when they said about the seven-year-itch. As that horrible thought entered my brain, I slammed the album shut with a snap that seemed to cut through the cavernous silence of the kitchen.

Blinking furiously, I put the album back and picked up another one at random. They were stacked in no particular order, definitely not chronological, so of course I stumbled upon one of the very ones that would make my melancholy worse. This one was from 1991, the year I turned twenty-one and three years after we'd moved to Cornwall. The picture upon which I opened was one of the four of us – my little

family. Lyndsey, nine years older than me, was visibly pregnant with her first child here – my oldest nephew Johnny – and yet my lip curled to see that she had a cigarette between her fingers. She had known full well the dangers of smoking, especially when pregnant, and yet she hadn't quit, instead choosing to cut down to one or two per day. It was a miracle that Johnny and Dean were both still alive and healthy. At least I presumed they were, although due to their move to Scotland after her death, I hadn't heard from them since I got married.

“You 'nana,” I murmured, touching Lyndsey's grinning face in the photo. I didn't have it in me to resent her any more. After all, she'd paid for her smoking with her life. Lung and throat cancer: the consequence of thirty-five years of chain smoking – literal chain smoking, one cigarette after another from morning until night, right from the age of sixteen. Petra had given up her smoking habit immediately when I told her, because it had been a deal-breaker for me. The power of love.

Except... where had that love gone? I didn't understand it, but it was becoming clearer by the day suddenly. She was pushing me away.

Just as I was about to shut the album, I looked at my twenty-one-year-old self again. The young woman in the photo would never have envisaged my life now. She would never have even envisaged me with short hair – in this photo, my locks were as long and brunette as Petra's were now, although more of a milk-chocolatey brown. Purple hair had been completely unheard of in our little Scottish village life as we grew up, and Cornwall had seemed just about the same.

And as for being a lesbian... well, I'd known. Of course I'd known, by then. But I'd never dreamed of being out. Of being with a woman. Of being able to get married to a woman. That type of life had seemed a million miles away, and it had seemed a charmed one, where nothing could ever go wrong.

It had, I realised suddenly. It had gone wrong.

And the scariest part? I didn't know how to get it back.

Chapter Twenty

Seeing my sister's face in the photos brought to my attention that I needed to go up to the cemetery where she was buried and do some maintenance of her grave. The events of the last few weeks had pushed it down on my list of priorities. Unlike my parents, who'd moved up to Bude about ten years after leaving Scotland, she and her family had chosen to stay down here in Miltree like me. As a result, she was buried in the local cemetery, about ten minutes' drive away. The next day was forecast to be nice, so before I went to bed I vowed to go up there after work. Perhaps being in her presence – even if she wasn't really there, just ashes under the ground – would help to calm me.

Thursday dawned bright and sunny – albeit chilly – so after seeing Petra off to work, I donned a jacket and drove up to the cemetery. The month of May on the West coast of England still had a bite to it at times, but I was one of those people who didn't feel the cold. A product of my upbringing in the chilly Scottish Highlands, perhaps, as Lyndsey had been the same. My constant warmth (even more so now with the menopause) had led to Petra's nickname for me as her little Scotch bonnet. I wasn't quite as warm as that chilli – one of the hottest in the world, I had read – but the nickname made me smile all the same.

True to form, I shed the jacket after a few minutes of working at the gravestone. The spring had sent the grass around it on a growth spurt, so I took my scissors to it, then washed down the stone and the pebbles around it. Nobody else did it these days – in the early days after her death, her husband Gareth had done this more than me, as had

Mum and Dad. But now Gareth and the boys had moved, and Mum and Dad were gone, so it was just me. I got up here much more frequently than I did Mum's and Dad's. It had only been a handful of weeks since I'd been here, but working on the spot broke me out into quite a sweat.

"There we go," I said aloud when I was satisfied. "You're looking good again. Not that you weren't before, but I've polished you up."

A memory arose unbidden of the later stages of her cancer. She'd never particularly cared about how she looked, but she and Gareth had been invited to a wedding of a close friend and she'd wanted to look the part, despite her dwindling energy levels. I'd helped her get ready, doing her makeup and painting her nails while she half-dozed, noting how skeletal she was becoming as I helped her into the dress. I now treasured this memory as she'd died four months later, and here I was today, still making sure she looked her best even though things had changed so much since then.

Petra had been up here once or twice, but she strongly disliked graveyards. In fact, she shied away from anything family-related, thanks to her bad experiences with her own. Nonetheless, she had always supported me in my grief, allowing me the time and space to talk about Lyndsey whenever she crossed my mind, which was often. My sister and I had been joined at the hip, after all, even after she got married and became a mother. Despite the nine-year age difference.

"I miss you, Lynds," I said aloud now. "My life is a whole lot poorer without you in it. Petra didn't fill the gap you left behind, not by a long stretch, but she filled other gaps. I've simply built myself around the grief, just like you said."

That was another crucial memory of mine, and one that never failed to bring tears to my eyes. By this point she had been almost entirely bed-bound, her voice no more than a rasp, and I had all but moved in to help take care of her, Gareth and the boys. They'd been at work or school during the day, and I'd managed to get compassionate

leave from work, leaving us some valuable sister-on-sister time. We'd been watching Breaking Bad on the television in their room, but neither of us were following the plot. Lyndsey didn't have the energy to even talk any more, but she'd held my hand. Then she'd started squeezing it urgently.

"What?" I'd said, sitting up quickly. "What's the matter?"

"Listen," she'd whispered. I'd shuffled closer and put my ear to her mouth.

"What?" I murmured again when she didn't say any more.

"You'll be okay, when I'm gone, won't you?"

"I don't know, Lynds, I honestly don't." Not the best thing to have said, with hindsight, but I was so taken aback that honesty was my default response.

"You will. Eventually. You'll build yourself around the grief. And I'll be watching you from up there, with the biggest smile on my face. So don't be afraid to carry on with your life, okay?"

"Okay," I murmured. Tears had begun to pour down my cheeks. "I'll be back in a minute."

She'd died ten days later. I wiped away my tears and hiccupped.

Of course, I had been okay. In the long run. The short-term aftermath of her death had been disastrous for us all. A grief-stricken Gareth had ploughed his way through the funeral, then announced he was putting the house up for sale. He was moving himself and the boys up to Scotland, near to where Lyndsey and I had been born. It was to feel closer to her, he said, and that was that. They'd been gone within eight weeks, and I had fallen apart.

But I tried not to think about that these days.

After about fifteen minutes, I put on my jacket again and stood up.

“Chin up, yeah?” I said to her, kissed my hand and patted the stone. I felt a little better, as I knew I would, and the grave certainly looked better. Now it was time to go home and tread on eggshells, with my wife mired in the tension that she seemed to be living in at the moment.

Chapter Twenty-One

Having said that, things began to improve in the run-up to Whitsun. Now the dust had settled following the sudden change in circumstances, the atmosphere between us became less combusive. It was still uneasy, but we seemed to be arguing less, for which I would be ever grateful. Her days still remained long while she scrambled to keep up, and some days she wouldn't get through the door until gone nine, at which point she was half-zombie. Whitsun was getting closer by the day, and I hoped that the week off would bring her some rest. In fact, I found myself quietly optimistic that the restorative effects of the half-term holiday ahead would give us enough of a boost to power through the final six and a half weeks of the school year.

That was, at least, until two days before the holiday, when Petra stalked through the door with the language of her entire body screaming of stress. To be fair to her, she did smile at me, and returned my peck on the cheek.

“Tolerable day?” I asked her, trying not to recoil at her excruciatingly strong perfume. ‘Tolerable’ was the adjective I had taken to using in place of ‘good’ when asking this question, for I had learned that by now, the adjectives used to describe her days swung between a spectrum of ‘tolerable’ to ‘fucking unbearable’, nothing better.

“Depends what you define by tolerable,” she said with a shrug, hanging her rain

jacket up on the hook. “How was yours?”

She didn’t always ask the question back, so I proceeded to tell her about my day, including about one particularly bitchy customer I’d dealt with at work that morning. I was intending to make her laugh – rude customers were part and parcel of the job, after all, and this one was by no means the worst I’d ever experienced – but I was just hitting my stride when Petra cut me off.

“Okay, okay, okay, okay,” she said dismissively. I froze mid-sentence and squinted at her through the door of the utility room, where she was getting changed. I could see her jaw was clenched and she actually looked furious.

“What’s the matter?” I said, and she tossed her head like a wet hen trying to settle her feathers.

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“I’ve had a difficult day, Jean. I played the role of Unofficial Therapist when The Kid was handed to me mid-meltdown while I was trying to edit this week’s newsletter, then put up with one of the new student cleaners whinging that she actually had to do her job rather than just stand there on her phone. We then had to explore why she wanted to stand there on her phone rather than do her job, and discovered that her mother is forcing her into this job as a cleaner because she’s behind on rent and needs the extra cash. I’m all therapist-ed out today, and I don’t have the mental energy to therapise you and your idiotic customers.”

Diatribes over, she wrenched her top over her head with a savage grunt and surged back through the house while I did my best to reattach my jaw. There were so many ways this conversation could go. I could stand up to her, and give her hell for the way she had spoken to me. That was my first instinct. But I was also curious – who was The Kid? She worked with a couple of hundred of them. What made this one stand out so much?

“Sorry... who’s The Kid?” I said, and she huffed at me from the bottom of the stairs.

“The one from a few weeks ago. The... one who didn’t know whether he was male or female. They. I suppose I should say ‘they’, for gender neutrality.”

“Don’t they have a name?”

“Anonymity,” she shrugged. I blinked.

“That’s their name?”

“No!” Despite it all, she actually laughed. “I mean I’m calling them The Kid to preserve their anonymity, in this conversation. You know what this village is like, with everyone wanting to know everyone else’s business. Not in a dehumanising or depersonalising way.”

“Let’s give them a code name. Let’s call them...” I cast around in my mind for a nickname but found nothing. “Anonymity. Anonymity... er, Smith.”

“Really?” Her mouth twitched. “Okay. ‘Anonymity Smith’ had a rough day today.”

“They’re still struggling?”

“Struggling like hell. I wish I had the answers for them. I still need to organise some LGBTQ... stuff. Education. For everyone. I haven’t gotten around to it. But really all I can do is listen to them, and give them access to a laptop, since their parents have full access to their search history and often check their phone.”

“Can’t they use an incognito tab?”

She shook her head. “Parents turned it off.”

“There has to be a way to un-turn it off, surely. In the settings-”

“Jean, problem-solving isn’t helping!” Petra’s bark nearly made me jump through the ceiling, and just like that, we were back to square one. “You can’t fix this, and neither can I. I shouldn’t even be telling you this shit. Just... listen up if I need you to, and butt out, okay?”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” I snapped, seeing red. “This is ridiculous. Have you forgotten we’re married? And you need to be nice to the people you’re married to, if you want them to continue liking you? I’ve put up with your bitchiness all the last few weeks,

and I understand that you're stressed, but I won't be spoken to like that. Do you understand?"

She blinked. I half wondered whether her jaw would hit the floor – it certainly dropped a couple of centimetres, and I heard it click. Obviously she hadn't expected me to retaliate like this, the allowances I'd been making for her in the last few weeks lulling her into a false sense of security. My fists balled at my sides as I forced myself to calm down, staring into the wall behind my wife while attempting to take some deep breaths.

"I'm sorry," she eventually choked, bringing my attention back to her. "I'll try to do better. I don't want to hurt you. I never want to hurt you." Then she made for the stairs. "I'm sorry."

Chapter Twenty-Two

It was very tempting to sleep on the sofa again that night. We spent the evening apart – Petra in the office, me in the living room – and even ate apart, as Petra took her noodles upstairs with her. I found I could barely touch mine, the nauseating slurry of anxiety and anger stealing my appetite. It was a feeling that had lessened over the last couple of weeks, and its return was most unwelcome.

In fact, by the time I clicked off the TV and returned the living room to silence, I felt rather like I would be sick. As I sat in the darkness, sweating but unable to open a window in case getting up made me vomit, my head began to throb and my vision on my right side began to go static, like a television losing signal. By this point I knew how the night was going to unfold: a proper migraine, which would probably last into tomorrow and potentially even beyond. I closed my eyes, but it didn't help.

Frozen to the spot because even the tiniest movement hurt like all hell, I contemplated calling Petra for assistance, but I wasn't hopeful that she'd hear me.

Raising my voice would feel like I was ripping my vocal cords out, and the most I could muster was a faintly agonised groan that – I listened hard – didn't seem to register upstairs. I opened my eyes and then immediately slammed them shut again as the visual information assaulted my brain, although the flickering in my right eye didn't go away. Movement was not an option – even raising my head felt as if my brain was being pulled out through my eyeball – so there I sat, head in hand, stomach churning, utterly stuck.

I was a mess.

The words came to me, fighting their way through the fog, branding themselves on the surface of my brain as if a particularly grotesque type of pyrogravure.

A mess.

Frumpy.

Fat.

Fragile.

Unable to do anything right.

Socially inept.

Generally inept.

Overcomplicated.

At times like this, I longed for my mum. She always knew what to do when I had migraines, because she herself had passed them on to me. In the first few months after Lyndsey died, I'd spent my life in a constant state of semi-migraine, which about half of the time left me completely unable to function, like now. Looking back on it, it was probably the emotional trauma hitting my limbic system. Just like this was probably the result of whatever was going on with Petra and I.

Before I could delve any further into that, my head started spinning. Or rather, I stayed centred while the world spun around me. The backs of my eyelids became a veritable fireworks show, and then my mind simply... left my body. That was the only way I could describe it to Petra the next morning when the pain eventually receded. What I didn't tell her was what it saw.

As if in a film, I had a birds-eye view of myself in the darkening living room, zooming in past the discarded bowl of noodles and bottle of water, landing squarely on me. But... the figure was not me. It was a woman, a dumpy middle-aged lesbian with purple and grey hair (mostly grey now), and until that moment I'd thought she was me.

But she wasn't. Her gender was wrong. Everything about her was wrong.

I'm not her, I thought with a sudden wave of nausea. I'm not a woman.

I had to accept it now. I'd pushed away that thought before, but now I could fight it no longer.

So then came the real question.

What in God's name am I?

Chapter Twenty-Three

I didn't move for hours. After my realisation, my mind had given up on thinking completely, and I'd floated around aimlessly in a pool of mental vacancy. That was how Petra found me: robbed of the ability to form words, curled up almost in the foetal position, leaving no doubt as to what afflicted me.

Her erstwhile easy manner came back to her as she helped me upstairs. She whispered reassuring, encouraging words that rolled down my spine and unlocked it enough for me to get upstairs, then assisted me in my ablutions before helping me into bed. There, I promptly threw up from motion sickness in the bucket she'd had the foresight to place by the side of the bed. How endearing.

Eventually, she settled me against the pillows, where I immediately put my head back in my hands, the one remaining part of my brain still functioning absolutely cringing with embarrassment. She'd seen me like this before, although these days my migraines didn't hit me anywhere near as often as they did after Lyndsey passed. But when they came, they tended to come in clusters, several over the space of a week or so. The thought that this was probably going to happen again in a few days made me want to curl up and die.

"Do you reckon you can lie down?" Petra's whisper broke through the roaring of my

blood in my ears.

“Nn-nn,” was all I could manage, not wanting to shake my head for fear of setting off the vomiting again. Quite frankly, I would have been happy to stay in that cramped position forever if it dulled the pain even slightly.

“Okay,” she whispered, brushing her lips over my bare raised knee. “I’m just going to clear up and use the bathroom, then I’ll come to bed.”

“Mm,” I grunted again, and was idly aware of her moving around as my mind continued to wander down its self-destructive alley, although none of the thoughts made sense. They simply floated by like wisps, leaving me straining to catch them in a net to analyse them, but ultimately failing. Somehow, before Petra even got into bed, I had fallen asleep.

When I woke up, I’d moved without realising it. Petra was asleep next to me, and I was laying on my right facing her. Inching my way cautiously onto my back and then onto my left to check my alarm clock, I was surprised to see that it was only two o’clock in the morning. The pain was gone completely, and I felt refreshed. Like someone had been in with a scalpel and hollowed out the part of my head that had been hurting. The relief was immense... except I couldn’t get back to sleep for the life of me.

In the end, after about half an hour, I risked getting up and (having found the dizziness gone too) gingerly made my way downstairs. I opened my laptop and signed on to the group chat, but there hadn’t been a whole lot of activity since I’d last looked, so it only took a minute to skim through it. Gemma’s ‘last active’ indicated she hadn’t been on for a couple of days – and although I was briefly tempted to message her, it was far too late to expect her to be up. Instead, I scrolled back through the messages and found our conversation about affairs. In the strange migraine-altered mindset in which I now found myself, they seemed to take on new meaning.

The thrill of an affair is like nothing else, she'd written.

My life certainly was missing some thrills, I mused. And validation. The only adrenaline I got these days was the bad kind, the 'oh-shit' kind when Petra snapped or when something happened at work. The only good kind I'd had recently was when Gemma had sent me that paragraph. The gushing, saccharine-sweet but simultaneously honest paragraph about how she saw me. I found myself scrolling further back now and finding it.

Determinedly ignoring the 'customer service lady' phrase, I focused on the rest of it.

You always brighten my day. It's why I jumped at the chance to chat to you tonight, even though I was half-asleep when I saw your message.

My mouth curved into a smile, and my fingers itched to message her. To weasel my way into a conversation with her, regardless of the time, and drown myself in more of this laudation, addictive as the most potent drug. She might not reply straight away, but there was no problem with opening a conversation, was there? She'd reply when she was awake.

Excitement fizzed in my gut as I typed out the most innocuous of messages – Good evening (or morning), how's tricks with you? – and pressed the send button. Then, absurdly, this was followed by a strange surge of guilt.

Shouldn't Petra be the one I was talking to at two o'clock in the morning when my brain was whirring fit to burst? She always had been that person. On several occasions before our engagement, she had been the recipient of many a long, emotional paragraph over text message in the wee hours. And since our marriage, a handful of late-night or early-morning panic attacks, although these had all but disappeared over the years. Now, however, I wouldn't dream of waking her. Not only because she needed the sleep, but because I didn't think she'd say the right things any

more. Not like Gemma would.

Oh, balls, I thought. Do not catch feelings for Gemma. Just don't. That would be the LAST thing you need right now!

This thought came because I suddenly recognised the warmth filling my body now the excitement had gone down. The twitching of my mouth as I read her old words. These had been the earliest signs that I was falling for Petra.

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The thrill of an affair is like nothing else.

Nope. Nope, nope, nope. We weren't going there. Not in a million years.

I slammed the laptop shut with a determined thump.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I was far too wired to go back to sleep now, so I hesitated at the top of the stairs before going into the music room. I had the sudden itch to play something on the piano – hopefully the ear-plugs Petra wore, combined with two closed doors between us, would prevent waking her.

There were only a few pieces I knew off by heart, but *Comptine d'un autre été: L'après midi* was one of them. Uncomplicated but yet effective, melancholy and moving without being loud and intrusive, it was the perfect song to play on the piano at two-thirty on a rainy Thursday morning, especially given how I was feeling.

Muscle memory led my left hand through the opening bars as I settled into a tempo the slightest bit slower than how it was meant to be played. I repeated the opening four bars twice, letting myself relax into it. I even closed my eyes and let instinct take over as my right hand began to pick out the melody line, calmly as if selecting each individual note from a mouthwatering choice, before tickling the keys lightly as the piece cantered along. Revisiting the opening melody, this time up the octave, brought tears to my eyes, stinging the backs of them and pinching at my nose. I forced myself to keep going even as they cascaded down my cheeks, the sadness in the notes cutting me deeply as they rippled in the highest keys. I could barely keep my hands from

shaking as they finally stilled on the final chord, bringing the piece to the perfect ending. Then my hands flew to my face as I cried quietly, hoping against hope that Petra wouldn't wake up and find me like this. Then I really would have to tell her what was going on: all the turmoil I was holding inside me. I felt that that could only go one of two ways: her disgust, revulsion and the complete breakdown of our marriage, or her taking on my problems stoically, adding them to the teetering pile she already had balancing on her slim shoulders. The former was highly unlikely, given how supportive she was being of 'Anonymity Smith', but even so I couldn't bear to see either of those happen.

No. I swallowed hard. As her wife, it was my duty to take on as much of her burden as I possibly could. With the sensitive nature of her job, that was very difficult, but she had a week off coming up. I knew that it would hardly be a week off, what with everything she had to organise, but I could at least treat her a little. Perhaps over the first weekend – this weekend. My spirits lifted. Yes – that was what I could do. As a starting point, at least. A weekend of Treating Petra Right. In capitals. Hopefully it would bring us closer together, reawaken those feelings inside me that had tonight been diverted by Gemma, and serve as a distraction from my angst.

My tears had all but dried by the time I stumbled back into bed a few minutes later. I had a solid plan: a decadent picnic on Saturday, followed by a shopping trip on Sunday. Both things I knew Petra enjoyed, and both of which would hopefully re-establish our connection. I could perhaps even initiate... a few things. Our sex life was non-existent at the moment, although my menopausal hormones had contributed to that long before any of this had happened.

Before pulling back the covers, however, I froze. Petra had shifted, now laying on her right facing away from me. One arm was outside the covers, and in her hand was a balled-up tissue, her ear plugs now on the bedside table next to her rather than in her ears. She was too tense to be asleep, and her breathing was that of someone who was awake. My heart thumped in my ears as I contemplated the notion that she'd actually

heard me playing, and possibly crying afterwards. And... that that had made her cry, too.

I didn't know whether to say anything. In the end, I decided not to. Gently, trying not to let on that I knew she was awake, I drew back the covers and climbed back into bed, laying on my back. Sleep was just pulling me under again when Petra shifted onto her back too and let out a deep sigh.

"Nursery rhyme from another summer," she said, her voice hoarse. For a second I thought she was talking in her sleep, and stayed still. But then, "That's what that means. The title of that piece." She paused. "I wish it was another summer."

Once again, I froze. I wanted to respond, of course I did. But I didn't know how to. Whatever I said, it would give away in a heartbeat how I felt. So I stayed silent, and after a moment Petra gave another deep sigh and turned back away from me.

Me too, Petra, I thought. Me too.

Chapter Twenty-Five

My weekend of 'Treating Petra Right' began the moment she stepped through the door. I met her with the most radiant smile I could manage, a peck on the cheek, and a chirp of "Congratulations, my love! You're free for a week!"

"Theoretically," she replied. "Victoria's feeling marginally stronger, finally, so I've arranged to go and see her at home tomorrow. She wants to hear everything that's going on."

"Tomorrow?" My heart sank.

"And then I've got buckets of work to do. She couldn't have gotten hurt at a worse

time, really. The summer term is always the busiest. There's Sports Day, the summer fete, parents' evening for Year Two and Year Five, all the jazz that goes with new intake for September, leavers' malarkey for Year Six... I need to use this week off to get on top of it all."

"Doesn't sound much like a week off," I said. It came out more sarcastic than I intended, but she didn't seem to pick up on it.

"No, it's not really, is it?"

She looked forlorn all of a sudden, her tote bag still over her shoulder, fiddling with the strap of her watch nervously. She wouldn't meet my eye, so I took a step forward and, with some effort, booped her on the nose. It was uncharacteristic for both of us, and she squinted at me sceptically.

"But all of that starts on Monday," I said, in the most decisive tone I could manage. It didn't wash, and she raised an eyebrow. "As your wife..." I gulped, hoping she'd think it was due to her glare, "...I'm staging an intervention, and forcing you to have the weekend off."

"No, Jean, that's not feasible."

"It'll have to be. I've made plans. Rearrange with Victoria, because tomorrow we're going on a picnic. I've got all the gear; I've even found our old picnic basket. And on Sunday we're going shopping."

Now her eyebrows almost disappeared into her hairline. "Shopping? You're actively volunteering to go... shopping?"

"It's how you unwind, isn't it? One of the ways, at least. I've done some strategic shift-swapping, so I have the whole weekend off, and we're going to walk around

Lygate shopping centre and make a damn sight better job of it than we did last time we went. I'm not going to be an arse, and you're going to get whatever the hell you want."

I must have had a rather frenzied look in my eye, because she squinted at me again.

"Jean, are you all right? You've never actively volunteered to go shopping before."

"I'm doing it for you. I'd do anything for you, Petra. Even if, in my less agreeable moments, it doesn't seem that way."

She looked at the floor again, and smiled. “Really, anything?”

“Of course,” I said, but now I felt unease creeping in. I knew that smile, and when she looked up, her eyes glinted with mischief.

“So you’ll come to the pub and do karaoke with me tonight, then?”

Chapter Twenty-Six

“You did say anything,” she said as we walked through the door of the pub.

I was saved from replying by a cry of welcome from what appeared to be half of the village’s inhabitants. I recognised a handful of women from the choir sitting at a big round table with their husbands, and waved. Meanwhile, Petra had been dragged almost bodily to a booth, in which I recognised some of the teachers from the school. Her face was positively throwing out sunbeams as she greeted them all. I awkwardly followed, standing to her side as she squeezed onto the edge of the bench on one side of the booth, pressed up against someone who I recognised as the music teacher Stella McBride.

“Room for one more?” I said, plastering a performance-mode grin on my face as they all looked up and clocked my presence.

“Everyone squeeze in,” Petra ordered, and after a hefty push I was perched on the edge of the other bench opposite Petra, next to Donna, one of the Year Three teachers. Immediately, however, we found ourselves getting up to let out one of the guys. He pulled himself to his feet with a groan.

“One of these days, they’ll invent a magic pill that stops you from needing the toilet every five minutes when you’re drinking,” he grumbled.

“Oh, you mean an anti-piss-tamine?” Petra’s comedic timing was spot-on. They all roared at her joke, and quite a few people looked over as we climbed back into the booth. I, however, chose to remain standing, because I knew Petra, and I knew she was about to offer to get a round in.

“So, what’s everyone drinking?” Petra said, right on cue, and there was a clamour of voices. She held up a hand, and they all shut up, as if she was their headteacher and they were the schoolchildren. In that moment, she was so like Victoria that my heart nearly stopped. “One at a time. Donna? We’ll go around the table from you.”

Once everyone had said what they wanted, Petra typed it into her phone and handed it to me. “You don’t mind going, do you, Jean? Use my card; it’s in the wallet.”

“Of course,” I murmured, taking the phone from her and heading for the bar. The total made me wince – but the money was coming from Petra’s own account, not our joint one, so I couldn’t complain. I shoved her phone in my back pocket and was soon wading back through the crowds with a loaded tray. As I approached, all of them, including Petra, were guffawing at something. The hairs rose on the back of my neck as, for one horrible moment, my mind supplied me with the suggestion that they were laughing at me and my barely-balanced load.

“Jean, Jean, do you fancy singing The Birdie Song with me? Donna suggested it,” Petra said over the top of everyone’s laughter once she spotted me.

“But that song’s got no vocals,” I said with a frown.

“I know, that’s why we’ve all told her she’s an idiot!” The whole table, including Donna, burst into laughter again, and I laughed along, even though I really didn’t find

it funny. The number of empty glasses on the table caused me to do an internal eyebrow raise – that would explain it.

“No, seriously, what song do you want to do?” Petra leaned forward and looked at me. “I’ll go and sign us up now.”

Now the whole table was staring at me expectantly, and I held my hands up in surrender.

“Surprise me,” I said, to a cheer from the rest of them. Petra leapt to her feet. “Just make sure it’s something that we’ve sung before, okay?” I added to her departing back, and just about heard her reply in the affirmative over the hubbub.

“We’re doing a group number.” One of the other teachers leaned over to address me. “Turn On The Radio by Eulalia Gray. Will you join?”

I quickly counted the people. Seven people, not including Petra and I. Between them, they’d murder the iconic vocals of the legendary Kiwi singer-songwriter with their Cornish accents. I held Eulalia in such a high regard that my insides cringed quite without any conscious input from me, and it was all I could do to shake my head with a polite smile.

It was going to be a long night.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Do you have any idea when we’re singing?” I asked when Petra came back.

“No idea, but the list looked quite long. They’re just starting up now. Cheers!” She clinked her wine glass against mine, but I couldn’t seem to drink more than a sip, instead toying with the stem nervously. I’d intended to order a beer, but at the last

minute had gone for the same pink Moscato as Petra for appearance's sake. It was after all the ultra-traditional Veronica on duty, who'd once berated Petra and I for too many public displays of affection in her pub.

"Veronica, why should we give the smallest of fucks what you think of us when we don't think of you at all?" Petra had said, sweeping out, and from then on it had been war between her and the pub landlady. But in time, Petra had gained power in the village, as deputy head, thus getting most of the villagers on her side. Veronica had subsequently tamed her vitriol to a few penetrating stares, plus a tone dripping with derision, and had stopped chucking us out of the pub.

The School Squad (as they'd named themselves on the karaoke list, I learned) quickly reabsorbed Petra back into their conversation, and I heard her enthusiastically agreeing to join their rendition of the Eulalia classic. I remained on the outskirts as usual, trying to keep up with their jargon and the conversation pinging back and forth between the eight participants, but it was a futile effort and I felt my eyes begin to glaze over. Meanwhile, the karaoke was in full swing as various villagers (and a handful of tourists, early for the Whitsun week) began to howl their way through the old upbeat classics.

After a while, I gave up and surveyed the room instead. At a little table by the door, I noticed Cass and her girlfriend Felicia Wilson. They seemed to have been waiting for me to notice them, because their faces lit up when I spotted them and they waved me over with big smiles on their faces. I felt a matching grin spread across mine as I made my way over to our fellow Sapphic couple.

"Hello, strangers! Hello, soloist!" I made sure my tone was bright and sparkly – which wasn't that difficult, as I truly liked and admired the two women. Especially knowing what I now knew about Felicia. I'd researched Dissociative Identity Disorder, and I knew that Felicia's life – and the lives of all of the alters – was significantly more complicated than someone without DID.

“Hello, choir leader!” Felicia matched my chirpy tone. She got up. “Have a seat. You looked like you were barely hanging on by one bum-cheek back there.”

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“I can’t just turf you out of your seat!” I protested, but Cass was already scooting her chair back and Felicia had sat down on her lap.

“Problem solved,” she said, wrapping one arm around Cass’s neck and gesturing with her other hand for me to sit down. I did, and my lower back groaned with relief.

“You doing karaoke?” Cass said, nodding towards the teachers. I followed her gaze and saw that the Squad had filled the little gap I’d left behind as if I’d never been there. It would have stung if I hadn’t been busy processing her question.

“Yes, but not with them.” I nodded towards the squad too. “I’m doing it with Petra.”

“Brilliant!” Felicia clapped her hands together delightedly. “I love it when you sing together. You don’t do it as much as you used to. Why not?”

I didn’t have an answer to her blunt question, but I was saved from replying by the Squad all getting to their feet and making their way to the stage. There were too many people in the way for me to see any of them except the one who was on the end of the row. Nonetheless, when they began to sing I immediately heard Petra’s voice, and eventually stood up to see her better.

There were four microphones, but they’d clearly agreed to give Petra one to herself, the others having one between two. I noticed that there was only seven of them when before there had been eight, and then I spotted Donna sitting in the booth where I had sat, clearly guarding their stuff. My glass of wine was in front of her – I’d forgotten to bring it with me, but I wasn’t that bothered.

The lyrics were simple and everyone knew them, so by the final chorus everyone was singing along, some even jumping up and down. In the live version, Eulalia had added some (what I believed were) improvised belts over the top of the main lyrics. Petra sung these, accompanying each one with a gleeful punch to the air like Eulalia had done in her farewell concert, and in the outro she and the teachers congratulated each other with a group hug.

Not many people would be able to do that with their boss. That was one of the many things that made Petra so good at her job, and such an all-around fabulous person. My heart ached with pride, and a tiny part of me missed her somehow.

They sat back down, not seeming to notice I wasn't there, and I glanced to my right. Felicia had Cass wrapped in the tightest hug I'd ever have thought possible, and a tear was running down the latter's cheek, although she was smiling.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! This is supposed to be a happy song!" I nudged Cass to show I was joking as I sat down myself.

"I know. I am happy. Eulalia's songs just get me a little... choked up," Cass replied, and Felicia loosened her grip. "I'm just going to the bathroom – shift yourself a second, Fee."

As she got up, I noticed Felicia raise her eyebrows at her, and Cass give a tiny shake of the head in response. But before I could say anything, I saw Petra get up again and disappear towards the stage. A couple of seconds later, Veronica's voice – laced with poison, as always – called out over the microphone. "Is Jean Taylor anywhere here? Petra's friend? If so, can she come up to the stage please?"

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"Freddie Elliot agreed to swap," Petra said, a beam adorning her face. "I'm on such a

high from that last number, I thought we might as well get ours out of the way too.”

Out of the way, she said. As if our duet was a chore, when she'd been the one to ask for it. But I didn't say anything – we were in public, after all – and took my position on the stage to her right. I still had no idea what song we were singing, but as the guitar began to play from the machine, I instantly recognised it as Shallow, and had a few bars to prepare and shift into character as Jack Maine from *A Star Is Born*. For a brief moment, I regretted not having a proper drink to loosen up, but then I glanced at Petra – waiting with a small smile on her face – and squared my shoulders.

I was lucky in that I only had seven lines to sing solo in the whole song. Petra had far more: a verse of seven lines, half of the chorus (the other half with me), a bridge and then another half a chorus before I came back in. While I sung my bit, I forced myself not to look at her, instead focusing on the back wall, where I presumed Cass and Felicia were. I finished my verse solemnly, and took a step back, as I positively felt the audience's focus shift to Petra.

Her voice was as crystal clear as ever, although it had a throaty element to it that made me think she was tearing up. She turned to me as she delivered her first line, as if she really were Ally Campana singing to her soon-to-be love interest, Jack. The word 'boy', used to address me, hit me like a punch to the gut. I felt my heart begin to race and my palms begin to sweat, but with a Herculean effort I forced myself to focus on her.

Then she turned to me again – just a brief glance, but she caught my eye. And I did see tears in hers. It made the last line of the verse hit hard – was she trying to tell me something? Ask me something? But I had no time to think about it in that moment as she was moving straight into the chorus, her voice chill-worthy although slightly more restrained than it would be later. The first four lines disappeared in barely more than a blink and then it was my cue to re-enter, both of us slipping back into our harmonies as if we'd only rehearsed it this afternoon.

The bridge was Petra's favourite part as it allowed her to really go to town on her vocal runs, stepping on each note firmly and making her years of training and experience evident. I couldn't really see the audience as we were under a spotlight and the pub was dark, but in the brief pauses between runs, they didn't make a sound. Too enthralled, like me. As she belted out the final chorus, I had a mental image of her voice cutting through the air like the subtle knife in *His Dark Materials*, opening up a window. Through this window, I could see Petra's vulnerability. How tightly she was gripping on. How close to the edge this whole headteacher business was sending her.

I almost missed my cue to re-enter. But even though I clawed it back, standing right next to her, slipping an arm around her waist and doing my best impression of a loved-up wife, I was acting on autopilot while my heart thudded in my chest. As we finished, Petra gave me a smooch on the cheek and we smiled at the whooping, hollering crowd. Then I felt her rip away from me as she took a bow, forcing me to take one too, and the applause turned to thunder.

We walked off the stage together, handing our microphones to Veronica, and Petra's hand found mine as we picked our way through the crowd once again. To my surprise, she led us to the door, fanning her face with her free hand on the way past the school squad to indicate we were getting some air. It wasn't a bad shout – the cool sea breeze sliced through my menopause- and anxiety-induced internal heatwave and I instantly felt a bit calmer.

My heart still thudded, though. I wanted nothing more than to kiss her senseless, chase away that haunting helplessness I'd seen in her eyes during the performance. But now she was staring at me, with (for once) an unidentifiable expression. And my mind clicked. Had she picked that song... just to call me 'boy'? To test it out, so I could see how it felt? To acknowledge the gender-based battle raging in my head? In the film, after all, the two characters were essentially asking each other whether they were happy being themselves. That was the premise of the song. Now my thudding

heart filled with relief. She saw me. She saw my anguish. Without even telling her, she'd picked up on it.

Then she blinked, and smiled at me.

“Wasn’t that mightily satisfying?”

I blinked too. “Huh?”

“They were eating out of the palms of our hands. God, I love that song. The harmonies are so juicy, and for the female singer it really shows off her belting ability. They loved it. I loved it.”

“Me too,” I said after a pause, although my mouth had gone dry.

Petra took a deep breath and then exhaled slowly. “Right, I feel a bit cooler now. You coming in?”

“In a minute,” I heard myself say. Then she was gone.

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So she hadn't chosen the song with any deep intentions, after all. Just because it was a good karaoke track for our voices. She didn't see me, or my internal torment, even if I had briefly seen hers. She hadn't even been looking for it.

She may have been in tune with the song... but she wasn't in tune with me.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The next day, I realised how ridiculous my spiralling thoughts had been.

Of course Petra didn't know how I'd been feeling. She wasn't a mind-reader! I hadn't mentioned a thing, so as far as she was concerned, I was still the same wife she'd always had, comfortable (ish) in her own skin. I gave myself a stern talking-to as I made seafood sandwiches the next morning in preparation for our picnic. This absolutely did not require the sleepless night you just had, I told myself sternly. Nor did it warrant you getting up at six o'clock in the morning.

But it meant you could go to the fishmongers early and get this seafood for Petra, another voice in my head replied. I ended the self-imposed lecture there, instead switching on some quiet jazz so as not to wake her while I chopped up some pre-cooked lobster and prawns, then mixed them with Marie Rose and lemon juice before stuffing them into two lettuce-laden brioche buns. Having tucked them into a Tupperware, I turned my attention to the fruit, washing the strawberries and raspberries before stashing them away too. And gradually our picnic was assembled – to be kept in the fridge until we went out later.

“You've been busy.”

“Jesus Christ, Petra,” I said, jumping out of my skin.

“Morning,” she said casually, yawning and sitting down at the kitchen table. “What time is it?”

“Eight-thirty.”

“Christ. I’ve normally been at work for an hour by now-”

“No, no, no.” I sat down opposite from her and stared into her eyes. “For the next two days, work is a taboo topic. No mention of it shall pass our lips. No thoughts of it shall enter your head. None. Nada. Zilch.” I made a slicing motion with my hand, just to emphasise the point, exactly as I imagined Felicia Wilson would have done. “Capisce?”

“Capisce,” she chuckled. “You were serious about this picnic then?”

“Dead serious,” I confirmed. “It’s all prepped and ready. I even bought some chocolate-chip pancakes to have for breakfast. What do you think?”

“You know the way to this girl’s heart.” She smiled up at me, although it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

In no time at all, I had heated up the pancakes, and had them on plates in front of us, drizzled with golden syrup. We ate them in an almost-comfortable silence, while I toyed with the idea of asking her, ‘And how IS your heart, these days?’

However, I couldn’t quite pluck up the courage. Perhaps the right moment would come on our picnic.

But as it was, it didn’t. Rather, there was a sense of unease hovering over it. We were

simply just going through the motions.

All the ingredients were there – pun not intended. While Petra showered and dressed at a leisurely pace, I washed up, then packed the cool-box with sandwiches, berries, grissini and a bottle of pale pink wine that I'd acquired at work the day before. I placed the cool-box into the picnic hamper, then tucked a couple of plastic cups and some napkins down the sides before topping it with the picnic blanket.

We set off on our walk towards the fields, as planned. It was a picture-perfect day: sunny, pleasantly warm, blue-skied and tinged with the fragrance of the ocean. For the millionth time, I marvelled at how lucky we were to live in a place like this.

There the awkwardness began. Ordinarily, we would have walked through the village hand-in-hand or arm-in-arm – after all, our relationship was no secret, and any opposition to it had generally run its course aside from the odd eye-roll or sneer. However, today our usually-entwined hands lay limply at our sides. I had the hamper balanced on one hip the same way one would carry a child if it had handles, but the hand nearest Petra was free and available. However, neither of us reached for the other. I wanted the sensation of her warm hand in mine with the keenness of an addict, but she didn't seem overly bothered, and I didn't want to seem desperate. This dominated my thoughts for the first few minutes of our walk, until we reached the small alleyway which led to the fields and to Clearview Hill.

The alley was so narrow that we had to walk single-file with the picnic basket between us, but we had all the room in the world once we got through the gate into the field. It may have been my imagination, but I thought that Petra used this fact as an opportunity to put even more distance between us. We were walking diagonally across the field, and at one point it was as if we were practicing social distancing again, even though that pandemic-related rule had ended nearly a year ago. For the first time, I wished we had someone else with us. A little dog, or even – and this thought really shocked me – a child. It had been a mutual decision of ours not to have

children, as neither of us had ever wanted them, but suddenly I realised that they would have been facilitators of communication between Petra and I, even if they were huge sources of stress too.

Communication, I thought. That was our problem. We were struggling to communicate with each other.

Exhibit A of that notion was being demonstrated here and now before my eyes. In the whole time it took for us to climb up the hill – an arduous task that ended up with both of us carrying the picnic basket before Petra took it off me completely – we exchanged ten words.

“Can I take a handle?”

“Okay.”

“Give it here.”

“Okay.”

Granted, both of us were rather too puffed to say anything more, but the air felt as if it was bristling with tension. It was so different from our usual easy chatter and affection and humour that it actually brought tears to my eyes at one point.

Where on Earth had we gone?

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The froideur between us melted only marginally while we ate at the top of the hill. Petra expressed appreciation for the food, especially the bar of salted dark chocolate I produced at the end, which she only ever allowed herself as an occasional indulgence.

“Just one square,” she said, but I kept handing them to her as she stared at the view and before we knew it, the bar had gone. When she turned back to me and noticed this, her eyebrows raised. “Hey, you’re supposed to be helping me out here! Not feeding me chocolate!”

“You’re still losing weight,” I said, the words coming out before I could filter them. “I know it’s the stress, but I thought a little chocolate might help. Plus, we’ve had fruit to balance it out.”

“I guess,” she said, and quickly got to her feet. “Come on. Let’s go home.”

Let’s go home? This time it was my eyebrows that raised. Petra never said that – she was always a doer, someone who wanted to be on the go at all times, always out and about. I took a closer look at her, and saw the dark circles under her eyes now she’d taken off her sunglasses, accentuated by the sun on her face. She must still be feeling pretty wiped. It was a foolish thought on my part to have expected one lie-in to make up for all those lost hours of sleep.

On the way home, she walked slightly ahead of me, carrying the now much lighter picnic basket. It was understandable on the narrower parts of the track, like going back down the hill, but even on the wider parts she stayed a few steps ahead of me, and to onlookers it probably looked like I was chasing her.

Halfway back home, she stopped dead.

“Shit. Shit,” she muttered.

“What’s wrong?” I said, finally drawing level with her. To my surprise, she handed me the basket.

“I need to drop by the school. I left something in my office. Something I need.”

“What can you possibly need if you’re not doing any work today, like we agreed?”

“My watch!” She tapped her empty wrist dramatically. “I like to be able to tell the time.”

“But you have your phone clock! And plenty of clocks at home...” I tailed off, because she was already walking back towards the school.

“You go ahead. I’ll be five minutes, okay?”

“Fine,” I whispered, and continued to trudge up the hill. By the time I let myself into Oceanview, tears were stinging my eyes, and I let them fall as soon as the door was shut.

Quickly. Cry and then get cleaned up. She’ll be back any second.

Throwing the basket onto the sofa, I lolloped up the stairs, clumsily because of my blurred vision. Petra had a box of tissues on her bedside table and as I fumbled for it, my hand connected with something cold and round and shiny.

Her watch.

Now I remembered seeing it on her yesterday. She'd been toying with it anxiously when she came in the door, before consciously making an effort to stop herself. Could she really have forgotten that, and thought it was still at school? Despite seeing it on her bedside table this morning? Or... was that an excuse?

Was she lying to me?

I sunk onto the bed, my hand grabbing a tissue on autopilot and wiping my eyes and nose. One more question appeared in my mind, out of nowhere.

Is SHE having an affair?

Chapter Thirty

The more I thought about it, the more it made sense.

Her physical and emotional absence. The way she carried her phone around with her now rather than leaving it laying around. Her aversion to sex, and touch in general. Her sudden new affinity for drowning herself in perfume – especially when she arrived home at night.

I gasped out loud. The signs were there. The signs were flashing in bright elaborate neon monstrosities – literally flashing as my vision started to flicker – and I'd been blind to them.

My blood ran cold. Who the fuck is it?

It had to be someone at work. That was where she spent all of her time, and someone would very likely report it back to me if they spotted her sneaking about into someone else's house. The rumour mill and gossip chain in this village were well-oiled machines. I cast my mind back to last night, the five other women (and two

men) who'd been at the booth with us, the way she'd come to life under all of their attention. There had been Stella McBride – of course, Stella McBride!

It was all so obvious now. Stella was gorgeousity personified. Young – in her late twenties, I'd say – and leggy. Dignified and confident. Dark-haired and alluring. Exactly as Petra had been when I'd first known her. Exactly as she still was, in fact. With us, it had been a case of 'opposites-attract', but how could I expect anyone not to fall for that...?

Clutching my head with my hand, I ran through everything I knew about her. She was a relatively new hire, having started in September. Petra had interviewed her for the position about a year ago, but other than that, I couldn't think of anything else she'd said about her. The only reason I even knew her face was because we'd seen her around the village and Petra had pointed her out.

And why would Petra feel the need to have an affair?

Even as I thought it, I knew. Her wife was a mess. An emotionally turbulent, unsure-of-herself mess. A physical mess, too, with scruffy, frizzy, more-grey-than-purple hair, frumpy clothes and wrinkles galore. I'd been called 'Sir' too many times than I cared to remember, especially after cutting my hair short when I was in my thirties. (Not that I'd particularly minded. In fact, I minded it more when people called me 'Madam'.)

That was the appeal of Stella McBride, I realised. She actually looked like a woman. Petra was a lesbian. She was, by definition, attracted to women. Conventional women, like her ex, and like Stella. Unlike me.

I was an androgynous person. I always had been, even way before I met Petra, and she'd always claimed to have found me attractive. But perhaps that was just... false. Perhaps she'd claimed that just to make me feel better.

Which posed the question...

Did she actually love me any more?

Just as that question rocketed through my head, I heard her key in the door and bolted upright. A quick scrub of the tissue over my streaming eyes and nose and I turned to face myself in the mirror. I would have to think about this later.

If Petra noticed I had been crying, she didn't mention it. She flitted about the kitchen like a trapped moth, preparing a cup of coffee, with a slightly crazed look in her eye.

And as I stepped closer, I was hit by the overwhelming smell of recently-applied perfume.

It was enough to make me retch, and the migraine came crashing in with full force.

Now I remembered once again what Gemma had said.

Until recently I'd have recommended it, until I realised what it was like to be on the receiving end.

If this was the receiving end, it felt like crap.

Chapter Thirty-One

“Will you be okay if I go out and see Victoria today?” Petra said the next morning, perching on the edge of the bed next to my legs. “You still look pretty peaky.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said through a mouth dry as the desert. “I’m sorry we had to cancel the shopping trip.”

“I’m not disappointed,” she reassured me. “I needed to go and see Victoria, anyway. If you need me to come home, or you start throwing up again, just call me and I’ll be there. Okay?”

“Thanks,” I whispered. “Bloody crustaceans.”

“Bloody crustaceans,” she echoed with a smile, before getting up and patting my legs. “Okay, I’ll see you soon.”

When she was gone, I swung my legs out of bed and tested their strength, surprised to find them functional. The nausea that had formed my reaction to Petra’s perfume

yesterday had segued into an afternoon of relentless vomiting as my mind processed the morning's discovery, before developing into a repeat performance of the other day's migraine.

Discovery was an inaccurate word, really. It wasn't as if there was any proof. I needed to get her phone off her at some point, ideally, but she was so protective over it these days. There was never any hope of her leaving it behind. And that wasn't even taking into consideration her passcode. She changed it every few months and while she normally told me her new one, she hadn't recently. I had a fingerprint saved on her phone so I could unlock it, but that had been set up a while ago and I'd never had any cause to use it. It was worth a try because surely, if they were having an affair, there would be incriminating text messages. There had to be.

As luck would have it, my chance came just a couple of hours later. Petra arrived back from Victoria's looking very evasive. She dashed straight upstairs and into the shower, claiming that she'd been watering Victoria's pot plants and had spilt plant food on herself. "And it bloody stinks," she said, whipping past me into the bathroom before I could even get out of bed to greet her.

The shower turned on immediately, and I knew that this was my chance. I crept downstairs and into the living room. When I went into the living room, her phone was sitting on the arm of the sofa, and my heart leapt into my mouth as I picked it up.

I was going to check my wife's phone for evidence of an affair.

A ridiculous notion, but I had to.

The sensor worked first time once I found it. It was on the back of the phone, which was different to mine. With a soft click, the phone opened onto a picture of some random figures that I presumed Petra had taken to show Victoria. I went back to the phone screen and opened the messaging app. Victoria Berry was the most recent

conversation, and underneath her... S. McBride. Heart pounding now, I opened the conversation.

Reading the messages, my brow furrowed. They were all repetitive, and each only had a couple of words.

S. McBride: 20?

Petra: Yes please!

S. McBride: Okay

That was it. I scrolled back, and there were a few of these conversations, starting about a month ago. Before that, there were a handful of conversations about work over the last nine months, most of them instigated by Stella. And then that was it. Nothing else. Nada. Zilch.

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I made sure to close the app properly, return the phone to the screen it had been on before, and set it down in the same position in which Petra had left it. Then I sat back on the sofa, frowning.

Perhaps she's just very good at deleting incriminating evidence? I thought. I'll have to keep a closer eye on her phone in the future.

Just then, I heard the shower switch off, and I knew that it wouldn't take long for Petra to get dressed and come back downstairs again. I bolted into the kitchen and stood there for a second, looking around wildly until my eyes settled on a loaf of bread and I realised I hadn't eaten lunch. My movements rather frantic, I grabbed a bread knife and started sawing off four slices, but halfway down the third I realised Petra may have eaten lunch with Victoria.

"I've already eaten," she said from behind me, as if reading my thoughts, and I nearly took my hand off with the knife by flinching.

"She gave you lunch?"

"I offered to make her some, and she told me to make myself some while I was at it. It was only canned soup and a sandwich, but still..." Petra shrugged.

"Hardly one of my gourmet sandwiches, then," I said with a concerted effort to seem chipper, carving off the third slice of bread completely and staring at it. "You sure you don't want half of one?"

"No, thanks."

I tried not to look shifty.

“So... how was she?”

Petra paused.

“Cowed, I think is the word. Shell-shocked. A husk of her normal formidable self. I’ve never seen her so... beaten down by life. She can still barely move. She’s not paralysed or anything, but they put a ton of metalwork into her spine, so she’s very stiff. She’s got her neighbour coming in to help her, who’s a lovely woman... but she’s still pretty stuck. All the same, she gave me some valuable advice on how to proceed for the rest of term, and now I’ve got a whole extra bunch of items on my to-do list!” She laughed mirthlessly. “I’d best get up there and get to it.”

“Really?” I pouted. “I thought I said work was banned for this weekend. It’s only Sunday lunchtime.”

I thought I saw a flicker of annoyance cross her face, but when I looked again it was gone, replaced by a softer look of sympathy.

“But I have so much shit to do, Jean.”

“I’m feeling better now. I thought... we could try Lygate again...?”

“No, Jean.” Her voice was firm, bordering on frustrated. “I just told you, I’ve got too much to do. We had quality time yesterday. I just want to make a cup of coffee and get on with my work upstairs. Just... let me be.”

“Okay then,” I whispered, and our eyes finally met. But she dropped the eye contact almost immediately.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m being a shitty wife. It’s not you, okay? I’m not intending to take it out on you. It’s on me.”

Guilt if ever I saw it. I swallowed hard, and left the room.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Over the course of the week, all notions I had about Petra getting some rest and time to recharge went out of the window. It was as if the kids were at school even though I knew they were off: Petra got up early and went to work, and didn’t return home until normally gone six o’clock. She seemed marginally less strung out, presumably due to the absence of the children themselves, and even commented on the Tuesday that it was satisfying seeing some of the items on her to-do list being crossed off. She also seemed to be sleeping better – some of the tension was dropping out of her face in her sleep, I observed when I got up early for work. I wondered if Stella McBride was there. And if she was contributing to the reduction of stress at all.

On the Wednesday, she gave in to my pleas and agreed to give herself the Saturday off again.

“We don’t have to do anything special,” I said beseechingly. “We can just stay at home and... potter. Titivate the garden. Wash the car. Do normal coupley things.”

“Normal coupley things?” She raised an eyebrow at me, and her lip quirked at the corner.

“No, no, not... it doesn’t have to be sex!” I protested, feeling my face heat up. “Although that would be nice if you’re up for it, of course. But we could just... I don’t know, do the stuff we used to do on weekends. And in holidays. Life stuff!”

“Life stuff,” she repeated, and raised her eyes heavenward, as if cursing my

ineloquence. Then she sighed. “Okay. We’ll do life stuff. Not sure I have the energy for sex, though.”

“Okay,” I said, feeling a mild burn of disappointment. I’d always been indifferent to sex, aside from in the first heady days of our relationship when our close proximity had been as necessary as oxygen. But she’d always, always been up for it. Any hour of the day, any place, in any form. Yes, life was full-on, but we’d not even attempted it since the day of Victoria’s accident more than a month ago, and even before that it had been sporadic.

It would make sense, therefore, for her to be getting it elsewhere.

Chapter Thirty-Three

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“Do you reckon Petra would cheat on me?” I said to Lyndsey’s gravestone the following day. In the absence of Petra herself, and the nullification of my own personal to-do list, I’d found myself up at the graveyard.

It was a bit of a stupid question. Lyndsey, when she was alive, had never met Petra. Petra had been up here with me on a few occasions to visit her, but she’d never said a word to her. On some level, I think she thought that speaking to a dead relative’s gravestone was a bit odd, which was why I’d never asked her to come with me to visit Mum’s and Dad’s. But it was how I coped – it was how I had always coped – and thus she had never questioned it.

“Okay, I know you don’t know her that well,” I sighed. “But if you are watching above me, you’ll have seen what’s going on. The last month or so, she’s been acting very strangely. Paying more attention to what she wears, wearing more perfume, coming home late, darting away at random moments... I didn’t see it until the other day, but they’re all neon flashing signs, aren’t they?”

Silence. As expected, of course.

I sighed again.

“It’s probably my own fault, if she’s playing away. Well, partially. My head’s not exactly been in the game recently. The more I chase her, the more she seems to be withdrawing. But that doesn’t justify her having an affair!” I spat, before forcing myself to remain calm.

“Of course, I have no proof. I looked at her phone, but the only texts between her and

the potential culprit are in code, and very sporadic at that. And I can't catch her in the act, because they work together and I can't exactly walk into the school unannounced. Perhaps I need to convince her that I'm still desirable. I'm not sure how, though. Neither of us have any sort of libido at the moment."

Now I stared miserably at the gravestone. I'd run out of words, which was unusual for me. Normally I could chatter away nineteen-to-the-dozen with my sister, just as we had together when she was alive. Today, I seemed to have lost my voice.

But I couldn't turn around and walk away now. I'd only been here five minutes, including the quickest tidy-up of the stone I'd ever managed. Such a short time was unjustifiable, but I had nothing left to say.

In the absence of anything else to do, I pulled out my phone. Anti-social, maybe, but I preferred to think of it as co-existing in companionable silence. There wasn't a whole lot of signal in the graveyard, but enough to check my messages (none) and then open Instagram and start scrolling through the short cat videos and interspersed adverts.

One of them caught my eye. I had automatically scrolled past it, but then I backtracked, screwing up my face as a thought passed through my head.

Well... maybe it's worth a shot.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Just over twenty-four hours later, my lip curled as I surveyed the two objects nestled in a puddle of plastic packaging on the bed.

You might as well put them on, I told myself, but made no effort to pick them up.

It had seemed like such a good idea at the time. The advert that had given me pause

in the graveyard was a lingerie advert. But not the usual ones consisting of a sex goddess wearing crotchless knickers and a pair of ‘fuck-me eyes’. This advert consisted of a middle-aged woman – about my age, actually – modelling underwear that was attractive yet tasteful. It made me wonder. Was this the sort of thing Petra would want me wearing? Would this resurrect us from the Lesbian Bed Death in which we found ourselves?

Lingerie, I had mouthed to myself, then – for the first time in my life, and with more than a little trepidation – clicked on the advert.

Once I’d gotten over the initial astonishment that I had not, in fact, been sent to some dodgy scam website, I’d clicked through the wares. Petra would have worn them to perfection, Greek goddess that she was, but the idea of me adorning any of them turned my stomach. When it came to underwear, I was firmly in my no-frills purely-functional practically-granny-pants era, and the last time I’d worn anything deliberately provocative had been in my twenties, eons before my days with Petra.

But perhaps it was time for a change. Make the most of what nature had given me, as it were. Galvanise us back into action.

“Can’t believe I’m looking at sexy undies while sitting at my sister’s graveside...” I’d muttered to myself, but still didn’t click off the website.

I’d selected what I thought was the least hideous of the matching sets. Then it was a case of going home and measuring myself to find out what actually fit – it had been so long since I’d actually bought anything of this ilk, I didn’t even know my size any more. Once added to basket, I’d discovered that they did an express next-day delivery. No time like the present. Before I could chicken out, I’d entered my card details and had a confirmation email pinging into my inbox. Only then did I sit back and curse my over-ambitious self.

Now I cursed them yet again, and checked my watch. Petra would be home any time now. With that hollow tiredness in her eyes, and the drawn look on her face, and the tense jaw that clearly ached from grinding. The longing to take that all away, and replace it with euphoria, spurred me into action. I adorned the matching lingerie set quickly and efficiently, then opened the wardrobe door to check it out in the full-length mirror.

And immediately started crying. As if some invisible force had taken hold of my lungs, I held a hand to my chest to try and draw in oxygen between my choked sobs.

That's not me. That's not me. The words whirled around my head again. I'm not her.

The reflection in the mirror was wrong. It didn't match the one in my head. There wasn't one in my head per se, but I knew that the one I saw now was not it. I wasn't supposed to have these attributes. Or this innately female face, or the womanly voice that filled the room when I moaned "No, no, no," to myself. My knees gave way and I sunk to the floor.

I really needed to figure this out. I knew I wasn't a woman, but I'd been putting off thinking about what I actually was. It was a daunting prospect, and my mouth went dry as I struggled to pull in some air. What if it sent my mental health spiralling out of control again? Petra wouldn't be there for me. She had her hands too full.

How could I put myself at risk of falling, if Petra wasn't going to catch me?

Chapter Thirty-Five

Just then, as if she'd sensed what was happening and had timed her entrance accordingly, I heard Petra's key in the door.

"Shit," I whispered to myself under my breath, making a dive for the bathroom. I

heard her call a greeting, then my name, but I didn't respond, dousing a cloth in cold water and holding it to my eyes, then my nose, praying that the redness would die down. Emotionally, I used every fibre of my being to put a freeze on my distress. In my mind, I selected performance mode, just as I would have done if a neighbour had come to the door, or if it had been time to go to choir practice, or if the phone had rung.

This was ridiculous. I let my hand fall to the sink, still holding the face cloth. I shouldn't have to put on performance mode for my own wife. The backbone of any relationship was honesty and communication, surely? I needed to be honest with her. Tell the truth about how I was feeling, sexy lingerie be damned. I realised I was still wearing it, and grabbed one of the straps in frustration. I was just about to tear it off when-

“Jean?”

“Petra,” I said automatically, dropping my hands to my sides as I turned to face her. In that instant, spotting the haunted greyness of her pallor, I knew I couldn't tell her. Not when she was so overwhelmed.

“Wow,” she said after a brief pause. “This is... different.”

“Surprise?” I said weakly.

“Yeah, a surprise,” she nodded, swallowing hard. “A pleasant one, of course. A different one.”

“This wasn't quite how I planned it,” I said. “I was going to surprise you at the door with it. In the hope that you'd be too stunned to speak and instead would just whisk me upstairs to the bedroom. But... you're just stunned. Full stop.” I chuckled nervously.

“Is that what you really wanted?”

“Only if you wanted it too, of course.”

“What if I... didn’t?”

She looked nervous now, and I rushed to reassure her.

“Then that’s not a problem either! I can take this off, and we can have a good old laugh about it while we eat dinner. How does that sound?”

“No, no,” she took a step back, looking flustered. “The last thing I want to do is laugh at you.”

“Don’t you mean the second to last thing? After... making love with me?” I tried to laugh, but I couldn’t stop the bitterness in my voice.

“Oh Jesus, Jean.” She took another couple of steps back and sat on the bed with a plop. “It’s not that I don’t want to. It’s just... I think it’s the stress. It’s like the route between my brain and my lady parts has just... been blocked. That channel where my libido used to flow is obstructed. By all the shit that’s been happening. I’d like nothing more than to... do it like we used to, but there’s just something stopping that message from reaching my... lady parts.”

“So this doesn’t do anything for you? The lingerie?” I stepped into the bedroom and gave her my best proud, upright, goddess-like stance. Like the models on the lingerie website. Like Petra, once upon a time. However, I made the mistake of looking in the mirror, and looked quickly away.

“No,” she almost whispered without even looking at me. “Not physically. As a person, yes, you do it for me... but if you’re talking about sexually, then no. But again, it’s nothing personal. It’s just me being... faulty.”

I moved to stand right in front of her.

“Not even if I were to kiss you? Or to...” I ran my finger down her jaw, down her neck and across the exposed collarbone shown by her scoop-neck T-shirt with the lightest of touches. “How about that?”

She gulped, then put her hand around my wrist to stop its trek downwards. I snatched it away immediately.

“No. Okay. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have pushed,” I said, heading back to the bathroom. “Give me five minutes and I’ll get some clothes on and we can start dinner.”

“It’s not you, it’s me,” she reminded me mournfully as I shut the door behind me.

I nearly growled. Of all the lines.

Chapter Thirty-Six

The Saturday off didn’t happen in the event – something came up. Petra did try to explain it to me, but I waved her explanation away and reassured her that it was fine. I knew that it was all potentially a lie, and she may just be sneaking off to see Stella. In her defence, she did look crestfallen when I waved her away, but I didn’t have the energy to probe. The light had somehow gone out of our relationship, for me. And I wasn’t sure how to ignite it again.

Gemma comforted me. I hadn’t told her my suspicions, but she seemed to sense that something was wrong that Saturday morning, because she sent me one simple message: Any more collywobbles on the horizon? How have you been doing?

Her intuition should have freaked me out, but it made such a change to have someone explicitly caring that it just made me smile. Not in the least because the old-fashioned

word reminded me of the paragraph she'd sent me.

Maybe a little, collywobbles-wise, I replied coyly.

Uh oh. Do I need to belabour you with my vomit-inducing cheesy words of affirmation again??

Maybe a little, I said again.

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Well, banish the collywobbles, because I'm here to remind you that whatever your mind may be telling you, things are going to be okay. This rough time of Petra's increased workload will pass, and life will go back to normal. Perhaps she hasn't reminded you recently how lucky she is to have you – but WHOEVER you were with romantically, they would be the luckiest person on Earth. You are everything, and you need to remember that.

I blinked away tears. She was right – Petra should be the one to be telling me this. But in her absence, Gemma was probably the next best person. Somehow, without me noticing it, she'd become my closest confidante over the last month.

Did I say the right thing? she said, and I realised that I'd gone silent for the last few minutes.

The perfect thing. Thank you, I replied.

I'm serious, she said. Petra is the luckiest woman in the world, because she has you. I just wish I was that lucky.

Whoa. Hold on a second.

Was she flirting with me?

Now the pace of my heart skyrocketed. If it was possible to feel tension between two people over the Internet, this was what I was experiencing. I suddenly remembered Gemma hugging me, on the two occasions we'd met. The way I'd been the taller one for once, and the way she had nestled close, like a little limpet, but not for long

enough to weigh me down. Something swirled in my abdomen – or slightly lower down – and I leapt out of my seat involuntarily.

It would be so easy to fall for Gemma. To start an emotional affair, without it ever being the least bit physical. To make that choice, and bathe myself in her love every day. My heart actually yearned for it, in a way that I hadn't felt since falling for Petra.

You know – anyone would be far luckier to have you, I typed, intending to inject a flirtatious tone into my own words, but then froze before I could send it.

What would an affair do to us? Petra and I? We were married, and even if I suspected her of having an affair, having one myself would lower me to that level. The next step would be divorce, surely. Then feuding, and a slow descent until we ended up on some hideous airing-dirty-linen TV show.

This realisation was like a cold bucket of water to the fire that had started flickering inside of me. I had to put an end to this... fraternisation with my online friend. Quit while I was ahead, before I had any stronger thoughts of starting something with her. Quite frankly, I didn't trust myself not to. Not after the way I'd acted after Lyndsey died, that utter breakdown that made me lose myself.

Thank you, Gemma, I typed back instead, then signed out of the chat room and closed the laptop. I almost wanted to burn it in case Petra ever saw the messages. She'd be hurt, undoubtedly, that I was seeking in another the comfort I'd always sought in her. I couldn't allow that, and I certainly couldn't allow anything else to happen.

Not when we'd sworn. For better, for worse. As long as we both shall live. This was simply one of the 'worse' times, but like Gemma said, we would get through it.

Forsaking all others. That was the crucial one today.

As long as we both did.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Petra came home that evening, positively bouncing. It was in her gait before she even said anything: a lightness. A floatiness that wasn't just down to the chic summer dress she was wearing. Sourly, mired in a post-adrenaline crash, I wondered to myself whether Stella McBride had had anything to do with it. The floatiness or the dress choice.

"My to-do list is officially ticked off," she announced, plopping her tote bag on the sofa next to me before sinking onto the other one. "I pushed and pushed and pushed, and I'm finally on top of things." She smiled at me. "Are you proud of me?"

"Always," I replied, affixing a smile to my face with some effort before returning to my laptop.

"So you know what that got me thinking? A free day tomorrow. A whole day off, with no work to be done whatsoever. You're off tomorrow, right? Hang on... right?"

"Yeah, I am."

"Great! So... us, tomorrow morning... the car boot sale!"

I squinted at her, and she deflated a little.

"Okay... it's not exactly the average location for a hot date. But the one at Thorney Hill starts tomorrow and it's always good for finding knickknacks. They have an ice cream van and a burger van and a donut stand... and all manner of knickknacks! It's shaping up to be a decent day weather-wise tomorrow, so I thought... unless you don't want to, obviously..."

“No!” My voice sounded over-bright, and its pitch made Petra jump along with my sudden animation. “No, I’ll definitely come! I’ll take any chance of quality time with you. What time does it start?”

“Ten,” she said, and bit her lip. “What you just said... that makes me feel like the worst wife in the world. Like I’ve been neglecting you.”

“You have,” I said before I could stop myself, and she flinched. I froze. She looked genuinely hurt.

What I should have done was stayed quiet, and let her absorb what I just said. She needed to hear it, to hear how I was feeling, even if it did hurt. But, me being me, I rushed to rescue the situation.

“But I don’t blame you,” I said, going over and sitting next to her. “You’ve been rushed off your feet. And it’s only for a little while, isn’t it? It’s not so long until the summer holidays. Mid-July. That’s... what... seven weeks away? And then I’ll have you back. I can wait until then.”

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I wasn't sure of what I was saying, not at all, but in that moment it was worth it to see her face relax with relief.

"Can you?" She grasped my hand. "Are you sure? I know I've not been attentive enough. I feel like you've been pulling away. But that's probably a figment of my imagination. It's not like I've exactly had the time to be paying much attention. Are you okay, though? Like... in yourself?"

"I'm fine," I lied. "If I have been pulling away, it's to give you space to breathe without all this school shit piling on top of you. Nothing to worry about. Honest."

"Yeah?" She looked directly at me, then pulled me into a hug. I couldn't help my sigh of relief as I settled into her embrace. How long had it been since we'd hugged like this? Far too long. I closed my eyes and inhaled her scent. It filled my lungs, then my heart, then my veins, until I almost – almost – felt whole again.

Then her phone pinged. She'd been holding it on the way in, and had laid it face-up on the arm of the sofa next to her. From my position in our cuddle, I could see the screen as it flashed up.

S. McBride: 20 Monday? You all good?

Again, it could have been completely innocuous. And it would have been weird to text now if they'd been together all day. But Petra's reaction screamed otherwise. The moment the message became visible, she practically threw me aside in a mad swipe at the phone. It fell to the floor in the gap between the sofa and the magazine rack, while I ended up at the other end of the two-seater, rubbing my elbow which had

come into contact with the arm with some force.

Okay, perhaps they hadn't seen each other today then. But there was something going on there. Definitely. Completely. One-hundred percent.

My blood ran cold, and the bubble burst.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

We still went to the car boot sale the next day. Petra had seemed so thrilled by the prospect of it, and I couldn't bear to let her down, especially now she wasn't getting much of a chance to have time away from work. All the same, it was hard to conjure up even the faintest veneer of enthusiasm as we got up together, ate breakfast and got ready for the day. It was only as I did so that I realised that we hadn't actually gotten up and ready side-by-side for weeks, what with both of our work schedules. I'd missed it. If it hadn't been for the pool of unease sitting in my gut, things would have been pretty perfect.

Everything should have been perfect. It was an idyllic early June day: a bright azure sky with the odd wispy cloud, a temperature that was warm without being sticky, the air faintly perfumed by the sea when the wind blew right. Petra and I folded ourselves into our little car and zipped through the winding lanes with the breeze blowing in our hair through the open windows. Once we got out of the village onto the main roads, Petra tuned in to Radio Miltree, where they were playing 'Sunday Breakfast Bangers' that she even sung along to.

I was surprised when the urge to join in found me, too. I hadn't sung since karaoke night the week before, nor had I felt any need to. There had once been a time when singing – music in general – had been as natural to me as breathing. But that had been a long while ago. Today, of all days, felt unexpected to have the urge again. Then again, Petra's voice had always had effects on me.

I'm still feeling something, I noted with relief. Our marriage can't be quite dead in the water yet.

So I cleared my throat and sung. Eulalia Gray's Always All My Love had been one of our songs, back in the early days. I'd turned it into a duet for our voices, in fact, creating our version of the power ballad that we'd intended to sing at our wedding before plans changed. Even though we'd never ended up singing it in public at all, our fondness for it had never abated, and now we slipped back into the same harmonies as if no time had passed whatsoever since we last did so.

Petra whooped as we finished on a euphoric note that clashed perfectly with Eulalia's prerecorded vocals, and held out a hand to me for a high-five.

"Put it there, wifey!"

I did so, but the moniker was like the finest needle to the little balloon of happiness that had been growing in my chest. It didn't burst it entirely, but it put a tiny air hole in it, and I could feel the happiness seeping out, allowing the familiar ache of unidentifiable negativity to take hold again. I closed my eyes and mentally duct-taped across the air hole. Don't think about it. Don't think about it. Focus on today. You, here, buying knickknacks with Petra and soaking up the sun. Not your gender identity.

Despite this, the ache persisted. Walking around the rows of tables groaning with other people's assorted... well, crap, I was afflicted with a sudden self-consciousness. I kept picturing what people saw: the dumpy, frumpy middle-aged woman. And I had established that what they saw was not me – I was getting more and more sure of that with every day that passed now. The problem lay in the fact that I wasn't sure what actually was me. As Petra rifled through a table full of chipped ornaments and costume jewellery, I glazed over and – out of nowhere – pictured myself as a man. It was difficult, but when I managed it, I was struck by a wave of revulsion.

Nope, nope, nope. That doesn't work at all. Absolutely not.

But then, it would feel unnatural at first, wouldn't it? It would be like cutting my face out of a photograph and sticking it onto a generic male body from a magazine. I'd grown used to seeing this face on a female body – surely anybody would feel the same if they mentally transplanted their face onto a body of the opposite sex. Perhaps, if I were to metaphorically photoshop my face onto a male body as opposed to a stark cut-and-paste, it might feel more normal and then I might know if I was actually a man. It felt like the logical first step into discovering my true identity.

“Another little duck ornament to add to my collection,” Petra said, shoving the ornament in my face and pulling me out of the reverie.

“I think you're quackers,” I said automatically, remembering to smile just in time to make it clear that I was joking. The joke landed well and Petra laughed with her once-abundant, recently-absent gaiety.

“Oh, I've missed your sense of humour,” Petra said after she'd finished laughing, and took my hand for the first time in God knows how long. “Come on. Let's see what else we can find.”

I let her lead, and tried to ignore the foul smell of burning tobacco that was creeping around the whole area.

I'd forgotten about this part of boot sale life. Somehow, they seemed to attract the majority of Cornwall's tobacco-smoking population. The scent was once as familiar to me as my own long-since-abandoned perfume – after all, it had followed my sister around like an invisible cloak for nearly three quarters of her life, and eventually it had just become... her. After she'd died, and my mental health went down the tubes, the merest hint of cigarette smoke had been triggering for me, but that had faded as my heart started to rebuild itself. I hadn't actually noticed it on Petra on our first date.

It was only when I'd gone to her flat on the second that I'd picked it up, seen the cigarette packet and lighter on her bedside table, and walked straight back out again.

Thus had ensued a tearful exchange – tearful on my part, at least – as Petra had chased me down the road. Hiding down an alleyway so nobody else would see my tears, I'd poured out everything, from Lyndsey's chain smoking to her lung cancer and the way it had almost destroyed my family and I. "I had such high hopes for you and I, but this would kill it completely," I'd sobbed, at which point she'd hugged me so tightly I couldn't help but hug her back.

"I'll quit," she'd said into my shoulder. "I don't care what it takes. If it means that we can make a go of it, I'll quit."

A rather extreme course of action in hindsight, given that we'd only been on one official date and a couple of choir rehearsals, but I'd gone back to hers and she'd put the cigarettes in the bin there and then. Her face had grown pale, but the set of her jaw had been resolute, and from that day on I'd never detected a hint of cigarette smoke on her.

Guess we'll both be stinking of it after today, I thought ruefully, glancing at one young lad with a cigarette dangling from his fingers. My thoughts now addressed him. How do you not know the damage your addiction is causing?

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Perhaps Petra, by some miracle, sensed my distractedness, because she kept up a stream of light-hearted chatter that I eventually half-tuned in to. If I'd have been feeling my normal self, I'd have probably capitalised on her now-seldom chattiness and tried to use it to gain some insight into the tangle of her thoughts, but as it was all I could do was listen and offer the odd affirmative. As if in a daze, I followed her around the whole field, row after row of tables filled with junk and the odd treasure. Petra bought a few more items, all of which she showed me but none of which went in, and I stood by her side smiling politely at the vendors.

Eventually we made it around the whole field and got back to the car. By unspoken agreement Petra made for the driver's seat again – my legs were too jelly-like to drive, although how she could possibly have known that I had no idea. As we'd walked away from the hustle and bustle of the crowds, I'd realised that the noise in my ears was a strange sort of roaring – not just the hubbub, because it followed me. But as Petra shut the car door with a bang, it stopped as if it had been a telephone conversation, with the wire cut.

“What?”

With unusual effort, I dragged my gaze to meet Petra's. I only managed to hold eye contact for a second before looking back out of the front window. “What ‘what’?” I responded numbly.

“You hardly said a word the whole time we were out there. Did I do something wrong?”

“No!” My response was automatic, and in far too high a pitch for my liking. “I'm

just... vibing.”

“Vibing?” Petra repeated the word incredulously, but with a quirk of the lips. “That’s not a word you use. Who have you been talking to?”

Gemma. I’d been talking to Gemma. She’d used the word a while back. But I couldn’t exactly say that.

“Social media!” I tried to laugh. “I think that’s where I got it from. Either that or watching Heartstopper. I think the kids on that show might use it.”

“You mean you watched it without me?” Petra pouted.

“I didn’t think you were interested,” I protested with a shrug. “It’s not like you’ve exactly been communicating with me recently.”

All of the air went out of the car as Petra froze. I scrabbled for the door handle to let some air in, but she still didn’t move. With supreme effort, I bit my tongue against my knee-jerk instinct to smooth things over again, like I had done last night. This might not be exactly what had been weighing on my mind this morning, but it was still a contributing factor.

“I’m sorry.” Her whisper was barely audible, especially over the thumping of my pulse in my ears. I leaned forward to hear her better, but she didn’t say anything else.

I didn’t know what to say either – I rummaged in my brain, but every avenue of conversation came up dry. The only words in my mind were ‘Are you having an affair?’ but I simply couldn’t bring myself to say them, not without any actual solid proof, and certainly not given how I’d been feeling about Gemma. So we sat there for what seemed like hours, but in reality was probably only a minute or two, until she finally broke the silence.

“We just need to get through seven more weeks,” she said. Her voice was unsteady. “Seven more weeks of this shit. Give or take a couple of days. Then we’ll be ourselves again. I can be a proper, decent wife to you again. I just need you to bear with me. I just... don’t have time for anything else outside of work right now.”

“Not even me?”

She stared, not at me, but at a point just past me out of the passenger side window. “Not even you. I never thought I’d say that. I’m sorry, but that is the way it is. I just need every scrap of energy I can get to haul myself towards the finish line. But in seven weeks, all of that will change. I’ll make it up to you. I promise.”

The deadness in her voice alarmed me more than anything else. I made a wild grab for her hands as she made to turn the key in the ignition.

“Petra! Please, let me in. Let me help you. I want to make this as easy as possible for you. Please, just tell me what I can do to help.” I hated the begging note in my voice... but then, I hated everything about my voice.

I hated everything about myself in that moment.

“You can’t do anything.” Now Petra’s voice was rough, like she was on the verge of tears. “I’m sorry. I know it must be hurting you to see me like this... but I just need to knuckle down. Just... let me get on with it. Let me cope the way I see fit. For seven weeks. Then it’ll all be over and normal life will resume. I’ll be me again. With you.”

“And what am I supposed to do without you? While you’re busy being headteacher, where does that leave me? Wifeless?”

She propped her elbows on the steering wheel and then massaged her temples.

“I thought you said you were okay. You were fine. You are okay, aren’t you?”

That wasn’t a question. That was a plea. And how could I respond to that with anything other than, “Yes, I’m fine.”

She sat back up and puffed out her chest. Determination poured over her, hardening her jaw and balling her hands into fists.

“I’m going to make a cake this afternoon. What cake do you want me to make?”

“Wha-? Cake?” My brain slammed on the brakes and scrambled to change directions, following the abrupt subject change.

“Yes. Cake. Therapeutic baking. That’s how you can help. Tell me what cake to bake.”

“Cake,” I said again. “Well... that’s... chocolate cake. Does that suit?”

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“Chocolate cake,” she repeated, nodding determinedly. “You got it.”

And with that, she turned the key, knocked the car into first and rolled out of the car park.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

True to her word, she did make the cake that afternoon. I’d hoped that baking would have its predicted therapeutic effects, but she seemed just as edgy afterwards as she had done in the car. After a quick dinner, she retired to bed, claiming exhaustion and repeating her need for as much energy as possible before the last half term.

I went up to bed a couple of hours later, and as I got in she rolled over and sleepily batted at me until she found my hand.

“Seven weeks, Jean,” she mumbled. “Don’t forget.”

“Seven weeks, you got it,” I whispered, parroting her phrasing from earlier, but that only served to bring the incident to the front of my mind again. This time, it was accompanied by a bolt of anger. Why should I have to sacrifice my wife’s love completely for the sake of her job?

Because that school and all its kids would be lost without her, my mind reminded me. And it’s better for you to be lost without her than for them to be lost without her. Damage limitation.

And then of course we were up and running again in the morning. It was Monday, so

another six a.m. shift for me. Petra actually got up with me at a quarter to five – getting up together two days in a row was quite a feat for us now – and was still yawning into her coffee cup when I left for work.

The whole time, neither of us said anything. But it wasn't an awkward silence, per se. We just didn't have anything to say to each other.

I found myself being grateful for the morning rush of customers. They were mostly rude, harried, perpetually-running-late commuters due to our position just off a main road in the middle of nowhere, but in they streamed one after another, rinsing my kiosk of vapes, tobacco products and cashback, and running the coffee-to-go machine dry.

After the rush, however, the shop went dead and, of course, my thoughts came flooding in. Perched on the shabby little seat that by this point was more plastic base than sponge covering, I felt my eyes glaze over as I tumbled into myself, my back hunching as I ran through the events of yesterday.

I'd had a panic attack. I could see that clearly now. There had been a time just after Lyndsey died that I'd had them on the daily, but they'd always been full-blown, all-consuming, crying-and-hyperventilating types. Yesterday's had been far more low-key – one in which I'd appeared perfectly fine on the outside, but had been screaming on the inside. I mused that in public, it was probably the best type to have. Less embarrassing than the few times I'd had a meltdown in public. The trigger yesterday had been cigarette smoke. It had reminded me of what I'd lost in my sister – and now my parents.

And Petra had noticed. Which was a good thing. Well, noticed afterwards, when the worst of it had been over. She hadn't exactly seen my anguish, but she'd picked up on something being off, which was about as good as I could expect from her right now, especially if her thoughts were filled with something – or someone – else.

Seven weeks.

I clung to that promise like a lifeline.

The door opened, and one of the regulars stepped through the door, little dog tucked under her arm as always. Tilly the poodle wasn't technically allowed in the shop, as a canine, but we made an exception for Mrs O'Callaghan, who had recently been diagnosed with dementia and always forgot that dogs were banned. I practically felt myself being flung back into performance mode as I rushed out of the kiosk and to the door to help the old lady unhook her dog's lead from the basket handle.

"Oh, you are a good girl, Jean," she said as I unclipped the lead from Tilly, whipped it out of the basket and reattached it. The little dog's tail wagged nineteen-to-the-dozen as she explored my fingers with her little pink nose. Smiling and chatting to the old lady as she got her bearings served as the perfect distraction from the fact that she'd called me a girl.

My initial reaction, unusually, had been a flash of anger. How dare you call me a woman? You don't know how I'm feeling. But I stuffed it down, and I knew that my work face – upon which I'd always prided myself – didn't show even a flicker of anything except jovial professionalism. My voice sounded strange to my own ears, but at the same time there was nothing different about it. I just focused on the feel of Tilly's rough fur, and let my autopilot carry on the conversation until Mrs O'Callaghan left to do her shopping.

Back behind the till, I served a few more customers, noting the elderly lady's progress around the shop. There had been a couple of instances where she'd gotten herself lost, and I was always on alert in case it happened again. But she made it back to me with a now full basket of shopping, which I scanned through for her while simultaneously chatting and packing her bag. She fumbled with her cash for a while, but we got the notes out, and I handed her some coins for change. One of them

missed her hand entirely and hit the table, where it bounced onto the floor at my feet.

“It’s alive!” I laughed as I handed it back to her.

“What is, dear?” she said absentmindedly as she put the coin in her purse.

“The coin,” I said, feeling like a bit of an eejit as I realised how I sounded. This feeling was amplified when she turned her gaze on me, now with a steely look in her eye. If I hadn’t known better, I’d have had her down as an elderly Kate Mundy from Dancing at Lughnasa.

“How can the coin be alive?”

“Well, because it jumped onto the floor. Obviously I know it’s not-”

“You do know that attributing human attributes to inanimate objects is one of the first signs of madness, don’t you? It’s called anthropomorphism.”

And with that, she picked up her dog and her shopping and shuffled off towards the door.

My first response was ‘You can talk, you silly old bat,’ but I bit it back immediately. It scared me how close I came to saying it – it was right on the tip of my tongue, from my heart to my mouth without consulting my brain whatsoever. But as I watched her departing figure, I actively processed what she’d said, and sighed instead.

Perhaps she was right. Perhaps I was going mad.

Chapter Forty

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The kid that we now automatically called ‘Anonymity Smith’ continued to be a source of stress for Petra. In just that one week – the first week back of school – the little ten-year-old was brought to her four times. Each time Petra was in the middle of something, and each time she had to stop what she was doing in order to coach the child through a panic attack or a meltdown.

“I’m the only one that seems to be able to get through to them,” she said on Thursday. “Everyone else has tried, but they don’t take.”

Then on Friday, she arrived home, shut the door and burst into tears.

“Hey, hey, hey, what’s happened? Is everyone okay?” I folded her into a hug, but she was like a plank of wood in my arms, except for the convulsions of her sobbing.

“I can’t tell you,” she said. “It’s not my thing to tell.”

“But it’s clearly bothering you,” I protested. “A problem shared is a problem halved, is it not?”

“But ethically, it’s not right to broadcast it.”

“You’re not broadcasting it. You’re offloading to me. One person. Your spouse. And I get the feeling that if you don’t offload it in some way, it’s going to eat you up on the inside until you either explode or disappear entirely.”

“But morally...”

We went around in circles like that for a bit, and I could see she was aching to tell me. Every cajole from me was met with less and less resistance, until she finally flopped onto the sofa, shoes discarded to one side, and put her head in her hands while simultaneously looking up at me.

“Anonymity Smith came out to me as non-binary today,” she said. Her voice was steady, but her eyes were swimming.

“Okay,” I said neutrally. “Congratulations to them. Why has that upset you?”

“Because for them, it’s a disaster!” she burst out.

“How come?”

“Their parents are vile to them! We had them in for a meeting just before half term, and they were like English carbon-copies of my parents. So entrenched in small-c conservatism and Catholicism that nothing will pull them out of it. For the longest time I couldn’t get them to see how bad their child’s mental health is, and when I eventually got through to them, they just blamed their child for being weak!”

Ah. Now I got it. Petra was being reminded of her own childhood.

“I gave Anonymity some literature about gender identity. You wouldn’t think there’s so little child-friendly literature on this subject in this day and age, but it’s true.”

“You should write some,” I said. Normally, the proposal of a solution – even a vague long-term one – helped bring her around, but now she sat up straight her eyes suddenly glittered with fury.

“In my spare time, huh? My non-existent spare time? I’m stretched to the maximum, Jean. How do you expect me to write a fucking book?”

“All right, all right!” I threw my hands up and took a step back. “Forget the book, then.”

Now we faced each other, both breathing heavily. I felt on the verge of shaking her, and begging her to come back to me. She looked like she was on the verge of screaming. But neither of us did either of those things. Instead, I turned away and walked into the kitchen, and she stood up and turned towards the stairs. But she must have had second thoughts, because she suddenly appeared behind me in the kitchen.

“And you know the worst part? There’s nowhere for Anonymity to turn. Not until they get older. Not without their parents’ support. So for now, they’re stuck where they are. With no hope of any sort of aid other than what their secondary school can offer when they go there in September. And they won’t have me there, so they’ll need to find a new ‘safe person’ to trust with this stuff.”

She perched on the edge of the table, a look of abject misery on her face.

“If only they were older. There would be more options available to them: hormones, surgery, therapy. For kids, there’s fuck-all. And it’s looking like even less, the way things are going politically.” She sighed. “I shouldn’t have told you any of this, Jean. Forget you ever heard it. I’m... I’m going for a shower.”

“Did it at least make you feel better? Getting it off your chest?”

A pause, while she considered it.

“Not really. Sorry. I just feel guilty now.”

Ah, guilt, that now-familiar companion.

Chapter Forty-One

Later that night, I heard Petra's voice from upstairs. She was in the music room with the door shut and I was in the kitchen washing up, but when I turned the tap off I could hear her saying something. Then pause, then say something else, and repeat. My first thought was Stella. There was surely nobody else she could be calling late on a Friday evening. With a small part of me hating myself for the slyness of what I was about to do, I slipped off my rubber gloves, walked through the living room and began to creep up the stairs.

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Every step brought me closer to her voice, until about halfway up I was able to discern her words.

“Oh, my life’s a bit of a disaster at the moment,” she laughed gaily. “It’s not all shits and giggles out here after all. But it’s a damn sight better than what we dealt with at home, as you’ll be finding out shortly enough. I’m just so, so bloody proud of you for getting out of their clutches.”

A pause. I furrowed my brow. Who could she be speaking to?

“Nicholas.” For a split second I thought she was answering my telepathic thought, but then I gauged her firm, no-nonsense tone. “No. Nicholas. You cannot think like that. Mama and Papa’s intentions may have been honourable, but their actions towards us over the years were not.”

Another pause, and then she sighed.

“Well, they’re right enough there. As you know. Perhaps when you’re in a more stable position, one of us can travel to the other and we can meet up. Where have you moved to? Berwick? That’s... on the English border with Scotland, isn’t it?”

My eyebrows shot up, as I imagined hers doing. I wasn’t surprised to learn that her youngest brother had fought her parents and run away the same way she had done, but Berwick-upon-Tweed seemed rather a random place to move to.

“Sorry, did you say your boyfriend?” Petra said faintly. “Are you coming out to me? Because that’s... that’s wonderful. Oh, my God, Nicholas... is that where he lives,

then? Your boyfriend?”

Ah. Now it made sense.

“I’m so happy for you, you know that? I don’t even know him but I can hear in your voice how in love you are.”

I smiled despite everything.

“Me? Yes, I’m still with Jean. Um...” she chuckled, “well, just about. We’re going through a bit of a rough patch. Very much my fault. I’ve taken on too much at work, and I’m sort of... neglecting her. And being an arse, to boot. But we only have to get through a handful more weeks, and I think we’ve agreed that we just need to put our heads down and get on with it. Just surge through all the shit we’re going through, then come back to each other when term ends.”

Now I found myself freezing completely. I had been about to go back down the stairs, but hearing this stopped me in my tracks, and I sank down onto the step.

“Oh, of course I do. And I really do miss what we had. But people change, you know? The honeymoon phase doesn’t last forever. We’ve been together nearly ten years, so of course we’re not exactly the same people we fell in love with. But you have to look past that. Around it. Communicate on it. Which we haven’t been doing, even before all this headteacher business. We’ve really been getting on each other’s nerves for a while, but we’re still us. We’re still Jean and Petra – just a slightly different edition. And we’ll be back to normal once work gets sorted out. I’ll be able to be who I was before. Nicholas – Nicholas.” She paused for impact. “Take. Care. Of. Your. Relationship. Hear that? Because we haven’t been doing that, Jean and I, and it’s really driving us apart. I just... can’t help the way I am at the moment. If I rock the boat now, I’ll probably send myself spiralling, and then who knows what could happen?”

I'd heard enough. Nicholas said something, and she latched onto that and started talking about something else. I stood up, hoping to goodness that the floorboards wouldn't creak, and crept back down the stairs and into the kitchen.

It was good to know that she saw what was happening between us. That it wasn't just all in my head, like many of the mild delusions I had experienced during my grief-stricken breakdown post-Lyndsey. And that I wasn't going mad, like I had briefly thought.

I tried hard to believe what she was saying. That we were being pushed and pulled and mauled by life, but that we would spring back into place over the summer holidays and return to how we were. But my gut feeling was that this wouldn't be the case. Since we last properly checked in with each other, I had discovered that I was a different gender to the one she had thought I was. And who knew what would happen when I told her that? I still didn't want to think about it.

Because when I realised what gender I really was... what then? Would I transition? Have hormones? Or surgery? Petra had always expressed an appreciation for my physical attributes – if those changed, would she still find me appealing? I knew a relationship could survive without sex, because asexual people existed, but could ours, with Petra's normally high libido?

Before I could think any further, however, I heard Petra's footsteps cantering down the stairs, and her voice calling my name.

"What?" I met her in the doorway of the kitchen.

"Nicholas called me," she said, her eyes shining. "He's okay. He's gay. And he's walked away from Mama and Papa. They had him in the exact same position as they had me – hiding away, working for them. But he made friends with a guy online, and fell in love with him. This guy, this Ajesh, he helped Nicholas realise what a toxic

situation he was in, and... now Nicholas has left our parents and moved up North to be with him.” She flopped down on a sofa and beamed. “I’m so, so happy for him.”

“Me too,” I said, a matching smile spreading across my face. “You were so worried about him.”

“I was,” she agreed. “But he’s out of their grasp now, and feeling a million times happier. He sends his regards to you. Perhaps we can all meet up some time.”

“A wonderful end to a shitty day, then,” I surmised.

“Yeah,” she chuckled. “Jean, I’m sorry about how I’m being. I really am. I keep vowing I’ll do better, then I keep being an arse. Can you hold on for just a few more weeks?”

“I can,” I promised her. “I absolutely can.”

Truth be told, I thought that a few weeks might do some good. There would be no point telling her anything while she was so stressed. So yes – why not wait?

Chapter Forty-Two

To say that the next couple of weeks were uneventful would be lying, but they weren’t quite as dramatic. With bullish determination, Petra hauled herself through the days, finalising plans for Sports Day and awards evenings and the next year’s intake of infants. I took on the responsibility of running the rest of our lives, including the choir.

Our summer performance at the school fete was looming at the start of July – another event for Petra to manage – and with every rehearsal, I dreaded it more and more. Petra’s mental absence had taken the wind out of the choir’s sails, and I was a very

poor substitute for her flair and ebullience. I'd always been the one who knuckled down and got the basics done, while Petra added the sparkle. Now, it was all she could do to turn up on time, play the piano and pretend to be her usual self. The singers had very clearly picked up on the state of things, because it showed in their lack of confidence.

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By the time we got to the point of having two rehearsals left before the performance, I was seriously worried, and so was Petra.

“I hope they’ve made some serious forward strides this week,” she said before she left for work that morning. “There’s only so much we can get done in rehearsals without them practising at home.”

“I’m sure they’ll be fine,” I said, but by that point she was halfway out the door.

Privately, however, I wasn’t so sure. And that unease stayed with me all day, all throughout the mountains of ironing that had accumulated, all throughout the preparation for tonight’s dinner (which I slung in the slow cooker), all throughout the journey down the hill to the school that evening. Our personal and professional reputations depended on the choir’s performance. If they screwed it up, who knew what might happen?

Perhaps they could tell we were both on edge tonight, because even the warm-up was horrific. It seemed that they were doing everything we’d always told them not to do: standing unevenly on their legs; singing from the throat; failing to pronounce their consonants in one of the more wordy exercises. I found myself stopping and correcting them countless times, and so the warm-up took five minutes longer than it should. That five minutes was valuable singing time lost.

“Okay, let’s transfer all that we’ve learned to Ave Maria, shall we?” I told them, and there was a flurry of shuffled papers as half of the choir produced their music.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold on,” Petra said, and they all looked up at her. “Why are

you using your music? We told you last week that this was one of the pieces we expected off-copy this week.”

Nobody spoke, instead simply exchanging glances with each other. I tried to take a deep breath, which caught in my throat, and tried not to make it obvious.

“I take it that most of you haven’t learnt it, then,” I said. “Well, goodness me. Here’s what we’ll have to do, then. We’ll sing it through twice. Those of you who haven’t learnt it, use your music the first time. But the second time around, I want to see every single one of your faces. No music. This isn’t a complicated piece, and we’ve been at it for months. Copies out, then.”

Once everyone was settled, and those who needed them had their copies in front of them, I turned to Petra and beat out a bar with my arms so she could get the tempo. The introduction was short, but half of the choir missed their entrance, even though it was completely in unison, and I’d brought them in. We went back to the beginning and started again, and this time they did get it right. It was rocky, but they made it through the short piece, even if they failed to come off with me at the end. I commented on this so they’d know for next time, then tried not to sigh. “Okay, music away, we’re going off copy.”

And the song fell apart. Never mind that they’d just sung it through fine. The way that a choir often worked was that when a handful of them were uncertain, the rest of their section would second-guess themselves. If all three sections were afflicted by this, the song would be a car crash. And that was what happened now. I dragged them through the first verse and chorus, intending to stop at the end of the latter. But as if Petra and I had connected thoughts, she slammed her hands down on the keys and shouted, “For the love of Christ, people!”

You could have heard a pin drop. She stood up, and she was almost trembling with rage.

“This song literally could not be simpler!” she shouted again. “We swapped it out for the hard one to make it easier for you! It’s a verse and a chorus repeated, a bridge that’s mostly in unison, and the same chorus again! What’s so difficult about it? If you’re struggling with this then I dread to think what carnage you’ll make of the Sea Shanty Medley. We couldn’t make it easier for you! We record each part individually on the piano and send it out to you for you to learn! What more can we do?”

Finally she stopped for air. The choir simply stared at her, then – as one – they turned their eyes to me.

After all, I was always the calm one. The safe one. I never got pissed off. I was never highly-strung.

Until today.

Now I could feel my body burning.

“Two weeks!” I shouted, and I could almost feel the energy surge as they all flinched. “After this rehearsal, there is one more until the actual performance! There is no excuse for this shoddy performance this late in the game!”

I forced myself to stop before I could say anything else, and turned to Petra desperately. Normally just the sight of her would calm me down, but she seemed to be almost sparking with suppressed rage which only served to amplify mine. It was as if she’d been waiting for my cue, because she came to stand beside me.

“None of you seem to realise what hinges on our performance,” she said, and I could tell she was trying hard to keep her voice even. “You’re all so blasé about it.”

“You’ve never known a performance to go wrong,” I jumped in. “You’ve never felt the humiliation.” My mind cast back to my failed performance at school. Forty-five

years ago, but right now, the mortification filled my veins as fresh as the day it had happened. It served to fuel my anger. “But you will! My God, you will, if you don’t pull your socks up. Put Ave Maria away, and go home and learn it for next week. Let’s have a stab at I Know You Better, which as you know we also expect off-copy, and I don’t want to see any less than one-hundred-percent effort from any of you.”

Not one word was uttered by any of them as they changed songs. I took the opportunity to walk to the door for a breath of air, and Petra followed me. When our backs were turned away from them, she massaged her temples and took a few deep breaths. I just stood there and watched her, not daring to touch her, even to put a calming hand on her back. We’d been on fairly even ground recently, and I didn’t want to ruin it now. After a moment, she shook herself off and walked back to the piano, and I followed her.

“Right.” My voice came out croaky, so I coughed and cleared my throat. “Remember your diction in this one. It’s fast-paced, so we want to hear every consonant crystal clear, otherwise all you’ll hear are vowel sounds. Everyone ready?”

Again, nobody said anything, but I saw a lot of nods. So, feeling like a robot, I turned to Petra once again for her cue.

It was as if we’d put the fear of God into them, because their voices were full of adrenaline. I had to call out “Watch me, watch me!” at one point because they were going so fast that they were getting ahead of my conducting, in a piece where pacing themselves was key. But the notes were correct and the rhythms were pretty much there, and we didn’t have to stop for corrections until the ending, which to be fair to them was quite complicated. We finally sung it through one more time, and they got it right. It wasn’t polished, but it would do.

“Very good!” I said, and shuffled my music. “Let’s do the Sea Shanty Medley. The whole thing, from the top. Cass, are you okay to do the solo?”

“Yeah,” I heard from somewhere in the alto section, and Cass came to stand at the side of the choir, between me and the piano, so she could see me and the choir could see her. In the actual event, she’d have a microphone and would be standing in the front row, but for now it would help the choir to be able to see both her and me. She shot me a sidelong glance. Was she scared of me?

Anxiety suddenly flooded me. This was one of the most technically tricky pieces we’d ever done, and I had arranged it. If the easy little Ave Maria had flopped, how on Earth was this one going to turn out?

But I was pleasantly surprised. For the most part, everyone seemed to know what they were doing. The piano wasn’t needed for this song, so once she’d given everybody their starting notes, Petra got up and walked around the hall, gauging the balance of the harmonies. It was all very well us being able to hear it while we were working with them, but we were standing a few feet in front of them. The audience would be further away. There had been a time when she’d have broken into a dance to make the singers laugh during one of the upbeat sections, but that wasn’t today.

“We need more alto,” Petra said at the end, turning to the lowest section. “Most of the songs are fine, but the alto line is lacking in Leave Her Johnny. The other two sections get the flash and dash in that one – you’re the bass line, and you’re supporting them up there. Without it, it doesn’t sound very authentic. More like a school choir arrangement, if you see what I mean.”

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“Let’s have that one more time, then,” I said. “First just the altos and Cass, then we’ll do it again with the whole section.”

It sounded far better the second time, and I checked my watch. Eight-fifteen. We weren’t due to finish until nine, but I exchanged a glance with Petra. She looked exhausted, which meant she was utterly dead on her feet, and she gave me a little nod.

“I’m going to break tradition here and suggest we leave the rest for today,” I said to the choir. “But we want everything perfect next week. Everything learnt, so we can focus on polishing the edges. Everyone happy?”

A rumble of assent could be heard from the assembled women, so Petra dismissed them. Then there was the usual fielding of questions, but Petra disentangled herself from them after a few minutes and disappeared off towards the offices. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Cass and Felicia whispering together. They kept looking at me. I was about to go over there and ask if there was a problem, but they left. Which was just as well, because I felt mentally and physically drained and couldn’t be dealing with any more problems.

Petra reappeared once they were gone. I made a beeline for her, intending to give her a hug, but she saw me coming and scurried back towards where she’d come from. I stopped dead in my tracks – she was actively, physically running away from me, a thing that she’d never done before. But before I could have any more thoughts on it, the caretaker appeared, and helped me pack up the piano and the chairs. Halfway through, my phone buzzed in my back pocket, so I took it out.

You take the car, I've got a couple of bits to finish up here then I'll walk back x

Why text me, when we were in the same building? I furrowed my brow. Could Stella have turned up? Were they canoodling in the office? Perhaps now was the time to catch them in the act... if they really were having an affair.

I'd been in Petra's office a handful of times, but the corridors were rather a rabbit warren, so I wasn't particularly sure where to go. Luckily, there was decent signage, so eventually I found it. It was in darkness, so I walked further up the corridor to Victoria's. That one had a light on, so I stood in front of the door and peered through the glass panel.

What I saw stopped my heart.

Petra was in there. Alone – no sign of Stella draping herself over her. It was only as I noticed this that I realised I'd never really expected it after all. Rather, Petra was hunched over the desk, and she had her head in her hands, nothing about her indicating that she was aware of my presence. As I watched, her shoulders gave a little shake, then a bigger one. She was crying. Here, alone, at work. Was this how she spent all her days? Lonely and in turmoil?

Every muscle of mine ached to go in and comfort her, but my instincts told me that that would not end well. She would react like a trapped animal, and probably lash out; it was almost a guarantee at this stage. My legs began to shake, and I stepped away from the door so that she wouldn't see me, before sinking to the floor just outside. There, I allowed the tears to roll down my cheeks.

What had our marriage come to, when I couldn't even comfort my wife for fear of rejection or retribution?

It occurred to me that this was not a healthy way to live. For either of us. But what

could I do? Go in and confront her? Go home and confront her? Neither of these would get us anywhere. It was the job. It was killing us. And it was all due to end in four weeks. Four weeks today would be the end of term. If we could only make it to then.

With these thoughts echoing in my head, I hauled myself to my feet silently and stole another glance through the door pane. Petra was no longer sitting at the desk, and the external door that doubled as a fire exit was open. Perhaps she'd gone out for a breath of air. It didn't seem a bad idea. I certainly wouldn't be going out to join her, though.

Back at home eventually, I checked on the meatballs that had been in the slow-cooker for the last six hours. I put some pasta in a saucepan ready to boil when Petra got home, then looked at it and simply thought, Why do I bother? Why, when she's determined to push me away at every turn?

Chapter Forty-Three

After that, Petra had three days of parents' evenings. It hadn't been her decision to put all of them across two weeks – that had been Victoria's. Petra simply hadn't thought to change them until it came to the point of sending letters and emails about the evenings out to the parents themselves. At that point, she had found herself rather stuck with it. So the consequence was that the Wednesdays, Thursdays and Fridays of the next two weeks would be extra-long days for her. No sooner had the kids left the school, the parent-teacher appointments began, one evening for each year group. Petra no longer did any actual teaching, but a number of parents had booked individual appointments with her, and her general presence was always required the rest of the time.

All of this meant that I hardly saw her. I was putting in some long hours myself – two staff off sick and one on holiday meant that we were hugely overstretched at the shop – and our general life really went out the window. On Friday night, Petra came home

with a migraine (those were normally my area, so it was a sign of her total exhaustion) and thus spent Saturday in bed sleeping while I did a nine-hour shift. That was valuable time lost for her, so she spent all of Sunday holed up in the music room working while I washed the car and mowed the lawn.

Then it was back into another week. “Three weeks and two days, and we’re done,” she said as I left for work on Monday morning.

“Love you,” I said, but the door banged shut somewhere between the ‘love’ and the ‘you’.

The busy-ness of the last couple of weeks had served to dull the rumble of dysphoria in my brain, but it seemed that the slam of the door had ramped up the volume once again. Today, sitting on my chair during a quiet spell at work, my skin seemed to prickle with unease. I almost wanted to cut myself out of my body, although how I could extract myself from this vessel was beyond me. Then that thought unlocked the memories I’d been trying so hard not to revisit.

I had cut myself before. Several times. Back when Lyndsey died, rocking our worlds apart, like a glass paperweight dropped on a tiled floor. For a while, self-blame had consumed me. I should have stopped her. I should have thrown away her cigarettes and locked her in her room until the cravings stopped. Because it was the cigarettes that had done it. Nothing else about her lifestyle was wrong. Her body had been otherwise fit and strong, so it had been fighting the cancer for all it was worth, prolonging the agony. It was all the fault of the smoking.

The self-harming had been a way to release the tension. I’d pictured the toxic cocktail of anger and pain coursing through my veins, and from there it had seemed like the logical next step to cut myself and let it flow out. And it had made me feel better, so I did it again and again over the next few months, hiding the wounds from my parents (who were living with me at that point while I struggled) under thick jumpers. But

spring had rolled around, and with it, short-sleeve weather. My pride had made me stop. I couldn't bear the thought of anybody seeing the wounds and asking questions. So I let them heal, battled against the urges with the backbone of a warrior, and told myself that I could start again when jumper season arrived. But then Petra had come into my life, and while she hadn't cured everything, she had given me a reason to stay 'clean'. Not that I liked the term 'clean'. It implied that self-harm was something 'dirty', and it wasn't.

Perhaps it wasn't healthy to lay so much blame at the feet of the cigarettes. But I did. The smoking was to blame for my sister's death, and every time I handed over a pack of rolling tobacco or a pack of cigarettes or cigarillos or cigars, another little tiny piece of me lit up with fury.

"Excuse me?"

"Hmm?" I jolted back to life to see a young man wearing a business suit standing in front of me. "Oh, sorry. Are you here for an interview?" A logical thought – we were hiring, after all.

"Sorry?" He looked perplexed. "No. I'd just like a pack of your cheapest cigarettes, please."

My heart plopped down into my shoes. Numbly, I grabbed a packet out of the cabinet, scanned them and waited for him to tap his card before I handed them to him. He examined them.

"Perfect, thanks!"

He gave me a grin, and turned to go. My hands balled at my sides, and I felt my body filling with pure rage. That young man. So full of promise, just like my sister had been. But willingly polluting his body full of tar and nicotine and other toxic

chemicals, because... what? Because it was cool? Because it was trendy? Because his mates were doing it? Because he was addicted, and too weak to quit like my wife had?

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“You have no idea of the damage you’re doing,” I said before I could even stop myself.

I didn’t recognise my voice. It was harsh and guttural, but the tiny part of my brain that was still present realised that I preferred it to my normal tone.

The young man turned back, and now he looked me up and down. I knew what he saw, and his thoughts were portrayed on his face. Finally he met my eyes, and his lip curled in a sneer.

“Who asked you? Miserable old bag.”

I screamed, but only in my head.

Chapter Forty-Four

The school fete rushed towards us at a headlong gallop. The week had simply sped by, and I felt a certain amount of trepidation as I got washed and dressed that Saturday morning.

Tuesday’s choir rehearsal had been better. Not brilliant, but better. I’d fixed them all with a headteachery look – picked up from Petra without even noticing – and told them, “This needs to be perfect on Saturday, ladies. One last push to the weekend and then we’re done until the autumn term, okay?”

They’d mumbled an agreement and the rehearsal had ended, but I could feel that something was off. Perhaps they were picking up on the tension between Petra and I.

It was certainly showing no signs of abating.

Just then, Petra appeared in the doorway of the bathroom. She was still in her robe, and she was holding a mug of coffee.

“You still in here?” She frowned. “I need to have a shower.”

“I’m just finishing,” I said. “And it’s not been that long.”

“Hmph. Any length of time is too long today. There’s so much to do.”

She’d disappeared, and I could do nothing but roll my eyes. Our paths crossed on the stairs, but no more words were exchanged between us until, half an hour later, Petra called down the stairs, “Are you ready to go?”

We met at the bottom of the stairs, and faced each other. She was wearing red – always her best colour, and today was no exception – and had painted her lips to match, making her look positively Parisian. I, on the other hand, had on my standard plaid shirt and smart-looking jeans. Like a stereotypical lesbian.

“You look good,” I said after an awkward silence.

“You too,” she replied evenly.

As we left the house for the short walk down to the school, I could almost see the glaze of ‘headteacher’ pour across her. While I secured everything we needed in the trolley, she locked the front door, and when she turned back to face me, she was her old self.

“Come on then, my lady, allons-y,” she chirped, gallantly extending her hand out to me. I took it, a little shiver going up my arm at the contact, biting back the

uncharacteristic snap that her term of endearment had sparked within me. It's what she's always called you now and again, I scolded myself. Get a grip. And be happy that she's being so effusive, even if it is only while we're in public.

On the way down, the streets were surprisingly quiet, everyone probably still asleep. It was just gone eight o'clock on a Saturday morning, after all. Our stuff rattled vigorously in the trolley as it bounced over the uneven road, and Petra removed her water bottle from it halfway down the hill.

"I can just see it spilling everywhere," she grumbled, much more like the crotchety woman with whom I was familiar these days. The moment passed, though, and when she straightened up from her crouch again it was with a beam, and a wave as she greeted a parent.

The first thing I did when we got to the school was haul the piano from the music cupboard. It had been inexplicably buried underneath boxes of musical detritus, and I worked up quite a sweat clearing the way for it. The caretaker helped me roll it outside into the playground and, with a complex system of wiring, plug it in next to where the stage would be set up. Then I left the folder of music in the shade of the piano, made sure the outside gates were still locked, then returned inside to find Petra.

I had an inkling that she would be in Victoria's office again (which of course was her office at the moment) and I was correct. She was sitting at the desk, listening to someone on the phone and twirling a pen in her fingers absently. When she saw me edge my way into the room, she nodded and motioned to the chair in front of the desk without altering her blank expression at all.

"You're sure I can't persuade you to put in an appearance? I think it would certainly do a lot for everybody's motivation if you were there," she said, and I squinted at her. Her delicate, treading-on-eggshells tone indicated that it was Victoria herself on the

line, but I hadn't had any inkling that the staff were any less motivated when their boss wasn't there. Was that part of why Petra was so stressed? And why she had lashed out at the choir last week about their lack of motivation?

I was brought back to earth by her deep exhalation. "Well, all right. That's completely valid, I understand. It would have been nice to see you, but I understand." A pause. Then her tone grew sharper, more defensive. "Yes, of course I can! I'm completely capable, don't worry." Pause. "Yes, I will. I got your email. I'll call you later and report back. Take care."

"The boss lady?" I inquired, although it didn't need saying.

"Won't come down." Petra shrugged. "Said she isn't strong enough yet, even though last week she told me she was starting to feel better."

"Well, it's been a long old road for her," I said tentatively. "It's been months, and she's only just starting to get better? There's a big difference between feeling slightly better and coming to her school's summer fete."

"Yes, I don't need you to tell me that, Jean," she said, scrubbing at her face. She hadn't put any makeup on yet, the bag still sitting next to her. Ordinarily, I would have put my arms around her and tried to infuse some strength into her, but I didn't fancy losing an arm or two today. Sitting on that chair was clearly giving her some of Victoria's anti-bullshit qualities.

"I'm sorry," I said instead, quietly. "I can tell you really wanted her to come."

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“They need a kick up the arse in some shape or form,” she muttered, but then a knock on the door interrupted us. “Come in!”

I watched her switch back to performance mode as the door opened, although I didn’t hear what the interrupter said over the sudden thundering of my heartbeat in my ears.

I’d never seen her like this before. So... cowed, and faded. With an involuntarily gulp, I looked over at the calendar on the wall. Two and a half more weeks.

Would we even make it until then?

Chapter Forty-Five

Several hours later, the fete was in full swing. I stood next to the piano, organising my music and waiting for our singers to turn up. This gave me the opportunity to observe the scene.

I had seldom seen the playground so crowded. Turnout was excellent, largely down to the marketing that Petra had fretted so much about. At the far end of the playground, bric-a-brac stalls and a tombola flourished, while local crafters sold their creations and a coconut shy drew quite a crowd. Next to that, the ring-toss had been getting increasingly popular, and right at that moment a cheer went up. I could see why: someone had finally hit the jackpot, securing a bottle of expensive champagne.

Elsewhere in the playground, people mingled, chatting with friends and family. Children shrieked with joy all around, from the bouncy castle to the fish-and-chip van, high on candyfloss and ice cream. It was getting hotter by the hour, and thus

every available patch of shade bar the stage was taken. The poor ladies working the cake- and drink-stalls under the gazebo could hardly move for people, and the tiny first-aid stall next to them was being visited by a steady trickle of people suffering from the heat.

Right in the middle of the throng was Petra. Staff lanyard round her neck, red 1950s-style dress flaring behind her every time she turned, face bright with adrenaline and make-up, she stood out to me like the queen bee in a hive. Difficult to spot at first, but then impossible to lose. For the next few minutes I followed her with my eyes as she shook hands, laughed and chatted, even high-fiving a handful of kids. Posh dress be damned, she crouched down to their level, absolutely enthralled by whatever she was told and responding to their enthusiasm in kind.

Our singers started turning up in their turquoise performance T-shirts, so I had to wrench my eyes from my wife. By five to two, they were all there, so I ushered them up onto the stage, organised them into three rows, and wiped my sweaty hands on my jeans.

“Ready, my lovelies?” Petra said, appearing from behind me and giving me a peck on the cheek.

“As ready as we’ll ever be,” I said over a chorus of assent from the group. Petra seated herself at the piano, and I fixed my gaze on them, drawing myself up to my full height and taking a deep breath. They all did the same, and the playground went quiet, as it always did.

Another deep breath and I raised my arms. The playground went even quieter. Then, after a couple of movements to settle into the tempo, I cued everyone in, with the first note that signalled the start of Adiemus.

The strong, punchy opening number brought the house down, as it always did. It was

a choir staple, one that they always loved, and it reflected on their faces as they sang. The applause thundered behind me, and I gave the ladies a moment to take a breath and have a gulp of water while I shuffled my music and gave Petra the tiniest of winks.

The performance had started on a high, and this carried on the whole way through the set list. Something seemed to have clicked, because they were singing better than they had all term. Although people did begin to drift away once the initial dazzle had worn off, some stayed where they were, listening the whole way through to the end. At the end of our penultimate song – that Ave Maria we'd been so worried about – Petra left the piano and came to stand next to me, facing the audience, with a microphone in her hand.

“Thank you, everybody, for being here today,” she said into it, and the rumble of the crowd died down as they turned to listen to her. “Before we perform our final number, I would like to say a few words.”

Now she took a breath and a twinkle appeared in her eye.

“The eagle-eyed among you may notice that I am not Miss Victoria Berry, our headteacher.”

The crowd chuckled, and Petra gave a mock-disparaging half-shrug. “I know, I know. Nobody can stand in her shoes. I am, however, Mrs Petra Taylor, acting headteacher. Miss Berry unfortunately had a serious car accident in late April, and she and I would both like to thank our staff, parents and pupils alike for their support in this turbulent time. I would also like to thank the members of our lovely village choir, who you see behind me, for putting up with what have been some rather hectic rehearsal sessions. That is all set to change when Miss Berry returns, hopefully in September, to resume her role in running our wonderful school.”

A cheer from the crowd, and a not-unnoticeable sigh of relief from the choir behind us.

“That’s all I have to say. Thank you all once again for attending, for supporting this school and this village, and I hope you enjoy our Sea Shanty Medley with soloist Cassandra Mulligan, arranged by our conductor Jean Taylor!”

The crowd burst into applause, and she handed the microphone to Cass in preparation for her solo. I tried not to think about how it should have been Petra doing the solo as I observed her stepping away to the side and melting into the front row of the crowd surrounding us.

The fear of performing one of my own arrangements never left, especially with the drama and tension surrounding this one. Added to that its technical difficulty – by far one of the hardest songs we’d ever tackled – and its five-minute length... I had to force my arms not to shake as I raised them. But I swallowed down the nausea, gave the ladies my best old-Jean grin, and began to conduct.

Soon, the songs were flying by. Roll The Old Chariot Along, Leave Her Johnny, Rolling Down To Old Maui and others swept past as the choir got into it. Then, we reached the end of The Seaman’s Hymn, lulling the audience into a false sense of security as we diminuendo-ed into what they thought was ‘a sweet, lasting peace’ to complete the medley.

Then came my favourite part. Just as the audience began to clap, thinking the performance was over, I gave the nod and the whole choir began stamping its feet. One. Two. Three. Four. One. Two. Three. Four. The crowd began to clap in time as they twigged what was coming.

Then came Cass’s voice, stronger than ever.

“There once was a ship that put to sea,

And the name of that ship was the Billy O’ Tea,

The winds blew up, her bow dipped down,

Oh blow, my bully-boys, blow.”

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And just like that, we were away again. The choir launched into the chorus, and the crowd joined in, most of them familiar with the lyrics thanks to this final song being a recent Internet sensation. We repeated the chorus three times, each increasing in vigour, the sopranos entering with a descant in the final round. All the while, feet were stamping, hands were clapping, people were singing, all culminating in one final, euphoric shout.

The applause was deafening. Children screamed, people whistled, and at that moment I knew what it felt like to be on a talent show. I bowed, Petra bowed, then we stepped away and let the choir take a bow.

“Thank you, everybody!” Petra shouted into the microphone, then leapt onto the stage and embraced a beetroot-coloured Cass. It turned into quite a group hug, and I hovered on the periphery for a moment until an arm reached out and hauled me right into it.

When the hug split apart, Petra jumped up and down on the stage with joy.

“Yes, ladies!” she shouted. “Yes, that was it! We did it! You’re all perfect; I’m so proud of you! Now go enjoy the rest of the fete!”

“Thanks, Petra! Thanks, Jean!” was heard from various voices, although they didn’t need telling twice as they hopped off the stage. Petra disappeared into the melee, too, leaving me to clear up the music, take down the music stand and hand out flyers to people who tapped me on the shoulder wanting to join. I did my very best imitation of Petra’s sunniness in my responses to them – like my ‘customer-service’ mode on steroids – and secured quite a few new attendees for the next term. Bonus, I thought.

By the time I'd cleared up and taken the piano in with the help of one of the teachers, the playground had largely emptied. The cake- and drink-stall ladies were busily boxing up the unsold food to take to the food bank, the game stalls were now nothing but a handful of folded-down tables, and all that remained of the coconut shy was one broken coconut, the water long since evaporated.

The crowd had moved down to the beach now. I could still hear them, and I could smell barbeques being lit and food cooking. It felt a lot later than three o'clock, and my stomach rumbled, reminding me that both Petra and I had missed lunch.

Right then, though, that didn't matter. Because Petra came waltzing up to me, her face radiant and eyes dancing, and bumped her hip against mine.

"Good work, beautiful," she said.

"You too," I said, kissing her on the cheek without even thinking.

"Pugliesi's for dinner? Once we're done here?"

Pugliesi's was the restaurant at which we'd celebrated several anniversaries and achievements over the years. It had been taken over by a new owner, and the prices had skyrocketed, so we didn't go there any more. Today, however, their beautiful little Italianate courtyard seemed the perfect place to be.

"I'll call ahead and then take the stuff home while you finish up here," I said. "Sixty-three suit?"

Chapter Forty-Six

The good thing about Pugliesi's was that while the prices had gone up, so had the quality. We arrived and were shown straight into the courtyard, which had had quite a

transformation since we'd last been there pre-pandemic. Our table for two was tucked away in the corner with sheer curtains of wisteria all but enclosing it. The fragrance was sweet but not overwhelming, and Petra's smiling, glowing face on a backdrop of light blue flowers was a balm to my internal pain. I found myself smiling back at her.

We ordered drinks – both opting for Prosecco quite without discussing it – and food. I ordered caponata, a Sicilian vegetable stew, and Petra ordered egg-yolk ravioli. We were silent for a while – but a good kind of silent, a comfortable kind of silent – until the Prosecco arrived, then we took hold of the flutes and clinked them together.

“To today,” Petra said. “One of the better days of the summer so far.”

“And to Cass,” I said, clinking again. “She really pulled off that solo. The whole thing was exactly as I'd imagined.”

“To the choir in general!” She smiled again. Another clink. “I didn't like shouting at them, but it clearly worked. I won't be making a habit of it, though.”

“To shouting,” I chuckled. Clink. “That age-old but best-avoided motivational mechanism.”

“To music,” Petra said, but she didn't clink. Rather, she put down her glass. “One of the only reasons to keep going, you'd think.”

“What do you mean?” I said. That faraway look had come over her face again.

“I mean... there's something about it, isn't there? There's something about music that... bypasses the brain, and all the shit that's going on within it, and arrows straight to the heart.”

“That's... poetic,” I said, taking a sip of Prosecco. My mouth was suddenly dry.

“Have you ever heard of Clive Wearing?”

I shook my head.

“Brilliant musician. Absolutely wonderful. Lost pretty much the entirety of his memory in the eighties because of a virus. But you know what did remain in there? Two things: his ability to play, read and understand music, and his love for his wife. He has one of the most extreme cases of amnesia known to man, with information hitting his brain and disappearing within a matter of seconds, and yet he can still play music. And play it perfectly. If he hits a set of repeat marks, he somehow knows where he is in the music, whether he’s already repeated the bars or not. When every other part of his short-term memory is entirely decimated, how can this be? I was thinking about it the other night when I couldn’t sleep, and the only reason I could come up with is that music is in a league of its own. It is unparalleled when it comes to being processed in the brain. It transcends vocabulary and reasoning. It has its own rules and processes. That’s how it cuts so deeply. And that’s why it takes someone special, someone with that... cognitive makeup, to truly understand it. Like you and I.”

Finally she took a sip of her drink, and stopped to breathe. I was stunned.

“How lucky we are, then, to have found each other,” I said quietly. Because I felt she needed reminding, and because Gemma had said something to that effect, which had stuck in my mind. “To be with each other, and to be able to create music like we do.”

“Did,” she corrected me.

I raised an eyebrow.

“Did? Did we not do that this afternoon?”

“Yes, of course we did.” She sighed. “But my heart’s not in it any more. It hasn’t been for a while. Music in general just... isn’t doing it for me.”

“You’re burning yourself out, aren’t you?” I said, as gently as I could.

“No shit, Sherlock,” she mumbled around the rim of her glass. She took a quick sip, then put it down again. “But it’s only for a couple more weeks. Twelve working days, I think? One final heroic push to the end. Then... it’s done. And I will pray every bloody day that Victoria gets well enough to resume her role in September. Because I can’t do it any more.”

“Two more weeks...” I repeated. It was all I could think of to say. I’d never felt so powerless in all my life. “Two more weeks.”

At that point, the food arrived. Petra moaned as she took her first bite of ravioli, and I wasn’t far off that myself with the caponata. She swallowed, then looked at me again.

“Is it all right if I get drunk tonight?”

I blinked.

“Sorry?”

“I just want to let go for one night. Never mind the hangover tomorrow. I just want to feel like myself again, and maybe a dose of alcohol will help. Is that okay with you? Will you be all right to drive?”

“Of course,” I said automatically. Privately I was thinking, If it brings the old Petra back to me – even for one night – then it’s worth a shot.

Chapter Forty-Seven

And for the most part, it did. After receiving my affirmative, Petra ordered a bottle of wine when the waiter came back to check everything was all right. Two glasses arrived with the bottle of white, but I only had half of one, then stuck to water. Petra chugged back the rest of her glass of Prosecco without even blinking, then giggled at my look of shock. I forced myself to giggle with her. I’d seen her drunk plenty of times before, and she was a happy drunk, not an angry or sad one. It would just be a case of dealing with the hangover the next morning. Luckily, we had coffee, energy drinks and painkillers all at home.

Being flourless, the chocolate olive oil cake she ordered for dessert did nothing to soak up the alcohol. By the time she’d eaten that, all that remained of the wine was the bottle, and she was getting that hazy look about her. But she was also laughing, and quipping, and generally acting as if everything was normal about our lives. It was like a gulp of oxygen after so long under water, and I latched onto it with a vice grip.

On the way home, she bid me stop off at my shop for another bottle. “I won’t drink it all tonight, of course. Just one more glass.” So I pulled into the car park and she threw open the door, but staggered as soon as she took a step out. “Oh, look at that, I’ve lost the ability to walk,” she laughed.

“Get back in, then. I’ll go and get it.” I shook my head as if in disapproval, but I was smiling as I walked into the shop. It was such a treat to see her happy, even if a substantial amount of alcohol had been involved.

By the time I’d made it around the shop, stopping to chat to one of my colleagues for a couple of minutes, Petra was waiting for me by the kiosk.

“Oh, hello,” I said, placing the bottle on the counter so that the lad could scan it. “What are you doing in here?”

“Missed you,” she said, pulling me into her and kissing me on the ear. She continued peppering the side of my face with kisses while I squirmed, never having been one for such overt public displays of affection.

“Okay, okay, let me pay,” I chuckled after a moment, disentangling myself from her to swipe my discount card and tap my payment card. “Come on then, Malinky. Let’s go.”

The nickname popped out before I could stop it, and I tensed after remembering her reaction the last time I used it, but she was halfway out the door, still giggling. She’d left the car unlocked, which in any other place on Earth would probably have been a red rag to a bull for thieves, but at half past eight on a country road in rural Cornwall, it was fine.

“May I?” she said, holding her hand out for the bottle. I handed it to her, then blinked in surprise as she twisted the cap off and took a swig straight from the bottle. But I shook the surprise off and started driving again, and twenty minutes later we were pulling up onto our driveway.

“Bit unseemly to be drinking from the bottle, isn’t it?” Petra said, looking down at the half-empty bottle in her hands. “Jesus. Where did it all go?”

“Your bladder,” I answered, unbuckling my seatbelt. “I’m surprised you’re not bursting.”

“I am!” Her tone indicated surprise, as if she’d only just realised this. “Oh my God, I actually am. Give us the key?”

I handed it to her and she staggered to the door, but she couldn’t seem to get the key in the lock.

“Get me,” she laughed. “Lost the ability to walk and unlock the door!”

“There we go,” I said, turning the key the right way, and she bolted upstairs to the bathroom while I lit some candles – the night was just starting to draw in, and it would be sunset in half an hour. Excitement was starting to flutter in my veins. I had the old Petra back, for tonight at least. I was fairly certain where the night would lead, and in just over two weeks’ time, I’d have her back forever. Our lives would return to normal, and with any luck, the gender-based stuff bubbling in my brain would simmer down and return to the dormant state in which it had rested for my entire adult life.

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The sunset was dazzling tonight. I stood at the front door and looked over the roofs of the houses opposite. It would be at its most beautiful on the beach, of course, but this was enough. I took a deep breath, letting the sweet scent of Cornish summer fill my lungs. Then another, and another, as if I was inhaling the strength I'd been missing with each gulp of air. I closed my eyes and felt it fill me, completely indulging myself. After all, we'd need as much strength as we could get for this final Herculean push to the end of the school year.

After a few minutes, there was still no sign of Petra. She loved sunsets, so I wondered if she was observing this one from the upstairs window. Or if perhaps she was getting ready. Sex was sure to be on the cards tonight, and I was rather looking forward to it. It had been a long time since we'd had anything close to such intimacy together, and it would prove that we were still us, despite everything.

But no. No, she was asleep. Crashed out on the bed on her front, still with her shoes on, dress bunched up around her middle. The excitement came crashing down and was replaced by a feeling of disgust. That was a new one. Why disgust? This was my wife. Was this what they called 'the ick'?

Of course, I did what I had to do. Gently woke her up, coaxed her out of her dress, shoes and underwear, then helped her back into bed. She wasn't really awake, her movements robotic and her gaze blank, and she fell straight back asleep once her head hit the pillow. I stood looking at her in the fading light, a multitude of strange feelings filling my heart, where the optimism and excitement had been just ten minutes earlier.

Chief among them was horror.

There is no 'us' any more.

Where have we gone?

Chapter Forty-Eight

Until they returned, I hadn't been aware of the absence of our arguments. We'd had that few weeks back in the spring, and the odd few days of bad moods since then, but on the whole we'd been rubbing along okay, with a minimum of frayed tempers.

That all changed in the last two weeks of the school year, when the UK's temperature really began to ramp up.

We began to argue every day.

Multiple times a day.

Over tiny little things!

The brand of jam I'd bought at the shop. Apparently it was wrong. (We'd never stuck to a specific brand, preferring to buy whatever was cheapest or best value for money, but that day, Petra got annoyed when she saw the newest unopened jar on the kitchen counter.)

A comment she'd made while we were watching the late news one night. (It had been uncharacteristically unpleasant, and my enquiry as to why she had made such a remark turned into both of us going for it hammer and tongs.)

My snoring. (Made worse by the menopause.) Normally it didn't bother her, but I was awoken in the middle of the night by a jab of her elbow to my side.

“What was that for?” I’d cried out.

“Because you’re happily snoring away in the land of nod, and it’s stopping me from sleeping!”

Eventually, for both of our sakes, I’d relocated to the sofa. The following evening, when she came home, I suggested that I stay on the sofa. “Just for the next week. Until the end of term. I reckon we both need as much sleep as we can get, don’t you?”

“I think that’s a good idea,” she’d said evenly, so I resigned myself to the notion of a few uncomfortable nights of sleep. Neither of us had the time or energy to clear out the spare bedroom, so it was a toss-up between the sofa or an air mattress on the floor of the music room. Since the choir concert, our piano had fallen abruptly silent.

That, in turn, turned into an argument. “It’ll go out of tune if you don’t play it!” Petra exploded the following evening. “Don’t you know the most basic of things?”

“It’s only been ten days, for crying out loud!” I’d responded, and it had descended from there. That night, I’d actually walked out and driven to the graveyard to clear my head. I had ranted it all out to my sister, then gone for a walk. When I got home, Petra had gone to bed, and my phone’s in-built step counter notified me that I’d done six thousand steps in that walk alone. I ached all over the next day. The power of frustration.

By the time we got to the final weekend before school ended, I felt that we were barely hanging on. After a blisteringly hot few days that saw temperatures in the country reach record all-time highs, everybody seemed to be utterly drained. There were two more days – Monday and Tuesday – until the holidays started. I personally couldn’t see the point in them, but that was just the way it was. And I didn’t dare voice this to Petra, whose jaw grinding I could actually hear on Sunday night when I

popped upstairs to use the bathroom in the small hours.

On that Tuesday morning, the last day of term, I wasn't working, but Petra's movements woke me as they always did. We faced each other blearily at the kitchen table, but didn't say anything. She'd recently started taking her coffee black, although it made her wince every time she took a sip. I opened my mouth to ask her why she put herself through it, but I couldn't be bothered risking conflict this early in the morning. Rather, I made her a sandwich while she was upstairs showering, and handed it to her as she picked up her bag on the way out.

"Thanks," she said, her voice dull. Our eyes met, and she looked like she was going to say something. My heart thudded in my chest. But the moment passed, and all she said – mumbled really – was, "I'll see you later."

"Last day!" I said in as chipper a tone as I could manage. Looking back, it reeked of performance mode. "You can do this!"

"Yes," she said, and left the house. I shut the door behind her and – despite everything – smiled.

It was the last day. Victoria had told her last night that she was going to return to the school as headteacher in September, even if she had to be wheeled in. So Petra's role as Acting Headteacher would end today.

I suppose I was foolish enough to think that the strain would melt off Petra's shoulders as she departed the school building that afternoon. That she'd canter back up the hill, burst through the front door and whirl me about the room, just like she used to at the end of each term. That she'd kiss me, and everything would click back into place, ready for a summer of clearing things up and getting to know each other again.

Little did I know...

Chapter Forty-Nine

Petra's footsteps weren't quite cantering as she came through the door at half past eight that night. I'd been starting to worry about how late it was getting, but I presumed she would be at the pub with her colleagues, like they often did on the last day of term. Or draped around Stella McBride, my mind supplied unhelpfully, although without much heart. Since seeing Petra crying in her office, my gut had been telling me that there was no affair going on there. Petra just wasn't that type of person.

Eventually I heard her key in the door and felt an adrenaline-filled frisson of pure excitement.

"I'm home," she called out, heading towards the kitchen.

"Good evening!" I called back, making my way down the stairs. "Well done! You made it! You're free!"

We met in the kitchen.

"At last," she said, submitting to a kiss on the cheek. Her voice was dull once again, and the excitement faded a little, but I figured that the last day of term had taken it out of her. She had left her basket in the living room, and on my dash past it I'd seen a number of items in it. Mostly of the wine and chocolate variety, if past years were anything to go by. Gifts from parents and children alike. She was so universally loved, and I felt immensely proud of her.

“No more early starts until September,” I said. “Six weeks of living your best life. You made it, my love!”

“I did,” she said, but now her tone caused me to cast a second glance at her. She looked back at me, her eyes glassy, and I squinted.

“What? What’s wrong? Shitty parent at work?”

“No. Nothing at work. It was a good day. I just... I need to tell you something, and I know you’re not going to like it.”

“Okay,” I said sceptically, without feeling anything. “Shall we sit down?”

“Mm,” was all she said as I pulled out our chairs at the kitchen table. She sat down, but in the event I preferred to stand, resting my forearm on the back of a chair in an effort to make my body language casual. She didn’t even meet my eyes, but clasped her hands in front of her and took a deep breath.

“Jean, I’ve started smoking again.”

A bomb detonated in our kitchen.

Silence.

I felt my pulse accelerate.

Dread flooded my stomach and all the strength drained away from my legs, forcing me to clutch the back of the chair for support.

“What?” My voice was flat. Deadly. It didn’t belong to me.

“I just couldn’t handle it.” Petra ran her fingers through her hair. “The stress. Of work, and what was happening to us. I’ve only had a few a day. At work, and only on the weekdays, almost never on the weekend. I’ve used it to cope.”

“So that’s why you’ve lost weight,” I said numbly. “And drowned yourself in perfume.”

“I didn’t want to stress you out. Knowing that I’ve been smoking.”

“Where do you even get them? The cigarettes? There’s nowhere in the village that sells them!”

“Stella gets them for me. Stella McBride, the music teacher. She lives in town.”

Stella bloody McBride.

“So you’re not having an affair with her.”

“What? An affair? Fucking hell. No, absolutely not. I would never do that to you. She just buys my cigarettes, and I reimburse her. She gets it. She... understands the need.”

“The need?” I repeated in a hollow voice. “The need to what? Kill yourself? Because that’s what you’re doing, Petra. Every puff is one step closer to the grave. You know what happened to my sister. You know what that did to my family. Why would you do that to me, Petra?”

My shout surprised me as much as her, deep and from the chest as if I was belting a note.

“I’m sorry.” Her face crumpled. “I just couldn’t cope. The craving never really leaves

you. And I couldn't handle it, the constant scratchy feeling, not on top of everything else."

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Now I did sit down. My legs were shaking too much for me to stand. I covered my mouth with my hands to stop myself screaming, and forced myself to regulate my breathing until the urge passed.

“Where are the cigarettes?”

“In my work bag.” Petra gestured back towards the porch. “She bought me a few packets today. In case I found myself unable to get them for whatever reason.”

Cigarettes came in packs of 20. So that was what the mysterious messages had been about.

“So you have no intention of quitting, then. Now it’s the summer holidays. That’s why you’re telling me now, isn’t it? Because you’ve got no way of hiding it any more.”

She nodded mutely.

I huffed out a laugh. “I don’t believe this. I never thought you’d do this. You quit for me. Back in the day. After I told you what happened to Lyndsey, how that nearly killed me and my parents into the bargain. You want to get lung cancer? Petra? Or throat cancer, or emphysema? Or any other smoking-related illnesses? You want to die young, and make me a widow? I can’t believe this.”

“No!” Petra cried out, her voice breaking. “Of course I don’t want that. But I’m addicted. If you’ve never been in this situation, you’ll never understand the need.”

“You quit before. Easily, it seemed.”

“It wasn’t. I just hid the struggle from you.”

“You quit because you loved me, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t love you then, I hardly knew you, but I knew I was going to love you, yes.”

“And how about now? Don’t you still love me?”

Silence. She wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand and looked away. I felt my eyes widen, and leaned forward.

“Petra? Don’t you love me?”

“I do,” she said. “But... I don’t think that’s enough for me to be happy, somehow.”

I flinched – she couldn’t have hurt me more if she’d struck me.

“But we’re... we’re married.” I breathed. “We exchanged vows. As long as we both shall live. ’Til death us do part. Which may be sooner than we’d like, if you keep smoking.”

“Well...” She seemed to be lost for words, and eventually shrugged resignedly. “I don’t know. Maybe we weren’t destined to be together forever.”

The air left the room and all I could do was stare at her. She met my eye briefly and shrugged.

“Maybe Dame Destiny’s big plan was for us to only be together for a short while. I think the romantic love has gone out of this whole thing, don’t you? We’re more like

companions than wife and wife. And I can't help thinking... maybe the pair of us are better suited apart, now. We both deserve to be happy, don't we? And I'm not. Not happy, I mean."

"No," I murmured. "No, that's not true. I still love you. Romantically. There's still love in this. I just... I can't believe you're smoking again. After all the damage it caused. After all the hurt. You're a singer, Petra. Those cigarettes will destroy your voice. Doesn't that factor into the equation? Even if you couldn't keep off them for me, couldn't you for singing?"

I stared at her, and I didn't recognise the woman looking back.

"Not any more." Her tone was clipped. "Frankly, I'd be happy if I never had to sing again."

The silence rung in the air between us. I sat back in the chair again and exhaled, deeply. Several times, but it didn't serve to calm me. It only made me hurt more.

"So... you want a divorce? Is that what you're saying? You want all this... done?"

"I don't know." Petra covered her eyes with one hand, propping her elbow on the table. Her voice came out as a whisper. "I think so."

An involuntary whimper escaped my throat, but I forced myself to keep my voice steady.

"And how would we... go about it? Divorce on the grounds of...?"

"I don't know," she whispered again. "Felicia Wilson's mother, Mabel, has been helpful. She spotted me smoking in hiding a couple of weeks ago after work and I shared a little of how I've been feeling. She was just there at the right time and... she

suggested a trial separation. A couple of weeks apart. She has a spare room now that Felicia's moved in with Cass, and she offered me the use of it."

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“You really are serious,” I said, before dropping my head on the table. I felt like banging it, but refrained.

“I might call her,” Petra said.

“Perhaps that would be for the best.” My voice sounded different when I was speaking into the table. Worse in closer proximity. I raised my head again.

“Really?” Her voice indicated surprise. That she had expected me to put up more of a fight. But I didn’t have it in me.

“Really. I’m not going to hold you hostage in this marriage. If you’re not happy, you’re not happy.” My definitive tone belied the way my heart was shredding. “Divorce sounds very final, but...”

“Well, maybe we should go for that trial separation, then. Re-evaluate in a couple of weeks. I’m sure someone in the village would take me in, if Mabel can’t. What do you think to that?”

I dropped my head once again, but this time just rested it on the table, making an acknowledging affirmative noise in my throat. Petra stood up to leave, but she didn’t turn away. I felt her staring at me.

“You know... I’ve never felt like I truly know you. That there’s something, deep inside you, that you’ve been hiding. And over the years it’s driven me crazy, trying to figure out what was going on.”

She was right. Oh God. My... gender crisis thingy. I hadn't even thought about that, with the shock of this declaration. I'd been counting on Petra's support, her steady presence, to get me through it. Now I wouldn't have that. Now it was genuinely just me, myself and I. None of whom knew who we were.

None of that showed on my face, though. Or it might have done, but her view was obscured. I didn't know. I didn't know anything any more.

When I didn't respond, Petra sighed. "I'll call Mabel."

She walked away, and I stayed frozen in place. It only felt like a few minutes later – perhaps it was – when she reappeared.

"Mabel said yes."

I finally looked up. She had a holdall in her hand. I whimpered again. "You had a getaway bag?"

She looked down at it uncomfortably. "It's only an overnight bag. I'll have to come back tomorrow for the rest of my things."

"Okay."

"I... guess that's it, then? I'll... be in touch?"

"Okay."

"You can keep the car. Mabel has one, and if I need to then I'll get on her insurance. If this becomes long-term."

"Okay."

“Is that all you’ve got to say?”

“At the moment, yes.”

“...Okay.”

Though my vision was bleary with tears, I forced myself to get up. To follow her to the door, then down the short driveway. We both winced at the blinding sunset, as if the sky was reflecting our agony. She turned around, and looked as if she had more to say, but I knew she would be conscious of the neighbours. It was a still night, and voices would carry.

“Be safe,” was all she whispered, and pressed a feather-light kiss to my cheek. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Mm,” I said. It was all I could say. I knew that if I opened my mouth, I would scream.

And when I got inside, locked the door, went upstairs and into our – my – bedroom, that was what I did. Into my pillow, which quickly became damp, I screamed it all out.

Once I was spent, I dried my eyes, settled my breathing and took some painkillers for the pressure that was building up behind my eyeballs and in my sinuses. Then I went to bed. Today was officially on the scrapheap.

Chapter Fifty

The next day, my tears had been replaced by a steely resolve.

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I was going to figure this the fuck out, I thought as I got up and opened the curtains. No wonder Petra was running from me. I didn't even know who the hell I was.

It was time to stop running from the issue. I needed to start researching, starting with good old Google.

That was my new mission and I felt good about it, until I opened the wardrobe. Hanging up, sitting demurely, were all of Petra's clothes. She'd need to come back some time today, to get what she needed for at least a couple of weeks away from here. I did not want to be disturbed while doing my research, but since I didn't know when she was coming, I didn't want to sit down and get settled, then be interrupted. I itched to send her a text – to check she was okay as well as to ask her when she was coming – but I didn't want to seem desperate. My shift started at two in the afternoon, so in the meantime, I decided to clean the kitchen. Not exactly my standard response to a crisis, but it would serve to distract me at least.

Or so I thought. As it was, the monotony of scrubbing simply gave my brain room to contemplate. After a while, I put on some music to try and drown out the thoughts, but the shuffle function immediately came up with Whitney Houston. One of her iconic songs was also one of our iconic songs, Petra and I, as a singing duo – not to mention being the epitome of a breakup track. The Artificial Intelligence of our smart speaker must have heard the argument last night, for every line of this song resonated in a way that it never had before. The first verse was Petra's perspective, the second and third from mine, as if I was responding to her. And the chorus... well, would I always love her?

Did I still love her?

...Had I ever actually loved her?

Petra had been my first serious relationship, and by the time we got together I – well into my forties by then – had resigned myself to the prospect of never getting married. Of spending the rest of my life looking after my ailing parents, then my ailing self, alone now my sister was gone. Every good-looking, slightly-queer-looking woman that passed me by had been filed in my mind as a potential partner, but none of them had ever shown the slightest interest in me until Petra. Had I latched onto her through sheer desperation? And then had I become addicted to her, to what she made me feel, physically and emotionally?

If that was the case, then how many of the couples around us, and in the wider world, were actually in love? Did love exist, or was it merely an addiction to the serotonin and oxytocin and other happy hormones that someone else released in us? Pavlovian in nature – a type of classical conditioning?

Or, if not that... a form of escape? Society's pressure on singletons to be married and in love was immense. Everything was geared towards couples, from the ridiculous 'single-person supplement' that a lone traveller would encounter if they dared to book a holiday alone, to the subtle messages sent out by the media. The adverts we saw, the books we read, the television programmes we consumed. I had been an avid reader before all this business with Petra, and I could count on one hand the number of books I'd encountered with a healthy, upbeat, optimistic portrayal of a long-term single person. There were plenty that were full of doom and gloom, with hysterical depictions of lonely old spinsters and bachelors withering away alone into desiccated husks. How many of us married people got hitched to escape that fate? And how many of us would really be better off alone, if only society made it more acceptable to be so?

Perhaps I would, I thought miserably. Petra clearly thought so. My mind flew back to my conversations with Gemma. I had all but cut her off, having come so close to

temptation... but perhaps I should get back in contact with her now. It was worth thinking about, if Petra and I did ultimately call it quits.

That thought caused a stab of pain to lance my heart. We couldn't split up. I called for the smart speaker to stop playing – the next song, a more recent one from Celine Dion's latest album, would have reduced me to tears within a minute.

It was a good job I did turn the music off, for only a couple of minutes later there was a knock at the door. My heart lurched. Was the distance so great between us already, that Petra felt she had to knock on her own front door?

"Oh," I said dumbly as I opened the door. Neither of the women standing on the doorstep resembled the one I was expecting. It took me a couple of blinks – the light was so bright, and the house so dark – to realise that it was Cass and Felicia.

"Hello," I said blankly, leaning on the doorframe. It was all I could think of to say.

"Petra asked us to come for some of her things," Cass said, looking distinctly uncomfortable. I blinked again, every part of me wanting to scream and slam the door in their faces, not wanting to let them into my space.

"Of course," I said without even registering it. Propriety trumped everything. "Come on in. I'll make you a coffee."

"We can come back if this is a bad time," Cass said, but I'd already turned around and gone inside so they followed me in.

"Do you take sugar?" I called through, then jumped when I turned around to find Felicia directly behind me.

"I'm so sorry this is happening, Jean," she said without any preamble. "It's a shitty

situation. Can I give you a hug?”

“Of course,” I said again, and she wrapped me up in her arms. She was a couple of inches shorter than me, but the sunshiny, mango-scented bubble in which she seemed to exist enveloped me. She held me for what seemed like hours, and just when a little chink seemed to open in the bubble and let the cold back in, I felt a second pair of arms surround me from the back.

“Group hug,” Cass’s voice said, and we all chuckled. Eventually, they let me go, and I turned to Felicia.

“I’m sorry, is it...? I don’t know which...”

“Heather,” she replied as if reading my mind. “The one who comes to choir. And thus actually knows you. You wouldn’t find any of my other alters hugging someone they barely know!”

“Fair enough,” I chuckled. “It’s not something I really do either.”

“Shit,” Heather said. “Did I overstep? You didn’t have to say yes to the hug.”

“No,” I waved the comment away, “I needed it. It helped, despite everything.”

“I always say Heather’s hugs have magical healing properties,” Cass laughed. “Daniella’s give you backbone, Kylie’s make you lighter, and the other two don’t really do hugs at all.”

“I’d like to meet your other... alters. Sometime.” I stumbled over the terminology, not wanting to say the wrong thing.

“Well, go in the bakery and you’ll meet Daniella. I’ll try and persuade Coral to come

to choir one day, although we'd probably have to sing another Eulalia Gray song for that to have even the slimmest chance of happening. And Kylie and Autumn don't really come out... a whole lot."

I nodded, and realised that I genuinely would like to know all of them better. Them and Cass. They were the only other rainbow relationship in the village, that we knew of, and these days young people couldn't really afford to move down here anyway, so they needed to be treasured.

“So... Petra’s stuff,” Cass said, bringing us all back to earth.

“Yes.” I snapped back to reality. “Did she give you a list?”

“Well, she gave Mum a list,” Heather said. “And Mum gave it to us. She didn’t want to leave Petra.”

“Shit,” I said. “Is she okay?”

“Mum’s fine. Petra’s a bit... fragile. Hardly surprising, given the circumstances.”

“How much do you know?” I whispered, dread filling my veins.

“Well, we were at Mum’s when Petra phoned.” Heather looked uneasy. “We were just leaving to go down to the beach when we met Petra walking up. She was in a bit of a state, so we walked her back to Mum’s, and then she just ended up telling us... everything.”

“Everything?”

“From her point of view, anyway. It’s a shitty situation, like I said.”

“It’s not ideal, no,” I said stiffly. I couldn’t believe that Petra had spilled it out to them like that. I held my hand out for the list. “Make yourselves comfortable in the lounge. I’ll go sort Petra’s stuff out.”

“Do you need any help reaching the top shelf?” Cass said. “Petra said some of the

stuff was quite high. Perks of being tall.”

“No, I can manage, thank you,” I said, heading up the stairs.

Just the sight of Petra’s writing made me well up. The conversation downstairs had scraped me to the bone, and seeing Petra’s curvaceous handwriting with its flicky loops and swirling frivolities just made it worse. But I set my jaw and worked my way through everything in the list, packing it neatly and precisely as was my way. I didn’t hear a peep from Cass and Heather up until I was almost finished, when I heard a sudden excited squeal, and then Cass’s voice, sounding soothing. Whatever it was, it sounded like Cass was dealing with it, so I carried on packing.

When I went down five minutes later, Cass was holding her girlfriend tightly, swaying her a little bit.

“Everything all right?” I said from the doorway, feeling like I was intruding on this coupley moment.

“It’s fine,” Cass said with a smile, never letting go of her girlfriend. “Kylie – that’s our five-year-old alter – took a liking to your feather duster in the kitchen, and decided to put in an appearance. It’s what’s known as a positive trigger. She’s just switched back out for Heather and we’re a bit... dissociated. We’ll be fine in a minute.”

“Okay. I’m done with this packing now, so I’ll bring the cases down.”

“Need any help?”

“No, you seem like you’ve got your hands full here.” I tried to smile.

“No, it’s fine,” Heather said suddenly, un-burying herself from Cass’s chest. “I’m

fine. I can help.”

“Stay there,” Cass said firmly, pressing her down onto the sofa until she obeyed. “You’re still dizzy. I’ll go help.”

Between us, we managed to get both bags downstairs without hitting the wall too many times. Then Cass took one and Heather took the other, and they stood on the driveway.

“Can we have another hug?” Heather said, stepping forward, but this time I hesitated. I felt so fragile – another hug might finish me off. She picked up on this hesitation and immediately stepped back. “That’s fine. There’s no pressure. There’s never any pressure.” Instead she held out her little finger, and I linked mine with it. Cass did the same, so we were suddenly a triangle, each linked by one little digit.

“Can we check in on you tomorrow?” Cass said.

I hesitated again. “I suppose so. But... maybe text, rather than come out here? I’m not working, but I might be... doing other stuff.”

“Sure,” Cass said, and gave me both of their numbers. I gave them mine and waved them off.

The reason I’d asked them to text rather than come over was because I knew that tomorrow, I’d have to make a start on my research. No more putting it off because I was scared. It was too late now – I needed to get some lunch and get ready for work – but tomorrow I was completely free.

It was high time I researched the gender spectrum.

Chapter Fifty-One

‘List of genders’ seemed the most logical thing to type into the search engine at first, after a whole morning and half an afternoon of procrastinating.

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Then the results came up, and my mind boggled. I'd overheard scornful comments by bigoted customers at work about there being 'ninety-two genders', but now I realised this number might not be so far off the mark.

Growing up, there had been two clear, ring-marked genders in society: male and female. Now, as I clicked on an alphabetical list of genders and sexualities, each with their own page on the website, I realised that that perception was way off. Gender was more like a very intricate multi-faceted Venn diagram (within a Venn diagram, within a Venn diagram, repeat ad infinitum). It was the bits in between that I was focusing on today.

My mind flitted to the child Petra had told me about. The Year Six who'd told her they were non-binary. 'Anonymity Smith.' Seeing how accepting she had been, it was a comfort to know that she wasn't virulently gender-phobic, if that was the right word. Not that I'd expected she would be, but I'd latch onto any small mercies at this point.

Non-binary. Gender non-binary. An umbrella term meaning 'something other than exclusively male or female'. That sounded like a good enough place to start.

A couple of hours later, I'd made copious notes. My mind didn't take in information through just reading: I needed to regurgitate the information myself to make it stick. My hand was cramping and the pages of my notebook were curling, but I'd learnt about lots of genders within the non-binary spectrum. There was agender, gender non-conforming, gender non-binary, two-spirit, pangender... my mind was well and truly blown, and I couldn't even begin to think which one applied to myself. Or whether it was a combination of them, as one article had helpfully suggested.

But I couldn't deal with that right now. Not today. I was feeling pretty frazzled, my eyes were turning square, and I really just wanted to take a walk along the beach to clear my head, then cook something nice for dinner and chill.

The thought of the deliberations to come should have daunted me, but instead, as I donned my trainers and locked up the house, the majority of what I felt was positive. Just making a start on the research, taking that first step forward into the unknown, had made a difference. On top of that, knowing that there were so many options for me to consider lightened the load. One article had said 'Biology doesn't get to decide your gender. Nobody does. Only you do.' This was such a stark contrast from the way I'd been raised – not my parents' fault, just a reflection of society at the time – that it had temporarily burst the little bubble of anxiety that had been hovering over me.

Descending the steps on the beach, I saw Cass and Felicia again. This time, whichever alter was present was helping Cass, in a role reversal from yesterday. They gave me a little smile but didn't take their arms away from Cass as they helped her up the steps. I wondered whether Cass had a problem with heights, and whether I should offer to help, but it seemed like they had got it covered.

The beach, when I got to the bottom of the steps, was packed. It was officially tourist season now we were in the summer holidays, and while many of the locals grumbled each summer about the influx of visitors, I didn't mind in the slightest. They kept our local businesses going – Felicia had told me once that it was tourist money that had provided the cushion for her bakery to fall back upon during the pandemic. Plus, they livened the place up a bit. I smiled to see the throngs of people on the beach. A distinct scent of fish and chips laced the air, from the mobile hut I had passed just now. A little way ahead was a donut stand – another pop-up that had appeared since the pandemic. A little paper bag of hot, freshly fried, sugary donuts (not doughnuts, according to the sign) seemed the perfect way to celebrate taking that first step into investigating who I was.

As expected, the donuts were wonderful. I ate them sitting on a rock near the stand, then deposited the greasy little paper bag in the bin they provided. Returning to my rock, I drew my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them, not because I was cold but purely because it was comfortable. Hope bubbled in my chest as I gazed out into the ocean – an unfamiliar feeling, but I didn't fight it. I was going to figure this out, and go back to Petra as a whole woman again.

Well... perhaps not 'woman'. Inaccurate phrasing.

That was just a glimpse of how hard it was going to be, I thought ruefully. If I did come out as something other than female, the whole world's perception of me was going to change drastically. Not everyone was going to be supportive or accepting.

But Petra's support and acceptance was the most important, I knew. If I could convince her to keep this marriage going, and not to give up on me. Another daunting thought, but I pushed it away. Right now, this exact moment, was just about enjoying the beach.

Chapter Fifty-Two

If I'd had any notions about sailing effortlessly through the next however-long until Petra got back in touch, they were all burst like a bubble the next day. It was grey and drizzling when I woke up, despite a rather spectacular sunset the night before. In the cold light of day, the copious notes I'd made daunted me. I didn't even dare move the paperclip – even glancing at the first page as I sipped my coffee at the dining table sent a shot of cortisol through my veins. The mug began to tremble in my hands as – I think for the first time – the gravity of my situation hit me.

My marriage was teetering on the edge of a cliff. My wife didn't love me, I was doubting every feeling I'd ever had about her, and I hadn't even told her about the biggest thing eating me up from the inside. Mostly because I still didn't know what it

was. I knew the nature of it, but not the exact identity.

And my identity is the whole question here, isn't it?

And even if I did figure out what gender I was... what then? My whole life would change forever. Everyone would know that I was insecure, emotional, after I'd spent so long trying to squash the image of me as poor bereaved Jean Taylor, grieving the loss of her sister.

Because discovering one's true gender often came with inner turmoil. I knew that from experience, and my research from yesterday had shown me that I wasn't alone in it. These days, I liked to adopt a stiff-upper-lip attitude. In public, and now with Petra too, it seemed. Except for when we'd both lashed out at the choir last month, I don't think I'd ever allowed a single crack to appear in my outward armour. The image I liked to give off was of an impenetrable, unflappable person, immune to pain or emotional unrest.

If I came out, they'd all know that I'd been hurting. They would surely see my pain. And I'd be treated with pity. The condescending 'I'm-so-glad-it's-you-and-not-me' gaze that oozed from their sympathetic faces as they bore down on me in the street. The pats on the arm or touches to the shoulder from veritable strangers if I allowed even the briefest cloud to pass over my expression. All things I'd hated when Lyndsey died, and all things I would hate even more now.

And then there would be the transphobes. Or non-binary-phobes. The bigots. Not everyone supported the existence of people who came under the trans umbrella. It seemed that every day brought new ways for society to demean people like me – from microaggressions to murders. My mouth went dry at the thought of the potential hostility. I'd faced my fair share of it just by coming out as a lesbian thirty-odd years ago, but how could I face it now? Without my sister and parents having my back? Without my wife at my side?

The coffee was giving me the jitters, so I poured the rest of it down the sink, rinsed the mug and set it carefully upside-down on the draining board. I stared at it, then picked it up and turned it over in my hands. It was a generic white porcelain mug that we'd picked up in a sale soon after we got married. And it summed me up: a cast-off, rescued off the shelf by someone with far higher aspirations, and now unloved, simply used for its function rather than being loved and cherished just for being itself.

How dare Petra abandon me like this? How dare she walk away without even trying to fix this?

The sound of the mug smashing made me jump. I'd thrown it before I even registered I was going to. The shards went everywhere, making a tremendous mess on the kitchen tiles. For one brief, awful moment I wondered if a ghost had come into the kitchen and snatched the mug off of me, but then I registered a slight reduction in the intensity of my rancour. I eyed the other three mugs, sitting placidly on the shelf above the kettle, and a surge of adrenaline sent me striding over to them, heedless of the shards underneath the hard sole of my slippers. I picked up all three, and one by one, hurled them to the floor.

Crash!

Crash!

Crash!

It wasn't enough. The kettle went next. Ripped out of the wall and launched southwards, hot water sloshing out of the broken lid. Then the tea jar. Then the coffee jar, sending a puff of crappy powdery instant through the air. Each missile caused a crash that simply added to the cacophony of unidentifiable noise crowding my head, until I finally sank to the floor where I stood next to the pile of debris, sobbing with enormous, heaving gasps.

This pile of rubbish was my life now: in a million pieces. With absolutely no hope of ever being pieced back together.

Chapter Fifty-Three

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It was impossible to tell how long I cried for. Time quite simply ceased to exist, and my whole world narrowed down to the desperate sawing of air in and out of my lungs, each breath bringing with it an increase in the pain, until I felt as if my head would explode if I didn't find a way to expel it somehow. The burning in my wrists became unbearable, and I ran my nails along them in a hopeless attempt at a placebo effect.

It wasn't good enough. My sobs quietened as I considered my next moves.

Within arm's reach was a pile of sharp objects. Broken things with sharp edges. It would be so easy to...

I lifted my head from where it had rested on my raised knees, and used the bottom of my dressing gown to wipe my eyes enough to see clearly. Then, without any conscious input from me, my hand was sifting gently through the pile until it found what it was looking for. The piece of porcelain was quite large, around a third of the mug. The bottom half of the handle was still attached, and I swung it on my finger for a moment as I contemplated it.

It would be so easy. And it would purge this pain. Release the tension. Just like it always had.

Here was something I could control. I couldn't get a grip on what was going on under this skin, but I could control what was on it.

I mustered all my strength, and then, with another cry, hurled the porcelain over to the other side of the room. I needed it away from me. I needed to be away from

temptation before I caved and broke my streak after all these years.

Somehow, I had enough strength to climb to my feet and bolt for the stairs. I made it up them and into the bathroom, then faced myself in the mirror.

“No,” I said through gritted teeth, not recognising the person staring back at me. “No. You’re going to figure this the fuck out. And you’re going to get your fucking life back. Come hell or high water.”

Chapter Fifty-Four

At work, I thought I was doing a pretty good impression of a woman whose life was absolutely not falling apart. Who had a fabulous, healthy, functioning marriage with her soulmate, who was entirely comfortable in herself, and who simply couldn’t be happier to be serving the many customers that passed through the automatic doors. After all, that was who I had been up until almost precisely four months ago.

It was getting harder and harder, but over the next few days I reached deep inside myself to make it work. I fussed over my appearance in front of the mirror before I left the house, and practiced my customer-service face and voice. “Good morning, Sir! What can I do for you? Twenty cigarillos? No problem!” At one point I even contemplated putting a pandemic face mask back on, and spending the next couple of weeks hiding behind it and pretending I had a virus. But I decided to save that for when things got really desperate.

While I was actually at work, I pretty much completely imagined myself out of my body. My brain lifted up out of the top of my head, leaving behind in my body the bare minimum required to do my job. Several times I’d wave goodbye to a customer, sit back down and think, What the fuck was I just chatting about? It certainly wasn’t me doing the job. It was simply autopilot. And once again, I wondered if I really was losing my mind.

Then on the Sunday – five days after Petra left, and my second nine-hour shift out of three in a row – something shifted. Legally we were only allowed to open for six hours – the other three of my shift was spent stacking shelves and doing other administrative tasks – but even six hours on the tills felt like too much for me. My mind kept thinking of Petra. What was she doing today? Was she rubbing along okay with Mabel, who from our few brief interactions I knew to be a very Marmite sort of character? How were things going to progress? Would I be the one to get in touch with her? Or should I wait for her to contact me?

“That’s not right.”

A customer’s voice cut through my reverie.

“Sorry?” My voice had its usual helpful inflection.

“You’ve given me the wrong change. I gave you a twenty, but you’ve given me change for a ten.”

With a monumental effort, I pulled my brain back down into my body, and looked properly at the customer. He was scowling, and showed me the coins I’d just placed into his hand.

“So I did,” I murmured. “I... let me just check what you gave me.”

“For fuck’s sake...” he grumbled under his breath as I opened up the till and looked at the last note I’d placed in the drawer. It was a ten. But that didn’t mean anything. Twenties, as a rule, were posted through into a secure cash box underneath the till as soon as we received them. I couldn’t remember putting one in there in the last thirty seconds, but equally I couldn’t remember putting a ten in the till either. Or giving the customer his change. Or indeed what he had bought in the first place. My mind was a complete blank, and I just stared at him numbly.

“Well?” he said impatiently. He gestured towards the till. “I just need another tenner to make it right.”

My mind see-sawed between calling my supervisor to check and just giving in, but procedure trumped everything.

“I... let me just call my supervisor,” I said, and asked for Laura to come to the tills on my radio.

“Your supervisor?” he spluttered, going puce. “Why do you need your fucking supervisor? It’s not rocket science! I gave you a twenty, you thought I gave you a ten, you gave me the wrong change, and now I need the right change. What part of that is so difficult to understand?”

“Jean, what’s going on?” Laura appeared beside me.

“I... I can’t remember,” I said, my chest going tight. “The gentleman says I gave him the wrong change, but I don’t remember what he actually gave me.”

“It was thirty fucking seconds ago!” the man bellowed. “Is she fucking losing it or something? Listen, you give me my change, or I’ll call the police.”

“Go out the back, Jean.” Laura’s voice was firm. “I’ll sort this out. Go and have a break.”

“I’ve had all my breaks...” I protested dumbly, but my legs were walking away from the till even as I said that. The rest of the queue gave me weird looks as I passed them, but I didn’t have it in me to wonder why. It took me two attempts to punch in the code for the warehouse door, but eventually I lurched through and headed straight for the ladies’. There, I braced my hands either side of the sink, trying desperately to draw air into my lungs. My face was deathly pale in the mirror – even paler than my

usual colouring – and contorted in an expression I couldn't bear to look at, so I dropped my eyes to the sink itself, trying to focus on the many nicks and scratches in it in an effort to put my mind back together again.

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The door opened behind me a couple of minutes later and Laura's head popped around it.

"Can I come in? Or do you need a minute?"

"A minute," I wheezed, and in the mirror I saw her nod.

"Okay. I'll be waiting in the office. Come and talk to me when you're ready."

"Do I have to?" I said, but she was already gone. I sighed, but noticed that I could actually breathe slightly easier now. A bone-deep fatigue seeped in, and I found myself clinging to the edge of the sink to stop myself collapsing altogether.

After five minutes or so, I could feel my legs again, and cautiously took my hands off the sink. Confident that I could support myself now, I met my own eyes in the mirror, surprised to see tears in them. A quick wipe with a tissue and a wash of the hands, and I squared my shoulders at my reflection. It was time to face the music. Or Laura, at least.

True to her word, my supervisor was in the office, clicking away on the computer. I stood in the doorway and squinted – she was printing labels. Then she noticed me and turned around, smiling gently. I suddenly remembered: she was the Mental Health First Aider for our branch. If I was going to have a panic attack on shift, she was probably the best equipped person to deal with it.

"Let's go sit down in the break room, shall we?" she said, and I led the way into the room next door. We sat down opposite each other, and I was reminded of my initial

interview for the position, some twenty years ago now. How times had changed.

“Is it all right if I ask you what’s going through your head at the moment?”

I couldn’t look at her, but I managed to chuckle.

“Right at this moment, I’m embarrassed to be even having this conversation. Fifteen minutes ago, I was also embarrassed, but for an entirely different reason.”

I waited for her response, but she didn’t give one. When I did look at her, she was leaning forward with her hands clasped... with an ‘I’m waiting’ look on her face. It made me feel a little uncomfortable, but it worked. I looked away again and prayed for strength.

“I just have a lot on at the moment. My mind got a bit tangled up with all these customers, and perhaps I gave him the wrong change. I wasn’t exactly... thinking too hard about what I was doing. Which is entirely my own fault, and all I can do is apologise.”

“You actually gave him the right change.”

Now I looked at her.

“Really?”

“Yep.” She nodded. “He was just trying it on. One of the things I have access to as supervisor is what the last ten notes were that were put into the cash box, and when you put them in there. The last twenty you put in the box was four minutes before the transaction. When I told him that, he deflated like a balloon and slinked away with his tail between his legs.”

“So I was right. But the point still stands that I couldn’t remember, because I wasn’t concentrating.”

“Are you comfortable telling me why that is?”

Her eyes were full of concern. Not a hint of judgement. Balling my fists tightly, I forced myself to say it.

“Petra’s left me.”

“I see,” she said, but didn’t say anything else.

“A divorce is... on the cards. But we’ve separated for now. It’s hard.” Against every ounce of my willpower, my voice broke and tears filled my eyes again. “It’s really hard.”

“I can tell,” she said gently. “Would a hug be helpful?”

“No, thank you,” I shook my head. “I just want to carry on as normal. Whatever ‘normal’ is at the moment.”

“All the same, there’s not a whole lot of point you going back out there now,” she said. “Not with only an hour left of your shift. Why don’t you clock off early? You’ve done enough overtime the last few weeks – nobody’s going to begrudge you a lost hour.”

“Can the two of you cope? You and Jordan?” I motioned towards the front of the shop, where I knew my other colleague would be doing my job on the tills.

“We’ll make it work,” she said. “There’s not much left to do once we’re shut. Go on. Go home and get some rest.”

“Okay,” I said, standing up and picking up my bag.

“Is there anything else you wanted to talk about?” Laura said, standing up too. “Are there any accommodations we need to make in the workplace? Time off for solicitor’s meetings, etcetera...?”

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“Oh no, nothing like that. All of this only kicked off on Tuesday. We’re spending a few weeks apart right now, just to see how things go. But thank you for the offer.”

“Not a problem. And remember, the option of going to your doctor is always there. They can sign you off for a week or two, if the need arises due to stress.”

“I hope that won’t be necessary, but thank you.” I pasted my best professional smile back on my face. “I’ll see you at six o’clock tomorrow.”

“I hope you have a bearable evening, Jean,” she smiled back. “And I hope things work out with Petra. You always struck me as a wonderful couple.”

Before I could start crying again, I left the room, left the shop and stumbled out through the late-July heat to my car. Autopilot took over again as I drove the twenty minutes home, and before I knew it, I was standing in my living room, which – like the rest of the house – was silent as the grave.

Once again, the fatigue overtook me, and I sank down onto the sofa. At that moment, only the television seemed to be a feasible plan of action.

Chapter Fifty-Five

At some stage, I must have fallen asleep, because the knock at the door a couple of hours later made me jump out of my skin. I hadn’t even managed to turn the fan on, and the jacket of my work uniform – only worn in the summer heat because it was cold in the shop – was stuck to my body with sweat. Not the best state in which to answer the door, but my body was once again moving on autopilot.

Please be Petra, I thought just as I swung the door open. Then –

“Oh,” I said as Cass and Heather (presumably) entered my vision.

“Well, thank God for that,” Cass said, wiping her brow.

“Sorry?” I spluttered.

“You’ve not been responding to our messages. Petra said you’d be working today, so Heather and I just drove out to the shop to find you, only for the woman in there to tell us that she’s never heard of you! We thought you’d... emigrated or something.”

Now Heather interrupted, putting a quelling hand on her girlfriend’s arm. “Did you quit your job?”

“No!” Despite it all, I laughed. “That’s just company policy. There have been a couple of instances in other shops where stalkers have come after employees, so it’s now standard policy in the company not to give any indication that anyone specific works there. If you see what I mean. Sorry. I’m not at my most eloquent today.”

“So why aren’t you at work?” Cass said. “I mean, you’re dressed for work. Are you okay?”

“The heat got on top of me,” I fibbed. “So I came home a little early.”

“The heat?” Heather repeated. “Your shop is freezing bloody cold!” Then she took a breath, and seemed to peer at me. “You don’t seem okay. Are you?”

I felt myself deflate. “No, not really,” my voice said.

“Called it,” Heather said, and I smiled despite myself.

“Do you want to come for a drink with us?” Cass said.

“When were you thinking?” Mentally, I was running through my self-imposed meal plan. Tonight was supposed to be ham and mushroom tagliatelle a la microwave.

“Like in about five minutes. Just for a drink. Lemonade is calling my name in this heat, I don’t know about you.”

“And one of the pub’s mocktails is calling mine,” Heather said. “What about you? Is something calling yours? Jeeeean, Jeeeeeean, drink me...!” She pulled a ghostly face to go with the ghostly voice, and Cass laughed.

“Fine, fine, fine,” I chuckled. “Just for one drink. You go on ahead and I’ll get changed. I’ll be ten minutes.”

“What drink is calling your name, then?” Heather said, picking up her bag again in preparation for leaving.

“Moscato-” I begun, automatically thinking of my go-to drink for seeming like a woman. Then I stopped. I wasn’t a woman. So why would I get that drink? “Half a pint of bitter,” I said instead.

“Wine and beer?” Cass narrowed her eyes. “Together? Like a snakebite gone wrong?”

“No,” I chuckled again. “Just the beer. Thank you. Next round will be on me.”

“I thought you wanted just one drink,” Heather laughed as they turned away.

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The smile slid off my face as I shut the door on them. I was, to be honest, pretty peopled-out for one day. But I had been thinking that we – I – needed to get to know the pair of them better, after all. And this seemed like the perfect opportunity to do so. (And possibly get a little intel on Petra's wellbeing while I was at it.)

Chapter Fifty-Six

The unease I felt as I walked alone into the pub was only marginally counteracted by the relief of the air conditioning. This heat was nothing compared to the scorching forty-odd degree heat we'd had the previous week, but for some reason I seemed to be feeling it more now. Perhaps because I was less distracted by all that walking on eggshells.

Cass saw me first and waved from a booth. Our drinks were in front of her. Heather was nowhere to be seen.

"Daniella's talking to Martine over there," she said, nodding towards the bar. Heather – Daniella? Another of her alters, presumably? – was leaning up against it, chatting to a blonde lady who I recognised as the owner of the boutique across the road from the bakery. I sat down opposite Cass, and we both watched their interaction for a minute.

"Daniella couldn't have done this even a year ago," Cass said suddenly, forcing my attention back to her.

"Done what?"

"Fronted in this place. In a public place. She's always struggled with agoraphobia,

and the pandemic didn't help. It's only thanks to her therapist that she can do it now. Even if she's not the most comfortable."

"Does she...?" I felt distinctly uncomfortable knowing this.

"Yeah, she said I could tell you this," Cass said, reading my mind. "You and Petra have been kind of at the forefront of our minds today, and when I suggested we tell you... some stuff about us, she was fine with it. Her part of it, at least. We didn't plan Martine being here, though. That was just good timing."

"What did you want to tell me?"

"Well, nothing in particular. But we are very guarded about our story, and we wanted to drop that guard a bit with you. Petra knows all about it now. It's not the most conventional of love stories. How can it be, when one of us has sometimes-crippling depression and the other has Dissociative Identity Disorder?" Cass chuckled.

"I meant to ask about that. How does that... work?" I said.

"Well, it was tricky at first. Felicia, as a system, has five alters. But there is nobody called Felicia: that's simply the body's legal name. My girlfriend is Heather, and I'm just good friends with Daniella, Coral, Autumn and Kylie. We couldn't have done it without therapy, though. Couple's therapy and individual. We... we nearly lost each other before we'd barely gotten off the ground. Stuff happened. And it's only thanks to therapy that we figured out how to proceed in the long-term."

"So what you're suggesting is that Petra and I have couples' therapy?" I could read between the lines.

"I'm not suggesting anything. I'm just floating the idea."

“And how is my wife?” I said. My defences were going up, and I felt Cass had overstepped the mark slightly, so I allowed a little edge into my voice.

“Oh, she’s fine,” Cass said – a little too brightly, I thought. “Odd as it sounds, we don’t really talk about the situation. We’re all just getting to know each other as friends. And, of course, we’d like you to be a part of it, whether you’re with Petra or not.”

“I couldn’t stay friends with her,” I shook my head, blurting it out quite without meaning to. “If we do split up, I mean. It would have to be a clean break. One of us would have to leave the village – probably me. I certainly can’t afford to buy her out of the house, and I can’t stay here, not if she does. The constant reminder would be simply too painful.” To my horror, tears were filling my eyes.

Cass’s knee connecting with mine under the table told me that she saw, but I was very glad she didn’t draw any further attention to it. The phrase ‘real men don’t cry’ popped into my head suddenly, and I felt myself jolt. Was my body trying to tell me something? Now a tear actually slid down my cheek.

“Hey.”

Now Heather’s – Daniella’s? Heather’s? probably Heather’s – face was filling my vision. She slid into the booth opposite me and held out both of her hands. I stared at them, until I realised she wanted me to take them. I tensed up automatically and made no move to do so. After a moment, she withdrew them quietly, and leaned forward in the seat instead.

“Jean. Listen to me.” Her voice was steady.

“Heather, sit back,” Cass murmured, and Heather scooted back a few inches without altering her posture or even looking at her girlfriend.

“Jean,” she repeated, and it was only when I looked at her that I realised I had no idea where my gaze had been before.

“Mm?” I acknowledged her.

“It’s going to be okay.”

I tried – and failed – to suppress an eye roll. When Gemma had said that to me months ago, it had buoyed me, but from Heather it riled me.

“How can you say that?” My voice came out thick. “You have no idea what’s going on in our heads right now.”

“That is true,” Cass put in, and I looked at her. “But we’ve seen how much you love each other.”

Love.

Oh, that infernal word!

The root of so many problems between Petra and I these days.

“I have to go,” I said, interrupting whatever obsolete words were still spilling out of Cass’s mouth. “Thanks for the... thanks.”

And with that, I stood up and made a break for it.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

There was a small white box on the front doorstep when I arrived home from work the next day. It was tied with a pink bow, and it had my name on a note on the top. It was cool, so it couldn’t have been there for very long. Curiosity piqued, I picked it up and carried it inside the house.

When I shut the front door, the first thing that hit me was the scent of Petra’s perfume. It smelled fresh, as if she was standing there in the room with me. I froze, but heard no sign of life.

“Petra?” I called, just to be sure. My voice – still loud from being in performance mode – bounced off the walls, but there was no response. I walked cautiously into the kitchen, set down the box on the table, then did a quick tour of the house just to double-check that she wasn’t here.

The first thing I noticed when I went upstairs was that our bedroom door was open. I'd pulled it partially closed before I left in an effort to keep the room as cool as possible, and my heart leapt into my throat as I walked in there. There was no sign that anything had been disturbed until I opened the wardrobe. More of Petra's clothes and shoes had gone and – as I saw when I went into the bathroom – so had more of her toiletries. But Petra herself wasn't there. Even if she clearly had been.

Back downstairs, I took the note from beneath the ribbon on the box and turned it over.

Hi Jean,

Coral (my sixteen-year-old alter) baked some shortbread last night. Petra told us how much you love shortbread, and so we thought it would be the perfect apology gift for what happened yesterday, even if it isn't the authentic Scottish stuff you're used to! We clearly overstepped, and we – Cass and I – are deeply sorry about that.

We hope you'll come out again with us sometime. Give us a call or a text?

Heather and Cass

My mouth curved into a smile, but it was a wry one.

Come out with them sometime?

The way things were going, I'd be coming out in more than one way soon enough.

As what, though?

That was the problem. I still wasn't sure. The one thing that I was completely, one-hundred-percent sure on was that I wasn't female. At birth, perhaps, but not on the

inside. I never had been, but it was only recently that I'd even entertained the notion of being anything but cisgender.

Logically, I knew that it was okay not to know any more than that. It would be absolutely acceptable to go to Petra and tell her how I was feeling. But now she was gone, I wanted to approach her as a whole person. To say "this is who I am", rather than just "this is who I'm not". I'd sort of missed the boat for letting her in because I was too busy trying to preserve what remained of her mental health... but, paradoxically, shutting her out had just contributed to the divide between us. It didn't take a rocket scientist to work that out.

I sat down with a thump on the kitchen chair as I realised the brutal truth. I'd approached this all wrong. It was on me to communicate how I was feeling as much as it was on Petra to ask. Like a spoilt, selfish child, I'd been raging away on the basis of 'if she doesn't care enough to ask, I don't care enough to tell'. And look where it had gotten us. Separated. Divorce in the pipelines.

This realisation did not change the current predicament, though. I still felt I needed to figure out exactly what I was. At the moment, the closest I'd gotten to a label was 'gender non-binary'. But this was a whole category of identities in and of itself, all of which still needed some thinking about. And it scared me.

I decided to leave any actual solid research for tomorrow. I had a full day off, and after a night's sleep I would be in a much better position to think clearly. Nine hours at work today – my standard shift these days – had turned my brain into mulch. I popped open the lid of the shortbread, bit into one, and chewed mournfully.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

It had seemed like such a good idea at the time. A wee dram just to round off the evening, after a dinner of shortbread, then a supper of microwaved fish pie at about

nine o'clock after losing myself in a show called Feel Good. I'd found a blog post which had told me that this was a good show to watch when considering one's own identity, but by the end of the first season I wasn't finding it particularly enlightening. It was entertaining though, a good show in general, and that was why I ate dinner so late.

One shot of whisky had taken the edge off the pain and lulled me into an almost-sleepiness. Another shot would send me off to sleep entirely, I thought, so I downed it with a wince before heading up the stairs to bed.

But try as I might, I couldn't sleep. I changed into my pyjamas and brushed my teeth, then cuddled down into our bed for what (not that I had been counting) would be my seventh night without Petra. The sound of rain outside, whipping itself into quite a storm, would be perfect white noise, I thought.

Up until now, I'd been fairly good at switching off the thoughts when it was time to sleep. However, the alcohol seemed to have broken the off-switch entirely, because in they crowded, like commuters on a London tube carriage, until I had to throw off the thin sheet covering my body because they were sending me into a hot flush.

If only I wasn't a woman, I'd caught myself thinking. Then I wouldn't have to deal with this menopausal nonsense.

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And from there my thoughts had spiralled. At God-only-knew o'clock, I'd found myself thinking wistfully of the slightly fuzzy state of sleepiness that had cocooned me after that first shot. Perhaps another will do the trick, I thought, and stumbled down the stairs.

I'd had two for good measure, and by then my eyes were stinging. Sitting back down at the kitchen table, my limbs were not quite of their own accord as I blindly reached up onto the shelf and pulled out an album.

Of course it had to be one of mine and Petra's. Of course. I sniffed and squinted in the semi-darkness at the year on the front of it. 2016. With half a year of marriage under our belts, we'd been confident. This was the year we'd taken on the choir – and the first picture in there was of Petra standing in front of them, arms raised as she conducted at our first rehearsal. I'd taken it from my old position in the second row of the altos. It had taken a little while for us to figure out that it worked better with me conducting and her playing the piano, but in that picture her expression was elated, her arms were blurry with movement and she looked... solid. Her usual tall, confident self. Not the compressed, almost stooped figure I'd become used to without noticing for the last few months.

Perhaps, when the choir resumed for the autumn term, we could make some changes. Give Petra the opportunity to conduct again. Shake things up a bit, get the choir out of the stalemate into which it had fallen over the last term or so.

That was presuming we still had the choir.

My stomach flipped as I remembered what I'd said to Cass the night before. "I can't

stay here, not if she does.” It was true. There was absolutely no way I could stay in the village – hell, even in Cornwall – if Petra did. Not without being her wife. Or spouse. So we’d have to give up the choir. Or I would. Perhaps Petra could keep it, and find someone else to take over. A sudden image flashed in my mind of Petra and an unidentified someone (who slightly resembled Stella McBride) having the time of their lives running our choir, while I sat in an unfamiliar flat somewhere new, alone.

I flipped through the album, not even realising that I had poured myself another whisky and was sipping it slowly. We’d been on holiday to the south of Wales that year. It had been an autumn break when the rates were cheaper, and there were a couple of photos of us bundled up in coats (the weather having been unseasonably chilly for October), crunching through multicoloured leaves, hand-in-hand and flushed with the thrill of being together. I didn’t recognise myself in the pictures, but then I never really had. Tonight, however, my gaze was drawn to Petra.

Her beauty, to me, had always been more than surface-level. Beyond her olive skin and high cheekbones and piercing brown eyes was a brain that was host to quite possibly the most wonderful human being to ever walk the planet. Out of any of the singers we both loved, her personality most resembled Eulalia Gray’s. Oozing with pure kindness, infectious positivity and sensitivity, and at the time I’d felt that I’d found my soulmate. No matter what I thought now, I couldn’t deny how I’d felt at the time. I had loved her. We’d bounced off each other so well, bringing out the best in each other, and tumbling headfirst into whatever we set our minds to.

When had it changed?

I gave a sudden sob.

And when was it coming back?

I suddenly had the urge to call Petra. To hear her mellifluous voice, thick with sleep

at this time of the morning, to just chat like we used to. My determination to let her make the first move dissipated as I clutched my phone in one hand and my glass in the other, staring at the old picture of her. I missed her like a physical ache. There was no other way of explaining it. I missed her.

But I quickly realised I couldn't do anything about it when I tried to turn the phone on, and realised it had died. I was only keeping it on in case Petra tried to call – some hopes, I thought bitterly. Gulping down the final drop of whisky, I put the glass in the sink and headed – staggered, really – upstairs to find my charger.

Even when I plugged it in, it took a few minutes to charge, so I lay on my back on the bed, folding my hands on my stomach and attempting to take a deep, if shaky, breath. In that position I had finally fallen asleep, and woken up the next morning feeling like my eyelids had been glued together.

Nope, definitely shouldn't have started on the whisky.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

The hangover was like nothing I'd ever known before. I couldn't pinpoint the moment I realised it wasn't simply an ordinary hangover, but a migraine. At some point, the two twin horrors had segued, and I spent most of Tuesday hunched over the toilet, resting my head on the back of the seat, in the only position that seemed to bring even a degree of comfort. My thoughts jumbled up like a jigsaw puzzle spilling out of a box, and I started in surprise when I opened my eyes to see it was almost dark. I hadn't even been downstairs that day.

This was where our marriage had practical benefits, I thought grimly. If Petra had been there, she would have helped me. Fetched me water, forced me to eat, persuaded me to try the latest of her Google-found 'miracle migraine cures'. Or at least, in the olden days she would have done. Perhaps nowadays she wouldn't have been as

bothered. Given that I seemed to mean nothing to her.

The sorrow and love from last night had gone, replaced by the return of my anger. When I eventually found my phone there wasn't anything from her, even though the one-week anniversary of our split had passed at some point that evening. A small part of me had wondered if she would get in touch to mark it in some way. Some hopes, I thought bitterly again, before moving my head too fast and bringing on another wave of nausea. When it subsided, I took the opportunity to call Josie – the supervisor of my shift tomorrow – and tell her I wasn't coming in.

“No, you don't sound very well, you poor thing,” she said.

“I should be all right for my next shift. I just... need a day to recover from this migraine.” Even though I wasn't fully mentally present, I registered the flatness of my voice, the way it almost slurred.

I never called in sick, which was probably why she didn't even question it. Which was a good thing, because I had to hang up in a hurry before my vision went again. The thing about migraine aura was that it didn't go away when I shut my eyes, and so I buried my face in my raised knees in an effort to compress them. It felt as if my eyeball had gone numb, and I wanted to quite simply pluck it out. Somewhere on my drifting subconscious I was aware that the doorbell had gone, but the noise of my pulse roaring in my ears and the crushing pressure in my head joined forces to pin me down onto the bed, and it was in that position that I woke up the next morning.

Wednesday was better, but only marginally. The pain had gone, replaced by an empty, slightly tingly feeling that filled my whole body. Looking at myself in the bathroom mirror, I noted my slightly vacant stare, almost as if I'd taken a hit of some sort of sedative drug – not that I ever had. And my thoughts had dulled, too, which I thanked God for. A temporary release from the turmoil.

A day pottering in the garden seemed like the best possible idea I could have had, I thought with a flash of optimism as I descended the stairs. But first, coffee and food, since nothing had passed my lips since my misadventures with the whisky on Monday night.

Then I entered the kitchen and spotted the photo album. It was still lying open at the last picture I'd viewed: one of us and the choir at our first Christmas concert as their leaders. We had an arm around each other and were wearing matching grins. I had to look twice before I actually recognised myself – my hair had been its former brunette, not a hint of the grey or purple that I sported now, and I had it slightly longer than I preferred these days.

Had that woman, that version of me, felt like this? It was quite a struggle to actually remember. Then it hit me. It had been there. This feeling of dysphoria. For a long, long time. I just hadn't recognised it. I'd pushed it away.

I'd always had little moments of unreality, but they'd increased particularly in number and severity after Lyndsey had died. The best way I could describe it – not that I had ever had reason to do so – was that it was like being on a train, which pulls up at a station next to another train. After a few moments, the adjacent train starts moving and it feels like your train is moving too, but then the tail end of it passes you by, you can see the platform and you realise with a jolt that you hadn't been moving at all, you're exactly where you stopped. That jolt was no stranger to me, but now I thought of it in the context of my gender. I'd be striding through life, firmly ensconced in my own little world in my own little head, and then I'd have the sudden, bone-deep realisation that something's not right. I'd never known what.

Now I realised... my body wasn't right. The vessel that held me was wrong. It always had been, but I hadn't realised it at the time. Now it made perfect sense, and I dropped the album I'd been holding this whole time without realising it, before scurrying over to the drawer, where all my notes on gender were.

Non-binary.

In all my learning, I'd thought that it was an umbrella term, with a billion other identities within it. But could it be an identity on its own? Could a person simply say, 'I'm non-binary', and have done with it?

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Because that would make it easier for me. I didn't know which of the other labels suited me best... so could I just use the umbrella term as an identity?

Forgetting all about food and coffee, I sat down and began thinking again.

Chapter Sixty

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me that non-binary was the right term for me. Right now, I felt I didn't need any more information than that. It was enough to simply recognise that I was outside of the gender binary, outside of the strictly defined 'male' and 'female' categories. I didn't know whether I was demigender, or agender, or bigender, or one of the many other identities that fell within the 'non-binary' spectrum. Perhaps I would discover that over time, and would be able to update my label accordingly if I so chose. For now, it was enough to simply say that I was non-binary.

Relief filled my veins, potent enough to make me quite lightheaded. Finally. Finally I had a name for this thing that I was. A non-binary person. Not a woman. Not female. Born female – or Assigned Female At Birth, AFAB for short – but non-binary as an individual. Non-binary.

“Non-binary,” I said aloud, even though there was nobody to hear it.

And again. “Non-binary.”

“Non bi-na-ry.” I broke the term down into its individual syllables, almost tasting each of them, wrapping my tongue around the letters. Then I breathed in, a deep

inhalation, only realising as the sweetness filled my lungs that I hadn't been breathing properly for what seemed like forever.

Perhaps I never had.

'I never knew what it was like to fly until I let myself breathe in.'

A line from a poem.

Which had struck me so hard when I first read it in my mounds of research.

By K Alexander.

A non-binary actor.

About being non-binary.

I exhaled.

Bingo.

Chapter Sixty-One

Now I thought I'd figured it out, I didn't really know what to do with this revelation.

At some point, I knew I'd need to come out publicly. Again. Coming out as a lesbian in the 1990s had been no picnic, but this was an entirely new ball game. Now the old fears came flooding back. I'd tried so hard to prove myself impenetrable, and 'normal', after my post-Lyndsey breakdown. They'd know that the façade was all a sham, and that I was an Other, a 'Prefer Not To Say' on tick-box forms.

And then there was Petra.

God, there was Petra.

If we did end up getting divorced, I'd be coming out into the world alone. Whether we stayed together or not, I knew that I'd have to tell her at some stage. It might change things, for the better or for the worse. After her reaction to Anonymity Smith, I was confident that she wouldn't scream or cry or make the sign of the cross to 'scare away the devil', all three of which her mother had done upon learning that her younger daughter was gay. But would she still want me?

Because, as I'd thought before, Petra was a lesbian. I didn't need Google to tell me that a lesbian was defined as 'a woman who is romantically or sexually attracted to another woman'. Would she still be attracted to me if I didn't identify as a woman?

Then my brain screeched to a halt and took off once again in a slightly new direction.

Hold on a second. In that case, surely I wasn't a lesbian either. If I wasn't a woman, how could I fit into this clear-cut definition of the sexual orientation that I'd always regarded as an unmoveable part of me? 'Lesbian' was etched onto my soul. Melded onto it with the strength of the most powerful solder. To lose that label – even if I was gaining another – would be like scraping off a layer of my skin: exquisitely painful and leaving me raw and bleeding. My hands began to shake – I couldn't not be a lesbian. It was who I was!

The hunger pangs (that came from some thirty-six hours without food) faded into obscurity as I grabbed my laptop. When I asked it to define a lesbian, it was exactly as I thought. All the top results agreed with my personal definition. My heart sunk.

Then, halfway down, one line caught my attention.

Some nonbinary people also identify with this term, it claimed.

I clicked hurriedly, but the page from which it came was simply a list of LGBTQ-related terms, much like the ones I'd already seen.

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I clicked further through the search results, then asked the engine, ‘can a non-binary person be a lesbian?’

The results were surprisingly sparse. Most of them missed the mark completely. Then I found an article by an LGBTQ+ news organisation, which linked me to a YouTube video. It said that yes, non-binary people could identify as lesbians, but it didn’t give me any solid reasoning behind it.

So I took to the comments section, of all places, and it was there that my research really took off. It was a surprisingly supportive environment, given that this was still the Internet. Someone suggested that in the absence of any terminology for ‘non-binary person attracted to one gender’, the definition of ‘lesbian’ should be expanded into ‘non-man attracted to non-man’. And vice versa for ‘gay’. That carried me over to a discussion of the lesbian flag, which had been updated in 2018 from pink, orange and white to several hues of each. One person suggested that the acceptance of non-binary people within lesbianism was inherent, etched even into its flag.

From there, one organisation claimed that the darkest shade of orange in it signified gender non-conformity. Further research seemed to solidify this.

That was good enough for me. There were other non-binary lesbians around. It didn’t seem like I would get ousted from the lesbian community if I identified the same way. I closed my laptop with a sigh of relief.

There was further thinking to be done. I still had lots of decisions to make. But my brain was fried, it was only nine o’clock in the morning, and the state of my stomach was now the priority.

The relief stuck around, though. I felt as if I was on the up.

Chapter Sixty-Two

No impulse decisions was my motto for the next few days.

Further Googling solidified my feelings about being non-binary. But most of it was aimed at young people, and there didn't seem to be much out there to tell you what to do next. There was nothing that said: So, you've discovered you're non-binary after fifty-two years of thinking you were a cisgender female. Congratulations! Now your marriage is in tatters! Here's how to proceed.

The closest I could get was a cautious advice blog from a non-binary teenager in Australia, who didn't say much of use to me except for one key phrase: 'no impulse decisions'.

'When the penny drops,' they wrote, 'you might be very excited. It can be tempting to tell people immediately. I advise you against this. Let yourself get used to your new identity first, and secure within it, because it's entirely possible that someone around you may try to drop a boulder on it when you come out to them. Sad, but true.'

For this reason, I fought against my urge to contact Petra. I told myself I'd give it another week. Next Tuesday would mark two weeks after we parted – if I hadn't heard from her then, I'd make the leap and initiate a meeting. After all, that was what she had proposed. A trial separation, just for a couple of weeks.

The whole world seemed different, though. It was as if I'd lost a layer of film over my eyes, and now every colour seemed slightly richer. Slightly more enhanced. Fog was less prone to crowding my brain – particularly at work – and it seemed that my brain fired quicker. Like something had been between my synapses, reducing the

efficiency of information transmission, and now it had gone. Perhaps the question of my gender had been affecting me more than I realised.

“You seem better, Jean,” Laura said the following Sunday, a week after my panic attack.

“I feel better,” I replied with a genuine smile. “The heat breaking has helped!”

“What about you and Petra? I don’t wish to overstep, but are you...?”

“No,” I said, and bit my lip, feeling myself deflate. “I’ve not... no. We’re not back together. But we’re not splitting up, per se. We’re just... no further forward than we were last week.” Now I had to bite my tongue to stop myself oversharing.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said. “But your mental health? How’s it holding up?”

I blinked at her boldness, before remembering that she was the Mental Health First Aider, and it was her job to check in.

“Better,” I confirmed. “It’s better.” Then, in the absence of anything else to say that wasn’t a declaration of my newly-realised gender identity, I returned to my shelf stacking.

After work the next day, now that I didn’t have to fear spontaneous combustion or heatstroke every time I stepped out of doors, I took a drive up to Mum and Dad’s graveyard. A flash of guilt struck me as I realised that the last time I’d been up there had been that rainy day in April, the anniversary of Mum’s death. So much had happened since then. Victoria’s accident, Petra’s new role, my gender crisis... but it was no excuse, really. I took a bunch of flowers as well as the usual Prosecco and Guinness, as if in compensation.

To my surprise, the stone didn't look too bad. Normally after any stretch of time it required a bit of scrubbing to shine it up again, but it seemed that someone had been up there, because as I approached I was struck by how neat it was.

"Well, well, well," I said as I sank to my knees in front of their spot. "Perhaps someone's been looking after you in my absence."

I opened the can of Guinness and unscrewed the cap of the Prosecco, and with one in each hand, poured the two drinks onto the stone. The bottle of water followed, so that they wouldn't dry into a sticky mess and attract wasps. The smell of the alcohol momentarily turned my stomach as I remembered my whisky experience from the week before. I hadn't touched the stuff – or any alcohol – since then, and didn't intend to. (Not that I'd had any chance to. I'd poured the remnants of the bottle away, and had declined Cass and Heather's invitation to the pub at the weekend.)

"Maybe I should have brought the whisky up here for you, Dad, instead of chucking it away," I thought aloud. "But then, it was cheap and nasty stuff. Not proper Scotch whisky. You'd have been horrified if you saw it. But then, you'd have been horrified if you saw me... that night."

I had a sudden urge to tell them everything. And because there was nobody else around, and these were my parents, I did.

"Petra and I are on rocky ground. I don't know whether we're going to split up. We've separated for now, but there's stuff I need to tell her, stuff that might end up being a game changer. I should have told her months ago, but I didn't know how, and she was so stressed with her job. Plus," I sniffed now, "she betrayed me. She started smoking again, and she only told me because she had no intention of quitting. I admittedly didn't react the best way, but I was – am – so hurt. Knowing what happened to me after Lyndsey died from smoking-related causes, why would she do anything that increased the likelihood of the same thing happening to her?"

I wiped my eyes with the heel of my hand, roughly.

“It’s always been a deal breaker for me, and she knows that. So if, when we get back in contact, she’s still smoking... I think I’d have to call it quits for the both of us. Better to lose her now when we can both consent to it, than lose her to death and the ultimate heartbreak, no?”

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That thought broke the dam and tears started rolling down my cheeks.

“But I love her. I do. And I don’t want to lose her at all. I just don’t see a way forward if she smokes.”

A settling breath, and I blinked the tears away, before they sprung straight back into my eyes as a fresh thought entered my head.

“Plus, the decision may be taken out of my hands altogether, anyway.” I sighed. “I think I’m non-binary. As in gender non-binary: neither male nor female. Not the daughter you thought I was, and not the wife she thought she married, either. Things were just starting to go wrong the last time I came up here. Now I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

This was the problem with talking to a gravestone: your parents, despite being under it, didn’t answer back. Instead, I had to imagine what they would have done. I closed my eyes and imagined myself into their living room. We’d be sitting with a cup of tea, perhaps, or a glass of wine for Mum and I and a signature whisky for Dad. We would all have put our glasses down by this point, and Mum would have moved to sit next to me, perhaps even holding my hand. Dad would be leaning forward in his chair, elbows on knees, an attentive but thoughtful expression on his face.

Now I had to imagine their responses.

They would have been supportive. I just knew they would. They’d accepted my sexuality without blinking, and although we’d never really discussed gender as a topic, I knew that they’d had no objection to the rights of transgender folk. Perhaps

they wouldn't have known what to say, but they would have expressed their support somehow. Mum would perhaps have simply hugged me, and asked questions about what it meant. And Dad – ever-practical – would have asked me how this would manifest itself in daily life.

“I think...” by now I was dry-eyed, “... that I'd like to use gender-neutral pronouns. ‘They’ feels right, rather than ‘she’. There are these things called neopronouns, but I don't feel the need to use them – ‘they/them’ fits just fine. And I'd use the word ‘spouse’ instead of ‘wife’ to refer to myself with regards to being married to Petra. If we stay married.” I gulped. “Things like that. You'd say I'm your ‘youngest’ instead of ‘daughter’, since ‘child’ implies that I'm young. ‘Shop assistant’ instead of ‘shop lady’, which is what I get a lot at work. I'm not sure how I'm going to apply any of these things to my life yet, but I'm going to try.”

Now I took a deep breath. Fly, Jean, fly.

“But there it is. You have a non-binary person for an... offspring. Shame it's taken me until the ripe old age of fifty-two to figure it out, but there we are.”

I stood up, and my knees cracked.

Then, out of nowhere, I heard a little fluttering of wings. My first thought, bizarrely, was Is that an angel?

But then I looked properly, and a robin sat on the gravestone. On instinct, I froze, not wanting to scare the little bird, but he didn't seem perturbed by my presence. He simply hopped from one end of the stone to the other, pecked at something known only to him, then looked up at me. The only movement I allowed myself was a smile, and then a tear rolled down my cheek. Perhaps it was the tear that did it, because he flew away, in a surprisingly straight line given the alcohol fumes that must have been coming off the stone.

It had to be a sign, I thought as I walked away. I'd never been one for signs before, but what else could that be? It simply had to be a sign.

That they were with me, and all would be well.

Surely?

Chapter Sixty-Three

Petra actually beat me to it when it came to making contact. Exactly two weeks after she left – down to the minute she walked out the door, give or take a few – my phone dinged with a text from her. I pounced on it. I'd just been thinking of texting her myself.

How do you fancy a walk along the beach tomorrow? It'll be good to talk, and I feel like we have much to say.

Immediately, my heart began cantering in my chest. I agreed wholeheartedly with both of her statements, and the beach seemed like the perfect location for what I knew would be a turning point in our relationship.

A few more texts and we'd agreed that I'd pick her up from Mabel's house the following evening, since I was working during the day. I went to bed in a good mood. Now I was more secure in my gender, I felt better about telling her. Hopefully then she'd realise that my emotional distance was for a reason, and all would be well on that score.

The following afternoon, I came in from work and found myself staring into my wardrobe, deliberating what to wear. Nothing seemed right, suddenly. It was August, but hopefully by seven-thirty the worst of the heat would have gone, so a jacket was possibly worth a glance. However, nothing else in the wardrobe felt right. Not that

clothes had ever been my favourite thing to think about. Perhaps she'd help me with a new wardrobe, at some stage, if this went well. One that really reflected me.

Having eventually decided on a light cotton T-shirt with nautical blue and white stripes, I found myself with three hours to spare. The idea behind meeting at such a late time was so as not to disrupt whatever Mabel had planned for dinner that night, but now I sorely regretted it, for it gave me too much time to stew. I sat in the living room, channel-hopping frantically and trying not to think about what might happen. No food had managed to pass my lips since lunchtime due to the churning of my stomach, but I wondered if a peace offering from the bakery might be a nice touch. There was still half an hour before it shut. Before I had a chance to think too hard about it, I'd grabbed my phone and my keys and was walking down the hill.

Daniella – if I remembered correctly, she was the alter of Felicia's who worked at the bakery – greeted me with a polite smile as I walked in. The stock in the cabinets was sparse due to the lateness of the hour, but I still managed to get Petra's favourite: a Florentine, packed with fruit and almonds and chocolate. I could tell that Daniella was deliberating over whether to say anything to me – she must have known about our intention to meet up today – but in the end she must have decided against it, and gave me the cake in a little white paper bag.

When I got home, I suddenly had the thought of a picnic blanket. There were plenty of large rocks to sit on down at the beach, but it would be good to have some options. I dug it out – remembering the fraught atmosphere of the last time we'd used it – and folded it away into a bag, then sat back down again. Two and a half hours to go.

Chapter Sixty-Four

In the event, I was ten minutes early to meet Petra. I found myself standing outside Mabel's house awkwardly, too scared to knock in case Petra wasn't ready. As it was, the door opened by itself, and then I heard Mabel's surprised bark of "Jesus Christ!"

“Sorry!” I said, taking a step back automatically with a little laugh. “I know I’m too early, and I didn’t want to knock.”

“Well, you’d have needed to at some point,” Mabel pointed out, leaning against the doorframe. Her posture wasn’t exactly unfriendly, but it didn’t scream sunshine and rainbows like her daughter’s did. “She’ll be out in a minute. She’s just putting on some sun cream. I forced her. Did you know that ten o’clock in the morning is the cut-off point for healthy sunlight? It’s at that point that the UV rays become damaging. I learnt it on a spa day a few years ago.”

“I didn’t know that,” I said on autopilot, trying to keep my customer-service-esque cheery smile on my face while subtly trying to look into the house behind her. As I did so, however, the door opened wider and Petra stood there.

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“There. All sun-creamed up. No penetrating UV rays for me. Happy, mother?” Her smile at Mabel was teasing, and Mabel shook her head with a chuckle.

“Go on then, off with you. I’ll be at the allotment when you get back – got your key?”

Petra jingled her keyring in response, and I tried not to let my stomach drop. Mabel had already given her a key? Was she expecting this to be a long-term thing?

“I’ll see you later, then.”

Petra smiled at her again, then stepped out the door towards me. Her smile, while still affixed to her face, almost imperceptibly lost its authenticity.

“Hello, Jean.”

“Petra.”

Silence. I was aware of Mabel watching us, however, so I motioned over my shoulder with my head. “Shall we walk?”

“Of course,” she said, and led the way.

Neither of us said anything on the way down to the beach. We passed several people we knew though, and Petra gave them smiles as if to say See? We’re fine. We’re together, and everything’s fine. I tried to do the same, but the movement of my facial muscles felt foreign to me, as if I’d used up all my smiling muscles at work the previous day. I’d been prepared for a happy reunion full of laughter and kisses. Not

this silence. Not this coldness.

It was only my shocked gasp and the thud of my bag on the sand that broke the silence when we got to the bottom of the beach steps.

“What?” Petra said, freezing to the spot.

“Your arms.”

She followed my gaze. Her arms were covered in healing scratches and what seemed to be puncture wounds. I immediately remembered Cass’s and Heather’s expressions the first time they’d been to see me. And the way they’d said Petra was ‘a bit fragile’ and ‘in a bit of a state’. Surely they didn’t mean...

“Oh,” she chuckled. “That’s Dobby. Mabel’s cat. He’s taken a disliking to me – as he has to everyone except Mabel and Felicia – and this was the result. Two weeks’ worth of maulings. I think we’ve turned a corner now, though. He let me pet him last night.”

“I see,” I said, although my mouth was dry. Now she looked up at me.

“Surely you didn’t think that I...”

“No!” I jumped in immediately. “No, I just... I didn’t know what to think.”

“I’m not that unstable.” The sudden bite to her voice made me jump, and I glanced around to check that nobody was close enough to hear.

“I never thought you were,” I hissed. “But this situation’s been shit for both of us, and it’s not beyond the realms of possibility that-”

“It is for me,” she said. “I’ve never self-harmed in my life. I thought you knew that.” She exhaled, then looked at her arms again. “I can see why you’d get that impression, though.”

I exhaled too, and felt the atmosphere between us soften.

“Shall we walk a bit further along?” she gestured with her head. “Away from the crowds?”

A nod was all I could manage and I picked up the bag containing the picnic blanket before following her. Her head was high and her posture akin to a ballerina’s in dignity... and tension. When I caught up with her, I had the strongest urge to take her hand, but I stopped myself. That wouldn’t be appropriate just yet.

“Will this do?” she croaked after we’d been walking for about five minutes.

“Absolutely,” I said, and turned back. The village was a mere dot on the horizon. Perhaps we’d been walking for longer than I thought. I unfolded the rug and flicked it out, and we both sank down onto it. Petra took another deep breath, clasped her hands together on her knee, and turned to me.

“Jean, I’m sorry that I took up smoking again.”

“And I’m sorry for reacting the way I did. To smoke is a personal choice, and nobody deserves to have their personal choices beaten down into a pulp like that. That said...” Now I paused while I considered my words. “It is a deal-breaker for me. You knew that right from the beginning, and it still is. A deal-breaker.”

“I know,” Petra said immediately. “I know it is. And I’ve quit. Or I’m in the process of quitting. Cold turkey. Mabel took all my cigarettes off me the day after I got to hers. Coral disposed of them – that’s one of Felicia’s alters. And it’s been

surprisingly difficult, but it's kind of forced me to re-evaluate... things. Even more so than I had been doing already."

"Why did you start smoking again?"

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“I told you. To cope. With the stress of work, the run-up to summer, and you... not being there. Emotionally present. And I think it all got on top of me when Anonymity Smith came out as non-binary to me.”

My blood ran cold, and I froze in the process of drawing absent-minded circles into the sand.

“How come?” My voice sounded strange and distant to my own ears, but she didn’t seem to register anything was amiss.

“I guess it was just the straw that broke the camel’s back. I was so strung-out with everything else that that was when I started smoking in earnest, rather than just the odd cigarette before work began. Suddenly I was responsible for the most personal of this child’s inner workings. And it was up to me whether to make or break them.” She blew out a breath of air through her lips. “I knew that you’d find the receipts or see the transaction on the bank statement if I got the cigarettes myself, so Stella got them the same time she bought her own, and I gave her cash.”

I shook my head and returned to the topic that spoke to me most. “So you... have a problem with non-binary... ness?”

“What?” Her expression was incredulous. “No, of course not. It was just another block on top of the teetering Jenga pile that was my life, and I didn’t dare let it fall in the final half-term of the year, the most active one.”

“Let’s rewind. You said I wasn’t emotionally present. But neither were you.”

“Well, I had a reason for that. Because I was stressed with work. Your job isn’t quite as stressful, so I don’t expect you to understand, but it was just...”

She stopped and clawed at her hair, then let out a growl of frustration.

“The pressure. You don’t understand the pressure of being nice all the time. You get to walk out of work, and come back to the village and be yourself again, rather than Customer Service Jean. For me, the only time I can relax and be my true self is when I’m within our own four walls. Because the moment I step outside, I’m besieged by pupils, or former pupils, or parents, or former parents. I’m not Petra out here, I’m Mrs Taylor. Or the former Miss Andino.”

Now she scrubbed at her eyes.

“When I was training to be a teacher, my mentor told me to be the person I needed the most when I was younger. This was one of the first things she told me – and she never even knew about the shit I went through with my family. The person I needed most when I was younger was who I am now. At work. Kind and compassionate and loving. I project as much love and care onto those kids as I can because they, like me, might be missing it completely at home. It might be the only love and care they get in the whole of their childhoods. But I just can’t keep that up all the time.”

“But what about me?” I was surprised to find my voice breaking. “Don’t I deserve your love and care too?”

“Well, I can’t pour from an empty cup!” Petra’s voice broke too. “Don’t you understand? There’s nothing left of me to give. And I thought I could rely on you to prop me up when I was falling, but instead of that you’ve just been... absent.”

Here it was: the perfect opening for me to tell her why. Why I’d been absent. What I’d been going through.

But I couldn't say it. Not when she was looking at me so... accusatorily.

"You can't twist this on me. You can't make this all my fault." Now my voice was unexpectedly even. "I've been absent, yes, but you have too. You've been pouring your worries into those tiny little cigarette packets you carry around with you. I've tried to be there for you, but every time I tried, you pushed me away."

Petra looked like she was about to retort, but then she deflated. "Fuck." She pushed a hand through her hair again. "Yeah, I did, didn't I?" She put her head in her hands. This was when I'd ordinarily have pulled her in for a hug, but I still didn't dare touch her somehow.

After a moment, she sat up straight again, and wiped her nose roughly with the heel of her hand in the absence of a tissue. Another deep breath and her eyes settled on me, just for a second, before her face crumpled.

"Oh, Jean." For a second, she looked like she was going to reach for me, but instead she looked past me out into the sunset. "Perhaps I'm just not that good at being married. Perhaps I'm better off alone."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She didn't answer.

"Petra?"

"I just... I feel like one of those squishy overstuffed fabric sofas your parents had in their living room, but one that's been stuffed so full you think it's about to burst. I can feel myself getting more and more rigid and my seams ripping, and now I'm so close to exploding that I need to get you out of the way. So you won't be in the destruction zone when it blows."

“When it blows?” This time my voice was incredulous. “Isn’t this it? Blowing?”

“Perhaps it is.” Now her voice was soulless. “And I do need to get you out of the way. So I don’t destroy you any more than I already have. I really do think we need a divorce, Jean. I just can’t see us ever being happy again. Can you?”

“I can.” Somehow, I still felt it.

She looked back at me in surprise.

“I’ve been thinking so much over the last couple of weeks. And I think we can find our way back through this. Just with... time and space. More time and more space.”

“How much more? We’ve had two weeks, and we’ve been at opposite ends of the village. There isn’t a whole lot more space to have, not unless I left the village entirely. Which would throw a spanner in the works with regards to my job.”

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“We need to try. Didn’t we have something beautiful? Don’t you remember our vows? How we acknowledged that there might be ups and downs, but that our love would see us through? Is that not your view any more?”

“Well, that was what I thought back then. But I really can’t see how. I don’t know how to be happy any more, in this marriage. Not without you letting me in. Because you haven’t been. Neither of us have.”

She couldn’t have hurt me more had she plucked my heart out without an anaesthetic. My hands curled into fists at my sides with the physical pain that ripped through me. Not in the least because it was all true.

“But aren’t you willing to try? Just try and wait for me to open up?” My voice came out thick, like my mouth was full of obstacles preventing it reaching the outside world.

“For how much longer? Until we’re both old and grey? I can’t carry on like this, Jean. On a practical level. Something needs to change.”

“Just... be patient with me?” I said weakly, but I knew how pathetic that sounded.

“I have been. And if it was just down to me, this problem, I would commit, honestly I would. But if neither of us are communicating, and neither of us know how... that leaves us up a creek, doesn’t it? We’ve lost touch with each other. If you can’t let me in... what can we do?”

“The photo albums,” I said. It was the first thought that came into my head, and I

paused to let it form for a second.

“The photo albums?”

“I’ll give you the photo albums. From the kitchen. You can go through and relive our relationship and... I don’t know, try and fall in love with me again? Try and re-connect with what made us fall for each other again? Those albums never fail to make me feel for you. Perhaps they’ll have the same effect the other way around.”

“And what would you do, while I’m doing that?”

The air seemed to be sucked out of my lungs. Tell her, I snarled at myself. Just bloody tell her.

“I’ll... work on myself.” My voice was faint now.

“What?”

“That’s all I can say for now.”

“What?”

I shrugged desperately. Petra squinted at me, then let out an incredulous huff.

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard you say that before. You’ve never been this... explicitly enigmatic. You’ve always put up walls and blocked me off completely, without even the tiniest chink in your armour. This is the closest I’ve ever gotten to seeing whatever it is that’s eating you up inside.” Now she fixed her gaze on me. “There is something, isn’t there?”

I nodded wordlessly.

“I knew it. And it’s something that can be worked through, yes? In terms of letting me in?”

Another nod. “When I’m ready,” I croaked. “Which will be soon, I think.”

“Okay.” She sighed again, then let a little smile cross her face. “Okay, that gives me a fragment of hope. Let’s try another week apart, then. I’ll look at these photo albums, and you... do whatever it is you need to do. Are you working next Wednesday?”

“Early shift. Like today.”

“Same place, same time? A week today?”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Okay then.” She smiled again. “Let’s go get these albums.”

Chapter Sixty-Five

As we walked back through the village towards Oceanview, the scorching sunset painting the sky orange and blue, we tried to make small talk. I told Petra briefly about the robin, and she told me about going swimming with Cass and Heather. She also told me about the fantastic cooking skills of both Daniella and Coral, two of Heather’s other alters, until I was half-jealous, thinking of the ready meals that had made up a far too large proportion of my diet recently.

Back at Oceanview, Petra shivered involuntarily as we walked through the door. “This place feels unfriendly, all of a sudden.”

“Unfriendly how?”

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“I don’t know. Like it’s disapproving of me, somehow. It felt that way when I came by to pick up those clothes.” She frowned. “And I’ve really been missing the piano. The itch to play has found me again, the last week or so. Do you mind if I...?”

“Of course not, go on up.” I waved her question away. “I’ll pack these albums while you’re there.”

She smiled her thanks and disappeared up the stairs while I went through to the kitchen. Outside, in the shed, I located a sturdy cardboard pallet from when we’d first moved in, and back in the kitchen I picked up all the albums from the years of our relationship and placed them in. Then my hand rested on the 1991 album. In it, I knew, I was a completely different person. Petra had seen it before, but perhaps she’d like to see it again. Perhaps it would help the situation. Shrugging to myself, I added the album in, then a few more recent ones at random.

One more from the early days of my childhood – 1979 – and I judged that that was enough to be getting on with. I only hoped that she wouldn’t show Mabel and the others any of the older ones, and made a mental note to ask her when she came down. But right at that moment, breaking the silence that I’d become all too used to recently, came the sound of a piano.

It took me only a couple of seconds to recognise the tune. It was one of the most recognisable ones she’d ever played. Camille Saint-Saëns had created a masterpiece in this one, as he emulated the calm dignity of the swan on the surface, while representing the frantic movement of its legs underneath and the rippling water around it. A piano solo of it, like the one Petra was playing, lent it a different dimension to the original cello score with piano accompaniment. My interpretation of

its meaning, I knew, was different to how the composer had intended it.

I'd researched it, of course, and I knew that the seriousness and solemnity with which it was taken these days was a far cry from what Saint-Saens had predicted or expected. He'd expected ridicule, as *The Carnival Of The Animals*, from which *The Swan* was taken, was a humorous suite. But you only had to listen to how Petra was playing it now to hear the pain she was in. It felt like a knife to the heart as it hit me for the first time how much pain this situation must be causing her, too. Up until now, I'd seen a rather more callous side of her. Forging her way determinedly through the obstacles to her freedom – i.e. me – with a resolve of steel. But now I realised how much it was hurting her, too. I wanted nothing more in that moment to have my arms around her, and her arms around me. Nonetheless, I stayed rooted to the spot as she rippled her way through the bars, right up until the end, where as she made her way down the piano – I could just picture the graceful movement of her hands down the keys – to the lower notes again, the tension in the song was expelled, and the house returned to its quietude.

Don't move, I thought. Not just to myself, or to her, but to the whole world. Don't let this moment end.

But of course, it did. I heard the squeak of the piano stool, then the sound of papers rustling. After a few more moments, there came the soft padding of her footsteps coming back down the stairs. When she appeared in the kitchen doorway, the pain was written plainly on her face for the first time since this whole situation began, but she smiled bravely.

Just as I was plucking up the courage to reach for her, she took a couple of steps forward and picked up the pallet.

"Jesus," she said, putting it back down, and with that one expletive, the palatal approximant and the sibilant ripping the air, the bubble burst. I flinched back to life,

and the moment was gone.

“I’ll give you a hand with that,” I said, although my voice didn’t sound like me. It never had, I realised, and those three words hit me like a ton of bricks. But I pushed the thought to the back of my mind – just temporarily, just until Petra had gone, I reassured myself – and forced myself to act normal.

In the end, we both got in the car with the pallet and I drove them up to Mabel’s house, Sea Haven. Having gotten it through the door, and said goodbye to Petra, I turned the car around and drove home feeling quite numb.

But at least you did feel something, Jean.

That thought popped into my head as I pulled back onto the drive, bringing with it a wave of relief. I remembered the thought I’d had back in April, when I’d first realised Petra and I were in trouble. The day I don’t feel anything when Petra played will be the day I know our marriage is over.

There was still hope for us, after all. I’d felt something – so our marriage couldn’t be over just yet.

Chapter Sixty-Six

As it was, I didn’t have to wait until the following Wednesday.

Not even twenty-four hours later, my phone rang again while I was sitting on my bed thinking things over. It was Petra. My heart leapt into my mouth.

“Jean, are you free at the weekend?” she said without preamble.

“I’m working on Saturday. Why?”

“Do you remember the hotel we stayed at in the Cotswolds?”

“As if I’d forget. I remember every little detail of that trip.” I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to remind her how committed I was still.

“Well, I was just poking around on Google, and they’ve got a cancellation. Saturday night is free. I went a bit impulsive and booked it. Can you make yourself free? Would that be possible?”

Hope filled my chest. The Cotswolds. The place we’d agreed to marry each other. What better place to reconnect? And perhaps I might even get the chance to come out to her while we were there.

“I’ll be there even if I have to go unpaid,” I said, conviction bolstering my words.

“And I was thinking...”

“What?”

“Can I stay the night tomorrow night?”

“Of course. This is still your house too!”

“I just thought it would be practical. Then I can pack, and we can set off first thing on Saturday morning without risking waking Mabel. If you’d rather I didn’t then that’s fine, I just-”

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“Petra.” I cut her off firmly. “It’s fine. You still live here, even if you’ve spent some time away. I’d love to have you back. I’ve... missed you.”

Silence.

“I’ve missed you too,” she whispered. Then, a pause, before she continued faintly, “It might still end up being just for one night. We need to talk when we’re in the Cotswolds. Properly. And decide what’s going to happen, going forward. Whether we’re staying together or splitting up. I need to know now.”

“We do need to talk. Petra...” I sighed. “There is something I need to tell you. When we’re there.”

“I gathered that from last night,” she said with a little chuckle. I could hear tears in her voice, though. “Is it a game changer?”

A brief pause while my mouth opened and shut.

“Yes,” I said eventually. “But I don’t know which way it’ll go. What you’ll want.”

“Okay,” she choked.

“Hey, don’t cry,” I whispered softly. “We’ll figure something out, okay?”

“I hope so,” she whispered back, and I heard her sniff. “I do love you, you know.”

“I’m working tomorrow morning, but you still have your key. Come back whenever.

And I'll see you when I get home."

"Okay," she whispered again, but her voice sounded more stable.

"Sleep well, Petra."

I hung up, and let myself fall back on the bed, heart racing. Work wouldn't be impressed by me dropping out of Saturday's shift, but perhaps Laura could help smooth things over. I fired off a text to her and my line manager before I could forget, then reached down and pulled the suitcase out from under the bed. The last time it had been used was over a year ago. We really did need a break – a holiday break, not just a break from our relationship.

And the Cotswolds was the perfect place.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

Petra was there when I arrived home, and it felt like she'd never been away. She was there when I walked through the door, and came into the living room to meet me.

"Well, hello there," I said. Even in two days, I could see a difference in her. She looked softer. Lighter.

"I looked at the albums," she said. "It worked, it really did. I feel... different. Like a tiny little flame has reignited in me. I want to try, Jean. I really do. But I want to know what it is you have to tell me before we say any more."

The moment hung heavy between us, and I opened and closed my mouth several times before looking around at the living room.

"Not here," I croaked. "Let's just wait until we get there. Tomorrow night. Tomorrow

night I'll tell you. Okay?"

There was no way it was happening in this house. Not in this village, not even in the entirety of Cornwall. It had to happen away from here, I knew that now. That way, if it went completely horrifically badly, I'd never have to go back there again.

"Okay," she sighed, clearly trying her hardest to be patient. "I'm just about to start packing. Do you want to come up and put your stuff in?"

It had always amused me how differently we packed for holidays. In this respect, we were polar opposites. I was strictly methodical. While she sat on the bed sifting through her sock drawer, I selected underwear, two tops for the daytime, one to change into for the evening, a pair of jeans, my toiletries and my walking boots. Each item had its place in my half of the suitcase, and fitted like a game of Tetris. Petra, on the other hand, crammed armfuls of stuff in haphazardly, and it soon spilled over into my section. I finished way before her, and watched her pack with barely-concealed mirth.

"Petra, you're not going to need four pairs of knickers for one night," I said as she was considering a fifth pair.

"But what if I piss myself?" Her tone was mournful as she stared at the suitcase.

"What, four times? When have you ever pissed yourself? And if you work by that logic, surely you'd need four pairs of trousers too? Or four skirts?"

"What if my period starts, though?"

"It's just finished!"

"Nail varnish remover," she muttered, scrambling to her feet again.

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“You’re not wearing any!” I called to her departing figure. “You haven’t worn any in months!”

“I know, but I might get a manicure,” she said, reappearing with the bottle. “In that salon across the road from the hotel, if it’s still there. And I might hate it, and want to take it off straight away.”

“When has that ever happened?” I got up and took the bottle off her. “Come on. Stop panicking.”

“Stop panicking?” she repeated, her voice laced with panic. “That’s the most unhelpful sentence in the world! You don’t understand, Jean. I thought it was a woman’s thing, packing for every eventuality. I don’t know why you don’t do it. Sometimes I question whether you’re a woman at all.”

If only you knew, I thought instinctively, my heart thudding in my chest. Then I thought, Well, you will tomorrow.

Luckily, she calmed down overnight, and seemed positively tranquil by the time we loaded our bulging suitcase into the boot of our car early on Saturday morning. We had agreed that she would drive first since my knees never did very well in the morning, and that we’d stop halfway and change over. Without saying much, we motored through the village and out the other end, heading Northwards.

We swapped just before we got to the motorway, and got coffee. It woke us both up, and we began chatting a bit more as I joined the motorway and started zipping between the cars.

“I forgot what a nippy driver you are on the motorway,” she said as the outside lane opened up before us and I leaned on the accelerator. Out of the corner of my eye, I clocked her reaching for the ‘oh-shit’ handle, and it finally registered that I was scaring her.

“You never seemed to mind before,” I said, but eased off all the same. I could almost sense her walls going up, and my heart sunk – I’d been counting on her being emotionally present for this... denouement, of sorts. In an effort to bring her back to me, I turned the car radio on. “Come on – find something we can sing along to.”

She obliged me, and soon found an eighties station that churned out hit after hit. No Eulalia Gray – she’d only emerged in the nineties, after all – but some of our other favourites played. Soon we’d slid into that particular happy place that can only be found when singing along to blisteringly loud music on a car journey with the world zipping past you at the speed of light. It gave me hope.

We swept into the hotel car park in the afternoon after a fairly painless journey. The little village was exactly how we remembered it: lush and green, with buildings forged out of Cotswold stone the colour of crumbly butter tablet, charmingly uneven pavements and old-fashioned street lamps. The sun shone brilliantly, just as it had done all morning, and in our mutual excitement it almost felt as if the village was putting on a show of splendour just for us. As we got out of the car, I exhaled deeply. It had been far too long, and I’d forgotten how much I loved the Cotswolds.

We detoured into a little pub for lunch, and as we chatted it felt just like old times. Nonetheless, something was holding me back from enjoying it. The elephant in the room was causing a queasiness in my stomach. Time and time again that afternoon, as we poked our way around the little independent shops, I found myself on the brink of telling her. But there were too many people around. I wanted to do this in private.

After dinner. When it was just us and the hotel room.

I knew I had to stop procrastinating, and just tell her.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

The curry and naan we'd shared churned in my stomach as we trudged up the stairs to our room.

It hadn't been a bad afternoon. Petra and I had gotten along fine, but there had been an undeniable tension between us. In her, especially. I got the feeling that she was bracing for impact.

I was, too.

She ushered me into the room ahead of her – “Ladies first,” she quipped with a nervous chuckle. I mirrored her nervous chuckle, because I knew she'd likely never be saying that to me again, not if she took it the way I hoped she would.

We sat down in the two chairs either side of the little table, but I immediately sprang to my feet and began pacing.

“Okay.” My voice came out more guttural than I'd expected. “I know I said I'd tell you something. And there is something I need to tell you. But I don't know how. I've been thinking and thinking, but I can't get the right words to come. So I don't know what to do now. You're probably not going to like it.”

“Jean, just talk to me.” Petra's voice shook. “We're a couple. We're married. The whole point of couples being together is that neither of them has to go through anything alone. We're supposed to be in it together.”

Fear paralysed me, and I froze.

“You’re going to leave me,” I whispered, shaking my head as the gut feeling hit me.
“For good this time. I know it. You’ll never look at me in the same way again and you’ll walk away.”

“Try me. This is important, isn’t it?”

“Mm.” I sat down on the chair finally, but I couldn’t look at her.

“I’m ready,” she whispered.

“I’m not the woman you thought you married, Petra.”

She tilted her body towards me. I could see it in the corner of my eye.

“That’s a bold declaration,” she murmured.

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“I know, but it’s true. I’m not the woman you married. I’m not the... I’m not a woman.”

Still in the corner of my eye, I saw her sit up, then turn back to me again.

“Okay. Continue...?”

I took a deep breath to settle myself, but on the next sentence, my voice broke.

“I’ve been trying to keep it from you for so long so that I wouldn’t add to your stress. But I’ve been so confused. My whole life, being labelled as a woman hasn’t felt right, but I’ve been able to ignore it. Except now I don’t seem to be able to. It’s been looming bigger and bigger in my life and I didn’t want to tell you in case I scared you away. And also because I know you’re a lesbian, and you’re attracted to women... and if I’m not a woman, you probably won’t be attracted to me and you’ll leave me.”

I blew out a breath, and then covered my eyes with my hands so I wouldn’t have to see her face.

“So you’re... you’re a man? Is that what you’re saying?”

I shook my head vigorously, still with my hands over my eyes.

“No. I’m not. I wondered, for a while, but the more I think about it the more I don’t think I’m a man. I’m not a man, but I’m not a woman either. I’m...”

I couldn’t even get the words out.

“I think I’m non-binary.”

The words came out garbled and half mixed with a sob.

“Sorry, repeat that?”

I swallowed. “I think I’m non-binary. Like Anonymity Smith. Neither male nor female. I feel uncomfortable being labelled as a woman. And I would feel uncomfortable being labelled as a man. I thought I could deal with it and it would go away and I’d go back to being able to hack this whole being-female thing... but it’s not. And I’ve spent our time apart thinking. This is who I am, Petra.”

Time stood still, with what felt like centuries passing between each thump of my heart. But Petra was only silent for a moment before she said, “Okay.”

Huh?

I ripped my hands from my eyes and squinted at her. “Okay?”

She nodded. “Yes, okay. If that’s what you are, then that’s what you are, and I will support you.”

Her plain, matter-of-fact delivery took the wind out of my sails. My gaze returned to the floor. “But... that means I’m not your wife any more. You don’t have a wife. You’re a lesbian – doesn’t that mean something to you?”

“I mean yes, probably. When I’ve had a chance to think about it, it might take some processing.”

“And let’s not forget that forty-eight hours ago you were adamant you wanted a divorce,” I said dryly.

“I did...” she sighed. “But that was when I thought you’d never let me in. Now I know. And it has to be said – I never loved you solely for your femininity, Jean. I didn’t love you solely because I thought you were a woman. You could be a ten-foot monster with three heads and a tail, but if your soul was the same as it is now, I wouldn’t give a flying fuck. The three-heads bit might be an issue when it comes to kissing you, but we’d give it our best shot.” Despite it all, I smiled at the imagery. “Because I fell in love with you. Not your body, although of course I love that too. But your soul.”

“What if my soul changes too, though? I mean, I thought I was a woman too until fairly recently.”

“See, my grasp of the concept of souls may be different to yours. In my view, your soul is your true, authentic self. Not all of which may be visible to you at any one time. If you’re non-binary, then your soul is and always has been non-binary, but you’ve only just discovered that. Even so, it’s the soul I fell in love with, and still love. Does that make sense?”

“Sort of. Not really. My brain feels like it’s been liquidised in a blender.”

She chuckled dryly. “I can only imagine. But to return to your point: you may not be my wife any more, but you are my partner. My spouse. If those are the words you want me to use. Why should your gender matter, if your soul’s the same?”

I smiled, but I still couldn’t look at her.

“Jean, will you look at me?”

My eyes remained stubbornly fixed on the corner of the bed. I shook my head. I couldn’t bear to see her face. Recently, when it came to me, she’d been terrible at hiding her true emotions. I couldn’t bear to see them now.

“Please, look at me.”

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There was something in her voice now. Something raw, and desperate. Eventually, inch by inch, with overwhelming effort, I pulled my eyes around to meet hers.

She got up, and knelt down in front of me. Both my hands were clasped in hers.

“My love for you has never been dependent on your gender, Jean. I should have made that clearer. It’s something that we should have made clear right from the off, probably, but it just wasn’t something that came to mind. There just isn’t the discourse around it yet. But I’ll say it now. Whatever it takes to make you happier in your body, in your identity, I will be there with you while we do it. I love you for being you. And if that you is non-binary, then I have a spouse, not a wife. Or a partner, or whatever term you’re happy with. Whatever pronouns you’re happy with. You tell me what to say, and what to do, and I’ll make sure to say and do it. Okay?”

Looking into the liquid brown eyes of my wife, full to the brim with sincerity and love, was what finally tipped me over the edge. I let out a loud sob and pulled her into me, letting out all the pent-up frustration and terror and uncertainty of the last few months.

“I love you, Jean,” she said into my hair. “However you come. I love you however, okay?”

Chapter Sixty-Nine

Perhaps for the first time since everything kicked off in April, I found myself relaxing that night. After my coming out, Petra and I had come together in a tender act of renewal that said all the things we hadn’t said with words.

We were staying together. That much I knew for certain. Not that either of us had said it... but I just knew. The feeling of conviction surprised me. It had been a while since I'd been sure of anything, after all.

There were further conversations to have, of course. I'd have to talk to Gemma, apologise for cutting her off, explain everything. Petra and I would, in time, tell each other how we felt in more detail. And how we had been feeling over the last few months. All the stuff we hadn't told each other at the time. And, to be honest, I couldn't wait.

But tonight was for sleeping. Petra had fallen asleep soon after we called it a night, but I was too happy.

Happy. Yes, I was happy.

The future was looking brighter the more I thought about it. We loved each other, even if those feelings had taken a battering. In a few weeks, Petra would return to her deputy head role – still a stressful one, but a manageable stress. Anonymity Smith had moved on to high school – although Petra had given them her email address, she had managed to set them up with a counsellor at their new school, she'd told me on the drive over. So hopefully their shitty situation would also be manageable, at least until they finished school and could make decisions for themselves.

And I'm non-binary.

I'd never expected to think those words and feel a rush of excitement flood my body, but now I did. It seemed as if a whole new world of possibilities were opening up, now I felt able to redefine myself to the world.

For the first time in perhaps my whole life, I felt excited about the future.

Chapter Seventy

It could only have been a few minutes later when Petra stirred, rolled over, and batted at me sleepily.

“You still there?” she murmured before her arm connected with my hip.

“As if I’d be anywhere else,” I said.

“Why aren’t you asleep?”

“Just... ruminating, I guess.”

“Good things going through your brain?” She sat up on her elbows and clicked on the bedside lamp.

“Of course,” I said, leaning over to kiss her now I could see her.

“Want a cup of tea? Make the most of having a tiny little kettle in our bedroom?”

“Go on then,” I chuckled, and she climbed out of bed. A few minutes later, she settled back down next to me, each of us with steaming mugs of builder’s tea in our hands.

“So, how is you being non-binary going to affect our day-to-day lives? Practically?” She blew on her tea, then took a tentative sip.

“Well, it’s not a legally recognised gender-”

“What?”

“No, it isn’t. Not in the UK. In terms of passports and legal documents etcetera. But

until the powers-that-be see the light, we can change as much as we can. Linguistically, first and foremost. I'm so much more comfortable with the prospect of someone using 'they/them' pronouns and gender-neutral terms."

"I can do that. And what about... like, transitioning? Medically. Hormones, surgery...?"

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“I’m not sure,” I said honestly. “That was what I was going to think about this week, so I would be able to come back to you next Wednesday with a complete idea of what I wanted.”

“There’s still time to think,” she reassured me. “I don’t expect a complete finalised plan. This isn’t a business deal. Now you’ve told me what’s been happening, it makes so much sense. And I understand why you didn’t tell me, what with everything that happened. You needed time to figure it out, and I wasn’t exactly making myself available for you.”

“Forgive me for not telling you?” I nudged her lightly.

“I do. Do you forgive me for being unavailable? And for smoking?”

“I do. I understand why you went back to it. And why you had to preserve yourself and your own sanity, even if you did have to sacrifice... well, our love life.”

“I can’t believe I neglected you. I feel like such a shit wife,” she said, her voice cracking.

“Hey, hey.” I took her mug off her and put it down next to mine on the beside table, before taking her hands. “We both fucked up. Okay? We both shut each other out, and we both suffered for it – massively. But... a clean slate now. Okay? We’ll go home, back to Miltree, and try again. How does that sound?”

“It sounds bloody fabulous,” she chuckled, then sniffed. Then, finally, she looked into my eyes again. “I really do love you. None of this was ever because I didn’t love

you. I just... got lost in my head for a while, and you got lost in yours. Now we can put our heads back together and be wife and wife again. Sorry – spouse and wife. Wife and spouse. Whatever words you want me to use.”

“I’m happy with ‘spouse’. Or ‘partner’.”

“So something along the lines of – ‘This is my partner Jean. Isn’t their hair looking gorgeous today?’ – would be good?”

Shivers went down my spine, sending electricity to the farthest reaches of my fingertips. It was the first time someone had ever used ‘they’ to refer to me, and it felt... exhilarating. And it felt right. Like something in me had clicked into place. I’d heard the term ‘gender euphoria’ in my research – was this it?

Whatever it was, I wanted more of it. A bolt of excitement shot through my veins, but just as quickly was tempered by a bolt of fear.

“It won’t be easy, though,” I said with a sigh. “Not everyone’s going to be accepting. There are some vile people out there. I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t want to face the hostility.”

“Screw them,” Petra said. “They can’t touch us.”

I so wanted to believe her – and then, looking at her properly, I realised that I did.

We were Petra and Jean Taylor. Wife and spouse.

A solid unit once more.

Epilogue

“Hey, Lynds,” I said, sinking down onto my knees before the gravestone. “The shop

didn't have any carnations, so I brought you chrysanthemums. And a bottle of Irn-Bru. You know, I pour Guinness and Prosecco over Mum's and Dad's grave whenever I go up there. I only just figured that perhaps I could do the same to you with your favourite drink. So... well, here goes."

The bright orange liquid fizzed as it hit the stone, and I chuckled.

"There's never been a day where I've seen this drink and not thought of you. It's Scotland in a bottle, isn't it? That and whisky, of course. I'm surprised you never turned yourself orange with the amount you drank when we were kids. At one point, I thought I could tap you like a maple tree and Irn-Bru would come out!"

Petra snorted, reminding me that she was there and had been watching quietly. It had been so long since I'd brought her up here that I'd grown used to being alone. But I'd wanted her to be here for this.

"Iconic line," she said with a grin.

"It's not mine," I held my hands up ruefully. "I think she said it herself. It tickled both of us, though."

Then I fell silent as I tried to find the right way to broach the subject. Petra came up and hugged me from behind, kneeling in the grass to do so.

"I'd have so loved to meet you, Lyndsey," she said. I blinked. It was the first time she'd ever said anything aloud to her. Every time I'd brought her up here, she'd been silent, allowing me the time and space to just be with my sister. "This sort of thing always goes over better when you can imagine what the other person would say. But Jean has something to tell you."

Bless her. She'd obviously picked up on the fact that I'd had no idea what to say, and was giving me a gentle nudge. If it had been anyone else I would have thought it

presumptuous, but this was Petra. She squeezed me tighter, and I nuzzled into her neck in silent thanks.

“Well...” I said, then sighed. “It’s no secret that I was never the most feminine of females. Always a tomboy, if you remember, and cutting my hair short gave me a new lease of life. It was always just that, until recently. I think the menopause hormones kicked off something huge, and the upshot of that is... I’m non-binary. Neither male nor female. I don’t expect you to understand how it feels, but I know you would have tried. And if you are watching over me, you’ll have seen what’s gone down and you’ll know already. All the same, I wanted to tell you in person. Just... so you know. Since you were always – and still are – my best friend.”

Now Petra kissed me on the cheek.

“And they’re absolutely bossing it, Lyndsey,” she said. Even now, a solid month after coming out to her, hearing Petra use ‘they’ to refer to me gave me shivers. “They’ve been so strong. Your sibling was always the strongest person I ever knew, but now they’ve shown me a whole new level of strength. They came out at work. At work, to their boss and everything! And their work has been great – they’re working with them to make the environment more inclusive. Next step is coming out to our friends, Cass and Felicia, and then... well, the choir. Hopefully. But all in good time. We’re still finding our own way.”

“I’m happier than I ever thought possible,” I admitted. “The only downside is that you and Mum and Dad aren’t here. But I know you’re listening somehow. In that little gap between the ocean and the sky, perhaps, like Eulalia Gray says in one of her songs. Smiling down on me. And...” I gulped back tears, “cheering me on.”

“Forever and always,” Petra whispered into my ear. She was missing the Scottish accent and the gravelly smoke-affected tone, but it was exactly what Lyndsey would have said. Proof that she didn’t have to have met her to know her. I’d talked about her enough, after all.

“I can breathe now,” I whispered. “I don’t think I had ever really breathed properly before. But I read a poem recently about being non-binary. And one of the lines was, ‘I never knew what it was like to fly until I let myself breathe in.’”

So I breathed in.

And let myself fly.

The End