



Now and Again

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Description: Juliet Sullivan loves her job as a nanny to wealthy families. It isn't her world, but she's a wonder with kids and anyone would consider her a gift to their household. Well, almost anyone. Because when she goes to work in the Powell household, there's one person who's not so thrilled to see her. And Juliet's not so happy to see that old face either...

Riley Powell is in a bind. She's been given the boot by her landlord, finding herself forced to move in with her rich father and his second family. Oh, and the nanny. Who just happens to be Juliet Sullivan, an old school friend. Friend might be the wrong way to put it, though. It might be more accurate to describe her as the object of a catastrophic crush that went right off the rails, breaking both their hearts.

Juliet and Riley haven't seen each other in ten years. But when fate forces them under the same roof, things are about to get awkward. Because some sparks don't die so easily, and even a decade hasn't killed this one...

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One

Juliet Sullivan was doing her best not to cry. God, this was hard. She hadn't seen it coming either, which made it all the worse. 'Did I do something wrong?' she asked.

'Juliet...'

'If it's something I've been doing, just tell me. I can change it,' Juliet cried, aware she was coming off a bit desperate.

'Juliet, oh my god, no. This isn't about you. Things have just... changed,' Helen told her, looking like she was trying not to cry herself.

'But, I thought... I thought it was working. Was it not working?' Juliet asked.

'It was working. It really was. But...' Helen sighed. 'Look, we couldn't have predicted it, but I've been promoted. And the position's in Montreal. But I promise you've been the best nanny we've ever had.'

Juliet choked back a sob. 'I... I'm going to miss the kids so much. Max, Lily. All of you.' She looked around the kitchen, the room suddenly taking on a melancholic quality. This was one of the last times she'd ever see that kettle.

'We'll miss you too. You've become family to us,' Helen told her sincerely.

That almost pushed Juliet over the edge again, but she took a deep breath and gathered herself. 'Well, if you've got this new job, I guess, I mean... I'm happy for

you all. That's... That's really exciting.'

'That's kind of you to say. And I want you to know, I'm going to make sure you're not left jobless. I know people who are crying out for a decent nanny. I'll get you sorted.'

Juliet shook her head. 'Oh, no, don't worry about me. That's not your problem.'

'Not a chance,' Helen told her firmly. 'I would never forgive myself if I left you high and dry. The only problem you're going to have is too many job offers.'

Juliet had just about gotten ahold of herself now, the shock subsiding somewhat. 'When are you leaving?'

'Not very long at all. A week.'

'A week?' Juliet repeated, shocked anew.

'Yes. As I said, this has all been a bit of a mad series of events. The guy who was going to take the job in Canada originally, well, he sort of... fell off a building.'

'What?!' Juliet cried, forgetting about her own worries. 'Is he alright?'

'From what I've heard, he was celebrating his new job on a rooftop bar and apparently celebrated a bit too hard and crashed through one of those plant barrier things. Luckily, it was only two floors up, and he landed on some rubbish bags, so he only broke about seventeen bones.'

Juliet was horrified. 'That seems like a lot.'

'There are two hundred and six bones in the body in total, so proportionally...,'

Helen said philosophically. 'Well, anyway, he's in a full-body cast for the foreseeable future, so he's not able to take the job. And I got the call. It's a real step up. I had to take it.'

'Of course you did,' Juliet agreed.

'You're a lovely person, Juliet,' Helen said. 'I don't know what the kids and I are going to do without you.'

'I'm sure you'll find a great nanny in Canada in no time,' Juliet assured her.

'We'll find a nanny. But she won't be you,' Helen said sadly.

'I'm trying not to cry here, Helen. Please don't say things like that.'

Helen nodded. 'Me too, so best I shut my mouth now. And anyway, I've got to go and have a Skype meeting with a property person in Canada in five minutes, so I better not start blubbing. But are you OK?' Helen asked, putting a gentle hand on Juliet's arm.

Juliet nodded. 'Yeah, go. I'm fine.'

'Are you?' Helen pressed.

'I'm... I will be,' Juliet assured her. Helen had enough on without dealing with her nanny's breakdown. Juliet would collect herself, get over this. Maybe not this second though. 'It's just... It's hard knowing everything's about to change.'

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‘Tell me about it. I don’t even know what currency Canadian’s use.’

‘Ummm... The Canadian Dollar, I think,’ Juliet told her, happy to finally sound like a functioning adult, rather than the desperate idiot of a moment ago.

‘Well, at least that’s one thing off the checklist,’ Helen said, checking her watch. ‘Oh shit, I better get on that Skype call.’ She started to walk backwards out of the room. ‘You’re the tops, Juliet. Whoever gets you in their home after me is insanely lucky.’ She vanished through the doorway as she attempted to organise her family’s emigration to another continent in the space of a week.

Juliet went into the living room to find the kids sitting in front of the TV. ‘OK, guys, that’s enough telly.’

Max and Lily both responded, ‘Awwwww!’ But Juliet didn’t cave. ‘Come on, we’re all heading out to the park.’

The kids couldn’t have cared less about the TV now. ‘The one with the ice cream?’ Max, three and a half, asked as both kids jumped off the couch.

‘That’s the one.’

‘Can we get some?’ Lily, eight, was quick to follow up.

‘I don’t know, do they have any broccoli flavoured ice cream?’ Juliet said, handing the kids their shoes.

Lily rolled her eyes, grinning. 'You always make that joke.'

Juliet smiled. It was hard to do. She wouldn't be making that joke with the kids soon. Worse was how quickly she'd fade from their memories. They would be sad at first, but then they'd move on, learn to love a new nanny. It killed her to feel so suddenly replaceable. Juliet wondered if anyone had told her about how it would feel when you leave a family, whether she would have chosen a different job. She supposed things would have changed when Max hit four in six months, anyway. He'd be going to school. Juliet had been hoping to move into a part-time thing, doing the drop off in the morning and pick up for Max in the afternoon like she already did with Lily, hanging out with them until dinner time. She could have survived on the pay. As long as it didn't mean anything had to change. But change was coming anyway, the bastard that it was.

At the playpark, the kids went hard. After forty-five minutes, they were red-faced from all the sliding and swinging and climbing. They cooled themselves down with some well-earned cones at the café, and Juliet was pleased to see them content. But eventually, the slurping stopped, and Lily asked, 'What's Canada like?'

Juliet forced a smile. 'It's lovely, from what I hear.'

'Mum says we're going to live there,' Lily told her.

'Yes, I know,' Juliet nodded. 'Are you excited?'

'She says we can get an even bigger house than here. She said we'd have a pool,' Lily told her. 'A whole pool to ourselves!'

'That sounds lovely,' Juliet said, putting a brave face on.

'Yeah, so don't forget to bring your swimming costume,' Lily warned her seriously.

‘Because otherwise, you won’t be able to swim with us.’

Juliet was taken by surprise. ‘Your mum didn’t tell you...’

The kids looked at her with interest. ‘Tell us what?’ Lily asked.

Oh no. Helen was probably drip-feeding them the changes to try and lessen the impact. She’d clearly not gotten to the Juliet-less part. Juliet decided to take the chance that Helen wouldn’t mind her taking this job off her plate. It felt right for her to tell them herself, anyway. ‘Guys. The thing is... Canada is going to be brilliant. You’re going to see so many new things and have so much fun. But... I won’t be able to come with you.’

The kids’ eyes popped. ‘What? Why?’ Max demanded.

‘Because... you’re going to a new part of the world, and they don’t let you take people with you; there are all sorts of visa issues...’ The kids looked blankly at her. ‘Well, anyway, I live here, in Medford. So I’m sorry, but I won’t be able to come.’

Max burst into tears, and Juliet went to him immediately, holding him in her arms. He grabbed on like a little monkey. Juliet let him cry into her chest. She looked to see how Lily was taking it. She was sitting quietly, a thousand-yard stare in her eyes. ‘It’s not fair,’ she muttered darkly, her half-eaten ice cream melting in her hand.

Juliet didn’t know what to say because she agreed. Life wasn’t fair. She’d been happy with these kids. She wished she could go back in time and stand underneath the roof that Helen’s drunk predecessor had fallen off and pushed a bouncy castle into his path. Then she wouldn’t have to disappoint Max and Lily. Everything could just go on as it had been: steady, simple, familiar.

‘Look, we can Skype, and sometimes you’ll come back to visit, and we can see each

other again. I'm not just going to vanish,' she assured the kids. They'd had enough of that with their dad. She didn't want them to think that was what people did—upped and left out of the blue, even if it was sort of true.

The day managed to get worse a few minutes later as they were leaving the park in solemn silence. 'Oh my god, is that Juliet from school?' said a voice. It was unpleasant, mean. Juliet knew before she turned around that it was India Kent. Juliet hadn't seen her in years, not since school. She hadn't exactly left a hole in Juliet's world. She was still the same fake-tanned, label-obsessed asshole, it was plain to see.

India was with several nameless henchwomen that Juliet might have gone to school with, or maybe not. They were too coiffed to allow Juliet to recognise the people underneath. Juliet kept walking, the kids holding her hands.

'Jesus, look at that. Two kids already. She must have started popping them out as soon as school finished,' India brayed loudly in that absurdly posh voice of hers.

Juliet couldn't help herself. She turned to India. 'These aren't my kids if you must know. I'm their nanny.'

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India gaped for a second before her face split into a wide grin, and Juliet knew she should have never engaged with this idiot. ‘You’re a nanny? God... Wow.’ She left it hanging, but Juliet knew what she meant. The poor girl from school was now, ‘The Help.’ India had to love that.

Though Juliet was not embarrassed about her job, she felt some of that familiar old shame that cruel classmates had always made her feel when she didn’t have the things they had. The nice clothes, the expensive holidays, the lift to school in the fancy car.

Juliet turned away from India, flushed. This was turning into a truly shitty day. Then it managed to get even worse. ‘India, they don’t sell ristretto, so I just got you a latte,’ said a new voice. Actually, not new at all. Juliet was intimately familiar with this voice, though it had not been heard in quite some time. Juliet spun around in shock and found herself facing Riley Powell. Riley stared at her in equal surprise. Several seconds passed.

‘Juliet, I need a wee,’ Max said. Juliet had forgotten he was there.

‘Yeah, come on,’ Juliet said to him, breaking her stare-off with Riley. She pulled the kids away, heading toward the toilets. As she went, she heard India say, ‘Remember her? Juliet something-or-other.’

‘Yeah,’ Riley said quietly. ‘I think I remember her.’

Juliet kept walking. She didn’t want to hear anything else that might be said. Anyway, if she didn’t move fast, Max was gonna pee down his leg. The day she was having, that would really cap it off.

As Juliet stood outside the toilet waiting for Max to go – he was about able to handle that job himself now – she must have drifted. ‘What’s wrong?’ Lily asked her. The kid was always observant.

‘Nothing.’

‘Are you sad?’

‘I’m alright.’

‘You don’t look alright,’ Lily said flatly, her penetrating gaze boring into Juliet.

‘Maybe I am a bit sad,’ Juliet admitted.

‘Because you’re not coming to Canada?’ Lily asked. ‘And you’re going to miss us lots and lots?’

Juliet nodded. ‘Yeah. I will.’

Lily nodded. ‘I thought so.’

‘You’re very smart, Lily,’ Juliet told her.

‘I know,’ Lily agreed. ‘I can spell better than anyone in my class.’ She went on to list all the things she could spell. As she talked, Juliet thought about Lily’s observation. Yes, she was very sad about the big move. But right at that moment, she hadn’t been thinking about that at all. She’d been sad about something else entirely.

Two

Riley Powell was doing her best to tune India out. She was banging on about some

guy she'd met six months ago, sure it was true love. Riley found it hard to invest. India met the love of her life on an annual basis. She was six months in, so the new guy would be gone in about three months. Three months after that, there'd be a new one. Riley would have to listen to the same crap again then, so she was just nodding along to all the classics. 'He's not like anyone I've met.' 'He's so sweet.' 'We just clicked.'

As she talked, Riley's mind was all for what had happened five minutes ago. Juliet Sullivan. Oh yeah, she remembered her alright. Not that she was ever going to tell India about that.

India was still going. 'So when I met his brother, I just had to sit there listening to him going on and on about how wonderful I am. It was so embarrassing—'

'Oh my god!' Riley cried when she couldn't take any more. 'Look at the time!'

'Oh, do you have to go?' India said, disappointed. 'I haven't even told you about Brandon's classic car collection!'

Riley tutted. She turned to Persephone and Xanthia, not really her friends, more India's. 'Guess you guys are in for a treat.' They nodded like the little lapdogs they were. Neither of them ever had a thing to say, so it worked out well. India talked, they listened, and Riley pissed off when she got too bored. Standard formation.

'Oh!' India cried as Riley stood. 'We haven't even talked about you. What are you, err, up to?'

An hour they'd been talking, and only now had India remembered Riley was a person with a life too. That was also standard. On this particular occasion, though, Riley was pretty thrilled about that. She had no desire to talk about how life was going right now. 'India, I'd love to talk more, but I've got the dentist at two thirty.'

‘Two thirty?’ India said with a hint of suspicion.

‘I know, haha! Tooth hurty, can you believe it?’ Riley was going to have to work on her lying skills. She pulled her bag onto her shoulder and said, ‘Anyway, text me and we’ll... Yeah, anyway, text me.’ She dashed off out of the park, glad to be free. But, she reminded herself, she’d known India since she was twelve. You couldn’t ditch old friends just because they weren’t perfect.

As she walked out of the park, she hoped she wouldn’t see Juliet again. Her mute shock had been bad enough the first time. She just hoped she’d managed to keep her mouth physically closed. God, how long had it been since she’d seen her? Riley was twenty-eight, so it was ten whole years since school. Ten years since... that stuff.

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She got out of the park without tripping over any further historical landmines and headed for home. She tried not to remember anything painful as she walked. Instead, she thought about the present. But that wasn't so great, either. So her brain compromised and she thought about the new facts learned in those few awkward seconds. What had India said about Juliet, something about her being a nanny now? That wasn't surprising. Riley could easily imagine her being good with kids.

In terms of Riley's assessment of the grown-up Juliet, she was forced to admit that she looked very... well. Grown-up agreeably. She looked better for no longer dressing like she was trying to make herself invisible. Her face looked better with age. Those arresting green eyes had only gotten... Riley settled on the word, 'Nicer.' Yes. Nice. No other words were allowed entry.

As she put her key in the door of her flat, she vowed to stop thinking about Juliet. It would only lead down a rabbit hole that Riley didn't have the headspace for right now.

But she needn't have worried, because Juliet fell off the agenda very quickly when Riley realised her key didn't work. 'What the fuck?' she muttered to herself. She banged on the door. There was no answer.

'Nick?' Riley called through the door quietly, so as not to bother the neighbours. A few seconds of silence later, she stopped caring about that. 'Nick?!' she yelled, banging on the door. 'Are you in there?'

There was a shuffling from the other side of the door. But no answer. 'I can hear you in there!' she called.

She heard a loud sigh, and the door opened—on a chain. Nick, her flatmate - and landlord - peeked out from the crack in the door, most of his skinny mustachioed face hidden. ‘Riley, I’m... I’m sorry. It just hasn’t worked out.’

Riley had wanted to believe this was a mistake, but there was no mistake at all. ‘So you just change the locks? Whodoesthat? What the hell happened to the thirty-day notice period?’

‘I thought this would be better. Clean break,’ Nick shrugged timidly.

‘This is totally illegal,’ Riley told him, still working through her shock, moving into rage.

‘Well, actually, you never got around to signing the contract, did you?’ Nick said smugly.

Shit. That was true. She’d moved in hurriedly six months ago, a quick change of address needed when Riley had broken up with Noah after she could no longer deny that it wasn’t working. Nick had been a friend of a friend, and it had all been nice and informal, leaving Riley under the impression there wasn’t a rush to get the contract sorted, eventually forgetting about it altogether. With time, Riley found that Nick was a bit stuffy, but nothing she couldn’t handle. Until Nick started laying down ground rules. Nothing big initially, clean up after yourself, no secret electric heaters racking up giant electric bills, that sort of thing.

Then it got a bit more... austere. He wanted her to use his system of colour coding for cutlery. Red dot on the handle meant Wednesday, blue dot meant Tuesday, and so on. ‘To avoid over-wear on some items,’ he explained. It was a bit much, but Riley went along with it for the sake of a quiet life.

Then Nick asked Riley if she could go out on the balcony to brush her hair, that the

hoover was not used to long, female locks, and was getting blocked up. Riley thought it was taking the piss to make her stand in the cold of morning just to brush her hair. But she had to admit, her hair was rather thick and long. She'd broken more than one brush in it. So maybe he had a point?

But then Nick crossed a line. Not one Riley knew she had until Nick told her he thought it was best if she didn't have any overnight visitors. Point of fact, Riley hadn't had any 'overnight visitors' in her tenure at Nick's place, but she didn't like the sound of the rule anyway. She was an adult who paid rent. She could do as she pleased in her own room. She could have an orgy, theoretically. Which was what she had told Nick at the time. His ratty little moustache shot up. 'An orgy? You're going to have an orgy?' he asked, horrified.

'I'm not planning one, but...'

'Because that's really... I mean, the unsanitariness just for a start...'

'Nick, I'm not gonna have any orgies anytime soon! I just want you to know that you can't dictate stuff like that. I pay my rent on time. You're my landlord, not my dad.'

Nick looked like he was going to argue about it, but instead, he just scrunched his moustache up and took a sip of his kombucha. Riley was quite pleased with herself for putting him in his place. She had hoped that this was the start of a more balanced relationship.

Until her key wouldn't work.

'Nick, just open the door, would you?' she asked, trying to sound like a reasonable and clearheaded person and not like someone who wanted to throw their control freak of a landlord from the balcony she'd been shivering on all winter while she tamed her locks. 'Let's just talk about this, can't we?'

Nick appeared to think about it. But it became clear that it was only for appearances. 'No, I think you should just go. I'll send your stuff on.'

'To where? I don't have anywhere to go, you know that!' Riley said, less calmly. Being reasonable had achieved nothing, might as well indulge some righteous ire.

But Nick wasn't too worried about her. 'There's got to be somewhere, Riley. You're a very personable... person. I'm sure one of your friends could take you in.'

'I can't just pitch up on someone's doorstep, Nick.'

'You pitched up on mine,' he said. 'This was never going to be a long-term arrangement, was it?'

'I agree. It wasn't,' she concurred happily. 'But that doesn't mean you needed to do this so nastily. We could have just talked. I could have left in a few weeks.'

'Yeah, but... I don't really like confrontation. I was hoping you might just go away,' he confessed.

Riley had to laugh. 'You thought you could just change the locks and I wouldn't want to have a conversation about it?'

Nick sniffed. 'Look, I have to take care of myself, so I'm shutting this door in a second and putting on noise-cancelling headphones, blasting Celine Dion to heal from this. I'll take them off in half an hour, and if you're still here, I'll be forced to call the police, OK?' he said nervously. He took a deep breath and slammed the door.

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Riley knew she had but seconds before the headphones went on. She had to make the most of them. ‘You’re a control freak twat, Nick!’ she yelled through the door. ‘That’s why you’re doing things like this! Because you can’t handle someone saying no to you! That’s not normal! And you know what? I hope the next flatmate is as anal as you so you can find out how fucking annoying you are. And I hope they turn out to be a serial killer who murders you in your sleep with a knife you’re only meant to use on a Wednesday! But, but... on a Tuesday!’ she finished, panting from the exertion of having to come up with a high-speed insult that would cut to the bone. She wasn’t sure she’d nailed it.

Once she’d caught her breath, she realised she was homeless. What the hell was she going to do about that?

Three

Juliet crossed her legs one way and then the other - trying to remember which way was the official direction you were supposed to fold your legs in a job interview - while the woman in front of her, Amanda, had a glance down Juliet’s CV. Amanda’s house was big, swish, fancier than Helen’s, in a posher district, Westover. That intimidated Juliet somewhat, but she was trying not to let it seep out.

Amanda was about thirty-five, and she bore all the hallmarks of the exhausted mother. Hasty ponytail, bags under eyes, small jammy handprints on her trousers. Helen had looked like this when Juliet had met her; when Max was still in nappies.

As Amanda nodded at the page, Juliet realised she’d fallen asleep.

Juliet didn't know what to do. Part of her wanted to let the woman sleep. But in the end, she knew the longer this went on, the more embarrassing it would become. She coughed into her hand, but Amanda didn't move. Juliet tried again, quite loudly. Amanda started and fell sideways off her chair. 'My leg!' she yelled as she slid onto the floor. Juliet jumped up and grabbed her hand, helping her up. Amanda looked up at her in utter mortification. 'My leg fell asleep. I did too, didn't I?'

Juliet smiled as she helped her back onto her chair. 'It happens.'

'During job interviews?'

'Your daughter is two and a half, right? Yeah, seems about right,' Juliet said with a light laugh. 'The last mum I worked for fell asleep on a treadmill once. Hit the wall behind her and put a hole in it.'

'Does it get better?' Amanda asked, slight desperation in her tone.

'Yes. The golden age is about three, so you're not even that far away from it. Plus, it'll be much easier once you get a nanny.' She paused. 'Did that sound a bit pushy?'

Amanda laughed. 'Not at all. You've already got the job, anyway.'

Juliet gasped. 'I have!?'

'Yes, of course. Even if you didn't have bags of experience, you come very highly recommended. Someone I used to work with knows Helen, and she told him you were a godsend. In fact, she said she nearly didn't go to Canada because she didn't want to let you go.'

'That's really nice. She was a lovely boss,' Juliet said sincerely, fighting back a blush. She had to text Helen her thanks later. She was currently on a flight with the

kids, headed for their new life. It had been a tough goodbye yesterday. Juliet was still processing her grief, but she was dealing with it, moving on. Right into a new job, apparently.

‘So, do you think you might be interested in looking after Mia?’

‘Oh, err-’

‘What am I saying? You probably want to meet her first!’ Amanda said, rolling her eyes at herself. She got up and walked out. Juliet was left to infer she was to follow, and she hopped up and trotted out of the large living room, through the open-plan kitchen, out into a rather gigantic garden, easily a couple of acres. There was an outdoor pool with a security gate around it.

On the decking, a little girl played with a tea set and a collection of teddy bears while a middle-aged man sat with his laptop nearby, his brow creased in concentration.

‘Mike?’ Amanda called over to the man. He didn’t look up. ‘Yeah?’

‘Juliet’s here.’

Mike finally looked up and frowned. ‘Who?’

‘The nanny I told you about.’

Mike looked up. ‘Oh, right.’ He closed his laptop with regret and stood. He walked over, shoving a brusque hand out. ‘Mike.’

Juliet shook his hand, thinking there was something faintly familiar about Mike. ‘Juliet.’

‘And this is Mia,’ Amanda said, picking the little girl up and wrenching her away from her play. ‘Teddy!’ she screamed. Amanda sighed and put her straight back down, and she went back to serving the toy its imaginary tea. ‘Well, she’s a bit busy right now. But...’

Juliet nodded. ‘She has tea to pour, I understand.’

Mike coughed loudly, and everyone turned to him. ‘You got the kid?’ he asked Juliet. ‘Because I need to make a few calls.’

Juliet gaped. ‘Oh, err, I...’

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‘She hasn’t actually accepted the job yet, Mike,’ Amanda said, embarrassed. ‘This is her interview.’

‘I have. I mean, I am. Now. Accepting the job, I mean,’ Juliet told her.

Amanda was palpably relieved. ‘Oh my god! That’s fantastic.’ She sighed dreamily. ‘I can’t believe I can go back to work! I might even go to the gym occasionally.’

‘Yeah, been a while, hasn’t it?’ Mike said, casting a quick assessing look down his wife’s body.

Amanda blushed and tried to fake a laugh. ‘Yeah, I guess.’

Juliet knew right then she didn’t like Mike. But she was pretty sure she wouldn’t have that many dealings with him. Hopefully, it would be all about Mia with pop-ins from Amanda. If Mike was kept to a minimum, this job could be good. Mia was deep into the terrible twos, but Juliet relished the challenge of guiding her out the other side of them.

‘Are we sorted here, then?’ Mike asked, already picking up his laptop from the chair.

‘Yeah, I’ll take her now,’ Amanda said.

Mike had already disappeared into the house. Amanda turned to Juliet. ‘He’s got a lot on at the moment. Very stressed with work. Not to mention...’ Amanda sighed. ‘His, er, his other daughter just moved in. From his previous marriage.’

‘Did she?’

‘Yeah. She ran into a bit of trouble and er, yeah, had to come and stay with us for a bit. She’s about your age, actually. Great girl. Only, they clash a bit, Mike and her. Anyway, you don’t need to hear about that. Stop babbling, Amanda! Are you OK to start on Monday?’

‘Sure,’ Juliet smiled, deciding she liked Amanda.

‘God, that’s really, really great,’ Amanda said, practically giddy. She glanced at Mia. ‘I mean, not that I don’t love being around her.’ She lowered her voice. ‘I just need to go back to work.’

She knew Amanda was battling with the age-old problem—Mummy guilt. Juliet had watched Helen go through it. You were supposed to do everything perfectly during an exhaustion you’d never known whilst telling everyone you’d never been so fulfilled. It was a bullshit deal. ‘Every mother I’ve ever met has needed a life besides their children’s. It’s healthy.’

Amanda looked quite keen on that take, though she had reservations. ‘But my husband... He was thinking, wethought, she should be raised to school age by me. But lately, I just feel like...’

‘You need to be around adults again,’ Juliet finished confidently.

Amanda’s smile was wide. ‘You get it.’

Juliet nodded. ‘So, Monday morning?’

‘Yes. I was thinking eight thirty till six, Monday to Friday?’

‘That’s great.’

Nearby, Mia admonished her teddy for drinking too much tea. ‘Teddy! Save some for Rabbit!’ She pushed him over. As he lay on the ground, Mia was further outraged. ‘Don’t go sleep! It’s not naptime!’ She picked him up, walked over to the pool gate, and lobbed him clean over, right into the pool.

‘Her language is coming along,’ Juliet said, looking for an upside.

Amanda sighed. ‘She called me “shit for brains” yesterday. I think she heard it when Mike was on a work call.’

Juliet wasn’t too shocked. Kids were sponges. ‘That’s quite a tough sentence. Impressive.’

‘I can tell we’re going to get along great,’ Amanda laughed.

As Amanda escorted Juliet back through the house, back to the front door, Juliet heard stirring from above. Amanda turned to the stairs. ‘Oh, that’ll be Riley.’

Juliet froze. ‘Riley?’

Four

Riley checked her watch; it was three on a Saturday. Her dad would be at home on the pretence he was having his weekend, but he’d almost certainly be in his office working. He worked in capital management and could never really be ripped away from the Dow. The upside was that she could risk leaving her room. She didn’t want to see his face for a few days. Hard now she was living with the bastard. But she really couldn’t think of anywhere else to stay while she got sorted.

Her first thought had been her mum, but she'd moved out to Copenhagen a few years ago after she married a Danish brain surgeon she met whilst skiing in the Alps. Riley wouldn't have minded a break in Copenhagen. But she had work, and it was a hell of a commute. Nine to five, she worked in the marketing department for a homeless charity, Helping Hand. If Riley hadn't known the realities of homelessness, she'd have been tempted to call the situation ironic. But the people they helped didn't have this fallback. Not by a long chalk.

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Riley wanted to feel grateful for this big, affluent house, and if the place hadn't contained her father, she'd have been cartwheeling. But of course, if it hadn't been her dad's house, she wouldn't be in it, so it was a catch twenty-two.

Luckily, the place almost had room enough to avoid him altogether. If only Riley hadn't come down for dinner last night at her stepmother's kindly insistence. She wouldn't have gotten drawn into that argument about tax breaks for the rich. 'We put alotof money into this country. Everything you buy is taxed and people like me buy a lot of things. High tax on earnings on top of that is unnecessary,' was his argument. Riley was disgusted, and she couldn't help but let it be known. Though she'd been raised around money, she didn't consider herself part of this world anymore. She'd opted out a while back.

Even at eighteen, as Riley embarked on a degree that was his choice (he was paying for it and Mike Powell only paid for what he wanted, a daughter with a BA in business), she knew she'd never follow in his size nines. After she'd graduated from university, she knew she couldn't take another penny from him. It came with too many strings. She decided to snip them cleanly, make her own money, choose her own path. It was hard at first, but she soon got used to it. And now? She felt like she was her own woman. Whatever she'd lost to gain that feeling had been worth it. Being under his roof again made her uneasy. She was going to get out of this fancy place as quickly as she could.

She had some house shares to look at later in the week. Until then, she was trying to suck it up and play nice. It was hard. Her dad's attitudes repulsed her. It wasn't enough to have a lot. He had to haveeverything.

Riley pitied his new wife. Amanda couldn't have truly known what she was signing up for when she married him and started a family. He'd probably laid on the charm at first. But then she went and got pregnant, didn't she? She was a tired, hassled mum now, much less exciting than the thirty-year-old he'd seduced in the beginning. Oh, and poor little Mia? As far as Riley could see, Mike Powell was no more interested in his new kid than he was in his old one. They were both useless to him for similar reasons. Mia was finding her independence, too; the word 'No' her favourite. Mike could no more tell her what to do than he could Riley.

She was mulling all this as she jogged downstairs to get a biscuit - she had her own cupboard that she stocked herself - when she heard Amanda on the stairs. She was talking to someone. Riley would just jog right past, grab her packet of hobnobs, and bugger off back to the guest bedroom, where she could continue to keep her head down while she rinsed out Rightmove. It didn't end up working out that way, however. Because standing at the door, talking to Amanda, was Juliet Sullivan.

Riley froze on the steps, her body locked with shock. After it loosened its grip, she wasn't sure what to do, so for want of a better idea, she began to reverse, silently backing up the stairs. She didn't get two steps before Amanda called cheerily, 'Riley! Come and meet Juliet!'

Riley found her mouth sliding into a rictus grin. 'Yeah, er, hi.'

Juliet's face was a lot more honest. She looked mortified. 'Hi,' she said in the sort of tone you might greet a cobra with. If you ever found yourself forced to socialise with deadly snakes.

As Riley felt her soul trying to leave her body, somehow, her legs took her down the stairs. 'Nice to see you... again.'

Amanda's eyebrows jumped. 'Do you know each other?'

‘Yeah, we, we went to school together,’ Riley told her.

Amanda gaped. ‘Oh, wow! That’s great!’

‘Is it?’ Riley asked her.

‘Yeah, Juliet already knows someone in the house! That’ll make it easier, won’t it?’

‘Make what easier?’ Riley asked with a sinking feeling.

‘She’s going to be around a lot from now on because she’s Mia’s new nanny. She’s starting Monday,’ Amanda told her. ‘And look, an old school friend is right here to make her feel at home. How great is that?’

No. Please, no.

Juliet looked like she was trying to smile her way through this awkwardness. She was making a complete hash of it. Riley could tell she was horrified to find out her new job involved... Well... an old friend.

‘Gosh, I’ve really got to be heading off,’ Juliet said, looking at her wrist. She wasn’t wearing a watch. ‘I’ve got to be at... the dentist.’

‘Oh, well, looking forward to Monday,’ Amanda said, letting her out of the front door. Juliet practically ran out.

Amanda shut the door behind her, looking as pleased as punch. She was a nice woman, but not the sharpest tool in the box. ‘She’s a sweetheart, isn’t she?’ she said to Riley.

Riley nodded. ‘She can be.’

Five

Juliet was running away from Riley, again. But what she couldn't seem to run from, what her legs could not help her escape from, was the memories she'd been pushing down all week. The memories were a decade old, but they seemed fresh as daisies.

THEN

Juliet was pretending to read a book in the school library. She didn't even know what book it was; she'd snatched the first thing to hand from a nearby shelf and put it in front of her face as soon as she'd seen India coming in. Juliet knew if they locked eyes, that was it. A serving of cruelty for one.

Juliet peeked over the page to see that she'd gotten lucky. India's full attention was on a friend of hers as she yammered away about whatever. The friend was Riley Powell. Juliet wasn't afraid of Riley, strictly speaking. In fact, India never seemed to give her crap when Riley was around. Riley was a bit of a mystery to Juliet. What she did know of her seemed too good to be true. She was one of the best students in the school, but she didn't show off about it. She was very good-looking but didn't seem vain about it. She was everybody's friend without ever trying to be. Juliet didn't understand her remotely. All she really knew for sure was that Riley had it made.

Meanwhile, everything seemed like a struggle for Juliet. Her grades? Middling. Her looks? Average. Her friends? Few. But Juliet was nearly at the finish line. Just a few more months of school and she was out; on to adult life, whatever that meant.

Juliet didn't lower the book until India vanished around a bookcase, just in case Riley's presence wasn't the protection she believed it to be. That loud bleat of hers could be heard, though. It was way too loud for a library. Though no one told her to shut up. 'So anyway, I'm doing English lit. I mean, how hard can it be to read a few books and say what you think about them?' India was saying confidently.

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‘Um, quite hard, I think?’ Riley said quietly. India only laughed. ‘You take things way too seriously, Ri.’

‘Probably,’ Riley conceded.

Juliet could put the book back now she was out of India’s visual range. But before she closed it, she looked to see what she’d been hiding behind. It turned out to be a rather detailed anatomy book. She realised with a shock that she was looking right down the barrel of a vagina. She managed to control her slight alarm long enough to place it quietly back on the shelf. She made a beeline for the shelf she’d been headed for before India had walked in. Horror. She loved a good spooking.

Juliet perused the limited library stock, looking for something she hadn’t read. She found a few options on the lowest shelf and was knelt down - trying to choose between Anne Rice and Shirley Jackson - when a shadow fell across her.

‘I’d go with Jackson if I were you,’ said a mellifluous voice.

Juliet tilted her head up to see Riley Powell looking down at her. She was tall anyway, but she seemed to loom more than ever. ‘Am I in your way?’ Juliet asked automatically.

Riley laughed softly. ‘Nope. I’ve done the bottom shelf. Working my way through the middle.’

Juliet heard herself laughing a bit too loudly at that. Riley gave her a quick smile and turned to the shelf. Juliet grabbed the Shirley Jackson book, *The Haunting of Hill*

House, and stood. She was about to walk away. But for some reason, she stopped and turned back. 'Umm, I didn't realise you were a horror fan.'

Riley turned to her. 'I like a lot of genres, but I'm kind of on a horror kick at the moment.'

Juliet was surprised at the fullness of the response. So you could just ask someone like Riley Powell a question and they would, just, like, answer it? It couldn't possibly be that easy.

It got even better, though. 'So, you're taking my recommendation, I see,' Riley said with a nod at Juliet's hands. Juliet looked down at the book she was holding. 'I guess so.'

'I think she's much better than Anne Rice. Though I guess it depends on your taste. I've never been big into vampires.'

'No, me neither. Twilight kind of ruined them. Once I started picturing them sparkly, they got a lot less scary.'

Riley chuckled. 'Yeah, that's probably it.'

Juliet couldn't believe the success she was having talking to Riley. It was going so well, the only thing to do was leave immediately before she ruined it. 'Well, see ya.'

'Yeah.' Riley turned back to the books.

Juliet dashed away, riding high. One minute of interaction. She could scarcely believe it. It was like watching someone on TV for years and have them suddenly pop out of the screen for a chat. Riley breathed different air than Juliet. She was the full package, smart, beautiful, rich as shit. Juliet could only imagine what it would be to

be her. Even for five minutes. To look in the mirror to see those deep-set dark amber eyes, not her boring green bland ones. That tawny glowing skin, not her chalky pallor. And all those lustrous, corkscrewing dark waves of hair that fell down her back like a gorgeous ocean you could be content to drown to death in, given half the chance.

Yep, all in all, Riley Powell had it. Juliet didn't have anything.

But the interaction could only be a novelty. Juliet was pretty sure that would be the last real conversation they ever had.

Juliet was eating a very rubbish cheese sandwich in the cafeteria a few days later with her friends, Haley and Meera. Friends was a loose term, though. They were just people she sat adjacent to at lunchtime so as not to look like a loner. Loners got bullied. Haley and Meera were a social beard, and for that purpose, they were fine, if dull. They talked about boys—a lot. Juliet was fairly sure they talked about them so much because they were getting zero action. Though she was one to talk. She'd barely been kissed. She thought she might be bisexual, but she wasn't sure. How could she be? She didn't have any field experience.

She never bothered mentioning her sexuality to Haley and Meera. She thought they'd be alright about it, but they were simple, boy-loving creatures and wouldn't have anything useful to say on the subject, so why bother telling them?

'So, anyway, I'm going to Jackstone Uni because I heard it was one and a half men to every girl. Raises my odds,' Haley said.

'Yeah, it's even better at Glede. Two and three quarters!' Meera said.

Privately, Juliet thought if getting a boyfriend involved having to stack your odds, it wasn't worth having one. But of course, she said nothing.

'So, you decided where you're going?' Meera asked Juliet, picking the crust off her sandwich.

'I'm not going to uni. I'm just gonna do a year at a local college, get my childcare qualification,' Juliet said quietly.

'Oh,' Meera said. 'That's it?'

'Yeah, isn't that a bit...' Haley began.

'What?' asked Juliet. She knew what was coming though.

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‘Aren’t kids a bit... a bit boring?’ Haley finished in a slightly patronising tone.

Juliet shrugged. ‘Not to me.’

Haley and Meera swapped a look. Juliet tried not to let it get to her. She knew people would be like this. But she didn’t want three years at uni getting smashed, only to come out with a mountain of debt and very few real job prospects. She wanted to make a real choice, start her life now. And she liked kids, she just did. She’d been looking after them her whole life. From a big extended family, they’d been utilising her as cheap childcare from an early age. But she didn’t mind; she was happiest with her cousins. She enjoyed their company more than her peers. They could have fun without making anyone the butt of it. They listened with open curiosity. They loved without prejudice. They laughed without restraint. They were themselves, unashamedly. It felt good to be around them. Juliet was going to centre her life around creatures that brought her a joy that her fellow teenagers had never done.

‘So anyway, I heard that at Glede, you can fail for the first six months and nothing even happens,’ Meera said, turning the conversation back to herself. Juliet didn’t mind. If they were just gonna shit on her choices, she was happy to stay out of the limelight.

But their babbling was cut short. Across the cafeteria, a barking male voice suddenly rose sharply above the din. ‘You can’t just fucking do that to me.’

Juliet turned to the sound. There was a tall guy at the other end of the cafeteria, looming over a table, eyes ablaze, fists balled. Juliet couldn’t see who he was yelling at.

‘What’s up with Jack?’ Meera asked.

‘Dunno, but I heard Riley Powell broke up with him yesterday. During indie study,’ Haley said. ‘Which is crazy. Like she’s gonna do better.’

That got Juliet’s attention. She took a hard look at the table he was standing over, to see if she could see Riley. But the angle was wrong. The room had quietened down, though, and she heard the response, despite it being at a much lower decibel level. ‘I don’t want to talk about this right now.’ It was Riley, alright; you couldn’t miss that voice. It was unusually adult sounding for an eighteen-year-old.

‘Tough,’ Jack said. ‘Come outside with me now.’

‘No,’ Riley said sternly.

‘She’s an idiot,’ Meera breathed. ‘He’s gorgeous.’

Juliet gave Meera a disbelieving look that she didn’t see because she was focused on that dreamy asshole, Jack.

‘Yes, you will. You owe me that,’ he was saying. Though no one looked directly at Jack, it seemed like the whole room was holding their breath.

Riley knew she was being watched because she cracked. ‘Fine,’ she breathed. She stood, Juliet seeing her at last. She looked mortified. Juliet was livid for her. Who the hell did Jack think he was, demanding conversations, being all threatening?

Juliet watched as Riley trudged toward the exit, which happened to be right next to her table. Riley passed with her head down. Next came a smug Jack. He’d gotten his way, and he didn’t care how he’d gone about it.

Juliet glanced over at Meera, who was smiling at Jack, trying to catch his eye as he passed. Juliet couldn't believe what an idiot she was being. Trying to flirt with this angry twat whilst he was in the middle of having a go at his very recent ex. But it sort of worked. Or at least, Meera caught his eye. 'What are you grinning at?' he asked, slowing slightly as he passed the table. Meera's smile slipped.

But just as he drew level with Juliet, she did something crazy. It was almost like she was outside of her own body, watching her leg slip out from beneath the table and hook Jack's ankle as he walked by. She kept watching from that removed place as Jack went sprawling, arms out, staggering right into a table filled with the football team, right in the middle of a serious carb load. Pasta, bread, and jacket potatoes were sent flying as Jack upended the whole table with his full body weight. He came to rest on top of the upset table, face down.

There was dead silence for several seconds. The footballers looked down in astonishment at where their food used to be. Jack rolled slowly to face the ceiling, dazed. From the corner of Juliet's eye, she could see Riley, wide-eyed at the scene. Time slowed.

But the spell had to break sometime. And of course, it was broken by laughter, coming from a footballer. He started giggling like a five-year-old girl. The rest of the room soon joined in once the seal was cracked. Someone yanked Jack up, and he got to his feet, blushing like a tomato. Juliet turned to see what Riley's reaction was. She wasn't laughing, not exactly. Her mouth hadn't moved. But Juliet was sure she could see a smile in her eyes.

Jack had now shaken off his shock. 'Who did that?' he asked the laughing room. They kept right on yukking it up. That enraged Jack, and he spun around to the footballer with the high-pitched giggle. 'Oi! Who was it?'

'I dunno, dude,' the snickering footballer said through tears of laughter. 'Chill out.'

But Jack didn't chill. He was looking around him, searching the room for a good stool pigeon. He soon found him, a ratty little kid with a wispy moustache that he didn't know how to shave yet. 'Oi, runt! Who legged me up?' Jack asked the boy, towering over him. The kid didn't pause as his finger pointed straight at Juliet.

'Shit,' she whispered to herself. Jack marched over. 'Did you trip me?' he asked, incredulous. As well he might. Juliet was no one at this school. Who was she to attack someone of his social standing?

'Umm, no?' Juliet replied. It wasn't very convincing.

Jack eyeballed her as the laughter subsided. Everyone went quiet again, barely able to believe their luck. First the argument, then the accident, now the kangaroo court. It was all their Christmases come at once. For Juliet, it was less fun. Jack's brow was nearly touching hers, his intense gaze boring into her. She was about a second from confessing all when Jack suddenly took a sharp step back. Or rather, he'd been pushed. 'Back off, Jack,' Riley said as she shoved him away. He directed his rage toward her. 'Oh, you're gonna defend her, are you? Did you see what she did?' he said, taking a step toward Riley. She didn't budge; she was angrier than he was now. Juliet didn't know what to do. She'd caused this massive scene, and she hadn't a clue how to shut it down.

But at that moment, the giggling footballer lost his amusement. 'Dude, you don't get up in girls' faces like that. Uncool.'

Riley and Jack broke their stare out and looked at the guy. 'Sam, it's alright,' Riley said.

'Mind your fucking business!' Jack yelled at him.

Sam glared at Jack. But he said nothing. Jack turned back to Riley. 'I can't believe

you're defending some rando nobody.'

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Riley folded her arms. 'You're the nobody, Jack,' she told him, quietly seething.

The entire school, as one, made the delighted sound, 'Oooooooooohhhhhhhhh.' Juliet felt all funny in her tummy. No one had ever defended her honour like that.

Jack looked ready to pop. He took a threatening step toward Riley, and that's when a fist flew out from nowhere and smacked Jack in the jaw. He went down like a sack of spuds. Juliet looked over to see the punch had been thrown by Sam, the footballer. 'Don't be a twat!' he told Jack.

Then someone else, a random meathead, punched Sam. 'That's my mate!' the meathead said. Then he got punched. 'That's my mate!' said another footballer.

About then, it turned into a full-on group brawl. Fists flying, chairs crashing, people running to get out of the way. Juliet was locked in place until she felt a hand grab hers. 'Come on!' said Riley, dragging her away from the smackdown, and they ran together from the cafeteria, struggling through the herd of teenagers either running away from or toward the fight.

When Juliet finally stopped running and caught her breath, she found she was out on the front lawn with Riley. They looked at each other. 'What the hell just happened?' Riley asked herself.

'Ummm, I don't know,' Juliet lied.

Riley grinned. 'You did trip him, didn't you?'

Juliet shrugged. 'I might have... I mean, maybe my leg was just, you know... Sometimes your legs are just hard to keep track of.'

Riley laughed. 'I'm not gonna tell anyone if that's what you're worried about.'

Juliet took a chance. 'Fine. I did it. On purpose.'

Riley laughed a bit more before she tamped it down to ask, 'What for?'

That was a much trickier question. 'He was being... I didn't like how he... I thought you might...'

Riley raised her eyebrows. 'You did that for me?'

Juliet took the chance that Riley wasn't about to laugh directly in her face. 'Yeah.'

Riley looked at her very seriously, and Juliet couldn't read her remotely.

'Juliet Sullivan!' said an adult voice, and they turned to see the deputy head, Mrs. Traynor, bearing down. 'I've just broken up a mass brawl, and I've been told it was all down to you!'

Juliet felt like she might soil herself as Mrs. Traynor flew at her. But as she reached her, Riley stepped forward. 'Mrs. Traynor, I was there. I saw what happened.'

'Then you can come too.'

Juliet cracked like an egg the second they got in Mrs. Traynor's office, blabbing about the leg-up. She'd never been good at defying authority. When she'd finished talking, Mrs. Traynor didn't immediately say anything, and Juliet felt pressured to confess further. 'And there was this one time during a science test - it was on

photosynthesis – that I kept writing after the teacher said pens down. I was writing an answer to the last question, and because I was at the back of the room, I had a few more seconds until she—’

‘Juliet, can you please shut up a second? I’m trying to figure out how to punish you,’ Mrs. Traynor said.

‘Juliet, wait a sec,’ Riley said. ‘She missed the bit where she was defending me because Jack was being a bully.’

Mrs. Traynor frowned. ‘What?’

Riley explained the start of it. Jack had, as Meera had guessed, been dumped and not taken it well. Jack was sure he was leaving her for someone else. That had come to a head in the cafeteria. ‘I said I didn’t want to talk, and he was being quite intimidating, and I felt like I had to go with him. That was until Juliet tripped him. That’s when everything went off the rails.’

Mrs. Traynor sighed through her nose. ‘Right. This just got more complicated. ThankgodOfsted finished with us yesterday.’ She pinched the bridge of her nose and looked up at the ceiling. ‘Everyone that was fighting gets a week’s detention.’

‘I wasn’t fighting,’ Juliet began hopefully. ‘Does that mean I don’t have detention?’

‘No. You’re doing clean-up instead. The cafeteria’s a mess.’

Riley’s mouth swung open. ‘What? You’re gonna punish her too?’

‘She started the fight.’

‘Not really, that was Sam. And he was trying to help as well.’

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‘People don’t get to use violence to solve disputes. Not in my school.’

Riley’s brow wrinkled. ‘For fuck’s sake!’ she said, thumping her fist on Mrs. Traynor’s desk. A picture frame was upset and slid off the desk, falling to the ground with a crack. Juliet was shocked. She thought Riley floated through life on a serene cloud of perfection. She’d never seen this side of her. She was having a shit fit at the deputy head. On her behalf, too.

Mrs. Traynor heaved a sigh. ‘What was that supposed to achieve?’

‘I don’t know!’ Riley said. ‘But you’re just being... you’re being a dictator.’

‘Riley, I didn’t expect this from you. I always thought you had a good head on your shoulders. You too, Juliet.’

Juliet blushed. Riley, far less humbled, crossed her arms tightly. ‘You’re being unfair. You’re punishing everyone without a thought.’

‘That’s right,’ Mrs. Traynor agreed. ‘Which is why you can join Juliet for clean-up duty.’

‘Me? What did I do?’ Riley demanded.

‘You just broke my picture and you’re being belligerent. That enough?’

Riley opened her mouth but couldn’t seem to find a good comeback, so she got to her feet and stormed out instead. Juliet was left with Mrs. Traynor. ‘Go and get her. And

then find the caretaker. She can direct you to the things you need to clean up the cafeteria.'

Juliet stood and sloped out. Riley was stood down the corridor. Juliet walked down the corridor, not sure she wanted to approach her right now. She looked het up. 'We've, erm, got to, err, go and get some, mmm, cleaning supplies,' Juliet told her, breaking out in a light sweat.

Riley had hell in her eyes. 'That... bloody... woman!'

Juliet shrugged. 'I don't know. Ididtrip Jack.'

Riley looked at her. 'You're too nice.'

'People always tell me that,' Juliet sighed.

Riley cast one last evil look to Mrs. Traynor's door and then said, 'Right. Better get this done.' She headed off down the corridor. Juliet scurried to keep up with her. She felt worried, nervous. She'd tripped up one of the most popular guys in the school. She was in trouble with the deputy head, which had never happened before. That was all a bit scary. But the scariest thing was knowing she was about to spend the next few hours with Riley Powell, alone. Scary and exciting.

NOW

As Juliet legged it away from the Powell residence, she was thinking, I can't take that job now. Not a chance.

But as she got on the bus, she was already doubting the doubt. There were two reasons she wasn't sure she could say no to the job. First, she'd already said yes to it. And Amanda had seemed to need help and support. It would feel cruel to tell her

she'd changed her mind.

The second problem was that she'd be making herself unemployed. That scared the cream cheese out of Juliet. Her family had always been ten minutes away from financial disaster; the only thing that kept the wolf from the door was that everyone worked, and they worked all the time. Juliet had gotten a part-time job when she was thirteen, washing cars, and stayed there until the place closed when she was eighteen. While she was getting her NVQ in childcare and education, she was working in a call centre. The minute she was out of training, she got a job in a nursery. A couple of years later, she was poached out of the nursery by Helen to be a private nanny. Work was a constant fact of life. The idea of being voluntarily jobless sent a chill down her spine.

But how the hell could she possibly go and work in the same household as Riley? Even though all that business had been ten years ago, she still thought about it sometimes. She didn't like to admit it, but it still pained her.

As Juliet made her way home from her interview, she swilled the memory of that day around, the fight, and the clean-up. It was just the start. But was this the end, here and now? Was she going to call Amanda and tell her she was reneging?

Six

Riley was checking her watch. It was Monday morning. She had to head out in a minute; she was going to be late if she didn't leave soon. But she was waiting to see if something was going to happen. Or not happen. She was waiting to see if Juliet was going to show up today.

Amanda hadn't said otherwise. She was going about whistling this morning. Riley didn't need to ask her if she believed Juliet was coming. That was obvious. But Riley found it hard to believe that Juliet would turn up, given the speed at which she'd

sprinted from the house when she realised who lived there.

Riley checked her watch. It was eight twenty-nine, and she had to go. She let herself out the front door and shut it behind her.

‘Oh, err...’ said a voice, and Riley turned around on the doorstep to find herself eyeball-to-eyeball with Juliet. ‘Hi,’ she said. And then, ‘Morning.’

‘Good... good morning,’ Juliet said, swallowing nervously.

‘So, you’re here,’ Riley said.

‘Yeah, of course. Said I would be, didn’t I?’ Juliet said, looking at her phone. ‘Speaking of which, I’d better get in.’

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Riley unlocked the door and let Juliet in. 'Well, I'm off to work, so... I'll see ya.'

'Yeah. See you around,' Juliet said, stepping past Riley. Once she was in the house, she turned to look at Riley as though she might say more. But nothing was said as Juliet went deeper into the house.

Riley turned around and headed for work. Amazing. Of all the people that could be coming here to this house to look after her little sister, it had to be Juliet.

Riley didn't have time for this. She had other things to focus on. Getting a new place to live was top of the list. It would solve two problems: getting out of the house and out of Juliet's way. Once Riley found a new pad, she'd likely never see Juliet again. Riley hadn't been a regular visitor at her dad's, and that situation was likely to resume once she didn't live there.

As she rode the train to work, she was hitting Rightmove hard, looking for a place that someone who worked in marketing for a non-profit who wasn't exactly making the big bucks could afford. Which ruled out living alone, unfortunately. She just had to hope she could find a place with relatively normal people. Somewhere clean and comfortable and in her price range, surely a basic ask. Though, as she flicked through various properties, it began to feel like a big demand. It was either nice and way the hell out of town, or a well-situated dump. She had a decision to make. She could either take a shithole and get out of her dad's ASAP or hold on for something better.

Tough call. Even without her dad's enraging presence, being around Juliet was going to be weird and uncomfortable. They simply had way too much history.

THEN

Riley was sweeping resentfully. She shouldn't be here, neither of them should. The only person who should be punished was that wang, Jack. He couldn't accept she was breaking up with him, could he? Be cool about it, accept her decision like an adult. He had to make a big drama, act like a shit. That was the reason she'd dumped his arse in the first place. He didn't care about what she wanted. He never had. She was a trophy to him. Once she'd agreed to be his girlfriend and the chase was over, he'd taken so little personal interest in her, it became almost funny. She'd started saying ridiculous stuff to him just to check if he was listening. 'Hey, Jack. I'm thinking I might not want to go to uni, I'm probably gonna go into porn instead. Really niche stuff, maybe scat.' 'Yeah?' Jack answered, looking at his phone. 'Sounds good.'

He also talked about himself constantly. Boring stuff that he thought was fascinating. The more Riley got to know him, the more obvious her initial mistake was thinking that Jack was a real person with feelings.

She was so happy to be free of him, it was sort of worth the chaos it had wrought. Though she did feel bad that Juliet had gotten dragged into it all. She was a bit of a mystery to Riley. She didn't speak up in class unless she was told to. She hung about with those two idiots who were always bleating on about boys they fancied, but she never heard Juliet say anything of the sort. In fact, she never seemed to be dating anyone. Turned out she was amusing too, that thing she'd said in the library. But the big thing was her tripping Jack, all for Riley's sake. Despite the fact she'd been sat at a table with her friends, no one else had bothered to interject on her behalf. And Juliet had gone further than that. Riley didn't know how to feel about that. Or rather, she wasn't sure she should feel the way she did, in fact, feel about it.

She liked it.

Riley glanced over at Juliet picking bits of baked potato out of a wall display. 'Hey,

I'm thirsty. I'm gonna get a can from the machine. You want one? On me?

Juliet looked over. 'Oh, yes, thanks.'

'What's your poison?'

'I'd love a Ginger Beer.'

'A woman of refined tastes,' Riley smiled, going over to the machine. She grabbed two cans and took them over to Juliet. Juliet dropped a handful of cold potato into the nearby bin and took the can. 'Thank you.'

They cracked the cans open and took sips. Riley felt like she should say something about the Jack business, but she wasn't sure how to put it. 'Thank you for tripping my ex-boyfriend over' was a bit lame. 'How are you getting on with that book I recommended?' she asked instead.

Juliet's eyes popped in excitement. 'Oh, yeah, it's pretty fantastic.'

'It's old school spooky, isn't it?'

'Yeah,' Juliet agreed. She took a pause. 'I like the central character. I kind of relate to her.'

'Yeah?' Riley asked, interested.

'Yes. She's very... She's on the outside of things.' Juliet looked embarrassed.

Riley smiled. 'I related to that too.'

Juliet laughed. Riley bristled. 'What's funny about that?'

‘Sorry, I just didn’t think... Never mind.’

Riley raised an eyebrow, trying to relax a bit. ‘Go ahead.’

‘You’re kind of...’ Juliet paused, and Riley could tell she wasn’t sure if she should say it. But she did anyway. ‘You’re theItgirl. Like if this was a John Hughes film, you’d be Molly Ringwald.’

Riley burst into laughter. ‘What?’ she spluttered.

‘Come on, you mustknowthat,’ Juliet said, which was bold for her. But Riley wanted to encourage it. ‘So, who wouldyoubeyou?’

‘I think it’s obvious. I’m an Ally Sheedy type. Pre-makeover,’ she added quickly.

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Riley laughed. ‘Yeah, but after she has that makeover, everyone thinks she’s hot, don’t they?’

Juliet blushed. ‘Well, maybe not Ally Sheedy then.’

Riley took a long look at Juliet and said, ‘Might be dead-on, actually.’

Juliet’s lips parted in a look of shock. And then she looked away, embarrassed. ‘This potato won’t bin itself.’

Riley hadn’t meant to embarrass Juliet. She meant what she’d said. She was getting a good look at Juliet for the first time, and she was seeing that there was some serious cute underneath that long fringe. Her eyes were a blazing green, flecked with little amber sparks. Her body had a slender fragility that was quite arresting. And when she smiled, which she rarely did, it was a dazzler. It was just a shame she didn’t know it.

But Riley knew it. And part of her felt like she’d neverunknowit now. Because once you notice a thing like that, it can start to take ahold of you. It starts as an idle thought, swirling around your mind until it begins to take root as a notion. And the next stage? It becomes an embedded belief.

As Riley watched Juliet scrape flecks of potato off the board, she had this feeling that she’d just taken the first step down that long, winding path.

Seven

Juliet was dead on her feet. Mia was a hurricane of a child. She’d forgotten what the

under-threes could be like. Mia needed to be watched constantly; she seemed to be ever on the lookout for trouble to get into. She never did a single thing she was asked. And she knew a selection of rather adult insults that were hard to hear coming from such a little child. Still, Juliet didn't regret her eventual decision to see through her commitment. Not because of Mia, anyway.

But this morning, bumping into Riley at the door, bloody hell, that was awkward. They'd seen each other three times in the past week, and the discomfort seemed to grow with each encounter, even though they were only in each other's presence for a minute, tops. But what if they had to be together for an extended period? How would that play? Would they be forced to acknowledge their history? It seemed like no one wanted to be the first to do that. But it was ten years ago, they'd been kids. They were adults now, so it didn't matter still, did it? Whatever had been said and done, it was consigned to childhood. Dredging it up now would be like holding it against Mia that she'd... drawn all over the kitchen cabinets with a pen she'd found from somewhere. Shit.

'Mia!' Juliet cried, running over to the child and taking the pen back as gently as she could. She'd taken her eye off the ball. This wasn't like Juliet at all. She took pride in being conscientious.

Mia looked at her work. 'I was drawing,' she told her.

'I know, and it's lovely. But we have to draw on paper in the future.'

'I draw mummy,' she said, proudly pointing at a circle with a few smudges in it. Juliet didn't want to discourage her, so she said, 'Oh yes. That's very good. But I'm going to have to clean it off now.'

Mia's face fell. She was seconds from tears. Juliet had to act fast. 'Tell you what, why don't I take a picture of it to show Mummy before I clean it? That way, we can

still keep the picture.'

Mia thought it over. She nodded. Juliet took out her phone. She took a snap of the picture. 'Tell you what, let's get one with you standing next to it?'

Mia nodded and stepped next to her work, smiling proudly. Juliet grinned as she snapped Mia and her artwork. The child looked so proud of herself, it was hard not to find it cute.

'What the hell!' yelled a voice, and Juliet turned to see Mike, tie skew whiff, face red. 'Why the hell are you letting Mia draw all over the house?'

Juliet was shocked into silence by the strength of his anger. By the time her brain could work again, Mike was ramping up further. 'Unbelievable, I knew we should have looked into you properly. Letting some random into my house because my wife likes her, I must have been mad!'

Juliet found her voice at last. 'Mr. Powell, I only looked away for a second—'

'That doesn't explain why you're taking snaps of the damage like it's all in fun. Teaching my child that it's alright to destroy property. Property her father worked hard to pay for!'

'I, I was about to clean it, Mia just wanted—'

'You're sacked,' Mike said coldly.

Juliet was struck dumb again. Once she realised no one was going to jump out and tell her she was being punked, she put her phone away and turned to little Mia. She looked like Juliet felt, shocked shitless. 'Mia, I'm gonna have to go now, but I want you to know I've had a lovely time with you, and I...'

‘What’s this?’ Amanda said, walking into the kitchen, looking at Mike and Juliet. ‘Are you going somewhere? I thought you were working till six, did I get that wrong?’

Juliet looked at Mike expectantly. He could explain for himself what this was. He seemed happy to take up the mantle. ‘She was letting Mia wreck the place! I’ve sacked her!’

Amanda blinked at her husband. She turned to Juliet. ‘What happened?’

‘It’s true that I did take my eye off Mia for a second and she wrote on the cabinet. I was about to clean it off, but Mia was proud of her work - she drew you, you see - and I was getting a snap before I cleaned it off.’ Juliet stopped there. She’d said it now, what had happened, and she felt better for that. If this was a fireworthy offense, at least she’d said her piece.

Amanda frowned, and Juliet thought she was just as angry as Mike. But then she said, ‘Juliet, would you mind waiting for a second, so I can talk to Mike?’

Juliet paused. ‘OK, sure.’

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Amanda looked at Mike. ‘Your office?’

Mike raised an eyebrow, but he followed his wife. Juliet took Mia outside to play with her teddies. She’d gone rather quiet. It was quite out of character for the child, and that disturbed Juliet. She wondered how often Mike flew off the handle at the smallest problem.

Mia sat down on a tiny chair and picked up an errant teddy from the lawn. ‘Teddy sorry,’ she said, handing Juliet the bear.

Juliet took the bear, trying not to break down in tears. ‘Teddy doesn’t have to be sorry. Teddy didn’t do anything wrong,’ Juliet told her gently. ‘Do you think he needs a hug?’

Mia nodded. Juliet gave the bear a small hug. ‘Would you like a hug as well, Mia?’ Juliet asked. Mia nodded. Juliet picked the girl up and held her. Mia squeezed her tightly.

The back gate at the far end of the garden suddenly opened, and Riley walked through. ‘Oh,’ she exclaimed when she saw Juliet and Mia. ‘I thought no one would be... Well, anyway, hello.’

Mia jumped down off of Juliet and ran over to her older sister. ‘Daddy’s angry,’ she told her with some urgency.

Juliet wanted to die. This was the one thing she didn’t need in the middle of getting the sack. For Riley to see it.

Riley looked down at Mia. 'Is he?'

'Yes. Angry at Joo-et.'

'At what?'

'She means me,' Juliet said awkwardly.

Juliet thought Riley wouldn't want to get involved, that she'd make an excuse, like every other time they'd been forced into each other's orbit. But Riley said, 'OK, Mia. I'll go and talk to Dad, see what's going on.'

Eight

Riley thought she had it licked. The backyard would be the easiest way to circumvent everyone in the house; she could sneak right around the living room and dash up the stairs. But what do you know, Juliet and Mia were in the back, playing.

Or maybe not. They both looked a bit... sad. And then Mia came running to her, something she never did. She was quite obsessed with her mother and would be around her legs all the livelong day. But Amanda wasn't around, and apparently, Mia thought Riley could help with, 'Joo-et.'

Riley wasn't sure what was going on and how useful she could be. But little Mia was relying on her. They didn't have a close relationship, being that being around Mia meant being around good old Daddy, but Mia didn't care about that today. So Riley didn't either. She wanted Mia to know that if she needed her sister, she had her. She had to get in the middle of whatever this was, regardless of her history with Mia's new nanny. 'OK, Mia. I'll go and talk to Dad, see what's going on.'

Juliet sighed. 'Err, Riley, you may want to... I mean, there's stuff going on. I don't

know if you want to be involved in it. I screwed up and...'

Riley turned to her. 'What actually happened?'

'Mia drew on a kitchen cabinet, and your dad's livid. He wants to fire me. I don't know if Amanda agrees with him.'

Riley waited for the rest of the story. But then it became clear that Juliet was finished. 'Wait. That's it? Mia drew on the cabinet? He wants to sack you because Mia did what literally every kid does the second they get a chance? Are you fucking kidding?'

Mia tapped Riley's leg. 'Not say that word.'

Riley tutted at herself. 'Yes, very bad word. Sorry, kid.'

Riley looked back at Juliet. She looked a bit flustered. As well she might. This was the longest conversation they'd had so far. 'Riley, don't worry about it. It's not your problem.'

'Well, Mia thinks it is. So, it is,' Riley said, giving Mia a quick smile. 'Back in a minute.'

Riley jogged into the house before Juliet could argue further. She wasn't sure what she could say, or whether it was even necessary. Amanda might be sorting it this very second. But if she needed backup, Riley wanted to be on hand. Juliet couldn't get the sack. It was clear that Mia liked her already.

She heard shouty noise coming from her dad's study, and she knocked on the door. She didn't wait for anyone to invite her in. Her father and Amanda spun around to look at her. Her dad looked peeved at Riley's presence. Amanda looked relieved to see her. 'Yes?' her dad asked irritably.

‘Yeah, I heard what was going on. I just wanted to let you know that you’re a dick if you fire Juliet.’

Amanda sucked a shocked breath in. But Riley wasn’t scared of Mike Powell. There was no reason to be. He didn’t support her in any sense; their relationship was practically non-existent. The only thing she needed from him was temporary accommodation. Which she would put on the line for the right cause.

‘Beg your pardon?’ Her dad said, shocked.

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‘You heard me. Amanda, how many times has Mia drawn on the cabinets before today?’

‘That’s what I was just telling your dad. Dozens,’ she said eagerly. ‘You only have to glance away for a second.’

‘Where does a two-year-old even get hold of a biro?’ Mike sputtered. Riley could tell he was on the ropes. She had him, and she pushed on. ‘Maybeyouleft one out? You’ve always got a pen in your hand. You’re telling me you never put them down and forget about them?’

Mike was incensed. ‘I can keep track of pens, Riley.’

Riley glanced around her dad’s office. She looked around the legs of his desk and saw what she wanted—a pen, sitting on the floor. She picked it up. ‘How about this one? Or did you intend to keep it on the floor?’

Mike snatched the pen and looked at it. ‘This proves nothing.’

Riley fixed her father with the strongest look she had. ‘Dad, Amanda has started back at work, and Juliet is good with Mia, it’s obvious. So just do us all a favour and let this one go, eh?’

‘We’ll put it down to a bad day,’ Amanda said. ‘Let’s open some wine. Juliet’s here for another half hour.’

Mike looked around him at his wife and daughter, and Riley knew he had a choice to

make. He could acquiesce, or he could try to keep it going and alienate everyone in the house. He had no allies. Even little Mia would be angry with him. It was a numbers game, and he simply didn't have the troops to win this battle. He dropped his shoulders. 'If everyone's going to act like I'm a bloody ogre for caring about my house, then I suppose I don't have a lot of choice.'

Amanda looked like she'd just cut a wire on a bomb with no real expectation that it was the right one. She was shocked not to be blown to pieces. 'Great. I'll have a quick chat with Juliet, and then I'll open a bottle.'

She walked past Riley, giving her a quick arm squeeze. Not for the first time, Riley felt pity for her stepmother.

After she'd left, Riley said, 'Just give her a proper chance.'

'She's your friend, isn't she? Is that what this is about?' Mike sneered.

'Is that whatwhat's about?'

'You coming in here and fighting for her job?'

'I'm not fighting for anything. Mia likes her. That's all. And anyway, we aren't friends,' Riley told him. 'I knew her for about ten minutes at school.'

Mike shook his head. 'Whatever you say. But if she messes up again, she's out.' He sat down behind his desk and started looking at some mysterious papers.

Riley shook her head at him and walked out. She went to the kitchen where she watched through the patio doors as Amanda spoke to Juliet. Amanda was working hard, whatever she was saying. She was probably giving Juliet an apology on behalf of her husband that he would have maybe given himself at gunpoint. Juliet nodded a

few times, and Amanda looked relieved.

Riley went to the fridge to get a drink. Amanda walked in. 'God almighty. I've been at work one day,' she said, going to the wine rack and selecting a bottle. 'I hope I don't come back to this sort of thing every day. I don't have the energy.'

Riley smiled sardonically. 'He just doesn't trust anyone. Give it time. Once she's proven she's not going to be a problem, she'll just become part of the furniture. He won't even know she's there.'

Amanda uncorked her wine. 'Is that how you feel?'

Riley laughed. 'I wouldn't bother trying to fix that relationship, Amanda.'

'Oh, no, I wasn't...' She stopped and sighed. 'Will we see you at dinner?'

'I already ate.'

Riley looked out of the window. Juliet was walking around with Mia on her shoulders. They both looked happy. She was glad to have put out this fire. This morning she'd hoped Juliet might change her mind about coming to work here, and now she was saving her job. Quite a twist. But what are you supposed to do when your tiny sister asks you for help? She couldn't do nothing.

Maybe there was some other motivation at the back of Riley's mind. But she ignored it very successfully.

Nine

Juliet was watching Mia drink imaginary tea from a tiny cup when Amanda came out. 'Juliet, I'm so sorry,' she said immediately. 'Please don't quit.'

‘Quit? I was fired,’ Juliet said, baffled.

‘You’re not fired at all,’ Amanda assured her. ‘Mike’s... just having a bad day. But I really, really don’t want you to quit because of this.’

‘So, he’s changed his mind?’

‘Oh, god yes. He’s super sorry,’ Amanda lied with such little skill that it was quite endearing. ‘He’d tell you himself, but he’s a bit busy now. Though he did say that he wanted us to give you a pay rise as an apology.’

‘A pay rise?’ Juliet goggled.

‘Yes, er, five percent?’

Well, this was quite the turnaround. She’d been waiting out here to be given the final bullet in the back of the head, and now she was the one with the gun. Amanda was practically begging her to stay.

‘Did err... Did Riley talk to Mike?’ Juliet asked.

Amanda nodded. ‘She did, yes. She was the one who made him realise how silly he’d been, actually.’

‘I see,’ Juliet said, not seeing at all. Why would Riley plead her case with her dad? She didn’t want Juliet here; it was quite obvious. But she had seemed rather set on correcting things when she’d come in. She had to have done it for Mia.

‘So, what do you think?’ Amanda asked, breaking up Juliet’s wonderings about Riley’s motives.

‘I’m not quitting,’ Juliet said quickly.

Amanda let out the largest sigh of relief Juliet had ever seen, cartoon big. ‘Oh, thank you. Thank you!’

Juliet didn’t want Amanda to feel so beholden. ‘Everyone’s allowed a bad day,’ she said with as much grace as she could muster.

Amanda nodded. ‘Yes, they are. Speaking of which, I need a glass of wine. You’re here till six, is that correct?’

‘Yes, we’ll be fine. Go ahead.’

Amanda scuttled back into the house. Juliet could find no ill will toward her for what had happened. Mike, however? She was going to have to watch him. Whatever Amanda had said, Juliet didn’t believe he was sorry. She thought there was a possibility he’d be gunning for her now. She really didn’t want to be shouted at like that again. Even though she knew she hadn’t done anything wrong, it was a hard thing to bear.

Juliet was getting her coat on to leave. Day one was done. She hoped day two would be far less dramatic.

Only the drama of the day wasn’t quite finished because Juliet had something she had to do now. Shereallydidn’t want to. But it was the right thing. ‘Hey, Amanda, OK if I pop up and speak to Riley?’

Amanda raised an eyebrow. ‘Oh, yes, of course. The third room on the left.’

Juliet thanked her and jogged upstairs. She knocked on Riley’s door. ‘Yep?’ came a muffled reply.

Juliet cleared her throat. 'It's me, Juliet.'

The door swung open. Riley appeared, astonished. 'Oh. Hello.'

'I didn't want to bother you, but I felt like I should come up and just say—'

Riley wanted none of it. 'If it's thanks, don't. Mia obviously likes you. Not to mention Amanda. She needs to be back at work or she's gonna lose her marbles; she's not cut out for the stay-at-home life. Given all that, I'd have to be a monster to stand aside and let you get sacked.'

'I'm not sure I'd use those words,' Juliet said. 'And, anyway, there are other nannies.' Juliet cleared her throat. 'Maybe even nannies you didn't... That you don't know.'

Riley gave an embarrassed little laugh. 'Right. Yeah. That.'

This was as close as they'd come to mentioning their history. It was a small relief. Juliet didn't have the constitution for the level of denial they'd been practicing thus far. She couldn't compartmentalise for toffee. 'Yeah. That.'

'Well, it doesn't really matter what happened now, does it? It was a long time ago. We were kids. I mean, we were practically Mia's age, right?' Riley said with a chuckle.

Juliet had to laugh. 'Good point. So, does that mean as adults, we can stop being awkward when we see each other around the house?'

Riley gave a slow smile. 'That would be nice.'

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Juliet nodded. 'It would, wouldn't it?'

Riley sighed. 'So from now on, we just greet each other like normal people.'

'Normal people. Let's give it a bash,' Juliet agreed.

They smiled at each other for a moment, and then Juliet felt like it had gone on slightly too long, and she said, 'Well, bye, normal person!' She backed up from the door as Riley said, 'Yeah, b-bye normal person!'

Juliet walked briskly down the hall as Riley's door closed.

As she got on the bus to go home, she was awash with relief. It would have been too much to keep scuttling around Riley all the time. But it was all sorted out now; they'd drawn a line under the past. Riley was right; they had been kids with a lot of growing up to do, mistakes to make. It was just a shame they'd had to make so many of those mistakes on each other.

THEN

The following Monday after the Friday cafeteria hoo-ha, it was all people could talk about. Almost everyone claimed to have either thrown a punch or received one. Juliet didn't comment either way, even though there could have been some social currency in being the one who'd started the whole thing. She was happy to have it forgotten, though. It was all a bit embarrassing.

What was truly embarrassing was talking to Riley while they were cleaning. God,

she'd said some stupid stuff. Really, really dumb. That thing about The Breakfast Club? She must have sounded like she had such a crush on Riley; it was pathetic. Whereas she just admired her. She wasn't so stupid as to start crushing on people that far out of her league. It would be like suddenly deciding she wanted to be an astronaut. She wasn't gonna have any kind of connection with Riley any more than she was going to the moon. Even though Riley had made that comment about her being hot. At best, it was a kind lie.

Juliet had liked getting an excuse to spend some private time with Riley, but that opportunity had ended when she'd finished picking spud off the wall. She thought they might probably be on nodding terms now, which would be kind of nice. But that would be the end of it.

For instance, here Riley came now, into the English lit classroom she'd shared with Juliet for almost two years, and she was sitting down at her usual table with her usual people. And oh look, a nod hello that Juliet returned before Riley turned back to her best buddy, that horrible witch, India. That was the end of the affair, so to speak.

It was quite funny that out of the twenty or so A level options their school offered, Juliet and Riley had one together. Somehow, it still felt like they were in two different classes. Riley always said remarkably interesting and clever things during class. Meanwhile, Juliet read the book and kept her face shut. She loved reading, but she wasn't up for voicing her opinions on books. She felt strongly that no good could come of it. Anyway, it wasn't like anyone ever asked. But it was proof - if proof were needed - that Juliet and Riley lived in different countries, even if they did occasionally wander near the borders that separated them.

'So!' the teacher said, clapping her hands together and making everyone jump. 'Gatsby! Did we all read chapter six? That's a rhetorical question; obviously we did since we were required to. What did we think?'

Hands shot up. Juliet's stayed on her lap. India was first out of the gate. 'I thought it was a load of crap, actually.'

The teacher raised an interested eyebrow. 'Oh?'

'Yeah, I mean, we're supposed to think that it was alright for him to be a bootlegger because he grew up poor and he loved someone rich? I mean, what a crock. It wasn't even about her.'

'What was it about?' the teacher asked, intrigued.

'He just wanted to be super rich!' India exclaimed angrily.

'Say that's true. What's wrong with him making himself rich?' Riley asked her, turning.

'Well, I mean, nothing. If you go about it the right way,' India sputtered.

'Maybe he couldn't go about it the right way?' Riley shrugged. 'I mean, making a lot of money sounds quite complicated to me.'

'That's what they all say,' India said. 'But if you work hard, you can be rich legally.'

'Easy for you to say,' Juliet muttered to herself. She was shocked when every set of eyes in the room turned to her. She'd been louder than she thought. Juliet had once read a quote from Dorothy Parker that said, "a girl's best friend is her mutter", and Juliet believed it sincerely. But that only worked when you kept it down. Which she hadn't managed to do. And now the focus was unhappily on her.

India's gaze was the scariest. She looked almost happy to have been contradicted. 'And why is it easy for me to say?' she asked with quiet intensity.

Juliet was quick to back down. 'Erm, no, sorry. I didn't mean that.'

India smiled at her like a hungry wolf. 'Whatdidyou mean?'

'Err...' Juliet tried to think, but fear was freezing her brain. There was no exit plan.

'Look, we all know your mum has that Jag dealership, India,' Riley suddenly said. 'So maybe what she means is that if you're born into money, you don't know how hard it is to actually, you know... make it?'

Juliet gaped, as did India. 'Yeah, and your dad is like, president of the Bank of England or something. You're one to talk.'

Riley shrugged and smiled. 'Yeah, true. And if my dad were a ballerina (the room tittered), I might think being a ballerina sounded within reach.'

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India looked bamboozled. ‘Do you want to be a ballerina?’

Riley shrugged. ‘I did when I was six. But I gave up on it. Which proves my point,’ she finished with a chuckle.

India looked like she didn’t know what had just happened. Had she been insulted? Should she kick off? In the end, she settled for a light, tinkling, fake as hell laugh. ‘Probably for the best. You’ve got two left feet.’

Riley laughed along with the room. Juliet’s heart returned to a normal rhythm, knowing her comment was forgotten. As Riley leaned back in her chair, she caught Juliet’s eye—for the briefest moment, blink and you’d miss it, but Juliet didn’t miss a thing. Riley wasn’t just debating for poops and giggles; she was saving Juliet’s arse.

Juliet lingered after class, letting the room get half-empty while she waited to ‘accidentally’ find herself walking out with Riley. She was a bit too successful. They tried to walk through the doorway at the same time and got wedged.

‘Oh! Hi,’ Riley said, shoulder to shoulder with Juliet.

‘Hi,’ Juliet said, wagging her shoulder to let Riley through. Eventually, they both popped through the doorway, out into the busy hall.

‘How’s it going? You finish that book?’ Riley asked easily, and Juliet was struck by Riley’s gift of making any situation less awkward.

‘Finished it last night,’ Juliet was pleased to say.

‘Sad ending, isn’t it?’ Riley said, dropping her bag on the floor and beginning to rifle through it, looking for something.

‘Very,’ Juliet agreed. And then couldn’t seem to say anything else. Riley had passed her a topic, and she had nothing. This was ridiculous. ‘So, err, you really helped me earlier.’

‘Did I?’ Riley said, still pawing through her bag, tampons and tissues flying. Juliet didn’t have her full attention, which made this all the more awkward. ‘Yeah. India, she... she doesn’t like me very much.’

Riley pulled out her phone and slid it into her back pocket, standing up. ‘Doesn’t she?’

Juliet shook her head. ‘No, she’s kind of... I mean, she can be a bit... Well, anyway, I’m not sure what she would have said if you hadn’t stepped in.’

Riley nodded thoughtfully. ‘Yeah, I guess she can be a bit... I mean, I don’t wanna bitch because she’s a mate, but she’s not always... She can be a bit thoughtless,’ she admitted.

Juliet thought that was putting it mildly, but she was kind of amazed Riley was saying anything critical of her at all, so she’d take it. She nodded. ‘Yeah, so, well, I just...’ Juliet was forced to take a deep breath. She was getting in a tangle. ‘Thanks, anyway. For helping me out.’

Riley grinned. ‘I owed you one, didn’t I?’

Juliet had to laugh. ‘Not really.’

‘I feel like I did,’ she smiled, glancing down the hall. ‘Right, I have to get to my next lesson.’

Juliet fully expected Riley to dash away with a quick bye. Which would have been fair. All debts were now settled. But before Riley legged it, she said, ‘Are you going to that thing tonight?’

Juliet didn’t have the first clue about any ‘thing.’ Her face must have betrayed that because Riley clarified, ‘Leila Bridgestock, you know her, right? Her parents are away on holiday, so she’s gonna live the cliché and have a massive party.’

‘That sounds fun,’ Juliet said, in the same tone as she might have said, ‘That sounds fun,’ if she heard someone else won the lottery. It was never gonna happen to her, was it? It was the lifestyles of the rich and popular. She was broke and invisible.

‘Yeah, so, you going?’ Riley asked.

Juliet was unable not to burst out laughing. ‘I think my invite probably got lost in the post,’ she finally managed to say.

Riley chuckled. ‘OK, I know they’re not your crowd. But a party as big as Leila wants it to be? If you know someone who’s going, it’s practically the same as getting invited.’

Juliet blinked several times while her brain processed what was happening. ‘Hang on. Are you asking me to come?’

Riley smiled. ‘What, you think I just like to list social events to people for fun?’ She checked her watch. ‘Shit, I gotta go. Tell me your phone number, quick.’

Juliet, as though in a dream, recited her number to Riley, who tapped it into her

phone. 'I'll text you the address,' Riley said and then ran off down the hall.

Juliet watched her go, her head swirling with shock and happiness. But as she turned to go down the hall, she had a premonition. Riley wouldn't text her. She'd forget they ever had this conversation.

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Ten minutes later, her phone vibrated in her pocket, and she thought, It'll be my mum telling me to pick up milk on the way home.

It wasn't her mum.

10 Crown Road, Easterbrook. I'm gonna get there about nine-ish. See you there?

Juliet's first thought was that there was no way in hell she was going to that party. She didn't belong with people like them, and they'd know it the second she stepped through the door. Her clothes would be wrong, her hair would be wrong, her vibe would be wrong. She'd go there and stand around for ten minutes, watching people whisper behind her back. Then she'd go home and feel awful for weeks. It was an appointment with misery, and she didn't see why she would consider attending.

Actually, she did have a why. Riley had asked her to go. Freaking Riley Powell. She was like the queen of the school. Or at the very least, one of several major princesses. Juliet didn't know how seriously to take it. Was she trying to be kind? Juliet felt utterly at a loss to read the situation. All she knew was, she didn't know how she was supposed to say yes, and she didn't know how she was supposed to say no, either. This was impossible. She half wished she'd never been in that library. She wouldn't be in this position now. Trying to figure out Riley.

She decided, for the sake of argument, that she would go. What would the next step be? She'd have to figure out what to wear from her wardrobe. That didn't take very long—she didn't have anything. Next would be hair, makeup, and she knew nothing about those topics. Girls like her didn't wear makeup, didn't do anything fancy with their hair. What was the point? No one was looking at them.

Well, that decided it. She wasn't an idiot. She'd both read the book and seen the movie, *Carrie*. She wasn't going to the prom to have a bucket of pig's blood dropped on her head. She would text Riley later with an excuse. It was a relief to make that decision. Her comfort zone was so, well, comfortable. She was going to slide quietly back into it and pretend this hadn't happened.

But then something happened as she walked to her next class, something dreadful. She thought of a solution to her problem. She hadn't meant to; it had just happened. Once it had entered her mind, things were re-complicated. There was a way that she could make herself socially acceptable, at least to the naked eye. And it was rather easy—kind of. She could ask her sister for help.

Her older sister Becca was aggressively normal. She was twenty and worked in a clothes shop. She wasn't the sharpest pencil in the box, but damn, she knew how to coif. She'd begged Juliet on many, many occasions to let her loose on her person for the dreaded makeover. It was always a no because Juliet never needed to wear that costume of normality; she could just quietly be herself... until now.

She texted her sister. She sort of hoped she'd be too busy to help. Again, it would decide for her.

Hey, I might be going to a thing tonight. You wouldn't have anything I could wear, would you? Maybe give me a few pointers on hair and makeup?

The reply came back seconds later.

I HAVE WAITED FOR THIS DAY

Right. So this was happening. Her sister was going to use her as a human barbie. But Juliet swore to herself that if she looked in the mirror at the end product and she thought she looked even slightly ridiculous, she wasn't going to that party.

Ten

NOW

Riley watched Juliet scuttle off down the hallway, mind somewhat blown. They'd been moving around each other like sentient grenades that might go off at any moment, and all it had taken was one intervention with her dad and Juliet had come right up, knocked on her door, and now the whole thing was sorted. They were fine. On good terms, even. They were just two people who'd sort of known each other once and were back in each other's orbits. Friendly, cordial, relaxed. It was a weight off Riley's back. She didn't know how big that weight was until it was gone. Thank god for Mia.

Riley went back to her bed - guest bed, anyway - and lay back down, setting her laptop on her stomach and hitting play on this terrible Netflix dating show she'd been watching. The concept was that everyone kept masks on the whole time, so no one knew how genuinely good-looking anyone was. Everyone was trying to act like they didn't care; that they were just there to 'Fall in love with the person.' Until they had to make a choice and the masks came off. Then they had to keep acting like nothing was different, even when they were obviously disappointed. The hilarity of it was the hubris. These people were as shallow as anyone else, and the effort it took to pretend otherwise was the pull of the show.

Riley wondered if she had it in her to fall in love with a person behind a mask. But she knew she liked a pretty face as much as the next girl. Still, the show had reminded her that there had been a time when she'd seen through a few superficial facts and understood beauty was present even before it became extremely obvious.

THEN

Riley was watching India being chatted up. It was one of the footballers, not one

Riley knew, but she vaguely remembered him picking pasta out of his lap in the cafeteria last week.

‘So, er.... You like football?’ he asked India anxiously.

India shrugged. ‘I don’t know, it’s alright, I suppose. I prefer rugby though. The men are a bit beefier.’

‘Yeah?’ the guy said, trying to hide his disappointment. He thought he was getting the kiss-off. Riley knew better. India liked to play with her food before she ate it. Once she’d finished batting him around, she’d end up snogging him in the nearest vacant bedroom. Riley could have written the script for the evening. The same things that happened at every party would happen tonight. Christ, she was so bored.

‘Oh no,’ she muttered as she laid eyes on someone she’d been hoping wouldn’t be at this thing—Jack. ‘India, I’m just gonna get a drink,’ she said, ducking quickly out of his eyeline.

India was in the middle of squeezing the footballer’s arm and saying, ‘I’ve felt bigger.’ Riley scooted out of the living room, into the kitchen. There’d be alcohol there. She wasn’t a big drinker, but that was what you did at these things. Get off your face.

She picked up a lukewarm beer from a stack on the counter and popped the ring pull. It foamed all over the place, and she had to hold it away from herself quickly. Practically half the can ended up on the lino. She put the can down and grabbed a kitchen towel and began to mop it up. She knew this was supposed to be a wild party, but manners costed nothing.

Just as she was chucking away the wet kitchen towels, she heard the back door creak open. She looked over and saw it was only open a crack. Through that crack peeked a

set of eyes she recognised. 'Juliet?'

Juliet pushed the door open completely, and Riley nearly fell over. Juliet looked...different. A little eyeliner, a fitted top, her light hair straightened, it wasn't that much had even changed. Just enough to show Riley the truth. She'd strongly suspected that if Juliet could learn to stop hiding it, she'd be pretty. What even Riley didn't realise was that the girl was gorgeous.

But Riley could tell Juliet was a bit nervous, so she didn't want to make a big deal of the transformation. She pushed down her surprise, as well as any other feelings about Juliet's new look, and said, super-casually, 'So you are an Ally Sheedy after all.'

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Juliet looked down at herself. 'My sister dressed me,' she admitted.

Riley smiled. 'She did a good job.'

Juliet seemed to relax. 'Do you think so?'

'Give her my number, I could do with some pointers,' Riley joked, grabbing two beers. She handed one to Juliet. 'Do you drink?'

Juliet shrugged. 'Not really. But this is a party, isn't it?'

'That was kind of where I was at.' Riley looked at her beer. 'Actually, what I'd like is coffee. I'm so tired.'

Juliet put her beer down and smiled, that smile that lit up her face. 'I'd love a coffee.'

'I'll put the kettle on, then,' Riley said, filling it up at the sink. Several people in the kitchen looked at her like she was weird. 'Look, grandma's having a nice cuppa!' someone called. She paid them no mind.

Once she'd made two coffees, she handed one to Juliet and said, 'It's too warm in here. You wanna go outside and have these?'

Riley and Juliet were sitting on patio chairs next to a kidney-shaped outdoor pool, having their coffees. A few drinkers milled about, having their own chats on the other

side of the pool. Riley felt a bit nervous suddenly. She didn't really know Juliet, but she wanted to. That's why she'd invited her to the party. That thing that had happened in English had been a bit uncomfortable. Riley had thought India was talking out of her arse before Juliet said it. And then she'd seen the horrible sharky way that India had looked at Juliet, and she'd been ashamed to call India a friend. She knew that India wasn't the most empathetic person in the world, but she was usually pretty chill.

But Juliet? Riley didn't know who she was, and she was growing more intrigued by the day. This was a real chance to get to know her. 'So, your sister gave you some guidance, did she? You get on with her?'

'She's alright. I mean, we've never been that close. We're pretty different.'

'Yeah?' Riley asked.

'She's erm, I don't know... normal?' Juliet said.

Riley chuckled. 'Yeah, I know what you mean. I kind of feel that way about India.'

Juliet looked surprised. 'Oh?'

'Yeah, she's a bit... You know, a bit...' Riley considered the best way to put it. 'It's like that shit she said in class about money. She can be... She's my oldest friend and everything but... she doesn't always think about stuff,' Riley admitted. She'd never said anything like this about India to anyone; everyone she knew was also a friend of India's. But Juliet was outside the group. It was safe. It felt quite nice to be free of her incestuous social circle. 'One time she told me she thought she could probably cure cancer if she had the time,' Riley said.

Juliet guffawed. 'Wow. Does the World Health Organisation know about this?'

Riley chuckled. 'We can only hope they never find out. Because they'd be right on it, forcing her to invent that cancer cure. Which would be very hard on her because it would cut right into her workout time.'

Juliet laughed even harder. Riley liked seeing it. But too soon, she seemed to force herself to stop. It was sad to see that smile go.

Riley knew then she was developing quite the little crush. It wasn't a big surprise. There had to be a reason she'd asked Juliet to come out tonight on the spur of the moment. Now they were here, Riley wondered if it could go anywhere. Sitting out on this porch, sipping coffee and laughing, it didn't seem like such an outlandish idea.

'But you do, don't you?' Juliet said.

'Do what?' Riley asked.

'Think about things,' Juliet said, suddenly serious. Riley felt a bit naked under Juliet's gaze. She thought she should make a joke, but it wasn't what came out. 'I like to think I do. Sometimes I worry I'm just as ignorant as India. But, like, maybe I'm too ignorant to know that I'm ignorant?' she said with a light laugh to cover the fact she was saying something quite real.

Juliet looked at Riley seriously with that lovely smile back and said, 'I wouldn't go to India for reading recommendations, I'll tell you that much.'

'Not unless you like the kind of magazine that wants you to please your man,' Riley joked.

Juliet laughed again. Riley felt like she was getting addicted to the sound. So she kept talking. For five whole minutes, she babbled on. Trying to be amusing, trying to be engaging, trying, trying, trying to keep Juliet's attention. Eventually, she realised

she'd fallen into a monologue. How embarrassing. Juliet must feel like Riley had with Jack. Just a mirror for her to preen into. Riley didn't want to be that or make Juliet that. 'So, tell me about you,' she said.

Juliet raised an eyebrow. 'Tell you what?'

'Anything you like.'

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‘Like...’ Juliet started, looking suddenly nervous.

‘Fine, OK, I’ll try to be more specific. Tell me about...’ She searched for a good question and found the perfect one. ‘...your first kiss.’

Juliet’s eyes widened in horror. ‘Oh. God. No. Not that.’

Riley was delighted. ‘Right. Now you’re definitely telling me.’

Juliet rolled her eyes. ‘Oh god. Fine. OK. So, I was twelve. I went on holiday to Butlin’s. That’s a holiday park with caravans, by the way.’

Riley tutted, mildly offended. ‘I know what Butlin’s is.’

‘I don’t know, you might not. Like India said, your dad is the president of the Bank of England.’

Riley gave a dramatic sigh. ‘She was exaggerating. He’s just a money manager.’

‘Oh, just a money manager?’

Riley was quite enjoying the mockery; it was somehow intimate. ‘He’s a prick if it’s any consolation.’

Juliet looked a bit shocked, and Riley realised maybe Juliet wasn’t used to people talking about their parents like that. Maybe hers were ordinary parents who just loved and cared for her and all that usual crap.

‘How is he a prick?’ Juliet wanted to know.

Riley considered sliding right around the question but thought it quicker to summarise. ‘He works all the time, and he’s made it clear that’s all he cares about. Now finish your story. First kiss. Butlin’s. Go.’

Juliet looked like she was thinking about probing about her dad, but Riley was thrilled when she continued her tale. ‘Well, alright, we go to Butlin’s for a week in July, like we always do, and I meet this boy named Kevin, his family has the caravan next door. He was... not the best if I’m honest. All he wanted to do was talk about Pokémon and eat jawbreakers. But I could tell he liked me and,’ Juliet paused, pink-cheeked. ‘I wasn’t exactly swimming in suitors.’

Riley chuckled. ‘We all have an awkward phase.’

Juliet gave Riley a very dubious look. ‘Yeah, surewedo.’

Riley didn’t know what to say to that. Was it a compliment? Maybe even a flirtatious one? Before she had time to decide, the story resumed. ‘So we’re in the arcade - we’ve both been given some change and told to bugger off so the adults can get drunk - and we’re playing this Pokémon arcade game. I hate it, but he can’t get enough. He’s eating jawbreakers – as usual - and he just smashes them down, one after the other. It would take me an hour to break one down. But him? He eats them like crisps. Crunch, crunch, crunch. And then he wins a level. And he’s so excited that he turns to me and kisses me, boom. And I think...’ Juliet paused.

‘What do you think?’ Riley asked, wanting every last scrap of detail.

‘I think... what’s that pain?’

‘Pain?’

‘Yeah. In my mouth. So I pull away from him and I can see blood on his mouth.’

‘He was bleeding?’ Riley asked, boggling.

‘He wasn’t. I was. It was my blood on his mouth. Because he had braces and broke one of the wires with a jawbreaker without realising. Poked me right in the gum with the broken wire, tore it open.’

Riley gasped, almost able to feel the pain. ‘Fuck! That must have hurt.’

‘I had to get a stitch. An actual stitch in my gum. That hurt even worse than the kiss.’

Riley laughed. ‘That’s a banger of a story for your first kiss. Wounded in battle! Love it.’ She kept chuckling. ‘Way better than a romantic story.’

Juliet smiled, but her eyes flitted away in a way that Riley found quite interesting. ‘So... do you have a boyfriend now?’ Riley asked; the question of the night.

Juliet’s eyes widened. ‘Who, me? No, no, no...’

Riley decided to roll the dice. ‘How about a girlfriend?’

For a second, Juliet looked too shocked to answer. Riley thought she’d made a massive fuck up. But then Juliet asked in a quiet, intrigued way, ‘Do I seem gay?’

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Riley shrugged. 'Oh god, I wouldn't know. My gaydar is terrible.' Riley paused for a moment and then added, 'Which is tough when you meet a girl you like.'

Juliet's coffee cup slipped out of her hand and smashed onto the tile. Coffee splattered everywhere, some of it dribbling into the pool. 'Oh shit!' Juliet cried, jumping to her feet, trying to pick up the pieces of the broken cup. Riley got up too, putting a hand on Juliet's shoulder. 'Relax. Have you seen all these beer cans?'

Juliet looked around the pool at the massive mess that had accrued in the space of a few hours. The place was a pigsty. Juliet looked back shyly at Riley. 'Yeah, I guess no one's gonna notice.'

Riley checked around her to see that everyone had dribbled inside. She could distantly hear everyone chanting about shots. 'Yeah, I don't think anyone's gonna notice anything that happens out here,' she said, with the merest hint of suggestion. She knew she was pushing it. She just needed a signal, and she was going for it.

She didn't get it. Juliet, terrified a second ago, now looked a bit peeved. 'Are you... Am I about to get hit with a bucket of pig's blood here or something?'

Riley's mouth dropped open. 'W-what?' she said through a shocked laugh.

Juliet's face flushed. 'Because I'm me. And I'm here. And you're you. And this all seems too...' Juliet looked away, mortified. 'Never mind.'

Riley decided what she needed to do right now was cut through the talking. She'd kissed a few people in her time, but there had always been a sense of, 'OK, so this is

literally the only thing that can happen at this juncture, so let's just get on with it.' But when she went toward Juliet, it had more urgency than that. She didn't just want to. She had to.

She leaned in and Juliet looked up at the very last second of approach. Riley had an idea she might be about to get a slap. But Juliet let her come that last, crucial inch, and Riley pressed her lips, ever so softly, to that wonderful mouth. Juliet kissed her back, just as softly. It was a sweet, tender kiss. Riley hadn't had too many sweet kisses. None so intense, either. Riley was surprised to find she was having the best kiss of her life.

NOW

Riley realised she'd completely tuned out the dating show because somehow, two guys were having a huge fight about a girl they'd both picked, and Riley hadn't seen any of the ramp-up to it. The first she knew, one of the guys was yelling, 'You don't even know her parakeet's name!' Riley skipped back to see how it had gotten to that. She'd missed about ten minutes.

She knew why she'd zoned out. She'd been thinking about that party and the kiss. That wasn't a good idea. She and Juliet had only just agreed to be friendly. Thinking of their very hot kiss was definitely not a friendly thing to do.

But maybe the new accord was the reason her brain had trundled down this path in the first place. It had been so awkward; Riley had built a wall out of that awkwardness and hid behind it. But Juliet had just, however unknowingly, knocked quite a few bricks out of that wall.

But Riley really did have to stop thinking about that kiss. It was a long time ago, so there was every chance she was romanticising it anyway. It couldn't have been all that, could it? Because the thing was, Riley still kind of thought of it as the best

first kiss she'd ever had with anyone.

But if she started getting all dreamy about their past, she'd fuck this truce before it had even started. She had to stop it. In a minute. After she'd just finished with what she had unconsciously started doing as she closed her eyes and slapped the laptop shut. She was almost there. Silly to stop this second.

Eleven

Juliet and Mia were in the pool. Juliet had her hands around the kid's small waist, but there wasn't a need. Mia was quite the little frog, paddling herself across capably and confidently. 'That's it, look at you go!' Juliet called as the child swam along, laughing.

When they reached the other side, Mia said, 'Hungry!' and clambered up the ladder. The second she hit terra firma, she was making a break for the kitchen. Juliet got up behind her, grabbing a towel. 'Mia, hang on!'

But the wet toddler was sprinting through the pool gate, across the grass. This was all Juliet needed. Mike doing another drop by and seeing a sopping kitchen floor. Juliet was still wary of him, even though she'd been there a while now and very rarely had contact. She didn't know if he was avoiding her or if he was just never home. He did give off serious workaholic vibes.

Riley, though? She'd seen her a few times. They were polite with each other, but it wasn't the forced politeness of before. It had a lot more ease about it. Though Juliet couldn't say it was breezy because the past couldn't be erased with one conversation.

'Mia!' she cried out as the kid reached the doors, 'Freeze!' Mia turned into a statue. This was a game that Juliet had taught her. Because if you just said 'stop,' she would gleefully carry on doing whatever it was she knew full well she wasn't supposed to.

Juliet caught up with her and towelled her dry while she stayed locked in position. As Juliet got to her feet, Mia whispered out of the side of her mouth, 'Can I move?'

'Not yet,' Juliet said. 'I'm just gonna lift this foot and dry it off.' Mia let Juliet lift her feet as though she were a posable action figure. Once the undersides of her feet were bone dry, Juliet said, 'Annnnd... Unfreeze!'

Mia was off and running, straight into the kitchen. She made a beeline for the fridge, which she could just about get open. 'Can I have banana?'

'Yes. No bananas in the fridge though. Makes them go funny,' Juliet said, grabbing one from the bowl on the counter and starting to peel. 'I'LL DO THAT!' Mia said irritably. Juliet, only a few centimetres into peeling the first part, stopped immediately. 'Sorry,' she smiled and handed Mia the banana. She was glad Mia wanted to do things for herself. Even if she didn't have the manners part down yet. But they were working on that. 'What do you say?' Juliet asked.

Mia, mouth jammed full of banana, said, 'THANK YOU!'

'Very good,' Juliet said, ruffling her hair.

Riley walked in. 'That looks nice,' she said and took a banana from the fruit bowl. She began to eat, sitting down at the counter.

'Nice,' Mia agreed.

Juliet watched the sisters enjoying bananas together, and she noticed that they looked more alike than she'd initially realised. Same nose, same eyes, same chin. Which meant Riley was a promise in looks of what Mia would become. Juliet thought that was going to work out pretty well for Mia. Her older sister was even better looking than she'd been at eighteen. Those dark amber eyes held even more mystery. Her

long hair was a little shorter now, but still wild and gorgeous, and her clothes, always well-chosen, hung on an even more curvy frame nowadays.

Juliet wondered if Riley was dating. She never saw her with anyone. But there was no reason she should. They had a crossover of about ten minutes at the end of the day if Riley came straight back from work, which she often didn't. Whether that meant she was working late or having fun, again, Juliet couldn't have said. They didn't talk about their private lives to one another. It wasn't the way things had shaken out between them. Probably for the best. It was a way to keep the past in the past.

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Not that Juliet had much to say in that department. She was still living with her parents and dating had not been a thing for some time. She'd had a couple of relationships. But nothing that lasted. She'd been single now for... Good god, was it that long?

'Hey,' Riley said.

Juliet snapped out of her fugue. 'You talking to me?'

'Yeah, Taxi Driver, I'm having a coffee. You want one?'

'I'd love one, actually,' she said. Though she was welcome to use anything in the kitchen and eat what she liked, she couldn't fathom the fancy coffee machine and she had to stick to instant. Sure enough, Riley was grinding fresh beans—the whole shebang.

As Riley handed her a hot cup, she was hit by a sensation of déjà vu. Riley. Coffee. A pool. When was it...

Oh. Yes. She remembered now. That party. The kiss.

It was like the memory hit Juliet over the head and the next thing she did was drop the entire cup all over the floor with the loudest smash. So much had changed, and yet some things clearly didn't. 'Oh, Sh...ugar!' Juliet cried, getting down on her hands and knees, grabbing up pieces. 'Mia! Stand back!' she warned the girl, who stayed exactly where she was, which would also do fine.

‘I’ll get some kitchen roll, you get the cup bits,’ Riley said, snapping into action.

They were both on their hands and knees, cleaning the mess. Juliet leaned over to snag a particularly evil little shard when she bumped heads with Riley, hard. ‘Godsakes, I’m an idiot today,’ Juliet said apologetically. Riley, rubbing her head, grinned forgivingly. ‘It’s fine. I’ve got a pretty tough nut.’

Juliet smiled at her. That’s when she saw the situation from a distance, her and Riley inches away from each other, on all fours, grinning at each other with Mia looking on. She got up quickly, opening the bin, trying to stop the tingling that was happening all over her skin. She wasn’t sure what her body was trying to do to her, but whatever it was, Juliet wasn’t having it.

Riley kept mopping up coffee with her back turned to Juliet, so she couldn’t read Riley’s feelings on the funny little moment. If she had to take a guess, though? Riley probably hadn’t thought twice. She was just being friendly, trying to stop Juliet from feeling like the fool she was.

She went back and picked up the remaining shards of the cup, careful not to look at Riley. Between them, they had the mess dealt with pretty quickly. Once it was done, Riley stood and put her hands on her hips, looking around. ‘That’s that. So, shall I pour you another one?’

Juliet laughed. ‘If the cup’s trying to jump out of my hands, maybe caffeine isn’t the greatest idea. Perhaps next time.’ She turned at the sound of the door. ‘Oh look, there’s Amanda,’ Juliet cried with relief as Mia’s mother walked in. Mia flew to her, and Juliet said, ‘Hi!’

‘Hi,’ Amanda said, looking a little baffled as to the level of enthusiasm her arrival had elicited from the nanny. Almost as much as her daughter. But Juliet didn’t care if she was being weird. She needed a reason to leave, and now she had it. ‘Right, well, I

hate to dash, but I have to get back. Got a... thing.'

'Oh, sure,' Amanda said.

'Bye,' she said to the room, careful not to say it to anyone in particular. And she ran.

As she left, she was annoyed with herself. She wasn't supposed to be like this anymore, sprinting from the Powell residence, trying to avoid Riley. So why was she doing it again today?

She shouldn't have been asking herself that question like she didn't know the answer. But she'd gone into self-protective mode. It required a healthy dose of denial.

She told herself she was crushing on a phantom, that she didn't know Riley anymore. If she ever had. Ten years could be a lifetime. But the thing was, she still felt like Riley knew her. When Riley looked at her, she felt like she was looking right into the heart of her, seeing everything. Because that's how Riley was, observant and sharp. She always had been. And there wasn't very much to dissect. Juliet was still the same girl she'd always been.

THEN

'Paul! You can't do a handstand in a pool when you're fucking smashed, mate! I'm too drunk to save ya!' yelled a voice, and Juliet stepped back from Riley with regret.

Juliet turned to see several drunk boys spilling out of the house, but they were pretty focused on their well-oiled buddy and his desire to become a party legend and maybe die in the process. They didn't seem to notice what they'd broken up. A kiss. Juliet's second-ever, but quite an improvement on the first one. Was this what kissing was supposed to be like? Because if so, wow. Riley certainly knew how to make a girl swoon. Juliet was drowning in confusing social cues one minute, then drowning in

Riley's lips the next.

But now some morons had broken it up, and she and Riley were standing in the reflective light of the pool, looking at one another. Juliet didn't know what was expected of her now. She had this instinct to run before anything could ruin the moment. But she knew that if she ran, she was the one ruining the moment. This wasn't just about what she wanted. This was happening to both of them.

'Well,' Riley said, and she looked away with a touch of shyness that Juliet had never seen her display before. 'That was...' She left the sentence hanging for about a thousand years before she finished. '...Nice.'

'Yeah,' Juliet managed to reply through an outrageous and sudden case of dry mouth. Then she started nodding, for quite a long time. She felt her feet take two small steps backwards. 'Nice.'

Riley's face dropped. 'Are you OK?'

'Who me?' Juliet said. 'I'm absolutely—'

The end of that sentence was going to be 'Fine.' But she never reached it. Because Drunk Paul still had every intention of doing his underwater acrobatics and he came running at the pool, fully dressed, his friends still begging him to stop. But his focus - if not his vision - was strong, and he sprinted, his arms spreading into eagle wings. Juliet caught one of those arms across the chest and was clotheslined right into the pool.

For whole seconds, she was underwater, sputtering, choking. Eventually, she felt a hand on her arm. 'Shit!' she heard Riley yell from a distance as she broke the surface. She realised Paul had tried to correct his error and was the one pulling her up. 'Are you alright, dude?!' he was asking her. 'Not a dude,' she coughed, a bit of water

coming up. People were coming out of the house now, the party becoming an alfresco affair. Riley was around the other side of the pool, walking round to help Juliet, who'd ended up at the side of the pool closest to the house. Juliet couldn't believe it. Why did these things always happen to her? Still, it had cut an awkward moment short, so there was that to be said for it.

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‘Don’t read anything into him calling you dude. Everyone’s his dude. I heard him call his mum dude once,’ said a girl at the edge of the pool, grabbing hold of Juliet’s hand and trying to drag her out.

But when Juliet rose out of the pool, something happened. Something from a nightmare. Her sister’s top, which hadn’t been a perfect fit to start with, was ripped down by the water. Worse than that, Juliet’s bra, which was strapless and therefore had nothing holding it up beyond her actual boobs – which, unlike her sister’s, would come many to the pound - flew down with it. Juliet was briefly topless in front of around forty people. She jumped back down below the line of the water to get her wardrobe functioning correctly. She squeezed her eyes shut as she pulled the clothes back in place and prayed that no one would comment, a prayer of the most desperate kind.

It did nothing. Paul, next to her, let out this big guffaw and then mumbled something drunkenly and released from the shock of the sudden nudity, the group heartily laughed at whatever mean joke he’d made. Juliet couldn’t bear to look at him, the heartless bastard.

Before long, the laughter had spread like a contagion, being passed to people who were still coming out of the house, no doubt quickly informed of history’s worst faux pas.

It got worse as Juliet watched Riley run around the pool. Juliet heard her laughing too. It was only briefly, but Juliet knew it was at her. It was like a slap around the face. She thought Riley cared about her. Now Juliet was just a joke to her?

By the time Riley had reached her, she was pretending she wasn't laughing at Juliet's humiliation. 'Oh my god! Are you alright?'

Juliet looked up, utterly mortified, though, now dressed. Everyone was laughing their arses off. This was the most shame Juliet had ever felt in her life. It didn't matter that it wasn't her fault. 'Yeah, I'm OK.' Riley held a hand out, and Juliet pretended not to see it, climbing awkwardly out of the pool by herself. Once she was poolside, she stood and checked her watch. It didn't work anymore. 'Is that the time? I'd better get home.'

Riley looked surprised. 'Oh, er, OK.' Juliet supposed she thought someone like her would put up with being laughed at and shamed. It was shocking, this turn in Riley. One minute, Riley had seemed like a good person, a decent person. Juliet felt seen, cared for. But then Riley laughed at her, and Juliet knew she'd been a fool. Riley was only amusing herself with Juliet, and now this was simply more amusement at Juliet's expense.

Juliet turned away and headed for the back gate, dripping as she walked. As she let herself out of the garden, she wondered if she could run her clothes around the dryer without waking anyone. If her sister saw these clothes, she was going to hit the roof.

By the time she got in, she'd stopped dripping. She headed for the bathroom, where she made the mistake of looking into the mirror. All the makeup that her sister had applied had melted down her face, and now she looked like she could front an eighties heavy metal band. No wonder Riley had laughed at her.

Juliet didn't know if she was angrier at Riley or herself. Because Juliet half believed that going into that pool had been her own fault. One step to the side and the whole thing could have been avoided. The kiss wouldn't have been ruined. Then again, hadn't it already been ruined before Juliet embarrassed herself?

It had. Because Riley hadn't meant it.

NOW

Juliet could still feel that decade-old embarrassment. It had burned beyond any mortification she'd ever felt. She'd thought she might die of it. She'd half wanted to. Though, of course, that wasn't the end of the story...

But it was better not to get into that because she was letting it all go. Turning all those memories over in her mind, rolling them around like they were on a mixed fabrics cycle in the washing machine, it was no good. She couldn't clean it. There was no such thing as Tide for unwanted emotions. Even if you ran your mind through a boil wash, it couldn't get out stubborn crushes either. Juliet simply had to decide to get over it. And then wait until her stupid brain caught up. In the meantime, she would be super cool, distant, removed. Riley would never find out about this.

'Mum?' Juliet called as she let herself into the house. 'Are you in?'

Her mother popped her head out of the kitchen. 'Oh, good. I need a hand with something.' The head vanished.

'What?' Juliet said, going to find her mother in the kitchen.'

'The man's coming tomorrow, so I need to clear out your sister's room,' she said, dragging flattened boxes out of a cupboard. 'Her old clothes, for a start. God knows how many boxes they'll fill. That's what happens when a fashion addict goes to work in a clothes shop. She brings half the bloody stock home with her. I swear, by the end of the week, every week, she had about five quid of her pay left—'

'Why do we need to clean out Becca's room?' Juliet interrupted.

Her mother raised an eyebrow as she began to assemble the first box. 'For the man to take the snaps.'

'Man? Snaps?'

'Of course. They can't sell the house without photos, can they?'

It should not have been hard to understand what her mother was saying. Only, there'd been no lead-up. Not once had her mother mentioned that she was selling the house.

'Mum, we're selling?!'

'Yes, I said, didn't I?' her mother replied, assembling the second box.

'I think not, Mum.'

'Idid,' her mother stated dismissively.

'I reckon I'd remember my childhood home being sold out from under me,' Juliet snapped.

'Watch your tone,' her mother said.

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‘Mum,’ Juliet said, trying to be calm. ‘You never mentioned that you were selling.’

Her mum tutted. ‘I could have sworn I did. Well, anyway. We’re selling. We’re making the last payment on the mortgage this week, and the Singh’s down the road just sold theirs for a lot more than they paid. This area is worth something now, getting gentrified. I reckon it was that coffee place opening on the corner. Dreadful coffee, but the staff all have tattoos, and apparently, that’s something you’re expected to pay through the nose for now,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘So, if we sell up and me and your dad move into a smaller place, we could retire a lot earlier. We found somewhere last week and put an offer in.’

Juliet frowned. ‘And where exactly will I be sleeping in this smaller place?’

Her mother rolled her eyes. ‘God, Juliet. You’re twenty-eight! Isn’t it time you moved out, anyway?’

Juliet wanted to swing for her mum. ‘I’ve been paying into this home since I could earn money. Didn’t you think I at least deserved a conversation before you made me homeless?’

‘I’m pushing you out of the nest. There’s a difference. And anyway, when me and your dad kick the bucket, you’ll get the house and any savings. Split with your sister, of course. So don’t act like we robbed you, Juliet.’

‘I wasn’t saying that...’ Juliet protested.

But her mother wasn’t paying any attention, she’d gone back to putting boxes

together. Listening had never been her strong suit. 'This is a three-bed and I'm about to turn sixty. I'm sick of cleaning this much house,' she announced passionately. 'And you make good money now, looking after all those rich kids. You could get a place of your own.'

'Don't act like I'm rolling it in. And I don't look after rich kids,' Juliet said, not liking that description. 'They're kids with rich parents, Mum.'

'I don't see the difference,' her mother said.

Maybe there wasn't one. But Juliet had sort of thought there was. At least at one time. 'Well, anyway... I don't feel like my job is that stable.'

'I thought they liked you?'

'The mum does. The dad doesn't.'

Juliet's mother waved a dismissive hand as she went into a cupboard and pulled out more flattened boxes. 'Oh, I wouldn't worry about him. As long as you're in with the mum, you'll be fine. Start putting these together, would you?' She dropped a load of cardboard on the floor and walked out carrying two erected boxes, apparently considering the small matter of evicting her daughter dealt with to her satisfaction.

Juliet began to construct boxes on the kitchen lino and tried to take this news in. She couldn't.

Twelve

Riley put a hand down on the kitchen counter, and it was immediately sticky. She tried to remove her hand from the filthy surface as surreptitiously as she could while maintaining eye contact with her potential new housemate. 'Yeah, so I kicked him

out. And we were using the spare room as a playroom for the dog, but it'll definitely, probably fit a double bed in it,' Daniel explained. He was tall and skinny, wearing a t-shirt with an egg stain down it. He seemed nice enough. Maybe not much of a housekeeper, but compared to Riley's last housemate's controlling style, Riley thought that was preferable.

Riley pondered the flat as Daniel explained about the hot tap that worked about seventy percent of the time and the cooker that only had two functioning hobs. The place was a bit on the small side. And clearly, housework was not a priority for Daniel. But Riley thought she might be able to make it work. She could pick up Daniel's slack if she was bothered by his slobbishness. And if it got really bad, she'd suggest a cleaner. The place was cheap, so she might be able to cover that herself. None of this was ideal, but Riley needed out of her dad's. Stat. She was sick of walking on eggshells every time he had a bad day at work. It brought back too many bad memories.

'So, err, how long have you been living alone?' Riley asked, trying to make conversation.

Daniel checked his watch. 'Err, about three hours.'

Riley raised an eyebrow. 'What?'

'Yeah, I mean, why mess about? If Oscar would rather have all these long, late sessions with his trainer, he's gonna come home and find I can replace him too.'

Riley didn't have a chance to react. The front door opened, and a chubby guy with a scruffy beard walked in, the ill-famed Oscar. He gave Riley a confused glance. 'Daniel, who's-'

Daniel smiled bitterly at the arrival of his boyfriend. 'Oh, good. Glad you're back.'

You can fetch your stuff. It's in a suitcase next to the door. I wanted to put it in a bin liner because it's trash. But we'd run out,' he admitted.

Oscar looked as shocked as Riley felt. 'Daniel, what are you on about?'

'This is my new housemate...' Daniel spat, gesturing to Riley.

'Well, I mean we hadn't actually—' Riley sputtered.

'...So you can go back to your little spandex slut,' Daniel almost screamed.

Oscar gave a worn-out sigh. 'Daniel. We've talked about this. I mean, for fuck's sake, I thought you wanted me to get in better shape. It was you that booked him in the first bloody place.'

Daniel folded his arms. 'Oh yeah, that's right, make it my fault. "Daniel's a paranoid nutcase." Well, it's not paranoia when there are pics of him bending you over on Instagram!'

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‘He’s just stretching me out, you twat! He does that with everyone!’ Oscar yelled, angry himself now.

As Riley watched them go back and forth, it seemed like this flat share probably wasn’t going to work out for her.

Riley let herself into the house and made a beeline for the stairs. She didn’t want to see anyone right now because she was heartily disappointed. That ad had seemed so promising. She’d thought she was incredibly lucky to have seen it before anyone else. Now that she knew it would have probably been taken down an hour later and she could have saved herself the drama. As she’d left, it seemed as though Daniel and Oscar were trying to work it out. The arguing had turned to tears, which turned to hugging. Riley had slunk out quietly.

Now she was back in the bosom of her father’s home. Nice, clean, yet cold. The polar opposite of the flat where Daniel and Oscar lived in messy, pokey passion. Hard to say who had it worse.

‘Riley!’ yelled Amanda, popping out of nowhere and scaring the bejesus out of her.

‘Christ, Amanda! You might want to look into a bell,’ she said, clutching her chest.

Amanda was instantly contrite. ‘Sorry, I was just wondering how you’d gotten on with that viewing?’

‘No good,’ Riley shrugged.

Amanda smiled. ‘Oh dear.’

Riley’s mouth hitched up in one corner. ‘Just so you know, your face doesn’t match up to the sentiment.’

Amanda tutted and screwed her face up. ‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to... I guess I just always wanted a house full of children. And your dad has made it clear we’re not having a second. So having you here is about as close as I’m going to get.’

Riley could have cried for Amanda. The poor mare. She’d have done anything to avoid being stuck alone with her husband. ‘Yeah, I mean... I guess I don’t have to hurry off, then. If you’re... If you don’t mind having me about?’ Riley said carefully. She didn’t really want to call Amanda out. She had a feeling that if she said anything about her dad, Amanda, happy or not, would be the first to jump to his defense. It was better to let Amanda dress it up if that’s how she wanted it.

‘Oh, great!’ Amanda said. ‘That’s... Yeah, that’ll be lovely. I mean, I know you want your space and everything but yeah, this way you can really take your time, find something perfect? So just, just don’t look too hard for somewhere, eh?’

Amanda skipped happily off, and Riley went up the stairs, wondering what the hell she’d just agreed to. She sat on the edge of her bed and pulled off her shoes. She was just starting to relax when there was a knock at the door.

‘Come in.’

Amanda’s head swooped in. ‘Sorry, me again! I forgot to say...’

‘What?’

‘You’re going to have a new roommate!’

‘Wuhh...’ Riley gaped.

‘I mean, not really,’ Amanda clarified. ‘You won’t be sharing a room, of course. She’ll be next door. Juliet, I mean. She’s moving in! Isn’t that wonderful! She’s got to move out of her old place, and I thought it might be good to have her on hand permanently.’ She smiled goofily. ‘You’ll be here and she’ll be here... Full house!’

Riley did her best to hide her shock. It wasn’t a great success.

‘I thought you’d think this was good news,’ Amanda said. ‘You know, having someone down the hall. Someone you could visit in the middle of the night.’

‘Why would I visit Juliet in the middle of the night?’ Riley asked through a slight case of dry mouth.

‘I don’t know, to chat about things. Like, I don’t, know, boys or something?’

Riley tried not to laugh. ‘Amanda... You know we’re not twelve, don’t you? I think you’ve only got about seven years on us.’

‘Yeah, I guess!’ Amanda laughed. ‘Well, anyway, thought you’d like to know.’ She left.

This day was going from weird to bad to worse to weird. Because now Riley was living with Juliet. How had she gotten here?

THEN

Riley was feeling this.

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She wasn't sure how long she and Juliet had been kissing, but she vaguely thought a few minutes had gone by. Could have been two, could have been ten. Could have been an hour. She'd checked they were alone before it started, but now, she didn't care who saw. She'd catch flack for this if it got back to India, but some things were worth a grilling.

That was until Paul Prentiss - who Riley knew semi-well and was considered by all who met him to be a sweetie pie but an absolute idiot - came flying out of the back door of the house. She felt Juliet pull back and, out of respect, did the same. But she was less than happy about the interruption.

Riley turned to the kerfuffle and heard Matt Jones, his best friend and partner in crime, cry out, 'Paul! You can't do a handstand in a pool when you're fucking smashed, mate! I'm too drunk to save ya!' Hot on his heels was Paul's long-suffering girlfriend, Jenny Yang. 'Paul!' she was yelling. 'Fucking stop!'

This was not the first time Riley had witnessed something like this. Paul pulled this shit almost every party. Got hammered and got it into his head that he simply had to play fast and loose with his mortality while Jenny prayed he didn't expire in front of her.

Riley turned back to Juliet. 'Well. That was...' She didn't have a good word to describe what had just occurred. There might not be one. The only word she had was inadequate but better than muteness. '...Nice.'

'Yeah,' Juliet replied. 'Nice.' But then she started to step backwards. Riley wasn't sure what Juliet was thinking, but she didn't look very happy.

‘Are you OK?’ Riley asked nervously.

‘Who me?’ Juliet said. ‘I’m absolutely—’

What happened next was a moment by moment tragedy of small yet ridiculous proportions. Because while Riley usually watched from a distance while the clown show went on, tonight, she didn’t have the luxury of a nice, safe seat. Paul was coming right at them. Riley took a step away automatically, but Juliet seemed to freeze. Before Riley could do anything, it all happened, and she could only watch as Paul’s arm swung right into Juliet’s chest, knocking her into the pool.

Riley gasped in shock and prepared to jump in. But Juliet came quickly back to the surface, pulled up by Paul, thankfully not so drunk that he didn’t know he’d taken Juliet down. He’d dragged her to the opposite end of the pool, and Jenny, who’d been in action before any of this started, was already poolside, putting her hand out for Juliet, looking mortified. ‘Are you alright, dude?!’ Riley heard Paul ask as she ran around the pool. She heard Juliet mutter something back as Jenny began to pull her out. Then somehow, Juliet let go and slid back down into the pool. People were coming out now, the party moving outdoors.

But then Paul said something like, ‘Whoa! I didn’t know it wasthatkind of party. Bring back the sixties!’ Riley didn’t know what that meant, but the next thing anyone knew, Paul was upside down in the pool, as promised, legs jutting out of the water. He’d taken his bottoms off and his arse was on full display to the school. Everyone dissolved into laughter.

‘Paul!’ Jenny cried, mortified. ‘Put your arse away!’

Of course, Paul didn’t hear her. He was underwater.

A laugh burst out of Riley as she went around to help poor Juliet away from this

ridiculousness. Riley put out a hand, and she could have sworn that Juliet saw it and ignored her, climbing out by herself, distress in her eyes. It seemed like it wasn't just about getting wet. It got worse as Juliet stood shaking herself off. 'Oh my god! Are you alright?' Riley asked, concerned, unsure what was happening, but knowing that there was something she didn't understand.

'Yeah, I'm OK.' Juliet said, checking her watch. 'Is that the time? I'd better get home.'

Riley tried not to look hurt. 'Oh. OK.'

Juliet turned away and headed for the back gate. Riley watched her go, bewildered. Why had she gone? Riley had thought they were... something. They'd talked, and it felt like more than just saying stuff. Riley had felt sparks. And then that kiss.

But Juliet couldn't get away quick enough.

Sure, Juliet had gone in the pool, and she was drenched through and probably needed to get home to dry off properly, but it didn't seem like it was just about that. Then again, she'd looked kind of funny right before she'd gone in the pool.

'Hey,' said India, wandering out and joining her at the side of the pool, looking pleased with herself. 'Totally snogged that guy.'

'That's nice,' Riley said, distracted.

'Yeah, it was alright. I'd give him about a six out of ten?' she said casually. 'He wants to take me out. Properly. On a date.'

'Yeah?' Riley asked, barely listening.

‘Yeah, you think I should do it? I mean, I’m already sort of seeing that guy from my gym.’

‘Mmm,’ Riley nodded, disinterested. ‘Tough one.’

Lucky for her, India was quite happy to keep blathering on about her non-existent problems. Which left Riley’s brain free to pick over what had just happened. The clues were these: She’d kissed Juliet, and then Juliet had seemed awkward. Then the pool thing. Then she’d left.

When Riley thought about it like that, it was obvious what had happened. The pool episode was incidental. The meat of it was that Juliet had allowed herself to be kissed, not enjoyed it very much, and then had to make excuses to get out of a difficult situation. Riley was shocked she’d misread that kiss so badly. She’d believed that if she was into it, then Juliet had to be too. Apparently, that was an incorrect assumption. Riley didn’t know how she could have been so out of touch.

Could she be wrong? There was only one way to find out. She would text Juliet. Not right now, of course. That was way too eager. Riley liked Juliet, but she wasn’t stupid. She’d wait a day, maybe even two, and then she’d send a carefully constructed message that was just the right blend of casualness and warmth. Whatever reply she got, she’d know if she was right or wrong.

She wanted badly to be wrong. How could you have a night like this end like it was nothing?

Thirteen

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Juliet couldn't believe how fast the sale went through. But 'No forward chain' was apparently how you went from hearing it was happening to being out on your arse inside a couple of months. Her parents had a place sorted for themselves, the absolute bastards. A one-bed flat twenty minutes down the road, they were ensconced, happy as pigs in shit. Juliet didn't understand how they could be so unsentimental about the house they'd lived in for thirty-plus years.

Juliet had taken it differently. She'd gone into full-scale denial until her parents were clinking cava in front of the mantel. 'Sale's gone through! You need to move out in two weeks.'

Thank god Amanda had stepped in. Been happy to help, actually. Juliet had tried to get Amanda to cut her pay in exchange. But Amanda laughed it off and said, 'Just babysit on an occasional evening, and we'll call it square.' God, she was a nice woman. Too nice for her husband, that was for sure.

Juliet had thoroughly believed that Riley wouldn't be living there by the time she moved in, so she hadn't worried about that situation too much beyond its current status. But here she was, all her worldly belongings in a few boxes and bags, being helped in by Riley.

'Jesus, what's in this one?' Riley asked, lifting a small box.

'Books.'

'You need a kindle,' Riley puffed. 'I could be carrying all this in my back pocket right now.'

‘You’re not the first to make that argument, but I can’t seem to bring myself to get one,’ Juliet told her. ‘Give me that box,’ she said, holding out her arms.

‘No, no,’ Riley said, stepping back. ‘I’m fine. Just complaining for fun.’ She took the box into the house.

Juliet grabbed another box and followed her in and up to her new room. It was big, beige, plush.

Riley dropped the box gently on the floor, and Juliet put her own on top. ‘You need help unpacking?’

‘Oh, no thanks. I’m gonna leave most of it boxed. This isn’t a permanent thing. I’ll probably only be here a few weeks.’

‘That’s what I said,’ Riley remarked grimly.

Juliet chuckled. ‘Not found a place?’

‘Oh no. I’ve found loads of places,’ Riley said dryly. ‘Yeah, if you want to share a tiny shithole with a hoarder with poor hygiene, you’re well catered for. I guess I was just hoping I might find a nice-ish place with a boring but pleasant enough housemate. Turns out, that’s asking too much.’

‘Don’t tell me that,’ Juliet grimaced. ‘I’ve got to start looking myself.’

‘It’s not that bad, don’t listen to me,’ Riley assured her. ‘Anyway, I’ve kind of stopped looking recently. Amanda, she... she asked me to stay on a bit.’

‘Did she?’ Juliet asked, surprised.

‘Yeah, she... I mean, she’d never say it, but... I think it’s been a bit of a relief for her to have some adults around the place that aren’t my dad.’

This was tricky territory. Juliet had found that you were never supposed to say bad things about people’s families, even if they started it. She had to be careful here. ‘So, things are a bit tense?’

Riley smiled. ‘Come on, you know what he’s like. You don’t have to be cool about it. He tried to sack you on your first day, for the love of god.’

Juliet had to laugh. ‘Yeah, he’s... he’s been a challenge.’

Riley looked at her fondly. ‘God, Juliet. You’re so fucking appropriate.’

Juliet shrugged. ‘I’m staff. I have to be.’

Riley grimaced. ‘Jesus. Please don’t refer to yourself that way. It turns my stomach.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. But it does,’ Riley said. ‘I mean, we went to school together.’

Riley’s eyes flitted away on the word ‘together.’

Juliet was slightly thrown and groped for the first conversational life preserver she could reach. ‘Yeah, I guess. You still close with India?’

Riley sighed. ‘Yeah, I see her now and again. I mean, we’re kind of... We don’t have a ton in common now, but we have a long history. You have to keep that going, don’t you?’

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‘I feel like that when I see my sister,’ Juliet said. ‘Though we never had much in common except a roof.’

Riley smiled. ‘How is your sister these days?’

‘She’s about the same. Well, except that she manages a clothes shop, and she’s married with a son, now.’

‘Wow. Sounds like she’s a proper grown-up.’

Juliet smiled. ‘She still just seems like the same old Becca to me. Clothes obsessed and flighty. Even with a kid.’

‘I’m not sure people change after a certain point,’ Riley agreed. ‘It all sort of sets in. Look at my dad. He faked being nice just long enough to snag Amanda and boom. Reverted to the same old prick I grew up with.’

‘Yeah, I remember,’ Juliet said without thinking. She added quickly, ‘I mean, I remember... you talked about him. That time.’

Whoops. Here came the elephant in the room, walking in all big, snuggling itself onto the bed and getting comfy.

‘Did I?’ Riley said. Juliet had to assume she didn’t remember a lot about that night. Then again, why should she? All of that might have been a big deal, but only to Juliet. Riley couldn’t know how that night had marked her.

THEN

It was Monday morning, and Juliet was faking sickness. She knew it was under suspicion. Her dad had given her the eye this morning, but her mother was doing more than looking. It was her day off work, and she'd been sniffing around Juliet all morning, asking about symptoms. Juliet had told her she felt hot, sick, and tired, the last two of which were true. Her mother had nodded and left. Juliet thought she was safe. But not twenty minutes later, her mother burst into Juliet's room with a small plastic device.

'What have you got there?' Juliet asked.

'It's an ear thermometer,' Juliet's mum declared.

'We don't have one of them. Where did you get it?' Juliet exclaimed nervously.

'I borrowed it from next door,' her mother told her, pleased with herself. The woman never believed anyone was ill, at least not with anything they couldn't battle through. Her work ethic was terrifying. 'Right, pull your hair back.'

Juliet did as she was told. Her mother stuck the device ungently into her ear and pressed a button. It beeped, and her mother checked the readout. 'Completely normal. I knew you were fibbing.'

'I'm not fibbing,' Juliet said weakly.

Her mother tutted. 'Get dressed. You're going in. I'll ring the school now and tell them about your miraculous recovery.'

'Mum, no!' Juliet cried.

‘If you can give me one good reason why you can’t go in, I’ll consider letting you off.’

Juliet sighed. ‘Fine.’ There was no chance she was going to tell her mother about the party. Not one part of it was parent-suitable. Mary Sullivan believed feelings were things people couldn’t afford to indulge in, anyway. Not embarrassment, nor heartbreak. Because that was the other thing. That horrible text she’d gotten Sunday morning.

Hey Juliet. It was nice to see you at the party. I hope to see more of you soon.

It was obvious what she meant. What she’d seen. Whatever anyone had seen. She obviously thought it was funny. Well, Juliet wasn’t amused by her total humiliation.

She got dressed and prepared herself for social horror.

She was at school for eleven, just in time for geography. She walked in, took her usual seat, and waited. For what, she wasn’t sure. Laughter? Whispers? Being pelted with rotten fruit?

In the end, nothing happened. Maybe it hadn’t gotten around the entire school yet. But it would, Juliet knew it. There were at least three people in this class who’d been at the party. They could have it around the room in no time. By the end of this lesson, she’d get an indication that people were talking about her.

Lunchtime, Juliet sat with her usual people, Haley and Meera. For once, they had a real use. They always picked up every tiny bit of gossip and dissected it to the nth

degree. They'd know what had happened and could tell her how it was being framed. 'Hey, guys, did you hear... I mean, what's going on, what's the, er... goss?' Juliet asked, trying to sound laid-back.

Meera, mid sarnie, stopped chewing. 'What do you mean?' she asked, little bits of tuna in her teeth.

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‘You know, like... Anything interesting going around?’ Juliet asked, trying not to look directly at Meera’s mouth.

Meera looked at Haley, swallowing. ‘J wants the goss.’

Haley sipped from her Ribena carton. ‘This is a first.’

Meera took another bite. ‘You’re talking about the party, aren’t you?’

And there it was—confirmation. It was a relief to hear someone say it. ‘Yes. The party,’ Juliet said sadly.

‘Pretty hilarious. I wish I’d seen it,’ Haley giggled.

Juliet pulled her cardigan tighter. ‘Do you?’

‘Yeah. I mean, it’s not every day you see a sight like that, is it?’

Juliet shook her head as she tried not to slide to the floor in a foetal ball. ‘I suppose not.’

‘I wish someone had taken snaps,’ Meera added.

Juliet frowned. ‘That’s a bit much. It was bad enough without seeing it passed around school today as well.’

Meera looked surprised. ‘Well, he didn’t mind if everyone saw, so I don’t know why

you're judging me for wanting to see his arse.'

Juliet heard every word of Meera's sentence very clearly, but her brain couldn't unravel its meaning. 'What?'

'I know he's not brains of Britain or anything, but I think he's cute,' Meera said defensively.

'Yeah, and a photo's the closest you'd ever get. Jenny Yang has him locked down,' Haley told Meera with a nudge in the ribs.

'Who are we talking about?' Juliet had to ask.

'Paul Prentiss, ding-dong. Who'd ya think?' Haley said.

Juliet felt like she was losing her mind. 'Can you just... Can we start this story again?'

'I thought you knew,' Haley said, confused. 'There was some party on Friday, and apparently, Paul Prentiss jumped in the pool, took his bottoms off, and did a handstand. The whole school saw his bum.'

'I'd have liked to see the other angle,' Meera said with all the worldliness she could summon. Haley screamed with laughter, delightfully scandalised. 'You're such a perv!' she shrieked. Meera looked thrilled to gain that title.

Juliet barely heard any of that; she was spinning. This was what people were talking about? How could it be? Poor, unpopular girl thinks she can party with the cool kids and her boobs pay the price? That was the headline. Wasn't it?

Juliet needed more information. She had to go to the source.

Juliet coughed into her hand. Paul Prentiss, asleep on the front lawn of the school with a comic book over his face, didn't move. Juliet coughed louder and something penetrated this time. Paul sat bolt upright, the book falling away. 'I'm awake! Jenny, don't leave!' His eyes focused, and he saw Juliet. 'Oh, hi.' He squinted and rubbed his eyes. 'I know you from somewhere, don't I?'

Juliet nodded. 'Friday's party. You knocked me into the pool.'

Paul gaped in horror. 'Oh, fuck! Yeah. Bro, I'm so sorry!'

Juliet shook her head. 'It doesn't matter. Really. I just wanted to ask... What do you remember about that?'

Paul shrugged. 'Nothing. It's all a bit of a blank after nine o'clock. That's when I found that bottle of tequila.'

'Oh,' Juliet sighed, disappointed. 'Well, thanks for...'

'But Jenny filled me in the next day,' Paul went on. 'She said I... She told me I showed my arse. Apparently, I thought...' Paul paused, rubbing the back of his neck. 'She told me I thought everyone was getting naked. So I got naked. But like, it was just me.' He laughed, shaking his embarrassment off. 'Oh, and she said I saw your... ladies. She's a bit mad at me about that, actually.'

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Juliet pushed through her mortification. ‘Everyone did, didn’t they?’

Paul laughed. ‘Actually... I think Jenny said...’ He thought hard. ‘Shit, what did she say?’ he frowned, and Juliet felt like she could smell burning as Paul tried to dredge up the memory. She was certain this was the end of the conversation, but then Paul got excited. ‘Hold up, I’ve got it in a text! Let me check.’ He got his phone out. ‘Right, she says...Paul, you absolute...’ Paul looked up from his phone. ‘You don’t need to hear that bit.’ He looked back down at the phone. ‘Are you telling me you don’t remember that the poor girl’s top came down after you shoved her in the pool? Lucky for her, I was blocking everyone’s view. But I know YOU got an eyeful! You were pointing your dirty little eyeballs right at her, and then you started talking about naked parties!’ Paul looked up, re-embarrassed. ‘I swear, I don’t remember that bit. But does that help?’

‘It really does,’ she assured him and walked back into the school, floating on air. The sanctity of her chest was intact. No one was laughing at her. Jenny didn’t sound like she’d be spreading around Juliet’s exposure, either. Which also meant... Oh god. She took out her phone and reread that text from Riley.

Hey Juliet. It was nice to see you at the party. I hope to see more of you soon.

It was just a nice message.

Fourteen

Riley was sitting down to family dinner, despite deep reservations. She’d been living in the house for a few months now, but she’d done a pretty good job ducking her dad

thus far. She had his schedule well memorised, which helped. It also helped that she knew the sound of his footsteps in the house, clomping and urgent, as though he were always dashing to somewhere that needed him right this second.

But tonight, there was no avoiding her destiny. Amanda had begged her to come down because it was Juliet's first night and she wanted to make a thing of it. Riley couldn't wriggle out of it.

'Riley, could you give Juliet a shout?' Amanda said, putting a large pot of something on the table. 'Tell her it's chicken.'

Riley got up and went to the stairs. 'Juliet?' she yelled up. No answer. She went up and knocked on the door. 'Juliet, you are cordially invited to eat downstairs right now,' she called through the door.

The door swung open. 'What? I'm invited to family dinner?' Juliet exclaimed.

Riley raised an eyebrow. 'Did you not realise you'd been adopted by Amanda when you moved in? You're part of the pack, as much as I am. Maybe more, since you actually help, and I just suck up oxygen. Which means you get the dinner invite.'

'But you never go to dinner,' Juliet observed.

'How do you know that?' Riley asked.

'Amanda might have mentioned it,' Juliet admitted.

'Yeah, well, she went to pains to get me down tonight. I guess she wants everyone to make an effort for your first night.'

'Oh god,' Juliet moaned. 'Really?'

‘Yeah. She pretty much lives in some sort of TV show from the fifties,’ Riley said with a snort. She dropped her smile quickly. ‘I didn’t mean that to sound cruel,’ she added.

‘I know you didn’t,’ Juliet said with a warm smile. ‘You don’t have to explain every joke.’

Riley felt a feeling that she didn’t recognise right away. It wasn’t very familiar. It was the feeling of being understood. ‘So, er, you coming?’ Riley asked quickly.

‘How can I not?’ Juliet said. ‘Just give me a second to get myself together.’

‘Don’t be silly. You look great,’ Riley said. Juliet very obviously blushed. ‘Oh. Well. If you think so...’ she said quietly and walked out of her room, closing the door behind her.

They walked downstairs together. Riley’s dad was now in situ, at the head of the table, like a macho twat. Riley wondered if she was being meanspirited, and perhaps he’d just happened to sit there by accident, that it had nothing to do with status. But then Amanda put a cooked bird down on the table, and he immediately went for the carving knife. This house existed in a different time—one Riley didn’t have any nostalgia for. Thank god Juliet was here. She might go mad otherwise.

Juliet sat down, and despite several seating options, Riley sat beside her. The second her cheeks hit the seat, she thought, What the hell am I doing? But it was too late, places were taken, and Amanda was serving up. Mia was parked up on the other side, raised on a booster chair. The seating arrangement was set.

‘Have you settled yourself in?’ Amanda asked Juliet, taking off the apron and sitting down.

It took Juliet a second to register that the question was meant for her. ‘Oh? Me?’

Mike made a gruff noise that Riley recognised as his laugh. ‘No one else moved in today, did they? I mean, we’re not taking in anymore strays?’

‘She’s hardly astray, Dad,’ Riley said, instantly sending him a warning look. They weren’t even eating yet, and he was already off.

Amanda put a hand on her husband’s arm and said, ‘He’s just kidding. She’s very welcome.’

‘Thank you,’ Juliet jumped in, sounding unbothered by the rudeness. Or at least, able to ignore it with great skill. ‘Yes, I’m settling in. It’s a lovely room. It’s bigger than my old one, actually.’

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‘Oh? Great,’ Amanda said. Dishes were passed, and people began to serve themselves.

‘Yeah. I didn’t have an en suite either. That shower, is that a rainfall?’ Juliet asked.

‘I think so, yes,’ Amanda said, pleased. ‘Though I wasn’t around when they were fitted.’ She turned to her husband. ‘Are they all rainfall showers, Mike?’

Mike, tucking into his meal, looked up, distracted. ‘I wouldn’t know, the designer did all that.’

‘I guess I’ll find out tomorrow morning,’ Juliet said cheerily.

A thick silence fell over the table. People were eating, which might have accounted for some of the quiet. But Riley could feel that some of it was just awkwardness. This wasn’t a family, no matter what Amanda wanted to think or see. They were just a collection of people connected by degrees of emotional and financial need.

That made Riley so fucking sad. Was there no such thing as family? Was it always like this? Could you never really find a connection?

THEN

Riley was waiting for her text to go through. She had read receipts on. Eventually, up it came. The message had been read. Now it was time to wait for a response, if there was to be one. Christ, the idea that her message would just be met with complete radio silence, that would be the worst.

And for over twenty-four hours, she believed that was as bad as it could get. All through Sunday and into Monday morning, all through the first lesson of the day, the silence killed her. Throughout business studies, she tried not to look at her phone. But her mind couldn't be ripped from her wait, and occasionally, her hands followed suit, tapping in and checking she hadn't missed a message.

India saw her. 'What's up with you?' she asked. 'Jack isn't bothering you, is he?'

'Mmm? Oh, Christ no. That's extremely over,' Riley told her. She'd almost forgotten about the whole Jack melodrama. It seemed like a thousand years ago now. Someone else was making her miserable now. It was so much worse than the social embarrassment Jack had heaped on her.

'Is there someone new?' India asked slyly.

Riley sighed through her nose. 'No,' she said. It didn't feel like a lie. 'Look, I'm not coming to lit, OK? I just can't be arsed with it today,' she told India.

India was astounded. 'But you never miss a lesson!'

'If Griffin asks, tell her I'm sick or something.'

'If you wanna go into town or something, have a look round the shops, I'd be up for that,' India grinned, not reading the vibe at all.

'No, I'm just... I'm just going home. I didn't sleep well last night.'

India stopped grinning. 'Oh, alright.'

The bell went, and Riley sped off, barely saying bye to India. She walked home at a pace and went straight to her room, got into bed fully clothed, and pulled the covers

over her head.

She hadn't been there five minutes when there was a knock at her door.

'Come in,' Riley called from beneath the sheet, not meaning it.

Someone who could only be her mother came in and sat down on the edge of the bed without a word. After a few seconds, Riley pulled the sheet from over her head. Her mother was staring at the carpet anxiously. Riley watched her, her stomach starting to hurt. She knew what it was going to be just before her mother said it. 'Your dad and I... We're getting a, a divorce,' her mother told her, barely able to meet her eyes.

'Where is he? Why isn't he here to tell me this?' Riley asked.

'He's got a meeting. He'll be back later,' her mother told her.

Riley wasn't especially surprised her dad couldn't make it to the announcement that the family was being dissolved. Seemed on par.

'Who's moving out?'

'He is,' her mother said.

Riley pulled the sheet down a bit further and said, 'Good.'

'That's... that's your reaction?' her mother asked nervously.

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‘Yes.’ Riley pulled the sheet back over her head. Her mother walked out. And that was that.

So Riley wasn’t going to live with her dad anymore, but it didn’t matter. She’d be gone in a few months anyway, off to uni. And then she’d make her own way—a brand-new life away from everything and everyone she knew. They could all screw themselves.

Riley’s mood was not improved by a text she got a few minutes later.

I thought you were different. Guess I was wrong. You’re the same as all of them.

Riley hadn’t been shocked by her mother’s announcement. But this? It stunned her. What the hell did it mean? Was Juliet mad because it was kind of Riley’s fault she’d gotten shoved in the pool? Because Riley had moved quickly, but she hadn’t pulled Juliet out of the way. Was that it? Did she blame her for it?

As Riley thought about it, she began to realise that maybe it wasn’t that. Maybe it was something much more terrible. Maybe this was Juliet’s way of letting her know that Riley simply wasn’t good enough. She thought Riley was average.

This was her worst fear made real. Riley had shown herself to Juliet, and all she’d seen was a spoiled, silly rich girl.

NOW

‘Would you pass the gravy?’ Juliet asked.

‘Huh?’ Riley said, ripped from her stupor. She looked over, and Juliet was looking at her with a small smile. Riley passed her the gravy, wishing she hadn’t suddenly found herself doing a small toddle down memory lane, stopping off along the way at a place known as ‘The worst text I ever received’ Road. It was a part of history she hadn’t thought about in a long time.

Only now she was sat next to Juliet, at ‘family’ dinner. And she couldn’t help but wonder if Juliet still looked at her and thought exactly the same.

Fifteen

It was midnight, and Juliet had been in bed for an hour. Nothing was happening.

She supposed it was just the shock of the new preventing her from falling asleep. That, and her neighbour. Right next door, Riley Powell. It was making her feel jittery. She didn’t understand the feeling. She had a crush, so what? Why did that have to mean she was lying here fidgeting around just because that crush was lying on the other side of the wall, possibly in some silky underwear? In fact, for all Juliet knew, Riley slept naked...

Juliet slapped her wrist and told herself to stop it and go to sleep. Just because someone was nice to you didn’t mean you had carte blanche to have salacious thoughts about them. Juliet felt it was quite rude of herself to let her mind turn Riley into the star of her sexual fantasies. It was like she was taking something from Riley that Riley didn’t know had been stolen. It wasn’t right. Riley had been kind to her since the day she nearly got her walking papers. Juliet had to stop this and be her friend, like they’d said. Be normal. Not the same idiot she’d been ten years ago, chasing a ridiculous, unobtainable dream.

THEN

Juliet needed to speak to Riley. Now.

She couldn't believe the level on which she'd fucked up. She'd never known anyone like Riley. She was nice, smart, sexy, thoughtful, and had reached out to her, tried to connect. And Juliet had blanked her. But it wasn't too late to make it right. She hoped.

When she arrived at lit, she was first there. The teacher hadn't arrived yet, the room was still locked. She leaned against the hall wall and waited, hoping Riley might be the next to arrive.

No such luck. What she got instead was India.

Juliet turned her eyes away from the approaching girl. That was all she needed today—a run-in with her. Juliet began to look through her bag on the floor, as though she'd lost something, trying to look busy.

But then she felt a shadow fall over her. She looked up. India had her hands on her hips, smiling down. Well, sneering. 'What are you looking for? Your phone?'

'Umm...' She didn't want to engage with India, but she didn't want to ignore her either. But which one would make whatever was about to happen worse? Hard to say. 'I lost a book.'

India shocked Juliet by reaching right into her bag and pulling out the copy of *The Haunting of Hill House*. 'What, this one?'

Juliet jumped up, trying to snatch the book out of her hand. But India was quick, and she yanked her arm back, the book just out of reach.

'What are you doing?' Juliet asked, surprised by her forthright tone.

India arched a nasty eyebrow. 'Sorry, didn't realise it was so precious to you. It's not even yours, is it? Belongs to the school library,' she said, thumbing the first few pages.

'Exactly. It's not mine. That's why I don't want you ruining it,' Juliet said. She was kind of loving this, talking to India without cringing, without stepping back. She supposed she was past caring about all this school crap. They were leaving soon. And who was India? Just your standard bitch. Nothing special. Not like her friend. Riley was worth caring about. Not any of this.

'Oh, I guess it's a bad idea to rip a page out then?' India said, holding the cover roughly.

Juliet shrugged. 'Go ahead. I'll let them know they can charge you.'

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India laughed sharply. ‘Checkyouout. Tough girl now, are we? Come to one party withrealpeople and you think you’ve got the right to talk to me like that? Fucking think again,’ she said, shoving the intact book into Juliet’s chest. Juliet felt, in a small way, that it was a victory to get the book back unharmed. Although that party comment... She hadn’t even seen India. How did India know she was there?

Actually, who cared? Juliet hadn’t backed down just now, and she’d won. That was the thing to focus on. ‘India, you know what? You can really just fu—’

‘Oh, and don’t think I don’t know about you and Riley,’ India sneered.

Juliet stopped cold. She’d assumed Riley wouldn’t say anything to India about them. The way Riley talked about India, Juliet had thought they weren’t that close. But just in case India knew less than she was making out, Juliet played it cool. ‘What are you talking about?’

India smiled like a cat playing with a mouse. ‘You know you’re just a joke to her, don’t you?’

Juliet felt less bold. ‘You don’t know anything.’

‘No?’ India laughed horribly. ‘She told me everything. She told me she snogged you for a laugh, and that it wasreallybad. Worse than she thought it would be.’

Juliet was angry and slightly afraid. ‘I don’t believe she said that. She’s not like that.’

India looked Juliet up and down. ‘Oh, you know her so well after a few

conversations, yeah?’ She laughed bitterly. ‘She told me all about it. Everything. Because she’s mine. My friend. You could never get between us.’ India snorted. ‘She told me that story you told her too. About that boy that kissed you and ripped your mouth up? Jesus, I almost felt sorry for you when she told me that.’

Juliet’s heart stopped. That was a lot of detail for India to know. It had to be true.

She’d thought she was in *Carrie* before and then found out she was wrong. But what if she was in another movie? What if she was in one of those films where the cool kids made a bet? To mess with someone like her, a nobody? It always ended with the cool kid realising they loved the sad little nerd. But this wasn’t a movie. If India was telling the truth, it was just a cruel joke. She was the joke.

India wasn’t done. ‘Oh, and she said that when you kissed her, the amount of tongue you used was fucking gross-’

WHACK

Juliet looked at the slightly creased book in her hand, and then at India standing back, clutching her cheek. It took her a second to connect those two things and understand that she’d slapped India around the face with her book.

India, a lovely red mark on her face, looked at Juliet in surprise. ‘Who the fuck do you think you are?’ she asked angrily. She took a step toward Juliet. Any other day, Juliet would have backed up at the sight of India advancing on her. But if India wanted to smack her one, Juliet was ready for it. The day she’d had, a punch in the face was nothing. Juliet almost relished it.

But India didn’t come any closer. She looked... hesitant, and Juliet knew in a second why. The girl India thought she was dealing with, the mouse, the coward, she was gone. India didn’t know who she was looking at now. For that matter, neither did

Juliet. She felt brand-new. And to think, all it had taken was one good heartbreak.

‘Fucking... Youfucking...’ India sputtered. She turned around. ‘You’re a fucking loser!’ she said over her shoulder, almost running.

Juliet watched her go, thinking she was right. She had lost something. A few things. Fear of India, which was magnificent. But Juliet had also lost hope. Hope that she and Riley could be something. That she could really and truly have her. Juliet had been a fool to even imagine it.

She got out her phone and tapped her rage and sadness into one brief statement and hit send without hesitation. I thought you were different. Guess I was wrong. You’re the same as all of them.

Juliet managed to avoid Riley for the rest of the term. It wasn’t that hard, even in lit. Riley had moved right to the other end of the class, along with India, who no longer smirked when she saw Juliet. She avoided eye contact altogether. As did Riley.

NOW

Yes, that had stung. That it was all just a way for Riley to amuse herself. But Juliet had walked away from the experience a little stronger, a little wiser. And now, as an adult, she could see it clearer. She didn’t know precisely why Riley had done something so cruel, but maybe she’d had stuff going on. Hadn’t she said so? Her parents had been on the verge of divorce, one they’d clearly gone through with. And if Juliet knew anything, it was that hurt people hurt people. Especially kids. Which they had been. Riley, despite everything about her screaming sophistication, had been the same age as cossetted, virginal Juliet.

But then again, maybe looking a bit harder at Riley's early unkindness was a good way to rid herself of these current unwanted feelings?

Hmmm. She'd have to come back to that one.

BANG BANG!

Juliet was so startled that she fell clean out of bed at the bang on her door. She got to her feet, rubbing her coccyx. She opened her door to find Riley standing in a huge, worn t-shirt with a picture of a sweaty wrestler on the front, and there went the fantasy of Riley's sexy nightwear.

'God, sorry to... I can't believe I'm doing this... I just need... I don't want to wake Amanda and my dad won't help, I know he won't...' Riley said, panic bright in her voice.

'What's up?' Juliet asked.

Riley sighed, and though it was dark in the hall and Juliet couldn't see it, she could hear the blush in her voice. 'There's a spider.'

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Juliet couldn't help but let out a little snort. 'A spider?'

'It's really big!' Riley said defensively. 'Honestly. I don't think it's indigenous to England. I think it probably got here in a banana crate. He looks Australian to me.'

'Do we get our bananas from Australia?' Juliet said, trying not to laugh. 'I thought they came from South America.'

'Then he's from Peru! Like bloody Paddington Bear! But there's no chance he's local, I'm telling you! He's exotically large.'

Juliet's snort became a big laugh. 'Let's go and look at this Peruvian gentleman, shall we?'

It was kind a big. But just standard, English-countryside big. Nothing to write home about. 'You got a glass and some card?'

Riley was aghast. 'You're just gonna get him out like that?'

'Did you want to ask to see his passport first?' Juliet asked, cocking an eyebrow.

Riley frowned. 'He looked bigger before. He must have been standing near the shadows, I couldn't tell where his legs ended.'

'So, we doing this or what?'

Riley went into her bathroom and came out with a glass and a magazine. 'These do?'

Juliet took them and advanced toward the spider. Who had chosen this moment to start running away from the glass, right towards Riley. She shrieked. Juliet had to move quickly, dashing up behind the spider as it made a beeline for Riley's feet and clunk, glass down. She slid the mag carefully underneath, trying not to hurt any of those long legs, and he was fully encased, ready for transportation. Juliet looked up at Riley, frozen in front of the door. 'Might wanna shift.'

Riley didn't need telling twice. She jumped aside as Juliet took the prisoner through the door and downstairs, right out the back door. The security light illuminated her way around the pool to the back of the garden. She couldn't risk it coming back in. She dropped it near a rosebush and went back inside. He scampered off without a backwards look. Juliet wished him well.

Upstairs, Riley was peeking out of her door. 'Is he gone?'

'Yes. But he told me to tell you he's local, Medford born and raised.'

Riley smiled, despite herself. 'Where is he now?'

'Rose bushes at the far end of the garden. He won't be coming back.'

Riley nodded. 'Thanks. I'm sorry to have dragged you out of bed.'

'I wasn't asleep anyway,' Juliet told her.

'No?'

'First night in a new place,' Juliet explained, embarrassed.

‘Yeah, I know that one. You know what might help?’

‘Cocoa?’ Juliet asked, hopefully. She wasn’t quite ready to go back to bed right now. She kind of liked hanging around the house in the dead of night with Riley.

‘I was more thinking whisky. But I reckon I could combo,’ Riley suggested.

Minutes later, Juliet was leaning on the breakfast bar, sipping her Irish hot chocolate. It took the edge off, she had to admit. Leaning across from her, taking tentative sips, Riley looked like she was calming down from her leggy invader.

‘So, you regret moving in here yet?’ Riley asked with a small smile.

‘It’s only been a few hours.’

‘Long enough,’ Riley said.

‘You’re not rushing off,’ Juliet reminded her.

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‘Nowhere to rush off too,’ Riley admitted. ‘Which is sort of pathetic.’

‘Look who you’re talking to. I came from my parents’ place to here. And nowhere in between.’

Riley shrugged. ‘The outside world isn’t all that.’

‘Did you...’ Juliet began tentatively. She had a change of heart about where the sentence was going, but it was too late. Riley was on it. ‘Did I what?’

‘How come you ended up here at all?’ Juliet asked, worried it was too personal.

Riley looked untroubled. ‘It’s a long story. But I guess it boils down to a breakup.’

‘You were living with someone.’

‘Yup. Noah.’

‘How long?’ Juliet asked, trying not to look as interested as she felt.

‘About a year and a half. The living together was a year of it.’

‘Didn’t work out, though, I take it?’

‘It did not,’ Riley said, taking a big sip.

‘How come?’ Juliet asked, feeling like she was pushing it.

Riley opened her mouth and closed it, trying to summon an explanation. Eventually, she simply said, 'I didn't love him.'

Juliet paused. 'That's sad. For both of you.'

'I just wish I'd realised before I moved in. But once we were living together, I felt obligated to make it work. And it just got more and more obvious that it wasn't... going anywhere.' She rolled her eyes. 'That makes me sound pretty selfish, doesn't it?'

Juliet shook her head. 'No. Maybe just a bit...'

'What?' Riley asked.

'Unconnected to your feelings,' Juliet said hesitantly. Was that too much?

But Riley laughed easily. 'That's probably exactly right.'

Juliet took another sip of her drink and was quite astonished to see Riley's shoulders shaking with silent laughter.

'What's so hilarious?' Juliet asked, already infected with Riley's laugh. She was amused, and she didn't even know why.

Riley shook her head, letting the laugh free. 'It's nothing, I just... I think I owe Amanda an apology.'

'For what?' Juliet laughed.

'She said something about you and me having midnight chats about boys, and I told her we weren't twelve. But here we are...' She lapsed into laughter again. 'Christ.

You never really grow up, do you? Your face just gets more creases.'

Juliet snorted. 'That's probably true.'

'Well, anyway, let's talk about your love life for a sec. I could do without the spotlight.'

Juliet let out a slow whistle. 'Oh, you wanna talk pathetic? Nuns get more action.' She was glad to have said that. She sort of wanted to let Riley know she was single.

'But there've been... people. Right?' Riley asked.

'There's been some... people. Yes,' Juliet admitted. 'Though barely worth the plural.'

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‘I find that very hard to believe. You grew up... well...’

‘If you think I’m not going to make you finish that sentence, you’re fooling yourself,’ Juliet said. She was starting to think she might have had just a touch more booze than she’d realised.

Riley gave a half smile. ‘I mean, you were always cute.’

Juliet, booze or no booze, began to feel slightly funny in the tummy. ‘Was I?’

Riley shrugged. ‘Sure. You were the classic Girl-Who-Doesn’t-Know-She’s-Hot. Tale as old as time.’

Juliet nodded at Riley’s drink. ‘How much whisky did you put in these things?’

Riley tutted. ‘See? Same old Juliet. Can’t take a compliment.’

‘I can,’ Juliet argued but was quick to see the truth. ‘Actually, you’re right. I never could.’

‘Well, maybe you should be getting out there a bit. Let yourself get paid a few. Get used to it.’

‘You’re assuming that’s what would happen. But I know how it goes on dating apps.’

‘How does it go?’

‘It ain’t romance,’ Juliet said, taking another sip.

‘That’s what you want?’ Riley asked nonchalantly.

‘Am I not supposed to?’ Juliet asked, feeling hot in her cheeks.

‘I didn’t say that. I just... I don’t know. It doesn’t always turn up right away—romance. Sometimes you just...’ She took a rather long pause. ‘It just happens.’

Juliet realised she’d taken a step around the kitchen island. ‘Does it?’

Riley didn’t move. But she smiled, half smiled. Juliet found herself taking another step. God, that whisky was strong. She was never this bold. She wasn’t even sure she was reading this right. If she had it wrong, this was going to be beyond embarrassing—the seventh circle of hellish social missteps.

But then Riley said, ‘Yeah. Just sort of creeps up on you.’ And she took a step, but it was a small one, smaller than Juliet’s. It was as though she was saying, ‘I’m going to make you walk all the way to me.’ Juliet liked that. She’d never minded hard work if the reward was enough. She stepped closer. ‘It never feels that easy to me.’

‘Maybe you overthink it,’ Riley suggested, still that little smile.

Juliet took another step, the final one. She was in front of Riley. ‘Maybe I do.’

‘Maybe you should stop doing that,’ Riley said. Juliet looked brazenly into her magnificent dark eyes, but Riley didn’t look away. There was a dare in her face.

‘Maybe...’ She leaned in close, this close to Riley. Riley didn’t move back. Her lips looked delicious. Juliet was going to taste them, any second now. But she wanted to

savour this, the moment before. Looking into Riley's bottomless eyes, feeling the possibility.

Only a few seconds passed, but it felt like an eternity. She couldn't wait any longer. She had to...

'Aahh! Shit!' shrieked a male voice, and Juliet's head snapped around to see Mike standing in the doorway. He wasn't looking at them; he was looking at his foot. He bent down and extracted a small piece of Lego from it. 'This fucking stuff! Why is it always underfoot!'

Juliet and Riley backed away from each other hastily. Mike looked up at the pair of them. Then he looked at the counter. 'Is that my whisky?'

Safe to say he hadn't read the vibe. Riley sighed. 'We just had a splash in our hot chocolate. We couldn't sleep.'

'It's forty years old,' Mike said icily. 'It's not something you put in cheap hot chocolate. It's meant to be enjoyed in a snifter glass with two drops of Springwater to activate the...' He stopped and sighed. 'Why am I explaining this? Leave my cabinet alone.'

He collected a glass from the cupboard while Juliet and Riley didn't look at each other. He poured himself some water and left the kitchen, saying over his shoulder. 'Turn off the light when you're done.'

Riley groaned as he vanished from view. 'He always has to say it.'

Juliet was angry that Mike had smashed the moment. But she hoped it wasn't beyond repair. Though when she looked at Riley, Riley didn't look at her. She was downing her drink. Juliet felt the Riley of a moment ago was gone. A dark cloud had

descended. 'Are you alright?' Juliet asked.

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‘Mm,’ Riley muttered, going to the sink and pouring out the rest of her drink. She turned with a smile that seemed forced. ‘Well, night. Thanks for the spider disposal.’ She walked out.

Juliet was left feeling confused, hurt. What just happened? One minute they were laughing, talking, getting close. The next, Riley was gone, in all senses. Juliet felt like she’d done something wrong. She had no idea what it was. But Riley had shut down with such speed, something had changed.

Sixteen

Riley felt stupid.

She shouldn’t have done any of that. Dragged Juliet out of bed and into a midnight adventure, culminating in booze and the exchange of secrets. Because, before she knew what she was doing, she was letting Juliet in. She’d always been like that. Drawing you out into plain sight, making you want to let her know you. Riley had found herself flirting with the one person on planet Earth she knew didn’t think very much of her. Because, as they’d agreed, they hadn’t changed. They were still the people they’d been. And Juliet had gotten a good look at Riley and found her distinctly wanting once. It wasn’t different now. There was no reason it should be. If anything, it was worse. Because the difference in who they were was even starker. They were on Riley’s alleged turf. The little rich girl who came home to daddy when real life got too hard. Riley had tried not to see it that way, but she wondered if Juliet did. Maybe it was just true.

Why was Riley going to kiss her, then? Why had she kissed her ten years ago?

Mysteries, mysteries. She couldn't keep trying to solve one like Juliet.

Riley was reminded of the definition of insanity. Doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. Thank god her dad could be relied upon to be his normal, asshole self. She wondered how many times he'd unknowingly busted up a good time in his life. This was the one time that Riley was grateful for it. He'd reminded her who she was, where she was, the way things were.

After nearly no sleep, Riley was on the train the next day in a mild stupor. She was staring at her phone mindlessly when a text came through from India, wanting to hang out. Though India wasn't the most scintillating company, she was a distraction, and Riley quickly accepted. She needed to cut back on scintillating company anyway.

'So, yeah, he said he wanted to move in. I said no.'

'Oh?' Riley said, sipping her coffee. She felt like she'd been listening to this story, or some form of it, for many years. She just had to make the right noises in the right places.

'Yeah. I was thinking of ending it anyway. I liked him at first.' Disdain dripped from India's voice. 'But then I noticed how much he talked about his mum.'

'His mum?'

'Yeah.'

'Is that bad?'

‘It is if it’s ten seconds after you finish fucking.’

‘What? What did he say?’ Riley asked, engaged now. This had been a good idea, after all. She wasn’t thinking about Juliet whatsoever.

‘He said he was worried that she shouldn’t be marrying some guy she met a few months ago. I mean, that’s not normal, is it? Talking about your mother’s love life, just after sex. There’s no way he wasn’t thinking about it during, is there? It’s like that book, or... What was it where the guy wants to shag his dad and kill his mum?’

‘It’s the other way around, and it’s a play called Oedipus.’

‘Anyway. I don’t wanna compete with his mum in the bedroom. It’s sick.’

Riley was forced to play devil’s advocate. ‘You’re sure that’s what was happening? Is it possible that he was just relaxed and then it popped into his head? I mean, did you ask him about it?’

‘Nope. I’ve decided. It’s too sick. I’m out,’ India declared casually. ‘Anyway, I’ve got a date with a total ten tonight. He’s six-one and has four horses. It’s meant to be.’

‘My god, when did you break up with Brandon?’ Riley asked, slightly shocked at how quickly India could shake it off and move on.

‘Brandon? That was weeks ago. The guy with the mummy thing was Justin,’ India said.

‘I really and truly cannot keep up,’ Riley had to say.

‘It’s just how dating is,’ India said with slight defensiveness. ‘You have to kiss a few frogs.’

Riley thought India had probably kissed a fair few frogs in her time and bolted before they had half a chance to transform into princes. Which was fine, as long as you weren't lying to yourself or other people about what you wanted out of the deal.

'What about you, anyway?' India asked. 'You haven't said anything since you and... I want to say Noel?'

'Noah.' Riley was shocked shitless that India couldn't even recall his actual name. She'd never wanted to meet him, seemed to actively avoid it. Even though Riley had spent numerous evenings in the presence of India's flavours of the month, India never met the longest-serving partner Riley had ever had. 'And there's been nobody since,' Riley said. Not the whole truth, but close enough. One near kiss didn't count.

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‘What’s going on?’ India asked. ‘Not meeting any hotties at the office?’

Riley had three other people in her department at Helping Hand. Two of whom were over sixty, and one that was under twenty. None of that was Riley’s cup of tea. ‘No, but it wouldn’t matter much if my office was brimming with talent. I’m currently living with my dad. Can you imagine taking a date home? “Hey, let’s go to my room after I’ve asked my step mum if it’s OK first. Watch out for my sister’s teddy collection, they’re a real trip hazard.”

‘Then come and live with me,’ India answered casually.

‘What?’ Riley said, suddenly caught up in a coughing fit.

‘Yeah. It’s a two-bed. You and me. It’ll be fun.’

‘Ummmm....’ Riley muttered.

‘Why would you ever say no to that? You hate living with your dad.’

‘Ummmm...’ Riley continued.

‘I mean, you’ve seen my place, right?’ India said pompously.

It was big, high spec, open-plan, minimalist white. Riley didn’t know who paid for it, but since India had never had a real job in her life (if you didn’t count part-time influencer), she was definitely not footing the bill. The flat reminded Riley of a very fancy airplane hangar.

But maybe it wasn't a bad idea to have an escape plan. 'I'll think about it. Thanks.'

The more Riley thought about it, the kinder an offer it seemed. Maybe Riley had underestimated India. Sure, she was flighty. But she'd always been there for Riley, in her way. Riley wondered if she should try with her, stop taking her for granted. It was easy after all this time to put someone in a box and leave them there. It was entirely possible that India had grown up, but that Riley hadn't taken the time to see it. Maybe Riley just had to try a bit harder to connect with her. 'Hey, you remember Juliet?'

'What, the one we saw at the café? From school?'

'Yes. I forgot to tell you, she's working for my dad now,' Riley said, interested to see how India would react.

India was struck dumb momentarily. 'She what?'

'Yeah. She looks after my little sister.'

'In your house. Where your dad lives. Where you live?'

'That's right.'

'You've had Juliet frigging Sullivan at your house and you never mentioned it?!' India goggled. 'Oh my god, that settles it. You have to get the fuck out of there.'

'Look, I know you two weren't buddies back in the day...'

'She's a cunt,' India informed in a hard, flat tone.

Riley was taken aback. 'Why would you call her that?' she asked, her hackles rising.

‘She attacked me, final year. Didn’t I tell you?’

Riley was sceptical. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘She was mouthing off about you, and I told her to shut up, then she slapped me with a book,’ India said easily, as though this was a story she’d told to death.

‘You never told me this. Why the hell wouldn’t you mention that?’ Riley asked, her head spinning.

‘I mean, it was only a paperback, but she clapped me right around the face with it.’ India paused, humility creeping into her tone. ‘I guess I was a bit too embarrassed to talk about it.’

Riley wasn’t sure about this at all. Was this true? It didn’t sound like Juliet. Then again, Riley couldn’t claim to truly know Juliet. Why did she keep forgetting that? Why did she keep forgetting there was no real bond, or history, or trust there? Why did she keep believing in Juliet, despite the fact she’d curb stomped her heart ten years ago?

She had to face facts. She was blinding herself to who Juliet was. Riley wanted badly to buy into her, the whole thing. But the real things Riley knew? They were at odds with the sweet girl next door that Riley kept imagining she was.

Whereas India? She’d known her for most of her life. If India said it had happened, then Riley had to believe it.

Seventeen

Juliet was walking down the hall in her pyjamas, rubbing sleep from her eyes. She was headed to the kitchen to collect a cup of tea and take it back to bed for a lazy start to her Saturday.

That plan ground to a halt as she passed Amanda's bedroom. The door was wide open. 'Fuck, fuck, fuck!' Amanda was crying out as she ran from cupboard to drawer to wardrobe, throwing things into a suitcase on the bed with no system whatsoever. Juliet paused at the door. 'Everything OK?'

Amanda didn't seem to hear her as she threw a swimming costume into her case and then looked at it. 'Why am I packingthat?'

'Amanda, what's going on?' Juliet repeated.

Amanda turned to her, surprised. 'Oh. Hi. My dad had a heart attack.'

'Oh my god!' Juliet said, clutching her hand to her mouth.

Amanda turned back to her frantic packing. 'They think it's... I mean, it's probably OK. It's mild, I think. My mum said... Anyway, I just need to get there. He lives a few towns over and I... Shit, I just need to get there.'

'Where's Mike? Is he waiting in the car or...'

'He left for Strasbourg this morning, work thing.'

‘Oh no,’ Juliet moaned. ‘That’s awful timing.’

‘No, it’s probably better,’ Amanda said, chewing her lip. ‘He’s not great with sickness.’

Juliet decided to swerve around the fact that Amanda didn’t feel she could ask her husband for support when her dad was gravely ill. ‘You’re not driving, are you?’ she asked.

‘I was going to. Do you think it’s a bad idea?’ she asked, frazzled, running to her underwear drawer. ‘I thought I had more bras than this.’

Juliet shook her head straight away. ‘You’re upset. You shouldn’t drive. You’d be better getting the train. Or I could...’

‘Oh, no. You can’t drive. I’m not imposing on you.’

‘You wouldn’t be.’

‘No, no, you’re right. I should just get a train. It’s quicker, anyway. But... You couldn’t do me a favour and pack some clothes for Mia, could you?’

‘Of course,’ Juliet said, turning around. She took two steps down the hall before she turned back around. ‘Amanda, you should leave Mia here with me.’

Amanda was horrified. ‘It’s the weekend! You’re off!’

‘Yeah, but we talked about me doing a bit extra in exchange for the room, and so far, you haven’t let me.’

‘I just said that so you’d feel OK about moving in. I didn’t mean it,’ Amanda told her,

throwing knickers in the case.

Juliet couldn't accept that. 'That was sweet of you. But if I don't help, I'll be drenched in guilt. You'd be doing me a favour by letting me do this.'

Amanda sighed. 'I've got to admit, it might be easier at the hospital without a toddler.'

'It's agreed, then. Just take care of yourself and your dad. I've got Mia.'

'What's going on?' Riley said, walking past and seeing the conversation taking place half in, half out of the room.

Amanda took a deep breath and garbled, 'My dad had a heart attack, your dad's in Strasbourg, Juliet's taking Mia, I'm taking the train.'

It took Riley a second to cut through the mess. 'My... Your... Fuck, is he alright?'

'Hopefully.' Amanda slapped her case shut. 'Riley, I need a favour; can you help Juliet out with Mia while I'm gone?'

'What?' they both said in unison.

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‘I’d just feel better knowing you had backup, Juliet. I could be gone days,’ Amanda said to Juliet.

‘OfcourseI’ll help,’ Riley said.

‘I won’t need it,’ Juliet told her firmly. ‘But thanks.’

Riley nodded. ‘Wait, where the hell is my dad in all of this?’

‘Strasbourg,’ Juliet reminded her.

‘Right. Does he know about the heart attack?’ Riley asked.

‘He’s still on the plane. I’ll call him later,’ Amanda said.

‘He hasn’t touched down yet?’ Riley asked. Juliet detected a touch of suspicion about the question.

Amanda didn’t answer right away. ‘I’m not sure.’ She clapped her hands together.

‘Right. I think that’s everything I need. I better order a cab to the station.’

Amanda dashed out, leaving Juliet with Riley. ‘I don’t need your help,’ Juliet told her.

Riley held up her hands in surrender. ‘I’m not trying to step on your toes. You’re the pro. I know that.’

‘I didn’t mean it like that,’ Juliet said quickly. ‘I just don’t wanna...’ she searched for the right word and found herself using Amanda’s. ‘Impose.’

Riley smiled. ‘Mia’s my sister. No one’s imposing anything.’

Amanda called up. ‘Cab’s two minutes away.’

Juliet and Riley jogged down the stairs to see Amanda holding on to Mia at the door. ‘Mummy! Too tight!’ the little girl said. ‘Mmm? Oh, sorry,’ Amanda said, releasing her tight grip. ‘Be good for Juliet and Riley.’

Mia had other priorities. ‘Will you bring a present?’

‘Of course.’ She took one last desperate look at her daughter, clearly holding back tears, before she stood and grabbed her bag, running out, calling, ‘Bye,’ over her shoulder.

Mia turned to Juliet and Riley. ‘I’m hungry.’

‘Cereal?’ Riley asked.

Mia nodded. Riley went off to the kitchen to fetch her a bowl.

Juliet, in the first calm moment she’d had since finding Amanda in a panic, found herself wondering how this was going to go. Looking after Mia with Riley. She wished she could go back in time and show this moment to her eighteen-year-old self. ‘Look at this,’ she’d say. ‘You may be gutted and heartbroken now, but one day, you’ll be living with Riley and looking after a child together.’

‘We’ll be married with a child?’ Eighteen-Year-Old-Juliet would gasp.

‘No, sorry, you misunderstood. It’s much weirder than that,’ Now-Juliet would have to explain. ‘And much less nice.’

‘What’s the situation?’ Eighteen-Year-Old-Juliet would ask. ‘I don’t get it.’

‘Yeah, it’s pretty confusing. You know what? Forget I said anything,’ Now-Juliet said to her young self, and she stopped imagining the conversation as she watched Riley give her sister cereal. It was gonna go how it was gonna go. Juliet wasn’t in charge of anything.

Eighteen

‘I just can’t this afternoon,’ Riley said for the third time. She was on the toilet. She’d concluded her business on there a few minutes ago but was stuck talking to India.

‘So you keep saying,’ India said. ‘But what family emergency stops you from going to a spin class?’

‘Jesus, India, if you must know, Amanda’s dad had a heart attack.’

There was a pause. ‘I haven’t got the first fucking clue who Amanda is.’

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‘My dad’s wife,’ Riley said between gritted teeth.

‘Oh. And how does that mean you can’t come to the gym, exactly?’ India said doubtfully.

‘India...’ Riley inhaled deeply, conjuring some patience. ‘Amanda had to leave to go and see him. My dad’s in France. So my little sister, Mia, needs someone to look after her.’

‘Oh. Wait, isn’t there... Isn’t she there?’

‘Yes. But I’m on hand in case of... I’m just helping.’

‘That doesn’t sound like a situation that needs you. I mean, isn’t she like, CRB checked and everything? She’s not going to sell her on the black market or anything, right?’

‘That’s not a big concern, no,’ Riley said, rubbing the spot between her eyebrows where a small tension headache was developing nicely. Riley christened it India. ‘I’m just trying to help out. She’s only supposed to be looking after her nine to six, Monday to Friday.’

‘So she gets overtime. Come on, it’s one little spin class.’

‘Christ, you’re not letting this go, are you?’ She checked her watch. She’d be cutting it fine, but she supposed she could go right now and come right back; she might not be missed. ‘But I’m leaving right after, alright?’

‘Great, I’ll—’

Riley hung up the phone, got off the toilet, washed her hands, and climbed into the stretchiest thing to hand. She ran downstairs. ‘I’m so sorry. I have to nip out, but I won’t be long. Ninety minutes max.’

Juliet, sat watching Mia colour in a jungle scene with an admirable disregard for the colours of nature, looked at her quizzically. ‘I keep telling you, I’ll be fine. Go.’

Riley nodded. ‘Right. Back shortly.’

‘For heaven’s sake,’ she heard Juliet sigh as she ran out of the door.

‘Pump it! Pump it hard!’ the maniac leading the class screamed at them. Riley was trying to pump it to some extent, but she hated spinning. She was more of a treadmill girl.

She surreptitiously checked her phone. No messages. That was good, right? Everything was fine. Juliet was right, of course. Why the hell would she ever need Riley’s help with Mia? She was excellent with her. The kid who threw epic tantrums was pretty much gone.

Juliet wouldn’t take a lot of credit for that, claiming she was just growing up. But she’d seen Juliet’s magic being worked. She’d installed several magic words in the child that would stop her right in her tracks before she could rev it into top gear. Once she was caught off guard, Juliet would redirect her energy with swiftness. She’d taught it all to Amanda, too. So, all in all, Mia was becoming much less of a handful. Anyone who could do all that didn’t need help from someone who’d never even looked after a neighbour’s pet for a weekend. Not so much as a goldfish had passed

through Riley's hands.

Still, Amanda had asked her to help. And she wanted to. She wanted to know where the fuck her father was, while she was at it. She texted him. Have you heard from Amanda?

'Focus!' India screamed from beside her, catching her on the phone. 'You're throwing my rhythm.'

'Sorry!' Riley said quickly, putting the phone away and trying to concentrate on the barked instructions from the front. Though all it really amounted to was cycling quicker or slower.

Her phone beeped from her arse pocket. She waited until India's eyes were back on the instructor and slipped it out of her pocket.

Yes. Why? was the terse reply her father had shot back.

So you're coming back, I take it? Riley demanded.

I'm back Tuesday.

Was there a chance he didn't know? Had Amanda not told him what was going on?

You know Amanda's father had a heart attack, don't you?

Seconds later, Riley felt stupid for even questioning it.

I'm not a doctor, why would I need to be there?

That's not what she'd need you for.

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Don't condescend me. You have no idea of the responsibilities on my shoulders.

That bastard. Riley put her phone away and started peddling a bit harder. What kind of person would let their spouse deal with this alone? Mike Powell, that was who. Riley started to feel the burn in her quads. But she paid it no heed as she thought about her mother, who'd gone through this too. Riley's bike was starting to judder a bit, but she didn't notice. That sociopathic sonofabitch never cared for anything but his job...

'Whoa!' yelled India as Riley's bike tipped, her feet still strapped in, Riley clanking right over. She screamed, and she heard the instructor cry out, 'Yeah! That's the burn!'

'No, you idiot!' India yelled. 'We've got an accident.'

The instructor came running through the bikes, all of them slowing down, everyone turning back to look. The instructor looked down at Riley. 'Oh no! I was supposed to put a sign on this bike because it...' He stopped himself mid-sentence. 'I mean, are you ok?'

He and India righted the bike, and Riley unstrapped herself and got off it. She dusted herself down and checked for injuries. A bruised quad and carpet burn on her ankle was the worst of it. Though India didn't agree. 'I heard what you said, and I'll have your bloody job! You nearly killed her,' she threatened the trembling instructor.

'India, leave it,' Riley said. 'Just get that bike out of here, would you?' she told the instructor. The man, almost in tears, nodded violently. 'I will,' he vowed.

Riley hobbled off, India attending her the entire way in quite an unnecessary fashion. 'I'm fine,' Riley told her. 'I just need to go home.'

India sighed. 'Alright, but keep your weight off of it. Text me if you decide to sue!'

When Riley got home, Juliet took one look at the way she walked in and said, 'What's happened?'

'Nothing,' Riley said, limping in. 'Slight spin bike incident. So, how's Mia doing?'

'Better than you! Sit down.' She ran off to the kitchen, leaving Mia looking at Riley as she sat down and inspected her ankle. Mia poked the graze. 'Does that hurt?'

'Yes, Mia,' Riley winced.

'How about here?' she asked, poking an inch over to the left.

'Yep, still hurts.'

'So what happened, the whole story?' Juliet demanded as she came in with a first aid kit.

Riley explained the accident, though she left out the bit about cycling too fast because she was angry about childhood wounds. 'Got me out of the class, though,' she finished with a grin. Juliet tore open a sachet and extracted an antibacterial wipe. 'You know, I really don't need all this fuss,' Riley told her.

'I'm taking precautions. Better two minutes' work now than an infected leg later.'

'What's infected?' Mia asked.

‘It’s when your cut goes weird and your leg drops off,’ Riley said.

Mia’s eyes widened. ‘What?’

‘She’s making a joke,’ Juliet said with a warning look to Riley as she dabbed the graze.

Mia looked down at her arm. She had a small, almost healed cut there. ‘Will my arm fall off?’ she asked.

Riley tutted at herself. ‘No, I’m sorry. Juliet was right. I was just making a silly joke. My leg and your arm are not going to fall off, OK?’

Juliet stuck a large plaster on Riley’s leg. She turned to Mia. ‘But just to be sure, let’s do you next.’ Mia held out her arm, and Juliet stuck a plaster on it. Mia looked relieved. ‘Can I colour?’

‘Yep,’ Juliet smiled, and Mia went to her living room toy box and grabbed her colouring book and crayons. She sat down on the floor and went right to work.

‘Sorry,’ Riley said to Juliet, hoping she wasn’t too pissed off at her for freaking Mia out.

Juliet shook her head. ‘Easily done. I told her last week that it was raining cats and dogs, and she screamed her head off.’

Riley guffawed. ‘You’d think she’d like that, a load of cats and dogs coming out of the sky.’

‘She’s got a pretty good grip on how gravity works. She thought they would all splat and die. Which they would, so she had me there.’

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Riley went to stand. 'Nope,' Juliet said, pushing her gently down. 'Stay off it. Just in case.'

'You don't have to take care of me,' Riley said. 'No one pays you for that.'

'Guess it's more of a hobby, then,' Juliet said with a small, cheeky smile.

Riley settled herself. She wasn't going to argue with Juliet. 'Hey, Mia? Come over here and colour with me.'

Mia jumped up and brought her supplies to the coffee table, spreading out. She pulled a random picture from her colouring book and handed it to Riley. 'Thanks, kid,' Riley said. She casually began to colour in her picture of a giraffe eating a leaf from a tree.

'Hey, is there a picture I can do?' Juliet asked. Mia barely looked up, just handed a sheet to Juliet, and got back to work.

A few minutes later, Riley realised she wasn't thinking about the stress of work, nor how angry she was at her dad. She was simply making a giraffe yellow and brown. So this was why adult colouring was a thing? It really did soothe your cares away. She hadn't felt this chill in a good long while.

'Look, I made my unicorn blue,' Juliet said, holding up her picture. Mia appraised it. 'You missed the horn.' She went back to her pony. Juliet shrugged at Riley. 'Everyone's a critic.'

And Riley wondered if it was only the colouring making her feel good.

Nineteen

Juliet stretched her arms and yawned as she came out of Mia's room. The girl was down for the night, and Juliet was knackered. Her days weren't usually this long. She could sort of see now why Amanda had asked Riley to pitch in.

She went downstairs to see Riley tapping on her phone. 'I'm getting pizza. What's your topping?'

Juliet took a small pause before saying, 'I likeHawaiian.'

Riley raised a cynical eyebrow. 'I'm not saying I won't order it for you, but I want you to know, I don't think that's an acceptable answer to that question.' She tapped it in.

Juliet chuckled. 'Don't even start on the pineapple. I've heard it all. I'm not wavering.'

'It's fruit,' Riley shrugged. 'That's the beginning and end of my argument.'

Juliet was well prepared for that one. 'What do you think a tomato is?'

Riley tutted. 'Yeah, but... It's... a different fruit.'

Juliet laughed. 'Sure is.'

Riley snorted. 'Fine. But everyone knows that no one has the pineapple, because it's just not right.'

‘So why is it always on the menu? Shouldn’t it have died off by now if no one eats it?’

‘You have an answer for everything.’

‘People who eat pineapple on their pizza get used to defending the choice,’ Juliet explained. ‘But we consider it worth the fight.’

Riley tapped a couple more times on her phone and said, ‘There. Your freak pizza is on its way.’

‘What are you having?’

‘Pepperoni, like a normal person,’ Riley told her dryly.

Juliet tutted. ‘Exactly. It’s a safe choice. You’ll never know the pleasure of the pineapple. You don’t have the guts.’

Riley smiled. ‘I’m OK with that.’

Twenty minutes later, the pizzas arrived, and they sat down to eat in the living room, off their laps. Riley put the TV on. ‘You have a preference?’

‘Anything good on Netflix?’

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‘If you’ve got three hours to scroll.’

‘We could just put the news on?’

‘I can’t eat to the news,’ Riley told her, grimacing. ‘I’d lose my appetite.’

‘Fair enough. Let’s just switch it off. We could just, I don’t know, talk or something.’

‘What a bizarre notion.’

Riley turned the TV off as Juliet took her first bite, enjoying the zing of her pineapple, despite the earlier ribbing. ‘Thanks for ordering, by the way. It was nice of you. I wasn’t expecting...’

‘What?’ Riley asked, holding a slice aloft, the cheese dripping, half eating it, half pouring it into her mouth. Juliet thought the lack of grace she was displaying was endearing.

‘Well, you and me, we haven’t eaten together since the first night I got here,’ Juliet reminded her.

‘I don’t come down to dinner because I’m avoiding my dad. Not you.’

‘Yeah, same, I guess,’ Juliet said without thinking.

Riley burst out laughing. ‘Oh, so she admits it, at last. You hate my dad. I knew it.’

‘I don’t hate him. He’s just... not my cup of tea,’ Juliet said, trying to dial it back. She hadn’t meant to get so easy with Riley, who was technically the boss’s daughter. If it got back to him what she’d said, it wouldn’t be great.

‘Juliet, relax. I’m not about to dob you in, am I? He’s a bastard. Always has been,’ Riley assured her.

‘That’s not for me to say,’ Juliet said.

Riley rolled her eyes. ‘Fine. But at least try to remember that I hate him.’

‘I do remember,’ Juliet said, taking her second slice.

‘Oh. Yeah,’ Riley said. ‘Back then.’

Juliet smiled thinly. ‘You don’t have to say it like that.’

‘Like what?’

‘Back Then. I can practically hear the caps.’

Riley burst out laughing. ‘I’m just... giving it its due.’

‘I see,’ Juliet said evenly. She sort of wanted to say more about it. But what else could she say? ‘So you and your dad, it’s never been easy between you two?’

‘Oh, no,’ Riley began sarcastically. ‘He was practically Santa Claus when I was young. Hugs and gifts and belly laughing. Nothing but good times.’

‘You don’t like being serious, do you?’ Juliet said, afraid it came out like a criticism. She was just trying to drill down a level into Riley. How many chances like this

would there ever be? She'd had one or two, but she had this feeling that any minute, the door would shut.

'I have nothing serious to say about him. What am I gonna do, talk about how he's ruined my chances of a lasting relationship by only showing me his total lack of regard, thereby cementing the idea that I'm worthless?' Riley said nonchalantly.

Juliet swung her head to look at Riley, shocked.

Riley blinked. 'You know when you start talking, and you think what's gonna come out is going to be funny...'

'And instead, you end up saying something way too real?' Juliet finished.

'That's the one. Can we pretend I didn't just say it?'

'If you want,' Juliet said.

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‘I do,’ Riley said, picking up her next slice.

Juliet would do her best to keep that promise. Though that didn’t mean she could simply delete what Riley had said, nor her shock about it. Riley had always seemed so solid. ‘But I kind of think that it would be OK if youdidsay something real,’ Juliet said.

‘Well, I’d love that, but....’ Riley stuffed nearly a whole slice of pizza into her mouth. ‘...I caamm eealy ‘alk.’

Juliet decided to let it go; she had to. But she wished Riley would talk to her. She wanted to know her. She really did.

Twenty

Riley shouldn’t have said that. She shouldn’t have even thought it. She didn’t evenknowthat she thought it. It just came out. And of course, it had to come out in front of Juliet. It was always Juliet.

Thankfully, Juliet knew how to make things easier on her. ‘You know, my mum’s a bit like that. She’s not exactly cold or anything. Just a bit... dismissive. She sold the house like it shouldn’t even matter to me.’

‘That’s harsh. But I bet she’s secretly really proud of you,’ Riley said, finishing another slice.

‘It’s a very well-kept secret, then. I’m not sure even she knows it.’

‘But you’re Super Nanny.’

‘I’m not,’ Juliet said glibly.

‘I don’t want to speak ill of Mia, but trust me, she wasn’t like she is now. She was a bit of a nightmare child,’ Riley admitted, wiping her greasy hands on a kitchen towel.

‘Don’t say that,’ Juliet said, though Riley saw that she didn’t completely disagree.

‘Don’t get me wrong. She’s my sister, and I love her however she is. But you made her... She’s really... I think...’ Riley paused to find the right word. ‘You made her happier.’

Juliet went to respond to that, but then paused, and Riley realised she was tearing up.

‘Oh god!’ she exclaimed, slapping her forehead. ‘I broke you.’

Juliet laughed as a tear slipped down her cheek. ‘No, it’s... it’s probably the best compliment I’ve ever been paid.’

Riley blew out a sigh. ‘Whoa.’

Juliet laughed. ‘Is that sad?’

Riley shook her head. ‘That’s not what I was thinking at all. I just meant... Most people think a compliment is about how they look. For you, it’s that you take good care of my sister.’

Juliet gave a small shrug, looking at Riley. ‘Well, you found my soft spot.’

‘I guess so,’ Riley said, feeling abruptly nervous.

‘You always have,’ Juliet said quietly.

Riley couldn’t find a smart-arsed response to that. They were just here, looking at each other, alone. Riley began to feel shaky, scared. She had to move fast, or she was gonna do a stupid thing. ‘Hey, I’m tired, I think I’m gonna go to bed.’

‘Oh, sure,’ Juliet said, looking at her last bit of pizza in the box. ‘Long day.’

‘Yup.’

‘Would you want to go to the park with Mia and me tomorrow afternoon?’

Riley was thrown. ‘Oh, er...’

‘Sorry, you’ve probably got plans,’ Juliet said quickly.

Riley pretended to think about it. ‘No, I don’t... I don’t think I’m up to much.’ She stood and did an extravagant yawn. ‘K ‘night!’ she said, practically running.

As she tried to sleep that night, she thought about tomorrow. Going to the park with Juliet and Mia. Spending even more time alone with Juliet. Racking up nice moments and cute exchanges.

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It was a bad idea. Riley had to put a stop to this, and she had to do it now. There was only one way to solve this problem. Take herself out of the equation.

Twenty-One

Juliet watched the book fly across the playroom and hit the wall hard enough to take a chip out of the paintwork. 'Mia, if you want me to read you another book, you can just ask.'

'I HATE IT! The bunny's stupid!' Mia cried.

'Why is the bunny stupid?' Juliet asked.

'Because carrots are horrid,' Mia exploded.

'Are they?'

'Yes, he gets all fat from eating horrible food! And he can't move!' Mia argued.

'Why didn't he eat ice cream?'

This was true. Boris the Rabbit ate too many carrots and then found himself stuck in a hole. It was a thinly veiled Winnie the Pooh rip-off, truth be told. But it was supposed to teach moderation, Juliet thought. Never a bad lesson. Only it wasn't cutting the mustard with Mia. Though Juliet was loving how much progress Mia was making in her verbal comprehension.

'You know how you like ice cream? Well, when Boris eats a carrot, it tastes just as

good as ice cream to him,' Juliet said, trying to spin another lesson out of the book. Empathy.

Mia was deeply sceptical. 'No, it doesn't,' she said mockingly.

'It's just the way it works. Something you like might taste terrible to someone else too. Other people can like things you don't like.'

Mia frowned. 'I don't know,' she said with a small shake of her head. Juliet decided to let her sit with that one. 'Well, it's true. Anyway, shall we read Gold for Penguin Pearl?' It was a book about a penguin whose dream was to compete in the Olympics, in the freestyle swimming category. It always annoyed Juliet how much of a spoiler the title was, but Mia liked it well enough. 'OK,' she agreed, calming down. She went to collect the book from a bookcase that sat underneath the window. After she'd been there a while, Juliet realised she wasn't trying to find the book. She was staring out of the window. 'Riley's in a pink car,' she announced.

Juliet got up and went to the window, and there was Riley, loading a bag into a pink SUV. Behind the wheel of the salmon monster was India, watching impatiently.

Juliet wasn't sure what to make of it. 'Hey, shall we go and see what Riley's doing?' she suggested to Mia. Mia was glad of the scene change and galloped off ahead of her.

Downstairs, Mia hit the front door first and swung it open. 'Riley!' she screamed. Juliet was just in time to see Riley jump in surprise, almost dropping a box she was attempting to slot into the boot of the car. She placed the box down and turned to Mia. 'Hi, cutie.'

'Where you going?' Mia demanded. Juliet was glad she didn't have to ask. She noticed India eyeing her smugly.

‘Well, err...’ Riley touched the back of her neck. Juliet thought it was weird she still hadn’t looked at her yet. She was locked onto the little girl. ‘I... I’m going to stay with my friend for a bit.’

Mia was open-mouthed. ‘Why?’

‘Yeah, why?’ Juliet added, unable to help herself.

Riley finally looked up and made eye contact with Juliet. ‘I just think it’s time to... move on. I’m sorry. That I won’t be able to come to the park today,’ she added quickly.

‘Yeah,’ India said from the car. ‘She’s coming to live with me.’ Riley shot her a look that was intended to shut her up. But, of course, India missed it. ‘So you can stretch out a bit. Enjoy the luxury. For a change.’

Juliet ignored her, focusing on Riley. ‘I thought you said you’d be hanging around for Amanda?’

‘Yes, I did, but... Look, she texted me earlier; she’s back tonight. Her dad’s OK. And I need to... I mean, I’ve got to go forward. I can’t be hanging around my dad’s house.’ Juliet thought she could hear another unspoken sentence attached to Riley’s words. That she couldn’t keep hanging around with her. She wasn’t just moving on from her dad’s house, she was moving away from other bits of the past, too.

‘Hey, maybe you should come over soon, hang out? Talk about old times?’ India said, grinning. Juliet was about ready to leap through the window of the car and tear her throat out. But instead, she said flatly, ‘Yeah. I’m sure we’ll get something in the diary really soon.’

Riley had the last of her stuff in the car now, and she turned to Juliet. ‘Can you do me

a favour?’

Juliet was on tenterhooks.

‘Can you apologise to Amanda for me? Tell her she was... She made it nice here. Nice as it could be.’

‘And what about me? What did I make it?’ Juliet heard herself ask.

Riley looked away. ‘You made it nice too,’ she said. It sounded like a lie. Juliet was sure then that she was one of the reasons Riley was flitting. Maybe even the reason. ‘Well, enjoy living with India,’ she said to Riley. It was meant as a barb. Who could enjoy the prolonged company of that creature? But actually, the insult only reflected back onto Juliet, didn’t it? Riley was choosing India, that absolute horror of a person, over having to spend another moment with her.

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Riley had no more to say and no more to pack. She got in the car. The second the door shut, India peeled out like a getaway driver.

And that was that.

Mia looked up at her. 'Why's Riley gone?'

'She's... she's a grownup. She had to move out sometime.'

'Why?!' Mia demanded.

It was a good question. Last night, Juliet could feel them getting close again, and she'd thought, she'd hoped that this time, she wouldn't run. Now Riley couldn't get out of there fast enough. But Juliet obviously couldn't say any of that to Mia, so instead said, 'It's just the way it is.'

Mia didn't look particularly satisfied with that but didn't ask again. Juliet fully expected her to pick it up later, but hopefully, she could ask her mother instead. Because Juliet was out of answers.

Twenty-Two

Riley didn't understand how she was where she was, with the people she was there with—at a cheesy bar, on a double fucking date. Her and India versus two entirely interchangeable men. Identical haircuts, identical accents, identical personalities. Riley was fairly sure hers was the one on the right, but she couldn't be a hundred percent on that. His name was Jake. Or Blake. Maybe the other one was Blake.

India seemed in their thrall, anyway; this whole thing had been arranged by her as a surprise. Or rather, she hadn't wanted to give Riley the chance to say no, pitching it as a done deal forty-five minutes before they were due to meet these men—her hunk of the month and his friend at a bar at eight. Riley had put up a decent fight before India had said, 'I thought it would be nice for our first night?' and Riley was stuck.

India was laughing at something Blake or Jake had said. Riley decided it was easier to think of them as Left and Right.

'So, you girls just moved in together today?' Left asked.

'Wow, what a house of hotties,' Right said.

India was delighted. 'Well, I didn't say it.'

Left and Right chuckled. Right said, 'Maybe we could go and check out the place?'

Riley wasn't letting that idea gain traction. 'Oh. No. I don't think... My shit's everywhere. We're not ready for company.'

'She's exaggerating. There's barely anything,' India jumped in.

Riley fixed India with a look. 'It's been a long day.'

India's smile dropped fractionally. 'Oh. Alright.' She turned to Left and Right. 'Sorry, boys. Another time.'

They looked deeply put out but didn't say so. Riley was relieved. She wasn't gonna sit around India's living room, watching her flirt with one of these guys while the other one tried to glide his way into her good graces. It was a waste of a night. She didn't want this, any of it. It was happening in too quick a succession to the previous

night. Juliet wasn't hard to be around. She was easy, amusing company. You talked without even realising you were doing it. These sleazy douches were the definition of hard work. They talked in brags, chat up lines. Nothing real. The whole evening felt transactional. Exchanging sex for attention, distraction for affection. It was quite awful. And this was India's whole life.

After they'd ditched the not-so-dynamic duo, Riley and India went back to the flat. India was pouting. 'I feel like you didn't try with them. You had a face on you all evening.'

Riley sighed and slipped her shoes off. 'Sorry.'

'What was it? Why couldn't you just relax and have a bit of fun?'

'I didn't find those guys very fun,' she confessed.

'They could have been if you'd given them a chance. I mean, I know they weren't going to be the loves of our lives or anything...'

'So what's the point then?' Riley asked, too tired to listen to this.

'The point is that we'd have a few drinks and get laid.'

'But I didn't fancy Blake,' Riley said flatly.

'Yours was Jake,' India informed her.

'It doesn't tell you anything that I couldn't remember his name?'

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‘But he was handsome,’ India argued.

‘Is that all you need?’ Riley asked.

‘Pretty much,’ India said defensively. ‘At least for now.’

‘What about later?’ Riley asked.

‘What do you mean?’ India said.

‘I mean, what do you want out of life? In the long run. You’re having fun now, fine. What comes later?’

‘I don’t... I don’t know what you’re asking,’ India frowned.

Riley slumped onto the couch, feeling bad. She shouldn’t be doing this to India. She was who she was. It wasn’t Riley’s place to question that. Especially since she barely had an idea of what came next herself. ‘I’m sorry, ignore me. And I’m sorry I was a fun suck tonight.’

India dropped the pout, already over it. ‘The evening isn’t over. Let’s put the telly on. Order some food. Have a drink. Make it a girl’s night.’

‘Yeah, OK.’

They put the TV on. India automatically put on the bloody Kardashian’s. Riley did her best not to let her blood pressure shoot up as she watched.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket. She checked it and saw she was getting a phone call from Amanda. It became a question of the lesser evil. Did she want to keep watching the show or take a browbeating from her stepmother?

‘India, I gotta take a quick call,’ she said, getting up.

‘Whatever,’ she said, barely noticing Riley get up, glued to the screen. Riley went into her room, shifting a box from a comfy chair and sitting down. ‘Amanda. Are you home? Is your dad still alright?’

‘Riley, hi, I just got back. Yeah, he’s gonna be alright. He’s got to stop eating red meat though, and he’s livid. But I just found out you’ve moved out! Your father’s quite upset.’

‘Is he?’ Riley asked. ‘Isn’t he still in France?’

‘Fine. I’m upset,’ Amanda admitted. ‘I thought... Was it that bad?’

‘Look, I just felt like... I felt like it was getting a bit cramped. With all of us.’

‘Four and a half people in a six-bed house?’ Amanda said, flummoxed. ‘Then you’d have hated where I grew up. There were six of us in a three-bed. I had to be on a bunk under my younger brother. My god, the farts.’

That made Riley feel like an entitled brat. She couldn’t bear for Amanda to see her that way. ‘It’s not really... It’s not about that.’

‘Is it me? Was I being a bit... Your dad says I can be a bit suffocating.’

That prick.

‘God, no. You’re like the lottery win of stepmums, Amanda. I like you more than my dad, actually.’

There was a pause. ‘Is that the problem? Your dad? Because I could talk to him. I mean, it’s not too late for you to come back.’

‘It’s too late. But no, it’s not about him.’

‘Well, that only leaves Mia and Juliet...’ Amanda trailed off. ‘Hang on, is that it?’

Is what it?’

‘I don’t know, I just... Juliet seemed a bit off when I got back. Did you two have a row? Is that what’s happened?’

Riley was desperate to say yes, and for it to be the truth. It would be so much easier if Juliet just got on her nerves. ‘No. We...’ She stopped because she couldn’t think how her sentence was going to end.

She didn’t need an end, however, because for once, Amanda was ahead of the curve. ‘Oh. Oh. I see.’

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Riley felt her pulse jump. ‘What do you see?’ Riley said, aflutter. She wasn’t sure why.

‘I’ve noticed a tension between you two,’ Amanda began. ‘I can’t believe it never occurred to me that it was because...’ She laughed at herself but contained it quickly, presumably out of sensitivity. ‘Why would you move out? Did something... Did it go wrong?’

‘There was nothing to go wrong,’ Riley said quickly. ‘I mean, we’re just friends.’

‘God, I’m dense,’ Amanda said. ‘Honestly, I should have seen it. It’s Sharon all over again.’

‘Who the hell is Sharon?’

‘A friend from work. Same thing. Suddenly quit her job out of the clear blue sky, wouldn’t say why. Turned out, she was in love with Steve in accounts. But he was married. She couldn’t shake it, so the only thing to do was leave. Hurt too much to be around him if it couldn’t happen.’

‘I’m not inlovewith anyone, Amanda,’ Riley snapped.

‘She’s sad, you know.’

Riley paused. ‘Is she?’

‘Yes. Even Mia’s noticed.’ She said, “Joo-et isn’t smiling today.”

Riley pinched her nose between her thumb and forefinger. ‘Amanda. I can’t keep doing this.’

‘Doing what?’

‘Going around in circles.’ Riley licked her lips, before adding, ‘Sheshouldn’t either.’

‘I don’t know what that means,’ Amanda said. ‘Oh, wait. Wait!’ Amanda sounded indecently excited. ‘You weren’t just friends back in the day either, were you? That’s right, isn’t it?’

Riley let out a low, slow moan of pure frustration. Of all the times for Amanda to start being observant. ‘No, I guess we weren’t.’

‘All the pieces of the puzzle are fitting together now.’

‘I’m so pleased for you, Veronica Mars.’

Amanda ignored the snippy tone. ‘So, what happened?’

Riley sighed to herself, wondering if there was any dignified, polite way to slide her arse out of this conversation. After a few seconds of consideration, she had jack shit—except for the truth. ‘When we were eighteen, we had one sort of date. That was it. Didn’t work out.’

‘Why not?’

‘I wasn’t her cup of tea.’

‘She ended it?’

‘I just told you, it was one date. There was nothing to end.’

‘So, it was nothing?’ Amanda clarified.

‘That’s right.’

‘Yet, you’re still hurting ten years later? I don’t buy it.’

Riley groaned. ‘Yes, it was quite a big crush, and it seemed like it was going to turn into more. But it didn’t.’

‘I’m not leaving this alone until I get some proper details, Riley. So you might as well spill it, or we’ll be here all night.’

Spilling through the door came the sound of inane TV, a snorting laugh from India tagged on. ‘I’ve got all night, Amanda,’ Riley said.

‘God, you really are your dad’s kid, aren’t you?’

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Riley prickled. 'What do you mean?'

'He never says what's bothering him either.'

'Ididtell you. I am telling you.'

'That she broke your heart?'

'Amanda! I'm begging you. Please stop it.'

But Amanda had no mercy. 'So it didn't work out ten years ago? Things change.'

Riley took a deep breath. She'd had enough. 'No, they don't. Because if you're chasing someone you liked ten years ago while you're back living with your dad, thennothinghas changed, has it? And maybe she's forgotten why she rejected me, but I'm not giving her the chance to remember. I'm not letting her do it again. I have to grow up!'

Riley hung up the phone, upset. Straight away, she knew that hanging up the phone on her stepmother while claiming she needed to grow up was not a great start to the process. She quickly tapped out a text.

I'm sorry about that.

That's alright. I shouldn't push. It's just, you two, I have this feeling. But I'll back off.

That would be appreciated.

Anyway. It's Mia's birthday in two weeks. The big three. Will you come to the party?

Riley groaned loudly. There was no relief, was there? You couldn't just be allowed to crawl into a little hole in the ground and die quietly of your issues. Someone always came along to exhume your damn corpse.

Of course I'll come. For Mia.

Twenty-Three

Juliet was getting her hair styled by Mia in the back garden, sat next to a table that was being gradually filled with plates of food by a catering crew, as well as Amanda, who was outpacing everyone else. It was always so obvious to Juliet that Amanda wasn't fully comfortable with the wealth she now lived in. Juliet would have been just the same in her position. Unable to leave things to 'Staff.'

She felt another clump of her hair being yanked into a hairband in addition to the other four bunches sticking out of her head. Mia wasn't being gentle about it either. But Juliet didn't like to stifle Mia's creative instincts, so she bit down the screams and let her have at it.

'There,' Mia said, satisfied with her work, handing Juliet a small hand mirror with a picture of a panda on the back. Juliet looked at her reflection. 'Beautiful,' she lied. Mia took the mirror and put it away. 'Now you can come to my party.'

Juliet laughed. 'Oh, thank you.' Hairstyle or no, she'd be in attendance. Though Amanda had made it clear, she wasn't working. She said she just wanted Juliet there for her birthday because Amanda wanted all the people who were important to Mia present. Juliet was happy to be counted amongst their number. Even if it meant

socialising with a few people who displayed a range of feelings toward her that swept from lukewarm to ice-cold.

Amanda ran out again, holding a really big jelly in the shape of a rabbit. She plonked it down, moving it around to find its best position. 'Wobbly jelly,' Mia observed as the jelly was shuffled.

'Hey, is Riley coming today?' Juliet asked Amanda, trying to sound blasé.

'Yes, she's coming,' Amanda said. 'Don't worry.'

Juliet didn't know quite what to say to that. She wasn't worried. Not worried at all. It didn't make any difference if Riley came today. If she came, she likely wouldn't speak to Juliet anyhow. Their last conversation had been weeks ago, as Riley blew the popcorn stand. That brief exchange, plus the silence since, added up to one simple, painful truth. Juliet had fucked up. She'd shown her hand one too many times, and Riley wasn't comfortable with knowing how Juliet felt. She wanted no more to do with Juliet than she had when they were eighteen. She was moving on. Juliet could only accept it or go mad; she hadn't definitely decided.

'Ouch!' Juliet screamed, unable to contain the yell this time. Mia had apparently decided there were finishing touches she needed to apply and was trying to pull about five single hairs into another bobble. She'd ripped them all out. 'Mia, perhaps my hair is done now?' she asked, trying to sound chill as she rubbed her scalp, checking for a hole. Mia had already lost interest, going over to examine the jelly on the snack table, poking it to watch it jiggle. Juliet tried not to worry about the sanitary implications of her grubby little fingers touching the food.

'Hey, what time are people getting here?' Juliet asked Amanda.

Amanda checked her watch. 'Err, nowish?'

‘What?!’ Juliet said, jumping to her feet. ‘I thought it was at three!’

‘No, it’s two thirty. Don’t worry, you’ll have time to sort your hair out before I let anyone in. Unless...’

The rest of that sentence was said as a set of feet pounded toward them through the kitchen. ‘She still has her keys,’ Amanda said as Riley was suddenly among them. Juliet was horror-struck.

‘Hi. Like your hair,’ Riley said, looking at Juliet’s ridiculous do.

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‘Err, thanks, yeah. It’s a Mia original. I might just go and run a brush through it, though,’ she said, dashing past Riley and into the house. She took the stairs two at a time. But she couldn’t outrun her embarrassment, and as Juliet sat in front of a mirror and looked at her bananas hair and her pink cheeks, she wondered if she’d ever recover. Then again, she’d come back from worse. She brushed her hair out hastily and waited for her colour to return to something less tomatoey.

By the time Juliet got back down, the garden was filling with guests. There were toddlers and parents everywhere, wait staff milling among them. Amanda and Mike were talking to another couple, standing side by side, doing a pretty good impression of a functional marriage. But Juliet didn’t watch them for long. Her eyes went straight to Riley. She was ladling a drink from a bowl that was strictly for the adults. Juliet didn’t know what she should do now. Though maybe there was no actual reason she had to feel weird around Riley? Because wasn’t it true that most of this had only occurred in Juliet’s head, very little of it making it out into the physical world? It probably wasn’t that obvious that she’d fallen in love with Riley.

Wait. What was that word she’d just thought? Love? No, delete. That wasn’t right. It was a crush—an intense, brain-melting, heart-splitting crush. They’d known each other for about a week when they were eighteen and, more recently, a few months of ups and downs. You couldn’t fall in proper love with someone in that patchy time frame. Though it was entirely possible to think so, to fool yourself. She’d done it twice now. She had to kick this habit—today. She had to shake it the hell off and talk to Riley like she was just anyone. Like she was Mia. Maybe not Mia. Mike? No, she needed someone she liked. Amanda? That worked. She was her very nice boss, and

the way Juliet talked to her was just right. Warm, with a slight layer of professional distance. Not a buddy, not family, a really good employer. She could use that voice for Riley.

Well, no time like the present, Juliet thought, helping herself to the adult cocktail bowl. Drink in hand, she began to walk in Riley's direction, winding around toddlers and a few fatigued mums and dads, headed for her target. She was standing at the edge of the pool beyond the locked security gate, looking into its depths. Juliet let herself through the gate, shutting it behind her.

'Hi,' she said.

Riley turned to her. 'You've changed your hair.'

'Yeah. I felt that it might be too eye-catching of a look to debut at a three-year-old's birthday bash. I wouldn't want to make the day about me.'

Riley chuckled, and Juliet felt good about the opener. Even tone, light joke. Spot on.

'Well, you rocked it,' Riley said, smiling. Juliet felt slightly less capable for a moment, but gathered her strength and plundered on. 'So, err, how's it going at India's?'

Riley took an infinitesimal pause and said, 'It's a nice place.'

Juliet thought she detected subtext. 'And India? She a good housemate?'

'Well, she's hardly ever home,' Riley said. 'She's very social.'

'Mmm, I remember,' Juliet said, trying not to add a tone to that.

Riley laughed. ‘Yeah. Same old India. A boy in every port.’

Juliet laughed, slightly surprised. She’d always had a theory about India. ‘I didn’t know that about her. I always thought... Well...’

‘What?’

‘Nothing. I mean, I didn’t know her. We weren’t exactly friends.’

Riley paused and looked down at her drink, and Juliet thought the conversation had come to an end. But then Riley said, ‘Funny you should mention that... India told me something. About the old days.’

That grabbed Juliet’s ear. ‘Yes?’

Riley bit her lip. ‘Yeah, she said... It’s silly to talk about it, really.’

Juliet felt nervous. Was this going to be about something uncomfortable? ‘What did she say?’

Riley frowned. ‘She said—’

‘Whoo!’ said a voice, and they both turned in surprise to see India herself suddenly appear between them. ‘That traffic was shitty!’ she said too loud in a garden full of kids. A few adults threw her a look she didn’t see. ‘But I made it.’ She let herself through the pool gate.

‘Oh,’ Riley said, looking thoroughly thrown. ‘I didn’t think... I didn’t realise you were free?’

‘For little Mina? I made the time,’ India smiled.

‘Mia,’ Juliet corrected.

India turned to her. ‘Oh. You’re here?’

Juliet flashed her teeth in what she hoped was a decent imitation of a smile. ‘I live and work here. I’m not sure why it would be a surprise.’

‘I guess I thought you might have the day off.’

‘I do. But it’s Mia’s birthday.’

Juliet’s teeth were practically grinding with antipathy. Why on earth was India here? She couldn’t give a damn about Mia, that was clear. So why would she take time from her little social whirl to come and slum it at a kid’s party? And her timing was as good as ever. What had Riley been about to say? India had said something to her about... what? ‘Hey, Riley and I were just talking about the old days,’ Juliet said boldly.

‘Oh?’ India said, her eyebrow arching slowly up.

‘Yes. She was just about to tell me something?’ She turned to Riley on that question. Riley’s lips parted. ‘Oh, err... Yeah. I was just...’ She gave a light laugh. ‘Well, we could all talk about it, right? It was so long ago,’ she said, catching India’s eye. ‘We could just air it out now?’

India’s face didn’t move. ‘Oh, that? I’d rather not.’

Riley looked surprised. ‘Oh. Sorry. I thought it might be OK. But I guess you’re not ready to...’

It didn’t matter if Riley had decided to respect India’s feelings: there was no reason Juliet had to. She decided to cut out the middleman, and she turned her body away from Riley, focusing entirely on India. ‘Come on, what is it?’

India snorted through her nose. ‘Look, forget it, alright?’

‘No. It sounded like maybe this involved something about me. I think I’ve got a right to know what’s being said about me.’ Juliet tossed a glance to Riley to see how she was handling this. But she looked neutral. She was allowing it. ‘Go on, let’s hear it,’ Juliet demanded.

India paused, and Juliet thought she’d simply refuse again. But then she said, ‘I told her about that time at the end of the year. When you hit me round the face with that book. That’s all.’

‘Oh,’ Juliet said. ‘That.’

‘Right,’ India said. ‘So, anyway, we can forget it, can’t we? Forgive and forget, right?’

Juliet shrugged. ‘You don’t have to forgive me. I don’t regret it.’

India bit the inside of her cheek, looking sourly unsurprised. But Riley was appalled. ‘Juliet.Jesus.’

Juliet didn’t want Riley to think she was just being a bitch, so she prepared herself to get into it. All of it. ‘Well, it felt justified. After what she said about what you two—’

The end of that sentence never came. Because India turned suddenly, saying, ‘My earring fell out!’ and as she bent over, her entire body concertinaed over, creating twice as much India in the area. That excess amount of India happened to overlap with where Juliet was stood. And physics has taught us that an unstoppable force cannot exist in the same place as an immovable object. One must stop being immovable or the other unstoppable. Juliet lost the battle, becoming a movable object. And as she rapidly moved (or was pushed, depending on your take), she found herself flying in the direction of another immovable object.

SPLOSH!

Juliet came up from the pool, gasping and choking. She could see the entire party had frozen to look at her flailing around in the pool. Kids, parents. And Riley.

‘Christ!’ screamed Riley, clutching her face.

‘Whoops,’ said India.

‘Happy birthday to you!’ sang Amanda, coming out of the kitchen.

Everyone turned to her. She hadn’t spotted Juliet in the pool and she implored, ‘Well, sing!’ Everyone looked a bit stuck about whether this was the moment. But after half a second, they all caved to the pressure of Happy Birthday.

Juliet hauled herself out of the pool and let herself through the gate and walked across the patio, her clothes heavy with water, as everyone kept singing. She locked eyes with Riley, then India, then Amanda, who finally saw the catastrophe. ‘Haaaappppyyyy...What the hell...’ Amanda sang and said, looking at her soaking nanny.

Right then, Mia - who up till then had been admiring a toddler-sized electric Porsche with a huge bow on it that was to be officially presented later – saw the open pool gate, said excitedly, ‘Can I swim?’

She didn’t wait for an answer, running through the open gate and jumping confidently into the pool. ‘Mia!’ Amanda screeched, running to the pool and jumping in to get her small daughter, the cake going in the water with her. She swam-walked over to Mia and dragged her to the edge.

But of course, Amanda hadn’t locked the gate behind her either in her panic. Ten

other kids followed Mia's example, running free and jumping into the water with whoops of delight. They were also followed by parents who ran to the pool and leaped in to grab their kids from too-deep water.

Juliet looked down in horror at a pool full of people grappling with their kids in the water, the cake a floating, soggy mess. But what she was really looking at was a ruined party.

She happened to glance over at Mike. He was paying no attention to the pool mess; his eyes were locked on Juliet. They were ablaze. 'Right. That's it. You're definitely fired this time.'

Twenty-Four

Riley wanted to punch India in the fucking throat. This was all her fault. If she hadn't been such a clumsy idiot, none of this would have happened.

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The party was called off, and everyone had gone home. They were too wet to continue. Mia couldn't have cared less; she was currently tooling around the back garden in her new little car, having the time of her life, blissfully unaware of the consequences of her little impromptu dip. Amanda was watching her from a lawn chair, soggy and tired. She wasn't fighting this battle with her husband; Riley was disappointed to see. Then again, Riley sort of got it. You had to pick your battles with her dad. Maybe this was a battle too far for Amanda.

'How much money did this party cost? Total waste,' Mike said, pouring himself a drink in the kitchen while Riley watched him. He was doing his fucking stupid thing with the whisky and the two drops of spring water. He took a sip as though it gave him life.

'Dad, it wasn't her fault,' Riley said, but her dad didn't hear. 'I knew that girl was going to be a problem. All that stuff on the first day, I should have listened to my instincts. But no. Mike's the bad guy. And now look. I had work colleagues here. Chris Billings had to jump in the pool in his TAG Heuer.'

Riley didn't know what the hell he was talking about. 'His what?'

'It's an expensive watch, Riley. Don't pretend you don't know that.'

That pissed Riley right off, but she was trying not to get waylaid on the point. 'I don't know shit about watches. And what does that have to do with Juliet? It wasn't even her fault—'

At that moment, Juliet, case in hand, popped her head around the door. 'Riley, don't

bother. I'm just gonna go.' She sped off before Riley had a chance to respond.

Riley looked back at her dad, but there was no remorse there. 'You know what? The way you treat people, I can't take it anymore. Don't expect me to come back here again.'

Her dad smirked. 'Sure. Until the next time you need a handout.'

That was Riley's limit. She'd finally had it with him. She'd always known one day there'd be an eruption. This was the moment. She went for the nuclear option. 'I know you think you've got a second chance with Amanda and Mia. But you haven't changed at all. And you'll fuck it up the same as you did with Mum and me. Amanda's gonna get sick of your shit. And Mia? She'll end up like me. Hating everything you are.'

The smirk dropped off Mike's face, and that one second was as close as Riley had ever come to getting satisfaction from him. Until he said, 'You only hate me because I gave you everything. Because now you've got nothing to hide behind if you fuck up your life. Every advantage and look at you. Wasting time at some charity that pays shit so you can pretend you're better than me while you live off my charity? Now living off your friend? You're a fucking child.'

Riley turned and walked out, her blood pumping hard in her ears. She thought that might be the last time she would ever speak to her father.

Outside, Juliet was only just reaching the end of the driveway. Riley jogged to catch up to her. 'Hey!'

Juliet turned in surprise. She didn't look happy to see Riley. 'What?'

'I just wanted to... Where are you going?'

‘My sister’s offered me the sofa. She says I can have it in exchange for some childcare. Not a bad deal, I guess.’

Riley sighed. ‘This wasn’t your fault.’

‘Well, I did leave the pool gate open at a kid’s party,’ Juliet said philosophically.

‘It was India. If she hadn’t bumped you into the pool, it never would have happened.’

Juliet paused. ‘You saw that?’

‘I mean, I don’t think it was intentional,’ Riley added quickly. ‘She’s just a bit... She doesn’t think.’

‘So, you didn’t see anything?’ Juliet sighed, turning away.

‘What does that mean?’

‘What I mean is that your friend is a bad person. But maybe you already know that, and you just don’t care. Maybe you’re more like her than I wanted to understand,’ Juliet said, walking away.

Riley was left dumbfounded in the driveway. All this time, she’d known this was going to happen. Ten years and here they were again. Juliet Sullivan had laid waste to her. Made her small and silly and nothing.

Nothing ever changed.

Twenty-Five

Juliet had had it. She’d been sacked. Again. This time, she was alright for it to stick.

Except she hadn't even been able to say goodbye to Mia. That poor little girl, she wouldn't understand where Juliet had gone. Juliet felt the rip too, felt torn away from Mia. They'd been together constantly for months. Yet with a click of Mike Sullivan's fingers, Juliet would probably never see Mia again.

She had to get away from this house and these people and the way they made her feel. It was just the same thing, time and again. Literally. She'd been shoved in yet another pool and been embarrassed, again. And what did Riley think about it? She only wanted to stick up for her precious India. India, who was only a bumbling idiot, not a mean, vicious, spiteful, cruel monster of a person who had been screwing her forever. If that was the side Riley wanted to take, then it was true, wasn't it? Riley was no better. She was the same girl who'd made her feel worthless when she was eighteen.

Juliet had been silly to imagine change was possible, that people ever grew, that her life wasn't always at the mercy of the rich and whatever mood they happened to be in. You could imagine they cared about you when the light was right. But then the sun set. And you were just staff. Amanda hadn't even fought for her this time; she'd just let it happen. But Amanda wasn't the person she was angry at. Not even Mike, really. He was who she'd always thought him to be—a cutthroat asshole with no kindness or compassion in him. His actions couldn't have been more predictable. No, at the crux of her anger was Riley. Always Riley.

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Juliet's rage powered her legs right through monied Westover, all the way to Tothmore, barely seeing the scenery change. But of course, it had. More houses, smaller, dingier, packed tighter together. Home.

Juliet knocked on the door of number eight, Smith road. Her sister opened the door with her five-year-old on her shoulders. 'Aunty Juliet!' Becca cried. Before Juliet could respond, Becca swung her son off her shoulders and popped him down onto the floor of the hall. 'Can you take him? I need a spray tan, stat!' and she was running past Juliet, out into the street, sprinting quite impressively on a pair of wicked heels, jumping on a bus that seemed to be waiting for her. Juliet watched her ride off down the street before turning to her nephew, who frowned at his vanishing mother. 'She said she has to go because she looks like a day-old corpse,' little Logan told Juliet.

Juliet smiled. 'Yeah, well... You hungry? Shall we see what your mother's got in?'

Logan nodded, and they went into the kitchen. It was amazing how quickly this transition had happened. One minute, Juliet was Mia's carer, now she was Logan's. It was at that moment, Juliet realised something. She couldn't continue to be a private nanny. That life wasn't for her anymore. In the homes of the rich, building a rapport with a child, a bond, feeling part of a family, until you were no longer of use and you got a boot out the door. It was breaking Juliet's heart too much to be wrenched from the lives of these kids. She was going back to working in nurseries. The money was dreadful, but at least she wouldn't have to go through this again. The kids were a gaggle, and though you got attached, it wasn't the same. When they left, there wasn't the heartbreak.

She had to go back to her old life. Be a Tothmore girl. Born and raised. No more

Westover, no more rich people. No more Riley.

Twenty-Six

Riley was at work, looking at a design for a poster campaign to raise awareness in the city. But her mind wasn't on the job because she was getting a steady stream of texts from India that were ripping her attention away every few minutes. Had Riley seen her Louboutin hot pink spiked velour trainers? Because India was due at a spin class in twenty minutes and she simply had to have them. Riley had not seen them and shuddered to imagine such a thing. Could Riley pick up a few basic things on her way home tonight that turned out to be forty items long and included such not even slightly basic things as truffle salt? Sure. Did Riley remember that time at school when Pete Wilks asked the janitor out on a dare, and she said yes? No, Riley couldn't, and she had to imagine she'd locked that one up tight in the memory vault because it was dreadful. What did Riley think about doing another double date with somemuch better-standard guys she knew from somewhere or other? Thanks, but no thanks.

India was wearing Riley thin.

Riley was back in the same position she'd been in before. It was time to find somewhere to live. She was back on the apps, scouring, looking for anything half-decent. Any place she could afford wouldn't be as nice as India's, but at least she wouldn't feel like she was under the thumb of her roommate. That was all she wanted anymore: just her freedom back, freedom from this misery. First Noah and all that business, then controlling Nick, then her bastard dad, now needy India. She'd had enough of the lot of them.

Riley had to wonder if she'd be able to deal with India better if she wasn't so down about what had happened at Mia's birthday. First, that terrible argument with her dad, and then...

No. She refused to think about that. It could join Pete Wilks and the janitor in the vault of dreadful memories locked up tight.

The phone beeped again, and Riley ignored it for a minute, thinking it was just more India. But it was Amanda, asking how she was. Riley was torn. She wasn't sure whether this was just Amanda asking after her, or if it was actually the start of a relationship rescue attempt of the kind that Amanda was famed for.

In the end, she couldn't leave her hanging, so she answered with the lie that she was fine. The reply surprised her.

I'm not doing so well.

Riley didn't mess about this time and shot her back an instant reply.

What's wrong?

Mia's upset that Juliet's gone, and so am I.

Riley frowned at her phone. What are you going to do about it?

What can I do? Your dad has made his mind up. I want to see his point of view, but I just don't. I'm trying not to be angry at him.

That sounded bad.

You're allowed to be angry. He was horrible.

Her reply shocked Riley.

Yes, he was. And now I'm probably going to lose my job because I had to take

emergency leave to be with Mia. I can't find anyone I trust like Juliet. I don't want to resent being at home. But it's hard. I love my daughter, but I really liked working.

Then why don't you get Juliet back?

I don't think she'd come back, even if Mike changed his mind. And he doesn't listen to me, so that's that.

Jesus. Something had flipped in that household since Riley had left. Amanda never said a word against her husband. But this had been the straw that had broken her back. Riley had prophesied something like this in that last conversation with her dad, but she hadn't thought it would come quite so soon. It didn't make her happy to be right.

Would you talk to him? Amanda texted.

If he ever listened to me, he won't now.

Why?

Amanda didn't know? How the hell didn't she know?

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We had a fight. The day of the party. Didn't he tell you?

He never said a word.

It got ugly. We both said some bad things to each other.

That makes a lot of sense. He's been in a terrible mood.

Riley wouldn't take responsibility for that. That would have nothing to do with me. He doesn't give a shit about what I think.

He cares about your opinion more than you might imagine.

Riley wasn't having any guilt trips. I doubt that. But even if it was true, that doesn't mean I have to listen to his shit.

No. It doesn't. Maybe neither of us do.

Riley couldn't think what to say to that, so she said nothing, and Amanda didn't say any more either.

'India, I said no. I have it in my texts; there's a written record of it. NO. It's right fucking here,' Riley said, holding up her phone for dramatic emphasis. She'd only been back five minutes, and any plans to be more patient with India were out of the window.

India sighed. 'I thought it was just banter. We both know you never do stuff unless I force you to do it. I've already confirmed with the guys.'

Riley tried to rein in her rage. She was living rent-free under India's roof, and Riley had to remind herself she was grateful for that. 'India,' she said slowly and quietly. 'I don't need to be forced to do anything. I live my life exactly as I want to. And that includes finding my own dates.'

India guffawed. 'You live like a nun. I'm just trying to make sure your hymen doesn't grow back or whatever.'

'Has it ever occurred to you that I don't need as much sex as you do, India?' Riley asked.

'Are you slut-shaming me?' India asked, folding her arms across her chest.

'On the contrary. You're prude-shaming me,' Riley told her.

India moaned. 'Jesus. It's one hour. One or two drinks.'

'Here. So I can't even leave when I want to.'

'I guess you'll just have to try for a change,' India smirked.

'You're doing this on purpose, aren't you? Why?' Riley asked. 'Why do you care one way or the other if I'm seeing anyone?'

'I just want you to be happy,' India said. For a moment, Riley felt slightly guilty for questioning her motives. But then India added, 'Which is never gonna happen if you keep picking up rubbish.'

‘Rubbish?’ Riley repeated quietly, angrily. ‘What the hell does that mean?’

India looked like she wasn’t sure she should have said that last part. But then she shrugged. ‘You’re my bestie, you know I think you’re... Well, you know, great and everything,’ she said quickly, with moderate awkwardness. India didn’t really go in for compliments as a general rule. Riley didn’t get a chance to appreciate the brief warmth, however, because India was quick to cancel it out. ‘But you do have this tendency to... date down,’ she finished.

Riley was agape. ‘Datedown?’

‘I can’t be telling you anything you don’t know. That you’ve got a bit of a wide-on for the proles. I’ve been known to swim in the shallow end myself. But you can’t take them anywhere, can you?’

Riley’s jaw was sitting on India’s expensive shag rug. ‘Are you fucking serious?’

India, who’d been on her backfoot before, decided to go on the offensive. ‘Riley, come on. If I didn’t have a point, you’d have stuck it out with someone, wouldn’t you? But it’s not what you’re looking for. Even if it does piss your dad off.’

Riley had never wanted to slap India around the face quite so much. ‘How could you say something like that?’ she breathed quietly.

‘What, I’m wrong?’ India said smugly.

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‘You areso fucking wrong,’ Riley told her. ‘I liked Noah because he was a good person, and we had a lot in common.’

‘And what about Juliet?’

Riley was surprised into silence.

‘Didn’t think I knew about that, did you?’ India said smugly.

‘God, what does it matter now?’ Riley said, giving up. ‘Yeah, there was a moment, back in the day, I thought... But it didn’t get very far, you’ll be delighted to know.’

‘Yeah, and I’ve no doubt she’d have put the moves on you again if I hadn’t gotten you out.’

‘Gotten me out? It wasn’t a war-torn country. It was my dad’s house. And Juliet and I aren’t going to happen.’

‘You wanted it to, though,’ India sneered. ‘It’s written all over your face.’

‘That’s none of your... Oh, for fuck’s sake. Why do you care who I pick?’

‘I don’t,’ India said with more defensiveness than seemed fitting. ‘Not really. I just thought you needed a hand.’

‘You thought I needed a hand? You’re not a love guru, India. You dump men over almost nothing,’ Riley heard herself say, and she knew they were teetering on the

edge of a real row. Maybe even headed to the point of no return.

‘I’ve never dumped anyone for a small reason,’ India screeched.

‘What about the guy you broke up with because he had a cat?’ Riley reminded her.

‘I’m allergic, Riley. What was I supposed to do? He wouldn’t even consider having it put down.’

‘Do you hear yourself?’ Riley asked.

‘Yes, unlike you,’ India said, looking rather red-faced now.

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means... Do you think I don’t see you rolling your eyes at me? Glazing over when I talk? I always have to chase you to get five minutes of your time, while some poor-o like Juliet fucking Sullivan has you practically drooling over her!’ India screeched.

‘India...’ Riley began feeling bad. India wasn’t wrong. Riley had done those things. She’d hurt her friend.

India looked embarrassed. ‘Hey, look, before you start overreacting, I’m not fucking in love with you or anything!’

Riley wasn’t sure how to tackle that one. ‘I never thought you were.’

India laughed very loudly. ‘Don’t make me laugh. I mean, you and me? No way. I’m strictly dickly, you know that. Jesus, I’ve had more peen than you’ve had hot dinners.’

Riley pushed that image away as she tried to tiptoe through this minefield. 'I know you've had plenty of... But, I mean... You don't think... There's no chance that you're, maybe, possibly overcompensating for anything, is there?'

'I knew it. I knew you'd think this,' India said, walking over to the bar and pouring a really large drink of vodka, neat. 'Well, fuck you. Just because it's in vogue now to be bisexual or whatever...'

'Actually, that's not really true,' Riley corrected, but India wasn't listening. '...Doesn't mean we all have to jump on board,' she finished, upset.

Riley was truly down the rabbit hole. She wasn't sure what to do. Was this something they could talk about if India didn't want to be honest with herself? Probably not.

Oh, and also, wait a fucking second... 'Shit, India. You did shove Juliet in that pool, didn't you?'

India, mid glug on her enormous drink, paused. 'Ha, what? No. What?' Riley fixed her with a look. India, either from guilt or more likely from that hit of booze, cracked pretty quickly. 'Jesus, fine. I'm not ashamed of it, anyway. It was fucking hilarious.'

Riley looked at her friend, the girl she'd known her whole life- thought she knew- and walked away from her, going into her room, packing her stuff. What she could carry out today, anyway. She had to go, and she had to go now. She walked out of her room, bag in hand.

'Off, are we?' India asked bitterly, topping herself up.

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‘I can’t stay here anymore,’ Riley was sad to say.

‘No. You can’t,’ India said quickly, trying to sound like it had been her idea. ‘You’re not welcome.’

Riley, a hand on the doorknob, suddenly remembered something. ‘You did it to shut her up. She was trying to tell me something. What was it... Something about your fight?’

India rolled her eyes. ‘You’re not getting me on that. She confessed in front of you.’

‘Yes, she did. But then she started to say...’ Riley was putting stuff together at speed. ‘She started to say why she’d done it. That’s when you shoved her. That’s it, isn’t it? You didn’t want her to say something. You didn’t want her to tell me something.’

India sniffed and took another vodka hit. ‘Wow. This is quite something to watch.’

‘What is?’

‘You, suddenly deciding you want to know things.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means you were always fine with not knowing things before. That was our arrangement. I kept you out of certain things, and you didn’t ask.’

Was that true? Had she been in the dark? Or simple denial? It didn’t matter now. She

couldn't have gone back if she'd wanted to. 'What did you do?'

'I protected you. Not that you'd appreciated it.'

Riley didn't like the sound of that. 'India. What did you do?'

India sighed. 'You remember that party?'

THEN

India was snogging that guy from downstairs, and she was bored. In general, but specifically bored with moving this guy's hand away from her pants. She was willing to let him go to town in the bra region. Why could they never appreciate what they'd been given? She moved his hand away, and he tried again a few seconds later. After the third attempt, she pushed him off her entirely.

'What?!' he cried from the floor.

'Take a hint!' she said to him. She got up and began to walk out.

'Are we still going out?' he called after her. India didn't bother replying. She wanted to find Riley. She'd left her downstairs; she hoped she hadn't gotten fed up and left. It had been known.

She found Paul Prentiss in the kitchen. He was pouring tequila into a beer can. 'Paul, have you seen Ri?' she asked him.

'Eh? Who?' Paul answered. He was pretty drunk, even for him.

'Never mind.'

She walked around the party for a while, saying hi to people, only caring if she found Riley. She found Jack instead, to her chagrin. 'Hey, is Riley here tonight?' he asked her, sounding tense.

'Ummm... no. She left,' India said, which, after all, might turn out to be true.

'Oh. Fuck. Did she... Has she said anything about me?'

India smirked. 'Nope. You're yesterday's news, Jacky Boy.'

Jack huffed. 'Fuck's your problem?'

India shrugged. Boys didn't like that she treated them like this. But there was something sort of two dimensional to her about the male of the species. She supposed she'd like one properly one day, maybe even fall in love. Until then, it was fun to knock them about like this, watch them wilt. There were never any true consequences to hurting them.

Unlike Riley. God, that girl was so fucking sensitive sometimes. She would be upset if she saw India being mean, even to Jack. So India was careful about that sort of thing. She hated to think of Riley thinking badly of her.

She didn't have that policy for most people. People like that loser, Juliet, as a prime example. India had a general dislike for that weak little squirrel since day one of comp. But recently, she kept catching Riley talking to her. At the library, in the cafeteria, in the hall. What the hell was that about? Why would they suddenly strike up a friendship out of the blue? Unless... Hmm. It couldn't be that? Could it?

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India knew Riley was bi. That was... Well, it wasn't really... India just didn't like to think about that. She also didn't like thinking about why she didn't like thinking about that. It wasn't important. All that mattered was that Riley was her best friend in the world, and nothing would ever be allowed to come between them. Boyfriends came and went, but they were real. They were forever.

She finally made her way to the back door. She put her hand on the door handle, looking through the glass—Riley, at last. She was talking to...

For fuck's sakes. What was she doing here?

It didn't matter why. It didn't matter that she'd gotten all gussied up either. She could dress like a real person all she liked. India knew who Juliet was. Just another person trying to take Riley away.

India walked through the house to the front, leaving the building. But she wasn't really leaving. She tiptoed around the side of the house, through the back gate, entering the back garden, though she didn't walk out into the open. She stayed just around the corner of the house, hidden. India didn't know why she was doing this. She supposed she just wanted to hear what they were saying, so she could confirm what she thought. That Riley had gotten stuck with Juliet. Then India could go over and drag her off, and they'd laugh about it.

Only that wasn't what she heard. They were talking. Really talking. Riley was telling Juliet about her dad. She'd never told India any of that. Then Juliet told her some fucking cringy stuff in exchange, some story about her first kiss. India was disgusted. But it got worse. Juliet had some sort of clunky accident and then, for some

godforsaken reason, Riley kissed her.

India froze, horrified, sick to her stomach. She wanted to scream. She went back inside. That little bitch. She was taking her Riley. She'd only just gotten her back from Jack and now this? Who the fuck did Juliet think she was? Nobody. This would not stand.

NOW

'So I told her you told me a bunch of personal stuff about her and that we were laughing at her, and she was fucking devastated,' India said, chuckling. 'It was so good. Every time I think about it, I still laugh.'

Riley looked at India, astonished. 'I can't believe I didn't see this. This is what she meant. This is why she thinks I'm like you.'

'Who, Juliet?' India said, her voice dripping with disdain. 'Yeah, she's so deep, isn't she? With her books and her shit clothes and her little job. It doesn't take much to fool you, does it?'

'I suppose it doesn't,' Riley told her oldest friend. 'All the times I've defended you. Just because you were nice to me, in your own way. But you're mean. I guess you always were.'

India rolled her eyes. 'Fuck off, good girl. Seriously, get the hell out of my place. I've got two hot guys coming around, and you know what? I'm totally gonna have a threesome with them.'

Riley did want to leave. But what India had just said sounded too sad not to be commented on. 'It won't help anything,' Riley warned her. She wasn't sure why she was bothering. For old times' sake, maybe.

‘Don’t tell me what to do. I’m not your problem anymore, right?’ she said. Riley heard the wobble in her voice. Part of her wanted to comfort India. Because she was a sad girl with dreadful deep-seated issues. But India had always been India’s biggest problem, and there had never been anything Riley could do about that. ‘Bye, India. Take care of yourself.’

India didn’t respond to that, and Riley shut the door quietly behind her.

She checked into a hotel that night. Though she didn’t sleep for even a minute. She was turning it all over. One piece of new information from a decade ago and she didn’t know anything anymore.

Only maybe she did know something. She’d kept Juliet at arm’s length because of this one thing. When she thought over every discarded opportunity to be close to her, she shuddered. She’d wanted it. And she’d told herself she couldn’t have it.

She’d made the most terrible mistake.

Twenty-Seven

Juliet looked at thirty screaming children running around the enclosure at Kute Kidz Daycare. She had forgotten the wall of sound that kids could generate en masse. It was something of a shock. ‘So, this is your usual number?’ she asked Deb, the woman who ran the place. ‘Yep. Legal limit. I’m careful not to go over. Not after they shut the last place. One little measles outbreak and everyone loses their marbles,’ Deb told her morosely. ‘You gonna take it then?’

‘Oh, I got the job?’ Juliet asked, not particularly excited.

‘Yeah,’ Deb shrugged. ‘If you want it?’

‘Can I think about it?’

‘You’ve got till tomorrow because there was another girl on the shortlist, and she’s also got an interview at Krazy Kids down the road, and I’d hate to lose her if you don’t want the job.’

Juliet had also been to Krazy Kids this morning. The name wasn’t a joke. ‘I’ll give you an answer by the morning,’ she vowed to Deb.

As she left, she thought it would probably be a yes. Kute Kidz was the lesser of two evils. On the bus home, she didn’t feel great about the decision, but it was time to get on with her life and stop delaying the inevitable.

She arrived at Becca’s half an hour later and found someone on the doorstep she didn’t expect. ‘Hello,’ she said.

‘Hi,’ said the surprise visitor.

‘What are you doing here, Mike?’ she asked the man. He looked different from the last time she saw him. Shorter somehow. She realised it was an illusion cast by a stoop in his posture.

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‘I need to talk to you,’ he said. He sounded different too. Quieter.

‘What about?’ Juliet asked, letting herself into the empty house, everyone out for the day. She turned in the door to finish the conversation. She didn’t want Mike in there, judging her sister’s house. But he said, ‘Can I come in?’

Defeated as he was, Juliet didn’t know how to say no to him. ‘Fine. Tea?’

Mike nodded. Juliet walked through to the kitchen, expecting Mike to sit down in the living room. But he followed her. He looked odd in the little kitchen, in his fancy suit. He watched her while she put the kettle on and got two mugs out. ‘How’s Mia?’ Juliet asked.

‘She’s... she’s not happy, actually. No one is. That’s what I’ve come about.’

‘Oh?’ Juliet said, suddenly knowing what this was. Mike had come to offer Juliet her job back. That was a twist. Mike had seemed to relish giving her her walking papers. But she could see something had changed in him.

‘Yes, you see...’ he began, but the kettle hit its peak, and Juliet couldn’t hear anything else over the boiling water. ‘I didn’t catch that,’ she said.

‘I said Amanda’s left me!’ Mike said far too loudly as the kettle clicked off.

Juliet didn’t know what to say to that, so she just made the tea and handed him a cup. He stood there, blowing on it, glancing around the kitchen. ‘This looks like the place I grew up in.’

Juliet nearly lost her grip on her tea. 'You didn't grow up rich?'

'I was born two streets away. Jackson Road,' he told her.

'Right,' Juliet said, acclimating.

'It's not easy getting out of somewhere like this, is it?' he said.

'There's nothing wrong with somewhere like this,' Juliet told him sharply. She was surprised by her own tone.

'Sorry,' he said. It was the biggest shock of all, an apology from Mike Powell. 'I didn't mean to offend you.'

'It's a bit late for that.'

Mike sighed and shook his head at himself. 'It might be too late for a lot of things. But I can't just... I let one family go. I can't do it again,' he sighed and rubbed his temples. 'I love Amanda and Mia. In my way. Amanda, she let me... She did her best to love who I was. Who I am. But you were the final straw. She can't forgive me for getting rid of you. So you have to come back. It's the only way to fix things.'

Juliet stiffened, despite the homily. He was still throwing out orders. 'I don't have to do anything, Mike.'

Mike realised his mistake. 'I didn't mean it like...'

There was a knock at the front door. They both looked toward it, visible from the kitchen. 'Better get that,' she said, putting her mug down on the side. She walked through and opened the door. 'Amanda?'

Amanda looked hassled. 'Thank god you're here. I've left Mike, I'm starting on my own, and I need you to come back!'

Juliet struggled to form a response. 'Errr....'

'Amanda?' Mike said, appearing behind Juliet.

Amanda's eyes went round. 'Mike? What the hell are you doing here?'

'I've come to get Juliet back,' he told her.

'What do you mean, you're getting her back? I'm getting her back! She can work for me wherever I land up now.'

'No... I'm getting her back. For us. I'm fixing what I did!'

Amanda, livid, walked right into the house. Juliet simply stood aside.

'Mike, if you thought this would fix everything, you're wrong. It was the last thing, that's all. This - you and me - doesn't work. You don't want to be married. We got pregnant, and we tried. But this isn't for you. You don't know how to be with someone like that. And I can't have Mia being around it anymore.'

Mike looked as though he'd been slapped. 'You're the best person I've ever known.'

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Amanda was unimpressed. 'If that were true, you'd be kinder to me. You'd treat me like I was special. But you don't do that.'

Juliet felt a bit embarrassed to be watching this. But what was she supposed to do? This was her sister's house; she couldn't just leave. Actually, yes, she could. She went to the door, saying, 'I'm gonna leave you to it. Let yourselves out when you're done.'

Amanda turned. 'No, I'm not here to talk to him, I came to talk to you!'

'Amanda, just hear me out,' Mike begged his wife.

'Call me later, you've got my number,' Juliet said. She didn't address it to anyone, in particular, she wasn't sure who to say it to. She opened the door.

But lo and behold, standing in front of the door was yet another Powell. 'Hi,' said Riley, sounding nervous.

Juliet felt a truckload of emotions dumped onto her at the sight of Riley. She couldn't deal with it. 'Why are you here?' she snapped.

'Umm, I came to talk to you,' Riley said, looking flustered.

'Riley?' said Amanda and Mike in unison from the room behind her.

'What the fuck?' Riley exclaimed as her father and stepmother appeared at the door behind Juliet.

‘Why are you here? Are you trying to hire her for Mia too?’ Mike said, baffled.

Amanda tutted at him. ‘That’s not what this is, Mike.’

‘Then what is it?’ Mike asked.

No one answered him.

Juliet looked behind her and in front of her. ‘I don’t know what’s happening, but I’m leaving. And then I need to have a word with whoever keeps giving this address out. Lock the door behind you, someone.’

‘Hold on, I need to speak to you,’ Riley begged.

‘You can have her after me,’ Mike said. ‘So, will you come back?’

Juliet turned around to Mike. ‘Well—’

‘He doesn’t need you, I do. He’s only gonna look after her at weekends,’ Amanda said. ‘Which will make a bloody change,’ she added bitterly.

Mike sighed.

Riley said, ‘Juliet, can we—’

‘Right!’ Juliet said sharply. ‘We’re not doing this on the doorstep! Riley! Get in the house.’

Riley stepped inside, and Juliet closed the door. She looked at the three of them, all awkward and out of place. ‘Everyone sit!’ Juliet commanded.

Everyone looked around them and perched wherever they could. Mike and Amanda at either end of the sofa. Riley in an armchair.

Juliet was surprised at how quickly they'd all done as they were told. She supposed kids never grew up, forever responding to the person in the room who took charge. But now she had everyone sat and quiet, she didn't know what to do with them. 'Would everyone like a cup of tea?'

'I've still got one in the kitchen,' Mike reminded her.

'I'll bring it through,' Juliet told him. 'Well? Riley? Amanda?'

'Sure,' said Riley. 'OK, thanks,' said Amanda.

Juliet went into the kitchen and got a tray of tea assembled, including one for herself. Extra sugar. She needed it. She took the tray in and put it down on the coffee table. Everyone took a mismatched mug.

Juliet blew on her tea and took a sip. 'Right, so I guess... Look, Mike? Amanda? Clearly, there needs to be a conversation between the two of you before you can hire Mia a nanny. But whatever happens... I don't think I can come back. I love Mia, and I miss her. But the situation has changed. I'm not a private nanny anymore.'

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Mike and Amanda swapped a look and then turned back to Juliet. 'What?' Amanda said. 'Why would you stop? You're fantastic at it.'

'I broke her,' Mike moaned. 'This is what I do.'

Riley looked at her father in mild horror. 'What thehell' shappened to you?'

'Amanda left him,' Juliet informed her quietly.

Riley looked at Amanda. She nodded. 'Shit,' Riley exclaimed.

Mike began to cry. No one in the room responded for a moment, too shocked. Riley eventually said, 'Jesus, Dad.'

'What?' he asked, snot bubbling.

'You didn't cry when gran died.'

Mike wiped his nose across the back of his very expensive sleeve. The room shuddered. It was then Juliet understood how truly at sea he was. The Mike she knew wouldn't have done any of this. But the sleeve? He was in pure crisis.

'Mike, are you alright?' Amanda asked him tenderly, despite herself.

Mike, still crying heavily, said, 'No! I'm losing it! Or I've already lost it. Both my daughters, my wife. I've lost everything.'

Riley, though she looked uncomfortable, said, 'You haven't lost your daughters. Not yet. But you have to do better.'

Mike managed to stop blubbing. 'I haven't?'

'I mean, don't get me wrong, you've been a real dick.'

'Yeah,' Amanda agreed.

Mike looked hopefully at his wife and daughter. He nodded. 'I know. I have. But, I'll... I'll go into therapy. Today. I'll get myself... I'll sort it.'

Amanda started coughing. 'You're going to therapy?! You!'

'Do you think there's no point?' Mike asked his wife.

Amanda didn't answer. Neither did Riley. For some reason, Mike turned to Juliet. 'Is there no point?' he asked her.

Juliet looked at the room and then back to Mike. 'It's not for me to say.'

Mike began to cry fresh tears. Juliet, despite how much she resented what was happening, knew what she had to do. She went to Mike and put a hand on his shoulder, deciding for him, if that's what she had to do. 'I think if you want to change, you will.'

Riley nodded slowly. 'Maybe she's right. If you want it, maybe you can. Maybe change can happen.'

Everyone looked at Amanda to see what she thought. She nodded. 'Yeah. You have to want it. But I think it's possible.' Mike dried his eyes, new hope in them. Amanda

added quickly. 'That doesn't mean anything for you and me, necessarily. But maybe we could talk. In a few months.'

Mike nodded like an energetic puppy. 'That's great, that's... that's all I need. Just to know there's a chance.'

'I'm not promising anything,' Amanda said sternly.

'I understand,' Mike said.

Amanda looked from her husband, from Riley to Juliet, took a sip of tea, and put the cup on the table. 'Right, we need to leave, Mike.'

Mike, wiping up his soggy face, said, 'What?'

Amanda was on her feet, getting Mike on his, shoving him toward the door. 'I haven't finished my tea...' he said as he was bundled out of the house. The door closed and then opened. Amanda's face reappeared. 'Thanks, Juliet. I haven't given up on getting you back, just so you know. I don't think anyone in this family has.' The door closed again.

Juliet frowned at the closed door, confused. She looked back to Riley, the last of the Powell clan left. 'What did that mean?'

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Riley was struggling to look at Juliet. 'It means Amanda's a nosy mare, that's what it means. She's also right,' she added. 'I fucked up. I don't know if it's too late for me either. Maybe a decade too late. But I came to explain some things. In the hopes... Well, I'll explain, and then you can decide.'

Juliet gripped her tea. 'OK,' she said, feeling nervous for reasons she couldn't understand.

'You were right about India. She did it. She pushed you in that pool on purpose.'

Juliet didn't quite know how to react to that, but she was not exactly ready to forgive or forget. 'I'm well aware of that. I didn't need you to confirm it.'

Riley sighed. 'You're still angry.'

'No shit.'

'Is it weird that I find that encouraging?' Riley asked.

'Encouraging how?' Juliet snapped.

'I probably shouldn't have said that,' Riley said with a nervous chuckle. 'I'm just kind of... I'm having to retcon some of my life, and it's putting me in a real spin.' She shrugged. 'But you don't... You don't care about that, do you?'

'Care about what, Riley? You haven't told me anything... except what I already knew. But if this is an apology, just...' Juliet slumped down in her chair. 'You know

what, I don't need any more apologies. Just get on with your life and consider me dealt with.'

'No, no, I don't...' Riley stood up. 'I don't want to consider you dealt with. I've had this...' Riley took a gulp of breath and looked at the floor for a moment. Then she gave Juliet a very hard, focused look that caused several goose bumps to pop on her arms. It pissed her off, but she couldn't fight her own body.

Riley started talking again, in a great, panicked rush. 'Shit, I'm just gonna go for it. I've had this mad crush on you since I was eighteen. I don't think I ever got over it.'

Juliet felt several things at that moment. Some of which were entirely antithetical. Excitement and anger. Rage and joy. Hope and despair. She didn't know what was going to win until she stood and said, 'Don't you dare!'

Riley looked slightly frightened. 'What?'

'Do not come into my home, well, my sister's home but kind of mine for the moment, and plonk this load of crap on me! Because I've been chasing you for months, despite the bloody horrid way you treated me when we were young—'

Riley stood excitedly. 'No, wait! That's the other thing! You've got that wrong! We both did.'

It was a good start to a story that lasted several minutes and included several apologies. Juliet was flabbergasted, not just by Riley's admissions of guilt, but by how much of it relied on Juliet's shortcomings. Riley had made mistakes, but so had she. They'd both been lied to, but both had been all too ready to believe the lies.

Juliet understood, at last, that they were both, well, total fucking idiots.

‘So, you never told India anything I told you?’

‘God, no,’ Riley said. ‘And you thought I saw your, erm, chest? That I was laughing at you?’

‘Yep.’

‘Well, I didn’t,’ Riley assured her.

‘I know. No one saw it, I found that out later, but then India...’ She trailed off. No point going back over it.

Juliet didn’t know what to do. So she sat back down and sipped her tea. ‘Fuck,’ she muttered into the mug. ‘That’s... What... How... What do we... I mean, what does this...’

‘Do you think I’m just like India?’ Riley asked suddenly.

‘What?’

‘Because that’s been making me sad for a decade now. Notcompletelybecause of you, but somewhat. I just need to ask you if you think I’m just some spoiled, boring daddy’s girl. That’s the most real thing I know how to ask right now, and it’s horrible to actually say the words...’

Juliet put her tea down, open-mouthed. ‘Riley? Are you... Have you fallen on your head? You’re the most...’ Juliet paused and thought and understood what this meant and why it was being asked. She couldn’t bear Riley to go on under this misconception for a second longer. ‘I know why you’re asking that. Because I’ve said some things to you in anger because I was hurt back then. And now. But...’ Juliet put her hand on her heart while she caught her breath. ‘You’reitto me. You always have

been. Nothing about you ever bored me for a single second.'

Riley's expression went quite beyond relief.

Juliet put her tea down, stood, and went to Riley. She knelt in front of her and softly took her hand. 'You're Riley Powell. You're not like anyone else. Not anyone.'

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Riley squeezed her hand and pulled her in, and it was happening. Lips, hands, warm, fervent, everywhere. Nobody knocked on the door, or walked into the room to interrupt, or pushed anyone in a pool. So it kept happening. And happening. And happening.

Ten whole years they'd waited for this, and it was worth it.

Twenty-Eight

TWO MONTHS LATER

'Mia! Mia! Slow down!' Riley said as her sister fled across the lawn on her ride-on Porsche. The thing was going quicker than it had a right to. Mia was headed for a rosebush at the end of the garden. It was Amanda's favourite. 'Mia, put the brakes on!' Riley screamed. But Mia wasn't listening. The plant was done for.

But the car screeched right into a pair of legs at the end of the garden. 'That's your mother's favourite plant!' Mike said to his youngest daughter with fondness. 'Do I have to take that car away before you destroy the whole garden?'

Mia looked up in horror. 'No, Daddy! Don't take my car!'

'Then listen to your sister when she tells you to stop,' Mike said, bending over and switching off the car.

Riley had caught up with the car by now. 'Dad, is this your day? I thought you had her tomorrow?'

‘Not officially, but Amanda said I could have an hour with her,’ he stated, picking Mia gently out of the vehicle, balancing her on his hip. She put her arms around him and leaned in, quite drained from the big getaway. ‘Is Amanda here?’ Mike asked, cuddling his youngest daughter.

‘No, that’s why I’m here. She got called into the office an hour ago, so she gave me a shout.’

‘On a Saturday? They’re taking advantage of her good nature. But anyway, she could have called me; I’d have been straight over.’

‘Aren’t you working?’ Riley asked.

‘It’s a Saturday,’ Mike said. Riley was tempted to mock him for suddenly deciding weekends were a thing, but decided to let it go. She was trying to do that a lot lately. If he wanted to change, she had to let him.

It took some getting used to, how much her dad had turned around in the last few months. Before, he was never here, even when he was. Now that he didn’t live here, you couldn’t keep him away. Amanda hadn’t taken him back yet. She didn’t think he was ready. She told Riley that she wanted to see if the changes would, ‘Really set in.’

Riley supposed it was a bit strange being such buddies with her stepmother, but they were too close in age to be anything else. So Riley ended up hearing quite a bit about her father’s second marriage and she agreed that if they ever got back together, it needed to be taken slowly. Her dad had to know he couldn’t go back to his old, cold, closed-off self. But when Mike Powell took on a task, he put himself into it completely. For a change, it had worked in his favour. He was trying, everyone could see.

It did Riley’s heart good to see it. To see that growing up, growing better, was

possible. If even Mike didn't have to be Mike, then Riley was free to be whoever the hell she wanted to be too. She didn't have to be stuck in old ideas.

Mike put Mia down and took something out of his pocket, saying, 'It's Amanda's birthday next week. Do you think she'll like this?' He opened up a ring box to reveal something sparkly. 'It didn't cost very much, it's from some designer on the high street, just a market stall. But I've heard Amanda talk about her stuff, and she seems to like it. Do you think it's her?'

Riley had a look. 'Yeah, Dad. I think it's very Amanda.'

Mike smiled, relieved. 'Great.'

They all went into the kitchen. Mike put the kettle on. 'How's work?' he asked.

Riley tried not to laugh out loud at her dad's attempt at being nice. She just nodded and said, 'Fine. Big campaign coming, on TV and everything. How's yours?'

'Ups and downs, you know,' he said casually.

Riley checked her watch. Mike saw it.

'Got somewhere to be? You can get off now if you need to. Me and Mia have got colouring to do.'

Riley grinned. 'Cheers, Dad.' She leaned down and planted a smacker on Mia's forehead. 'See you soon, Little Rabbit.'

'Don't call me that,' Mia said. 'I don't like rabbits anymore. I like tractors now.'

'Tractors, OK,' Riley smiled. 'I'll work on a nickname for that.' She said goodbye to

the pair of them and ran off home—a nice two-bed shared with a very chill guy named Sid, an Uber driver with a sideline as a stand-up. He was out most nights, either at work or trying to get open mic slots.

‘Sid?’ she called, as she let herself in. She had the place to herself, as usual. It was about as close as you could get to living alone while still splitting the rent. Wonderful.

Riley got to work. She cleaned the flat, top to bottom, then got to cooking. She was checking her watch constantly. She wanted this to be perfect.

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There was a knock at the door. 'Shit!' Riley cried. She went to answer it. 'I'm not even ready!' she complained as Juliet kissed her on the cheek. 'Hello to you too.'

'God, sorry. I was just planning this whole thing where dinner was gonna be on the table, and then I was gonna...' Riley pursed her lips, embarrassed. 'I was gonna do this super cheesy thing where I put rose petals on the bed and be on it, like, you know, naked...' She shook her head. 'Now that I'm saying it out loud, it's stupid.'

Juliet chuckled. 'I would have loved it. But you don't have to do anything special. You in a bin bag would drive me wild.'

Riley rolled her eyes, though she was smiling as she did. 'You're a smooth talker.'

'I've never been that,' Juliet said, taking her coat off. Riley took it and hung it up as Juliet went on, 'But we got things wrong for a long time by not just talking. I just want to make sure I don't forget to say something I should.'

Riley smiled, but it was tinged with remorse. 'Makes me sad to think about what could have been. Ten years, everything we might have done.'

'That makes me sad too. But on the other hand, we're more grown-up now. What if we'd have mucked it up the first time? Can you imagine that?'

'What do you mean, can I imagine it? It happened,' Riley said with a sad smile.

Juliet laughed but added, 'I guess I mean if we'd gotten together and really and properly ruined everything with our insecurities. In a way there was no coming back

from because we were still kids.'

'I hate to say it, but we still might,' Riley said, going to the kitchenette and turning off the heat on the stove. 'I mean, my dad's in his fifties, and he's still trying to get his shit together.'

'I think you started from a much more evolved point than him right out of the gate,' Juliet said. 'But I've got to hand it to him, he's trying. He told me he was happy I was Mia's nanny again yesterday. He said, "You're a good influence. On both my daughters."'

Riley laughed loudly as she plated up. 'Oh, is that right?'

'Yeah. I don't think I'd mind if Amanda took him back, if he was around a bit more.'

Riley was stunned. 'You'd be OK living with him after everything he put you through?'

'I think he belongs there. And anyway, I'm happy living there, but it's not forever. It's a family home. I want my own home one day.'

Riley liked the sound of that. She liked living with Sid, but long term, she hoped... Well, she didn't want to get ahead of herself. They hadn't even swapped the big Lyet. Riley wanted to say it though. It had been on the tip of her tongue for months. She loved Juliet, and that was alright now because she was exactly the person Riley had always thought she was. She was Juliet Sullivan, and she was wonderful.

But there was a time and a place for everything. Riley was waiting for it, and when it came, Riley would say it. She just needed a sign.

Riley brought the food through, putting it onto the table in the corner of the living room. 'Sit at the table for this, the least I can do is light a candle.'

Juliet sat down, and Riley joined her, lighting the candle, opening a bottle of wine. She poured a glass for both of them. Riley sat down, and they clinked. 'To... I can't think of a toast,' Riley frowned.

Juliet raised an eyebrow. 'How about to India coming out on Instagram?'

Riley put her glass down. 'Come again?'

'Yeah. I saw it today. She's got a girlfriend. Some model. She posted pics of them at some fancy shindig.'

Riley thought about it for a moment. 'Wow. Good for her. And still so very on-brand.' She looked at Juliet. 'Sorry. I don't wanna... I know you hate her. I'm not sure why I don't.'

'Because you're a good person. And anyway, I don't hate her, not now. She was in love with you. Like I can't understand that?'

Riley's heart palpitated. 'Oh?'

Juliet looked abruptly nervous. 'Oh. Um. I mean... I didn't mean it to come out like... Shit. I've scared you off, haven't I? It's way too soon.'

Riley smiled and took Juliet's hand. 'I love you too.'

Juliet let out a long, ragged breath of relief. 'You do?'

'You think I'm giving everyone cheesy rose petals and sweating over details of every date?'

'So we're in love?' Juliet said, smiling.

‘Yeah. We’re in love,’ Riley agreed, deeply and irrevocably happy.

‘Who’d have thought it ten years ago while I was crying under my duvet,’ Juliet said.

‘God, I want to go back and tell that girl...’

‘Tell her what?’ Riley asked.

Juliet thought about the question and said, ‘That everything’s possible. That anything can happen. That it was all still to come.’

‘It’s all still to come,’ Riley said. ‘I’ll drink to that.’ They clinked their glasses.