



Loving Jemima

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Category: Romance, Lesbian Romance

Description: Can the truth really set you free?

Jemima Darlington has a secret, one that's she's determined to keep from her rich, intolerant family. Until fate steps in and she's forced to work with the only woman that's ever turned her down, and the one person who can spill the truth. Jem's got two options: trust Ellie or go nuclear and get her fired. And she's never been one for subtlety.

Ellie Baker has spent her life building up her party planning business, and the Darlington Bank anniversary party is a make or break opportunity. Her life is comfortable, and the last thing she needs is for Jem Darlington to show up with her stupid pretty face and penchant for sabotage. She's got panic attacks and mold in the bathroom to deal with, after all.

But being forced together means Jem and Ellie can't help but start to see each other in a different light. And soon, the anniversary party becomes the least important thing on their minds. They just can't keep their hands off each other, no matter how inappropriate that may be. Until they both have to decide what's more important: a comfortable life, or the truth?

Add in a glamorous assistant, a Welsh socialist who can't decide what she wants, a next door neighbor who isn't at all what he seems, a fake boyfriend with secrets of his own, and a cat who just wants to sleep on the couch, and eventually the truth will out. But will Ellie and Jem be able to survive the fall-out?

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Chapter One

If Ellie Baker could have one current wish, it would be for five minutes of peace and quiet. That was a superficial wish, obviously she'd wish for world peace or something if given slightly longer to think about it. Not that wishes existed or she for one second believed that the universe gave anything without demanding payment in return. And not that that stopped her from occasionally wishing for a lottery win. Or even a dropped twenty pound note on the pavement.

"It's something about her face," Carys was saying, feet propped up on the corner of Mo's desk.

"Yeah, that she's hot," said Mo.

"No, that's not what I meant, I meant she's... I don't know. Funny looking."

Ellie gritted her teeth and stared at her own computer screen, where the final guest list for Rachel Cohen's Bat Mitzvah looked a lot longer than it had half an hour ago.

"Funny looking?" Mo screeched. "Funny looking?"

And... Ellie gave up. "Who?" she demanded. "Who exactly is funny looking?"

"I'm not even sure I should tell you," said Mo.

"For God's sake, you can't just sit there arguing at a hundred decibels and then not tell me what the hell is going on."

“Well, if you’d been paying attention from the start,” Carys began.

Ellie growled.

“Fine, fine,” said Mo. “Greta Garbo.”

“Greta Garbo?” Ellie breathed in through her nose and then slowly out again. “Greta Garbo. You’ve spent the last ten minutes arguing about someone who’s been dead for a hundred years?”

“Thirty years,” Mo put in. Their grasp of ancient Hollywood history was unmatched. Ask Mo who the current Prime Minister was though, and they’d struggle.

“Thirty years,” Ellie said, shaking her head. “You do know this is a place of business, right?” She turned to Carys, who was sticking her tongue out. “And you have your own office. It’s right next door. A whole set of rooms that you pay rent for and everything.”

“You know, you should just move in here,” Mo said to Carys conversationally.

“No!” said Ellie.

She sighed. Carys was a graphic designer who rented the office space next door. Mo was, ostensibly, Ellie’s assistant. Though at this point they did far more than just assist.

Ellie suspected that Mo, with their glittery eye makeup and penchant for flouncy skirts with boots, had been more attracted to the idea of planning parties than the reality of it. But they’d proven themselves to be more than up to the task, and most days, Ellie didn’t know what she’d do without them.

“It’s nicer in here,” Carys was saying. “My office doesn’t have Mo in it.” She darted her eyes at Ellie. “Or you,” she said, waggling her eyebrows.

“Flirting, or attempting to, will get you nowhere,” Ellie said immediately.

“Spoilsport,” pouted Carys, her lilting Welsh accent making the word sound friendlier. She sniffed. “Anyway, I’m not exactly swimming in business.”

“Neither are we,” Mo said, sympathetically.

“We’re doing okay,” said Ellie, slightly stung. The business was hers. All hers. She’d worked her backside off to start this little company and, well, okay, she wasn’t rich. But the bills were getting paid. Just.

“You’ve got your cranky pants on this morning,” Carys said, swinging her legs down to the ground with a resounding thump. Her Doc Martens had extra thick soles.

“She’s had them on all week,” Mo said, shuffling their desk chair around the edge of the desk.

“So, want to tell Auntie Carys what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Ellie said immediately. She didn’t believe in the superstitious, really she didn’t. But she also didn’t want to run any risk at all that she might jinx things.

Mo rolled their eyes. “She responded to a tender,” they said. “Something swish and posh.”

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“Ooo,” said Carys, dark eyes lighting up. “Are princes involved?” She waggled her thick eyebrows again. “Or princesses?”

“No,” Ellie said shortly.

“It’s a corporate thing,” Mo said. They scratched at the five o’clock shadow on their chin. “Derpington’s... Darlings? Desmond’s?”

“Darlington’s,” Ellie said, giving up. “It’s their hundred and fiftieth anniversary and they want an event.”

“And you would be the perfect person to plan it,” Carys said, grinning.

“I wish.” Ellie sighed and fully gave up, laying her head on the cool of her desk. “We really need the business,” she said miserably.

“You haven’t lost it yet,” Carys said, clomping over to lay a hand on Ellie’s shoulder. “Trust to the universe, Els. And if you don’t get this, then something else will show up.”

“We’d better get this,” said Mo, finally getting up and coming to perch on the edge of Ellie’s desk. “The payment for the party is one thing, but the publicity we’d get for running a show like that, we’d be run off our feet with orders. We could really use a win on this one.”

“Way to take the pressure off,” Ellie said, voice smothered by the surface of her desk. With one hand she reached for her mouse and clicked the refresh button on her email

box, lifting her head just enough to see that there were no new mails. She groaned and lowered her head again.

“Come on,” Carys said, clapping Ellie on the shoulder. “I’ll take you out to lunch, my treat.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Ellie said, stomach grumbling at the thought of food.

“I don’t have to, but I want to,” said Carys. “You too, Mo. Get your skates on. What do you think? The Ritz or the caf down the road?”

Mo cocked their head to one side and sniffed. “To be honest, I was disappointed with the tomato sauce vintages at the Ritz last time.”

Carys laughed and Ellie managed a weak smile. “Caf it is then,” said Carys. “Come on, sausage sarnies wait for no man. Or woman.” She paused infinitesimally. “Or Enby.”

“Thank you for being inclusionary,” said Mo.

“That’s not even a word,” Carys said.

“Is so. It means the opposite of exclusionary, and that’s a word,” Mo said, going to their desk and picking up a leather jacket from the back of their chair.

Ellie lifted her head and smiled, letting the worry drain away a little. She needed this contract. The company needed the contract. Mo was right that the publicity itself would be worth a fortune. But she was also lucky, and she knew it.

Not just lucky because she’d managed to eke her way out of a tiny council flat in East London. That wasn’t really luck, anyway, that was hard work, pure and simple. But

lucky because she had people like Mo and Carys.

Lucky because life had to be about more than just working, right? Carys appeared behind her and started physically lifting her from her desk chair.

“Okay, okay,” Ellie laughed. “I’m coming.”

“Two sausage sandwiches for you,” Carys said, letting go. “You’re light as a feather.”

“I’m a perfectly healthy weight,” Ellie countered.

“Inclusionary is a word, right, El?” Mo asked.

And they chattered themselves out of the office.

THE FLAT WAS so tiny it might as well have been a mouse-hole. Standing in the living room, Ellie could touch all four walls if she turned in a tight circle. And the bedroom was so small that she’d had to compromise with a small double bed, and even then she sometimes smacked her head on the wall if she turned over too fast.

“Pspspspsp,” she said, rattling Constable’s food jar.

The cat dashed out from under the couch, meowing and headbutting her shins as she bent down to feed him.

“There you go, Con. How was your day? Plenty of birds to watch today?” she said, stroking his knobbly back and long tail.

The flat wasn’t even hers, or theirs now that she had Constable.

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The rent was exorbitant, the area less than desirable, the wallpaper in the corridor outside was peeling, and there was a distressing patch of something that Ellie was denying was mold in the bathroom.

But it was home. And it was close enough to the office that she could walk to work. And she could mostly afford it. And it wasn't a council flat.

Constable stiffened and then there was a knock at the door. He meowed ferociously and Ellie grinned. "Come in," she shouted. "It's open."

"I could be anyone," Paul from next door said, his bulk practically filling the flat up. He put a tupperware box on the tiny kitchen counter. "Hungarian goulash."

"Ooo, fancy," said Ellie. "And Constable knew it was you at the door."

"Clever cat, that," Paul said, bending to scratch behind Constable's ears. "It's not spicy, but there's plenty of peppers, so keep it out of Constable's reach."

"Will do," Ellie said. "And you don't have to bring me dinnerevery night."

"It's once or twice a week at most, and the restaurant won't miss it," Paul said. He worked three nights a week as a waiter, supplementing his paramedic income enough that he could afford to live in the city. He looked around the flat. "Fancy going out for a drink?"

"Not in the slightest," said Ellie, pouring the tupperware's contents into a bowl. "I'm about to curl up on the couch with Constable and a good book."

“Like every night.”

“Most nights.” She sighed with contentment. “It’s my happy place.”

“You won’t meet Ms. Right in your happy place. In fact the only things you’ll meet are Constable and the fungus spores growing in your bathroom.”

“That’s not mold,” said Ellie immediately.

“Except it really is.”

“And who said I wanted to meet anyone?”

“Everyone wants to meet someone,” said Paul.

“No. No one night stands. No blind dates. No messing around. I’m happy,” Ellie said, gesturing around at her flat. “This is my castle, my job is my partner, and Constable is all the company I need.”

“Charming,” Paul said, ruffling his dark hair.

“You know what I meant,” said Ellie, just as her phone chirped a notification. “Hold on a second.”

She grabbed the phone to silence it before being distracted by the new email icon. Quickly, she opened up Gmail and then squeaked, actually squeaked, in excitement. Constable’s tail puffed up into a bottle brush and Paul raised an eyebrow. “News?”

“I got it,” she said, half not believing what she was seeing. “Okay, I didn’t actually get it. Not yet. But I got an interview. I get to present my ideas.”

“To the King?” asked Paul.

“No, to Darlington’s,” she breathed. She looked up and grinned. “I’m in with a shot.”

Paul shook his head. “No, you’re in with a good book, remember? I’m out with a shot though. So I’m leaving you to celebrate alone.” He grinned at her fondly. “I’m happy for you, El. Just don’t forget that there are things other than work, you know?”

Ellie nodded, reading the email again as he kissed the top of her head and disappeared off.

She was in with a chance. And that was all she needed. Just one chance to really get ahead.

Chapter Two

An arm reached around and grabbed the apple that Jem had taken for breakfast dessert. “Hey!”

“Are you still here?” said Jasper, dragging out a dining chair and flopping into it. “You have an expensive flat in London, why don’t you disappear off back to it?”

“You have a wife, why don’t you disappear back off to her?” snapped Jem, scooping up some more porridge.

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“Children,” droned their mother from behind her newspaper.

“Rosie is at her mother’s,” Jasper said. “Not that it’s any business of yours.”

“And I thought I might stay for the gymkhana today, not that it’s any business of yours,” said Jem.

Their mother lowered her newspaper. “Honestly, the two of you will be the death of me. It’s ten thirty in the morning, do I really have to deal with you two snapping away like children? I’ll send you back to school early.”

Jasper grinned at his mother. “Mother, darling, we’re all grown up and there’s no shipping us off to boarding school so you can ride in peace anymore.”

“Then act like it,” their mother snapped back.

Jem stuck her tongue out at Jasper who returned the favor. God, she hated him. No, he was her brother, her older brother, she didn’t hate him exactly. She just... no, never mind. She hated him.

“Won’t do you any good hanging around all those old lezzie horsey women anyway,” Jasper said, biting into his apple. “You want to get yourself married, start popping out children. It’s what you’re here for.”

Deep breaths. Deep breaths. She couldn’t make any excuses for him. He was an arrogant little twat and always had been. He was cruel, spoiled and had few redeeming features. The homophobic slurs were getting worse though. Bad enough

now that she always had a faint shudder at the thought that perhaps he knew something.

Perhaps Rolly had spilled her secret.

Except Rolly would never do that. Would he?

“You’re quite detestable, do you know that?” she said, finishing the rest of her porridge. She pushed the bowl away. Someone would clean it up.

“And you’re practically a spinster, do you know that?” Jasper asked, flicking an apple seed at her.

“For Christ’s sake, Jasper, go home,” their mother said, folding her newspaper angrily. “If you can’t say anything nice, then don’t say anything at all.”

“Ha!” laughed Jem.

“And don’t you think you’ve got the better of him,” said their mother. “He’s got a point. Getting you married off is high on my to-do list this year.”

“It’s not the eighteenth century,” Jem said, flicking her hair back over her shoulder.

“You’d be burned for a witch if it were,” put in Jasper.

“A fortune on your education and you don’t even have the faintest grasp of history,” said their mother, standing up. “Now get out, both of you. You’ve homes of your own to go to. I don’t want to see you until you can behave like adults.” She marched out of the room, her riding boots clicking on the hardwood floor.

“Love you too, mummy,” Jasper shouted after her. “You’re just lucky Pa isn’t here,”

he added to Jem.

“Why? Because he takes your side in everything?” Jem said. “Because it’s easier to bully someone when there’s two of you todo the bullying?”

Jasper’s eyes gleamed deep china blue. Looking at him was disconcertingly like looking in a mirror, his face a masculine version of her own, with long, dark lashes and high cheekbones. “Pa spoils you, as well you know.”

She had to cede that point. Her father probably did spoil her. Not that he was around to do it that often any more. “Where the hell is he anyway?”

“New mistress,” sniffed Jasper. “Quite the looker as well, wouldn’t mind a crack at her when Pa’s done.”

“Jesus, you make me sick,” said Jem. She pushed her chair back from the table.

“Then come ‘round less often, there’ll be less chances to make you sick,” he grinned at her. “Porridge work on your hangover, did it? You’ll be alright to drive back to London then, won’t you?”

To be honest, her head was still a little cloudy and her stomach wasn’t entirely happy with the porridge. Still though, she probably felt better than she had any right to feel after the amount she’d drunk the night before.

“You really are an execrable little man, aren’t you?”

“Careful, careful,” he said, still grinning. “Only one of us will be controlling the family trust when Pa is gone, and it won’t be you. So play nice, baby sister.”

She snorted and got up. “I don’t know what Rosie sees in you,” she said. Her sister-

in-law was actually quite lovely and her comment was an honest one. Heaven knew what pretty, kind little Rosie saw in monster Jasper.

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“Probably my huge cock,” he called out as Jem walked out of the dining room.

Which was more than enough to persuade her upstairs, where she grabbed her phone, her overnight bag and her car keys. She really didn’t need any more family this weekend.

THE LITTLE RED MG was Jem’s pride and joy. There was something classic and yet sexy about it and she’d adored it from the moment she’d seen it. Luckily, her father had thought it the perfect little run around for her, and had snapped it up.

Driving it down the motorway was a tad bumpy, to be sure, but it was fast and nippy enough that the trip back to town wouldn’t take too long.

She’d be back in time to go out, if only she could think of something that was supposed to be happening tonight. Surely someone had something going on.

“Darling,” Annabelle said when she answered the phone. “Drinkies?”

“Exactly why I was phoning.”

“Debbie’s at seven,” chirped Annabelle. “I’m meeting Philip there, and he’s bringing a friend. Not a stinker, I promise. His name’s... Lucas or Luke or Luca. Something like that. He’s something in the city.”

Jem’s stomach twisted. But she couldn’t exactly say no. Not when she’d already admitted to calling wanting to go out. For fuck’s sake. She pressed her foot on the accelerator and glided around an SUV and back into her lane.

“Sounds, um, lovely,” she said, cursing herself for not first asking what Annabelle was up to before committing.

“Excellent, excellent. Looking forward to it.” Annabelle hung the phone up with a snap and Jem breathed out.

“What the fuck am I doing?” she asked out loud.

It wasn't like the problem was going to go away. Although she supposed plenty of other people buried it. She'd always sort of assumed that at some point she'd... change her mind or something. Or meet someone like Rolly and get married and pop out some brats to keep the gossips off their backs while each of them went their own secret ways.

Not that it was the eighteenth century or anything. Not that she could be burned as a witch. Not that she couldn't just say the truth out loud and... and what exactly?

Be cut off and disowned and left all alone?

Although, to be fair, she'd be rid of Jasper, which would be a definite plus to being poor, homeless, and alone.

The traffic slowed as she got closer to the city.

It just got worse the older she got. The older she got the more her choices seemed to hem her in, the harder it became to speak the truth, the longer the charade went on the more she was forced to live it.

And the harder it became to just keep on going.

There were, she had to admit, definite advantages to being Jemima Darlington. Not

least of which were her speedy sportscar and expensive flat. But there were disadvantages too. Big ones.

Her phone rang.

“Jem-Jem.” Rolly’s cheerful voice came over her speakers. “Drinks?”

Thank god. She could depend on Rolly to defuse any date-like atmosphere even if she couldn’t depend on him to be her fake-boyfriend any longer. He’d been seeing someone that he was keeping awfully secret and who had made him swear not to appear in the society pages on Jem’s arm any longer.

“Debbie’s at seven,” she said.

“Wonderful. How’s the fam?”

“Awful.”

“Just the usual then,” he said. “Jasper there?”

“Still an asshole and still straight.”

“Shame,” Rolly said. “Alright, I’ll see you at seven.”

He hung up, by which point, Jem was already in Chelsea and about to turn into her street. A nap, a bath, and she’d be ready to party again.

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Her parking space required reversing, never one of Jem's better skills, but she was used to it by now. Swinging the car around past the space she glanced backward to make sure she was lined up correctly and took her foot off the brake to begin sliding back.

She'd just touched the accelerator when she saw a glimpse of orange in her rearview mirror.

Panicking, she wanted to hit the brake but hit the gas instead, twisting the steering wheel around as she turned. It took a splitsecond.

The sound of the car hitting the brick wall was almost a scream, the screeching of metal told her that there was no way she was going to get away with just a scratch.

"God damn it," she shouted, the engine shuddering to a stop.

The orange cat skulked out from the parking space before slinking across the road in front of her.

Jem closed her eyes.

Today was really not her day.

Chapter Three

Ellie crossed her legs and then wished she hadn't. Crossing them made her skirt ride up a little too far and the last thing she wanted was for Alistair Darlington to think

that she was trying to hit on him.

But if she uncrossed them now, then she'd look indecisive, which was equally the last thing she wanted. And if she started tugging at her skirt she'd look like a primary school kid who had to go to the toilet.

"... quite a small company?"

She switched back from the legs/skirt issue just in time to hear the end of the question. Now she had to make up a beginning for the question that hopefully fit whatever was being asked. Christ, this was going terribly. Focus.

"We are a boutique firm," she said, voice strong and steady. "Which means we can more easily personalize our services to give the client exactly what they need."

Very good, that was excellent.

This could be the break she'd been waiting for, praying for really.

She tried to look around the huge office without actually gaping. There was enough leather to clad a biker gang and the vase on the plinth by the door looked like it had been dug up just the day before. Honestly, this man had more money than he could ever possibly spend. How was that fair?

How was it fair that some people got to have eight cows worth of leather in an office and others had to live on cup noodles for the last week before payday?

"I will be honest with you, Ms. Baker, it is not my role as company president to be interviewing party planners."

"Executive function logistical managers," Elle said quickly. She almost thought she

saw a sparkle in his eye.

“Indeed,” he said, lips perhaps twitching a little at the corners. “However, this event is extremely important, and quite personal to me.”

“Oh?” she asked, looking politely interested and wondering if it could be as personal to him as it was becoming to her. This contract would make her name known among those that mattered. Those that could pay her bills.

Maybe then she could afford a new interview suit that had a slightly longer skirt. And that didn’t have Constable’s claw marks on the back of it.

“My great grandfather incorporated this company a hundred and fifty years ago,” he said.

Which just made Ellie think about a hundred and fifty years of old white men with mustaches having more money than was good for them.

Alistair Darlington cleared his throat. “And I intend to announce my retirement at this event.”

“You do?” Ellie said, surprised now. He looked sort of old, she supposed, but not that old.

“That’s between you and I,” he said, looking somewhat surprised himself that he’d told her. “But I have a son waiting in the wings, and I know what it’s like to be the heir apparent, chomping at the bit to get started. So I’ve decided to give Jasper his turn, to let the younger generation take over. Finance is a young man’s game, at least investments are.”

“Mmm,” said Ellie noncommittally. Like she had any idea what he was talking about.

Her idea of investment was buying Crunchie bars right after payday and hiding them in the back of the cupboard so she could find them when she was broke again.

“So, as you can see, this is a very important event.” He smiled at her.

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She felt her heart start to thrum a little in her chest. It was important. And he'd told her it was important. He'd spilled his secret to her which meant... Didn't it? It had to mean... Her mouth was too dry to talk properly.

His smile widened and she saw that actually, under the arrogance, he was quite an attractive man. "Your company is small, but your ideas are exactly what I'm looking for. Unique, but tasteful, minimalist and yet still eye-catching. You have quite the eye for detail." He paused and studied her more closely. "You don't have a history of producing large corporate events, however."

No. He couldn't dangle this in front of her and then take it away again. Not now. She swallowed hastily. "I do have a history of producing large private events," she said, thinking of Rachel Cohen's Bat Mitzvah. "As well as several smaller company functions."

He nodded. "As I said, I like your ideas and you're who I want." He held up a finger to stop her talking again. "However, I will supply you with a company liaison, someone from Darlington's who will work with you and ensure that everything is running as it should be."

She could hardly argue about that. Not if she got the contract. Her tummy did a little flip and she nodded in agreement. "Of course."

"My younger assistant, Toby, should be suited for the job," he said. "He's not here right now, but I'll ensure that he's here for the full briefing meeting later in the week." He glanced at his watch. "Now, if you will excuse me?" He stood, holding out his hand.

Ellie stood too, her legs wobbly and not to be trusted. Was this real? “You mean... I mean... We got the contract?”

He smiled again and again she saw that he was actually quite a handsome man. “If you want the project?”

“What? Yes, of course, yes, please.”

“Then it will be a pleasure doing business with you, Ms.Baker.” He gripped her hand and shook it precisely twice. “Discuss your diary with my first assistant on your way out and arrange a briefing meeting.”

He sat down again, his eyes on his computer and Ellie was clearly dismissed. She walked slowly out of the large office, legs still wobbly and a dance in her heart.

She’d done it. They’d done it. She was on her way.

SHE COULD HEAR voices even before she opened the office door. And sure enough, Mo and Carys were lounging in desk chairs, Mo exasperatedly explaining the plot of some ancient film for what was probably the third time. Carys was not known for her long attention span.

But both stopped when they saw her in the door. Mo’s eyes opened a little wider, questioning. Today’s sartorial choices, namely a mustard yellow silk skirt paired with black combat boots, made the office look merrier and brighter. Carys jumped up.

“Well?” she said.

Ellie steeled herself, keeping her face straight.

Carys’s face dropped. “It’s alright,” she said. “You’ll get the next one, thecoc

oedoesn't know what he's talking about."

"Coc oen?" asked Ellie.

"Lamb's penis," Mo supplied. Carys looked at them. "What? I'm not allowed to take an interest in the Welsh language?" Then they turned back to Ellie, their eyes narrowing. "Wait a minute, her face is all pink."

"So?" Carys said, leaning in to better study Ellie.

"So, she can't tell a lie without lighting up like a Christmas tree," said Mo. "Eleanor Baker, come clean right this minute."

Ellie couldn't keep a straight face any longer. She broke into a wild grin. "We got it," was all she managed to say before she was swamped by both Mo and Carys.

Her heart beating wildly and her best friends' arms around her, she finally let out the shriek of jubilation that she'd been holding in for the entire tube trip back to the office.

"Jesus," Carys said, letting go. "I've gone deaf in one ear now."

"We really got it?" asked Mo, also letting go.

"He loved our aesthetic and we're in," Ellie confirmed. She turned to Carys. "And you get all the graphics work, promise."

Carys held up a hand and high fived her. "Much appreciated even though I don't just come in here for the business opportunities, I swear."

"So we're really in," Mo said, as though confirming it to themselves. They nodded,

face becoming more serious. A glittering line of yellow eyeliner twinkled in the office lights. “Then there’s something we need to discuss.”

Ellie stilled. “Mo,” she said regretfully. “I can’t give you a raise. Not yet. Maybe after the party when more work comes in but—”

“But nothing,” said Mo. “I’m not angling for your hard-earned money, you idiot.” Their face split into a smile. “I’m angling for an office party.”

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“No,” said Ellie at the exact same time as Carys said “Yes.”

“Come on,” said Mo.

“We have to celebrate,” said Carys. “It’s the law.”

“It might be Welsh law, but it’s not English law,” said Ellie, who felt her evening on the couch with her book and Constable slipping away between her fingers.

“It’s important for office morale,” put in Mo. “Come on, please?”

She looked from one to the other. Both faces had wide eyes and pleading expressions and in her heart she knew that she owed them this. Both had supported her, and Mo had worked their arse off on getting a prospectus put together. She sighed. “A drink.”

“That new queer bar opened up close to the tube station,” Carys said to Mo. “There should be something for all of us there.”

“I’m in for anything queer,” said Mo. “Do you think I should go home and change?”

“No, that skirt is most excellent, no way can you change it,” Carys said.

“One. Drink,” Ellie said more firmly.

But neither one looked at her. They were far too busy deciding what to wear and arguing over whether the bar had karaoke or not to listen to the voice of reason.

Ellie sighed. She loved them, but a night of looking after two drunken queers wasn't necessarily her idea of fun. Still, they deserved it, she supposed. She grinned half to herself. She'd really done it. Baker Functions was about to become a name that people recognized. All she had to do now was see that the Darlington party was a huge success.

Chapter Four

The car was undrivable. Just that morning when she'd sat in the driver's seat and turned the key, it had uttered a sad choking noise and then lapsed into silence. Jem had screeched in frustration and was now having the worst day ever.

Well, perhaps not ever. But close.

Her manicurist had canceled, her favorite coffee shop had messed up her order leaving her uncaffeinated and tasting faintly of cinnamon, and then, to top it all off, she'd peeked at her bank balance and had had to look twice before she realized that there just weren't enough numbers.

Which meant she had to walk the gauntlet.

"No, no, wait!" called the young man in the suit as Jem clipped by in her favorite heels.

"It's me," she caroled.

"He's busy," Toby caroled right back.

"He'll see me," she practically sang.

"He'll kill me," he sang back.

She stopped. “Tobes, it’s me. It’ll be fine.”

He pulled a face. “Give me a minute? Let me at least tell him that you’re here. You know, prove that I can do my job and all.”

“Fine,” she said, leaning against his desk and folding her arms. “How’s the mood?”

“Oh, you know, I’m alright, bit tired I suppose,” Toby said as he picked up the phone. Then he paused and looked at Jem who simply raised an eyebrow. “Oh, you mean Mr. Darlington. Um, yeah. He’s okay, I suppose. He finally found a party planner so that put a smile on his face.”

Jem, who suspected that Toby harbored more than a little crush on her father, frowned. “Who did he go with? Farber’s? Or Carrington’s?”

“Neither,” Toby said, covering the mouthpiece of the phone with his hand. “Some new place, the girl was here this morning. Baker’s?”

“Never heard of it,” Jem said, rolling her eyes. It wasn’t like her father to go against tradition. It was like her father to look for a bargain, however.

“Mr. Darlington, your daughter’s here,” Toby said quietly. He looked up at Jem. “Go right in.”

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“Told you,” Jem said, pushing herself up off his desk.

Her father was already standing when she walked in, and she rounded his desk to give him a perfunctory peck on the cheek.

“How much do you need?” he said grumpily sitting down again.

Jem ignored the question. “Did you really just hire a no-name for the anniversary party?” she asked.

He eyed her, then grunted. “Not that it’s any of your business, but yes, I did. She’s a talented woman and I liked what she had to offer.”

Big boobs then, Jem thought privately. “And she’s trustworthy enough to leave the biggest party you’ve hosted for decades in her hands?”

“None of your business,” her father said again. He put his hands on the desk. “Well then, out with it.”

Jem sighed and sat down. She hated doing this, really hated it. But she didn’t have a choice if she wanted the car fixed. “It’s about the MG.”

“Yes?”

She cleared her throat. “There’s been a bit of an accident.”

“I see,” said her father before she could say any more. “And I suppose you want me

to pay for the damage?”

She put on her best smile. “If you wouldn’t mind. I’m sure it won’t be too much, it’s not awful, but you know how temperamental she can be.”

“No.”

The word was so unexpected that Jem was silenced for a full thirty seconds. “No?” she finally repeated.

“No,” said her father again. “This is the fourth time you’ve crashed this car and I’ve had enough. I suppose you were off your face again, or hungover, or driving too fast to get to your hair appointment, or something equally frivolous.”

“I’m not frivolous!” Jem interrupted.

“Are you not?” her father asked, leaning forward in his seat. “Then tell me something you’ve done recently that wasn’t frivolous. That didn’t involve going to a party or getting ready to go to a party or the aftermath of a party.”

Jem opened her mouth then closed it again. She couldn’t think of anything. “That’s unfair,” she said finally. “You’re putting me on the spot.”

“Because it’s about time you grew up,” he said, little spots of color on his cheeks. “You’re an intelligent girl, Jemima, and I’ve spoiled you and put up with all of this for too long. I thought you needed time to find yourself, to find your place in the world, so I stepped back. But enough is enough.”

Jem, who had heard this more than once before, took a breath. She needed the car fixed, that was about it. Her allowance would come through next week, and she had her credit cards until then. This would all blow over.

“Fine,” she said reasonably. “I’ll start looking for a job, something I can do. But in the meantime, I’ll need the car for... interviews and such.”

He glared at her and Jem sensed that something had shifted. She saw for a second what other people saw when they sat opposite her father, the shrewd businessman, the peerless negotiator. She gulped.

“I’ll pay for the car,” he said finally, sitting back again.

“Thank you,” Jem said, breathing a sigh of relief.

“But you’ll work off the debt.” He held up a hand to silence her protest. “You’ll work off the debt first.” With a sniff he turned back to his computer. “Be here on Thursday at eight.”

“In the morning?” squeaked Jem.

He glared at her again, and she took that as her cue to leave.

“OH, DARLING, IT can’t be that terrible,” Rolly said, patting her arm with a pudgy hand. “I’m sure he’ll just have you do some filing or something for the morning, just to teach you a lesson.”

“Filing?” asked Jem, putting down her glass of champagne.

“Isn’t that what finance companies do? Or maybe counting money?” said Rolly, an unsure look passing over his face.

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“Darlington’s is a hedge fund,” Annabelle said snippily. Both Jem and Rolly turned to her. “What? I can’t know things?”

“As a general rule, if said things aren’t fashion or gossip related, then no,” Rolly said. There was no love lost between the two.

Annabelle rolled her eyes. “If you don’t like it, then I suggest you get someone else to get your car repaired,” she said to Jem. “Lucas, for example.”

“Luca,” Jem said, trying not to think about the creepy blind date that had attempted to put a hand up her skirt before the first course had even been served. “And no, thank you.”

“What’s wrong with Luca?” asked Annabelle. “He’s well-bred, plenty of money in the bank, he dresses beautifully.”

“His eyes were too close together,” Jem said. And he has a penis, she mentally added. Rolly squeezed her thigh under the table.

“His eyes were perfectly positioned under terribly nicely groomed eyebrows,” said Annabelle. “Honestly, I give up with you.”

“You and my father both,” Jem said miserably.

Annabelle drained her glass. “I’m loving you and leaving you. David will be sending a car for me.” She got up.

“What happened to Philip?” Jem asked.

“His nose was crooked,” Annabelle called over her shoulder, throwing them a wave as she strode out of the wine bar.

“Good riddance,” Rolly said as the door closed behind her.

“She’s not that bad,” said Jem.

“She’s an evil witch, and worse, she’s one of those terrible people that will pick at a scab until it bleeds.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Rolly sighed. “You know what it’s supposed to mean. It means that if little Annabelle doesn’t get news soon that you made the beast with two backs with at least one of the horrible men she sets you up with, she’s going to get suspicious.”

“The beast with two backs?” Jem said, shaking her head. “What a horrible turn of phrase.”

“I quite like it,” Rolly said with a smile. His round face was sweet, with little dimples on either side of his chin. “But on a more serious note, you could just tell her, you know.”

“Tell her? And have half of London know by this time tomorrow?” said Jem. She groaned and leaned back on the leather banquette. “I can’t.”

“I know, trust me, I know. You think you can’t,” Rolly said. “But it would make your life an awful lot easier. Fewer penises for you, more for me. Or is that penii? I was always horrible at Latin at school.”

“It’s easier for you.”

“Is it?” Rolly asked. “What on Earth makes you think that informing my father that his one and only son and heir is a shirt-lifter was easy?”

“Don’t use words like that.”

“I’m reclaiming it,” Rolly said, folding his arms and looking truculent.

“You’re using a disparaging term about yourself because other people make you feel lesser for being different,” she pointed out.

“At least other people know I’m different,” he countered.

Jem closed her eyes. He was right, of course. At some point she was going to have to put up or shut up. Either tell the truth or commit to living a lie. Neither option sounded good.

“Which is a problem for another day, I’m thinking,” Rolly said, squeezing her leg again. “And now that Her Witchness has left, you and I can move on somewhere far more interesting.”

“Like where?” asked Jem, interest perked.

“Oh, there’s a new little queer place opened up that I’ve just heard about, for boys and girls and everything in between, it sounds lovely.”

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“I thought you were attached,” Jem said.

“Doesn’t mean I can’t look,” grinned Rolly. “Come on, drink up, let’s get out of here.”

Chapter Five

Mo had somehow found a feather boa that was draped over their shoulders and Carys was glued to her phone studying the karaoke list. Ellie tried to relax, she honestly did. She deserved this, this was a celebration. Except every time she tried to enjoy herself she thought about the massive amount of work that this party was going to take.

“Chillax,” Mo said.

“Not a word,” said Carys. She looked up at Ellie. “But they’ve got a point. You could sort of... let loose a bit?” She held out her phone. “Want to karaoke with me?”

“Other than sticking a fork in my eye, I can’t think of anything that I’d like to do less,” Ellie said. Then she relented slightly. “But thank you for asking.”

“I’ll do it,” Mo said, beckoning for the phone. Carys handed it to him. “I’m thinking Olivia Rodrigo or Dua Lipa.”

“You know, that boa makes you look pretty queer,” Carys teased.

“I know, isn’t it great?” beamed Mo.

Ellie laughed. “At least the two of you look like you’re having fun.”

“That’s because we actually know how to have fun,” said Carys. “Unlike you. Honestly, El, you could at least pretend that you’re liking this.”

“I know how to have fun,” Ellie protested, letting Mo twine the feather boa around her neck. To be fair, she did. It was just that her kind of fun involved a book, a couch, and on the odd night perhaps a glass of wine.

Carys just rolled her eyes. “You’re not ancient yet. You need to get out more. How else will you meet people?”

“I have people! I have you, Mo, Paul from next door.”

“People from outside your comfort zone, I meant,” said Carys.

“People to date is what you meant,” said Ellie.

Carys sighed. “Right, fine, yes. But we’ve already dated and it didn’t work out, you’re not interested in Paul due to him being a him, and I’m pretty sure Mo’s not into you.”

“Nope,” Mo said automatically. Then they looked up from the phone looking guilty. “I mean, I’m sorry, El, you’re just not my type and, well, you’re my boss and I don’t know, it feels—”

“It’s fine,” Ellie interrupted before they could spiral any further. “I’m not interested in you either.”

“Ouch.”

“Hey! You started it,” she said.

Mo grinned. “I suppose I did.”

Ellie drank down the rest of her sweet cocktail and put down the glass. “And that’s me done,” she said. “You’re right, I’m bringing the party down. This just isn’t my scene, I’m sorry. But I do appreciate the effort and you two should stay here. I’ll be fine getting back by myself.”

“No,” Carys said. And she looked quite bereft. She ran her hands through her short, spiky hair. “One more drink,” she pleaded. “You haven’t even heard me and Mo sing yet.”

Mo put on their puppy dog eyes. Ellie shook her head but started to smile despite herself.

“Fine, one more drink. But I’m going to the bar to get it myself. You two make your song choices, I don’t have all night. Constable needs feeding, you know.”

She began pushing her way to the bar, making it about half way before she stood on someone’s foot.

“Oh god, sorry,” she said, turning around to find a large man with merry dimples wincing. “Absolute accident, so sorry.”

“It’s alright,” he said. “No real harm done.”

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His companion took his arm and Ellie let her eyes stray for a second. The woman was tall, with long dark hair, deep blue eyes, and impossibly long eyelashes. She was the kind of woman that magazines would call an English Rose. For a split second Ellie thought to smile at her.

But the woman wasn't looking, she was asking the man if he was alright and so Ellie turned back to her fight to get to the bar.

???

"Is this really our kind of place?" Jem asked.

"It has alcohol, loud music, and many people who may be willing to indulge in pleasures of the flesh," Rolly said. "What makes you think this isn't our sort of place?"

"It's on the wrong side of the river, for a start," Jem said. She looked around at the writhing mass of people. "And there's not a free table in the house."

"All the better for dancing," Rolly said. "And stop being such a spoilsport, Jem. You might be right about it being not quite our sort of place, but that means it's certainly not the kind of place that anyone else we know would go to. Which in turn means you're safe to lure flies into your web. Or whatever it is that you women do together."

"It has little to do with spiders, I can assure you," she said. But he was right. There was not a single recognizable face in the place, and that, in the end, was probably what mattered. And there was alcohol. "Drink?"

“Allow me,” Rolly said, sliding out into the crowd with surprising grace.

She watched him go and reminded herself that she loved him. She did, in her own way. Rolly had been her secret keeper for as long as she could remember. Ever since one awful party when they were both fifteen and he had tried to kiss her under a snooker table and she had tried to kiss him right back and neither had been able to hide their mutual disgust.

Up until that point, Jem had been sure that whatever she was feeling it would go away with time. It had been Rolly’s kiss that had informed her in no polite terms that boys were definitely not what she was into.

They’d grown together, kept each other’s secrets, until Rolly had had the courage to tell his father and then Jem had been there for the fallout.

“Here,” Rolly said, back in an instant with two large shots clasped in his hands. “Drink it fast, it’s not Grey Goose.”

Obediently, Jem took the glass, tilted it back, and drained it in one.

“Steady on,” said Rolly. “That was a triple. Thought it’d save me going back to the bar.”

“I’ll get the next one,” Jem said, eyes still stinging from the first.

“In a while,” Rolly said. He was smiling at a small, dark man who was dancing nearby. “I’m going for a dance first.” He paused for a second. “Make your choices Jem, we’re not hanging around here all night. If there’s someone you like, well, you know how it works.”

It was a bit like being taken to the dog park and being allowed to run around without

a lead for half an hour. Jem knew exactly how this worked. Once every month or so, she and Rolly would sneak away and come to a place like this and she'd... find someone. Just for a couple of hours, or a night maybe.

It wasn't exactly romantic. But it satisfied her urges and meant she could sit through dinners with men like Luca without actually scratching their eyes out.

Rolly disappeared into the throngs on the dance floor and Jem let her eyes stray over to the bar, nobody catching her attention until suddenly someone did.

She was standing at the bar, one foot up on the rail, one elbow on the bar. Her hair was gloriously dark and messy, all curls and waves that begged to be tangled between Jem's fingers. Her profile was sharp, her body was curved, not too skinny, hips that needed to be held, cleavage that just peeked out of a sensible work shirt.

Whoever she was, she fit in here about as well as Jem did. There was no leather, no feathers, no sequins, just someone in dark pants and a white shirt. Someone who'd come straight from work. Someone who was probably here for the same reasons that Jem was.

Jem left her empty glass on the edge of someone else's table and moved toward the bar, not taking her eyes off the woman. She looked... like someone who needed corrupting perhaps. Jem could feel her heart beating under her skin at the thought of it.

"Hello."

The woman turned and smiled a little and Jem could see that her eyes were dark. A little sweat had collected in the hollow at the base of her throat. "Hello."

Jem let her eyes obviously stray up and down. "I'd ask if you come here often, but

I'm afraid you've probably heard that more than once tonight already."

"I shouldn't think anyone's heard that since about nineteen seventy five," the woman said crisply. Her voice was deeper than Jem had expected.

Jem grinned now. A fighter, she liked that. The woman wasn't going to make this easy and Jem thrived on a challenge. "Buy you a drink?"

The barman slid a cocktail over to the woman just at that moment. "Already got one," she said, lifting her glass.

Jem could feel the moment inexplicably slipping away. Shit. "Feel like some company while you drink it?" she tried, thinking that she might be starting to sound desperate.

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“I’m with people, actually,” the woman said, starting to shift from her position.

For fuck’s sake. All in then. “Feel like going to my place when you’re done then?” Definitely sounding desperate now. But there was something about her, something about those dark eyes, those hips, that messy hair, that made Jem really want this one.

The woman didn’t even hesitate. “No, thank you. I’m really not that sort of girl.”

She slid off into the crowd until Jem’s eyes lost sight of her.

Huh.

That didn’t happen often.

Jem shook herself. Jesus, she needed another drink. There’d be a hundred other women here that she could make a move on. But she found herself comparing everyone else to the dark-haired woman at the bar. Until eventually, she let Rolly pour her into a taxi alone.

Hardly a successful evening.

Chapter Six

The not-mold in the bathroom was starting to look suspiciously furry and Ellie thought she’d better pick up some kind of product to deal with it. Yet another thing to add to her shopping list. She’d practically crawled into the shower and now she practically crawled back out of it. Lack of sleep did not agree with her.

“Okay, okay, I’m coming,” she told a meowing Constable as she hurriedly towed off. “You’re not starving yet.”

Constable meowed his disagreement with this statement and didn’t start purring until she’d opened a can of malodorous tuna cat food.

She poured boiling water from the kettle over instant coffee in a to-go cup. Not as good as Costa, but a tenth of the price, so she’d deal with it.

“You’re excited,” she said aloud. “You’re a go-getter. You can do this.”

She picked up her cup and walked out the door, forcing herself to walk energetically even though she didn’t particularly feel like it. Honestly, tonight she was going to bed at seven and getting a decent night’s sleep. All this going out to bars was not conducive to running a successful business.

“Bye, Con,” she said as she closed the front door.

A light spattering of rain greeted her when she stepped outside, so she decided not to walk to the office. The tube jolted and smelled of unwashed people and got stuck in a tunnel for five minutes, but otherwise got her there dryer than she might have been.

Reaching the office door she heard... nothing. Not a peep. When she left the bar last night, Carys and Mo had both been busy signing up for their next karaoke song and had barely noticed her going. It looked like they were both hungover enough this morning not to be early birds.

So she squeaked a little in surprise when she opened the door and both were there. Mo was standing by their desk, arms held away from their body like they didn’t know what to do with their hands. Carys was as far as possible from them, her face pink and half her spiked hair flat.

“Jesus,” Ellie said. “I can smell the alcohol wafting off you. Did the two of you sleep in here?”

“No,” they both said at once.

“Right,” said Ellie, eyeing them. They both looked guilty and she suspected that they might have just crawled back here and crashed on the rug, which she’d expressly forbidden them from doing after finding a half-eaten kebab in her rubbish bin one morning.

“We didn’t, honest,” Mo said, wiping their hands on their kilt and walking back behind their desk.

“Good,” said Ellie. “We’ve got a busy day ahead, lots of planning to do before I report back to Darlington’s in the morning. I’ll need a full, clean brochure.”

“Big stack of them in the filing cabinet,” Mo said.

“And I’d like some fresh ideas that we can offer. I know he likes minimalism but that he also likes to flaunt his cash, so we’re walking a thin line there.”

“Have we thought about entertainment options?” Mo said, getting a notepad out of their drawer. They picked up a pen with a clutch of feathers at the end.

“He hasn’t mentioned them, but I’m assuming we’re going to need at least music. But let’s come up with a few ideas for walk-arounds just in case. I’m thinking acrobats, dancers morethan magicians. Classy, Cirque de Soleil types, you know what I mean.”

Mo was scribbling on their pad. “Got it, I’ve got a few people I can call. I was thinking maybe a sculptor?”

“A sculptor?” Ellie asked, intrigued. She pulled off her jacket and threw it over the back of her chair.

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“Hear me out,” said Mo, putting their pencil down. “When we went to that big Expo I saw an ice sculptor.”

“Ice sculptures are so ten years ago,” said Ellie, sitting down.

“Right, but I wasn’t as much interested in the result as I was in the process,” said Mo. “Like the actual sculptor making the thing, it was fascinating to watch.”

“Huh, I hadn’t actually thought about that,” said Ellie.

There was the sound of someone clearing their throat. Ellie and Mo looked up and Carys was edging toward the door. “I’ll, uh, I’ll see you both later then, I suppose. I’ll, um, I’ll just be going.” She slid out of the door and closed it softly behind her.

“What’s up with her?” asked Ellie.

Mo looked thoughtfully at the door. “She’ll be alright,” they said eventually. “Now, about that sculptor.”

CARYS DIDN’T REAPPEAR until almost four o’clock, but when she did she looked a lot better than she had that morning.

“Did you just nap at your desk?” Mo asked her.

Carys stuck her tongue out. “Might have done.”

Mo groaned. “You’re lucky you don’t have a slave driver of a boss around.”

“Hey, you know I’m sitting right here, don’t you? And this was your own fault. No one made you stay out late. In fact, I have a distinct memory of telling you that you might want to think about going home.”

“There’s no point living for tomorrow,” Mo said. “Right Carys?”

Carys sniffed and flopped into the spare chair opposite Mo’s desk. “Right. It was a good night, actually.”

“She’s right,” said Mo. “You should get out more, it’s important to socialize and relax.”

“No, thank you, I’m perfectly fine the way I am,” Ellie said, closing down the document she was working on.

“You have to be the only party planner in the world that actually hates parties,” Carys said.

“I’m paid to design them, not to go to them,” pointed out Ellie. “And going out like that, it’s just not my thing.”

“Says the person who got hit on within an hour of being there,” said Mo.

Ellie grimaced. She’d hoped that neither one of them had noticed the woman hitting on her at the bar. She’d recognized her immediately as the English Rose woman, the one whose companion’s foot she’d almost crushed.

“She was pretty hot,” Carys said.

Great, so they’d both noticed. “She was... attractive,” Ellie agreed, there was no point denying that. The woman had been very attractive. She could still remember the

deep china blue of her eyes.

“So...” Mo said, drawing the word out.

“So what?” asked Ellie.

“So... why didn't you at least dance with her?” Carys asked. “Was she plastered with makeup?”

“Or she had an extra arm hidden under her dress?” asked Mo.

“Ooo, maybe she only spoke a mysterious Slavic language,” Carys said.

“You're both idiots,” said Ellie. “And for your information, not that it's any of your business, but I don't do one night stands.”

“Is that what she offered?” Mo asked, looking somewhat aghast.

“Not exactly,” Ellie allowed. “But it was sort of implied.”

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“Which doesn’t mean that’s what she was asking for,” said Carys. “She might have been in for the whole hog, like actually hitting on you as in she actually liked you.”

“You’re never going to find out if you don’t let people in,” Mo said. “You should have at least had a drink with her. Don’t you want to find someone?”

“I have someone. Someones,” Ellie said.

“Me, Carys, Paul from next door, and Constable don’t count,” said Mo. “Don’t you want someone special?”

“I’m just fine the way I am, thank you. I’ve got friends and I’ve got a company to run. Besides, not everyone wants someone around all the time. I mean, do you? You want to be tied down to just one person? To involve someone else in every decision that you make?”

Mo shrugged. “I wouldn’t mind a Bogey to my Bacall. Or a Bacall to my Bogey. Whatever.”

“Fine,” huffed Ellie. “What about you, Car? Interested in any amazing women right now?”

To her surprise, Carys, who was generally the first one to over-share about her dating life, clammed up and turned faintly pink. “Dunno,” she mumbled.

“As a society we put far too much emphasis in pairing off and forming these isolated units,” said Ellie, warming to her theme. “In actuality, we’re probably better off in

group situations, rather than relying on just one person to fulfill all our needs.”

“So you’re poly,” Mo said. “I can get behind that.”

“No,” said Ellie shaking her head. “That’s not what I meant, I just meant…”

“You just meant that you haven’t found the right person yet,” said Mo. “The one that makes you believe that you can do anything and that makes you think you never want to be with anyone else ever again. And my point is that the woman at the bar could have been that one, but since you didn’t give her a chance you’ll never know, will you?”

Ellie snorted, not least because the idea of anyone as strikingly beautiful as English Rose wanting anything to do with someone who lived in a flat where you could literally touch all the walls at the same time was laughable.

Then, for just an instant, she imagined what it might be like to wake up next to that face, to see that face when she walked in the door in the evening, to have that face be a part of her world.

Ridiculous.

“I know,” she said. “And I know that picking up women for one night stands in bars is not my scene, thank you very much.”

“Enough, enough,” said Carys. “You’ve done your relationship counseling for the day, Mo. Now where are you two on graphics?”

For the next hour they both filled her in on what they were looking for in terms of place cards, menus and invitations. And then Mo yawned and stretched. “I tell you what, I could go for hair of the dog. Fancy a drink?”

“Absolutely not, it’s home for me,” Ellie said, thinking of Constable and the book she had sitting on the coffee table.

“Carys?” Mo asked, turning casually to her.

She hesitated for a second then shrugged. “Why not?”

“Because you have work in the morning, because you should have an early night, because you’re a responsible adult,” said Ellie.

“And you’re boring,” Mo said, getting up from their seat. They leaned over and dropped a kiss on Ellie’s head. “But we love you anyway.”

“Don’t forget I’ll be at Darlington’s in the morning,” Ellie called out as they were leaving.

But neither of them seemed to hear her.

Chapter Seven

Strolling out of the bathroom and into her walk-in wardrobe, Jem wondered what her best option was. Obviously, she needed to look stylish, that was a given. But she needed to be demure as well, which was a tough ask. In the end, she selected a black dress and was zipping it up when her phone buzzed.

Delighted you’re joining us. Followed by a devil emoji and a laughing face. Fucking Jasper. If she’d known that her father was having dinner with him, she wouldn’t have invited herself along.

Actually, she probably would have, to be fair. Her father’s main assistant, Audrey, had texted her a reminder to be at the office tomorrow bright and early. The problem

with that was that Jem didn't do bright or early, let alone both.

Which meant she needed to be persuasive and lovely over dinner, whilst still getting her car fixed and not outing herself in front of her horrifically homophobic brother. What a wonderful evening.

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She texted her car service, picked up her bag, and walked out of her flat, patting her sad MG on the bonnet as she walked past.

The restaurant was predictably bland. The staff were hushed, the tables were far enough apart to be discreet, and the food was the sort of fare she'd grown used to at boarding school. Her father was on his phone when she arrived, so she kissed his cheek and ordered a glass of wine. Just one glass, she promised herself.

"Good to see you," her father said when he finally put his phone down.

"You too," Jem said politely. "You're looking well."

"And you're looking like someone who's regretting her decisions," her father said sharply. "I suppose you've come to beg me to be lenient."

"No, I..." Jem sighed. What was the point of lying? Her father had always had an uncanny ability to read her. "Well, yes, I suppose. I was just wondering what you thought working for you would give me in the long run. I mean, wouldn't it be better for me to work in an area well-suited to my skills?"

"Which are?" her father asked.

Jem swallowed. It was a fair question. She had been to boarding school. Then she'd done a year at finishing school. And then, well, then she'd just started living. She had no degree and had shown no real aptitude in anything other than field hockey, and that wasn't a skill that most employers were looking for.

“Pa,” Jasper said, appearing like a cheap magician. He bent down and kissed his father on the cheek. “Jem.” No kiss for her.

“Jasper, my boy, glad that you’re here. In fact, I’m glad you’re both here, there is something I’ve been meaning to tell the two of you.”

“Me first,” Jasper said, pulling out a chair and gesturing to the waiter who hurried over. “Bottle of champers, we’ll take whatever Dom you have on the list. Quick as you can.”

“Spending my money profligately, I see,” their father said, raising an eyebrow.

“You’ll see why in a moment, Pa,” Jasper said mysteriously.

Jem eyed him. He looked uncharacteristically slightly flustered, though he had his usual arrogance and a familiar self-satisfied look. “What’s going on?”

The wine waiter was already pushing over the champagne bucket and they all sat in silence as the bottle was opened and poured.

“I have an announcement to make,” Jasper said, once they were alone again. He lifted his glass. “To family.”

Jem mouthed the words but didn’t actually say them.

“Out with it, boy,” said their father.

Jasper grinned. “Rosie’s pregnant.”

Jem could see the relief bathe her father’s face, could see that he had been carrying the entire weight of the family until just this moment.

“Well done,” he said gruffly.

“Congrats,” Jem said. Poor Rosie. Now she’d never escape Jasper.

“We’re not formally announcing it yet,” said Jasper. “But I thought you should know, Pa. Of course, it’s early to tell but I’ve got a feeling the sprog’ll be a boy.”

“Good, good,” said their father.

“And you had something you wanted to talk about?” Jem prompted him.

Their father shook his head. “Not now, let’s not distract from the main news of the day, shall we?” He raised his glass again. “Jasper, I’m proud of you.”

Why, Jem had no idea. Donating sperm to make a baby wasn’t exactly the most difficult part of the process, after all. It was poor Rosie that would be paying the price. Still, she drank and waited as her father and Jasper talked about the markets.

It wasn’t until dessert that she finally had a chance to speak again. Jasper had excused himself and her father was happily eating a sticky toffee pudding, his favorite.

“I’m sorry, Pa,” she said.

He raised an eyebrow at her.

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“I am,” she said. “I know I take what we have for granted, and I know that I haven’t been making the most of myself. I understand that you’re trying to teach me a lesson and I want you to know that I’ve taken it to heart.”

“Good,” said her father. He paused in his eating, looking at her with sharp eyes. “You’re not a fool, Jemima. And I won’t treat you like one. You’re an intelligent woman who knows her ownmind. You could be successful in whatever it is you choose to do. I’m not insisting on marrying you off or on leaving you the company. But I do want you to be able to stand on your own two feet, not an unreasonable request.”

“It’s not,” Jem said, feeling relief start to come over her. Not quite the relief her father felt at finally securing the bloodline, she was sure, but enough. She would start looking for something to do, she promised herself. Maybe in the new year when things were fresh.

There would be far too much to do in the next few months leading up to Christmas.

“And it’s also not an unreasonable request that you pay off your own debts,” her father was saying.

Jem’s ears pricked up. “No,” she said slowly.

“Which is why you will be coming into the office tomorrow at eight,” he continued. He leaned in slightly. “If you don’t appear, then consider your allowance suspended indefinitely.”

Jem's mouth fell open of its own accord. "But... but..." she spluttered.

"The matter is closed, Jemima. You have a lesson you need to learn and you will learn it. I expect to see you tomorrow." He looked up and smiled as his son returned. "Now, Jasper, I want your take on that meeting this afternoon. What did you think?"

The issue was closed.

She'd be going to work.

SHE LEFT HER father and her brother drinking disgusting port and being manly, escaping into the light drizzle of the evening and pulling out her phone to text as she went. She couldn't believe her father was actually going to make her follow through on this one.

Not only that, but he'd doubled down. Now it wasn't just a matter of getting her car repaired, it was a matter of keeping her generous allowance.

Out?She texted to a group chat. Then she sent the samemessage individually to Rolly and considered sending it to Annabelle.

Except maybe Rolly was right about Annabelle. Maybe she was starting to get suspicious and maybe she should stay firmly out of her way for a while, even forever. She couldn't risk Annabelle getting involved in her private life.

She hesitated and decided not to text her. She'd known Annabelle for a long time. She was rich and spoiled, but then Jem was self-aware enough to know that she was too. She could be annoying and was definitely interfering, but she was also loyal and amusing. However, Jem was willing to sacrifice her from her social circle if it meant keeping herself safe.

She climbed into the car that was waiting for her. “Just drive around the block a few times, I’m waiting for a text,” she told the driver, settling back into the soft leather seat.

Ten minutes later the only reply she had was from Rolly. Not tonight, darling, I’m actually cooking.

Huh. Rolly cooking. Whoever this man was that he was seeing was having a good influence, she supposed, if a boring one. Which left her at a loose end. She thought for a long minute before tapping on the window that separated her from the driver. She gave him an address and he took the next turning on the right.

THE PLACE WAS heaving, sweating bodies intertwined on the dance floor, a drunk couple daubed in glitter paint singing karaoke, the tables littered with empty glasses and the odd bottle.

It wasn’t even that late, Jem thought. She checked her phone. Alright, it was eleven, so not that early either, but still. It was a week night and she assumed most of these people had jobs to go to.

She supposed she had a job to go to.

She was annoyed at herself for that. She should have been able to talk herself out of the situation. If Jasper hadn’t been there then she probably would have. And now she was supposed to be showing up clean and pretty and painted nine hours from now. Still, she deserved a bit of fun first, didn’t she?

She could have gone to any of the bars on her own side of the river. She didn’t know what had driven her back to this one.

Her eyes strayed over the room, carefully scanning the crowd, knowing that the bar

was her best shot and deliberately leaving that until last.

After a full five minutes of looking, she shook herself and headed to the bar to order a drink.

“Double vodka,” she told the busy bartender.

He provided and she held out a twenty pound note. He grinned and she pulled it back a centimeter. “Seen a dark-haired woman?” she asked. “Messy, curly hair, dark eyes, looks like she just stepped out of an office. About this tall.” She gestured to her chin.

He eyed the money, then shook his head.

With a sigh, she handed over the twenty pounds, drinking the shot in one go. Anxiously, she searched the bar again with her eyes, but there was no sign of her.

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Honestly, coming all the way down here in the hopes of seeing a woman she'd met once for thirty seconds and who had turned her down.

What an idiot.

She gestured to the bartender for another drink.

Chapter Eight

Constable purred and rolled over, wanting his tummy tickled. Ellie obliged as she looked over the list on her laptop. It was good, but not perfect, and she needed perfect. With a sigh, she picked up her phone and called Mo.

Who didn't answer.

She growled and tried Carys. No answer there either.

Her laptop flickered up a message that her battery was low. Why was tonight the night when things decided to go wrong? She found the power lead, plugged it in and went into the kitchen to make tea.

Comfortably settled with a cup of tea and her laptop in her lap again, she went back to work. Color swatches were added to table decorating ideas, yet more menu options. She needed some kind of idea of what the location was going to be, but so far, Alistair Darlington had been close-mouthed on the situation.

A nice hotel would be her first choice. Something central. She googled and added a

few ideas to the list.

And then her laptop flashed up another power warning. Muttering under her breath, she wiggled the cable and went back to work.

The kind of hotel that Alistair Darlington would like and the kind of hotel that Ellie Baker was familiar with were two very different monsters. Actually, now that she thought of it, she'd only ever stayed in a hotel once, on a school trip to StratfordUpon Avon. Or had that been a hostel? Probably a hostel now she came to think of it.

Still, anything was better than the tiny broom cupboard of a bedroom that she'd shared with her sisters.

She didn't allow herself to think of her family often, so she blurred out her sisters' faces from her memory, like on Court TV. She could clearly see the bedroom though, the bunkbeds and the single bed crammed together into a sort of mattress fort, half obscuring the only window. The posters that she'd ripped out of magazines at the library to decorate the wall.

The entire flat hadn't been much bigger than the one she was in now, and there'd been four, sometimes five of them, depending on who her mother was taking up with at the time.

One of the things she treasured most about her life now was the quiet, the silence when she walked in the door.

Constable meowed for attention as though to remind her that she wasn't completely alone, not that she minded being alone. And then the computer flashed up a very serious sounding power warning.

"For God's sake," she muttered to herself, plugging and unplugging the power cable,

jiggling it around in the slot, and finally moving it to a different socket.

Her laptop started to make a death-rattle, a slowing sound that she knew meant it was about to shut down. And the power cable was doing precisely nothing.

She reached out to hit the save icon but was a fraction of a millisecond too late. She wailed in frustration as her laptop screen faded into blackness.

“God damn it!”

She took deep breaths, in and out, focusing on the feeling of oxygen flowing through her. Trying and failing to calm herself down. What if this was a sign? A jinx? What if the whole stupid party was going to be like this? Doomed from the very beginning?

And then she’d be a laughing stock. Her name would still be known, but it would be known as someone to avoid, her business would collapse, she’d have to fire Mo, she’d have to let the flat go. The sound of breath rushing into her lungs grew louder and faster.

Someone knocked at the door. But Ellie was too busy trying to catch her breath to answer it. They knocked again and Ellie’s vision started to fade like her computer screen, started to close in at the edges.

“El! Ellie! Breathe!”

Which was ridiculous advice because breathing was exactly what had gotten her into this situation in the first place.

“Count with me,” Paul said, his worried face pale. “We’re going in for four, hold for five, out for six. Come on, love, you’ve got this. In, two, three four. Hold, two, three, four, five. Out, two, three, four, five, six.”

She did as she was told because she had nothing else to do and if she was going to die of a heart attack right here on her own sofa then she supposed there were worse places to go. Paul was holding her hands, counting patiently, and she just kept doing what he told her to.

Until slowly, her vision came back, the darkness receded, her breathing slowed, and she was able to mumble that she needed water.

“Here,” said Paul, handing her a glass carefully then sitting on the couch beside her.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to apologize for.” He grinned at her. “Lucky you’ve got a paramedic living next door. And lucky that you made that weird screaming noise.”

“Yeah,” she said, sniffing. “Yeah, I suppose.”

He took her hand again and she realized that he was taking her pulse. “Has that happened before?”

“What? Having a heart attack on the couch? No, thankfully.”

“Not a heart attack,” he said. “A panic attack.”

Panic attack. She shook her head. “No, no it hasn’t.”

“Alrighty, then why don’t you tell me what was going on before it started?”

She breathed. “Nothing. I was working, just working, then my laptop died and I hadn’t saved what I was doing and...” Her breathing got faster again.

“Woah, woah, slow down there,” said Paul. “Deep, full breaths, fill your lungs up and then empty them slowly.”

“Right,” Ellie said.

“So, you’re working on something big, I suppose?”

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

“Alright, you keep taking those big breaths. It’s the laptop here that failed?”

She nodded again.

He picked it up, tested the power connection, pulled at the plug in the socket, then reached down and picked up the connection in the middle of the power cord. “This’ll be your problem.” He plugged the cord back into the box, waited a second, then wiggled his finger over the mouse pad. The screen came back to life.

Ellie’s heart beat a little more slowly when she saw that her document was still open. Quickly, she pressed save. Nothing had been lost.

“Panic attacks happen when we feel anxious,” said Paul now. “You feeling a bit off? Nervous like?”

“I’ve got to start planning a big event tomorrow,” Ellie told him. “I suppose I’m a bit nervous about that.” Which was understating things more than a little.

Constable headbutted Paul’s leg and he reached down to stroke the cat. “Are you prepared?”

Ellie nodded.

“And are you the best person to be planning this event?”

“I’m not sure if I’m the best, but I’m more than capable.”

“Then what is there to be worried about?” Paul asked with a smile.

“Oh, only losing my entire career and everything I’ve worked for and having to fire Mo and losing my flat and...” Her heart was thudding again.

“You’re spiraling,” said Paul. “It’s anxious thinking. You need to stop that spiral if you can, remove the negative thoughts, or tell yourself something to stop them. Like telling yourself you’re capable of doing this. If you don’t, this’ll happen again.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t make me not anxious,” Ellie said, taking deep breaths again. “I mean thinking of collapsing in front of everyone at Darlington’s doesn’t do much for my anxiety.”

“You can see someone. Get a prescription for anti-anxiety meds. But part of that will involve learning coping techniques like I’ve just shown you.” He paused. “This has only happened once though, so maybe we don’t need to take things that far yet.”

“No, no we don’t,” Ellie said, gratefully grasping at the straw he was offering. “I don’t have time for that. Anyway, I’m sure things will be fine after tomorrow. It’s just first day nerves is all.”

Paul sat back on her couch. “What makes this such a big deal anyway?” he asked. “You’ve planned loads of parties, you’re great at your job. Which is a wee bit surprising for someone whose idea of a good time is an early night with Inspector Morse.”

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“I’ll try not to be insulted by that,” Ellie said, sitting back now, the tightness in her chest getting looser. “I just... this is a different class of event. The big leagues. That’s all. I wanted the project, now I’ve got it, and... Well, kind of a lot is riding on it.”

“And you’re more than capable of doing this, as you’ve said yourself,” Paul said, smiling at her. “And if it all goes tits up, which, let’s face it, it might because there’s always that risk, then there’ll be other opportunities. No one’s going to die, no one’s going to get hurt, and if you bankrupt yourself, well, you can always sleep on my couch.”

Ellie snorted with laughter. “Cheers, appreciate the pep talk.”

“You’re welcome.” He put his hand on her knee. “You’re going to be alright, you know that, Ellie. Want me to sleep on the couch and keep an eye on things?”

“No, God no. I’ll be fine. I’m sure.” She grinned at him. “I can always scream if things go wrong, you’ll be here in a minute.”

“Yeah, not locking your door in London isn’t necessarily the best idea, you know that, right?”

“I’m lucky enough to have neighbors like you to keep an eye on me.” She swallowed. “Thank you.”

Paul shrugged and got up. “You’re a good friend and you’ve no idea how many single people die at home from choking. I make sure I listen out just in case you need a heimlich maneuver.”

“Thanks for that,” Ellie said, making a mental note not to make any loud noises in her flat. And to make sure she wore headphones when watching anything spicier than the news.

“You’ll be fine, El. Good luck tomorrow.”

She thanked him again and showed him out, not locking the door after a second’s thought.

It had scared her, being helpless like that. Scared her badly. But she wasn’t going to let that stop her. What kind of person would she be if she didn’t just keep going? She hadn’t fought so hard and worked so hard just to be scared into stopping.

Besides, she could do this.

Constable meowed and she picked him up. “Come on, you beast. Another half hour of work and then an early night. We need to be in good shape for the morning.”

He meowed again when she lowered him to the couch. But she couldn’t play with him right now. Tomorrow could be life-changing.

Chapter Nine

Jem crossed her legs and tried to look interested. Her head was pounding and in all honesty she wondered if she might still be slightly drunk. She’d seriously considered not showing up, or at least coming in late. But from the look on her father’s face, she’d made the right decision for once.

“Two months,” he was saying from behind his desk. “I’ll have it written up as a two month internship, that way you’ll be able to put it on your resume for future employment. And of course you’ll be paid.”

Jem opened her mouth to inquire as to how much that might be, but he waved a hand at her.

“You’ll receive your allowance on top of that, of course, and your salary here should be enough to cover repairs to the car.”

Again, she opened her mouth. She needed her car and waiting two months to even start getting it fixed seemed like a complete waste of time to her. But again, her father waved his hand patronizingly to shut her up.

“If you needed the car sooner than that then you should have been more careful with it.”

“I was,” Jem said, finally getting a word in edge-wise.

“Evidently not, since it seems to be broken.”

“But there was a cat and—”

“I don’t care about the details.” He leaned forward, the expensive leather of his chair creaking. “What I care about is what you prove in the next two months, Jem. I care that you show me something, something about yourself.”

She breathed out through her nose, keeping her patience. Obviously he was after her having some kind of Come to Jesus moment, a moment that was very unlikely to happen. Jem was fairly sure that Jesus wouldn’t like her, though he did have that water and wine thing going on which was a good party trick.

She felt like she’d been conned into this. She’d assumed her car would get fixed, that her father would pay for it, and that after a week or so he’d lose patience with her and she’d be back to her old ways.

Maybe he still would.

Two months though? That was an eternity. An eternity of doing what exactly? Running around and making coffee? Filing papers. She looked uncertainly around his office. There weren't any papers in sight.

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Well she definitely wasn't going to be trusted with anything financial, that was one thing she was pretty sure about.

The vodka from last night was catching up with her. She yawned. She really could go back to bed for a couple of hours.

"What exactly is it you'd like me to do?" she asked, figuring she might as well get on with things before she fell asleep in her father's office.

"Something that you should know a lot about already," her father said, standing up.

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"I'm Ellie," Ellie said, sticking out her hand.

The young man took it hesitantly. "Um, Toby."

"Great," Ellie grinned. "I love that tie, by the way. The color really brings out your eyes."

"It was a present from my mum," said Toby, blushing slightly. "To be honest, I'm more of a hoodie and jeans type, I still feel a bit itchy in a suit."

"Well, as long as we're working off site then I don't mind what you wear," said Ellie, beaming. "You should see some of the things my friend Mo wears to the office. They're way more into fashion than I am and it really brightens the place up a bit."

Toby was frowning. “Ooo-kay,” he said very, very slowly, like his brain was still trying to catch up with the conversation. “Um, if you’d like to follow me, we have a meeting room reserved for you.”

“We’re not a formal office at all,” Ellie chirped as she followed him down the corridor. “Hard work and dedication are expected, of course, but we do have fun. Just the other night we were all doing karaoke together.”

She said that to make him feel more comfortable even though she hadn’t technically participated in the karaoke herself. She’d been there though, and she thought that counted.

As they walked, she monitored herself. Her breathing was doing fine. She was nervous, but not weirdly nervous, just the normal first day jitters. All in all, she seemed to be doing alright. Perhaps last night had just been a glitch in the matrix.

There was nothing to be worried about here. She’d been chosen for a reason, she reminded herself. She could do this, they could all do this. And Toby seemed like a lovely chap, if slightly off the ball.

“Can I get you a coffee?” he asked when they reached a glass door. “Tea? Water? Something else?”

She chuckled. “I don’t expect you to bring me drinks, Toby.”

“Um... it’s sort of my job?” He was blushing again.

And Ellie suddenly began to see why perhaps Toby wasn’t quite as sharp as she’d thought he should be. “Sorry, sorry, I think there might be some misunderstanding here.”

“Misunderstanding?”

She cleared her throat. “It’s just that Mr. Darlington said... he said that you’d be my liaison with the company, you’d be helping me with the planning?”

Toby’s eyes widened a little then disappointment settled over his face. “That would be lovely,” he said. “But I think the boss has changed his mind.”

“God, I’m sorry, I was just assuming...”

“It’s fine,” Toby said, perking up his bright smile. “And your office sounds like a lovely place to work. If you’d just like to go inside I’m happy to bring you anything you like. A coffee maybe?”

“Yes, absolutely,” she said, letting herself be ushered into the meeting room. Her heart was beating a little faster now, her chest feeling a little tighter.

She took deep breaths, counting them in and out, calming herself.

“I’ll bring you that coffee then,” Toby said as she settled her work bag onto the table.

“Thanks,” she said, breathing a little more evenly now. Then she had a thought. “Oh, do you have any idea who Mr. Darlington has chosen as the liaison?”

Toby shrugged and smiled. “I’m sure whoever it is, their tie won’t be as great as mine.”

And Ellie was laughing as the door closed.

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“I’m not sure I quite understand,” Jem said, as she hurried after her father.

“What’s there to understand?” he grumbled. “The woman plans parties, you like parties, a little too much in my opinion, therefore this should be the one area of the business that you’re more than qualified to participate in.”

Choosing to ignore the fact that apparently her father thought she was an idiot, Jem plowed onward. “I just don’t quite...”

Her father turned around. “Do you want to talk yourself out of this job?”

Well, if he was offering. Her head was still fuzzy and she really could use the sleep. She bit her lip.

“Were you expecting to sit at a trading desk?”

“No,” Jem said quickly. “But, well, I am your daughter.”

“So?”

“So, Jasper got his own office and assistant.”

“Jasper has a degree in finance and business,” her father snapped. “Fully qualifying him for his position. He also comes into work every morning. Unlike some people.”

Ouch. But fair, she supposed. Jem sighed. “Fine, fine.”

“But if you’d prefer to do some filing or data entry, I’m sure that could be arranged?”

“No, no, you’re probably right, this is probably the perfect role for me to fulfill,” Jem said, altering her smile to make it a tad wider.

“Good,” her father said, turning back and striding down the corridor.

Planning parties didn’t sound so bad, Jem thought as they walked. Mind you, she’d have far preferred to be working for one of the big companies, rather than whoever this little upstart was that her father had brought on.

She’d actually never considered event planning as a career. Well, she’d never really considered anything as a career. She hadn’t had to. Her life was full enough, what with manicures and waxing and lunches and shows and everything else, she wasn’t exactly bored.

And she definitely wasn’t looking for anything full time.

“Two months,” her father said. “That’s the arrangement.”

“Yes, daddy.”

Two months was an awfully long time. Still, she was fairly sure that this was going to turn out like the time her boarding school had decided that all students should do their own laundry. A week later, many, many, many shrunken and stained clothes later, not to mention a lot of parental complaints, and the rule had been reversed.

All she needed to do was screw up badly enough that the party woman refused to work with her and her father would give her a good scolding and send her on her

way. That sounded like a solid enough plan.

“Here we are then,” said her father, stopping outside of a glass door. “This is Ellie Baker, she’s got some incredible ideas, all you need to do is liaison between her and me and help her realize her potential. It should be easy enough, even for you.”

He swung the door open, a smile on his face now. “Ms. Baker, so nice to see you again. Allow me to introduce your liaison, my daughter Jemima.”

Jem stepped in front of him and then stopped. They’d spoken for no more than a few seconds, but the face was hauntingly familiar, those dark eyes, that curly hair. Jem wondered if she was going to pass out.

She was very used to being the only person in the room that knew her secret, the only person in most buildings that knew her secret. And it was only while her body was busy celebrating the fact that she’d finally found the woman from the club that her head realized that she was now in a very dangerous situation indeed.

Because now there were two people in the building that knew her secret. And at any moment that two could become three. She didn’t dare open her mouth, begging with her eyes for Ellie to say nothing to her father.

But Ellie smiled big and then opened her mouth to speak.

Chapter Ten

Her insides felt like jelly and for a second Ellie wondered if this was some kind of joke. Or maybe the woman was a stalker. A pretty dedicated one, to be sure, but the coincidence of it all just seemed a little too much.

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Except she was a Darlington daughter. Even the most accomplished stalker couldn't have arranged that, right?

And Alistair Darlington was looking at her, his eyes starting to cloud with doubt and Ellie knew she had to do something, so she did the only thing she could think of.

"Jemima, is it?" she said brightly, holding out her hand. "Lovely to meet you."

"Call me Jem," said Jemima, just as brightly, shaking her hand with cool fingers.

Ellie shuddered a little at the touch and wasn't sure why.

"Well, I'll leave the two of you to get acquainted," Alistair said. "You should have all you need, Jemima will report back to me, and if there's anything you don't have just ask Toby." He turned and for a second Ellie considered asking him not to go, asking not to be left with her potential stalker.

But how was that conversation supposed to go?

Just a coincidence, that was all it was, she told herself. And Jem had shown no signs of recognition. Mind you, she might have been expecting this meeting. Maybe she wasn't a stalker, maybe this was some kind of industrial espionage or something, maybe she'd already known that Ellie was about to work here.

Ellie felt her chest growing tighter, felt her grip sliding. She took a deep breath. No, this was nothing other than fate. She was just going to pretend that nothing had happened, that was by far the simplest solution.

She managed a smile. “So, Jem, do you have any experience with event planning?”

“Event planning?” Jem said flicking through the brochure that Ellie had left on the table. “No. Events? Obviously.”

Her accent was cut glass and Ellie figured that of course it would be. She was rich, after all. Rich and spoiled by the looks of it. Which sort of made sense. Everything clicked into place. Darlington needed a role for his daughter, a daughter who by the looks of things wasn’t exactly the academic or financial type, so he’d fobbed her off onto the event planner.

She sighed.

“What?” Jem asked, looking up sharply, those deep china blue eyes narrowing.

“Nothing,” said Ellie, sticking with her plan to pretend that they didn’t know each other at all. That seemed safest. After all, Jem hadn’t brought up their unfortunate meeting either, had she?

In fact, now that she thought of it, Jem seemed sort of... nervous perhaps?

None of this sat right.

Ellie cleared her throat. “Alright, well, that shouldn’t be a problem. I’m sure you’re well acquainted with what needs to be done.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Jem asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“Just that... well, I suppose you’ve been to a lot of the places we’re considering as venues and you know most of the guests, that sort of thing,” Ellie said. She really hadn’t meant to insult her. But Jem was looking disgruntled and like she didn’t want

to be here at all.

“Right.” She flicked through the pages of the brochure again. “This your work?”

Ellie nodded.

Jem sniffed but didn’t comment. “So what happens now then?”

For a long minute, Ellie wondered if that was a challenge. If she was supposed to rise to it, say something. Maybe Jem thought circumstances had changed. Maybe she thought that because she was the boss’s daughter that Ellie would fall at her feet.

She was still flicking idly through the brochure though. That horrible chest tightening started to happen again and Ellie had to remind herself to breathe. What she really needed was to get out of here. She thought fast.

“Okay, well, if you’ll give me your email, I’d like to send you a few things.”

“Like what?” Jem asked, looking at her again.

Ellie shifted. Those blue eyes really were quite piercing. “Like décor ideas, a provisional entertainer list, things that you can look through at your leisure today to ensure that we’re on the same page about things.”

Her eyes widened a little, a curve of a smile appeared. “At my leisure? You mean you’re cutting me free?”

“I, uh, I mean, I suppose...”

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“No, no, that’s fine,” Jem said hurriedly, tossing her long dark hair over her shoulder. She pulled a card out of her jacket pocket. “My email is there,” she said. And she turned to leave.

She seemed suspiciously eager to get out of the room, something that settled Ellie’s nerves a little. Jem didn’t want this any more than she did. But that didn’t mean there wasn’t a job to do. “Hold on there.”

“What?” Jem turned back.

“Tomorrow.”

“What about it?”

Ellie sighed. “We need to decide on a venue ASAP. You know the Walthambridge Hotel?”

Jem sighed, louder and more dramatically. “Obviously.”

Ellie forced herself to smile. “Excellent. We have a meeting there at ten. I’ll meet you in the front lobby.”

Jem stared at her for a minute and then nodded. “Fine.”

After she left Ellie was startled by just how empty the room seemed without her in it. Like Jem had filled the whole space. She could still smell the flowery scent of her perfume. For a long minute she just stood there, heart beating faster, breath coming

harder, before she reminded herself to breathe long and deep.

She needed to get the hell out of here.

WHEN SHE PUSHED through the office door, arms full of idea books and brochures, she found Carys, her feet up on Mo's desk, reading a magazine. There was no sign of her glamorous assistant.

"Woah, wasn't expecting you back so soon," Carys said, lowering her magazine.

"Don't you have an office of your own to go to?" Ellie asked as usual, dumping her armful of stuff onto her desk. "And where's Mo?"

"Mo's gone to pick up lunch and yes, I do have my own office, but it's not as nice as yours."

"It's next door and identical to mine," said Ellie.

"But it doesn't have you or Mo in it," grinned Carys. Then her smile faded. "What is it? You look like you've seen some kind of ghost or something."

"Tough morning is all," said Ellie, not at all sure she wanted to talk about it.

"Go on, tell your Auntie Carys all about it. You look a bit shaky there." Carys swung her feet back onto the floor. "Let me get you a cuppa."

She went off into the little kitchen space and Ellie took a breath. She did want to talk to someone about this, she decided. It was just a little too strange, a little too awkward, she needed someone else's input.

"Here you go," Carys said when she came back, putting a cup of tea down on Ellie's

desk. “So, out with it, bach, tell me all your worries.”

Ellie scratched her nose and then picked up her tea. “You remember the other night when we went out?”

“Who’s been talking out of school?” Carys said. “I didn’t drink that much, I remember every second, thank you very much.”

Ellie let herself grin. “Not what I meant, but thanks for clarifying. No, while we were at the bar, or while I was at the bar, a woman, um, came up to me.”

“You mean that lovely, lithe thing that looked like she belonged on the cover of Vogue, yeah, I remember.”

Ellie wasn’t at all sure about that description, but she nodded anyway. “Well, um, as it turns out, she’s Darlington’s daughter.”

“See, money always looks like money. You could tell she was posh from a mile off,” Carys said, then she stopped. “Wait, she’s his daughter?”

“Not only,” Ellie said. “She’s also now my liaison for the whole project. As in we’re supposed to be working together.”

Carys’s round face lit up. “You know what this is, don’t you?”

“A pain in my arse and a disaster waiting to happen?”

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“No, it’s fate. Your eyes met across a crowded room and you thought you’d never see each other again, yet the fates intervened, and now you have your second chance.”

“You’re a romantic idiot,” Ellie said.

“Bet you a tenner I’m right,” said Carys. She frowned. “Why’d you turn her down again? She’s attractive enough if I remember correctly.”

“She’s... attractive,” said Ellie, being scrupulously fair. “She also wanted a one night stand. Probably. Remember?”

“Ah,” said Carys with a sniff. “Well then, I suppose she might not be all class.”

“There’s nothing wrong with casual sex,” Ellie said, not understanding why she was jumping to Jem’s defense. “It’s just not my scene is all.”

“Fine, fine,” Carys said, holding up both hands in surrender. “So what does she have to say about all of this?”

“That’s where things get... complicated.” Ellie explained the stilted, odd meeting she’d just had, Carys shaking her head as she listened.

“So you both pretended like nothing had happened?”

“Well, Jem didn’t bring it up,” Ellie said.

“Jem now is it?” Carys said, eyes sparkling. “Well, I suppose there’s no accounting

for who we're attracted to, is there?"

"I'm not attracted to her!"

Carys nodded, pursing her lips a little. "Fine, well then, it shouldn't be a problem to work together, should it?"

"I suppose not," said Ellie doubtfully.

"And as long as you're both pretending that you've never met before, well, I suppose there's no harm in it, is there?" She paused and looked thoughtfully at Ellie. "As long as you can forget that she was attracted enough to you to hit on you at a bar."

"Not helpful, Car."

"Fine, fine, the two of you plead ignorance then. I'll still have my tenner on this being the hand of fate."

"It's business," Ellie said, determining that she had made the right choice. She'd just pretend she'd never seen Jem before and the whole embarrassing incident would be behind them. They did have to work together, after all.

Chapter Eleven

Jem's legs were shaking so much that when she walked away she thought she might topple off her heels. And wouldn't that just be perfect? Not only had she had to endure the humiliation of that woman turning her down at the club, but now she was supposed to work for her too?

Try as she might though, she couldn't turn her fear into anger. The second she was out of the building she texted Rolly. Just one word. Emergency.

An hour later, they were sitting in high backed armchairs at Rolly's club and Jem was sipping at a therapeutic whiskey.

"Bit early," Rolly said.

"Fully necessary," said Jem. She took another warming sip before telling him exactly what had just happened.

By the time she was done, he was open-mouthed. As in literally agape. "Sweet Jesus."

"Don't bring him into it, there's enough players in this little game as it is," Jem said grimly. "So the real question is, what do I do now?"

"Nothing drastic," Rolly said quickly. She eyed him. "I know you, Jem. No sending her death threats or showing up on her doorstep or anything."

"I wasn't even thinking of it," said Jem, who had very much been thinking exactly along those lines.

"Great, you do that and all she has to do is ring your father, then the cat's really out of the bag, isn't it?"

Jem rolled her eyes and took another drink, but it was a fair point. "Alright then, what do you suggest?"

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Rolly shrugged. “You said she didn’t acknowledge that you’d met at all, right?”

“Not even a glimmer of recognition.”

“Well, we were at a club. Perhaps she was drunk, or she’d taken something. Maybe she really doesn’t remember you.”

Jem bit her lip. “Maybe,” she said. “I wish I could be sure.”

“I don’t think you’re going to get certainty,” Rolly said. “But given that she didn’t react or say anything, I’d say there’s a fair chance that she won’t. I mean, maybe she does recognize you but she has her own reasons for not saying anything. You’re not the only one keeping secrets, Miss Puddleduck.”

Jem groaned at the nickname, a childhood holdover based on a character in a book. “I don’t think I’m willing to stake my future on her being able to keep her mouth shut.”

“Then find another job. Get your father off your back, or plead for a different role in the company.”

She tapped her fingers on the arm of her chair. Truth be told, she was growing used to the idea of working on the party. Maybe even liking it. If she had to do something, planning an event was probably the best option. There was no denying that her father really did know her well.

“Or I could keep the job and get her fired,” she said finally.

“Yes... you do realize that sounds hugely unethical and not at all kind?”

She puffed out a breath. “I’d compensate her fairly, once my allowance deposits. And then we wouldn’t be working together and maybe she’d—” She stopped herself talking.

“Maybe she’d what?” Rolly said, looking amused. “Give you a second chance?” He leaned forward and helped himself to the whiskey decanter. “So what’s the real problem here, Jem? That you’re afraid she’s going to force you out of your closet in front of Pa? Or that you’re angry that she turned you down? Or that you actually just want to get into her knickers?”

“Don’t use phrases like that,” Jem said, but only because she didn’t know how to answer the question. If she had to be honest, her answer would probably encompass all three options.

Rolly sighed. “Do what you have to do, that’s what you’re going to do anyway,” he said.

“She can’t work at my father’s company, not like this, it’s too...” Jem trailed off, then she closed her eyes. “It’s too scary.”

“Do you have a plan for getting her fired?”

“I’ll think of something,” Jem said, eyes still closed. And she would. She hated herself for this, hated that she was even thinking about doing something like this. She wasn’t a bad person, really she wasn’t. But she had to protect herself, wasn’t that like nature or something? Call it an instinct. She couldn’t run the risk of Ellie Baker opening her mouth in front of her father again.

JEM HAD BEEN inside the Walthambridge Hotel so many times that she didn’t even

bother to look around the expensively appointed foyer. She marched straight up to the reception desk. “Ellie Baker,” she barked.

“Um, I’m here?”

She turned to see Ellie clad in a dark suit and white shirt cut just low enough that Jem could imagine what was underneath it. She almost growled. The thing with Ellie was that she just didn’t know she was attractive, which made her all the more attractive.

“Let’s get started then,” said Jem. “Where’s the manager?”

“We’re meeting with their events co-ordinator,” Ellie said, walking off and leaving Jem no choice but to follow her.

Jem steeled herself for this. Despite appearances, bad behavior wasn’t actually in her nature. She’d been to finishing school, for heaven’s sake. But this was the only thing she could think of to get the results she wanted.

She’d get them thrown out of the hotel, and given that the owner was a friend of her father’s, she was sure it wouldn’t take long for the news to get back to him. She’d blame Ellie for whatever happened, her father would believe her, and then he’d hire a new company. Easy.

Well, easy as long as she could persuade herself to be awful. She sort of wished she’d brought a little nip of something along with her in her purse.

“This is currently the top runner,” Ellie was saying as they were shown to the co-ordinator’s office. “It’s convenient, well within budget, and would make a beautiful setting for what we have planned. I assume you’ve read the emails that I sent you.”

Jem, who had spent an hour last night going through what she’d been sent, nodded.

“It wasn’t bad,” she said with a sniff.

Ellie stopped, turning, her eyes flashing. “Not bad?” she demanded.

“Well... slightly provincial at times,” said Jem, craning her head to see if the coordinator’s office was nearby. “But acceptable with a few changes.”

“Like what?”

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“Like if my father sees a juggler or a clown he’s likely to push them into the nearest water feature,” Jem said.

Ellie snorted. “Did I specify jugglers and clowns?”

“No,” Jem said, starting to feel slightly defensive. “But you did say entertainers.”

“Of which there are many kinds.”

“Like what?”

Ellie breathed in and Jem got a whiff of her perfume. “Like acrobats, for example.”

“Ah,” said Jem. “Great. The circus is coming to town.”

Ellie looked about ready to slap her, but the porter who had been showing them to the co-ordinator’s office finally turned back and cleared his throat. “Ladies?”

Jem grinned. “Coming right along.” She heard Ellie growl behind her back.

“AND WE WOULD expect the wallpaper to be replaced, obviously,” Jem said.

The events co-ordinator coughed slightly. “I think you’ll find that that’s original William Morris,” he said faintly.

Jem, who had known that, smiled. “Nevertheless...”

“What are you doing?” Ellie hissed as the co-ordinator led them out of the dining room.

“Pa hates green,” Jem said airily.

They followed the co-ordinator into a pleasantly lit smaller room. “And this is our secondary dining room,” he said.

“Oh no,” said Jem. “Far too dingy.” She peered around. “And where would we put the stage?”

“The stage?” asked the man.

“We’re thinking a full band,” Jem said. “Maybe two. That way we’ll have live music all night, well, until two or three, I expect most people will have left by then.”

“Two or three?” said the man, sounding faint again.

Jem marched out into the corridor, the co-ordinator and Ellie now following her as she went back into the foyer. “We’d need a full cleaning team in,” she was saying as she walked.

“The Walthambridge is perfectly clean,” the co-ordinator said indignantly.

“Jem,” hissed Ellie again. But Jem ignored her.

“And we’ll need to discuss use of your kitchens.”

“Kitchens?” said the co-ordinator.

Jem stopped at the reception desk. “Oh, and we’ll need you to prevent the public

from entering through the main doors here, we'll need the foyer as a grand opening to the party."

"Close the hotel's main doors?" The co-ordinator had turned a funny shade of pale green. He coughed again. "Um, when exactly is this event?"

Ellie scowled at Jem who ignored her. "These are the dates," she said, passing an itinerary to the co-ordinator.

His face cleared and he even smiled a little. "I am terribly sorry, but the Walthambridge will be unable to accommodate you on those dates." He gave a brief nod to them both. "Ladies." And he walked away.

Jem, who had been holding her breath, let it go. Mission accomplished. If this had been the perfect location, she'd blown it, something that was bound to get Ellie into trouble. On the off chance that her father didn't fire Ellie for blowing the best event location, well, maybe Ellie would be irritated enough with Jem herself that she'd just quit.

"What the hell was all that about?"

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Jem turned to Ellie with a sweet smile. “What?” she asked. Ellie’s cheeks were pink and for a second, Jem forgot what she was trying to do and wondered if she should ask the woman back to her place.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Ellie said, voice low and angry.

“Making sure we get what we need,” said Jem lightly.

“I suggest you remember who you’re working for,” Ellie said. “I’m the leader of this project.”

Jem smiled again, equally sweetly. “And I suggest that you remember who you’re working for,” she said. “I’m the boss’s daughter, remember?”

She took one long second to look Ellie up and down and then turned on her heel and stalked out of the hotel.

Chapter Twelve

Ellie walked back to the office, the rhythm of her shoes on the ground keeping her breathing. She tried so hard not to think, not to consider what had just happened. Every time a stray thought snuck in she counted her footsteps, anything to stop her losing herself on the street.

But as soon as she opened the office door she gave in to the inevitable. The band around her chest started to squeeze, the air didn’t seem to fill her lungs enough. She collapsed into her chair. What had she gotten herself into?

Jem was a saboteur, she'd deliberately ruined what could have been the perfect location for the party. And why? For no reason at all that Ellie could fathom. Her breath caught in her throat, her head started to swim. Somewhere on the edges of her consciousness she could hear voices by the door and she just hoped that it was Mo and Carys.

"Jesus," Carys said.

"Get a glass of water," said Mo. They crouched down in front of Ellie and took both her hands in their own. "Breathe with me, El."

"Here," Carys said, putting water on the desk. "Should I call the ambulance?"

"Not yet," Mo said. They were counting softly to Ellie, controlling her breathing.

Ellie could hear them, could see them, but couldn't respond, not yet. She was too busy trying not to die.

"Okay, okay," said Mo. "We've got this. Slowly, deeply, keep counting, you're fine." They picked up the glass of water and tilted it to her lips. "Just a sip. There we go."

"It's alright," said Ellie, the panicking subsiding. "It's okay. I've got it." She took the water from them with shaky hands. "I've got it."

"Where d'you learn to do something like that?" Carys said, looking at Mo with wide eyes.

They shrugged. "Had a boyfriend once who had panic attacks. It's not the end of the world." They looked at Ellie. "I didn't know you had them though. Have you got meds somewhere?"

Ellie shook her head.

“Hmm. Want me to fill your prescription?”

“I haven’t got one,” Ellie said, struggling to sit more upright. “I, uh, this is sort of a new thing.”

Mo perched on one corner of her desk and Carys on the other. “What happened?” asked Carys.

Ellie groaned. “I don’t know if I can talk about it.”

“You should,” Mo said with authority. “Naming the beast makes it less scary.”

“It’s Jem.”

“Jem?” Mo asked.

“Jemima Darlington,” sighed Ellie. And she told them about her morning.

“Jesus,” Carys said when she was done. “What are we supposed to do about that?” Ellie noticed the use of we and it made her smile a little.

“We should fire her,” Mo said firmly.

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“She’s the boss’s daughter, I don’t think firing her is on the table,” Ellie said.

“She’s too dangerous to keep around,” said Carys.

“She could ruin everything,” said Ellie quietly. “That’s why... Why I panicked. I just thought about all the damage she could do if she wanted to and... And then there wasn’t enough air in the room.”

Mo went to the kitchen and Ellie could hear them boiling the kettle.

“What do you want to do about it?” Carys asked.

“I honestly don’t know,” said Ellie. “Maybe I should withdraw from the contract altogether. I mean, it’s better not to have the job than to have it and do it badly, right? Our reputation would never recover.”

Carys shook her head. “That seems unfair.”

“It is unfair,” Mo said, bringing in three teas. “Yours has extra sugar,” they told Ellie. “It’s unfair and unnecessary.”

“Look at the woman, for god’s sake, Mo, won’t you?” Carys barked. “She’s spent a morning with this haridan and she’s already panicking.”

“You two need to let light into your lives,” Mo said primly, taking their tea.

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Carys demanded.

“It’s supposed to mean that we don’t always assume the worst,” said Mo, putting their hot mug down again. “It’s easy to assume that everyone has bad intentions, when in fact most people just have their own intentions, without meaning for them to be either good or bad.”

“You’re giving me a migraine,” Carys warned.

“Listen, this Jem woman isn’t an evil witch from a fairy tale.”

For a second Ellie had a vision of Jem with her hair wild and her eyes flashing and she felt a strange surge of warmth.

“She has her own agenda, that’s for sure, but you have to give her the benefit of the doubt. Maybe she didn’t think things through,” Mo said. “You’ve got to at least find out what her intentions are before you start going nuclear on her.”

Carys bared her teeth at Mo and Mo rolled their eyes.

“Fine,” they said. “You need to sit down and have a chat with Jem, that’s all. Find out what she was doing, what she’s thinking, and explain your point of view to her. If she’s still a problem after that, well, we can move on to more serious options, but right now, frankly, she just sounds like a spoiled little kid.”

“She’s spoiled alright,” Ellie said. “Her shoes cost more than my rent.” Then she blushed, aware that she sounded jealous.

But Carys snorted. “I know the type. Poor little rich girl, eh? Mo’s probably right, she’s probably just acting out. Talk to her.”

The last thing that Ellie wanted was to see Jem again. An hour in her company and she’d already felt like dying. “You don’t think, um, that she’s acting this way

because... well, you know...?"

"Because she hit on you and you turned her down?" Mo said.

Ellie looked at Carys who shrugged. "I told them she was the one from the club."

"Great. Now everyone knows."

"Everyone important, at least," Mo said cheerfully. "And maybe. I mean, no one likes being told no, do they? So maybe that's something you should bring up with her. That you need to be professional and all that jazz."

Ellie groaned again. "Why can't this just be simple? Why can't life ever be easy?"

"Because it's a bitch," Carys said, laughing. "And you need to come up with a new location, remember? Better that you report in to Mr. Darlington about the hotel than that Jem gets in there first."

"Oh god." Ellie laid her head on the table.

"Nope, up and at them," said Mo. "Get your big girl trousers on, or skirt if you prefer. Make the call."

"You'll probably only talk to his assistant anyway," Carys said.

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Ellie took a drink from her heavily sugared tea and then took a deep breath. “Fine,” she said, and picked up the phone.

Toby answered and Ellie felt a flood of relief.

“Hello, this is Ellie Baker? From the event planning company?”

“How could I forget someone who compliments my tie,” said Toby cheerfully. “What can I help you with? Do you need to talk to the big boss?”

Ellie considered this for a second, then dismissed the idea. She couldn’t bother the man with every tiny detail. “No, I just wanted to give you a quick update and you can pass it along.” Another deep breath. “Unfortunately, the Walthambridge Hotel doesn’t have any availability for our dates, and we did find them a little... straight-edged for our tastes. But I don’t want anyone to panic.”

She did enough panicking for everyone at this point, Ellie thought grimly.

“We have plenty of other options and we’ll be settled on a venue within the next couple of weeks. Mr. Darlington will get final approval, of course.”

“Right,” Toby said, sounding as though this was all perfectly normal. “I’ll pass that along then. Thanks, Ellie.”

Ellie thanked him and put down the phone.

“There, see, not so bad,” Carys said, putting a hand on her shoulder.

“Good job,” said Mo.

“When did I luck out getting people like you in my life,” said Ellie, already starting to feel better.

“Well, I’m getting paid for the privilege,” Mo said with a grin. “And Car gets the referrals, so I’m thinking we’re not exactly uninterested parties in this.”

Carys squeezed her arm. “Good people attract good people, and you’re a good person.”

“I attracted Jem,” said Ellie without thinking.

Carys pulled a face. “You’re going to have to talk to her, Mo’s right.”

“Since when have you agreed with Mo about anything?” Ellie asked.

She sighed and covered her face with her hands. They were right, it wasn’t like she could just walk away from the situation. And technically, she was Jem’s boss, at least to some degree. But the thought of just how much damage the woman could do if she wanted to frightened her.

She’d spent years building up this company, working side jobs until she could afford to party plan full time. And Jem could destroy it all in seconds if she felt like it.

“We’re right,” Mo said gently. “You need to talk to her.”

“Fine,” said Ellie, and she picked up her phone to text.

THE AFTERNOON WAS sunny but cool and Ellie hurried a little to keep warm, even though she didn’t want to get to the cafe any earlier than she really had to. So

she stopped short when she reached the place.

Through the large plate glass window she could see that Jem was already there. She was sitting at a table, legs crossed, browsing through her phone with her perfect hair and her perfect clothes and her perfect everything.

Ellie felt a grip of something in her stomach. Maybe the honest truth was that she was jealous of Jem, of how easy she'd had things, of all that she had. But there was a little piece of her that felt like this was all a set-up in some way.

After all, why would someone like Jem be interested in someone like her? She'd come up to the bar on some kind of bet or something like that, Ellie didn't know, and she didn't really want to find out. But equally, she didn't like being toyed with, and that was the impression that she got from Jem. She was like a cat with a mouse, playing, teasing, without realizing quite how serious the consequences were for the mouse involved.

Jem turned slightly until the sun caught in her hair and Ellie's pulse quickened a little. She was attractive though, there was no denying that.

With a sigh, Ellie pulled herself together. This conversation was not likely to be a pleasant one. She rolled her shoulders and then walked into the cafe.

Chapter Thirteen

The problem was, Jem thought, as she sat and waited, that she wasn't at all sure where she stood with Ellie.

In general, the world was divided into a very big group of people that she was above, and a very small group of people that she was below. And she knew how to behave appropriately with each of those groups. Ellie seemed to float back and forth between

them until Jem didn't really know what she was supposed to do.

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Oh, and then there was the whole secret business. That didn't help either. But over the last couple of days, she'd let her anxiety on that count subside slightly. Ellie hadn't said a word and Jem was starting to be convinced that in actuality, she either didn't remember the evening, or she didn't remember Jem. Which wasn't exactly flattering.

This little meeting though, Jem was unsure which way it was about to go. She'd behaved abominably, of course, although she also truly believed that the hotel wasn't the right place for the party. She'd sort of expected Ellie to quit or perhaps for her father to fire her.

Yet here she was, a couple of hours later, summoned to a meeting and feeling, well, rather nervous if truth be told. She wasn't used to behaving that badly, though if it got her the results she wanted, she'd be fine with that.

"You're early," Ellie said, pulling out a seat.

Her hair was all messy waves, the way that Jem was sure it would look on a pillow the morning after a good night. "I was in the area," she said breezily. "How can I help you?"

"I think you've done more than enough, don't you?" snapped Ellie.

"What on earth do you mean?" Jem imbued the words with just the right amount of innocence.

"Are you really that naive? That stupid?"

The word stupid took Jem by surprise and spiked her anger, but the waitress appeared and she tamped it down to make her order politely.

“I’m not stupid,” she said, once the waitress was gone.

“Really?” Ellie asked. “You could have fooled me. You deliberately sabotaged the Walthambridge venue and you thought that I wouldn’t notice?”

Jem slammed her mouth shut. Best not to admit to anything.

“You’re a spoiled little girl, do you know that?”

But she couldn’t keep her mouth shut for that long. “I absolutely am not.”

“You’re not?” Ellie snapped. “Because anyone normal would see that this is my life.”

Jem frowned. “It was a stupid hotel.”

“No, this company is my life,” Ellie said. “I’ve built it up alone, without help from my family, without outside investment. I’ve poured my heart and soul into this and there’s no safety net. What do you think will happen if I get fired from this event? Or if the event ends up being a disaster?”

Jem blew out a breath. “You’ll get another job, I suppose.”

“Because jobs are things you just walk into,” said Ellie. Her cheeks were pink and she was angry, the heat coming off her almost palpable.

“I... suppose?”

“See, that’s the problem. You live in this little bubble of richness and have no idea

about the real world. I lose this contract, I do badly, my company will get a bad reputation, I won't be able to pay my employees, I'll have to declare bankruptcy, I won't be able to afford my rent..." She ran out of steam just as the waitress brought their coffees.

"You have employees?" Jem asked curiously.

"One," admitted Ellie grudgingly.

Jem scratched her nose. "You have a point."

"I do?" Ellie said, looking surprised.

Jem nodded. "Yes, you do. I behaved badly and was fully intending for you to get fired or quit or anger my father, but I didn't consider the long term consequences and I'm sorry. I genuinely apologize."

Ellie stared at her, mouth half open. "Huh?" she said finally.

"Huh what?" asked Jem, stirring some sugar into her coffee. "You're right, I was wrong, I apologized. Isn't that how things work?"

"Um... I suppose?" said Ellie, seeming confused. "I, uh, I expected more of an argument, I suppose. I..."

Jem shrugged. "I'm not evil. I understand the difference between right and wrong. You are right, I was wrong. I'm sorry. But that doesn't change the facts of the matter, does it?"

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She'd been brought up to apologize, to admit fault, something her father had always insisted on. It was far better to admit something had gone wrong than it was to be found out covering something up. And Jem was adult enough to see that she really hadn't thought about the consequences of what she was doing in terms of Ellie rather than herself.

She'd made a bad decision, it was that simple.

"What are the actual facts of the matter?" Ellie asked, wrapping her hands around her mug. "I mean, I'm fairly sure that you're not exactly a permanent employee or anything."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Jem said, stung. She thought she'd done rather a good job of dressing the part that morning.

"It means that it's pretty obvious that your father has put you on this project for a reason. What is it?"

Jem thought about this for a second and then thought that there was no reason to lie. "I crashed my car, it needs to be fixed, this is how my father thought I should work off the debt."

Ellie sat back in her chair, her eyes narrowing. "But that doesn't explain why you're trying to get me fired. I mean, unless you're childish enough to just want to act out to spite your father. To be honest, it seems like he's doing the right thing, making you take some responsibility and all."

“Yeah, good parenting isn’t exactly his thing,” Jem said.

Ellie ignored this. “So, what is it then? Why do you need me off the job?”

Jem bit her lip. She didn’t exactly know what to say to this.

But Ellie did.

“Is it because you hit on me and I turned you down?”

Instinctively, Jem looked over both her shoulders to see if anyone had heard. Then she let out a full breath.

Ellie leaned in again. “I didn’t bring it up because it’s unprofessional. I don’t know what you’re thinking about all this, but I’m assuming that it was just as much of a surprise to see me when you walked into that meeting room as it was for me to see you.”

Jem’s mouth was dry, her heart was hammering in her chest. She did remember, she did recognize her. She should have known that she couldn’t be that lucky. Except maybe she was because it didn’t sound like Ellie was planning on telling anyone. “Unprofessional?” she croaked.

“Yes, you might not have a lot of work experience, but even you should be able to see that whatever did or didn’t happen between you and I in a club one evening has nothing to do with the actual job at hand.”

Another deep breath. “So that means... that means that you just want to forget it? Pretend it never happened?” It was her turn to lean in closer. “To never tell anyone?”

Ellie shrugged. “That seems like the adult thing to do.”

Yes, she was lucky, that was the only answer. She was going to get away with this. A sudden feeling of relief and gratitude overcame her. Right at that moment she was willing to do whatever it took to repay Ellie.

???

There was something there, a spark of something in Jem's eyes, those lovely china blue eyes, that Ellie didn't recognize at first. It was only when she heard the relief in Jem's voice that she finally put the pieces together.

"You're not out, are you?" She spoke without thinking properly.

"I... I don't know what you mean," said Jem.

Ellie took a breath. It explained things, she supposed, explained why the woman would be defensive, trying to protect herself. It was also none of Ellie's business. She never should have said anything. Now that she had though, she couldn't leave it hanging like that.

Jem's hand was on the table and Ellie moved her fingers closer, feeling the weight of Jem's secret, knowing that she must have been scared thinking that her life was about to be overturned.

"I... I won't tell anyone," she said, letting her fingers touch Jem's. "I would never do that. Your secret is safe with me."

For a long second, Jem looked at her and Ellie thought that she might feel something. There was a warmth there, a tiny spark of something that might have been or could be, she wasn't sure which. Then Jem nodded, just once.

"I'll call the Walthambridge tomorrow and apologize," she said, withdrawing her

hand. “My father knows the owner so it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“No,” Ellie said. “No, I think you were right. That isn’t the venue for us. We’re looking for something more... unique perhaps.”

Jem grinned. “That’s something that I could work with.”

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“So you actually do want to help then?”

“Listen, you don’t want to get fired but neither do I,” Jem said. “I need my car fixed.”

“And showing your father that you’re not quite the hopelesscase he thinks you are wouldn’t hurt either,” Ellie said, sure that she’d read the situation right.

“Fair point,” said Jem. “And since I go to every party that’s worth it, there’s no one better to come up with a location.”

Ellie nodded. “Alright.” She was going to take a risk on this, but not a huge one. “Come into the office in the morning and give me a list of places you’ve come up with, we’ll talk about it.”

“Deal,” Jem said, holding out her hand.

Ellie took it and again felt that strange breathless feeling. She started to count in her head, hoping to hell that she wasn’t about to have a panic attack right here and now. But when Jem withdrew her hand, the feeling went.

“I’ll be off then,” Jem said. “Work to do and all that.”

Ellie let her go, thinking that maybe she’d misjudged her slightly. She had apologized, after all, and she’d done it quickly and genuinely. Maybe she’d just been anxious. Maybe they could work together.

Then she realized that Jem had left her with the bill.

Yeah, maybe she wasn't quite as considerate as Ellie thought.

Chapter Fourteen

Carys planted three mugs on Ellie's desk. "It's like the queen's coming to tea or something," she said. "We're getting all the fine china in."

"No, I'm borrowing mugs from you because you dropped our last guest mug last week and broke it," said Ellie. "And don't you dare go calling Jem the queen. She's bad enough as it is."

"All plummy accent and dog hair?" Carys said.

Ellie laughed. "No dog hair as far as I could see. Definite plummy accent though. But apart from anything else, she's Darlington's daughter and she could make or break us, so behave yourself."

"What about me?" Mo asked.

"What about you?" said Ellie. "You generally behave yourself better than Car, so I expect nothing but the best from you." She took a beat. "She's not that bad," she added grudgingly.

"So your little talk went well then," Carys said.

"I think... I think we just agreed to pretend we'd never met and be professional. That's all," said Ellie. Truth be told she was slightly worried about Jem coming to the office. She'd made the invitation without thinking and now she was wishing that she'd chosen somewhere less... personal perhaps.

But the woman had to come sometime and at least Carys and Mo were here for

backup. Not that she needed backup.

She gritted her teeth. Somehow Jem always made her feel like she was on the back foot, that she had to be prepared for the worst. She didn't like the feeling, but even she had to admit that it was better than the chest-compressing feeling of panic. Since she'd spoken to Jem, things seemed to have calmed down on that front.

"You should make a doctor's appointment," Mo said, concern in their voice.

Looking down, Ellie realized she had a hand on her chest. "No, no, I'm feeling fine."

"Still," Carys said. "You should make a doctor's appointment."

"I don't like it when you two gang up on me," grumbled Ellie, sitting down.

Carys and Mo exchanged a look that begged questioning, something secretive and stealthy in it. Ellie was about to ask what was going on when there was a knock at the door.

"Behave yourselves," she hissed.

Carys and Mo both nodded.

"Come in, it's open," shouted Ellie.

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Jem marched in like she owned the place, stopping in the middle of the room, looking around and nodding. “Not bad. It’s a little small.”

“We’re not a big company,” said Ellie. “In fact, let me do the introductions now. This is Carys, she technically doesn’t work for us but she does all the graphic design stuff, her office is next door.”

Carys held out a hand and Jem politely shook it.

“And that’s Mo, my glamorous assistant, although we’re working on a better title.”

“Like Party Queen or potentially Ellie’s Right Arm,” Mo said with a grin. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Likewise,” said Jem. She pulled out a chair and took a seat. “Now who do I have to sleep with to get a coffee around here?”

“Car,” Ellie said warningly, seeing the spark light up in Carys’s eyes. “I think we’re about done here. I’ll get back to you when I know more about the invitations.”

“You make me miss all the fun,” Carys grumbled as she letherself out.

“So I’m fun?” Jem said, looking across the desk at Ellie.

Her lips were slightly parted, her hair looked like it hadn’t quite been brushed, her skin looked fresh and unmade-up. Something clicked inside of Ellie. Something that hadn’t clicked for a long time. She suddenly found herself feeling quite warm. She

swallowed. “Um, coffee?”

“Please,” said Jem.

Ellie got up and escaped back to the small kitchen, taking her time making instant coffee because her hands were inexplicably shaking. She pressed at her chest, making sure her heart was beating correctly.

“Behave yourself,” she whispered. “What’s wrong with you?” Too much work, too much stress, she decided, as she poured boiling water over the coffee. She needed to calm down. She was a great planner and all of this was going to go swimmingly. As long as Jem behaved herself, of course.

“Here we go,” she said cheerfully, bringing the coffees in and depositing one in front of Jem, one in front of Mo, and one at her own place. “So first things first, we need to really talk about locations.”

“Jem’s got a couple of doozies,” said Mo.

“I was just telling him about a few ideas I had,” said Jem.

“Them,” Ellie said automatically.

“Sorry?” asked Jem.

“Them,” said Mo. “I go by they/them, not he/him.”

“Oh.” She turned to look at him. “But you’ve practically got a beard.”

“And a very delicious vintage fifties skirt,” Mo said, swinging their legs up onto the desk to prove it. “Neither of which nowadays tell you anything about what’s under

the skirt, by the way. Not that that's any of your business if we're not intimate, and I'm supposing that we're not going to be."

Ellie held her breath, waiting to see what was going to happen. Obviously, she'd defend Mo to her dying breath, but she also knew that Mo was perfectly capable of defending themselves. So she waited.

"Perhaps not," Jem said, smiling slightly. "Not that you're not my type, but we are technically colleagues and I seem to remember that fraternizing amongst the ranks is frowned upon."

"Fair enough, Jim," Mo said, grinning back.

"It's Jem, actually."

They grinned wider. "Calling you the wrong thing is uncomfortable, right?"

Ellie saw Jem take a breath, saw the realization come over her.

"Right," Jem said. "And I apologize. It was rude of me and I shouldn't have assumed your pronouns. I'll get them right from now on."

Once again, Ellie was struck by how genuinely Jem apologized. Just like she had at the cafe yesterday. She was easily corrected. It was a nice characteristic to have, one that not many people had.

"Ah, everyone makes mistakes with it at some point," Mo said airily. "It's alright. Just try your best. And I'll do my best not to call you Jim."

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Jem snorted a laugh. “Seems fair to me,” she said. “And I’m she/her, just for the record.”

“Good to know,” said Mo.

“Alright, alright, if we’re done with the business of pronouns, could we move on to locations please,” Ellie said.

She realized now that she’d been anxious about Jem coming here because she didn’t know how she’d fit in, whether she’d be accepting of Mo, of Carys, of herself even. And that seemed silly now, because Jem might be rich and spoiled and all the rest of it. But she also looked very much at home sitting in the little office. Oddly at home.

She wondered if Jem felt at home everywhere. And then she wondered what Jem’s home actually looked like. And then she wondered what Jem looked like in her home. And then...

“El,” Mo said. “Earth to El.” They turned to Jem. “She gets like this sometimes, all up in the air.”

“There are worse places to be,” Jem said.

“Sorry, I was miles away,” Ellie said. “Tell me about the locations you’re thinking about.”

“Real work time,” Jem said, rubbing her hands together. “Alright, let’s start with the least likely and work our way up the list.”

CONSTABLE RUBBED AGAINST Ellie's legs. "You've had dinner already," she reminded him.

Unlike herself. Her stomach rumbled and she wondered if she had the energy to go back out to the shop to pick something up. She was just starting to persuade herself that she really did need a nutritious meal when someone knocked at the door.

"Checking up on my patient," Paul said when she opened the door. He held out a tupperware container. "And bringing Butter Chicken if you're hungry?"

"I'm hungry," Ellie said, beaming and accepting the box. "Come in." She led him into the tiny kitchen. "You know, I can't help but wonder just what kind of restaurant it is that you work at. Hungarian goulash one day and butter chicken the next. I'll have to come and visit you at work one night."

"It's eclectic," Paul laughed. "And good luck getting a reservation."

"Good luck getting the money to pay the bill as well," Ellie said, tipping the chicken into a microwavable bowl.

"Good day?" Paul asked, leaning against the counter.

"No attacks, if that's what you mean," said Ellie, pressing the start button. "But in general, yes a good day."

Jem's ideas had proven satisfyingly good. In fact, once the three of them had narrowed down the list to three solid choices, Jem had been sent off with instructions to run them by her father the next morning. Ellie was actually starting to feel like she had a handle on this situation.

"Anything exciting?" asked Paul.

“Jem, the new girl, came to the office,” Ellie said, not going into all the details. “And she was good, great even. She even got along with Mo, so she’s really fitting in.” The microwave beeped and she pulled the bowl out, only then turning to look at Paul.

He had an odd look on his face. “Ah.”

“Ah?” Ellie asked, opening a drawer to find a spoon. “Well, I suppose your day was much more exciting than mine anyway.”

Paul shrugged. “Not really. Just did a shift at the restaurant, so no excitement, I’m afraid. Who is this Jem girl then?”

“Long story,” Ellie said. “Fancy some chicken too? There’s loads.”

Paul looked at her for a minute before he finally smiled. “Nah, I’m good thanks. I’ll leave you to it, I suppose.” He bent down and patted the purring Constable. “Bye, Con.”

“Thanks,” Ellie called after him.

The chicken was good, just what she’d needed. She’d lucked out having Paul living next door. And now that her belly was full she could focus on getting preliminary designs for the party knocked up.

“Come on, Con, let’s take this party to the couch.” The journey was all of two steps, but Ellie was happy to settle into the cushions and reach for her laptop. There was a book waiting on the coffee table for when she was done.

Chapter Fifteen

Okay, so things hadn’t exactly gone according to plan. But then, maybe this was a

better plan. The more Jem started to think about it, the better things seemed to be going. After all, what better way to butter her father up than by excelling at something? And maybe this was something she could do well. Plus, there was a time limit here, the party was going to happen and then she'd be back where she started.

If that's where she wanted to be.

There had been something about going to that office. Something about seeing Mo and Carys and Ellie all living their lives, all being themselves, that had lit something inside Jem. It had taken a few drinks and a new club in Soho to figure out that actually, she'd been jealous. Jealous that they got to be who they wanted and she didn't.

So perhaps getting on her father's good side was no bad thing. Especially if she was considering ... No, that was taking things too far. Maybe. Probably. She felt a bit sick as she walked up the stairs to the tiny office.

She knocked once but went in without waiting for an answer, only to find the place deserted except for Mo, who was wearing a very fetching pair of chartreuse culottes.

"I didn't think you were supposed to be here this morning," they said, crossing their legs.

"I'm not, I'm heading to my father's office right now. I just needed to stop and pick up the scarf that I left here." She looked around, spotting the scarf tied around the handle of a filing cabinet. "It's an Hermes," she added by way of explanation.

"Oh, I know," Mo said. "I'd kill for one."

Jem shrugged. "I've got a couple of last year's designs if you want one, I was going to donate them anyway."

“Are you kidding?” Mo said, their face lighting up.

“No,” said Jem, confused as to why they might think that. She nodded toward Ellie’s desk. “No boss this morning?”

“Not yet,” said Mo, still looking like a kid at Christmas.

Jem grinned. “Big night, eh? Probably still hungover in bed.”

Mo laughed. “El? Now you really are kidding. Ellie’s idea of a big night out is reading past midnight.”

Jem crammed the scarf into her handbag. “Huh?”

“You don’t know Ellie,” explained Mo. “She comes here in the morning, goes home in the evening, feeds her cat, reads a book, goes to bed. Rinse and repeat. This place is her whole life.”

“But... what about restaurants and going out and... other things,” Jem asked, suddenly curious as to why Ellie would be alone. Curious and weirdly relieved.

“In London?” squeaked Mo. “She doesn’t have the money for that. Besides, I wasn’t kidding when I said reading was her idea of a good time. She says that her life is comfortable and that’s how she likes it.”

“I suppose there’s no accounting for taste,” said Jem, thinking that it was strange that someone as attractive as Ellie just wanted to be at home. And then thinking that the idea of Ellie all snuggled up in bed was quite... enchanting actually. “I’d better go. I’ll drop by with those scarves when I can.”

“No hurry,” Mo said, but the look on their face said different and Jem was grinning

when she left the office.

IT WAS LIKE a little queer bubble, she thought as she walked to Darlington's. A little queer bubble where everyone was happy and themselves, which was all very well and good, but occasionally they all had to leave the bubble. It was the real world that was the problem.

She checked her messages and mentally noted the parties that were happening over the next few days, automatically deciding which she wanted to show up at. She'd better remember to make a nail appointment as well.

It was all very nice living in a bubble like that, all nice and lovely and tolerant and all the rest. Except... Except what exactly? Except she didn't deserve to have a bubble of her own?

The thought niggled her. Nagged at the back of her head. For the first time she thought she might understand why Rolly had just decided to say fuck everything and told the truth.

She'd never really thought of herself as a coward. Never really considered it. It wasn't like she'd refused to get up on a horse, or said no to a karaoke song despite having the voice of a tone-deaf snail, or not danced on stage. But she was beginning to think that courage might take different forms.

The foyer of Darlington's was dark, all wood and deep carpets and leather chairs. It looked the same way it had looked for the last hundred and fifty years, she supposed. At least, she'd never seen it look any different.

She didn't bother with the reception desk, simply strode over to the lift and pressed the call button. It came after a few seconds and she stepped inside, the doors sliding almost closed before someone stuck a hand in and opened them again.

“Well, well, well,” Jasper said, smirking at her. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here. Pa hasn’t fired you yet?”

“Very funny,” said Jem, taking a step back to the rear of the cabin. Jasper’s aftershave was overpowering.

“Don’t get me wrong, sis, I’m impressed is all.”

“Right.”

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He shrugged as the doors closed. "I'm not entirely evil. You've spent most of your life swanning around, you're actually doing an honest day's work, I am actually impressed, take it or leave it."

She bit her tongue. Sometimes it was hard to remember that Jasper really was her brother, and that he wasn't always a complete bastard. Just most of the time. "Thanks, a double-edged compliment, but I suppose I'll take it."

"Going up to the top?" She nodded and he pressed the appropriate button. "I suppose you're reporting in on the big party. How is it going?"

"Fine," she said politely.

"I'm not sure Rosie's going to make it," he said. "She's sick as a dog at the moment. Can't keep a thing down." He side-eyed her. "What about you? Thought about who you're bringing to this little shin-dig yet? It'd be nice to see you settling down and growing up."

Patience, she told herself, patience. The elevator ride couldn't take forever. "I haven't put much thought into it yet," she said politely.

"Huh, I suppose it won't be that Rolly at least."

"What's that supposed to mean?" The words shot out of her mouth before she could stop them.

"Just that he's a pillow-biter now, isn't he?" Jasper said.

“Jesus Christ, Jasp, do you have to be such a Neanderthal?”

He sighed. “Listen, sis, I’d punch the fellow if I thought he’d strung you along.” He narrowed his eyes. “But I’m not entirely sure that you didn’t know about his...”

“Homosexuality, Jasper. It’s a long word, but I’m sure you can say it if you try.”

“Hishabits,” Jasper finished.

She stared at him. “You make me sick,” she said.

He raised an eyebrow. “Hey, I’m just looking out for you. I would certainly defend your honor.”

Jem snorted and the lift door opened. “You disgust me,” she said, stepping out.

“I really don’t know why,” Jasper said, coming after her.

“Maybe because you’re intolerant, disrespectful, and generally a horrific human?”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” Jasper grinned. “You’d better go, you know Pa doesn’t like being kept waiting.” He waltzed off toward his own office, leaving Jem gritting her teeth.

There was something about her brother that made her stupider. Given time she could craft the perfect insult, but all logical and sensible speech left her brain as soon as Jasper started to talk to her.

She wanted nothing more than to just slap him.

Maybe one day she would.

“SO YOU’RE A working girl now, are you?” Rolly smirked, picking up his cocktail.

“Ha ha,” Jem said. “And yes, since you ask, I am. It’s easier to buckle down and just do it. Besides, it’s not exactly the most difficult job in the world, is it?”

“You’ve changed your tune.” He took a drink and put the glass back on the bar.

“Ellie gave me a talking to,” Jem said. “Explained that the consequences of me behaving badly reflected worse on her. I don’t want to bankrupt the poor woman.”

“Ah,” said Rolly. “Ellie.”

“What?” Jem took a hefty drink from her own glass. “You say that like it means something.”

“Doesn’t it?”

She looked at him for a second before looking down at the bar. “No.”

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Rolly leaned one elbow on the bar. “You mean to tell me that you highly coincidentally get forced into a position where you have to work with a woman that you obviously find attractive and it means nothing?”

“Not a thing,” Jem said. “And who said I found her attractive?”

“You hit on her,” screeched Rolly. “You found her attractive, you said it, or showed it at least. Out of every woman at that club, this is the one that you chose.”

“And she turned me down,” said Jem picking up her drink again. “So she wasn’t interested and now, since we’re both adults, we’ve moved on. We’re being professional.”

“Hmm.”

She sucked in air over her teeth. “Rols, you’re starting to get on my last nerve here.”

“Far be it for me to irritate you,” he said, grabbing his cocktail. “But the Jem I know doesn’t just buckle down and do a job. Not unless there’s something in it for her.”

“There is! I get my car fixed.”

“Really? That’s the prize here? You sure that it’s not Ellie Baker?”

“Absolutely not.”

Rolly put his hand on her shoulder. “Whatever you say, Jem. But regardless of any

feelings you might or might not have, you do realize that your worlds are mixing.”

“What?”

“Well, you’re letting someone who knows your secret into the world that you’re trying desperately to prevent learning your secret. That might not be considered wise.”

“I’ll handle it.”

“Can you trust her?”

It was a good question and one that she really should know the answer to. But she didn’t. She had a feeling that she could, she had a feeling that Ellie was a good person. But who really knew? She poured back the rest of her cocktail.

“Obviously, I can,” she said. “Let’s dance.”

Chapter Sixteen

As she left for work, Ellie almost tripped over a sheaf of papers that had been slid under her front door. She was in a hurry and picked them up before locking the door behind her. On her way to the office she flicked through them, finding techniques for calming panic attacks as well as the contact number for a local psychologist.

Paul. She smiled to herself. He really did go out of his way to look after her, and it was kind of sweet. She’d have to remember to take him a muffin from the bakery downstairs, or bake some brownies maybe.

She was busy wondering if she had enough time to make brownies and do the shopping today as she went up the stairs to the office. All was quiet and she slid her

key into the lock. It didn't turn though, because the door wasn't locked.

When she stepped in she found both Carys and Mo were there, standing as far apart as it was possible to be in the small office, both looking somewhat flustered.

"Oh no," Ellie said. "I don't have time for this today. No fighting. Whatever it is that the two of you are arguing about, shake hands and forget it right now."

Mo cleared their throat and Carys looked like she was about to say something.

"I mean it," said Ellie. "There's too much going on."

"Er, sorry?" Carys offered.

Mo grinned. "Also sorry."

"Good, well done." Ellie dropped her bag on her desk. "Right, Car, I've got mock ups of the invitations for you. Mo, you're meeting with three entertainment acts today, you'll need to go to them, we don't have room here to see what they can do. But I've planned the routes and everything, you can cab it and put it on expenses. And I'll be eating all day."

"Aw, can't we switch?" Mo complained.

"Not if you want to stay vegan, love. I need to taste everything on offer and make a final decision for the Darlington party."

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“Fine,” they huffed just as the door opened.

“I come bringing good tidings,” Jem said, striding in and flopping on a chair, not even bothering to take off her coat.

Ellie wondered how she got her hair to look like that, like she’d just been to a salon every morning, all bouncy and shiny. But then maybe she did go to a salon every morning. Or maybe she had a private stylist who woke her up.

“I said good tidings,” pouted Jem.

“Right, what?” Ellie asked, sliding her bag off her desk and sitting down.

“All three locations get the go from Pa.”

“Pa?” asked Carys, perching on the edge of Mo’s desk. “I had no idea that anyone outside of a Dickens’ novel used that word.”

Jem’s face creased. “It’s what we call him,” she started.

“Ignore Carys,” said Ellie. “She’d like everyone to believe that she grew up working the coal mines and walking fifty miles to get there. She grew up in a suburban semi outside Swansea.”

Carys glared at her. “Which doesn’t make me any less dedicated to the socialist cause.”

“Be kind,” Ellie said. “Also, don’t you call your dad dad?”

“It’s the Welsh word for dad!”

“Well Pa comes from the Latin,” Jem broke in.

“I’m not sure you’re going to help your case by bringing in Latin,” Mo said.

Ellie rubbed at her face. “Okay, okay, business time, please. All three locations approved, that’s good, Jem, well done.”

Jem shifted in her chair and grinned. “I, um, took the liberty of making an appointment at Leigh House so that we could check it out since it’s the preferred favorite. We can always see the other two if that doesn’t work out.”

“Taking initiative,” Ellie said, nodding. “Alrighty then, I’m impressed. Just let me know when and I’ll be there.”

Jem blushed slightly and Ellie could see that she was proud of herself. It was oddly touching. She was about to congratulate her and was desperately trying to think of some busy work to give the woman to keep her out of everyone’s hair for the day, when Mo suddenly squeaked.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

Mo waved their phone at her. “No, and neither are you.”

Ellie frowned and Mo tossed their phone over. She read the message and her heart sank. “She specifically said that she didn’t want staff at the party.”

“What?” asked Carys.

“The Cohen Bat Mitzvah is this afternoon,” Ellie explained. “It’s all set up and ready to go, we contracted out the entertainment, the caterers are already on site, everything’s a go. And now Mrs. Cohen is asking that one of us attend to keep an eye on things and make sure they go smoothly.”

“You already do that, surely?” Jem asked.

“We do generally,” said Ellie. “But this was a package deal that we’ve done a hundred times, and Mrs. Cohen said she didn’t want strangers mingling with the guests. She said she knew the caterers and it was all fine. But it looks like she’d changed her mind.”

She groaned. An afternoon surrounded by thirteen year olds was not her idea of fun. She had too much to do. She turned to Mo. “I’m meeting the caterers for the Darlington party.”

“Don’t look at me, I’m handling the entertainment,” said Mo.

“And I’ve got your invitations to do, plus a bunch of flyers for the bakery downstairs, rush job,” Carys said.

“I’ll do it.” Everyone turned to Jem, who shrugged. “I’ll go. All you need is someone as a contact, right? I can smile and be polite, I’m terribly good at it, actually. I’ll just ring you if something goes wrong.”

Ellie bit her lip. “You don’t even work here.”

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“Neither does she,” Jem said, nodding at Carys. “But you’d let her help.”

Ellie looked at Mo, who nodded furiously. This was their best solution. And it wasn’t like Jem would have to do anything difficult. She’d just turn up and smile. Even she could do that. And... And it was nice of her to offer. Strangely nice. Nice in a way that Ellie hadn’t expected her to be.

“You don’t have to,” Ellie said.

“I want to,” said Jem. She flushed slightly. “I mean, I’d like to help. Consider it an apology for the way I behaved at the Walthambridge the other day.”

“You’re sure?” asked Ellie.

“Unless you don’t trust me to do it.”

Ellie looked at Mo again and they nodded again. “Okay, thank you. It’s nice of you to offer. I’ll get you the address of the venue.”

ELLIE WAS SO full of canapes and tiny pieces of cake that she thought she might explode. She was stepping out of the second caterers and was deciding whether to head back to the office or call it quits and head home when her phone rang.

“Emergency,” Jem said.

Ellie’s heart started to beat fast. “What kind of emergency?”

“Well, there’s an ambulance here so...”

“Jesus, I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Ellie said, stepping out into the street to flag down a taxi.

She could see blue lights flashing in the distance as the cab screeched around a corner. She shoved a twenty pound note at the driver, not bothering to wait for a receipt as she fell out of the taxi.

Jem greeted her in the lobby of the small community center, her face pale and something that looked suspiciously like vomit on her plain, black dress. “It’s Armani,” was the first thing she said.

“Is that a kind of food poisoning?” Ellie asked.

“The dress,” Jem said faintly. “I meant the dress.”

“Ellie, dear, I’m so sorry,” Mrs. Cohen came rushing out of a door. “I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry for what?” Ellie asked, trying to take everything in and wondering just what the hell had happened here.

“It’s not your fault,” Mrs. Cohen said, her face red and her hands fluttering. “And besides, it’s all going to be alright. The ambulance men said it’s just a precaution.”

“What’s a precaution?” asked Ellie, her own heart starting to beat faster now.

“The hospital, obviously,” Mrs. Cohen said.

“But... what?”

Jem put a hand on Ellie's arm. "There was an allergic reaction to the cake," she said quietly. "One of the kids went into anaphylactic shock."

"The mother didn't warn us," Mrs. Cohen broke in, close to tears. "I had no idea."

"Just one child?" Ellie asked.

Jem nodded.

"And they're going to be alright?"

Jem nodded again.

Ellie let out a breath. "Alright, okay, that's unfortunate, obviously, but everything's in hand now and the child's going to be fine. And Mrs. Cohen, we have to think about Rachel's day. Is she alright?"

"Fine, fine," Mrs. Cohen said.

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“Good. Well let’s get in there and let me talk to the caterers and the entertainment, I’ll make sure everyone’s being kept happy.” She checked her watch. “It’s almost going home time anyway.”

Mrs. Cohen smiled gratefully.

“Stay out here,” Ellie said to a still pale Jem. “I’ll be with you in a few minutes.”

She went into the hall and did just as she’d said, ensuring that everyone was happy and things were going as well as could be expected, before coming back out to Jem.

“What is that?” she said, as she came out and flopped next to Jem on a bench.

Jem looked down at her dress. “Vomit.”

“Vomit?”

Jem shrugged. “It’s what happens when you feed thirteen year olds too much sugar and then teach them TikTok dances.”

“TikTok dances?” Ellie asked. Then she shook her head. “Never mind. Are you alright?”

Jem gave a shaky smile. “It’s not the first time I’ve been thrown up on, believe it or not.”

“That’s not what I meant,” said Ellie. Without thinking too much about it, she took

Jem's cold hand. "Mrs. Cohen says you took charge in there, that without you that kid would be in much worse shape than they ended up in."

"Did first aid at finishing school," Jem said softly.

Ellie could have been wrong but she thought that maybe Jem squeezed her fingers. Just softly, just for an instant. Then she pulled her hand away.

"Let's get you home, shall we?" Ellie said, standing up.

"I'm fine, I'll just get a car," said Jem, reaching for her phone.

"I'd rather make sure you got home okay." Ellie took her hand again, this time to pull her up. Jem was looking rather pale. And she had saved the day. It seemed only fair to make sure she was alright. "Come on, we'll get a cab."

"You're coming home with me?"

It was the arched eyebrow that made it seem like a proposition. An eyebrow that Ellie firmly ignored.

"I am," was all she said.

Chapter Seventeen

Jem stepped out of the lift and unlocked her front door. "After you." She ushered Ellie inside.

To be fair, it had been her intention from the first time she'd seen Ellie to take her home. Maybe not like this though. The smell of vomit was slightly overpowering, and Jem's legs still felt a bit shaky.

If she closed her eyes she could see the small child choking, could feel the struggle leaving him as he slowly stopped getting oxygen. And the thought of what could have happened made her feel sick enough that she could throw up on her own dress.

“Let me just change out of these clothes,” she said, closing the front door.

“Nice place,” said Ellie.

Jem gave her a glance, saw the wide eyes and the familiar look on her face. Yes, her flat was bigger than most houses. Yes, it was filled with expensive things. She didn’t think much about it until the odd visitor inevitably commented on it.

She didn’t make any excuses for it now. “There’s a bar over there if you need a drink,” she said.

God knew, she needed a drink. But the dress had to come off first.

She disappeared into the bedroom, stepping out of her dress just as soon as she decently could.

She wasn’t sure why she’d stepped in. She wasn’t sure why she’d offered to go to the party in the first place other than a sudden, overwhelming need to please her new boss. And then when the cry had gone up, when she’d seen the child on the floor, she’d been overtaken by something.

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It was true that she'd done first aid. But she'd also seen how everyone drew back, how no one had wanted to take responsibility, and it had both scared and disgusted her. So she'd walked forward. And... and she'd done well.

She washed off in the bathroom, pulling on some lounge pants and a tank before going back out to the open plan living area. She'd done well and now, perhaps, she was being rewarded because Ellie was sitting here, perched on the edge of the couch like she was afraid to sit on it.

Jem's core tightened, warmth started to run through her veins. Okay, this wasn't quite what she'd planned, but beggars couldn't be choosers, could they?

"You didn't get a drink," Jem said, pouring herself one. "What can I get you?"

"Nothing," said Ellie. "Thank you. I need to get out of your hair. I just wanted to make sure that you were alright."

"All in one piece, as you can see," said Jem, coming around to the couch. She sat down and very carefully, almost discreetly, Ellie moved a centimeter or so away.

"Well then, I'll be off."

"There's no hurry," said Jem, wondering if she should call for food, wondering if the sheets were clean.

Not that she was assuming anything but... But Ellie was here, wasn't she? And she was attractive and... And Jem was lonely. It took a second to realize that. She'd been

afraid and now she wanted someone and Ellie was there.

“We have that meeting at the hotel tomorrow,” Ellie said. She stood up. “We don’t want to be late.”

“It’s six o’clock,” snorted Jem.

“And I really need to leave.”

“Why? To read your books?”

“Been talking to Mo, I see,” Ellie said with a small smile. “I get that my life might seem boring to someone like you, but I’ll have you know that I’m very comfortable where I am, thank you very much. My life is... comfortable.”

“My couch is comfortable,” Jem said, raising an eyebrow.

It was Ellie’s turn to snort. “My entire flat could probably fit in your toilet.”

“Ha ha.”

“I’m serious.”

Jem frowned. “Really? I mean, I know I’m lucky, obviously, but, well, your place can’t be that small.”

“I’ll show you some time,” Ellie said. Then she clamped her mouth shut like she’d said something she didn’t mean.

Which was probably exactly what Jem needed. This was stupid, she was being stupid, she got the message. Ellie had been kind and was making sure she was alright,

nothing more than that. They were professionals. She'd forgotten that part.

And she'd forgotten just how much Ellie wasn't interested. Forgotten almost that Ellie had turned her down in the first place. Which still stung, because she was pretty and fun and rich and ticked all the boxes, surely?

Except for Ellie. Ellie standing there in her black pants and white shirt and black jacket, looking like a waiter at a French bistro and yet still somehow very, very sexy. The way the cheap jacket clung to her curves, the way the sensible mid-heel shoes elongated her legs, the way her hair was just the right kind of curly-messy.

The way her eye makeup had smudged a little over the day until her dark eyes looked smoky.

The way her lips were swollen.

The way...

"I need to get out of here," Ellie said, breaking the spell.

Jem crossed her legs, squeezing them together and feeling heat. "Right, off you pop then."

"I didn't..." Ellie took a breath. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

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“Thank you for volunteering to take the job, thank you for going, and thank you for taking care of that child. I don’t really know what else to say. You averted disaster and I’m very grateful.”

Not grateful enough to stay though, thought Jem. Not grateful enough to like me. Which was childish and petulant. She sat up a little straighter. “You’re welcome,” she said a little more softly and gently. “I wanted to help.”

Ellie gave a nod, registering that the tension in the room had changed. “I’m glad you were there.”

Jem didn’t really know what to say to that. She was disappointed, not that she’d had any reason to expect anything at all. But... but she’d never really been in this situation before. She was suddenly trying to think of reasons for Ellie to stay. Even if that just meant looking at her from across the room.

Which was completely ridiculous. She was a grown adult, she could take no for an answer, obviously.

“I, um, sent you the menus from the two caterers I saw today. They’re both good, I preferred the second, but you should go through the menus and see which possibilities you think are best.”

“Right,” Jem said. “Right, I’ll do that.” Maybe.

“Alright then, I suppose I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes. Tomorrow.”

Ellie stared at her for what felt like half an eternity and then turned around and showed herself out.

The flat felt weirdly empty with her gone. Weirdly empty in a way it had never felt before.

And Jem felt weirdly empty.

What the hell was wrong with her?

She picked up a cushion and threw it toward the door. It didn't even make it half the distance.

THE MENUS WERE so close to identical that Jem couldn't really think of a reason to choose one over the other. So she was busy making a list of the dishes that she thought should be served when her phone rang.

“Jem, darling, where on Earth are you?”

Jem grinned. “Annabelle? What's happening?”

“Only the greatest party since, well probably since last weekend, to be honest. We're at Benton's.”

Benton's. Hmm. Jem could see the neon now, could feel the leather of the bar stools. There was a champagne fountain, a specialty of the house. Now that she thought about it, there was a dress she'd picked up last week sitting in her wardrobe that would be perfect for Benton's.

“So where are you?” Annabelle persisted.

Jem’s eyes caught her computer screen. She’d made half the list she needed. She sighed. She should really finish this. Ellie would be pleased if she sent it tonight, she could tell. Not that she was kidding herself. This wasn’t exactly the most important part of the plan, she was pretty sure that Ellie had already decided on the food.

Still though, it’d make a good impression. Ellie might smile. She had dimples, just small ones. Jem sucked on her teeth. “I’m at home,” she said.

“Right, you can be here in an hour then,” said Annabelle.

“Actually...” Jem wasn’t sure what to add to that sentence. It wasn’t like she’d turned down an invitation like this before.

“Luca’s here,” said Annabelle temptingly. “He was definitely asking about you. I’d say that you’ve en-tranced him.”

“Yeah, I’m not so sure about that.”

“Does that mean that you don’t want to en-trance him?” Annabelle said, voice sharp.

Shit. “Not really, he’s not my type,” Jem said quickly.

“What is your type then, Jem? I swear, I’ve introduced you to every eligible man in the city and you turn your nose up at them.”

“I suppose I’m just looking for something special,” said Jem, aware that sounded weak.

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“Right, well, get your arse down here and we’ll find you something special.”

She looked at her computer again, then at the drink she’d made herself, still sitting untouched on the coffee table. “Actually, I think I’m staying in for the night.”

Annabelle laughed.

“No, I mean it,” said Jem. “Have fun.” She hung up.

It took all of two minutes before she received a text. I hope she’s worth it, from Rolly followed by a smiley face. The implication was clear. But Jem ignored it. Ellie was out of play, she had to accept that. Which was probably a good thing, it was hard enough having a job without having to deal with feelings that made her feel... confused.

It had taken a while to figure out what was going on. A good ten minutes had passed after Ellie had left before Jem had realized that actually, she’d never had a problem with women leaving before. She’d always sort of wanted them to leave.

Jem sighed and went back to her list. At least working kept her mind off other things. The only problem now was what to do after she ran out of work. She supposed there were books on the shelves. Not that she’d chosen them for anything other than decoration.

Still, maybe she should give Ellie’s comfortable life a go.

Or maybe she should just focus on getting this party planned, getting her car fixed,

and then never thinking about Ellie again.

Chapter Eighteen

Jem arrived ten minutes late and Ellie already had her arms folded in disapproval. “If you can’t get here on time, then don’t bother coming,” she barked.

“I got stuck in traffic,” Jem said.

“More likely hungover and stuck in bed,” Ellie countered. Jem looked frustratingly good for someone who was probably hungover though. Her skin was glowing, her hair was messily perfect, and the dress she wore skimmed every curve in a way that made Ellie feel slightly dizzy.

“Actually, I stayed in and read a book last night,” said Jem primly.

“Right.” Ellie rolled her eyes. “The event co-ordinator is in her office, we’d better go through if you’re ready?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Jem looked put out and Ellie wondered for an instant whether she actually had stayed home all evening. But why would someone like Jem do that?

Together they met the event co-ordinator and had a tour of the premises. After which, Ellie was pretty certain that Leigh House was the place they needed. With interior courtyards featuring ponds and water features, terraces that would let guests mingle, and beautiful decorated interior rooms, this was just the location they’d been looking for.

“We do have an extensive wine cellar,” the event co-ordinator, a tall black woman with immaculate make-up, was saying. “And you’re welcome to taste what you’d like.” She’d stopped in a small alcove looking out over a courtyard.

“All of this seems very reasonable,” Ellie said, looking at the financial statements she’d been sent.

“Leigh House does like to consider itself a friend of the Darlington family,” smiled the woman.

“The owner went to school with my father,” whispered Jem.

“I see,” said Ellie. How was it that rich people kept saving other rich people money and never passed those savings down to people who could actually use them? But she bit her tongue, she did have a budget here after all.

“I take it that you like what you see?” asked the co-ordinator.

Ellie found herself looking at Jem who was beaming, and then nodding. “We do, as it happens. Although we obviously have a couple of other locations to see.”

“Well, at this point, I like to leave people alone so they can really experience Leigh House and drink in the atmosphere,” said the co-ordinator. “If you don’t have any further questions?”

Ellie shook her head.

“Then feel free to stay here as long as you’d like. I’ll have a member of staff come and offer refreshments and I’ll be in my office if you should need me. It’s been a pleasure.” She shook hands and strode off toward her office.

“Well, left to our own devices,” Jem said, flopping down on the couch in the alcove. “And not a moment too soon, I’m dying for a drink.”

“It’s eleven in the morning,” Ellie said, sitting down beside her but staying on the

edge of the sofa and crossing her legs.

“It’s five o’clock somewhere, as they say,” said Jem.

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A tall, swarthy waiter hurried toward where they were sitting. “Can I offer some refreshments?”

“Which champagnes do you stock?” Jem asked.

The waiter listed off a dozen varieties and he and Jem eventually decided on one. Jem turned to Ellie.

“Don’t look at me,” Ellie said. “I don’t drink on the job.”

“Drinking is literally part of your job right now,” Jem said. “Asin, you’re not about to serve our guests something you haven’t tasted, are you?”

Ellie opened her mouth to argue that she hadn’t even had lunch yet, but Jem was already telling the waiter to bring the bottle and two glasses.

“If you don’t like it, don’t drink it,” Jem said.

Ellie gave up since Jem had a fair point. But she wasn’t going to do any more than taste the stuff. Not at this time of the morning.

“Christ, you look like you’re at a job interview, why don’t you sit back and enjoy the view?” Jem said.

With a sigh, Ellie turned and settled back properly into the couch. A small fountain was playing into an ornamental pond in the middle of the courtyard, and bright green grass with multi-colored flowers ringed the water. The Georgian architecture of the

building rose up around the little garden and it was like being at an oasis in the center of the city.

“Mesdames,” said the waiter, pushing an ice bucket with the wine in it toward them. He served two glasses and then with quick fingers released the curtains at the sides of the alcove so that the couch was private with a view only to the gardens.

“I might get used to this,” Ellie said, even though she felt uncomfortable in so much luxury.

“You’re hating it,” Jem observed lazily. “And that’s alright.”

“It is?” Ellie asked. She sipped at the champagne, the cool bubbles sliding over her tongue and found it was sweeter than she’d expected. Nicer.

“There’s nothing wrong with breaking out of your comfort zone,” said Jem, taking a drink from her own glass.

“My comfort zone is comfortable, thank you very much.”

“Mmm, the clue’s in the name,” said Jem. “The problem is, how are you ever going to do anything new, meet anyone new, if you just stay where it’s comfortable? I mean, I’m assuming you do want to meet someone, even if you are so desperately uninterested in me.”

Ellie glanced at her quickly and saw that she was teasing, so she drank a little more champagne. “You’re a fine one to talk about breaking out of comfort zones,” she said.

To her surprise, Jem didn’t argue with her. Instead she gave a soft laugh. “I suppose I am.”

Which made Ellie feel brave enough to pursue the subject a little more. She was desperately curious as to how Jem had kept her secret for so long, why she felt she had to. “Does anyone at all know?”

“You do,” Jem said. She paused. “Rolly, my best friend knows. That’s it.”

Ellie was quiet for a moment, thinking about how lonely that must be. “Can I ask why?”

“How did your family react?”

“Answering a question with a question is rude,” said Ellie. But then she was going to answer it anyway. “I never knew my dad, my mum died four years ago, I don’t speak to my sisters much.”

“We grew up very differently.”

“Yes, you got all the advantages,” Ellie couldn’t help but say.

Jem laughed that soft laugh again. “You’d be surprised,” she said.

“Oh, I’m sorry, did you have too much money to spend? Too many horses to ride? Was your wardrobe so big it was scary?”

Jem stared at her then shook her head. “Never mind.”

Ellie drank the rest of her champagne, annoyed at herself that she’d snapped. She shouldn’t have said that, it was unkind. She reminded herself that money didn’t mean everything. It was just that sometimes it felt like it might, especially when there were bills to pay.

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“Sorry,” she said eventually. And she saw now why Jem did that, why she genuinely and immediately apologized. It felt good. “I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have said that stuff.”

“There’s a lot of expectations,” Jem said, pouring them both more wine. “There’s a way you’re supposed to be, I suppose.”

“I don’t think I could have hidden it that long,” said Ellie. “I mean, my mum probably knew before I did. Not that she liked it much, but she came around to it.”

“It’s easy when you’re in boarding school for most of the year,” said Jem, settling back. “I mean, it’s not like I spent much time around my parents. Or my brother. And...” She paused. “And I hear enough that I’m sure they wouldn’t like the truth.”

“Do you ever plan on telling them?” Ellie asked. She was aware that when Jem had sat back again she’d sat much closer than before. She was also aware of the fact that she didn’t really mind. Actually, strike that. She was starting to feel funny. Like her chest was bound in metal, like her heart was beating so hard it might do something stupid.

“What’s the point?” Jem answered. “It’s not like there’s any reason to. I mean, part of the problem with keeping all this secret is that I don’t generally meet a lot of people like me.” She looked at Ellie. “Like us.”

Her eyes were so blue that Ellie wondered if she wore contact lenses. So blue that they looked like glass. Her skin felt like it was too tight and her cheeks felt flushed and for an agonizing second she thought that she might actually fall into Jem, just

splash into those eyes and give up all control of everything.

Huge mistake, her brain said. Huge, huge mistake.

“I suppose not,” Ellie said. She sniffed. “Still, there’s always picking up one night stands in clubs, I guess.”

She’d thought that Jem might laugh at this, that the atmosphere might be broken, that she might escape from this whirlpool that seemed to be dragging her in. But Jem didn’t. Instead she turned slightly so that they were almost face to face.

“I never said anything about one night stands.”

“Did you not?” Ellie said, voice croaking more than she’d like. “I could have sworn...”

“No,” Jem said. “I didn’t. And you turned me down flat.”

There was a long, long minute where all they did was look at each other. Then Jem turned to move, to get up and Ellie felt strangely like her heart was being torn out, like Jem was pulling her skin off as she got further away.

“I didn’t say that,” she blurted out.

“What?” asked Jem, turning back, sitting on the very edge of the sofa.

Ellie waited, trying and failing to make a different decision. “Before, when you said I absolutely wasn’t interested in you. I didn’t say that.”

Water in the courtyard fountain trickled and a breeze blew in through the open curtains and then impossibly, unwisely, incredibly, Jem was leaning over her. Ellie

waited for a heartbeat that lasted an hour and then lifted her face to let their lips meet.

Chapter Nineteen

If she thought for too long, or closed her eyes for a second, or stopped thinking for a moment, she could feel Jem's lips on hers. Which was fine, better than fine, it was nice, it was soft and perfect and steamy and a bunch of other adjectives that made Ellie's stomach feel like it was on fire. But then her breath would catch in her throat and a band would tighten across her chest and she'd think that she was going to have another panic attack.

"Just let me get back to the office," she begged under her breath, heels clattering on the pavement as she rushed back.

She didn't know who she was begging, but she added a silent addendum that whoever it was also let her forget that she had actually made an idiot of herself as well.

Maybe more than an idiot of herself.

Pulling out from the kiss had been like extracting herself from some kind of wetsuit, difficult, almost painful, and yet highly necessary. She'd finally managed to break contact and then Jem's eyes had been staring into hers and she'd almost lost herself again.

So she'd stood up, brushed off her trousers, cleared her throat and said: "Yes, this place will do nicely. Go over our dates with the event coordinator and get everything set up." And then she'd turned on her heel and marched away without even looking back.

And now she was about to have a panic attack in front of a Tesco Express. She hurried on. If she could make it to the newsagent on the corner she had more faith

that a passerby would help. Tesco Express people were in a hurry, the clue was in the name, they'd never stop.

As it was, she made it all the way to the office building where she practically collided with Carys who was coming down the stairs as she was attempting to go up them.

"Iesu mawr!" Carys took a step back, steadying herself with the banister. Then she peered closer at Ellie. "You alright there? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Ellie opened her mouth to speak, but just at that moment it started to be difficult to get air, so she hiccuped and began to pant instead, not a good look.

"Sit, sit," Carys said, pulling her down until they were both perched on the stairs. "Alright now, deep breaths, just like Mo showed you, alright, love? In and out, in through the nose, that's right."

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Ellie took three full deep breaths before she could say anything. And when she did, the words broke out without her meaning them to. “I kissed Jem.”

“You... you what?” Carys said, raising her eyebrows in surprise.

“I kissed Jem,” Ellie said again, getting used to the idea. “Or she kissed me, I’m not sure which.” Now that she was putting words on it, maybe it didn’t seem as ridiculous as she’d been thinking.

“Well, how about that,” Carys said slowly. She cocked her head. “And how are we feeling about that?”

Ellie took another deep breath, then another, trying not to think about Jem’s soft lips. Or trying to divorce her feelings about the matter from her feelings about soft lips in general. “I, uh, I think...” Another deep breath. Be realistic. Be truthful. “I think that maybe it’s not the right thing.”

“Hm. Alright. And why not, pray? She seems like a nice girl, disgusting wealth aside, and she’s pretty enough.”

Ellie had to swallow again. “Because... because she’s things that I’m not and I don’t want to have to deal with that.”

It was a pathetic excuse even if it was kind of true and Ellie fully expected Carys to pull her up on it. But to her surprise, she didn’t, she just nodded. “We can’t always fall for the right person at the right time.”

Which was a bit of an understatement. Jemima Darlington was a dangerous person, a rich person, and a secretive person. None of which added up to someone who Ellie should let into her comfortable life. She did have soft lips though. Sort of pillowy and warm.

“But then, I don’t suppose we get to choose, do we?” Carys went on. She put a hand on Ellie’s arm. “After all, feelings are feelings, they don’t necessarily come out to play only for the suitable playmates.”

“Huh?” asked Ellie, thinking that maybe she was having some kind of attack now.

“Nothing,” Carys said, with a strangely puzzled look on her own face. “Nothing. Just... I don’t know, I’m the last person to give romantic advice. I mean, if you don’t like the girl then you have to tell her, you can’t lead her on. Though I suppose she’s the boss’s daughter in a way, so maybe you have to string her along until the job is done.”

“Helpful, thanks.”

Carys grinned. “Like I said, not really best positioned to give advice. I suppose you need to think about what’s deep inside, what your real feelings are, and go with that? Isn’t that what you’d tell me to do?”

“Yes,” admitted Ellie. “But I’m not sure how that applies here. I mean, obviously this isn’t going to be a thing.”

“No, you don’t want it to be a thing. It could be a thing if you wanted it to be.”

“I—” Ellie interrupted herself with a sigh. “Fine, I need to think about things.”

“And then you need to talk to the woman.”

“Right.” She blew out a breath. “Um, thanks?”

“Not sure I helped that much,” said Carys, standing up and offering her a hand.

Ellie took it and let herself be pulled up. “It was enough that you’re here.”

Carys grinned. “I’m always here. Except when I’m not. Like now. I’m off to the dentist.”

Ellie waved her goodbye and went on her way up the stairs to the office. It was empty when she got there, Mo off seeing musical acts, and she was glad of the quiet finally. It would give her time to think, time to forget those soft lips, and time to consider just what she should say to Jem about not ever repeating what had just happened.

Even though every cell in her body wanted nothing more than to kiss Jem again.

WHEN THE DOOR clicked open Ellie was so sure it was Mo coming back that she was halfway up out of her chair to go and make tea. But then Jem appeared and she sank back down. This was going to be tough, she needed to be sitting down for this one.

She’d had time to think, time to consider just what kissing Jem could mean, for her company, for her life, and time to recognize that she couldn’t do this, it just wasn’t right. And she’d had time to figure out just what she had to do. She needed to take a leaf out of Jem’s book and be the adult here, apologize immediately. Which was exactly what she did.

“I’m sorry,” she said, as soon as Jem walked in. “Kissing you was inappropriate and out of line. It won’t happen again.” She’d decided to dismiss the idea that Jem might have been the one that kissed her. Laying blame wasn’t going to help matters here.

“Why?” Jem slid into the seat opposite her desk and arched an eyebrow.

Ellie’s heart started to pound in her chest. “For a million reasons.”

“Such as?” Jem asked.

Ellie breathed. “Well, for a start I’m your boss.”

“So?”

“And then there’s the fact that we’re polar opposites.”

“Opposites attract,” Jem said.

The light was hitting her face and her skin looked luminous in a way that made Ellie want to stroke it. So she said the real truth, the part that really was non-negotiable for her. “And you’re not out.”

Jem’s eyes widened a fraction. “Sorry?”

“Jem... I get it. I do. I would never tell your secret and I’d never force anyone to come out before they were ready. But I equally can’t be involved in keeping a secret like that. I don’t want to sneak around. And I know, I should break out of my comfort zone, maybe you’re right about that. But this isn’t the way to do that.”

“I see.” Ellie could see Jem taking a deep breath and then nodding. “Alright, I can appreciate that. Thank you for your honesty.”

“You’re welcome,” said Ellie, trying desperately not to look at her mouth. “Back to being professional?”

Jem’s face tightened for just a second, then she nodded. “Back to being professional. No hard feelings.” She paused for a millisecond. “And no regrets either.”

Before Ellie could respond to that, the office door opened and this time it was Mo, glorious in cerulean today, with eyeliner to match, they waltzed in grinning fit to bust. “I’ve done it,” they caroled.

“Done what?” Ellie asked, half angry at being interrupted and half relieved that she didn’t have to explain herself further.

“Found the perfect band, and even better...” They paused for effect, a wide grin on their face.

“Yes?” prompted Ellie.

“They’re playing tonight and we have tickets to go and see them.”

Ellie’s heart sank. She needed sleep. She wanted to be home on the couch thinking about how she shouldn’t have kissed Jem and then thinking about how she shouldn’t have turned Jem down. Because in her heart she was still torn. She knew it was inappropriate, but having Jem here right now was just letting her know that actually, she did rather like her.

“Where are they playing?” Jem was asking.

“There’s a gay club on the embankment close to where the boats dock.”

“Ah,” said Jem, looking half-afraid.

“But I’m sure you don’t need to come, if you have other plans,” said Ellie, taking pity on her and guessing that she might not want to be seen at a gay club.

“No, no,” said Mo. “I’ve got tickets for all of us, including Carys, and you too, El. There’s no excuses, this is work, you all have to come.”

Ellie took a look at Jem, who was smiling now, gracefully accepting and hugging Mo. And she was jealous. Jealous of the easy way that Jem touched Mo. Jealous of Mo for getting the hug. Which was about when she realized that it might not be as easy to stop her feelings as she'd thought. She really did like Jem. She liked her far too much.

Chapter Twenty

The problem with kissing Ellie was that Jem simply wasn't done. It was like she'd opened some kind of dam, and all she could think about now was not just kissing Ellie but touching her and tasting her.

Which would be fine except for the fact that Ellie still wasn't interested.

Jem was even okay with the no one night stand rule. Because she wasn't stupid enough to think that she was never going to meet someone, that she never wanted to change. Ellie, for whatever reason, had a hold on her and Jem wanted more, wanted to get to know her, to have those long conversations that lasted all night with her.

She wanted to see how she could change, how someone else might make her a better person. Ellie with her sensible shoes and her regular job and her sharply pretty face might not have been the kind of person Jem thought she would fall for. But that moment at the hotel, when she'd leaned in and Ellie had leaned right back, everything had fallen away and the only thing that had mattered was that kiss.

So now what was she supposed to do?

Her car pulled up in front of the club and Jem climbed out, slamming the door behind her. She couldn't remember ever having shown up at a party so miserable.

She wasn't going to be unreasonable, she would never force anyone to do anything.

But the thought of having to spend more time with Ellie and not be able to touch her... It made her feel slightly sick.

“Hey! Hey! Over here!” Mo was waving wildly at her.

Jem grinned. She couldn’t help but like the assistant. Their positive attitude and easy friendliness made them easy to like.

“Got your ticket?” Mo asked as she got closer.

She pulled it out of the pocket of her tight pants.

“My, aren’t you looking glam,” said Mo.

“Thanks, you’re not looking bad yourself,” Jem said, surveying the long, silky sarong that Mo was wearing coupled with a tightly buttoned shirt.

Mo did a little twirl. “You’re going to love this place. Full of great music and plenty of people.” They winked at her. “So if you want to slope off early with a nice girl, just give me the nod and I’ll cover for you.”

“With a nice girl.” Her mouth was dry. She wasn’t used to this. Wasn’t used to people just... knowing.

“Or... not?” Mo said, looking a bit confused.

“No, no, I like nice girls,” she said, there was no point in lying. Besides, what harm did it do that Mo knew and was open about it? It wasn’t like Mo was going to be playing polo with Jasper or anything.

“Uh-huh,” said Mo, eyeing her up and down. “You like nice girls, or do you like one in particular?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She stood up on tiptoes, looking at the queue in front of them to see how fast it was moving but mostly to avoid Mo’s eye.

“It means you’ve hit on Ellie once and you could do it again,” Mo said reasonably.

“What’s she told you?” Jem sank back down to the pavement, taking a step back from Mo.

“Nothing,” Mo said quickly. Then they smiled. “Is there something to tell?”

“No,” said Jem before realizing she’d responded way too fast and definitely given the game away. “Maybe,” she said with a sigh. “Except she’s not interested. I think. Or she is and I’m not the right person or... I don’t know.”

Mo took her hand. “I’m not entirely sure we get to pick the right person,” they said.

“Got experience with that, have you?” she snapped back.

They shrugged. “Dunno. Maybe. I’m not sure yet. I’m not sure what the hell’s going on with my love life. I am sure about what’s going on with Ellie’s though, and that’s absolutely nothing. So you’re in with a shot.”

“She wants to stay professional,” Jem said glumly.

“Bullshit. Her life could use a shake up.”

Jem was running out of energy for this conversation. She closed her eyes. “There’s a problem. I mean, I think it’s the problem. But then there’s no guarantee, is there?”

Maybe the problem is just an excuse and then I'm destroying my life for no reason and—"

"And what on earth are you talking about?" Mo broke in.

Jem opened her eyes again. "I'm, um, I'm not exactly, er... open about things. And Ellie isn't interested in someone who, um, isn't open."

Mo's eyes widened in understanding and they nodded. "Fair enough, on both parts. I mean, your journey is your own, no one can make decisions about your coming out other than you. But then it's Ellie's right not to want to be involved with someone she can't be honest about. Surely you can see that?"

"I do see that, I do. I just... it's so hard. I don't know what to do. I like her. God knows why, but I do. I've been drawn to her since the first time I saw her, but I don't know if I'm ready for something like this, for just announcing things."

Mo squeezed her hand. "I can't help you with that," they said, pulling her closer. "But just so you know, when you're ready, I'm here for you. So will Carys be, and Ellie too." They gestured around at the line of people waiting to go inside. "There's a whole community of us queers out here, all dancing in the sunlight, all waiting to welcome you with open arms. But the dark is safe, I get that. So you take all the time you need."

Jem felt tears pricking in her eyes. "Thanks," she said, pulling away again. She wasn't going to cry in public. "Come on, let's skip this line."

"We can't do that," said Mo.

"Obviously we can," said Jem, pulling them by the hand until they were both marching up to the bouncer. "We're with the band," Jem said, with a bright smile and

a twenty pound note just poking out from behind her ticket.

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The bouncer grinned and let them both inside.

WHEN ELLIE SHOWED up she was wearing tight jeans and a loose shirt that slid off one shoulder and almost sent Jem into heart failure. She opened her mouth to speak and found that the words wouldn't come out.

"Finally made it then," Mo chirped. "Carys is getting drinks you two should go and dance."

Jem shot them a look and Mo looked innocently back.

"You know, guests will be dancing at the party, it's only fair that you two give it a go and see what the fuss is about. How else will you judge?" said Mo.

"I'll wait for a drink," Ellie said sharply. She turned and the colored lights caught her cheekbones and Jem wanted nothing more than to kiss her again.

To distract herself, she looked around the club. People were everywhere, people of every stripe, color and want. There were groups of women laughing together, there were men kissing in corners, there were genderless couples dancing. Everywhere she looked there were people just being... happy. Themselves. People who had no worries here, who were home and could be who they wanted.

And Jem felt her heart rise in her throat, felt her jealousy rise to proportions she couldn't deal with. Why couldn't she be like that? Why couldn't she just be who she wanted to be?

“Drinks,” Carys said, coming with four pints clutched between her hands and gently lowering them onto the table.

“Dancing,” Jem said, suddenly decided. She could have this, even if it was just for a night, just for an hour, just for one song.

“That’s my girl,” Mo said, grasping Carys’s hand and pulling her toward the dance floor.

Jem looked at Ellie who was shaking her head.

And she did something that she didn’t think she’d ever done before.

“Please?” she asked, softly and sincerely and honestly.

Ellie bit her lip.

“Get out here,” Mo called. “Come on, you two.”

And reluctantly, Ellie held out her hand. “I suppose one dance can’t hurt.”

Then Jem was pulling her in, putting a hand on her waist, feeling her skin, her breath, feeling the way her body moved under her clothes. And she knew that she was totally and completely lost.

One dance became two, then three, then time stopped meaning anything and all Jem could think about was Ellie, her face shining, her skin sweaty as they moved to the music, silent and yet communicating so much more than they had with words.

Until Jem was pulling her closer, until she was pulling her in and kissing her, right there in public in front of who knew how many people, until she was tasting that

sweet, cinnamon taste of her again and knowing that she didn't want to spend the rest of her life without this.

And Ellie didn't pull back.

It was Jem who finally ended it, the band calling a break, the noise of the club dimming for long enough that they could hear each other speak.

"Sorry," Jem said.

Ellie looked at her, eyes dark. "I should be sorry. I should be the one who stopped that. I'm the one who set the rules, I'm sorry."

Jem narrowed her eyes. "Can't you go against the rules, live without them?"

"What would life be without rules?" said Ellie.

But her lips were still swollen from the kiss. "One night," Jem said. "Live without the rules for just one night."

"You just want sex," Ellie said, standing taller.

Jem shook her head. "No sex. No one night stands. I told you. But just for tonight, please, let's just... just be."

Ellie hesitated, then looked around. "Where are Mo and Carys?"

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Jem shrugged. “Not a clue.” She put out a hand again, stroked the curve of Ellie’s waist and the music started to play again. She moved her body closer to Ellie’s.

“Fine,” Ellie said as Jem breathed in her scent. “Fine. One night.”

Chapter Twenty One

Her heart beat with the beat of the music and Ellie pushed through the crowd looking for either Carys or Mo, not caring which she found. Eventually, she came upon Carys leaning up against a wall looking uncharacteristically flushed.

“Car? Are you alright?”

“Sure,” Carys said. “What about you? You’re looking like you’re actually having a nice evening for once.”

Ellie bit her lip. Jem was getting a taxi. She’d promised her a night and was already starting to think that it might have been a mistake. At least now she was, when she was out of range of Jem’s magnetic attraction. But she’d promised. And maybe she just needed to get this out of her system.

“It’s alright,” she allowed. “But I’m leaving, I just wanted to check on the two of you. Let Mo know that the band is good, they were right, they’d be a solid choice for the late evening, so get them to set it up.”

“Right,” Carys said, eyes darting away. Then she looked back at Ellie again.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” Ellie asked.

“Perfectly fine, thanks.” Carys sniffed then looked toward the lines at the bathroom.

“Actually, maybe there’s something we can talk about, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course I don’t,” Ellie said, even though Jem must be done finding a cab by now.

“It’s a bit weird,” Carys started.

Jem appeared, waving wildly from near the entrance so that both Carys and Ellie saw her.

“It’s fine,” Carys said. “It’ll wait.”

“Sure?” asked Ellie, heart already starting to beat harder. Was this what it was like, having someone? Being interested in someone? Would her heart never beat properly again?

“Yeah, yeah, you go on.” Carys was grinning at her now, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively.

“It’s not about sex,” said Ellie, already turning toward the door.

“Right, right.”

“It’s not,” she called over her shoulder as she left.

“Come on,” said Jem. “We’ll never get a drink in this place now that it’s so packed. I’ve got the perfect location.”

She looped her arm into Ellie’s and propelled her out of the club, out into the cool of

the evening to where a black car was waiting.

“Hold on, I thought you were getting a cab?” Ellie asked, looking at the tinted windows.

“This is my car service,” Jem said, opening a door. “Easier than a taxi. Jump in.”

In the back seat of the car, Ellie tried to keep her distance from Jem, tried to keep some kind of control of herself, but Jem was holding her hand and the car kept going around corners and they kept sliding together.

“So, tell me about you,” said Jem, her features shaded in the darkness.

“There’s not much to know,” Ellie said.

“Right, you’re a party planner who likes reading and has a cat. You’ve got sisters and that’s it, your entire life distilled down.”

Ellie laughed. “You’re not far wrong. I’m not that interesting.”

Jem snorted. “I wouldn’t say that. Why did you become a partyplanner? I mean, forgive me for saying it, but you don’t seem like you particularly enjoy parties.”

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“I enjoy organizing,” Ellie said. “But to be honest, I had an internship at a planning company when I was in college and it just sort of went from there.” She cleared her throat. “I’d, um, ask how you became what you became but...”

“I didn’t become anything?” Jem offered. She squeezed Ellie’s hand to show that she was kidding.

“Well, sort of,” Ellie said, shifting in her seat so that she was looking at Jem full on. “I mean, you’re obviously intelligent, you’re definitely charming, you have a lot to offer, I just don’t really see why you’re not doing something that you love, I suppose.”

“You really think that?”

There was a slight pause. “Yes,” Ellie said quietly. “Yes, I do.”

Jem shrugged. “I suppose I just... missed a step somewhere. I never found that thing that I love, I never had to. I think my parents assumed I’d just get married and then I didn’t, obviously, so now it’s all... complicated.”

Ellie debated saying something. But she didn’t want to ruin the evening with talk of Jem’s family, of her secret. Not this one evening. She was supposed to be having fun, she reminded herself.

“We’re almost there,” said Jem, distracting them both as the car pulled up in front of a darkened building.

“Almost where?” Ellie couldn’t see the lights of a bar or anything similar.

“Just you wait,” Jem said. She started to open the door, then hesitated. “Um, just one thing.”

“Yes?”

“There, er, there are probably some people I know in here, or who know who I am and, well, if we could...” She trailed off.

“Be discreet?” offered Ellie. If she’d known this was how it was going to be, she might not have come.

“Mmmm.”

“Fine,” Ellie said. She supposed that she’d let Jem into herworld. Now it was her turn to see Jem’s. And she was more than capable of behaving herself, even if that meant not touching Jem for the next few hours.

But she felt sad as she followed Jem out of the car.

“I HAD NO idea places like that really existed,” Ellie said, laughing as they stepped back out into the night hours later.

“It’s a private club,” Jem said. “There are tons of them hidden around the city, but they don’t exactly advertise. You should see my father’s, it’s all pipes and hunting trophies and women can’t go into half the rooms.”

“Sounds lovely,” said Ellie.

“Come on,” Jem said. “This way.”

Ellie let herself be led, surprised to find that she wasn't as tired as she would have expected. Jem took her hand as they rounded a corner and headed toward the river. The sky was already lightening, turning a pale gray.

"Just in time," said Jem, stopping in the middle of the bridge. A pale edge of orange was visible at the horizon. "This is my favorite time of day."

"I don't think I've ever seen a sunrise," Ellie said, starting to shiver with cold.

Jem pulled her in close, warming her with her body. "It's a brand new, fresh start, and it happens every morning," she said softly. "Something I've always found to be quite miraculous."

Ellie laid her head on Jem's chest as the sky turned from gray to pale gold and then bright orange, as the sun rose over the city, balancing on the water of the river for what felt like forever. She could smell Jem, could feel every inch of her body. "It is miraculous," she said.

"I thought you'd fallen asleep," Jem laughed, and Ellie could feel the vibrations of it all through her self.

"No," Ellie said, half to herself. "No, not yet. I wouldn't want to miss this."

"You'll miss work if you're not careful," Jem said pulling back. "We should get at least a bit of sleep, don't you think?"

Ellie didn't want the evening to end. She couldn't imagine being alone. Not after spending the entire night with someone there. It sounded cold and lonely to let Jem go. "My flat's close," she said, hardly believing that she was saying anything.

Jem said nothing for a long moment. "Well, we'd better go then," she said finally.

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Ellie clasped Jem's hand in her own and they walked together down the street. This was... good. Better than good. It was calming and beautiful and she couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so at peace. They were just coming in through the front door when Paul came rocketing down the stairs dressed in his green paramedic uniform.

"Late for shift," he panted, then came to a full stop, eyeing Jem with undisguised curiosity.

Ellie sighed. She didn't know how Jem managed to keep her life so secret, in Ellie's case, everyone knew everything. "Paul, this is Jemima Darlington, Jem, this is Paul, my next door neighbor."

"That's a grand name," Paul said, face wrinkling into a smile.

"Darlington?" Jem grinned back. "You don't know the half of it."

"Like the bank?"

"It's a financial services company, not really a bank," Jem began.

"And not really the time?" Ellie suggested.

"Right, right, gotta run," Paul said. He grinned at Ellie. "You ladies behave yourselves."

"He seemed nice," Jem said as they rode the lift up to Ellie's floor.

“He is, he’s lovely. He keeps an eye on me.”

Jem side-eyed her.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Jem said. “Just... your life is very safe, isn’t it?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing at all,” Jem said firmly, stepping out of the lift.

“Here we go then,” said Ellie, opening up the door to her flat. Constable appeared immediately, miaowing in complaint. “Oh, don’t give me that, you have plenty of dry food, and I don’t answer to you.”

“Apparently, you do,” Jem said, stepping inside and closing the door as Ellie rushed to the kitchen to open a can for Constable. “Jesus, this place is the size of a crisp packet.”

“You will remember that I told you my entire place could fit in your toilet,” Ellie said, feeding Con.

“I thought you were kidding.”

“No. And beggars can’t be choosers. We’ve only got a couple of hours to sleep, do you want the couch or the bed?”

Jem just stood there looking at her and Ellie knew what the answer was and knew that she wanted it so badly herself. But she wasn’t going to do this. She wasn’t going to be Jem’s secret. She wasn’t going to be anyone’s secret. No matter how much her

heart pounded or her body responded.

“Just sleep,” Jem said, voice rough. “Nothing else.”

And Ellie relented even though she wasn’t sure she could sleep tangled up with Jem in the same bed.

“The bathroom’s through there if you want to wash your face.”

Jem went through. “Is that mold on the ceiling?” she asked when she came back, face shiny.

“No,” Ellie said shortly. “The bed’s that way.”

Jem held out her hand and after a hesitation so short it almost didn’t exist, Ellie took it.

Chapter Twenty Two

It took everything Jem had not to pull Ellie toward her, not to put her hands on her waist and start something that she knew she had no right to start.

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“What?” Ellie said, opening her eyes sleepily.

“Nothing,” said Jem. “Nothing. Do you want to shower first?”

“No, go ahead.” Ellie looked at her and Jem wanted to kiss her so badly she could taste it. For a long minute they just looked at each other until Ellie smiled a little and turned away. “Do you need to borrow some clothes?”

“Nah, I’ll stop by my place before I come into the office,” Jem said, swinging her feet over the bed. The bedroom was cute, almost like a tent in its smallness. And she’d slept surprisingly well, though she hadn’t been sure she’d be able to with Ellie so close to her. In the end, they’d slept barely touching but it had been enough to comfort Jem in a way she didn’t know she needed comforting.

“Are you sure that isn’t mold?” she said when she came out of the bathroom.

Ellie sighed and plated up the eggs she’d made. “It might be, I suppose.”

“Do you make eggs for all your overnight visitors?” Jem teased, sitting down at the tiny bar between the kitchen and living room.

“We were drinking, we have a long day, eggs seemed like a good idea,” Ellie said primly. Then she looked away, putting the pan in the sink. “And there haven’t been any. Just for info.”

“Any what?” asked Jem, blowing on a forkful of eggs.

“Overnight visitors. There haven’t been any.”

Jem suddenly felt proud for reasons she couldn’t fathom. And slightly touched. “No one else has ever slept here?”

“We barely slept here,” Ellie said, standing up to eat her own breakfast.

“And yet I feel full of life and raring to go. Don’t you? Come on, El, admit it, you had a good time last night.”

Ellie smiled and Jem’s heart threatened to explode again. “Alright, yes, I did. But that doesn’t mean that I can live like that every night.”

The room seemed a little darker. “Right, it was just one night. I remember.”

With a sigh, Ellie put her plate down. “Jem, I like you. God knows why, but I do. I’m not going to deny that there’s an attraction there, I’m not going to deny that under different circumstances I’d be willing to... to, I don’t know, to get to know you better, I suppose.”

“Then why not?” Jem said, putting down her fork. “Why not, Ellie? We’re both adults here, we’re both attracted to each other.”

Ellie’s eyes softened and she shook her head. “Not like this. I won’t be anyone’s secret.”

“I’m not saying we’d be secret forever,” Jem said. “But why create a fuss when we don’t even know where this is going. We could be terribly mismatched.”

“We are terribly mismatched,” Ellie said.

“You know what I mean. This could all end in disaster. Why don’t we just... have a trial period, see how things go.”

“And then you’ll tell your family if I happen to live up to expectations?” Ellie snapped.

Jem closed her eyes, took a breath, and swallowed. “That’s not how I meant it.”

“But it’s how it would be,” Ellie said gently. She took a step forward and leaned her elbows on the bar so that her face was closer to Jem’s. “I understand, Jem, I really do. And I’m not giving you an ultimatum here.”

“That’s what it sounds like.”

“Well, I’m not. But, here’s the thing. I’ve worked long and hard in my life to be myself. It’s not always been easy. I’ve come out so many times over the years and sometimes it ends badly, I’m not going to lie. But I didn’t do all that work just so that I could jump back into the closet with someone, even with you, Jem.”

“So it is an ultimatum. If I want to be with you in any fashion, I have to come out to my family.” Her stomach flipped at the thought of it. It seemed so unfair and yet so fair all at the same time.

“I suppose,” Ellie said. She shook her head sadly. “I hate this as much as you do, Jem. I swear I do. The only thing that I can tell you is that I really do like you, I really am attracted to you, but there are rules that I won’t break, and this is one of mine.”

“Rules, rules,” Jem said. “It’s always about the rules.”

“Life is about rules. It’s about obeying them, making them, punishment for breaking them. If we didn’t have rules, we’d have chaos.”

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She was so close now that Jem could smell the sleep on her skin, could feel the warmth emanating from her and she couldn't help herself. She leaned in, her lips brushing against Ellie's, feeling that heat, feeling her core start to melt.

"No," Ellie said gently pulling back. "Not anymore. It was one night. The night is over."

"There's never been any for me either," Jem said. "Overnight visitors, I mean. There's never been anyone that I've spent more than a couple of hours with, to be honest."

Ellie looked at her with big, dark eyes.

"I'm changing, Ellie. For you. I don't know how or why, but there's something about you that makes me want to be different. I'm working for you, for God's sake. I'm making an effort here. But it's a long road, it's a big ask."

"It is," Ellie said, nodding.

Jem didn't know what to say. Her eyes were prickly with tears. She knew that Ellie had the right to feel the way she did, but it didn't mean that she wasn't disappointed. "I want to change for you, Ellie."

"I know." Ellie's voice sounded none too firm either, like she was a fraction away from crying.

But the conversation didn't get an end. Ellie's phone rang and she grasped for it,

looking away and answering it as though glad for the distraction.

Jem wasn't listening to her, was busy thinking about how she could dig herself out of this hole. So she was surprised when Ellie offered the phone to her, looking worried.

"It's Paul, the paramedic from next door," she said. "He wants to speak to you."

Jem frowned but took the phone. "Hello?"

"Listen, this is definitely some kind of code violation I think, but you are one of the bank Darlington's, right?"

"It's not a bank exactly," Jem started.

"But you are, right?" There was urgency in his voice and it made Jem sit up straighter, made her feel wobbly inside.

"Yes."

"Right, well you want to get down to St. George's. I overheard over the radio and got as many details as I could, but I don't know much. Someone called Rosie is on her way there. Rosie Darlington."

"Shit," Jem said and didn't even remember to thank him before she hung up.

???

Ellie tried desperately to concentrate on her computer screen. She was tired, which didn't help. But more than that, she was worried. Worried about Jem's sister in law partly, but mostly worried that she was forcing the issue with Jem, putting her in a terrible position.

It wasn't something she felt that she could compromise on. Honestly, she couldn't. She wouldn't be hidden. But then, she and Jem moved in such different circles, did it really matter all that much? They were unlikely to meet many of Jem's friends if they started dating. Unless Jem wanted to go to places like the private club they'd been to last night.

Ellie fervently hoped that she didn't. The place had been nice as a one off, but she'd felt out of place, not to mention badly dressed. She couldn't imagine going to places like that regularly.

And then...

And then there had been all the rest of it. The smiling, the laughing, the touching, the kissing. It had been so long since there'd been anyone in her life that she'd begun to think that perhaps there couldn't be anyone.

She'd slept like a baby just knowing that Jem was there, which was unlike her. She'd invited the woman into her home, which was equally unlike her. She didn't know why she felt this way and she desperately wanted to find out, desperately wanted more, but she didn't want to be a secret. And, to be perfectly honest, she didn't want to destroy this party, didn't want to risk anything.

"There you are." Carys flung open the door like she'd been searching for Ellie for hours.

"It's eleven o'clock in the morning, I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be."

"Right," Carys said, pulling out a chair and sitting down.

"And if you're looking for Mo, they're sourcing table linen."

“No,” Carys said, looking shifty. “Not who I was looking for.”

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“Seriously? The two of you spend at least a half hour every morning going over celebrity gossip.”

“Mmm.”

Ellie frowned. “Mmm? That’s all you’ve got to say for yourself?” She remembered now that Carys had wanted to talk to her last night. “Hold on, what’s wrong? Is everything alright?”

“Yes. No.” Carys rubbed her face. “Um, I don’t know.”

“Helpful,” Ellie said. She minimized her window and turned away from her computer. “Come on, spill it, my time is your time.”

Carys pulled a face. “Um, I don’t quite know where to start with this.”

“At the beginning?”

“At the end is probably better,” said Carys. “Mo and I kissed.”

Ellie felt her mouth drop open, felt her eyes widen. “You what?”

“We kissed,” said Carys defiantly.

Ellie’s phone rang and she reached out to silence it before seeing it was Jem calling. She grimaced. “I have to take this. We’re not done here, we’re far from done here, don’t you move an inch.”

But for the second time that morning, Ellie was destined not to finish a conversation.

Chapter Twenty Three

Jasper was ashen, his face the color of dirty dishwater as he strode back and forth in the hospital corridor. Jem hurried over to him. “Jasp, I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“What happened?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. They won’t tell me anything, I’m just supposed to wait. I haven’t even seen her yet. Jesus, Jem, what am I supposed to do?”

Jem took a deep breath and put her hands on his shoulders. “Sit down, first of all.” He lowered himself onto a hard plastic chair. “Now stay there. There’s a machine in the waiting room, I’ll get you tea.”

She hurried off, scraping up spare change from the bottom of her bag to feed into the machine. When she got back, Jasper was still sitting. He looked so much smaller than he normally did, so pale, so absolutely bereft that she wasn’t sure she knew what to say.

“Here.”

“What’s this?” he asked.

“Tea.”

“Is it supposed to be this color?”

“Dunno,” Jem said. “I’m not sure I’ve drunk tea out of a machine before.”

“Christ.” He banged his head back against the wall. “I told them to move her to a private hospital, but they wouldn’t listen, just told me to wait out here and someone would be with me shortly. That was half an hour ago.”

“I’m sure they’re doing their best,” Jem said, sitting down next to him.

“What if their best isn’t good enough?”

There was silence for a while then, a deep silence that Jem didn’t know how to fill.

“She was feeling better,” Jasper said finally. “She was feeling better and she wanted to go out and do some shopping. She wanted things for...” His voice cracked. “For the baby.” He looked up at Jem. “Jesus, Jem. What am I supposed to do?”

She had no idea. She patted his arm. “Wait,” she said. “Just wait. They’ll tell you what’s going on as soon as they can.” Then she had a thought. “Should I call Pa?”

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“He knows,” Jasper said, closing his eyes. “He told me to keep him in the loop.” Then he opened his eyes again. “I thought he sent you here?”

Jem shook her head. How typical of their father, of both their parents, not to be around when needed. But then, she hadn’t even thought to call them before now. She’d texted with Rolly on her way to the hospital, had promised Ellie she’d keep her informed, but hadn’t once thought of her parents.

“How did you get here then?” asked Jasper suddenly, puzzled.

“Long story,” Jem said. She really didn’t want to get into who Paul was, and why he knew Rosie was in the hospital. She barely knew who Paul was herself.

She was rescued from further questioning by the appearance of someone in a white coat. A doctor, she presumed.

“Mr. Darlington?”

Jasper straightened up and the doctor slid into the chair next to him. She looked exhausted, Jem thought, with black shadows under her eyes and hair that hadn’t seen a shower for at least a couple of days.

“Right, there’s no large cause for concern,” the doctor began.

“My wife got brought to the hospital in an ambulance,” snapped Jasper.

The doctor stared him down until he shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“As I was saying,” she went on. “There’s no real cause for concern. Your wife has been suffering from what we call hyperemesis gravidarum.”

“Sounds like something out of Harry Potter,” grumbled Jasper.

The doctor smiled faintly. “It’s simply some serious morning sickness is all. She appears to be coming out the other side of it now, but this morning she had a turn and passed out whilst in the street.”

“Had a turn? Is that your professional medical opinion?” Jasper said sarcastically.

Once again the doctor simply looked at him until he sighed and shut up.

“We’ve done all our tests on both her and the baby, both are fine, though we’ve got your wife on an IV just to get some hydration into her. There should be no lasting damage, but the paramedics were understandably concerned when they learned she was pregnant.”

“She’s going to be alright? The baby’s alright?”

The doctor nodded and color flooded into Jasper’s face.

“Thank you,” he croaked. “Um, my apologies for not being... more polite.”

“I understand,” the doctor said, smiling slightly. “You love your wife and were worried about her. You’re not the first person that’s snapped at me and you won’t be the last.” She stood up. “Give your wife a few minutes to get cleaned up after the ultrasound and then a nurse will be out to escort you in to see her.”

“Thank you,” Jasper said again. “Thank you.”

When the doctor left he laid his head back against the wall taking deep breaths and Jem suddenly realized that the doctor had been right. Jasper loved Rosie. She supposed she'd never really thought about it before. It was difficult to think about someone as generally hateful as her brother falling in love. But clearly he had.

And a little piece of her started to see him in a new light.

"You do love her, don't you?" she said, almost in a whisper.

There was silence for long enough that she thought he might not answer her. Then he said, equally quietly, "Yes."

"She's going to be fine, the doctor said so."

"But what if she weren't," Jasper said, eyes still closed. "What if she's not next time?"

"She will be," said Jem.

For the first time that Jem could remember, Jasper took her hand and squeezed it. "Thank you for coming."

And if she couldn't say it now, when could she? If he couldn't understand now, when would he? Her skin started to buzz, to itch with what she needed to say. Her pulse started to race, but it needed to be done. It needed to be done because if Ellie were the one lying in that hospital bed then Jem didn't know what she'd do.

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Because she loved Ellie like Jasper loved Rosie and the only way she was ever going to be able to prove that was by telling the truth.

“Jasp?”

“Yeah?”

The words tumbled out of her so quickly that it was impossible to put them back. “I think I’m in love.”

His eyes opened in surprise and then his lips curved into a grin. “No kidding? It’s about time. You’d better bring him to dinner so he can be vetted by the fam.”

Deep breath. Deep, deep breath. “He’s a she.”

For a minute she wasn’t sure that Jasper had even heard. Was sure that she was going to have to say it all again.

“You’ve probably already met her,” she went on, babbling, trying to fill the space. “Ellie Baker? The party planner? The one Pa hired for the big anniversary event?”

He dropped her hand like it was molten metal and pushed his chair away from her with a screech of plastic on linoleum and stood up, his face red and the vein in his forehead throbbing.

“You... you...” He struggled for words. “You... you dirty little... You... get away from me.”

“Jasper,” she said reasonably. After all, it had to be a shock.

“No, get out, go, now.”

“Jasper, for God’s sake, let’s talk about this like adults.”

He came closer to her now, his eyes narrow, practically spitting in her face with anger and she knew that she’d made a mistake. “You disgust me, you pervert, you...” He couldn’t find the words again, but this time Jem was sure that he was going to hit her. She took a step back, then another, but he kept coming closer and her heart was pounding and there was pure anger in his eyes.

“Hey, what’s all this then?”

They both turned to see Rolly, a bunch of flowers in his hands, at the end of the corridor.

“Jem?” Rolly said, dropping the flowers.

“You,” said Jasper. “You did this.”

“Did what?” Rolly asked, dismay on his round face.

“This, made her like this, made her...”

Jem’s mouth was dry with fear. “Made me gay,” she said, saying the words for the first time out loud and trembling with the bigness of them.

Rolly lifted an eyebrow. “Let me get this straight. You’re accusing me, a homosexual man, of... of forcing your sister to become a lesbian?”

Jasper looked from one to the other, his face furious. “You’re twisting my words.” He balled his fists up.

“Steady on there,” Rolly said, moving to Jem’s side. “There’s no need for violence.”

“I ought to thrash the both of you,” Jasper hissed.

Jem let Rolly’s arm pull her closer, let him start to walk her backward, away from Jasper, away from his anger, his boiling hatred. But Jasper began to follow them, to match them step for step.

“Mr. Darlington?”

All three turned to see a nurse coming out of a side room.

“Mr. Darlington, you can see your wife now.”

Jasper glared at Rolly and Jem. “I’ll deal with you two later,” he said, before turning and following the nurse into the room.

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For a long minute nothing happened, nobody moved. Then Jem felt her world come crashing down around her, felt the bricks fall, felt her stomach twist with nausea.

“I thought you said I’d feel better after I told them,” she said faintly.

“Oh, Jem,” said Rolly, pulling her into a hug, holding her against his warm body.

“Oh, Jem, I’m so sorry.”

The tears wouldn’t come. It was like there was too much emotion, too many feelings, to feel any one thing. “Don’t be, I did this, I started it, I stupidly thought he might understand, with all this, with him loving Rosie, with... I don’t know.”

“Come on, Ms. Puddleduck, let’s get you out of here,” Rolly said. “Let’s take you home.”

She nodded against his chest and he pulled away, keeping one arm around her as he walked her down the corridor.

“Shall I ring her?” he asked as they pushed through double doors.

She knew instinctively who he meant, and knew instinctively that Ellie was the only person in the world other than Rolly that she wanted to see right now. “Yes,” she said. “Yes, please. Take my phone.”

She handed it over and listened numbly while Rolly made the call.

Ellie shivered in the cool of the wind, wrapping her jacket tightly around her as she hovered in the doorway of Jem's building. Whatever had happened, she knew she had to be there. A man she didn't know had given her the bare details, but all she'd really heard was that Jem needed her.

So she'd come.

A mistake, perhaps, but Jem seemed to provoke that in her. Jem seemed to overcome all sensible thought and make her do things that she knew she really shouldn't. Like right now, for example. Right now she should be refining the guest lists, checking the silverware, vetting service staff. And yet here she was. One phone call and here she was.

What was it about her? There was something magnetic about her, for sure. But it was more than that. It was, Ellie had to admit, some kind of visceral attraction. Even the first time she'd seen the woman she'd made an impression.

A handful of hours later and she couldn't get Jem out of her mind. Despite the fact that she was the very antithesis of anything Ellie had ever known or wanted. Still though, there was a vulnerability about her, a fragility that Ellie hadn't expected.

A car drew up and the back door opened, Jem practically falling out onto the pavement, followed by a thick-set man with a worried air.

"Jem?" Ellie said, hurrying up to her.

"Are you going to be alright?" the man said.

Jem nodded, putting out a hand and grasping hold of Ellie's arm like she needed steadying. "I'm fine. I'll be fine. And where are my manners? Ellie this is Rolly, Rolly, Ellie."

Ellie smiled quickly at the man.

“Look after her,” he said. “Please. She... she’s more fragile than you might think.”

Jem shook her head. “Rolly is my knight in shining armor. But he does have a life of his own to get back to, don’t you?”

Rolly sighed, but nodded and turned back to the car. Jem clung to Ellie’s arm and began leading her toward the building.

“You’ll be so proud,” Jem said, brittle and chipper in a way that told Ellie something was really wrong.

“I’m sure I will,” Ellie responded, pulling Jem closer and pressing her arm against her body to feel its warmth. Whatever was going on, Jem needed to be inside, Ellie knew that she was unlikely to spill a thing until they were in private.

“Morning,” Jem said, smiling too brightly at the doorman.

“It’s afternoon by now,” said Ellie.

Jem didn’t seem to notice. They took the lift up in silence, Jem handing over her keys to Ellie with shaking hands so that she could let them both into the massive apartment. Only once they were inside did Jem let go of Ellie’s arm, practically running to the bar and pouring herself a drink.

“So...” Ellie said, approaching the bar. “Everything’s not alright.”

Jem ignored her, gulping down the amber liquid in her glass and then pouring another immediately.

Ellie had a horrified thought. “Your sister-in-law?”

“She’s fine,” Jem said. “Absolutely fine. The baby too.”

Ellie hadn’t known she was pregnant. Alright then, what else could have happened? She didn’t have a clue. “Jem, you have to talk to me. Please. I’m here for you, I can see that something’s terribly wrong, but I honestly don’t know what.”

Jem put her glass down, put both hands on the bar and bent her head, closing her eyes. “I told him.”

“Told who what?” Ellie asked.

“I’m an idiot, such a fool. He’s the worst of the bunch, I should have known what his reaction would be. But he was so different at the hospital, actually human for once, he was so worried about Rosie, so in love with her. And I thought he might understand, might actually be able to show some empathy, so I told him.”

Ellie’s stomach rolled and an acidic taste rose up in her throat. “Him? Your brother?”

Jem nodded and Ellie suddenly understood what had happened, the pieces all falling into place.

“You told your brother that you’re gay and he...” She didn’t know quite how to put this. “He didn’t take it well,” she finished weakly.

Jem shook her head but said nothing.

“Oh God,” Ellie said. She stood up, going around the bar, wrapping her arms around Jem’s waist. “I’m so sorry. So, so sorry.”

Only then did Jem finally turn, sinking her head onto Ellie’s chest, beginning to shake until Ellie could feel the heat of her tears soaking through her shirt.

“I’m so sorry,” Ellie murmured again.

“I should have known better, I knew this was going to happen. I’ve ruined everything,” Jem sobbed.

And Ellie’s heart practically broke for her. Even though she knew, deep down, that being truthful about herself was the best thing that Jem could do, the only thing that she could do. It would all be for the best, she knew that, but that was the last thing Jem needed to hear right now.

“You haven’t ruined everything,” Ellie said. “I’m here.” She said the words without realizing it, only knowing after she’d said them that they were true. Jem being in the closet had been the major impediment. Now she was out, well... Things could be different, couldn’t they?

But Jem was pulling back, her face shiny and wet, her beautiful eyes puffy and swollen. “Oh God, Ellie. Jesus. I didn’t think, I didn’t... I wasn’t thinking. I’m so sorry. So, so sorry.”

“About what?” Ellie said, mouth getting dry, looking at Jem and pleading for this not to be true, pleading for Jem not to say what she feared she was going to.

“I told him it was you. He knows it’s you.”

Ellie swallowed and felt her chest growing tighter. Her breath started to get faster.

“Your brother knows it’s me? Knows you’re... what?”

“I told him I was falling in love with you,” Jem said miserably.

Ellie couldn’t breathe. Her chest was so tight it was like she was wrapped up in metal. Jem’s brother knew, which meant that soon Alistair Darlington himself would know. And then... and then it would be the end of everything. There was no way that she’d keep the party contract now. No way that she could start working on the reputation she wanted.

She tried to pull oxygen in, tried desperately to suck in what she needed, but it just wasn’t working. Her heart was thrumming in her chest, the separate beats barely even distinguishable.

“Ellie? Ellie? What’s happening?” Jem had gone even paler.

“Panic... panic,” Ellie said, forcing the words out of her mouth.

Jem let her go, pushing up the tap on the small bar sink, the sound of water running loud in Ellie’s ears. Then she let go of Ellie, rummaging around in the fridge under the counter, coming out with what looked like an ice bucket.

But Ellie’s vision was already starting to blur and she couldn’t be at all sure what was happening. There was a rush and a crackling sound as Jem emptied the bucket into the sink.

“Come on,” Jem said.

Ellie had no idea what she was talking about, what she wanted.

“Come on,” said Jem again.

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Ellie didn't move.

Jem physically pushed her to the sink and then grasped the hair at the back of her head, pushing her down until Ellie finally realized what was happening and started fighting against it.

"No, relax," Jem said. "Trust me."

For an agonizing, breathless second Ellie couldn't move. Then she relaxed, letting Jem move her, plunging her head into the ice and water filled sink.

It was over in less than a second. The sharp shock from the freezing water made Ellie's breath stick in her throat, but when Jem pulled her back out she could suddenly breathe again, the band on her chest was gone. She gasped oxygen in and out, regaining her balance.

"It's called the diving reflex," Jem said, handing her a towel. "It immediately lowers your heart rate."

"Jesus," Ellie said, mopping at her face. "Thank you."

"You shouldn't thank me," said Jem sadly. "We're both destroyed, aren't we?"

Ellie let her breath come back, simply nodding.

"I'm so sorry."

“No,” said Ellie. “No. Don’t be sorry. There’s nothing more important than you being your true self. Please don’t apologize for that.”

Jem started to blink back tears again. “I’ve ruined everything, Ellie. I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m at a bit of a loss myself,” Ellie admitted. She did the only thing she could think of, which was to take Jem back into her arms. The warmth of Jem’s body melted into hers, with one hand she stroked Jem’s hair. “It’s going to be alright,” she said.

“Is it?” Jem asked, looking up at her with those dark blue eyes.

Ellie laughed a little, the fear of it all still settling in. “Fuck knows.”

Jem smiled, a slight crinkling of her eyes, her lips barely moving.

“What’s done is done,” said Ellie, moving her head just slightly, unconsciously lining herself up with Jem’s mouth. Jem pushed against her, molding her body into Ellie’s until Ellie wasn’t sure where she ended and Jem began.

“Are you sure about this?”

Ellie knew exactly what she was talking about. “Are you sure about what you told your brother?”

Jem frowned. “Yes, I’ve known since I was a child, for God’s sake.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” Ellie said patiently. “The other part. The part where you said you were falling in love.”

Jem took a breath and Ellie bit her lip, preparing herself to hear the worst, to hear that

it was just the shock of the moment, it was just to prove a point.

“Yes,” said Jem simply.

Which was all Ellie needed to hear. She leaned in and slowly, softly, brushed her lips against Jem’s. “In that case,” she whispered. “Other than both of our lives getting destroyed, there doesn’t seem to be anything standing in our way, does there?”

Jem’s answer was to push her mouth hard against Ellie’s until Ellie groaned with wanting.

Chapter Twenty Five

With careful hands, Jem pushed Ellie’s wet hair away from her face, looking down at her, trying to drink her in, trying to memorize this moment forever. But Ellie was having none of it. She arched her body against Jem’s, pushing her hips against her, running strong fingers up her back.

“Jesus,” Jem hissed.

“We’ve waited long enough,” Ellie said.

And any lingering doubts that Jem might have had disappeared. She was no longer concerned that she’d just blown up her own life and Ellie’s with it. She was no longer worried that Ellie’s response to all this had been a full blown panic attack. She could only think of the way Ellie felt against her, the warm shape of her, the scent of her.

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She leaned in, kissing Ellie slowly and fully, letting her tongue slide into her mouth as Ellie moaned against her. The heat in her stomach expanded, flowing down to other places, making her pulse beat hard, making her heart beat hard, until she was pressing into Ellie like she could meld their bodies together.

Then she found a modicum of control. She pulled back. “Bedroom?” she whispered hoarsely.

She didn’t wait for an answer, taking Ellie’s hand and starting to pull her away from the sink, pull her away from the bar.

“Stop,” Ellie panted as they rounded the corner of the bar.

Jem turned to see what was wrong, only to be greeted by Ellie’s hot kisses, Ellie’s hands cupping her face, Ellie pressing her closer.

“Don’t think I’ll make it that far,” Ellie mumbled into her mouth.

Jem half-laughed until she felt Ellie’s hands pushing up under her shirt, felt Ellie take her waist to pull her even closer. Then she groaned. “There’s a perfectly good floor here,” she said.

But Ellie was already groping upward, her hands greedy to touch Jem’s body, forcing their way under Jem’s bra, pinching at her nipples until Jem was seeing stars.

“Sorry, sorry,” Ellie said as Jem groaned through gritted teeth. “Getting carried away.”

“Nope,” Jem said, reaching for Ellie’s shirt and stepping back just long enough to yank it over her head. “You’re not getting carried away.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” panted Ellie, eyes starting to close as Jem scratched nails lightly up her spine.

“Not possible.”

In response, Ellie pushed Jem’s bra up and leaned down the tiniest fraction to circle her tongue around Jem’s nipple.

“More,” Jem said, breath rasping in her throat. She couldn’t remember ever being this turned on, couldn’t remember ever wanting anything so much. Pressure was building up inside her, like she was a volcano waiting to blow. The touch of Ellie’s hands set her on fire, so much so that she was already panting, already wet and ready and waiting.

“More?” Ellie purred.

Jem nodded, unable to speak now since Ellie’s fingers were insinuating themselves under the waistband of her trousers.

Ellie put her hands on Jem’s waist and turned her, pushed her, so that her hands were on the bar and her back was to Ellie. Then her trousers were being pushed down and Jem laid her forehead on the cold stone of the bar as Ellie’s hands traced up the inside of her thighs.

“Hurry,” she managed to say, not at all sure she could wait.

Ellie didn’t tease her, didn’t make her wait at all. Her fingers came up, dipped inside wetness, and Jem could hear her sharp intake of breath and almost dissolved. She

parted her legs further, giving Ellie better access as she reached around from behind.

Those strong, long fingers stroked upward and Jem let out a cry as they found a rhythm. It was like the whole world disappeared under those fingers, everything faded away except the exquisite sensation of being touched.

Jem struggled to get her breath, struggled to keep still as the feeling of being touched almost overwhelmed her.

“Relax,” whispered Ellie, pressing against her from behind. “Just let it come.”

With pure force of will, Jem made her muscles relax, only for them to instantly tense up again as Ellie quickened the pace and then there was nothing that Jem could do, no power on Earth that could stop this. It started as a low hum and built up to a crescendo that made her legs shake and her eyes squeeze shut and her thighs tighten around Ellie’s hand.

After, it was hard to get her breath, tiny hiccups of sensation still running through her.

“You know,” Ellie said conversationally from behind her, “there is such a thing as foreplay.”

“Mmm,” was all Jem could say.

“Although I suppose it’s a good idea to save something for next time.”

She laughed breathlessly and then turned, facing Ellie and bringing her into her arms. “Next time? We’re not done with this time yet.”

“Are we not?” Ellie asked, eyes cloudy and lips swollen.

“Not even close,” said Jem. “For a start, you’re wearing far too many clothes.”

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“That’s a problem with an easy solution.” Ellie stripped off her trousers, then looking Jem directly in the eye, pulled off her knickers and her bra.

“I’m not sure I was expecting such brazenness,” Jem said, unable to control the heat that was starting to flow through her again.

“Listen, neither one of us is having a good day, think of this as... a way of trying to find the bright side.”

And Jem sort of knew what she was trying to say, knew that the heat of it, the quickness of it, was a way of blocking out everything else that had happened. A way that was working. Ellie stood in front of her, breasts high and pert, not too slim, but rounded in ways that Jem wanted to touch, wanted to feel.

“The bright side,” Jem said, not taking her eyes off Ellie’s naked body. “I think I might be able to find a bright side here if I look hard enough.”

“Charming,” Ellie said through a grin.

“Might require less talking though.”

“Feel free to occupy your tongue in other ways.”

Jem’s breath caught in her throat again and she grabbed Ellie’s hand almost roughly, pulling her toward the armchair in the living room, then pushing her so that she half-fell into it. She stood for a moment, watching Ellie as she parted her thighs unprompted, baring herself completely as Jem’s heart pounded in her chest, as her

pulse bounced through her veins.

“Fuck,” Jem swore.

“If you wouldn’t mind,” Ellie said.

Jem dropped to her knees, shuffling until she was between Ellie’s legs, smelling her already, knowing she was ready. She pressed in, finding Ellie’s breast with her mouth, feeling Ellie’s wetness pressed against her chest as she suckled a nipple and Ellie arched her back, gripping her fingers in Jem’s long hair.

“Now,” Ellie said. “Please.”

Kissing downward, feeling the bumpy breastbones between her lips, then the generous curve of stomach, then the wiry touch of hair, Jem found herself breathing hard again, found herself wanting to touch herself.

But she restrained herself, hooking her arms behind Ellie’s knees, kissing the soft, sensitive skin inside Ellie’s thighs, and then finally, finally parting folds with her tongue to find sweet-sour wetness. Ellie wriggled under her tongue, finding the position she needed and Jem let her move, let her get comfortable.

And then she began. Sucking and lapping and circling, keeping a steady rhythm as Ellie’s hips bucked against her, bringing Ellie to the edge and dancing her there, holding back until Ellie whimpered before diving back in.

“Jem,” Ellie said, desperation in her voice. “Jem, please.”

And it was all Jem could do not to climax herself as she pressed her tongue onto Ellie’s sweet spot and finally pushed over that edge.

Ellie gasped and sighed, trembled as Jem held tight to her until Jem thought she might suffocate and really didn't mind in the slightest if she did.

It was full minutes until Ellie relaxed, legs parting again, and Jem laid her head on one thigh, getting her breath back.

"That was..." Ellie began.

"Hush, still not over," said Jem, thoroughly conscious of the fact that she was still very wet and very ready for Ellie to take her again.

"We should talk about things," murmured Ellie, brushing her fingers through Jem's hair.

"Not now," said Jem. "Let's just have now. Today, tonight, just us. Nobody and nothing else. Reality can wait a while, can't it?"

There was a pause and Jem could almost feel Ellie fighting against her need to play by the rules, to do things properly.

"Yes," Ellie said eventually. "Yes, it can wait."

"Good," said Jem. "Because we haven't actually made it to the bedroom yet. And I was thinking..."

"Always a dangerous thing," Ellie grinned down at her.

"I was just thinking that the bathroom is on the way to the bedroom and..." Jem lost the ability to speak as she thought about pushing Ellie's wet, slippery body against the cool of the tiles in the shower.

“And you thought we might find some trouble in there?” Ellie finished for her.

“Maybe.”

With one movement, Ellie pushed her away and stood up. “Beat you there.”

“Eager for more trouble, are you?” said Jem, amused.

“I’ll start without you,” warned Ellie, already walking away.

Jem took in the sight of her leaving, the curve of her backside, and registered somewhere in her head that her phone was vibrating in the bag she’d dumped on the couch.

With a sigh, she stood up, pulled her mobile out of her bag and checked the screen. Eight missed calls. Five from her father, three from Annabelle, and a message from Rolly.

She bit her lip and then dropped the phone back into her bag.

Reality could wait. But from the sound of running water it seemed that Ellie couldn’t.

Chapter Twenty Six

Ellie’s legs felt wobbly as she walked up the stairs to her flat. Wobbly in a good way though. A very good way. A way that she just wanted to keep thinking about so that she could ignore everything else.

She was rounding the last corner of the staircase when Paul came out of his front

door. For a second she felt like something was wrong. She hadn't heard footsteps through the thin walls, almost like he'd been waiting at the front door for her to come up.

But she dismissed the thought as stupid.

"Afternoon," Paul said, smiling brightly. Then his smile dropped somewhat. "You alright? You're looking a bit... disheveled?"

"Fine," Ellie said, smiling brightly.

"I'm glad I'm seeing you, how did it end up with that friend of yours and her... sister-in-law was it?"

"Fine, fine," Ellie said, reluctant to get into it. If she started talking about it now it would make everything real and honestly, she'd just come home to change her clothes and feed Constable, not to actually consider the reality of losing the Darlington contract. Not yet.

Paul leaned on the banister. "You sure you're alright?"

"Mmm," said Ellie, anxious to get inside.

Paul sniffed. "Bit odd that Jem, wasn't she?"

"Odd?" Ellie said, surprised. It wasn't the word she'd personally use to describe Jem. Tall, definitely. Attractive, certainly. Sexy and warm and very attentive in the bedroom, for sure. Not odd though.

"Yeah, odd. Just thought there was something a bit off about her is all," Paul said. "You know, you get a sense for these things when you're a paramedic. A sense for

the reality of people, for when they're lying and hiding things, for when something just isn't quite right."

"Do you?" Ellie said, starting to feel a prickle of anger.

"Or maybe it's just me reading too much into things," Paul said with a grin. "I can get protective over you, you know. How are those panic attacks coming along? Had any more?"

"No," Ellie lied and then wasn't sure why she'd lied.

"Good, glad to hear it." Paul stood up straighter, like he was preparing to leave. "Watch out for that Jem though, eh? Just in case I'm right."

"There's nothing wrong with her," Ellie blurted out.

"What?" Paul had started to come down the stairs and now he stopped. "Bit defensive that, wasn't it?"

Ellie licked her lips. "She's a lovely person. She's got her faults like anyone else, but she's actually really nice when you get to know her."

"And have you?" Paul said, eyes narrowing. "Got to know her that is?"

"None of your business," snapped Ellie, she made to push past him, but his arm shot out and stopped her. She paused. "Do you mind?"

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He looked at her and she thought that he might even be angry, though she didn't really know why. In fact, she didn't know why they were arguing at all. It made no sense. Except probably she was already stressed and burying it and she hadn't slept much and... And probably this was all her fault. Talk about reading too much into something. She took a deep breath.

"Sorry, I'm a bit on edge," she said. Paul lowered his arm. "I know you're just looking out for me. But honestly, everything's fine, and Jem's the last person you have to worry about."

He leaned back against the banister again so that there was plenty of room for her to squeeze past. "Yeah, no, I'm sorry. I've been working long shifts. You're a big girl and you don't need me to look after you. Sorry for stepping over the line."

She smiled at him now. He was a big teddy bear really, and it was nice to have a neighbor that looked out for things in the way that Paul did. Useful too, to have someone to save her life when she started feeling that panic again. "No harm done. Off to work?"

"No rest for the wicked," he grinned, and jogged down the stairs as she unlocked her door and went inside.

THEY MET IN A little Indian restaurant, the sort of place that could be found on any street corner, and Ellie was sort of relieved that it wasn't posher. She'd made a bit of an effort to dress up just in case, but she wanted to relax.

When the waiter came, Jem ordered a water and Ellie was the one to push for a bottle

of something, uncharacteristically.

“Not like you to drink on a school night,” Jem said, when the waiter had hurried off to get what they’d asked for.

“We’re celebrating, aren’t we?”

Jem’s face dropped a little. “Are we?”

Ellie reached across the table and took her hand. “Hey, I thought we weren’t letting reality intrude yet?”

Jem squeezed her fingers and then let her hand go. “It has to at some point.”

“Wait, hold on, you’re the eternal optimist. How did our roles get switched over?” Ellie said, trying to eke some humor out of the situation.

“What does this mean for you?” Jem asked.

Ellie sighed. She obviously wasn’t going to be distracted. Fine. “Back to the way things were, I suppose, depending on just what your father plans to do.”

“Which means what?”

Ellie shrugged. “Bar Mitzvahs, birthday parties, small corporate events.” She tried not to think about the accounting that had to happen at the end of every month, the squeezing the budget to get everyone paid. Days that she’d thought were behind her with the Darlington contract.

“You’re underselling that a bit, aren’t you?”

“I... it’s hard to explain.”

“Because I’m rich and I’ve never worked a real day in my life?” Jem asked matter-of-factly.

Ellie rubbed her face. “Alright, it’s going to be a struggle. It’s always been a struggle, but the cost of living crisis hasn’t helped things and I know Mo deserves a raise and I can’t give them one. Two months ago I had to dip into my savings to get everyone paid. Last month I took half my salary. Things aren’t looking great and your father’s contract would have paid the bills for at least three months and would have meant a serious bump to my reputation.”

The waiter came, pouring wine and water and leaving a dish of poppadoms and chutneys.

“I’d help you,” Jem said when the waiter left. “Except I don’t think I’m going to be in a position to do so.”

“What does this mean for you?” Ellie asked, her stomach feeling funny at the reality of losing the contract.

“I’m not sure. I’ve been ignoring my father’s calls. I’m assuming that Jasper has already told him and I suppose I’m going to be cut off. Which, given that my father owns everything from my flat to my car, means I lose everything.”

“And if your father chooses to be petty, he could ruin my reputation,” Ellie said glumly. “I’d never survive that. The company would have to fold, I’d lose my flat, I’d lose everything too.”

“Christ,” Jem said, putting her head in her hands. “I can’t believe I’ve done this, I can’t believe I was so stupid.”

Ellie looked at her, her heart breaking a little. Then she reached out, a spark of heat in her refusing to let the darkness take over everything. “It wasn’t stupid, Jem. I meant it when I said we should be celebrating.”

“Celebrating what exactly? Me fucking up everything?”

“Not everything. You haven’t started world war three yet,” Ellie pointed out.

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“It’s early, give me time,” Jem muttered.

Ellie reached out for her hand again, caught it between both of her own. “I’m serious, Jem. Serious that this had to happen. Okay, maybe not the greatest timing, but there’s nothing more important than the truth.”

“You and my father have a lot in common.”

“Jem, I know this is all a bit shit, I know it’s hard to deal with and fresh and raw. But you’ve finally told the truth, you can finally be yourself. And we...” Ellie let the thought trail off because she didn’t want to come on too strong.

“And we can do this,” Jem finished for her, looking up.

“If you want,” said Ellie carefully.

“It’s fast,” Jem said. “I know that. I don’t want to push you into anything.”

“Like you pushed me into that armchair this afternoon?”

Ellie saw a ghost of a smile on Jem’s face. “Alright, maybe there are some small advantages to all this.”

“It’s a shitty situation,” said Ellie. “But we have to make the best of it. And to be honest, we don’t really know the consequences yet, do we? I mean, your father might be ecstatic at having a gay daughter and a party planner in the family.”

“Already inviting yourself into the family, are you?” asked Jem, picking up a poppadom and snapping it in half. “Sadly, you don’t know my father.”

“I don’t, not really. But I do know that often this sort of thing is a shock, a surprise, and like with most things in life, people sort of settle into living with something that they would have thought unthinkable.”

“Says the person who doesn’t contact their family,” observed Jem.

Ellie shrugged. “Not everything in life has to have a happy ending. You aren’t the first person to come out. We do what we have to do. And when our birth families aren’t interested or disregard us, then we build our own families. If there’s one thing that the LGBTQ community is good at, it’s building families.”

“Like Mo and Carys.”

“Like Mo and Carys,” Ellie said, suddenly remembering the momentous news that Carys had told her that morning.

“Alright then,” Jem said. She pulled her phone out of her bag. “I suppose it’s time to bite the bullet.”

“Call your father, you mean?”

Jem nodded and Ellie practically crushed her hand she squeezed it so tightly. “I’ll be here for you.”

“I know that.”

Jem pushed her chair back and went outside to make her call. Ellie could only watch through the restaurant window, hoping that things went better than either of them

expected.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Jem wasn't sure she'd ever been so anxious in her life. Even being shipped off to boarding school at aged eight hadn't been as overwhelming as this was. She stood in front of the office building, not at all sure that she had the strength to walk into it.

"It's going to be unpleasant, but it's a bit like going to the dentist," Rolly said, hooking his arm through hers. "In that you'll feel better once it's over."

"I'm not sure that destroying my life is quite equivalent to going to the dentist," said Jem, stomach churning. She hadn't eaten a thing this morning. Even Ellie had refused breakfast, looking pale as Jem had ushered her off to work.

Sending her to work had been the best thing to do in the end. There was nothing Ellie could do here, and having her here would probably just make things worse.

Rolly squeezed her arm. "Do you want me to come in with you?"

Jem shook her head. He's been kind enough to ring to check on her, but she had to handle this herself, had to handle her father herself. Even if it made her feel sick and achy and tired and horrible.

"I should have kept my mouth shut," she said. "I don't know why I said anything."

"Because the secret gets too big to keep," Rolly said quietly. "It fights its own way out eventually." He turned so that they were face to face. "And because she's worth it, isn't she?"

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Jem thought back to the last few hours with Ellie, to the feel of her body and the taste of her lips and the sense of not being alone, just for a while. She nodded. “I think that makes it worse though. I’ve ruined her life as much as my own.”

“No, you’ve ruined her career, and not even quite that,” Rolly said. She’d filled him in in the car. “The two of you will have to work things out. That’s how it works. And if she’s important enough to you, you’ll do anything for her.”

Jem nodded again. “I know that. I...” She thought about Ellie again, felt her heart slow slightly, felt her breathing come a little easier. “I’d do anything she needed me to do.”

“In that case, you need to go in,” said Rolly. “Because it sounds like Ellie needs you to be your authentic self before she can be with you.”

“Right, right.”

He pulled her into a rough hug. “You can do this, Jem. After all, what’s the worst that can happen? Your father is hardly likely to murder you with his assistants sitting right outside the door, is he?”

“S’pose not,” Jem mumbled, wondering if she could stay in Rolly’s warm hug for the rest of the morning and just pretend that the rest of the world didn’t exist.

“Your brother is a bit of a bastard.”

“I know,” Jem said. But at the back of her mind she could still see Jasper sitting in

that hospital, sick with worry about Rosie. She could still see that little glimpse of humanity in him, the spark that had made her tell him.

What an idiot she'd been to think that Jasper could be anything other than the complete arsehole he obviously was. She sniffed and pushed Rolly gently away.

"I'd better get in there then. If I'm late it'll just make things even worse."

"Shall I wait here?" His kind eyes looked down at her.

"Don't you have better things to do?"

He grinned. "David's at work, so not really."

"David? He has a name," Jem teased. "It must be getting serious."

Rolly blushed. "Perhaps."

"No, you go," said Jem. "I don't know how long this'll take. I'll ring when I'm done, just as proof of life."

"Whatever you say, Ms. Puddleduck."

"Don't call me that," Jem said, but she was smiling anyway. Rolly had always been able to cheer her up, even if only momentarily.

"Go on then. Once more into the breach and all that," said Rolly. "Head high, heart full, courage flowing through your veins, let's face the monster." He paused. "Not that Alistair is a monster."

"Not that he's not," Jem said. She was already steeling herself, readying herself to

walk through the door and get this done.

And once she was decided, she walked into the building without looking back.

THE SMELL OF her father's office had always reminded her of the stables at home. Something to do with the massive amounts of leather, she supposed. She was sweating so much she couldn't cross her legs, her thighs slippery. Her hands clasped the arms of the chair she was sitting on.

It was deliberate, she knew that.

Her father had been sitting in his chair when she was shown into the office. She'd sat down, and for the last three minutes he'd simply been staring at her. It felt like an hour had passed.

He'd done this when they were children, when he thought they'd done something wrong and should admit to it.

But she didn't think there was anything to say now. Jasper must have said it all for her.

"I'm disappointed."

The two words echoed around the room and Jem didn't respond to them. She thought she might be sick and she eyed the bin close to the desk.

"You lied, Jemima. You lied and you've been lying for years. Straight to my face. What is the one thing that was practically beaten into you?"

Jem bit her lip.

“Answer the question.”

“The truth,” she said. This wasn’t what she’d expected to happen. She hadn’t seen this as an issue surrounding the truth, not for her father at any rate.

“You know how important the truth is, and yet you’ve continually lied to me,” he said, shaking his head.

She felt tears prick in her eyes, but said nothing. She knew well that attempting to defend herself in a situation like this would only make him more angry.

“You never came to me, never said a word.”

As if she could. As if he’d been there.

He banged his hand on the table. “And you lied!”

She was shaking, could feel herself trembling at his voice.

“Have you nothing to say for yourself?”

She took a deep breath, keeping as steady as she could. “I’m sorry for lying, I apologize. I wasn’t thinking of it as a question of the truth, but you’re right, I shouldn’t have lied.”

This seemed to mollify him slightly and he leaned back in his chair. He shook his head. “I don’t know what to do with you, Jemima, I honestly don’t. You’ve been given every opportunity, and yet you squander everything.”

She took another breath. “I think I might have found something, Pa,” she said. “I think... I’ve been working these last couple of weeks and... and I like it.”

“You like it because you’ve been sleeping with the help,” he snapped. “Honestly, Jemima. She’s hired help, nothing more. Do you not have better taste than that?”

“She’s not help, she’s not a servant.”

“She’s close enough and frankly, the matter’s moot since she’ll be fired just as soon as you and I are done here.”

Jem closed her eyes, her breath coming faster. Her father was right, she shouldn’t have lied. And now that she had, there was only one thing she could really do, and that was to take responsibility for her actions. She just didn’t quite know how to do that, how to fix the things that she’d broken.

“There’s only one thing to do,” her father was saying. “You working here was a mistake and I should have known better. You’re to stop immediately. In fact, you should take some time away and think about the choices that you’ve made.”

She nodded numbly. It wasn’t as bad as she’d feared. If this was all that was going to happen maybe she’d been wrong, maybe she should have been honest from the start.

“But there’s more than that, isn’t there, Jemima?”

Shit. Here it came. She nodded again. She couldn’t trust herself to speak. Her father was white hot angry and she knew he wasn’t done with her yet.

“I have every right to cut you off,” he said. “To simply disown you for lying to me. I’m not going to pretend that I’m happy about your lifestyle choices, but I will not stand being lied to.”

“It’s not a choice.” Jem’s voice surprised herself.

“What?”

“I said, it’s not a choice.” She straightened up in her seat. “Do you think I would have chosen this? Do you think I would have deliberately put myself in a position where I couldn’t be myself, where I was surrounded by people who hated the very essence of what I am? Does that sound like a choice?”

He looked at her carefully, templeing his fingers with his elbows on the desk. “Very well. I accept it wasn’t a choice.”

Was that a small victory? Jem couldn’t really tell.

“But that doesn’t change what’s happened.” He sighed, breathing hard through his nose. “You are my daughter, Jemima. And believe it or not, I love you.”

It was the first time she’d ever heard him say that and it took her so by surprise that her mouth dropped open.

“You may disagree with some of my parenting decisions, but anything I’ve ever done has been with what I considered your best interests in mind,” he continued.

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She closed her mouth, swallowed, and nodded.

“Which is why I’m going to give you a choice. And I want you to think very carefully before you come to a decision.”

TEN MINUTES LATER the swish notification of a text message being sent echoed through the silent office. Jem’s hands were shaking and she still felt sick and like she was going to cry at any second. But in the end, this had been the best choice.

Neither she nor Ellie could afford to lose everything. What could ever be worth that?

“Good girl,” her father said approvingly. “Now, go. Your mother will be expecting you at home, though I suspect your conversation with her will be less onerous than the one you have had with me.”

Automatically, Jem stood, kissed him on the cheek, and walked out, ignoring every face that she saw. Because none of those faces were Ellie. And they never would be. Ellie was out of her life forever.

Chapter Twenty Eight

“I’ve got some bad news.”

It was better, Ellie thought, to be honest and open. Mo was frowning in concentration at their screen and barely looked up when Ellie came in.

“Mmm?”

“We’re probably losing the Darlington contract.”

Mo definitely looked up at that. “What? How?” Then their eyes narrowed. “Hold on, you look different... shiny. What’s going on?”

“Long story,” Ellie said, collapsing into her desk chair her legs pleasantly aching.

Okay, okay, so today was not going to be a good day. She wanted to care so much about the business, she did care so much about the business, really she did. But every time she tried to concentrate on what might happen, she thought about Jem’s hair cascading down her smooth back, about the way her mouth tasted, about waking up with her in her arms.

“Then you’d better start from the beginning,” Mo said, spinning their chair around and scooting it over to Ellie’s desk.

Ellie sighed and Mo grinned.

“You did it,” they said. “You and Jem, you’re... together, aren’t you?”

Which was as blunt as questions got and Ellie really didn’t want to jinx anything, but how could they not be together. It was like the dam had opened and everything had come flooding out and she was grinning involuntarily as Mo started applauding and whooping.

“You’ve finally got a girlfriend.”

“Potentially.”

Mo paused and eyed her. “And... we’re losing the Darlington contract.”

“Potentially,” she said again.

Mo pursed their lips. “Let me guess what’s happening, Jem’s decided now is the appropriate time to come out of her closet, which in general I’d be all for, but I’m assuming it hasn’t gone well.”

“I don’t know,” Ellie admitted. “She’s gone to meet with her father now.”

“So we’ll just sit here on tenterhooks until she gets back to us.”

“She’ll let me know as soon as something’s happened. And we can always call Toby, he’ll give us the low-down.”

“Toby? Oh, the assistant, got it.” Mo’s lips started to twitch and then they were smiling again. “So tell me all the details.”

“About losing the party we’ve already worked hard on?”

They rolled their eyes. “Things might not be that bad,” Mo said. “I mean, the first time I showed up at home wearing a skirt I thought my parents were going to lose their shit. But my mum just told me to take it off because it needed ironing and my dad just snorted and said I was lucky I hadn’t inherited his knobbly knees.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not what’s going to happen here,” Ellie said, chest tightening a little. She took careful breaths, counting in her head, controlling things.

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“Then we’ll recover from it, just like we’ve recovered from things before,” said Mo. “We were doing alright before we got the contract. Well, mostly alright. And who knows, even without the contract, Jem probably knows enough fancy people that we can get some good gigs that way.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Ellie said.

“So, it’s probably not the end of the world. At least not yet. Besides, there’s no point celebrating tomorrow’s troubles, so whilst we’re sitting here waiting to get fired—”

“Potentially,” put in Ellie, not quite ready to believe that this really was happening.

“Potentially fired,” corrected Mo. “Why don’t you fill me in on all the juicy details.”

“I’m not giving you a blow by blow account.”

“So there was blowing,” Mo said, waggling their eyebrows suggestively.

“Who blew who?” Carys said, pushing the door open.

“Were you eavesdropping?” asked Mo.

“Only to the good bits, the rest of the time I was debating whether to go down and buy croissants. But then you got to blowing and I thought I’d be better off joining in here.”

Ellie sighed and shook her head. “Go and make some coffee and then I’ll give the

two of you the PG rated version of everything that went on, alright?”

Mo and Carys went off to the kitchen grumbling and Ellie laughed. Mo had reacted better than she had any right to expect, a mark of true friendship. And despite what Carys had said about needing to talk to her, Ellie thought that the two were chatting quite nicely in the kitchen. Whatever had or hadn't happened they seemed to be fine with each other.

Maybe life wasn't quite as dark as she'd been thinking. She thought about the touch of Jem's hands on her skin. Alright, life wasn't dark at all. And once this morning was over, they'd have some answers and, well, then they'd all be able to make plans.

THE TEXT MESSAGE came as Ellie was pre-emptively working on an invoice for the work that had already been done on the Darlington party. She intended to put together a file for whoever might be taking over the project to show what had already been done. Carys and Mo were going through the gossip pages online, arguing about outfits, and generally seeming completely normal.

Normal enough that Ellie was wondering whether she'd heard Carys correctly. They didn't look like they were having any kind of... kissing issues.

She was trying to estimate just how many hours she and Mo had spent on the project and the bleep of the text notification was just what she needed to distract her. It was probably either the phone company or the bank, since those were generally the only places that texted nowadays, but she welcomed the distraction anyway.

Until she opened it and read it and read it again as the band around her chest tightened and her breath left her body. It hurt so much it didn't hurt at all, she went instantly numb, closing her eyes against the darkness that she knew would be creeping into her vision.

Her body ached with need, her chest heaved with effort, but the tightness in her chest was just too much. Her eyes were closed so she felt rather than saw Mo and Carys rush to her. It was all spiraling away, all leaking slowly down the drain, until it hardly seemed worth the massive effort to make her lungs work, until it all just seemed too heavy to carry anymore.

The last thing she heard was Mo telling Carys to call the ambulance.

THE BED WAS hard and the sheets were scratchy. Ellie wriggled a little, trying to rub the spot between her shoulder blades that itched the most.

“She lives,” said a voice.

Ellie opened her eyes and that was all it took for everything to flood back into focus. The breathing, the text, Jem, and then... this. “Oh God.”

“Nope, just me,” Mo said cheerfully. “And Carys is around as well. But they’d only let us in one at a time, so she went to get a cup of tea.”

Technically, this was the part where she asked what happened, but she knew exactly what had happened. She couldn’t un-know what had happened, even if she truly, really wanted to. “You’re looking... happy,” she said instead.

“I’m glad you’re alright,” said Mo, climbing up so that they were sitting on the edge of the bed. “You gave us a scare.” They paled a little. “I didn’t know if... Well, I didn’t know if it was all going to be alright.”

“And is it?” Ellie asked.

Mo sighed. “Health wise, yes. You had a panic attack, you’re going to be fine, but you’re going to get a psych referral to get these attacks under control. And, um, job-

wise we're apparently going to be fine too."

"What?" She didn't understand that.

"I, uh, looked at your phone," Mo said, blushing. "I'm sorry, I wanted to know what had happened and, well, I saw the message."

She thought about it now, the words burned into her brain, and they were agony.

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“So, um, then I wanted to get hold of Jem, but she wouldn’t pick up her phone, so I did the only thing I could think of and I called that guy Toby and...” Mo took a breath. “And we’re not fired. Whatever else happened, we still have the contract.”

“What?” Ellie said again. “How?”

“I don’t know,” Mo said. “But he hadn’t heard anything about us being let go and he made some discreet inquiries, and the job is still ours.”

“Right,” Ellie said, knowing she should be happy about this.

“But it doesn’t make up for the other part, does it?” Mo asked, taking her hand. “I’m so sorry, El.”

“Don’t be, it’s my own stupid fault. I shouldn’t have let it happen.”

“You know that’s not true.”

“Isn’t it?” Ellie said, tears coming to her eyes. She blinked them away furiously. “You all tell me to get out of my comfort zone, but honestly, it’s a comfort zone for a reason. It’s comfortable. And when I leave it... things like this happen.”

Mo shook their head. “That’s not what this is about, you know that.”

“Isn’t it? I know that I let someone in, someone that I shouldn’t have let in. And then...” Her breath started leaving her body again. She let Jem in. She gave herself to Jem. And then as soon as she had, Jem sent a text, a text, to say that they wouldn’t be

seeing each other again. Just like that. Those words.

“It’s alright,” Mo said, squeezing her hand. “Take deep breaths. It’s alright.”

“It’s not alright.”

Mo blinked away their own tears. “I know,” they said. “I know it’s not. But it will be. It will be alright, El, I promise.”

And Ellie finally let herself cry because Mo was crying too and it seemed rude to leave them to do it alone. And because she couldn’t hold it back anymore. She’d trusted Jem and now she was gone and the hole she would leave was bigger than Ellie had ever imagined.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Rolly settled her into a club chair and ordered drinks for the both of them. Jem was shaking so badly she wasn’t entirely sure she would have made it out of her father’s building if Rolly hadn’t shown up to see where she was.

“It can’t have been that bad,” Rolly said, leaning in. “I mean, surely Jasper was the worst part. He was always a homophobe, even at school.”

“It was bad,” Jem mumbled.

Rolly sat back again and shook his head. “You know, sometimes I wondered if Jasper protested too much.”

“What do you mean?”

Rolly shrugged. “I don’t know, I suppose when you’re that against something it does

sometimes carry that implication that perhaps you're trying a little too hard to, you know..."

"I don't think Jasper's gay," Jem said. "Rosie's pregnant."

"So?" said Rolly. "That doesn't mean a thing."

"Still, I'm pretty sure he's not." She laughed bitterly. "Could you imagine my father's reaction if both his children ended up being defective?"

"You're not defective," said Rolly immediately. "Far from it. You're a wonderful, kind, loving person who's figuring out her place in the world, that's all."

"I've destroyed my place in the world."

The drinks came, set silently upon the table by a waitress who immediately disappeared.

"You've destroyed nothing, Jem. I'm sure you haven't. I'm sure it was a difficult situation, but you've handled it now, haven't you?"

She laughed again, that same cold sound. "I've handled it all."

Rolly sighed and put down the glass that he'd just picked up. "What exactly happened, Jemima?"

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She closed her eyes and laid her head back against the seat. “He offered me a choice.”

“What kind of choice?”

She kept her eyes tight closed. “I could carry on as I wanted, but I would be cut off. Or I could...” She had to swallow. “I could break up with Ellie and leave the city for a while, keep everything, and be more discreet when I came back. Basically live the life I’ve had up until now.”

“Oh, Jem,” Rolly said. “I’m so sorry. My spare room is yours, obviously, we’ll get your things packed up immediately and have them moved over.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Jem said, eyes still closed.

There was silence. A long silence. Until she heard Rolly pick up his glass and swallow. When he finally spoke, his voice was higher and tighter.

“Surely, you didn’t...”

“I did what I had to do.”

“Jem, you didn’t...”

Her eyes flashed open and she sat up straight. “You weren’t there. I did what I had to do.”

“But...” Rolly’s face was pale and his eyes were wide. “But I thought you loved

her?”

It hurt more than she could possibly say, in a visceral, barbaric kind of way, like having her insides ripped out through a hole in her stomach. “She got to keep her job.”

“What?” asked Rolly, still pale.

“She got to keep her job,” Jem repeated. “That was the deal that I made. We both get to keep everything except each other, which since having each other was the problem in the first place seems rather fair, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t understand,” said Rolly.

Jem picked up her glass and drained it in one. “I destroyed both our lives by opening my big mouth in front of Jasper. This way I get to undo all that. I’ll go back to the life I had before, and what was so wrong with that? And Ellie will get to keep the contract for the party. Her business will be a success, she won’t suffer at all for what I’ve done.”

“She won’t suffer?” Rolly said. “You think she’s not suffering right now? I assume you’ve already told her.”

“Suffering is a part of life, it’s the price you pay for winning, at least according to my father.”

“Who is absolutely to be relied upon for advice in matters of the heart,” Rolly said acidly.

“Rolly, please. I’m trying to do the right thing here. I know it doesn’t look good, but it was the best choice that I had. I know it’s not what you wanted me to do, and it’s

probably not what Ellie wanted me to do, and it's not what would happen in some stupid saccharine movie. I know I'm supposed to give up everything for her."

"But you didn't."

"I would," Jem said, closing her eyes again. "I would. I'd give it all up for her. But she shouldn't have to give up her business for me. I did the right thing. The pain is temporary. And we'll both get to go back to our normal lives."

"You did the cowardly thing," Rolly said simply. "You're afraid, afraid of being yourself, afraid that your self is so tied up in your name and your wealth and your status that you'd lose yourself without those things. So when faced with a choice, you took the easy way out."

"The easy way?" She opened her eyes. "You think this is the easy way?"

Rolly drank his drink. "I think this is the path of least resistance. I think this is the way that lets you keep your secrets, lets you go back to a life that you think is safe. But I think you're in for a nasty surprise."

"Nastier than having my brother call me a deviant?"

Rolly nodded and his eyes were sad. "I think you're going to find out that you can't go back. That you can't unsay things, undo them, that you've changed, Jem, and your old life just won't be enough anymore."

"Fine," Jem said. "Fine, if that's the way it has to be. But Ellie will be alright. She'll do the party, she'll get a reputation, she'll play by the rules like she always does and she'll find the success that she's worked so hard for."

"If that's what she wants."

“It’s what she deserves.” Jem took a breath. “And maybe you’re right, I’m a coward. But I don’t know how to be anything else, Rolly. I really don’t.”

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“That’s a shame,” said Rolly, standing up. “Because I always thought you were the fiercest and bravest of us all.”

“I’m not,” Jem said simply. “I’m just not.”

“What happens now?” He was buttoning his jacket.

“I’m going to the country. I’ll stay with mother for a while, clear my head. And then I’ll come back and... And life will resume as normal.”

“I hope not,” Rolly said quietly. He bent and kissed Jem’s cheek. “I hope for your own sake that your life changes. That you see sense.”

Jem watched as he walked away and felt more alone than ever. Rolly had been the one person she thought she could count on, and even he was leaving now.

IT WAS DUSK by the time the car drew up in front of the house. Jem paid the driver and lifted her own bag out of the boot. She took a deep breath of clean air. Her mother wasn’t exactly the person she wanted to see. But then again, she didn’t want to see anyone. And at least her mother was likely to ignore her in favor of the horses.

Besides, she didn’t have anywhere else to go.

Just last night she’d been with Ellie and it had seemed like even though life wasn’t perfect, perhaps it could work out. Except it obviously couldn’t, it had been wishful thinking. Though she was sure she’d done the right thing, the thought of going on without Ellie was... sad.

It was such a small word but there was nothing more fitting. She was sad. The world was sad. Everything was just filled with sad.

“Are you going to come in or are you planning on sleeping on the lawn?”

She hadn’t heard her mother’s footsteps. “I’m coming in,” she said hurriedly.

“Good. Put your things in your room and there’ll be kitchen sups when you’ve finished.” Her mother stalked off around the house and Jem sighed.

So her mother was planning on speaking to her as well. Fantastic. Just what she needed. Still, she might as well get it over with. So she went in, deposited her bag, and went back down to the kitchen.

“Cold sups tonight, I’m afraid. I wasn’t expecting you.” Her mother slid a plate in front of her on the long kitchen table. Jem picked up a fork. She wasn’t particularly hungry.

“I suppose you’ve heard.”

“Mmm,” said her mother picking up her own fork.

“Pa’s already said his piece, so I don’t need another lecture.”

Her mother arched an eyebrow. “What on earth makes you think I’m going to lecture you?”

“Well... I mean...” Jem put her fork down, confused about what she was supposed to say. “I just thought...”

“There’s nothing wrong with it, is there?” sniffed her mother, spearing a piece of

ham. “Unless you’re ashamed of it, I suppose. Are you?”

“Ashamed of what?” Jem asked. This conversation was not going at all as expected. In fact, it was veering off into very uncharted territory.

“Being homosexual. Or gay? Or does one call it queer nowadays? I’m afraid I don’t know the proper terminology. I’m sure you can educate me. Which do you prefer?”

“Um, I haven’t really thought about it,” Jem said weakly.

“Well, just as long as you’re not ashamed.” Her mother studied her for a moment, then put down the ham she’d been holding. “I’ve never molly-coddled you. To be fair, I haven’t been the most hands-on mother. Never had the talent for it.” She sniffed again. “Perhaps haven’t been the best role model.”

Jem absolutely did not know what to say to this. She kept her mouth firmly closed.

“I know about your father’s affairs, if that’s what you’re wondering. Never bothered me,” her mother went on. “Wasn’t really in this for the companionship. More for the house and the horses, to be honest. The lifestyle, I suppose you’d say. Still, your father and I have our arrangements and it works very well for the both of us.”

“I see,” said Jem faintly.

“I just say that in case you thought that I was in any way... weak, I suppose,” her mother said thoughtfully. “Or less than able to get what I wanted out of life. Because that’s what’s important, isn’t it? Finding what you want and then aspiring to get it.”

“I suppose,” Jem said.

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Her mother nodded. “Something you should probably work on then,” she said. “Depending whether or not the gal is worth it.”

“Gal?”

“This party planner,” her mother said, tilting her head. “Eleanor? Ellie? Bella? Are you going to eat that ham?” Jem shook her head and her mother reached over with her fork and took the slice. “I’m positively famished. Are you riding out with me tomorrow?”

“Uh... sure,” Jem said, who’d had no intention of doing so.

“All that money on your education. ‘Yes’ is the word you’re looking for. I won’t have this American ‘sureness’ about everything. Tell me about the gal then.”

And to her surprise, Jem found herself talking to her mother.

Chapter Thirty

Ellie pushed herself hard because she thought maybe she had something to prove. Alistair Darlington had said nothing about her personal life and nothing about Jem. And Jem had said nothing about Jem either, not that Ellie had tried to call or message. It just hurt too much and was better off behind her.

So for the week after she got out of hospital, Ellie did all the things she was supposed to. In a way, she guessed, she got her old life back. And on Friday evening she was finally climbing the stairs to her flat, looking forward to feeding Constable and falling

asleep on the couch, when she saw Paul standing in front of his door.

“Were you going to tell me you’d been in hospital?”

Ellie did her best to smile. “I didn’t want to worry you. Besides, it was only for a few hours and it’s all fine now. I’ve even got a psych appointment to follow up, so really, there’s nothing to worry about.”

“I do worry though,” Paul said as she reached the landing. “Of course I do. It’s my job to look after you.”

Ellie paused at this, key in hand. “Um, not really,” she said lightly. “Though thank you for thinking of me.”

Paul sighed and she could hear it lingering in the air. “Ellie, come on. You need someone to keep an eye out for you.”

She didn’t know how she felt about that. On the surface it seemed nice enough, but it also sounded... creepy.

He stepped closer. “And then there’s the break up too.”

“I really don’t want to talk about it,” Ellie started before frowning. How had he known about that? She hadn’t seen him to tell him. “Who told you?”

He smiled at her and came in another step closer. “Does it really matter? What matters is that I’m here for you, El. Why don’t I bring some dinner over and you can tell me all about it?”

“I’m alright, thanks,” she said, pressing her keys between her fingers.

“You’re better off out of it, anyway,” Paul went on. He cleared his throat. “Actually,” he added casually, “I was thinking of asking you out myself. Is it a bit soon? Cos I can ask again in a week or so.”

Ellie just stood there, mouth half open, letting the words sink in. Was that what all this was about? All the caring and the food and the chats? It had all been leading up to this? Suddenly she felt dirty. Dirty and dusty and quite stupid.

“Bit soon then, eh?” Paul said, grinning.

“No, well, yes,” Ellie stuttered. She swallowed and looked up at him. “Paul, you know I’m not interested in men, right?”

“I’m not just any man though,” he said, still grinning.

She blew out a breath, got her keys ready, slid the appropriate one into the lock just in case she needed it. She’d never felt unsafe here before, not like now. Not with Paul looming over her in front of her own door, that grin on his face, any understanding she’d thought they had all gone down the drain.

“I mean, we know each other pretty well by now, El, don’t we? And I can see that you’re interested, maybe even curious. So what if we went out for a night or a few dates, just to see? It’s not like they’d take your lesbian card away, is it?”

Her heart was starting to pound, her chest was starting to tighten. But she couldn’t show it, couldn’t give him another reason to think she was weak or needed looking after. He was bigger than her, far bigger. And she... she was afraid, she realized.

“I’ll think about it,” she lied, turning her key quickly as she talked and hoping he didn’t hear the sound.

“Alright then, I’ll go get some food, shall I?”

“I’m not hungry. Tired. I’m just going straight to bed, not feeling my best,” she said, the words all running together.

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He stepped back, looking concerned. "Alright then, if you're sure?"

She nodded. "I'm sure. Um, thanks though, thanks anyway."

"Just bang on the wall if you need something," he said, still looking worried. "I'll be right there."

"Will do," she was already pushing the door open, walking over the threshold and then, finally, banging it behind her and locking it tight. Locking it for the first time since she could remember. She'd always left it open for Paul to walk right in before.

And then her breath started to come faster.

Her fingers were losing feeling.

So she did the only thing she could think of to do.

"SO YOU JUST use freezing water?" Carys said, peering into the sink.

"It works like a charm, stops the panic in its tracks," Ellie said, trying not to remember Jem's hands holding her hair, Jem wiping away the water with her soft hands from her face.

"Probably not useful when you're not at home though," said Carys. "I mean, there's not a lot of sinks on the tube, for example."

Ellie wrapped the blanket around herself more tightly and pressed herself into the

corner of the couch. "It did the job for now."

The kettle came to a boil and Carys poured the tea, carefully carrying the cups over to the couch. "I'm sorry, bach, I truly am. You've had a rough few days, haven't you?"

"Putting it mildly," said Ellie, accepting the tea.

"Want me to go and rough up this Paul?"

"Maybe later," said Ellie, cradling the warm mug in her hands. She hadn't realized how cold she was. "I feel better with you here."

"It's not a problem, had nothing else to do on a Friday night anyway," Carys said.

"You sure about that?" asked Ellie. The tea was warming her, making her feel slightly more human. And she was glad for the chance not to think about her own life for a minute or two. "Because when I rang Mo they didn't pick up."

"They've got karate class," Carys said quickly.

"Which you know all about because you've memorized their schedule at this point?"

Carys snorted. "You'd know about it if you paid attention, it's all they've been going on about all afternoon. You had your head buried in your computer."

"Right," Ellie said. She'd been attempting to distract herself all week. As long as she didn't think about Jem, things were fine. But the second her mind stopped being busy she remembered it all and the hurt and betrayal came flooding back. How could she have done this? How could Jem have said what she said and then left her, dumped her by text, for God's sake?

“Want to talk about it?” Ellie asked now.

Carys sighed. “You want distracting, I suppose.”

“You wanted to talk to me and I blew you off for a thousand reasons, which was rude. And I’m sorry. But I’m here now and I’m listening. You and Mo?”

“We kissed,” Carys said. She sniffed, settled down in the couch. “Then we cuddled. We watched some films. It’s nothing.”

“If it was nothing, you wouldn’t be bringing it up.”

Carys shrugged, biting her lip.

“What is it?” Ellie asked gently.

“I like them,” said Carys.

“So?”

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“So...” Carys blew out a big sigh. “So, I’m not sure I should and I’m confused about everything and...”

“Take a deep breath.”

Carys closed her eyes. “Mo’s great. They make me laugh, they know me inside out, and there were definite sparks.”

“All of which are good things. So what’s the problem?”

“The problem is me.” She opened her eyes again. “I’m an intolerant fucker, that’s the problem.”

“That’s not even close to being true,” Ellie said.

“Is it not? Then why is it bothering me that Mo has a penis?”

Ellie let those words echo around the room for a second, trying to grasp the full meaning of them. Then she took hold of Carys’s hand. “You’re not an intolerant fucker,” she said. “You’re not. I know you’re not, and Mo knows that too.”

“How can that be true?” said Carys miserably.

“Listen, this is something you and Mo have got to sit down and talk about. It’s something that was sure to come up and you’ll need to go through it together.”

“Right.”

Ellie squeezed her hand. "Listen, Car, I think I kind of get it. You've never even experimented with a man before, have you?"

"Not interested, I've only ever been interested in girls. And Mo."

"Well, Mo isn't a girl. But they're not a man either. So this is brand new territory. You've got no experience with this, and neither have I. But Mo does, Mo's been dealing with it their whole life. So I think Mo is probably the one you need to be speaking to."

"Yeah," Carys said, squeezing her hand back. "Yeah, you're right. I just... I just didn't know if it was alright to bring it up, that's all."

"For all you know, Mo feels exactly the same way about your... um, you know."

"Vagina, you can say it," Carys said. She sniffed again. "And that's a fair point, I suppose."

"So, if you're really interested and this is really important, then the two of you need to have a conversation. It's that simple."

"Huh. It is pretty simple. See, I knew I needed to talk to you about things, you always make life seem clearer," Carys said, sipping at her tea.

Ellie sipped her own tea, let the warmth run through her.

"Penny for your thoughts," said Carys.

Ellie frowned. "I was just thinking, what with Jem and now Paul, and you and Mo, I really don't know anyone, do I? It seems like no one's who I think they are."

“I’m not weird. And I’ve not changed,” said Carys.

“You are indisputably weird. And there’s nothing wrong with changing.”

“Is there not? You’re the one that wants to live a comfortable life.”

The words hung in the air again. Ellie sighed and looked at her book sitting on the coffee table. Constable was curled up in front of the window, bird watching. And for the first time in a long time she didn’t feel like being home alone, reading, sleeping.

“Want to have a sleepover?”

“Yes,” Carys said firmly. “But you have to paint my nails.”

“What?”

“That’s what happens at sleepovers and besides, I think Mo will like it.”

“Fine,” Ellie said.

“And you can tell me all about Jemima so I know where to find her and exact appropriate punishment.”

“No,” Ellie said. “In fact, Jem is completely off limits.”

Because maybe if she tried hard enough she could forget that Jem ever existed.

Chapter Thirty One

Every morning, Jem went out with her mother to ride. For the rest of the day, her mother occupied her with various horse-related tasks. Jem knew that her mother was trying to distract her, but it wasn't working.

Every time she closed her eyes she could see Ellie's face.

It was slowly beginning to dawn on her that forgetting Ellie wasn't going to be as easy as she thought.

It also hadn't escaped her notice that whenever they were anywhere with other people, Jem's mother insinuated herself into any conversation anyone tried to have with Jem. It had taken a couple of days to realize that her mother was protecting her, not letting others confront her.

It was strangely touching. Touching because being protected wasn't a part of who Jem was. And strange because, well, it was her mother, the least maternal person on

Earth.

They were bumping along a farm track in her mother's four wheel drive late one afternoon, going to see a horse for sale, when Jem finally brought it up.

"I'm not china, you know."

"Did I say you were?" her mother said, wrenching the steering wheel to keep the car on the track.

"I mean, I know you're trying to get people not to talk to me about it, but frankly, I'm out now, so at some point someone's going to say something."

"And it's something you're ready to talk about?" asked her mother sharply.

Jem thought about this. "Yes," she said, finally, because she might as well get it over with. "So maybe stop turning every conversation into a horse conversation?"

Her mother snorted. "I do not do that."

"You very much do that."

"Well, horses are far more interesting than people," said her mother stoutly. "But if that's what you wish, then I'll stop being a mother hen."

"Not words I would have used to describe you."

Her mother gave her the side eye and drew up in front of a large stable block. "Amuse yourself while I go and deal with this."

Jem got out of the car and breathed in the clean country air. She was debating going

back to London. But the longer she stayed here, the more her old life seemed to dissipate behind her. She couldn't hide away forever, she got that, but it was the only plan she had for right now.

As much as she couldn't forget about Ellie, she suspected being in London would make things a lot harder. Seeing Ellie in every corner of her flat couldn't be healthy.

“Good lord, there you are!”

Jem turned and groaned. Annabelle. Just when she'd told her mother she didn't need protecting, along came the one person that she really could use protecting from.

“You know I've been calling and calling, but you just don't pick up,” Annabelle said primly, picking her way through the yard in immaculate wellingtons.

Oh well, she'd said she was ready to be confronted, she supposed a baptism by fire might not be a bad way to get started. “I suppose you've heard then?” she said.

Annabelle lifted one beautifully manicured eyebrow. “I should say. And I'm absolutely furious.”

Great. Jem took a breath. “I can understand why this might come as a shock,” she began. “But there are certain things that can't be changed—”

“Good grief,” Annabelle interrupted. “I couldn't give a fig about you being queer, what I do care about is my reputation.”

“Your reputation?” Jem asked confused.

“I do pride myself on my matchmaking skills,” Annabelle went on. “But how am I supposed to make a match for you when you don’t tell me that I’m barking up entirely the wrong tree. When I think about all the potential partners I’ve passed over who would have been perfect for you, I could just spit. Barbie Linden would have been perfect, but she’s married off to that American woman now. Honestly, Jem, could you make my life any more difficult?”

But Jem was laughing too hard to answer.

“What?” Annabelle said, looking faintly offended.

“Nothing, nothing,” said Jem.

By the time her mother returned, Jem had promised Annabelle that she’d let her know when she was ready to start dating again, and Annabelle had gone off to see the horse for sale for herself.

“Everything alright?” her mother asked.

“Mmm,” Jem said thoughtfully.

“That big thing you were keeping hidden suddenly not seeming quite as big as it did when it needed hiding, I assume?”

Jem narrowed her eyes.

“I saw Annabelle in the barn,” her mother said. She started the car. “You do people a disservice when you presume you know how they feel about things. Something you might want to consider. Annabelle isn’t the only example.”

“Who exactly are you thinking about?”

“That gal of yours, for a start,” her mother said, turning in a tight circle to face the farm track again. “Food for thought. Lord, that horse was a fine filly.”

As her mother chattered on about the horse, Jem had plenty of time to connect the dots and draw her own conclusions about what her mother really meant.

THE RED MINI bounced along the drive and Jem let the drawing room curtain drop. “Are you expecting someone for supper?” she asked her mother, who was happily flicking through Horse and Hound.

“No,” answered her mother. “Why?”

“Because we’ve got a visitor,” said Jem just as the doorbell rang.

“So sorry,” Rosie said as soon as Jem opened the door to her. “I shouldn’t just turn up like this.”

“Nonsense,” Jem’s mother said. “You’re family, you can turn up whenever you like.”

“Thank you, it’s just for a night,” said Rosie, pulling in a small suitcase.

“A night?” Jem said, confused. “Why? What’s happened?”

“Oh, I’ve left Jasper,” Rosie said. She turned to Jem’s mother. “I know it’s a terrible imposition just appearing like this. But my parents are so far away and I just didn’t

have the energy to drive all the way up there tonight. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not a jot," Jem's mother said.

Not that Jem was surprised. Rosie was as horse mad as her mother and the two of them had always gotten along well.

"Wait, hold on, you've left him?" asked Jem, looking back and forth between the two women who didn't seem at all surprised by this turn of events.

"Oh yes," Rosie said. "Obviously, I did."

Jem frowned and had a terrible thought. "He didn't, um, do anything to you, did he?"

"Lord, no," said Rosie cheerfully. "Jasper's all talk and no bite, you know what a bully he can be."

"That boarding school of his wasn't the best influence," said Jem's mother. "He came home with all kinds of ideas. You do have my apologies for that, though I'm sure you're straightening him up."

"Of course I am," Rosie said. "There's nothing to worry about. He'll come to his senses, I'm sure. I can't help but love him, you know, and he does want to please me, no matter how he blusters on the outside."

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“Alright,” said Jem slowly. “So, um, if you don’t mind me asking, why have you left him?”

“Because of you,” Rosie said, turning to her in surprise as though this should have been obvious. She turned back to her mother-in-law. “Is it alright if I take the blue room?”

“Of course,” said Jem’s mother and Rosie picked up her case and started up the stairs.

“Wait, because of me?” Jem asked.

Rosie turned back. “Obviously. I mean, what if our daughter is gay?” She put a protective hand on her stomach.

“It’s a girl?” asked Jem’s mother, smiling.

“It is. I haven’t told him yet,” grinned Rosie. “He’ll be furious.” She turned back and took her case up the stairs.

“Wait, what?” Jem said, looking at her mother.

“Are you a fool?” her mother asked. “Rosie left your brother to teach him a lesson because he’s being a terrible homophobe. Something that he learned at school, I’m sure, because he certainly didn’t learn it here.”

“Alright,” Jem said. She looked up the stairs. “And... um...”

“And Jasper will be lost without her and will come looking for her in a day or so just like he always does. He will learn some kind of lesson, or at least we hope he does. Hungry?”

“Um, yes,” said Jem, following her mother to the kitchen and trying to take all this in.

“Speaking of house guests,” her mother said as she opened the massive fridge. “It’s about time you stopped feeling sorry for yourself.”

“I’m sorry?” Jem said.

“You’ve had enough time to come to your senses,” said her mother. “And it’s time to get back out there. You can either continue with this farce or set things straight, I don’t particularly care which, though I think you’re too intelligent to let this nonsense go on much longer.”

“Nonsense,” Jem said weakly.

Her mother sighed, put a cold pork pie on a platter on the table and looked at her. “Have you not been thinking about things?”

Jem blew out a breath. Had she? Not really. Well, there was one exception.

“That’s what I thought,” her mother said. “Thinking about that gal. So, it’s time you did something about it.”

“Something about what?”

Her mother looked as though her patience were rapidly running out. “Well, do you love her or not?” She eyed her daughter up and down. “No, don’t analyze it, just answer.”

For once, Jem answered from her heart. “Yes.”

“Well then, you’d better find a way to repair the damage that you caused, hadn’t you?” said her mother. “There’s some fresh tomatoes by the sink, chop them up will you, there’s a good girl.”

She made it sound so simple.

Jem started to chop.

Except...

Maybe it was simple.

Maybe it was time that she stood up for something, that she became something, that she changed something.

Because her old life was gone, that was clear. Rolly hadn’t rung all week. Annabelle wanted to set her up with an old school friend. Her mother was suddenly far more perceptive and caring than Jem had thought she could be. Rosie apparently wore the trousers in her relationship with Jasper. Things weren’t at all as she’d always thought they were.

Which meant she might have made a mistake.

Or several.

Was she really going to have her come to Jesus moment chopping tomatoes?

Except this wasn't a moment at all. It was an accumulation of thoughts and feelings and realizations and the growing sense that being without Ellie wasn't going to be easy, that leaving was harder than she'd thought. A realization that you could do the right thing for the right reason and still be wrong.

Which she was beginning to think had happened. Sure, she'd handed Ellie her old life back. But... but what if Ellie's old life was just as full of holes as Jem's old life? What if Ellie actually didn't want her old life back and she'd never given her the opportunity to decide?

She handed the cutting board full of tomatoes to her mother. "I'll go back to London tomorrow."

"As you wish."

Chapter Thirty Two

The office was as silent as she'd ever heard it, despite the fact that there were three of them in the tiny space. Ellie tried to focus on her computer screen where she was choosing table linens for the Darlington party.

The problem with trying very, very hard to forget Jemima was that she was still, unfathomably, working for Jemima's father. So far no one had said any differently,

and the one meeting she'd had with Alistair had been short and to the point. Which left her feeling like she definitely hadn't been fired.

Not that she wasn't pleased, she was, very much so. At least if she couldn't have a private life she could have a successful company. It was still an odd feeling though, and it did make it difficult to forget that for an instant there she'd been happy.

She growled under her breath. The silence was really getting to her. Finally, she banged both hands down on her desk.

"Alright, enough, I can't take it anymore."

"Can't take what?" Mo asked, looking up with big blue eyes lined today in deep purple to match their fancy Hermes scarf.

"We're not doing anything," Carys added somewhat defensively.

"You're being too quiet."

Carys rolled her eyes. "Too loud, too quiet, we can't win in here."

"Why are you in here?" Ellie asked. "You've got your own office."

"My office doesn't have a heart-broken bestie in it who needs looking after," Carys said.

It was Ellie's turn to roll her eyes. "I'm not heart-broken and I don't need looking after."

Carys swapped a look with Mo who shrugged in return.

“Fine, maybe a little heart-broken,” said Ellie, regretting being sharp. “But it’s weird when you’re both in here being quiet, I don’t like it. I prefer it when you’re talking nonsense about people who are supposedly famous like... Ryan Seacrest.”

“Ryan Seacrest?” Carys said. “What is this, 2005?”

“I didn’t mind American Idol,” Mo said. “It was better than The Voice at any rate.”

“See? That’s what we’re missing, the opinions, the banter,” Ellie said. “You’re not making me feel any better by being good. In fact, it makes me feel worse. I just want things to be normal again.”

“Fair enough,” sniffed Carys. “How about a kebab for lunch?”

As much as Ellie didn’t want the place smelling like kebab, she knew Carys was trying, so she nodded and pulled a twenty pound note out of petty cash. “Extra spicy,” she said.

Carys danced off happily and Mo sighed.

“You really like her, don’t you?” Ellie said.

Mo grinned. “I do. Is that so wrong? I mean, I know she’s struggling a bit with the whole Enby thing, but it’s all in her head. She’ll come around, I’m sure of it.” They paused. “I don’t think I’ve met anyone before that made me smile just by breathing.”

“That’s nice,” said Ellie, aware that sounded slightly pathetic. “I mean, I’m happy for you both. I really am.”

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“But the last thing you want to hear about is how happy someone else is when you’re wallowing in your own misery?” said Mo sympathetically.

“Something like that,” sighed Ellie.

Mo leaned back in their chair. “You know you’ve got to change, Ellie. You know that whatever else you take away from this you’ve got to start getting out of your comfort zone, you’ve got to start grabbing life instead of just waiting for it to grab you.”

“I know, I know,” said Ellie, closing her eyes and leaning her head on the back of her chair. “I get that. I get that I had a taste of something I didn’t know I wanted and... well, found I wanted it, I suppose.”

“Except after what happened it might be easier to put the blinkers on and pretend that you never wanted it in the first place, that you shouldn’t have risked anything in the first place.”

“That was my initial reaction,” Ellie admitted. “But there has to be a balance, doesn’t there? I mean, I like to live life by the rules, and I should. I shouldn’t have gone out with Jem, I shouldn’t have let anything happen. Apart from anything else she’s the boss’s daughter. But then risk nothing, win nothing, right?”

“Right,” agreed Mo.

“So maybe there’s a mid point somewhere there where I break out of my comfort zone and meet new people who aren’t filthy rich and important to my job. You know, just a normal person.”

“Think you’d be happy with just a normal person?” Mo grinned. “I’m not sure I can see that. I think you might be on hold for someone special.”

Ellie groaned. “Lame. But fine. I get it. I get that I was supposed to learn a lesson here. I need to change, I’m just not sure how to change yet. Maybe I need to take a little time.”

“No thoughts of calling Jem?” asked Mo, raising an eyebrow.

“She dumped me by text.”

“Yeah, not the best. But then... she did have her own issues going on.”

“Not issues I need to be part of, I’m afraid. I knew better going into this thing. I would never force anyone to come out, but I also don’t want to be part of the drama and the secrecy. I’ve spent a long time being comfortable with who and what I am, I can’t go backward.”

Mo smiled a little. “I get that. I really do. But I also get that we’re not all perfect, El. It’s a struggle to be yourself, it always is. Do you think that there aren’t streets I avoid because I look the way I do? Even though I know that I should be proud and brave and strong, sometimes I just want to be... safe, I suppose.”

Ellie wanted to hug them. “You are proud and brave and strong, Mo. I can’t think of anyone who knows how to be themselves more than you.”

“And if I find that hard, how hard do you think someone like Jem finds it?”

She nodded. “Okay, okay. I get your point. But it’s moot. Jem is no longer around. I have learned the valuable lesson that I was supposed to learn. And...”

“And what?”

“I’ll join a dating app?”

“It’s a start, I suppose,” Mo said. “Just make sure you run potentials past Carys and me because we don’t want any weirdos in our little family.”

“That’s going to limit my options,” said Ellie dryly.

“Well, we’ve got enough to handle with you.”

“I’m perfectly normal.”

“Ah, yes,” said Mo. “But you’re planning on changing, remember? Breaking out of your comfort zone? Who knows what that might lead to.”

TALKING ABOUT CHANGE was all very well, actually doing it was something else entirely. Ellie was lying on the couch, Constable on her stomach, flicking through the dating app she’d downloaded.

It wasn’t that there weren’t any attractive women on it, it was just that... She sighed. It was just that none of them looked like Jemima. It seemed that the harder she tried to forget her, the more she thought about her, which really wasn’t the point of this project.

“Choose three women,” she said to herself.

Constable started to purr at the sound of her voice. And then both his eyes sprung open and he started to quiver. Ellie just had time to recognize something was wrong when the front door opened.

Holy shit. She'd forgotten to lock it. It was such a habit to leave it open that she hadn't locked it when she came home.

“Hello, hello,” Paul trilled.

Ellie jumped up, sending Constable sliding to the floor where he stalked off to the bedroom. “Paul?” Her heart started to beat harder. “What are you doing here?”

He wasn’t dangerous, she told herself. All the time he’d been her neighbor he’d never done anything dangerous. He might have the wrong idea about a few things, but he wouldn’t actually hurt her, would he?

“I just thought I’d come in and deal with that mold problem in your bathroom,” he said with a grin, holding up a bottle of something.

Ellie took a breath. A week ago she wouldn’t have thought anything of this, she thought. A week ago this would just be Paul being friendly. It could still be Paul being friendly. “That’s kind,” she said.

His grin widened. “And then I thought we could talk about us.”

Okay, not just being friendly. “Us?” croaked Ellie.

“It’s been long enough, Ellie. You’ve had time to think about it. And I know you know I’m right. All this playing around with women has been fine, but it’s time for you to settle down, and we make a good couple. They always say that you should be friends before lovers, and we’re good friends. I’ve been patient, I’ve let you work all this other stuff out of your system.”

Her chest was getting tighter. He was inside the flat already. She couldn’t anger him.

How had it come to this? How had she never noticed how creepy he was? She'd been so sure that he was just a kind and gentle neighbor.

With a deep breath she forced a smile on her face. "It's kind of you to take care of the bathroom problem," she said. "You know the way, don't you?"

"Your place is the exact same layout as mine," he beamed.

She waited until he was in the bathroom before dialing 999.

She just hoped that the police came quickly enough.

Chapter Thirty Three

Jem strode out of the elevators. "He'll see me," she said.

"Hold on," Toby said. "Please, we talked about this."

She stopped and sighed. "Fine, call him right now, but you've got about three seconds."

He nodded and picked up the phone by his side. "Just, um, I know it's none of my business..."

"And?" asked Jem.

Toby blushed a bright red. "Nothing, just, well, I heard about things and..." He sniffed and straightened up. "And if anything happens in there you can depend on me to call the police or security or whatever needs to happen."

For a second, Jem was confused. Then things clicked into place. Toby had obviously

heard the rumors and the gossip and knew what had gone on and was offering to protect her. She smiled at him and let her voice grow softer. “Thank you, Toby. I appreciate that. But I don’t think you have anything to worry about. My father isn’t angry because I’m gay, he’s angry because I lied.”

Toby looked relieved. “Oh, good.” He bit his lip. “I was a bit worried because, well, I don’t want to get fired.”

“For being gay?” Jem said without thinking.

“Bi,” Toby said with a nod.

“None of anyone’s business but yours,” Jem said with a grin. “Been to that new club that opened down by the river? The one with karaoke? It’s great, you should check it out.”

“I will,” Toby said, finally dialing the extension number with a relieved look on his face.

Jem walked on to her father’s office feeling a little better. It was the first time she’d ever talked openly about a place and it felt strangely freeing. A feeling that she suspected she might have to get used to.

“Jemima,” her father said, standing up as she opened the door.

“No need to stand,” she said, reaching into her handbag. “I’m not staying.” She took out the keys to her flat and her car and placed them on the edge of his desk.

“What’s this?”

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“Enough,” said Jem. “I don’t want to fight with you, I really don’t. Because I don’t think you’re intolerant or prejudiced. I think you’re angry because I lied and perhaps disappointed because I’m not who you thought I was.”

He sat back down rather abruptly, looking a little older and a little paler. “I taught you better than to lie, Jemima.”

“You did, and I shouldn’t have done it. I should have told you from the beginning.” She sat down on the edge of a chair. “I was afraid, and that’s on me. I should have been braver, better.”

He took a breath. “Perhaps I should have fostered an environment in which you felt more able to be truthful,” he said after what felt like a long time.

“I’m not here to place blame,” Jem said. “I’m here to do exactly what I’ve done, which is to return my keys. I’ve kept a spare set and I’ll move my things out just as soon as I can.”

“You don’t need to do that.”

“I do,” Jem said. “I do because I’m not doing this anymore. I’m not having other people make decisions for me. I’m going back on our deal. I’m not hiding a thing going forward.”

“I see.”

“And I know what you’re thinking. I’m a girl with no prospects, no skills, no

ambition. And you're right, or you wereright. But that's not how it's going to be. I'm not depending on you anymore. I liked working with Ellie, so I'm going to try and get a job, a real one. And I'm going to stand on my own two feet."

"A job?"

Jem shrugged. "I'll work at McDonald's if I have to. There's no shame in that. In fact, there's no shame in any of this. The secrets are gone."

He breathed out through his nose. "And this... Ellie?"

Jem shrugged. "I don't know. What I did to her, just dumping her like that, was terrible and I never should have done it. I should have talked to her rather than made decisions for her. That's what I intend to do now."

Her father nodded and then slowly, to Jem's astonishment, he began to smile.

"What?"

"Nothing. I just... I never expected to see this from you, Jemima. This determination, this strength. It's a new side to you and I like it."

"You do?"

He leaned forward, his elbows on the desk. "I do. I've despaired of you, with your parties and your social events and your swimming around doing a little of everything and a lot of nothing. But this... ambition, it suits you."

Jem was wrong-footed. "Okay," she said, not sure what else to say.

He sat back again. "I'll take the car keys," he said. "Keep the flat keys—"

“But,” began Jem.

“But nothing. You need a place to live. We’ll discuss a fair rental agreement, you may need room-mates to help pay the bills.”

“Okay,” said Jem, swallowing. “Okay, that seems fair.”

“I’ll continue your allowance for a further three months, that should give you time to find a job. After that, you’re on your own.”

“Fair,” Jem said again. “Though if I find something before then—”

“I’ll stop it sooner,” filled in her father.

“Which leaves the question of Ellie,” said Jem, because she was serious about there being no more secrets.

Her father was quiet for a moment. “Did she put you up to this?”

“No,” Jem said honestly. “I haven’t even spoken to her yet. I don’t even know that she will speak to me.”

Her father nodded. “You have feelings for the woman?”

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“Yes.” There was no point embellishing the answer, her father wouldn’t appreciate it.

“Very well, then you must do what you must do.” He hesitated. “Jemima, I’m not a monster.”

“I know,” Jem said.

“I want you to be happy. I truly do. And if this Ellie is the reason that you’ve found your point in life, the reason that you finally want something, then you have my blessing.”

Jem smiled gently. “Thank you, I appreciate that. And I appreciate everything, I really do. I’m not throwing anything back in your face.”

“No, you’re standing on your own two feet, which is more than that brother of yours has ever done.” He smiled. “Believe it or not, I’ve been waiting for one of the two of you to stand up to me. I just never expected that it would be you.”

“Well, aren’t I just full of surprises at the moment,” Jem said.

He nodded. “Just remember, Jemima, standing on your own two feet is all very well, but should you fall...” He looked directly at her. “I shall be here with outstretched hand to aid you back to your feet.”

She would have hugged him if she thought he’d appreciate it. Instead she got up and rounded his desk, dropping a kiss on his cheek and letting her hand linger on his shoulder just a little too long. “Thank you, Pa.”

“Close the door on your way out,” he said gruffly.

SHE KNOCKED ON the door, just in case the doorbell wasn’t working. And then she knocked again, just in case her first knock hadn’t been loud enough. When the door finally opened, Rolly was wearing a robe and his hair was ruffled.

“What?” he asked grumpily.

“I need to see you. I’m an idiot and you were right, I need to be braver and better.”

“As much as I love being told that I’m right, why exactly do you need me just at the moment?” Rolly asked.

“Because I need a plan, one that might help me get Ellie back. I’ve already dealt with my father, my mother seems to think that horses are more important than girlfriends, and you’re my best friend. I can’t do this without you.”

He put his hands on his hips. “So your world didn’t crumble around your ears?”

“I’ve been stupid, Rolly, I know. And now I’m trying to get everything put right again. You’ve always been there for me, please let me talk to you.”

“Roland? Who is it?” The voice came from inside the flat, and it was rough and thick, very East End.

Jem raised her eyebrows and Rolly blushed and sighed, before saying: “It’s Jemima.”

“Oooh,” said a voice, coming closer to the door. “The famous Jem.” The door moved and suddenly a tall, attractive man was standing there, his hand out. “Pleased to finally meet you, Jem.”

“Likewise,” Jem said, looking at Rolly.

“David,” Rolly said reluctantly.

“Dave,” David said, grinning. “And I’ve heard all about you, Jem, I’ve been dying to meet you.”

“Rolly’s been keeping you very secret.”

“Almost like he’s ashamed of me,” Dave said with a wiggle of his eyebrows. Jem found herself liking him very much indeed. “Don’t worry, he’s actually not, I’m a bit discreet because of my job.”

“Jem’s come hunting for advice on how to get Ellie back,” Rolly said.

Dave laughed. “Well, you two will have to deal with that by yourselves, I need to get to work.” He stepped around Rolly, kissing his cheek as he went, and out of the door.

“Lovely to meet you,” Jem said.

“I hope we see more of each other,” said Dave. “Just out of curiosity, did you have a plan at all?”

Jem shrugged. “I was thinking a billboard in Picadilly maybe, something big and flashy, showing her that I’m not keeping anything secret.”

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Dave laughed again. “You might want to try talking to the girl first. Maybe a bit of a chat before you light up the night sky with her name in fireworks?”

“Can we get fireworks at this time of year?” Jem asked Rolly eagerly.

“Not outside of Eastern Europe, no,” Rolly said. “And I’m not trusting you with explosives. Come in while I get dressed and we’ll tackle this problem like adults.”

Jem grinned and stepped inside and Rolly enveloped her in a hug so hard she could barely breathe.

Chapter Thirty Four

Mo held onto her hand as the policewoman came back into the room. “Can I get you something? Coffee?”

“No,” Ellie said. “I’m fine, thank you.”

The woman sat down. “I’m afraid I don’t have great news for you. Our powers here are very limited.”

“Meaning what exactly,” Mo said. “He came into her house, he frightened her.”

Which Ellie wished she could deny, but it was true. It was only once Paul was already inside that she realized how much potential danger she could be in. She’d been lucky that the police had come so quickly. But Paul had, quite literally, been dragged out kicking and screaming.

“He did, and technically that’s entering premises without consent,” the policewoman said. “However, having heard the story from both sides, the problem here is going to be that he has a history of being allowed into the house, including a time when he provided medical care.”

“But—” Mo started.

“She’s right,” said Ellie. “It’s he said, she said. I should have locked the door.”

“Currently, I don’t even have enough to take out a temporary restraining order,” the policewoman said kindly. “And I know that’s of no help to you right now. We can’t hold him, I’m afraid, which means he’ll be back on the streets in no time. The most I can do is keep him here for further questioning in order to give you an hour or so to go home and pack your things.”

“So your solution is to have her move out of her flat?” Mo said, sounding stunned and disgusted.

Ellie sighed and squeezed their hand. “She’s doing her job, Mo. And she’s right. There’s no pattern of abuse here, there’s no history of him doing anything untoward. He frightened me and I need to be more careful in future. But he’s not exactly done anything wrong just at the moment, has he?”

“That’s the problem,” the policewoman said. She sighed. “Listen, if you want to go back then I can have someone come with you. I can have someone look at the locks on your doors and advise you. I can give you the number of a support service that offers advice to women in situations like yours. But right now, legally, there’s nothing I can do.”

Mo shook their head. “Un-fucking-believable.”

“I understand, sir,” said the policewoman. “I suggest that you start keeping records so that you can prove some kind of pattern should this become an issue. And, as flippant as this advice might sound, I do suggest that if at all possible you move, or at least stay somewhere else tonight.”

“She’ll stay with me,” Mo said.

“Let me go and get the paperwork for you to sign and then we’ll have you on your way.” She stood up and then shook her head. “I really am very sorry, Ms. Baker. No woman should have to be afraid in her own home.”

“Yet so many are,” snapped Mo.

The policewoman hesitated but left without saying anything further.

“Mo, leave her alone, she’s doing her job,” Ellie said.

Mo’s phone beeped. “I know it’s not her personally, it’s the system,” they said as they pulled their phone out of their pocket and unlocked it. “But still, she should...” They trailed off.

“What is it?” Ellie asked.

Mo said nothing, turning the phone screen so that Ellie could read it. There was a message from Carys, just one word, all capitals. TROUBLE.

“What kind of trouble?” Ellie asked.

Mo shrugged. “No idea.” They turned their phone back, ran their finger over the screen and held it up to their ear for a second. Ellie waited, heart starting to throb. “Line’s busy,” Mo said, putting their phone down again.

“It can’t be Paul, he’s still here.”

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“Does he know where the office is?”

Ellie thought for a second, then nodded. “Yeah, he’s met me after work a couple of times, walked me home.”

Mo’s face paled further. Their phone beeped again. “It’s Car,” they said. “She says there’s someone in the office and she’s called the police.”

“Jesus,” said Ellie. Her chest was starting to tighten. “Not again.”

“Paul’s here,” Mo reminded her.

“Is he? I haven’t seen him,” Ellie said, breathe coming faster.

“Mistakes happen,” Mo said, standing up. “Maybe they let him go already.”

“And what? He’s gone to destroy the office?” The band around her was tightening further.

“How should I know?” Mo said. They were starting to panic now too. “All I know is that Carys is there, right next door, and she’s already had to call the police and...”

“Mo,” she was struggling now, really struggling.

“And she could be getting hurt and I haven’t even told her I love her yet and...”

“Mo!” Each breath was snatched, barely enough oxygen to let her function.

“And I really do, I have to tell her.”

“Jesus.” The door had opened. “Ambulance, now!” Shouted the policewoman.

“Ellie!” said Mo.

“Is she having a fit?” asked the policewoman.

“Panic attack,” Mo said, bending over Ellie, undoing the top button of her shirt.

And all Ellie could do was watch as the lights began to fade and her eyes began to close.

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“Explain to me again why this is a good idea?” Rolly said, looking in dismay at the bags of deflated balloons on the desk.

“Because we’re making a fuss,” Jem said. “We’re making it big, not keeping anything discreet. We’ll fill the place with balloons, get the flowers in, and then we’ll film the whole thing, put it on TikTok or something, really make a splash with it. It’s a real, big gesture. She’s going to love it.”

“Is she really?” asked Rolly, tilting his head as Jem rolled in a huge canister of what could only be helium.

“Actually, maybe not,” Jem said. “But it’s important that I do this. Important that I show her that everything’s out in the open. I promise that I’ll ask her permission before posting anything online though, okay?”

“Maybe you should have asked permission before breaking into her office,” Rolly

said, trying and failing to open a package of balloons.

“I knew she wouldn’t be here, she’s supposed to be home by now. I had rather thought that either Carys or Mo would still be around though. I thought they could help us blow up balloons.” She took the package from him and pulled it open. Footsteps sounded on the stairs. “That could be one of them now though.”

“Thank God,” Rolly said. “I am not equipped to deal with balloons in any way, shape or form.”

“Of course you are,” said Jem. She was about to explain exactly why, but she didn’t have a chance to.

“Police!” shouted a voice from just outside. Then the door was kicked open and all hell let loose.

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Mo bustled into the cubicle, phone still in their hand. “So?” they said.

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“So yourself. I’m obviously still alive. What about the office?” Ellie answered.

“The police came, Carys is fine. It looks like a burglary perhaps?” They shrugged. “There’s no real news yet. They took her statement and then rushed off. She’s on her way to the police station right now to try and find out what the next steps are here. Now, your turn.”

“I’m fine, it was a panic attack, I need to go see a psychiatrist and probably a psychologist too,” Ellie said.

“All of which you’ve known for a while now,” Mo pointed out, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“I’ve been too busy to deal with it.”

“You need to make yourself a priority. We’re going to make that psych appointment together when we get out of here, alright?”

Ellie nodded. “Alright. Thank you.”

“It can be a part of your big life change,” they grinned back. Then the smile slid from their face and they looked worried again.

“What?”

“Nothing, just, well, is all this a coincidence?” Mo said. “I mean, what are the chances that all of this all happens at the same time?”

“Bad things happen sometimes, Mo. And I suppose sometimes, two bad things happen in the same day. To be honest, it’s not like there was anything that important at the office. Even if it was burgled, my laptop’s in my flat, there’s little cash there. It’s not the end of the world. The insurance will pay for any damage.”

“Mmm,” said Mo. “I suppose. It’s like we can’t be safe anywhere though, isn’t it?”

“We have each other,” Ellie said. “And we’ll all be fine. Which reminds me, didn’t I hear something quite important back there?”

“Like what?”

“Like you loving Carys?” Ellie said, raising an eyebrow. “I was in the middle of a panic attack but I’m pretty sure that you said you loved her.”

Mo grinned sheepishly. “I suppose I should tell her, huh?”

Ellie nodded. “I would.”

“And what about you?” said Mo. “Any further thoughts on that whole calling Jem thing?”

For a moment, Ellie was about to give the same answer that she’d given the last time. Then she thought about it, really thought. She thought about how she couldn’t not think about Jem. About how things in her life had to change. About how frightened she’d been when she realized Paul was in her flat. About how quickly things could change.

“I might ring her,” she said quietly. “Later. In a few weeks maybe. Just for coffee. Just to be friends.” Just to have someone like Jem in her life to remind her that anything could happen.

“I would,” Mo said, with a grin. Their phone started to ring. “I’ll be right back,” they said, disappearing out of the cubicle.

She could be friends with Jem, she thought as she waited. Maybe even more, one day. Maybe it was time to stop playing by the rules and start doing things she actually wanted for once. And maybe Jem would change too.

“Um, so, here’s a thing,” Mo said, slipping back through the curtains, phone in hand.

“What?” Ellie asked.

“Someone wants to talk to you,” they said, handing the phone over.

Carys’s face beamed from the screen. “Hello,bach, you doing alright over there?”

“Fine, I’ll be fine. I’m sorry for your scare,” Ellie said. “But you really didn’t have to call and check on me.”

“Oh, I’m not the one who wanted to talk to you,” Carys said, still beaming.

“Really? Well who does then?”

“Your burglar,” laughed Carys, turning the phone so that another face materialized next to her.

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Jem was biting her lip looking half amused and half worried. “Hello,” she said softly.

And Ellie’s heart filled up.

Chapter Thirty Five

“You... you tried to burgle my office?”

Jem’s pulse quickened at the sight of Ellie’s face, pale and wan in a hospital bed again. “Your body tried to suffocate itself,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, you go first on this one,” Ellie said.

Jem sighed. “I wasn’t trying to burgle your office, I swear. Apart from anything else, I still had the key that you gave me, which isn’t breaking and entering, is it? It’s just entering, and that’s pretty fine from a legal stand point.”

“Just going into my office then?”

Jem tilted her head and wondered just how honest to be. But Ellie was bound to see the evidence at some point. “Um, no, not really. I was making my grand gesture.”

“Grand gesture?”

Carys was giggling next to her, which wasn’t helping matters. “Listen, do you think that perhaps we could talk in person?” Jem asked.

Mo's face appeared on the screen. "Shall I bring her to yours?"

"That scarf looks lovely on you," Jem said. "And yes, that'd be good."

"Do I not get a say in this?" Ellie said, grabbing the phone and moving it back to her face.

It was Cary's turn to get involved. She yanked the phone out of Jem's hand. "Mo? My love?"

"Right here," Mo said cheerfully.

"I've had enough of this dancing around. I'll get Jem bailed out or whatever and you get Ellie to Jem's place and then we'll lock them in until they both decide what they want."

"Fair enough," Mo said. "Shall we say in an hour?"

"Perfect," beamed Carys.

"Oh, and while we've had enough of dancing around, you should know that I love you." Mo's eyes were glistening on the screen.

Jem watched as a slow smile spread across Carys's wide face. Until the Welsh woman sniffed and nodded. "Dw i'n dy garu di."

Mo's eyes opened wide. "You told me that meant you had to go to the toilet!"

"Well it doesn't," Carys said. "It means I love you."

"So you said it first? Why didn't you tell me?"

“I thought you might freak out so I said it and then... well, then I freaked out,” Carys said.

Ellie cleared her throat and Mo moved the phone so that her face appeared again. “I rather thought that Jem and I were having our big moment here?”

“Right,” Carys said. “Yeah, let’s get a move on then, I’ll deal with bailing, you deal with doctors, Mo.”

She hung up and Jem raised an eyebrow at her. “You can’t just lock me in my own flat.”

“Are you saying that you’d object to being locked in a flat with Ellie?” Carys asked sweetly.

“Not exactly, just...” Jem sighed. “I really thought things would be slightly easier than this. I know I messed everything up, but I’m trying to put it right and then I just end up arrested.”

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“Well, maybe the actual declaring your love bit will be easier?” offered Carys. “You won’t know until you try.”

“You made it look relatively easy.”

“I did, didn’t I?” Carys beamed. “Just say what’s in your heart, it’ll be fine, bach.”

“It would help if I weren’t in a police station,” said Jem.

“Yes, I can see that. Let’s see what we can do about getting you out of here. Where’s your bloke?”

“He’s not my bloke, he’s just a bloke,” Jem said. She had no idea where Rolly was. He’d disappeared once they’d been taken from the station and she hadn’t heard from him since. Probably flirting with one of their jailers.

“We could get your dad to come and bail you out,” Carys said uncertainly.

“Yeah, that’s going to be a no,” Jem said.

The door opened and Rolly stood there, straightening his tie. “Come on then, girls, we’re free to go.”

“We are?” Carys asked. “I mean, you are?”

“Free as birds,” Rolly grinned. “It helps to have connections. Now where are we off to.”

“Well, Ellie and Jem are going to be locked in Jem’s flat while they either make up or slaughter each other, whichever comes easier, and Mo and I will probably find the nearest caf and have a sausage sandwich.”

“Oooo, that sounds nice,” Rolly said. “Red sauce or brown?”

“Both,” said Carys quite grandly, taking Rolly’s arm. “Shall we go then?”

IT WASN’T UNTIL they were alone that Jem’s heart finally felt right, like it had settled into place. Mo closed the door behind him and Ellie perched on the edge of the couch and all of Jem’s nerves slithered away under the rug until she was as calm as a millpond.

“I fucked up.” Maybe not the most romantic start.

“You did,” Ellie said. Her hair was swept back off her face and it made her look younger, more fragile somehow.

Jem sighed and choosing her words carefully began to tell Ellie what had happened, what her father had said, the choice she had made. And Ellie’s face got a little paler, a little more fragile.

“I didn’t ask for that,” Ellie said when Jem was done.

Jem took a breath. “I know. I realize my mistake now. I thought I was doing the right thing, I thought that giving you your old life back would be easier. I thought having my old life back would be easier. I didn’t know it would be the hardest thing I’ve ever done.”

Ellie shook her head. “You’re not the only one to blame. I’ve been so stuck in my ways, so comfortable in my life, that I didn’t want to change. I suppose it was natural

that you'd think I'd want to keep the life I'd built."

"But you don't?" Jem asked, shuffling a little closer.

Ellie looked up at her. "I want things to be different. If you've shown me one thing it's that life is better, bigger with someone else in it. I like being quiet, I like being at home, but sometimes a little drama can be... exhilarating."

"Am I a little drama?"

"You're a lot of drama," Ellie said. She smiled. "But perhaps with time we could both... moderate a little. You could become less drama, I could accept more drama."

"Do you mean that?" asked Jem, mouth starting to dry up.

"Losing you was one of the most horrible things that's ever happened to me," Ellie said, the truth naked in her eyes. "It was ridiculous, every part of me said it was ridiculous. We barely know each other, we've hardly spent any time together, I didn't want anyone in my life. And yet that text message you sent me felt like a body blow, like my house collapsing around me."

"I never meant to hurt you," Jem started.

"I know," interrupted Ellie. "I know you didn't. I know your intentions were good. I can see that now. Even when I was hurting I think I knew you had your reasons."

"And I know you had yours for not wanting to be with me," Jem said carefully. "But I'm hoping that I've changed enough that you'll reconsider, is that a possibility?"

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Ellie laughed a little and her face got more color. “Jem, I never asked you to come out, but I can see how I might have put you into a position where you thought you had to. Could you ever forgive me for that?”

“Forgive you for finally pushing me into being me?” Jem said, surprised. “Ellie, I hate to break it to you, but I came out for me, not for you.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“As sure as I am that I have feelings for you.” Jem reached out and smoothed Ellie’s hair. “I know all the cons. I know that I’m rich and spoiled and closeted. I know that I’m the opposite of you. I know that you’re sensible and ambitious and out and proud. But opposites are supposed to attract, aren’t they?”

Ellie smiled a little more. “They are. But what you did, Jem... Just dumping me over text like that...”

“Was horrific. I realized the minute that I did it. But I didn’t know how to take it back. This is me here saying that I’m sorry. I had truly good intentions, and I screwed it all up.”

“Okay,” said Ellie, looking down at her hands.

“And this is me here saying that I can’t get you out of my head. I know we haven’t known each other long, but I’ve up-ended my life for you because you deserve it, because you made me want to do it. I think of you every night when I go to sleep, every morning when I wake up. Every second that I’m away from you I spend

thinking about you. I either have real feelings or I'm having some kind of psychotic break."

"Let's only have one of us under psychiatric care at a time, please," Ellie said. She was looking up now, her eyes clear and dark and Jem wanted more than anything to kiss her. "I've had a hell of a day."

"What happened?" asked Jem, suddenly concerned. Ellie told her about Paul, the neighbor that had seemed so nice, and Jem felt a ball of anger in her stomach. "I'll kill him."

"Not necessary," Ellie said. "But it did drive home the point that what we assume about people isn't necessarily the truth. And..." She seemed to hesitate and then made up her mind. "And it made me think that perhaps it would be better to spend a little more time doing the things that I want rather than the things that I should."

Jem allowed her lips to twitch. "Is that you saying that you want me?"

"Perhaps," Ellie said, drawing closer.

"I'm going to need a definite yes or no, I'm afraid."

Ellie smiled for real this time. "Jemima Darlington, I have feelings for you. What they are, I don't know yet, but I'd very much like to take some time to find out."

"I could deal with that," Jem said. "I'd like to maybe... take you on a date."

"That'd be nice." Ellie closed her eyes.

"You look exhausted," Jem said. And instead of kissing her as she truly wanted to do, she pulled Ellie close and held her in her arms. "I'm so sorry about what happened to

you, you must have been terrified.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” admitted Ellie. “I can’t feel unsafe in my own home.”

“Then move.”

“You make that sound easy.”

Jem pulled back a little. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I have a spare room and, since my circumstances have changed and I’m working on becoming an independent and ambitious woman, I’m in need of a roommate to help pay the rent.”

“Are you serious?” Ellie said.

“No pressure. You’re not required to date your roommate if things don’t work out. But it is a safe place, even if you only want to stay a few months. With Constable, of course.”

Ellie breathed in, then out. “I’m not very used to being taken care of,” she said.

“Then you’d better get used to it,” said Jem.

Then she did kiss her, slowly and deeply as the silence crept in around them and the only sound was the soft rustling of clothing as it dropped to the floor.

Epilogue

“Keep still,” Jem said as Ellie wriggled in her black dress.

“Then stop tickling me,” Ellie said right back. Jem’s hands were warm on her skin

and half of her wanted to turn around and kiss her firmly on the mouth, wanted to press her backward until they both fell onto the bed.

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The other half of her was far too worried about how the Darlington party was going to go to even entertain the idea.

“You look fantastic,” said Jem, standing back so that Ellie could see herself properly in the mirror.

“Thanks to your beautician and nail lady and all the rest of it,” Ellie said, barely recognizing the person in the mirror.

“Where are your shoes? I want to see the whole look.”

Ellie scooted off down the hall to her own room, patting Constable who lay curled up on her bed, before picking up the shoes and going back to Jem’s.

“Not bad,” Jem said when she put them on. “Nice heel.” She tilted her head. “Weren’t you going to wear jewelry?”

With a sigh, Ellie went back down the hallway and picked up the earrings she’d planned on wearing, fixing them in her ears as she went back to Jem’s.

“Nice,” Jem said. “But your neck looks a little bare.”

“Shit,” said Ellie. “Almost forgot.” And she went back to her room.

Sitting on the edge of the bed to search through her jewelry box she could see that all this was ridiculous. But then it had been ridiculous for a while now. Despite living together, she and Jem had separate rooms. Sure, they spent the majority of nights in

Jem's bed, but they still had separate spaces. And on nights like tonight it was a pain in the backside.

More than that though, it seemed to Ellie like one last hurdle.

More than anything she wanted to push the commitment, she wanted to clear this last obstacle and finally be living together properly. Yet something was holding her back and she didn't quite know what. Perhaps the idea that Jem hadn't suggested it yet, or the fact that Jem might prefer things this way. Or, and her heart shook a little at this, maybe Jem didn't quite feel as committed as Ellie did.

All of which added up to the fact that as silly as it was, Ellie just hadn't had the guts to raise the conversation, which after almost six months was almost unbelievable.

"Finally," she muttered, dragging a necklace out of the bottom of the box.

She trotted off back to Jem's room where Jem fastened the necklace around her neck and let her hand stray to Ellie's bare shoulders, then the tops of her arms until Jem was pressing herself against Ellie's back. "You look delicious."

"Are you sure?" Ellie asked doubtfully. All this was more than she'd ever done, more than she'd ever worn, and she wasn't exactly comfortable.

"Everyone's eyes will be on you," Jem promised.

"Not what I need."

Jem shook her head and let Ellie go, turning her around. "It's all going to be absolutely fine," she said in her familiar drawl. "The party is planned to the last sandwich, you've all worked terribly hard, you have nothing to worry about. What on Earth could go wrong at this point?"

“The caterers might not show up.”

“They’ve already shown up and have been working the venue since lunchtime.”

“Or no one will come.”

Jem rolled her eyes. “Everyone’s coming. Calm down, El. You’ve got this. Now, your car will be here in five minutes. Are you sure you don’t want me to go with you?”

“And have you be early enough to start interfering with things?” Ellie said. “No way. You have to arrive with everyone else so that you can get the full experience and then report back.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jem said with a twitch of a smile.

Ellie felt her stomach flip and put her hands on Jem’s waist. “Sometimes, I can’t believe I’m allowed to kiss you,” she murmured.

“You’re very much allowed,” Jem said, leaning in closer.

Ellie squeaked. “But not now, I’m not. Can’t ruin my lipstick. I’ll see you there, alright?”

“Good luck,” Jem grinned, letting her go again.

Heels clacking on the hallway floor, Ellie left Jem’s room, wondering if they’d ever get to the point where it was their room rather than just Jem’s.

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Glass in hand, Jem watched as Ellie argued about something with one of the wait staff.

“Need a refill?” Rolly asked.

“For once, you’re not my date, so it’s not really your area of responsibility,” grinned Jem. “Anyway, I’m fine, I don’t want to drink too much.”

“I never thought I’d hear you say that,” Annabelle said, picking a canapé off a roving waiter’s plate. She sighed. “These really are too good, I’ll have to diet for weeks after tonight.”

“Or you could just enjoy life,” Rolly said.

“Which is all very well for you to say, you’ve already found the love of your life,” Annabelle said, sticking her tongue out at him. “As for you,” she said, turning to Jemima. “Are you making all this official or not? Because, frankly, I’ve got women lining up in the wings for a shot at you.”

Jem blew out a breath. “Flattering, I think. But, um, well... I don’t know, to be honest.”

“You don’t know?” screeched Rolly. “It’s been six months, how on Earth can’t you know? I understand it’s more complicated than, say, buying a sofa, but it’s not rocket science. Either you love the girl or you don’t.”

“Oh, I very much do,” Jem said hurriedly. Then she exhaled again. “The problem is, well...”

“She doesn’t love you back?” supplied Annabelle, taking another canapé.

“Oh Christ,” said Jem. “I hadn’t thought about that.” She truly hadn’t. What if Ellie didn’t feel the same way? They’d been living together for months now, but what if that was only because Ellie didn’t have anywhere else to go?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Rolly said. “It’s clear the girl is bats about you. She barely takes her eyes off you, and I’m fairly certain that she’s not the type to keep her mind to herself.” He touched his lime-green bow-tie uncomfortably.

“It was the yellow one she was very much against,” Jem said. “She likes the green, don’t worry.”

“Still, I don’t think she’d fail to let you know if she was finished with you,” Rolly said.

“So what’s the problem then?” asked Annabelle.

Jem took a large drink. “I just... I haven’t actually... Um, I mean... I haven’t said it.”

“It?” asked Rolly, then his eyes widened. “Oh, you haven’t told her that you love her.”

“Have you not?” asked Annabelle. “I always seem to do that far too soon. Might be part of my problem.”

“I haven’t,” Jem confirmed. “But not because I don’t. Just because.... Well, because I’m afraid of scaring her off. You know what she’s like. She gets comfortable with

things and, to be honest, she's still sleeping in the guest room. At least ostensibly."

Rolly rolled his eyes. "You two are a nightmare. Just tell her."

"I could tell her for you," Annabelle said.

"No, no," said Jem hurriedly.

"Listen, she adores you, you adore her, it's been six months, you need to speak your heart," Rolly said. "If not, she'll think you don't feel the same and then she'll start looking for someone else."

"That's the pot calling the kettle black," Dave said, sidling up to Rolly. "It took you months to even admit that you liked me."

"Yes, well, that was different," Rolly said. "Mostly because you talk enough for the both of us."

Dave snorted a laugh and then kissed Jem on both cheeks. "Trouble at home?" he asked.

"No, just lamenting my inability to commit," said Jem, with a grin.

"To Ellie? I thought you two were on the verge of wedding planning," Dave said.

"Not quite," said Jem, but now that she thought about it, the idea of a wedding was very tempting. Ellie in a long white dress... Ellie walking down the aisle... Jesus, she needed to get a grip. She hadn't even said the L word yet.

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“What’s stopping you from saying it?” Rolly asked.

“I don’t know,” said Jem. Even though she really did. What if Ellie ran away? What if Ellie didn’t say it back? What if Ellie freaked out and had another panic attack and died?

“You’re an idiot,” Annabelle said, taking yet another canapé. “That’s what’s stopping you. And it would serve you right if I made a play for Ellie myself. She’s very attractive and stunningly competent.”

“You?” asked Jem.

“What?” Annabelle said. “You’re the only one allowed to sleep with women now, are you?” A waiter passed by with another tray, and Annabelle followed him like a dog after sausages.

“You need to tell Ellie how you feel,” Rolly said. “Or you can’t blame her for not knowing.”

“Fine, fine,” Jem said. She took another glass of champagne from a traveling tray. “But I’ll need at least one more drink before I can say a thing.”

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Mo was wickedly elegant in a brightly colored kilt and tux jacket, complete with a tartan bow-tie. Ellie hugged them hard. “You look amazing.”

“Not a patch on you,” Carys said, whose full tux and trousers ensemble was itself very fetching.

“Really?” Ellie asked anxiously. “Jem chose everything, I’m not sure about this dress or the fancy hair, to be honest.”

“Relax,” said Mo. “You look fab and everything’s going like clockwork. This is your big night, and you’ve done splendidly.”

“With help from the both of you,” said Ellie.

“Well, we do our best,” said Carys. “Oh, and we have news.”

“You do?”

“We do,” Mo said. “We’re moving in together. Thought we’d let you know.”

Ellie felt a little shaky, but she smiled at them both. “Congratulations.” There was the sound of a crash coming from the catering back room. “Crap.”

“I’ll go,” Mo said.

“So?” Carys said, once Mo was gone.

“So what?”

Carys sighed. “You don’t look thrilled about the fact that me and Mo are living together.”

“Oh God, it’s not that, Car. I promise. I really am happy for you. I’m just... well, I’m worried about Jem and I. You two moving in together is just a reminder that I’m still

sleeping in the spare room.”

“For God’s sake, El, you need to talk to the woman. How can you build a relationship without communicating?”

“We do talk,” Ellie said. She shrugged. “Just not about this, for some reason. I...” She sighed. “I want to bring it up, but every time I think about it I get worried that she’s going to get funny about it. Maybe really living together isn’t quite her thing, or she’s not ready for it yet, or she’d prefer to go back to her party lifestyle.”

“El, she goes out with her friends at least once a week, something that I think is an admirable idea, and Mo and I have already taken that advice to heart. You and Jem have your separate sides, but you’re also great together. And, as you once told me, you can’t just assume things. You have to talk them out or you’ll be anxious all the time.”

“I know, I know. You’re right. It’s just, you know she hasn’t even said she loves me?”

“Well, have you?” Carys asked.

“Not exactly.”

Carys shook her head. “You two are exhausting. Listen, take it from someone who wasn’t at all sure what she was doing when she got into her present relationship, the only way through all this is talking, not guessing. So get your big girl pants on and have a conversation.”

“I will, we will. I’ve been so focused on getting this party together that I really haven’t had time to deal with things at home.” Ellie felt a prickling at the back of her neck. She glanced around, but there was no one there.

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“What?” asked Carys.

“Nothing,” said Ellie. But she’d had the uncomfortable feeling that she was being watched.

“Talk to Jem. Do it tonight. Do it before things can spiral out of control.”

“Right,” Ellie said, her legs a bit shaky at the thought. “Right, I will. I promise.”

“And they’re all out of shrimp at the buffet table,” Carys said.

“I’ll deal with that too,” Ellie said, rushing off to talk to the caterer again.

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Rosie’s belly was stretched tight as a drum. “I can’t believe you even came,” Jem said, dropping a kiss on her sister in law’s cheek.

“She’s not due for two weeks yet, and everyone says the first is always late,” said Rosie, beaming and glowing.

“The first? That implies there’s going to be more,” teased Jem.

“Hmm, let’s see how this one goes, shall we?”

“And see whether Jasper behaves himself or not.”

Rosie sighed. “He’s been trying, I know he’s not perfect. But he has been trying. He’s alright at home, and I hope you’d tell me if he wasn’t alright with you. Whatever he does or says outside the house though, I can’t be responsible for that.”

Jem smiled at her. It had taken a month for Jasper to scrape back into his wife’s good graces, and even now Jem wasn’t entirely sure he’d been forgiven for being so prejudiced. On the other hand, it was very clear that he and Rosie loved each other, and for her future niece’s sake she hoped that Jasper and Rosie could sort things out.

“Rosie, so glad you could make it.” Jem stood back so that her father could kiss Rosie’s cheek. “How are you feeling?”

“Perfectly fine,” Rosie said.

“Rosie, why aren’t you sitting down?” Jasper appeared at his wife’s side. “Sorry, family, but she’s under orders not to overdo things.” He turned back to his wife. “You promised you’d spend the evening on a chair.”

“Fine, fine,” grumbled Rosie, letting herself be escorted away while flashing a grimace at Jem and Alistair.

“It looks like those two are getting their acts together,” Jem’s father said, watching them go.

“I hope so, for the baby’s sake. Even if Jasper is slightly put out that it’s a girl.”

Alistair chuckled. “Just you wait until she’s born, it won’t matter a jot to Jasper that it’s not a boy, mark my words.” He looked down at his daughter. “And speaking of getting acts together, girl, you’ve been busy, I see.”

Jem shrugged.

“No, don’t be self-deprecating, it doesn’t suit you. Two university acceptances, have you decided which you’re going to choose?”

“I think the business program,” Jem said, heart leaping a little at the idea of it. “That seems the most flexible. I’d like to be able to help Ellie out when I can, and honestly, I think I like the idea of being my own boss, starting something of my own.”

“There’s always a place for you at Darlington’s,” her father said.

She smiled, knowing that he meant it, knowing that however hard the past few months had been, it had brought more truth to her life which had resulted in a better relationship with her father. “I’m not sure that’s for me.”

“I’m not so sure it’s for Jasper either,” Alistair said, watching his son fuss over his pregnant wife. He turned to Jem. “I was planning on announcing my retirement tonight.”

Jem’s eyes widened in surprise. “Really? I had no idea.”

“Mmm. To be honest, I think that announcement’s going to have to wait a few more years, given Jasper’s behavior I’m not sure he’s ready.”

“Because of what he did to me? What he said?”

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Alistair nodded. "Showing prejudice like that is no way for a gentleman to behave. But showing bad judgment, failing to keep your emotions in check, is no way for a businessman to behave."

Jem nodded. "I see your point. But..." She couldn't believe she was about to do this. "But Jasper's good at his job, Pa. He's an arse, but he's a clever one. I'm not so sure that you should be postponing your announcement."

Her father grunted in response. "He's not ready."

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"You're a fine filly, aren't you?"

Ellie turned around to see a tall woman looking her up and down as though she was about to buy her, and it was only the high cheekbones and the long limbs that clued her in as to who it must be. "Mrs. Darlington," she said, holding out her hand and desperately wishing Jem was here.

"Better call me Jessica now that you're in the family."

Ellie swallowed down her surprise. Jem's mother didn't leave the country often and they'd never met until just now, something had always come up. "In the family?" she choked out, not sure she'd heard right.

"Well, you'll be making an honest woman of her soon, I suppose," Jessica said. "You're not planning on shacking up together without a ring, are you?"

“Um, well... I, uh...”

Jessica boomed out a laugh. “I’m teasing you, Ellie. You two do as you please.” She leaned in a little and Ellie could smell expensive perfume. “But don’t miss your chance. She’s dotty about you, as I’m sure you know, and she’s just moping around waiting for you to ask for her hand.”

“She is?” Ellie said, not at all sure this was true.

“Take it from her mother, Jemima adores you. And from your looks I can see why. You organized all this, didn’t you?”

Ellie nodded.

“Efficient and competent too,” said Jessica approvingly. “I see what she sees in you. If it doesn’t work out, come knocking on my door and we’ll see what we can do to get rid of old Alistair and install you as lady of the manor instead.”

She picked up a glass of champagne and waltzed off, leaving Ellie with her mouth wide open staring after her. Once she managed to close her mouth, she laughed to herself. Jem’s mother was quite a character, but she’d been warned.

Maybe she wasn’t quite as crazy as she seemed though. She did seem to think that Jem was crazy about her, a sentiment that burned warm in Ellie’s stomach until a sudden chill ran down her spine. She spun around, but no one was behind her.

Why did she have the feeling that she was being watched?

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Jem crept up beside Ellie, drinking in the sight of her, barely able to believe that she

was allowed to speak to her, let alone touch her.

“Oh, there you are,” Ellie said, turning and smiling brightly at her.

“This is all amazing,” Jem said, gesturing at the party. “I can’t believe that you arranged all this.”

“It’s my job,” Ellie said, lifting an eyebrow. “Remember?”

“I know, but it’s still incredible. It’s almost like magic.”

“Right,” scoffed Ellie.

“Hey, just take the compliment,” said Jem, moving in so that she could put her hand on Ellie’s waist. Immediately she felt warmth. “Listen, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something.”

Ellie’s lips curved into a smile and Jem’s heart skipped a beat. How could she think that Ellie wouldn’t want this?

“Actually, me too,” Ellie said.

“Well, I get to go first.”

“Says who?” said Ellie, laughing.

“Um, me?” Jem said.

“Excuse me, Ms. Baker?”

They both turned to see a man in a plain black tux, an earpiece dangling over his collar. “Yes?” Ellie said.

The security guard stood straighter. “Just to report in, ma’am. We’ve had a few gatecrashers, most of which we’ve caught. But I’m afraid that the side door was left unattended for a few minutes after one of my men rushed out to help at an accident scene. Nothing to worry about, just a small altercation, a lady fell. But I thought you should know.”

Ellie nodded but Jem saw her face pale. “That’s fine,” she said. “Let me know if anything else happens.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What is it?” Jem asked as the guard left. “You’ve gone the color of paper.”

“Nothing, it’s silly.” Ellie looked down. “Just... I’ve had the oddest feeling all night that someone was watching me.”

“PTSD,” Jem said. “Although, I suppose everyone’s watching you, since you organized all this and all.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

Jem could see that her words hadn't helped, could see that Ellie really was worried. "Hey, how about I have a look around, see if there's any faces that I don't recognize?"

Ellie smiled again and looked up. "That'd be nice, thank you."

"It's the least I can do for my beautiful girlfriend," Jem said. The word just slipped out. It slipped out and Jem slipped away before either of them could notice that it had been said.

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The terrace around the courtyard was quieter than the main room, and Ellie walked slowly around the outside. Had Jem really called her girlfriend? Even the thought of the word made Ellie's blood run warmer.

It was time. Carys was right. She and Jem needed to sit down and talk about all of this, about what they wanted. About love. For once, she didn't feel a band of tightness around her chest, there was no anxiety now. Just an overwhelming need to get things said, to set things right.

"It's a good party," said a posh voice.

Ellie peeked around a column into the courtyard itself. Jasper and one of his cronies were standing next to the water feature.

"It's alright," Jasper said, taking a drink.

"No, it's a good one. Who's the party planner that your father used? I've got that anniversary bash to set up," the other man said.

Ellie burned with pride.

“Uh, she’s my lesbian sister’s life partner or some shit,” Jasper said with an eye roll.

For a second, Ellie thought about saying something, but then she didn’t. She bit her tongue. Jasper wasn’t going to change overnight, if he ever really changed at all. And as long as he didn’t say anything in front of Jem, Ellie wasn’t going to fight a needless battle. He could think what he liked, it wasn’t her job to teach him differently.

She turned to leave and almost crashed into someone. Someone who took a step back until their face was revealed in the soft light and Ellie’s chest did start to tighten now. It started to tighten and her breath started to come faster and she was frozen.

“Ellie, El, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to surprise you. But I didn’t know where else to find you,” Paul said.

He looked different, swarthier, less clean even. Ellie fought for her breath.

“You moved and I didn’t know where, and then Mo always kicked me out from in front of the office, and really, this was the only function that I knew for sure you were planning, so... So I came here.”

Ellie gritted her teeth, tried hard to calm herself, tried all the tricks her psychologist had taught her.

“I just had to see you,” Paul said.

She turned, facing the courtyard, hoping the fresh air would help her, stepping out onto the grass. But he simply followed, forcing himself into her eye-line.

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“I know things went bad for a while there, but we have to give us a second chance,” he said, eyes glistening. “I know you’ve missed me. And I was so patient with you, Ellie. I waited so long. I helped you, I let you get everything out of your system, and I know that you’ve had time to think, time to reconsider, time to see what we truly could be.”

Her breath was stuck inside her chest and she was heaving now, eyes watering, trying to get air.

“Calm down, El, just calm down, count your breaths, remember?”

In that second, she snapped. The band on her chest loosened and with tight, hard fists she ran at Paul’s strong figure, hating him for what he did to her, pushing him, crashing into him.

He stumbled backward, catching Jasper’s arm as he did so, careening into Jasper until both men, arms reeling, fell into the scummy pond beneath the water feature.

And Ellie finally took a deep, full breath.

She was shuddering as Jem’s arms wrapped around her and held her tight. “Sorry, sorry,” she mumbled.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” Jem said, keeping her close. She leaned down. “You know, you’re supposed to put your own face in cold water for the panic attacks, not someone else’s, right?”

Ellie managed a small laugh and Jem let her go.

“What’s going on?” asked Rolly, rushing into the courtyard.

“Where’s Dave?” asked Jem.

“Here,” said Dave, appearing next to Rolly.

“Ellie has a restraining order against him,” Jem said, pointing to Paul who was sputtering water and trying to climb out of the slippery pond.

“Arrest him,” Rolly said.

“Arrest him?” Jem and Ellie said together.

“David is a policeman,” said Rolly.

“Dark horse,” murmured Jem.

Dave waded into the pond, grabbing at Paul’s hand. “You’re under arrest, mate.”

“No,” Jasper said, standing up, his elegant suit dripping. “Arrest her.” He pointed at Ellie.

Dave paused for a moment, his hand around Paul’s wrist. “Why?”

“She pushed us. That’s assault,” Jasper said.

“What’s going on here?” Alistair Darlington strode into the courtyard and every single person there ignored him.

Dave turned to Ellie and raised an eyebrow. “It was an accident,” Ellie said. “Well, the Jasper part was an accident. And he was being slightly homophobic at the time too, so...”

“Hate speech is a crime,” offered Dave, twisting a protesting Paul’s arm behind his back as he dragged him up.

“What?” Jasper cried. “That woman assaulted me.”

“And you can press charges,” Dave said calmly. “As can she, for hate speech.”

Jasper’s mouth flapped open but he was prevented from speaking further by the appearance of Annabelle who yelled out his name as she rounded the courtyard. “Jasper, oh thank God. Rosie’s in labor.”

Jasper paled and followed Annabelle back to the party, Dave pushed Paul ahead of him and Rolly went after them both. Alistair Darlington regarded the pond, then the two women, then shook his head. “I’ll get started on the speeches, that should distract attention from all this kerfuffle,” he said, and strode away.

And Ellie sank back into Jem’s arms, letting safety warm her.

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Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:07 pm

“Here,” Jem said, handing Ellie a glass of champagne. “And I know, you don’t drink when you’re working, but frankly, this hasn’t exactly been a normal work day, has it?”

Ellie took the glass and took a small sip. “Not exactly,” she said as Jem sat down next to her at the table.

Alistair Darlington was in the middle of his speech and the room was politely paying attention to him. The band would come on after the speech and then the party would be winding down. It would finally be over.

“El, I have to tell you something.”

“I remember,” Ellie said, taking another sip. “But—”

“No, no buts. I need to get this out or I’m going to burst,” Jem said. “It’s right now, we’re doing this now, here, like this, however inappropriate it might be.” She took a deep breath, she was really going to do this. “I love you.”

Ellie’s cheeks turned a faint shade of pink and she smiled. “I know.”

“That... that’s it?” Jem said, sinking back into her chair in relief. “No arguments, no panic attacks, nothing?”

“Would you like me to have a panic attack?” Ellie asked.

“No, of course not.”

“Then that’s it,” Ellie said. “Other than to say I love you too.”

“Right,” Jem said, not sure what was supposed to come next.

Ellie turned to her and smiled. “It doesn’t have to be momentous to be a moment, you know?” she said quietly. “I mean, we could make long speeches and all, but why? You show me that you love me every day in every little thing that you do for me, I don’t know why I ever doubted that. And that’s all love is, a collection of tiny actions that add up to something so huge I don’t know how to describe it with words.”

Jem reached out and touched her hand. “I don’t want to overwhelm you with things. I don’t want you to panic. But I do want you to know that I’m here and that I love you with all of my heart and I don’t care who knows it.”

There was a smattering of applause and Alistair Darlington raised his voice to speak over it. “And finally, of course, I’d like to thank the organizers of this wonderful event. My daughter, Jemima, who many of you will know. And Ellie Baker, party planner extraordinaire and Jem’s wonderful life partner.”

Both Ellie and Jem stared open-mouthed as they received a polite round of applause.

“Did he just...” Ellie said.

“Uh-huh,” said Jem.

“Then I guess we really are official, huh?”

“Well, if Pa says we are, we really have to be, he doesn’t take dissent well.”

The band came on stage and music started to play. Jem put her hand in Ellie’s. “I never would have thought my life could turn out like this,” she said.

“No regrets?” Ellie asked.

“Not one,” said Jem. She stood, pulling Ellie up by the hand. “What about you? I mean, your life has changed pretty dramatically too. You’ve got a new flat with a swanky address, you’re going to have tons of new business, oh, and you’ve got a beautiful life partner to boot.”

“Not regrets,” Ellie said, looking into china blue eyes.

“In that case, would my life partner care to dance?” asked Jem.

Ellie hesitated for a second. “That depends. Does this mean I can finally move into your bedroom?”

Jem laughed. “I’d say so,” she said, as she pulled Ellie onto the dance floor.

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Rosie’s baby was born perfectly healthy and immediately named Jessica Jemima, which Rosie said was Jasper’s idea, though the rest of the family had their doubts. Six months after JJ, as she was affectionately known, was born, Rosie left Jasper and went back to her parents’ home.

Jasper, who was besotted with JJ from day one, was devastated at the loss of his daughter. After a rocky start, he pulled himself together and eventually persuaded Rosie to come home. He insists that he’s a work in progress, and Rosie is convinced he’s trying hard to change.

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Alistair Darlington did retire, eventually. Two years after the anniversary party he handed over the reins to his son. He now lives on the French Riviera where he spends the majority of his time chasing the kind of women who like his bank balance. He visits his grandchildren as often as he can.

Jessica Darlington fell in love with a jockey and moved to Ireland. She gave Alistair no prior warning of this, and he realized only when he found the house stables empty. She lives a very comfortable life surrounded by the horses that she loves only slightly more than her new husband.

Mo and Carys did move in together, after which they found that perhaps they weren't quite as happy as a couple as they'd first thought. After a lot of discussion, the addition of a third person to their household made all the difference. They are now a perfectly formed triangle of a throuple that have far too many dogs. Mo despairs of ever getting the dog hair out of their skirts.

Rolly and Dave were married in a quiet registry office ceremony the day before Christmas Eve. Annabelle was their best man.

As for Jem and Ellie, it took Jem another year and a half to propose to Ellie. When it finally did happen, one sunny July afternoon at Camden Market, Ellie promptly had a panic attack. Oddly, it was the last one she ever had. She, of course, said yes.

Jasper came to the wedding, along with Rosie and both of his daughters, who have their daddy wrapped firmly around their little fingers. Jem and Ellie did not plan their own wedding, which was just as well, since Baker Functions was running at full capacity. They did, however, have a wonderful day unmarred by any incidents

involving water features or stalkers.

They remain firmly and undemonstratively in love. Their only current problem is how to explain to Jasper that the baby his sister is carrying is going to be a boy. That and how to get Constable to stop sleeping in the new baby crib.