



Second Verse

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Description: Back in their teens, musician Poppy and artist Norah were glued at the hip, their friendship blossoming into a whirlwind romance. But just as quickly as things heated up, something happened that forced Poppy to pull the plug, leaving Norah heartbroken and in the dark about what went wrong. With a secret she couldn't share, Poppy hit the road to pop stardom, reluctantly leaving Norah behind.

Fast forward twenty years: Norah and Poppy are both now parents, their relationship just a painful memory. Until they unexpectedly bump into each other at the school gates and learn their kids aren't just in the same class, but total besties. And while it's extremely awkward for Norah and Poppy to have to be around each other, they've got no choice but to play nice with each other. Between playdates, bake sales and parties, old sparks start flying, reigniting their long-lost friendship and the attraction they once shared.

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One

The morning Norah Cauldwell saw Poppy Jennings again for the first time in twenty years at the gates of Northwood Primary School, it was a major head fuck. Like Norah didn't have enough going on without running into the all-time ex. But life was gunning for her that day.

Her husband Max had gotten the day off to a cracking start first thing by announcing that he was thinking about divorce. It wasn't the first time, and Norah was starting to take the announcements with a grain of salt. Nevertheless, it was a hell of a bomb to get dropped on Norah five seconds after her eyelids opened. So she'd had to have that talk before she could even put on a bra.

'I don't know if this is working,' was how he put it.

That phrasing angered Norah more than what he was actually saying. Obviously, it wasn't working. They both knew that. He didn't have to keep announcing it like it was his own personal revelation. Norah might not know much, but she knew she wasn't in a good marriage. Max could have credited her with enough intelligence to suss that out. But she supposed that was simply another symptom of the larger problem.

The conversation resolved with the conclusion they were going to have to go to couples' counselling, if only to defer the inevitable. But defer it, Norah would. Their five-year-old son, Freddie, would be devastated if they split, and Norah would have done anything to save him from hurt if it was within her power.

With all that to contend with, Poppy was not on Norah's mind at all when she walked (and occasionally pulled) Freddie to school that Monday morning. So she looked like she always did for drop-off—like crap. She worked from home, and though she wasn't at the slobbering-up-to-the-gates-in-her-pyjamas level, she wasn't far off. She was in sweats, with her hair pulled into a greasy ponytail and eye bags for days.

'Come on, Freddie, we're gonna be late,' she said to her son for the fourth time.

'No, we're not. It's only 8.40,' he insisted, looking at his new Pokémon watch.

'But we're six minutes away. Add that on to the time, and what do we get?' she explained with a patience she had to force.

Freddie groaned and quickened his step, but only just.

At the tall, wrought iron gates of Northwood Primary School, parents were pushing pell-mell into the playground, the late crowd perpetually a few minutes behind. Norah was a regular in their number.

But a few were not pushing, having completed drop off in comfortable time, and were just standing to chat on the street. One such woman was turned away from Norah and somehow, despite Norah's haste, caught her eye. She had her back to Norah and was chatting to Susan Graham, a lean woman with the black bobbed hair of a villain. This was handy because, as far as Norah was concerned, she was one. Norah disliked Susan because she was always putting passive-aggressive comments in the parents' WhatsApp group about the source of the latest head lice infestation—determined to find patient zero, like some kind of nit Poirot.

As Norah passed them, she noted Susan talking to a woman facing the other way. The mystery woman had a perfectcaramel messy bun, and her crisp denim shirt was cinched at the woman's small waist by a thick leather belt. Her jeans fit perfectly, and

her high-top white Converse were box fresh. It was a casual outfit, but at the same time, perfectly executed. Even from the back, she was the definition of effortlessly cool.

Norah, only ever a frumpy, vaguely human-shaped blob at this time of the morning, thought, ‘Who has the time?’ and kept walking. She was well aware it was a thought coated in envy.

She took Freddie to the first year’s entrance of the old, red brick building, and he ran in before she could even say goodbye. He had shit to do. Norah exchanged a brief nod with his nervous yet sweet young teacher, Miss Potter, and headed back home to Google marriage counsellors.

But on the way out, she passed Susan and the mystery woman once more, coming a little closer this time, enough to catch a snatch of conversation.

‘If you want to have a voice here, you’ve justgotto join the PTA,’ Susan was saying.

‘Well, I’d have to see if that’s doable right now,’ the woman said.

Norah immediately had a funny feeling that she didn’t understand. Later, she would come to understand that she’d recognised the voice without realising it consciously. But at that moment—before the woman turned and Norah’s mind slid out of her head and down her leg—she only knew that something had set off what Freddie would have called her Spidey Sense, but Norah would have said was a distinct feeling of, ‘Uh oh.’

Norah didn’t intend to pause, but then Susan locked eyes with her. ‘Oh Norah, late again?’ she said in a tone that was probably supposed to sound affectionate and familiar but was obviously an admonishment.

‘You know me,’ Norah shrugged, not playing Susan’s game.

The woman turned. ‘Norah?’ she said, agape.

Norah could no longer deny that she was looking right at Poppy Jennings. Childhood friend, former lover, and the one true mortal enemy of Norah’s life.

Two

Though it was her daughter’s first day at a new school, Poppy Jennings was the nervous one. She’d been up since six this morning, fighting it. The form that took for Poppy was a thorough quaffing. She was going to look as close to perfect as she could for the school run. Her hair needed to be on point and her outfit pristine. She didn’t know if she could keep it up ad infinitum, but for now, it was the only way to cope with all the changes. She was going in strong.

She loaded Luna into the BMW for her first day at Northwood (a school she knew well, having attended it from four to eighteen) and travelled the mile there, a walkable distance to be sure. But mornings only worked if they drove. If Poppy attempted to walk Luna to school, Luna would triple the time it took to make the journey. She might graze a knee to what she considered a near-fatal degree, launch an involved rescue for a pavement-stranded worm, or decide she was not actually that keen on going to school today because she wanted to watch Moana three times back-to-back. Some days, it could be all three.

But somehow, Poppy wasn’t nervous about the one thing it turned out she should have been. Because what were the odds she would run into Norah, now with her own five-year-old, at the same school they’d both attended as children? It was an absurd coincidence, too unlikely to consider. Even though life had brought Poppy back here, it seemed impossible she would find Norah back here, too. She’d be somewhere else, wouldn’t she? Doing cool things. Not standing there in sweats, looking life-worn.

But shewashere, staring Poppy in the eye with an expression that could only be described as mild horror.

‘Norah!’ Poppy exclaimed. She waited for a response for agonising seconds.

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And then Norah said, 'Do I know you?'

Poppy almost laughed. Norah knew precisely who she was. Her reaction had made that crystal clear. 'Norah, I think you know...' she began to say.

Norah then made the most preposterous song and dance of remembrance. She clicked her fingers. 'Oh, right, it's Poppy, isn't it? Sorry, it's been so long.'

Poppy decided to roll with the ludicrous performance. There was nothing to be gained from calling her out. 'OK, sure,' she said evenly.

Susan suddenly jumped in. 'You two know each other?'

Oh boy, what a question. It created the most terrible pause.

'We grew up on the same street,' Poppy eventually managed to say.

Norah shot her an inscrutable look before she turned to Susan. 'Yeah. We both went there, actually.'

Susan clapped her hands together. 'And you didn't know your kids came here together? How funny.'

Poppy thought that was an interesting word choice, seeing as no one appeared close to even cracking a smile right now.

'It's mine's first day,' Poppy said. 'We moved recently.'

‘What class?’ Norah asked, her eyebrows knitting together in a familiar expression, even after all this time. She was worried.

‘Miss... Potter?’ Poppy said, unsure if she had the teacher’s name right.

But the sigh that fell from Norah’s lips made it clear she had it bang on. Norah’s child was obviously in the same class, which was not something Norah considered good or even neutral news.

‘Right. Well, I guess I’ll be seeing you around,’ Norah said. She turned and walked off before anyone could stop her.

Susan, who was as dense as plutonium and had missed all the tension completely, went right back to banging on about the Northwood Parents and Teachers’ Association. And if Poppy hadn’t cared much about that before, she gave negative shits about it now.

Poppy was back where she had started, and she’d come back to find the one person in the world she hadn’t expected to see. And the one person that (in the dark recesses of her mind) she’d kind of hoped to see again one day. But not today. Not here. Not now.

Three

Norah walked home along the suburban leafy streets of Northwood in a daze. A car could have hit her and she might not even have noticed. What the hell was she doing here? She was supposed to be living somewhere fancy now, somewhere that former pop stars retired to, her face filled with Botox, her arse filled with silicon. She should be in one of those small, expensive British villages that attracted the rich and celebrated after they finished being famous and wanted a life of quiet luxury for the second half of their monied lives.

Why would she ever come backhere? Northwood was not a bad place. It was a fine enough place, actually, and Norah felt lucky to live here in a lot of ways, but it had its limits. The small square was the centre of the area, and it contained a café, an orthodontist, a butcher, a greengrocer, and a newsagent. If you wanted a supermarket, it was a ten-minute drive away. Not exactly rich with amenities.

There was nothing for Poppy to come back for. Her parents were gone. Her dad had died when she'd been a kid (Poppy and Norah had that in common), and her mother had died a couple of years ago, from what Norah understood from her own mum.

And she had akidnow? They might have been preggers at the same time. How weird was that? Norah wondered who had provided the other half of the DNA. Was Poppy married? Norah had done great at never finding anything out about Poppy's lifedespite how easy it would have been. But she had filters on everything with Poppy's name, so that had helped.

But that wasn't going to be possible now. They would be running into each other at the school gates twice a day, five times a week, for the foreseeable. And oh Christ, what if they becamefriends?

There was nothing for it. Norah would just have to move. She could tell Max she wanted a fresh start or something. He might go for that. Freddie would be unhappy initially, but he'd make friends soon enough at a new school. It wasn't crazy. It was a sane reaction. Yeah, so normal and healthy to run from the area at top speed rather than having to interact with Poppy Jennings.

Only things weren't good right now with Max. And it was a well-known fact that moving was high on the list of the most stressful things you could go through. She wasn't sure if she and Max could stand up to that kind of strain. It could well be the thing that led to another thing high on that list—divorce.

She took a deep breath and tried to find her way to rational thought again. It helped a little. So she had to see Poppy? So what? It wouldn't kill her, would it?

Right?

Norah let herself into the house, a small two-bed on Grange Street, two minutes from the square. 'Max?' she called.

He didn't reply. He'd gone to work, thank fuck. She couldn't deal with any more of him for a while. She needed to breathe. She couldn't believe that it was only five to nine and she'd already discussed divorce and run into a hated foe. The way it was going, a flaming meteor would fly through the back window by lunch.

She went into the kitchen and made coffee, her stupid brain forcing her to relive the excruciating moment of the meeting, second by second. She couldn't believe that she'd pretended she didn't remember Poppy. She hadn't been fooled for a second, and Norah appeared stupid in front of her. And she looked like warmed-over shit, another humiliation.

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And Poppy was perfect. Perfect hair, perfect clothes. That's who she was now—that woman. Though she wasn't a far cry from the girl with the messy ponytail and loose plaid shirt carrying her battered acoustic guitar wherever she went, she was a tidier, adult version.

No Botox. It hadn't been needed. She'd aged into an even better version of her youthful beauty. She was still in possession of porcelain-perfect skin with that natural ruddy glow in her cheeks. Her crystal blue eyes still twinkled. Her rosy mouth still carried mischief in its heart shape. She barely even looked tired, which was absurd with a child that age.

She was probably one of the mums who was always full of energy to plan exciting activities that were both educational and fun, always carrying a Tupperware full of fresh vegetables for her child to snack on, and always on time. She was already aligned with Susan within five minutes of arrival because Susan knew her own. She knew a perfect mum when she saw one.

Norah had never been that. She was always a bit late, always slovenly, always caught by surprise by World Book Day or Red Nose Day or any of the other days that were defined by sending your kid to school in some carefully handcrafted outfit you didn't have the time to be fucking about with the night before.

Norah sat down at the kitchen table with her coffee. She'd have to open her laptop in a minute for work, but she felt so beaten that she couldn't face it yet. Poppy was back. And she was doing exactly what she'd done before, making Norah look a fool.

Norah eventually sighed and logged onto her customer service job at Flowers-To-

Your-Door, a flower delivery service. The queue was already pretty deep.

Hi, I'm Norah. How can I help? she asked the first customer.

He proceeded to rant about how his delivery of roses was late for his mother's birthday, causing her to have a full panic attack because she thought he'd forgotten. Norah thought the guy had bigger problems than late posies, but she offered him half his money back.

The next few complaints were not quite as dramatic, merely dreary. Norah could easily phone it in while thinking about other things. That was a mercy some days. But not today. She didn't want to be alone with her thoughts today.

She didn't want to think about that.

Twenty Years Ago

Norah was late for school.

It was her mother's fault. She was consumed with what to do with the leftovers from the funeral. Should she throw them out, try to give them to someone, or should they freeze them? Norah knew her mother didn't want an answer; she just wanted to talk at Norah.

Norah had stood nodding and mirroring like a parrot, saying things like, 'Mmm, that's a lot of sausage rolls,' until her mother released her.

Norah thought it was possible that in other families, they would have cried together over this monumental loss. But that was for functional types. In Norah's house, they processed together via trivialities. If her mum was crying, she did it privately. Norah did the same. The shower was a good place for it, masking both sound and moist

eyes.

But anyway, that was the reason that Norah was walking into Art and Design at twenty past nine. Mrs Kane noticed but only gave her a nod. The teachers had been told to 'understand' about her current situation. Norah didn't know how far that understanding would extend.

It had been three weeks since her dad had departed the planet, but when would the grace period run out? Would she be expected to get her shit together after the funeral? When was the grieving meant to be over? When was everything supposed to be normal?

Norah sat down next to her friend, Joy. She looked over in surprise. 'Oh. You came. Thought you might have fucked it off today.'

Joy was a casual friend, more due to table geography than anything else. She was slightly disconnected, but she was certainly unique, and Norah appreciated that about her. Joy had a very particular artistic style she called Contemporary Despair, where she took gothic figures of the past and put them in situations of modern ennui. She was currently painting a picture of Edgar Allan Poe trying to assemble Ikea furniture. Needless to say, her parents had not correctly anticipated their daughter's personality at the time of naming.

'I got waylaid,' Norah explained vaguely.

She got out her latest project, a graphic novel she'd been working on for months. She was a bit stalled with it currently. It was the story of a girl who accidentally dug up an ancient alien artefact in her back garden that gave her super strength. Norah had started it without knowing where it went.

She felt stupid for attempting it now. But she'd gotten ambitious, and there was no

going back. She'd put too much time into it. She couldn't afford to drop it. There wasn't time to start a fresh project without her grade going to shit. And she needed this grade. It was gonna take her to art school.

'Yeah?' Joy asked.

'Yeah. Needed to chat to my mum about stuff,' Norah told her.

Joy looked like she wanted to say something about that. But then she seemed to chicken out and went back to adding shade to an Allen key that Edgar was squeezing hard enough to draw blood from his palm.

Sometime later, paused mid-stroke and said, 'Oh, that girl asked for you, by the way,' she said.

'What girl?' Norah frowned.

'That girl who does the thing.'

'I know exactly who you mean now,' Norah said dryly.

Joy frowned, trying to summon anything that might place this mystery figure. 'You know, she's like... That guitar player.'

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That lit a bulb. ‘Oh, do you mean, um, Poppy?’ Norah asked, confused.

Poppy lived on her street; their mothers knew each other. They’d been friends when they were little. But then they were placed in different classes at eight. Poppy had been considered a wee bit tricky for their new and anxious teacher, her lack of attention span and general distractibility making her a bit of an obstruction to the lesson plan. She’d been shifted to a more experienced teacher who knew how to handle her mercurial nature, and they had gone their own ways.

Poppy’s friends were now the cool muso crowd. Norah knew she could never be cool enough for them and didn’t care to be. Norah had friends, loosely speaking, but mainly, she liked to spend a lot of time drawing, which happened to be a solo pursuit. Hanging out with other people had never been a priority.

Though Norah’s and Poppy’s lives ran parallel, they didn’t intersect much. Occasionally, they’d see each other on their street and smile and say hello—nothing more. Norah thought she seemed alright, but who could tell at a distance?

Only Poppy was asking for her. She’d never done that before.

‘Did she say what she wanted?’ Norah questioned Joy.

‘No, she just asked if you were here. Which you weren’t. And she left.’ Joy dabbed at her piece.

Norah frowned. ‘OK. Weird.’

She turned back to her bastard project and soon forgot about it.

Four

Now

Poppy sat in a boxy, drab kitchen, looking at the clock in agony: 2.15. She was due to pick up Luna in an hour, which meant running into Norah again. Poppy had had all day to mull over their interaction. That was no good thing. She was feeling very paranoid.

Norah had been here building relationships with the other parents for a while, and Poppy was a newcomer. If Norah hated her and decided to do something with that feeling, it might not be too hard to make everyone else hate her.

Was Norah that person, though? She hadn't been when Poppy knew her. But a lot of time had passed. And the way she'd treated Poppy today.... There was anger there, still. That much was clear.

But who was she now? What was her life? She'd always carried a melancholy; it had been part of her charm. But where was the shine that went with it? Those grey, almond-shaped eyes had always been deep and mysterious, but a little of the soul in them had seeped out somewhere along the way. She still had that sexy, sarcastic mouth, but it didn't smile.

Who was Norah Cauldwell now? Poppy didn't know. She only knew who she had been.

Twenty Years Ago

'I did look for her. She wasn't in,' Poppy explained to her mum, sitting in the kitchen

eating a biscuit.

Her mother was stirring something mysterious on the hob. It didn't smell very good.

'Then go and call for her,' her mother said.

Poppy sighed. 'I'm not eight. I can't just bang on someone's door and ask them to play.' She paused. 'I don't even know what you think I can do, anyway.'

'Come on, Pop,' her mother said. 'I'm not going through this again.'

'I'm not a grief counsellor, Mum,' Poppy said.

She knew how it sounded. Like she didn't care what had happened to Norah. And of course, she did. Truly. However, she and Norah weren't friends now. How could Poppy help?

'I know that,' her mother retorted, tossing a sharp look over her shoulder. 'But I just think she could do with someone who understands.'

Poppy sighed again. 'Mum...'

'I know this feels like a lot to ask. But I just think it's important you try and talk to her. At least once. I talked to her mum. I don't think either of them is coping.'

'Did she say that?' Poppy asked.

'Of course not. She acted like everything was fine,' her mother said, turning the hob off and going to the table, where she leant her hands on the back of the chair opposite Poppy.

‘Maybe it is,’ Poppy suggested.

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Her mother raised an eyebrow.

Poppy looked down at the table. 'Yeah, OK. Fine. I'll go.' She pushed the rest of her biscuit into her mouth. She looked back up to find her mother staring at her. 'What, now?' Poppy asked, mouth full of hobnob.

'Yes.'

Poppy got to her feet with a heavy heart. This was going to be so bloody awkward.

Poppy walked out of their old red front door, down Orchid Road and knocked on Norah's blue front door. She was thinking about how to open. Something about just wanting to hang out? That would be weird. They didn't hang out, ever. Maybe she could ask for some help with something school-related? But that would be a pretty see-through lie since they didn't share any classes.

Poppy pushed the doorbell, hoping inspiration would strike when the moment arrived. But then Norah answered, looking at her, she asked, 'Is this about that casserole dish?'

That threw Poppy for a loop. 'What?'

'Joy told me you were asking for me, and I remembered your mum gave my mum a stew thing a few weeks ago, so I thought...'

'Oh. No, it's not that,' Poppy said. But what was it?

Norah stared at her, waiting. Her irritation showed in those shrewd grey eyes. Inspiration had failed to strike Poppy. There was only one thing for it.

‘Can I be honest?’ Poppy asked.

Norah looked confused. ‘I don’t know, can you?’

‘Look, the thing is... I think you’re gonna hate this. The reason I’m here. So I think I just need to tell you straight out, and then you can tell me to piss off, OK? Because that’s what I’d do if I were you.’

Norah looked increasingly puzzled. ‘Hate what?’ She rolled her eyes. ‘Oh.’

Poppy nodded. ‘Yeah.’

‘Was it your mum’s idea?’

Poppy nodded, grateful that Norah was intuiting a lot about the situation. Saying it aloud would be agony.

‘Well, come in for a bit, and then you can at least tell her, god, I don’t know. But something.’

Poppy smiled. ‘I appreciate your understanding on this.’

‘It’s just mum bullshit, that’s all,’ Norah said with a wry smile that Poppy would come to know well in time.

Poppy laughed. ‘Yeah.’ And she went in, thinking, Maybe it won’t be so dreadful after all.

Now

Mum bullshit. Poppy remembered those words so well, still. They were about to take on a new meaning. Because now? Poppy and Norah were the mums. The bullshit was their bullshit. And it was time to go and pick up Luna.

Five

Norah trudged to school as though she were walking through wet cement. Her pockets were full of snacks for Freddie. He always came out voracious. He seemed to need to be eating every minute of his life at the moment.

She approached the school gates, and now panic was setting in. It was actually ridiculous. Why should she be scared of that woman? She was just a person. A person who broke her heart for the first time and did it so successfully that it remained the worst heartbreak of her life.

So what? Norah had only been eighteen. She'd been stupid. She was older now. Wiser. In possession of a thicker skin. And married, too. It wasn't a happy marriage, but Poppy wasn't to know that. For all Poppy knew, Norah was blissful in her matrimony.

Taking all that into account, Norah should have nothing to fear from the grownup version of an ex-girlfriend. Twenty years had passed. So much change had occurred between now and then that they were virtually different people. She didn't know this woman. She wasn't that girl. She was just wearing her skin.

Norah came pretty close to convincing herself of that until she locked eyes with Poppy at the gate, and her stomach felt like it was gonna fall out of her arse.

'Hi,' Poppy said with a modest wave.

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‘Hello,’ Norah said quietly and went in.

They were almost side by side as they crossed the playground. Norah decided to slow her pace to allow Poppy to leave her behind. Unfortunately, Poppy had the same idea, so their paces still matched. They were walking in perfect tandem toward the door of the open classroom. The kids were piling out, flying to their caregivers. Norah and Poppy were among the last to reach the door.

‘You first,’ Norah said, gesturing at the door.

‘No, please,’ Poppy said.

Norah sighed through her annoyance and said, ‘OK, thanks,’ and stepped forward.

Freddie was ushered out by the teacher. ‘Mum!’ he said.

He wasn’t usually so excited to see her, and his shiny, happy face offered solace in amongst the banal horror of the situation. But that was swiftly cancelled when the first words out of his mouth were, ‘I’ve got a new friend!’

No. Please, no.

A little girl ran out, and you couldn’t miss the likeness. She was a mini-Poppy, albeit one with perfect braids. ‘Mum!’ she yelled. ‘Can Freddie come to our house?’

‘Oh!’ Poppy exclaimed. ‘Ummm...’

Norah couldn't believe it. And yet she could. Her fear had come to pass. It was comforting, in a way. Norah wasn't paranoid. Life really was as stupid as she'd always suspected.

The one bit of fortune in this was the question wasn't aimed at her. It was Poppy's to deal with.

'Well, maybe not today,' Poppy said quickly.

'Why?!' Luna demanded. She was a mini-Poppy in more than looks, it seemed.

'I've got to get back,' Poppy asked.

'What for?' Luna pressed.

'The... plumber is coming,' Poppy improvised.

'What for?' Luna kept on.

Norah felt the corner of her mouth slide up infinitesimally.

'The toilet won't flush,' Poppy said.

'Did you break it?' Luna asked.

Poppy grabbed her daughter's hand and tried to coerce her out of the playground.

'No, well... Well, yes,' she said, pulling at her hand.

But Luna wasn't going into that goodnight gently. 'How? Was it a massive poo?'

'Oh my god,' Poppy muttered to herself, pained. She was still trying to pull Luna,

whose feet were edging forward, but not nearly fast enough.

‘Why aren’t you answering me?’ Luna demanded.

Norah decided it was becoming a little too fun to watch Poppy’s suffering, and she took Freddie’s hand. ‘Come on.’

‘Have you brought my snack?’ he asked. He seemed to have realised no playdate was forthcoming and was over it, bless him.

‘Yes, of course. Let’s get out of the playground, and I’ll give it to you,’ she told him.

The allure of the snack pulled him from the playground with relative ease. She heard one last snippet of the conversation between Poppy and her daughter as she passed through the gates to a waiting BMW.

‘Yes, Luna. It was massive. OK?!’ Poppy was saying irritably.

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Norah worked hard to push down the smirk that was trying to take position on her face as she left the playground and fed Freddie a fruit bar. But only out of propriety. In her heart, the smile was allowed to be as big as it wanted to be—because Poppy wasn't so perfect.

Twenty Years Ago

Poppy was in Norah's tiny, cluttered bedroom. That was weird thing, numero uno. Numero dos was that she was looking at Norah's half-finished graphic novel, her slender guitarist's hands flicking through the pages. She'd just picked it up off the desk without asking. For Norah, it felt like someone had walked in on her in the shower. But what was she gonna do, rip it out of her hands?

After a minute, Poppy looked up. 'This is cool.'

'Oh,' Norah said, surprised. 'Is it? It's not.'

'It is. The drawings are unreal.'

Norah told her face not to even dare blush. 'Thanks,' she said, trying to sound casual.

'The central character is cute. Kind of looks like you, actually,' Poppy observed casually.

Norah didn't have a single response to that.

'How does it end?' Poppy asked, putting it down.

‘I don’t know yet,’ Norah admitted.

‘Well, when it’s done, I wanna read it.’

‘It’s more of an if than a when,’ Norah admitted.

‘What’s the problem?’ Poppy asked casually.

‘Umm...’

Poppy shook herself. ‘Sorry...’

‘No, it’s fine. I just... I think the hamster has fallen off the wheel,’ Norah said.

Poppy’s eyebrows flew up. ‘What?’

‘It’s something my dad used to say...’ It still felt weird to use the past tense about him, but Norah tried to shake that off. ‘It means something about not running at full function.’

‘Oh. Yeah. I get it. But I mean, you wouldn’t be, would you? Running at full function. When I...’ Poppy stopped. ‘Sorry, I wasn’t supposed to talk about this.’

‘No, go on. Say what you were gonna say,’ Norah prompted.

‘You sure?’

‘Might as well,’ Norah shrugged.

‘OK. Well, when my dad died, I wouldn’t get out of bed for about two weeks. My mum did everything to entice me. She even tried to drag me out once. I bit her.’

‘How old were you?’

‘Ten.’

‘That’s a horrible time for that to happen,’ Norah observed.

‘There’s no great time to lose a parent,’ Poppy shrugged.

Norah was amazed at the way Poppy was talking. Everyone else tiptoed around this subject, and it made Norah feel like she should stay quiet on the subject, too. But Poppy was just talking about it like it wasn’t a forbidden topic but simply a thing that happened.

‘What caused it?’ Norah found herself asking.

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‘Heart disease. He didn’t know he had it until it was too late. He was at work; he was an insurance adjuster, and he hated it, according to my mum. She thinks it was the stress that did it for him. That and doughnuts.’ She sighed. ‘He died on the way to assess a house fire.’

‘Did he crash?’ Norah asked, horrified.

‘No, luckily, he was able to pull over, or he might have taken people with him. He flagged down someone passing. They got him to the hospital. But he died there.’

Norah felt her stomach turn. ‘Did you... see him?’

‘No. My mum did, though. She raced straight there. I was at school. She thought she’d have time to get me. But it happened pretty quickly after she arrived.’

‘I’m sorry you weren’t there,’ Norah said with feeling.

‘It was better, I think. My mum said... It wasn’t good.’

‘But you didn’t get to say goodbye,’ Norah said.

‘Did you?’ Poppy asked and made a face. ‘I’m doing it again. Should I shut up?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said eventually, the only honest answer she could give.

‘Alright.’ Poppy paused. ‘You wanna see a movie?’

The tone change threw Norah. ‘Oh. Umm...’ She thought over what her evening would look like. Her mum was due back soon from work. They would eat dinner together and then sit watching TV in a silence so thick you could spread it on bread. ‘What movie?’ Norah asked.

‘It’s called Monkey Killers.’

‘Monkey Killers?’ Norah repeated in disbelief. ‘Are the monkeys themselves killers, or are people killing monkeys?’ she asked.

Poppy stood. ‘The first one. If we go right now, we can just catch it. But I should warn you, the movie won’t be good.’

‘I got that from the title.’

‘The reviews say the plot exposition is so bad that they might as well have turned to the camera to explain. It got onestar from the local paper, and the same reviewer thought that the Britney Spears movie was “An underrated gem.”’

‘You know that, and you’re choosing to pay money to see it?’ Norah asked.

‘It’s kinda my thing,’ Poppy explained. ‘I like watching terrible movies and imagining the number of idiots that had to be rounded up to create something so awful. The number of opportunities people had to say, “Are you sure about this?” that no one ever took. Incredible when you look at it like that.’

‘I might have to rethink your review of my graphic novel,’ Norah said with a small smile.

Poppy rolled her eyes. ‘I can tell the difference between good and bad. I can just get pleasure out of either.’

‘That’s a good skill to have,’ Norah noted as she followed her out.

She felt a little nervous about spending an evening with Poppy but also hopeful. Poppy wasn’t uncomfortable knowing what Norah was going through, and she wasn’t scared to talk about it. She knew the experience intimately. Even if they never spoke about it, being around her felt like a relief. Poppy just got it.

‘Hey, if you could choose, would you rather be able to fly, but you can only go twenty miles a day or read minds, but it’s only dogs?’ Norah suddenly heard herself ask as they walked down the street to the bus stop.

Poppy looked at her like she was bonkers. Norah supposed it was a bit silly, but she’d always liked hypothetical. Usually, they stayed in her head. But it felt good to talk about nothing.

‘Cauldwell, are you insane?’ Poppy said with a tut. ‘That’s no question at all. I’d read the minds of dogs.’

‘What?’ Norah said. ‘You wouldn’t fly?’

‘Twenty miles? I’d get as far as what? The next town? Pointless. Might as well get the train.’

‘But you can fly!’ Norah said.

‘Or I could know the mind of a dog and all its mysteries. Clear winner.’

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‘You’re nuts,’ Norah said with a shake of her head, grinning.

‘You’re nuts,’ Poppy grinned back.

Six

Now

‘No, I managed to flush it, so I cancelled the plumber,’ Poppy was lying to Luna while she dug around the fridge for a yoghurt.

Luna was sceptical. ‘But you said you couldn’t. That it was a giant poo. You said it needed an expert—’

‘Luna, can you please just accept what I’m telling you?’ Poppy begged.

But of course, Luna couldn’t. That would have been completely against her nature of needing to know everything all the bloody time. Some days, it was a wonderful feature of her personality. She was unrelentingly curious. Then there were days like today when Poppy just wanted a little mercy from the child. But she would give no quarter.

‘I’m only asking why it’s different now,’ Luna went on.

The reason it was different now was that a fictional ginormous poo was no longer necessary. It fulfilled its function, which was to get Poppy out of a car crash of a social situation with Norah. Of all the kids Luna could have attached herself to on her

first day...

Poppy wanted to be happy for her. The transition to a new school hadn't been too horrendous if Luna was skipping out with a fresh bestie. But of all the besties, it had to be Norah's son, didn't it? Even that awful woman Susan's kid would have been an upgrade from this.

But it might peter out. Kids made lots of friends at that age, and they could be fairly superficial. This was just the first day. Tomorrow would be some other kid. Right?

'Mum!' Luna cried. 'Answer me!'

There was nothing for it. Poppy was going to have to be honest. Luna wouldn't buy anything else.

'Look, Luna... I lied. There was never a plumber coming. I just didn't want to have a friend round today.'

'Why not?' the kid asked instantly.

'Because it's stressful.'

'Why?'

'Because while you're playing, I have to entertain the parent,' she said simply.

'Why?' Luna asked.

'Because that's how it works.'

'Why?' she asked again.

‘It’s the social contract,’ Poppy said desperately.

‘Social contract?’ Luna repeated.

‘Look, adults are different from kids. We can’t just ask each other to play. It’s not simple for us.’

‘I asked other kids to play today. Freddie was the only one that would,’ Luna said.

That took the wind out of Poppy’s sails. ‘Really?’

‘Yeah. He’s nice.’

‘Is he?’ Poppy sighed, annoyed.

‘Yeah. He let me play with his pterodactyl.’

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Great. Freddie had to be a sweetie pie, didn't he? But it didn't change anything. They'd have to be friends on their own time. Poppy and Norah could have no part in their friendship. It was simply not possible.

Twenty Years Ago

'It's not on anywhere round here,' Poppy complained.

'You could watch it on DVD?' Norah suggested.

'I need to see it on the big screen. This is *The Room* we're talking about. It's the Mona Lisa of awful movies,' Poppy said passionately.

'Wait. It might come on?' Norah said.

Poppy sighed and went back to strumming.

It had been a few months since Poppy had been sent to comfort Norah and failed utterly. The only thing Poppy could do was hang out with her and provide a distraction. So that was what she did. She was glad of the break from her usual friends/bandmates anyway. Shit was getting annoying with them lately. Too much ego bullshit. She was more comfortable with Norah.

Sometimes Poppy dragged Norah to bad movies, but often they just sat together in Norah's bedroom while Norah drew and Poppy strummed her battered acoustic. Usually, Poppy needed to be alone to feel uninhibited enough to noodle with compositions, but somehow, Norah sitting and drawing in the background was kind

of nice. The sound of her pencils scratching against paper became a background rhythm.

Though this had started as a favour to her mother, it wasn't that now. Norah was her friend. It had happened so easily that Poppy wondered if it was because they'd known each other when they were little. Maybe they were still the same kids underneath it all. It was a nice thought.

'Hey, what's that tune?' Norah asked suddenly. 'It sounds kind of familiar.'

'It's not a song, just me fucking around,' Poppy said.

'Oh, I thought...' Norah stopped and smiled. 'You know, it just sounded so catchy; I thought I knew it.'

Poppy smiled back. 'It's nothing.'

'You've been playing it for weeks.'

'I don't even have lyrics for it,' Poppy dismissed.

'When you do, I wanna hear it,' Norah told her.

'I might not even get that far, Cauldwell.'

'You write for your band, don't you?'

'This one won't be for them. Slightly too upbeat,' Poppy said with a dismissive hand wave. 'We're very strict. Alt rock only. If Thom Yorke wouldn't like it, then we don't play it.'

‘They’ll be missing out,’ Norah observed. She was struck by a thought. ‘Hey, would you rather be able to see people’s dreams or read their emotions as a colour aura around them?’

‘How well can I see the dreams?’

‘You can watch them like they’re on TV.’

‘How specific are the emotions? Can I see that someone is sad yet slightly horny at the same time?’ Poppy checked.

Norah thought it over. ‘Sure.’

Poppy considered. ‘I’m gonna go with the dreams.’

‘That’s so the wrong answer,’ Norah said with a chuckle.

‘You want the emotions?’ Poppy said, aghast. ‘You wouldn’t want to watch someone’s personal nightmare, wherethey’re, like, trapped in a world where squirrels are the size of t-rexes?’

‘If you had the colour thing, no one could ever lie to you,’ Norah pointed out. ‘You’d know exactly where their heads were at.’

‘I don’t want to know when people are lying to me, thanks,’ Poppy said. ‘What if you told me you liked my song just now, and then your aura was pity coloured?’

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‘What’s the colour of pity?’ Norah asked, amused.

‘Chartreuse?’

‘Well, I’d have been orange. That’s sincerity. So you wouldn’t have to worry about that,’ Norah said. She went back to her work.

Poppy liked that answer, and she went back to working on the chord progression.

Sometime later, Poppy realised she was a bit parched and looked up to ask Norah something banal about a beverage, but the words never left her mouth.

Norah was bent over her work, with her inky black hair falling across her face. She moved to pull it back behind her ear, her pretty, serious face in a light frown of concentration, her grey eyes so intense it seemed like they might burn a hole in the page, and Poppy thought, ‘I want to kiss her.’

It felt like Poppy had been seconds away from this revelation for a while, and when it presented itself, it was a surprise, yet it wasn’t. They’d been getting closer for months. And Norah was cute, with her soulful eyes and her mouth that looked both sarcastic and incredibly kissable. She had depth. She was talented. She was funny. She made Poppy feel interesting. Poppy liked to talk to her. She felt easy around her. It felt good and exciting to see her.

But the gender of her was surprising. Poppy had never felt this reaction to a girl before.

Oh shit, Poppy thought. Am I gay?

‘Hey, you want to get a coffee around the corner?’ she asked Norah quickly, trying to shut her brain up.

Norah looked up. ‘Gimme three minutes. This shading is fucking me up, but I’m nearly there.’

‘Cool. How are you getting on, by the way? You’ve been working on that thing a lot lately.’

‘It’s going slow, but I think it’s finding its feet,’ Norah told her.

‘So I’ll get to see the end of the story, then,’ Poppy said, pleased.

They smiled at each other for a second. And then Poppy felt like her aura was showing. ‘Anyway, finish your shading. I want coffee,’ she said quickly.

Norah chuckled and did as she was told. Poppy went back to her strumming. And soon enough, some words came for her music. Just like that, it became a real song.

Seven

Now

Norah was finding her rhythm. The shock of Poppy’s reappearance was passing with the weeks, and she was left with the situation as it truly was. A niggle, nothing more. She couldn’t carry on worrying about it. She had bigger fish to fry. She was sitting in a waiting room, preparing herself to go into her first couples’ counselling session.

‘You ready?’ she asked Max.

‘What do you mean?’ he replied, confused.

‘Just what I said. Are you ready?’

‘Readyhow, though?’

Norah rolled his eyes. ‘Forget it.’

A woman in a jaunty scarf popped her head through the door. ‘Norah and Max?’

They came out fifty minutes later, and Norah was exhausted. She had just found out that everything was her fault, and Max was a blameless angel. She’d been quite surprised to learn that.

‘Should we go for a drink?’ Max asked. ‘Talk about the session.’

‘No, we need to get back,’ Norah said flatly. ‘Jane’s expecting us.’

‘I could text her?’ Max asked.

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‘What for?’ Norah asked as they headed down the dark city street towards the car.

‘What’s wrong?’ Max asked, finally twigging the bad vibe.

‘What’s wrong?’ Norah spat back, a rage building in her that had been aired in the session. There wasn’t the time. Max had sucked up the whole session with his many, many grievances. ‘What’s wrong was the whole last hour.’

‘I thought that was good,’ Max said, shocked and hurt. ‘We really talked, for the first time in a long time.’

Norah could only laugh.

‘What is it?’ Max asked.

‘You’d like to know what’s wrong with me?’ Norah asked.

‘Yes?’ he said nervously.

‘Funny, you didn’t seem to give a shit in there,’ she said, thumbing in the direction of the counselling office.

Max was confounded. ‘I thought we did great. Really opened things up.’

‘The counsellor made a point of saying that one person couldn’t be solely responsible for every problem in this relationship. Did you even hear that?’ Norah checked.

‘Of course. I know I’m not perfect.’

‘What are your imperfections?’ Norah asked.

Max paused. ‘I don’t always remember to take the rubbish out on time.’

Norah stared at him agog. ‘You said I was emotionally cold. And you think that’s equal to missing the odd rubbish collection?’

‘If you had stuff to say, you should have said it,’ Max said, irate.

‘When? You barely drew breath!’

‘I’ve been holding on to a lot of stuff. I needed to vent. I thought that’s what we were there for.’

‘I thought we were there to talk to each other. Not just vomit grievances,’ Norah fired back.

Max looked wobbly. For a second, Norah thought she’d gotten through to him. But then he shook his head. ‘That’s exactly what I did.’

No, nothing. He couldn’t see past his nose. He never could. Why had Norah overlooked that? She had to be honest with herself. She’d always known this about him. Hadn’t she just thought it was who he was and decided to be OK with it?

Well, the question had now become, could she keep doing that? And for how long?

They got home, and Jane was waiting. Jane was fifteen, a third cousin on Norah’s mother’s side, who she’d known since she was in nappies. Not that she’d ever seemed young. She had been an old soul since she could speak. Her mother, Lauren, claimed

her first words were, 'I'm tired of this,' while playing with Duplo.

'Freddie isn't asleep, but he's pretending to be. I keep catching him reading with a little torch,' Jane told them.

'Don't worry about that. It's a system we've worked out,' Norah said. 'I pretend I don't know, and he gets to feel like a rebel while he works on his reading.'

Norah went into her purse and pulled out some money, handing it over. 'Can you do parents' evening next Tuesday?'

'Yes, but I have to be back by eight thirty at the latest. My mum wants me to meet her new boyfriend, and she's being quite neurotic about it. If I'm late, she's going to read it as an unwillingness to make space for this man.'

Norah wasn't sure how to address the bulk of that, so she stuck to the practicalities. 'No problem. We probably won't even need that long.'

Jane packed up her homework and headed out.

'Wow, so Lauren's dating again?' Max noted.

‘Mmm.’

‘I thought she’d quit that. After—’

‘Getting robbed by three boyfriends in a row is a tough streak. But she said she was ready to get back out there after she found a website that runs DBS checks for £19.99. It’s given her a new confidence,’ Norah told him.

They were moving past the argument, pretending it hadn’t happened. Norah didn’t have the energy to keep butting her head against a brick wall.

‘Kind of a low bar,’ Max said.

‘Mmm,’ Norah said vaguely, but it horrified her, too.

And the worst thing about it was that would be her if she got divorced. After the grieving period had passed for the family she’d tried to build, she was sure she’d be alone for a long time. And then one day, she’d get that feeling again. She’d want to meet someone. Laura’s track record was a horror show, but it was probably standard, right? Because how could you ever truly know who someone was until it was too late?

Max was the devil she knew. Was that enough to sustain her? Was she crazy to dream that something better was possible? Or were other people only ever capable of providing disappointment?

Twenty Years Ago

‘Er, maybe at five,’ Norah said to Poppy.

She was trying to figure out when they could next hang out. It was getting trickier lately. Things were heating up at school as the year progressed towards exams. Norah was making progress with her graphic novel, but she had two other subjects to contend with—business studies and computer science. She hated them, but her mother had insisted that she needed some practical subjects for balance if she was gonna be artsy-fartsy.

‘Five? I’ve got band practise then.’ Poppy said, disappointed.

‘How late does it run?’ Norah asked.

‘Depends on how long Liam acts like a princess about his drum solo. No one wants it, but he just keeps harping on. On and on and on...’

‘Maybe it’s not a goer. Tomorrow then?’ Norah posited.

It was crazy how, a few months ago, they’d only been on nodding terms, and now, Norah couldn’t imagine life without Poppy. It was so easy to be around her, so pleasurable. Being around Poppy made life feel like it hadn’t ended. It could still go on and would. Her dad was gone, and that was still agonising, but it wasn’t the crushing grief it had been.

Norah supposed she was healing. In some ways, that frightened her. Her grief was the last thing she had from her dad. Her only inheritance. Once that was gone, he was gone. Sometimes, it felt like a betrayal to carry on, to be OK. To live felt like saying it didn’t matter that he wasn’t anymore. She didn’t know what to do with that feeling.

Part of Norah wondered if she should say something to Poppy. Of all people, she would understand. But they hadn’t talked about her dad all that much, even now. A

part of the beauty of Poppy was she showed Norah what the future could be, which was possible to thrive even after the heavy loss. Poppy knew how to be happy, and Norah liked that about her so much. It was another reason not to bring up her dad. She didn't want to make their friendship about sadness.

'How about I text you when it's done, and if you're up, I'll come over?' Poppy suggested hopefully.

Norah was delighted she wasn't taking the get-out. 'Yeah, do that.'

Poppy smiled. 'Great.' She went into her house.

Norah got all the way to her front gate before she realised she'd left her pencils in Poppy's bedroom. She was planning on finishing a panel tonight, and she couldn't do without them. She turned and went back the way she came.

She knocked on the door, and Poppy's mum answered. 'Oh, hello. Forget something?' she asked warmly. She was nice, Poppy's mum. She wished her own mother would take a leaf out of her book.

Norah nodded ruefully. 'My pencils.'

'Run up and get them. Poppy's in her room.'

'Thanks.'

Norah went up the stairs, and the familiar sound of plucked guitar strings drifted down to meet her. The same composition she'd been working on for weeks, Norah knew it back to front. But it was accompanied by a new sound. Vocals. Poppy was singing.

Poppy never sang in front of Norah. Norah didn't realise that she even could. She sang a bit of backup in the band, but it was only the odd 'Yeah' or 'Ooh ooh.' But as Norah stood listening at the door, she learned that Poppyreallycould belt. Her voice was sweet and melodic and filled with rich emotion.

Norah stood shocked for a second, rooted to the spot by the surprise of her friend's vocal talent. She wasn't trying to earwig, but she was simply astounded.

And then she heard the lyrics.

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‘She finds solace in the stroke of a pen,

In the colours that bleed, she finds a friend.

Through the sadness that clouds her gaze,

Her drawings weave through the darkest maze.’

Wait... Was the song about Norah? It couldn’t be, could it? No. That would be silly.

‘In the silence of her room, where shadows play,

Norah's drawings come alive, in their own way.

With tears like ink, she paints the night,

Sketching her sorrows in the fading light.’

OK, she definitely heard her name there. Poppy had written a song about her? Norah didn’t know how to process that. But she didn’t get the chance to figure out her feelings because there was one last surprise to come.

‘In shadows cast by flickering light,

I watch you draw, lost in the night.

Each line you trace, my heart does ache,

For love I hide, for your sweet sake.'

Norah took one step back and another and then turned and ran back down the stairs.

'Did you get your pencils?' Mrs Jennings called after her.

'Yep! Bye!' Norah said, flying out the door and slamming it behind her.

She ran down the street and into her own house, running into her bedroom and flopping onto her bed. Her heart was pounding, but not just from the run. She was scared.

Poppy had written a love song about her.

Eight

Now

Poppy was looking at her bank balance. It wasn't a pleasant experience.

She was running out of money, fast. The house was paid off, thank god. Her mother had paid the mortgage off a few years before she died. But there were still bills, and Luna wasn't cheap to raise, even at this age. Just keeping her fast-growing feet shod seemed to take the GPA of a developing nation.

Poppy looked at little Luna, sitting at her plastic craft table, working on a picture. The kid had no idea of her money worries, barely understanding the concept of money at all. Poppy liked it that way. That's what childhood was for. Blissful ignorance.

Many times in Poppy's young life, one or both of her parents would say the phrase, 'We can't afford it.' And Poppy knew to shut her trap. But Luna had never heard that

expression. Not that she got everything she ever asked for. Poppy didn't want to raise her like that, even when she had more to give.

It was no good for kids to get everything. Not just because it spoiled them but because it wasn't that fun to get everything you wanted. It was good to want things. It was part of what made life worth living. It would have done Luna a disservice to give her nothing to desire.

Unfortunately, Luna didn't understand that yet. She would throw some pretty intense strops or, if she was feeling in more of a bartering mood, could beg with the best of them. There was going to be a lot more of that in her future because Poppy was almost broke now. The royalties from her songs were drying up. In fairness, it had taken longer than Poppy would have expected. She'd let it happen, though she knew there was more she could do.

Even as funds dwindled, she could not bring herself to go on the nostalgia tours she was occasionally offered. She wanted that time in her life to die. She hated her music now. It embarrassed her to hear the recordings. It was such a horrible dilution of what she'd set out to do, which was simply to make something worth hearing.

If she'd been good at it once, the joy of doing it was beaten out of her now. Despite what she'd achieved with it once upon a time. Getting the attention of someone she was in love with, albeit accidentally.

Twenty Years Ago

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Poppy's voice died in her throat as she heard the front door slam. It was probably just her mum, right? Nipping out for milk?

That was when Poppy saw the pencils lying on her desk. Norah was never without them. If she realised she'd left them behind, wouldn't she...

Poppy ran downstairs to find her mother folding laundry. 'Did Norah just come in?' she asked, trying to sound casual.

'I sent her up to you. Didn't you see her? She was coming to your bedroom for her art stuff.'

The colour drained from Poppy's face.

Norah had heard the song and legged it. She was probably completely freaked out, maybe even revolted. It wasn't supposed to go this way. It wasn't supposed to be now, and it might not have been ever. Poppy had no real plans to tell her. And certainly not via song.

'What's up?' her mother asked.

'Nothing.'

Her mother rolled her eyes. 'Oh, yes, because your face always looks green. What's wrong?' she demanded, putting down a jumper on the pile.

It had never crossed Poppy's mind to discuss this with her mother, but apparently, her

face was an open book. And her brain wasn't functioning enough to make something up. So she told half the truth.

'I think she heard something.'

'Who, Norah? Heard what? What are you talking about?' her mum asked, baffled.

'She heard a song I wrote.'

Her mother frowned, trying to puzzle out the problem. 'And you didn't want anyone to hear it yet, is that it?'

'Ummm...'

'Was it personal?' her mother asked, getting closer to the truth. This was her mother all over. Part bloodhound.

'Very,' Poppy said.

'What was it about? You haven't played me this one yet.'

Poppy cleared her throat. 'I wasn't ready.'

'You've never minded before,' her mother said, her brow deepening. She was getting there.

'I wrote a love song,' Poppy admitted.

'For someone specific?' her mother pressed.

Poppy nodded.

‘Oh.Oh.’

There it was. But what would she think about it?

Her mother’s face cracked into a big grin. ‘Oh, sweetheart!’ she said, laughing. ‘Oh god. You must be dying!’

‘Mum!’ Poppy exclaimed, incensed.

‘I’d have never sent her up if I’d known, kiddo. I’m so sorry.’

‘It’s not your fault,’ Poppy said miserably.

But it was sort of nice to commiserate with her mum. She didn’t seem very surprised by the object of her love song either, and that was a comfort, too.

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‘Did you always know?’ she asked.

‘Knowwhat, exactly?’ her mother asked, and it was clear that she was trying not to insert her size fives into her mouth, which she was apt to do on occasion.

‘I’m still figuring it out,’ Poppy said honestly.

‘It had crossed my mind,’ her mother admitted. ‘You and Norah... I thought you were just being kind at first. But lately, I did start to wonder.’

‘And you don’t, you don’t mind or anything?’ Poppy checked.

‘God, no!’ her mother exclaimed, almost angry at the idea she could be. ‘Actually, if you did turn out to be a lesbian, it would be a load off my mind,’ she admitted. ‘Boys are... I mean, some are fine. I even married one. But as a group? Rather worrisome.’

‘Mum, I really don’t know if that’s the word I want to use,’ Poppy told her.

‘No, OK, sorry, got a bit excited there. I’ll shut up now.’ She paused. ‘But you never wrote a love song about any boys. That much I do know.’

Poppy groaned. ‘Oh god. She heard it. She bloody heard it!’ Poppy sat down on the sofa and fell sideways, her face pushing into a cushion.

‘So, I take it you hadn’t talked about it, you and Norah?’ her mother said.

Poppy turned her face out to look at her mother. ‘No.’

‘So you don’t know if she...’

‘No.’

‘Were you going to tell her?’

‘I’m not sure. I was waiting, I think. Probably,’ Poppy said, uncertain. She hadn’t worked all this out yet.

‘Waiting for what?’ her mother asked.

‘I don’t know. Maybe the right time?’

Her mother laughed.

‘What’s the joke?’ Poppy asked, irritated.

‘There is no right time. That will never happen.’

‘Yes, but her dad just died,’ Poppy said emotionally. ‘So there might not be a right time, but there’s a wrong time and a wrong way. And that’s how it’s happened. In the worst possible way.’

‘But it has happened,’ her mother shrugged, picking up a pair of jeans. ‘Toothpaste won’t go back in the tube, sweetheart.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, you should talk to her.’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

Her mother was stunned. 'What? You think you're just going to carry on and pretend it didn't happen?'

Poppy thought it over. 'She knows, but she doesn't know I know. If she doesn't bring it up, I can just... not.'

Her mother folded up the jeans, sighing. 'Good luck with that.'

'Mum! I need your support!'

'And you're getting it.'

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‘No, I’m not! You’re supposed to tell me whatever I do is fine.’

Her mother tutted and smiled. ‘Oh, Pop. That’s a total misunderstanding of my job,’ her mother told her.

‘Then what is your job?’ Poppy demanded.

‘To lovingly prepare you for reality. And the reality is that she’s your friend, and you’ve been as thick as thieves for months. And now there’s this big thing in the middle of it. It’s not just going to go away, as much as you might want it to.’

Poppy was furious at her mother. She’d only wanted a comforting lie, just one beautiful little fib. But it wasn’t her way.

‘Mum... What if she hates me now?’ Poppy asked her mother.

‘She won’t.’

‘How do you know?’

‘I don’t. But I believe it. Norah’s a good kid. She’s not going to turn her back on you over this.’

Poppy sat up on the sofa, her spine functioning again. ‘But she won’t like me like that, will she?’

Her mother stopped folding and sat down next to her. She slid an arm around her

shoulder. Her mother wasn't a big hugger, but when Poppy needed it, she always seemed to know. 'I don't know. But for her own sake, I hope she does. She'd be lucky to have you.'

'Thanks, Mum,' Poppy said, her bottom lip wobbling.

Now

Poppy was in the same living room where she'd come out to her mum, watching TV with Luna, some movie with Barbie and unicorns. It was nice to remember her mother in that crucial moment of her own young life. The woman could not be thrown by anything. Poppy could have announced she'd murdered someone, and her mother would have simply grabbed a shovel.

But now Poppy was the mum, and it was her job to be that for little Luna. Be the woman of iron. Poppy didn't feel so tough, though. She missed her mother. It had been two years now. She could have used her perspective on things. She'd have known the shove to give Poppy.

Looking back, though, Poppy had to wonder. Her mum wasn't infallible. She wasn't superwoman. Maybe all she'd done was show strength because she knew that it was needed. Maybe she hadn't always felt that sure of herself. Maybe she was playing the role she had to.

'Mummy, can I have a magazine today?' Luna asked.

Poppy immediately tensed up. 'Err...'

'There's a new Frozen one,' Luna told her. 'Agnes at school said it's got a bracelet on it.'

Those bloody magazines. They were branded rags from popular kids' shows and movies that came with plastic toys attached to the front. The magazine was just a front to sell fifty pence worth of plastic crap for six quid. Luna loved them, of course.

‘I don’t know, Lu.’

‘Pleeeeeease, Mummy? I didn’t even get the last one. And it had lipstick,’ Luna complained.

The wheedling Poppy cracked like an egg. ‘OK.’

‘Can we get it right now?’ Luna asked.

Poppy nodded. She needed the break from Barbie and her money worries anyway.

They walked into the square and Luna dragged her straight to a newsagent, where her head was immediately turned by the amount of choice.

Poppy watched as Luna's attention was drawn to a bright pink magazine with a sparkly charm bracelet on the cover. "Can I get this one instead?" Luna asked eagerly, holding up the glitzy publication.

‘I thought you wanted Frozen?!’

‘This one’s got unicorns.’

Poppy hesitated. The bracelet was made of bad metal and would probably turn Luna's wrist green. But her daughter's eyes were lit up with anticipation.

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‘Alright, let's get that one,’ Poppy relented with a weak smile.

Luna beamed and clutched the magazine to her chest as they brought it to the counter. They passed an old lady who smiled at Luna.

The cashier rang them up. "That'll be £9.99," she said.

Poppy's heart sank. ‘I'm sorry, sweetie, Mummy doesn't have enough money for this magazine,’ she said regretfully. That was it, she'd said it. She'd never felt so broke.

Luna's face fell. ‘But you said I could get it,’ her lip quivered.

‘Can't you just get the Frozen one? It's cheaper.’

‘Oh, mum.... Pleeeeeessssssssss?!’

Poppy thought it over. It was four quid difference. It shouldn't feel so crucial. Poppy would face up to her poorness tomorrow. ‘OK.’

Luna fist-pumped while Poppy paid, and they turned to see the old lady behind them now. ‘Tough, isn't it? I remember that.’

Poppy nodded, embarrassed. They walked around the old lady and went outside, where Luna commenced ripping the plastic off the magazine.

‘I can't do it,’ she complained.

Poppy took it and had a go. It was really on there.

While she was struggling, the old lady came out of the newsagent. 'Oh, you're still here.'

'Yep,' Poppy said, wrestling with the magazine.

'You look familiar. Have I seen you before?' the lady asked.

'I just moved back here, so probably not,' Poppy said. The plastic finally began to give.

'No, I definitely... Wait a second. You're not Carole's daughter, are you?'

Poppy was stunned. 'Yes, I am. I'm sorry, I don't—'

'I run the café, The Sugar Cube? Your mother used to work for me.'

The memories came flying back. 'Oh my god, Lilian? Of course I remember you.'

'I know she passed. I'm so sorry,' Lilian said sadly.

'Thanks,' Poppy said.

Luna let out a very big sigh. She was stuck listening to boring grown-up chat, but she'd just have to bear it. It was nice for Poppy to meet someone who knew her mother.

'I remember you left to be a musician, didn't you? Your mother was so proud.'

'Thanks. But that's over now,' Poppy told her, still trying to fiddle the magazine

completely from its prison.

‘You quit?’ the woman checked.

‘Sort of.’

‘I don’t mean to be rude, but you’re not looking for a job, are you?’ the woman questioned.

‘What?’ Poppy asked, the plastic wrapping giving at last.

The magazine flew out of Poppy’s hands, but Luna caught it. ‘Yes!’ she cried.

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‘I’m fully staffed for the breakfast rush, but after my part-timers leave—they’re all students—it’s just me and the cook till three. And I’m getting ready to retire. I thought my daughter might take over, but she’s moving to Australia. She said she needs to live in the heat and her husband is from there originally. She met him in a bar. He was behind the counter. She said it was love at first sight. I think she just liked the accent, but of course, I didn’t say anything. She’s a romantic, and I wouldn’t want to take that away from her...’

Poppy was barely following this story, but she kept listening because yes, she did indeed need a job. This was the answer. If she had to literally follow her in her mother’s footsteps, that wasn’t the worst thing. There were worse paths to take.

Nine

Norah clocked off for lunch, slapped her laptop shut and went to look in the kitchen cupboards. Nothing appealing. She decided to treat herself to lunch out. Let someone else make her a sandwich for a change.

She headed around the corner, into the square, straight for The Sugar Cube. It was a small café, cosy and inviting, with warm lighting and mismatched chairs and tables. Norah liked the place and the food, but she was hoping not to see anyone she knew. She just wanted to eat quietly while she doom-scrolled.

She joined the long queue, hoping it would move fast. She only had twenty-five minutes before she had to be logged back in. A minute passed, and she’d get an email from her bloody boss talking about time theft. No one loved the rules more than he, the self-important tosser.

The queue shifted, and she was swept up to the counter. She had a tuna bagel in mind, maybe even a brownie. She was feeling kind of wild. She felt a bit less excited when she found herself eyeball to eyeball with Poppy stood behind the counter—in a pinny, no less.

‘What?!’ Norah exclaimed.

‘Oh, Norah. Hello,’ Poppy said with an embarrassed head dip.

Norah realised her reaction was a bit much. ‘You got a job? Here?’

‘That’s the situation, yes.’

‘Why? I mean, aren’t you...’ Norah began, before realising what she was about to say was inappropriate. You didn’t ask strangers, ‘Hey, aren’t you rich now?’ So she stopped mid-sentence.

Poppy frowned. ‘What?’

‘Sorry, none of my business.’

There was an awkward pause, and Norah decided to fill it with the reason she’d come in in the first place. ‘Umm, can I have a tuna bagel?’

‘Sure,’ Poppy said, nervously writing it down on a pad in front of her. ‘To go?’

‘No,’ Norah said and regretted it instantly. But once the word was out, she was stuck.

What the hell was going on? What was Poppy doing slumming it behind a counter?

‘Anything else?’

‘Umm, a hazelnut latte?’ Norah said, unsure why she’d phrased it like a question. She knew her coffee order, for the love of Christ. She was just so bloody flustered.

‘OK, that’s £8.75.’

Poppy held out a card machine, and Norah tapped her phone to it, feeling like she was in the twilight zone. She’d totally forgotten about the brownie.

‘Thanks,’ she said and turned to grab a seat.

The place was packed. The only free space was right next to the counter. Well, that was a relaxing lunch pissed away. She was now going to have to sit within a foot of Poppy while she ate the food she’d ordered from her. Absolutely fucking surreal.

Norah sat down, reeling. She watched as Poppy took orders and worked the espresso machine. Had she been working here long? And why, as a joke? She used to be a pop star, for crying out loud. Surely she’d made good money doing that? She’d had a song at number one for four weeks. Despite not knowing much about her life, she knew that. She knew it very well indeed.

A few minutes later, Poppy called out Norah’s order, and Norah hopped up to fetch it. ‘Thanks,’ she said.

‘Enjoy,’ Poppy replied.

Norah sat down, took a bite of her bagel, and tried to focus on her phone, but her eyes kept drifting back to Poppy. Her curiosity was killing her. She was dying to ask her directly, but they didn’t really talk, even now. Time and again, they bumped into each other at the school gates and yet no ease had developed between them. They were nowhere near chummy.

Norah decided to do something she never did. She googled Poppy.

It was as expected. Old stuff about her girl band. They'd had three albums and then called it a day. Beyond that, there wasn't much else. It seemed Poppy had kept her personal life private, unlike her bandmates. There was plenty about them. Their dating track records alone were epic. Lots of footballers.

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But not Poppy. Very little was known. There was nothing about her daughter, marriages, zilch.

As the queue quietened, Poppy walked by to collect empty mugs from a nearby table. Norah couldn't take any more. She initiated a conversation for the first time in their adult 'reunion.'

'So, how long have you been working here?' she asked, trying to sound casual.

Poppy paused, looking slightly caught off guard by the question. 'Oh, um, just a week,' she said.

Norah nodded. An awkward silence hung between them for a moment before Poppy continued. 'The coffee machine was a bit of a bastard at first, but I'm getting the hang of it.'

'Yeah, it's a good place,' Norah said.

'Are you here much?' Poppy asked.

'Now and again,' Norah answered.

Poppy smiled in a way that locked off the conversation before hurrying back behind the counter to serve a new customer. Norah finished her lunch, gave a little wave goodbye to Poppy, and headed home, still deeply weirded out. It brought back a few memories of the last time Poppy had freaked her out.

Twenty Years Ago

The next night, as planned, Poppy texted Norah around ten. The second her phone pinged, Norah came out in a cold sweat.

Hey, practise is over. Still wanna hang out?

Technically, Norah didn't need to reply, and the issue would go away for the time being.

But for some reason, she found her thumbs tapping out a reply.

Yeah, I'm up. Come over.

The reply was brief.

Cool.

Norah was truly panicked now. What was she going to say to Poppy? She probably had no idea that Norah had heard her song. Maybe it was fine? Maybe they didn't need to talk about it? And maybe there wasn't anything to talk about? Maybe the song wasn't really about Norah. Maybe Poppy had just been looking for some words to put to music, and Norah's name had merely the correct number of syllables to fit a rhyming scheme.

The only trouble with that theory was that the lyrics felt specific to her as a person. It wasn't just her name. From what she could remember, it was about a sad girl who drew—which was Norah. And if all that was true, well...

Norah didn't know what the hell to think. If only she could have talked to someone. The trouble was that the person she'd talk to was Poppy.

Poppy texted again to let her know she was at the front door, their usual system, to avoid disturbing Norah's slumbering mother. As she headed out of her room and down the stairs, Norah knew there was a choice to make. She could pretend everything was fine, or she could admit she'd heard the song and deal with it head-on.

She slapped on a casual expression and opened the door. 'Hi.'

Poppy didn't look casual. She looked terrified. 'Hello.'

They headed upstairs to Norah's bedroom. The first thing Poppy did was go into her bag and dig out Norah's pencils. 'You left these in my room.'

Norah took the pencils. 'Oh yeah, thanks. That's g-great because I'll need those because I was just doing a panel, and I realised I didn't have anything to work with, so I was staring at this panel and trying to draw with my mind, which sounds a bit crazy, like I know I wasn't achieving anything, but it was still—'

'I know you heard the song,' Poppy said.

OK, so... Plan B.

Norah sat on the swivel chair at her desk and turned it to Poppy. 'Yeah,' she said with a lick of her lips.

Poppy plunked her bum on Norah's bed, and they looked at each other nervously for some time. Each seemed to be waiting for the other to say something.

Norah chewed the inside of her mouth. 'Play it for me.'

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Poppy looked stunned. 'What?'

'I didn't hear the whole thing.'

Poppy looked alarmed. 'No, I can't.'

'Why not?'

Poppy was stuck for an answer.

'Is it about me?' Norah asked.

Poppy nodded.

'All of it?' Norah asked.

'Yes.'

They sat in another thick silence.

Poppy took a deep breath. 'I want you to know, I never meant for you to hear it. It was just for me.'

Norah wasn't sure what to do with that. So she just waited.

'I wish you had just knocked on the door,' Poppy said eventually.

But there was no reproach in her tone. Only a longing for a time before this had happened. Norah felt for her. She was suffering, knowing the song had been overheard. It took the pressure off immensely. It wasn't a declaration. It was a mistake.

'I was going to knock,' Norah said.

'Then why didn't you?' Poppy asked.

'Because I heard you singing. I've never heard you do that before. It stopped me in my tracks. You were really good,' Norah told her frankly.

Poppy's mouth pinched at the corners. 'I'm not a singer.'

'Bullshit,' Norah said. Whatever else she felt uncertain about, it wasn't Poppy's singing.

'I'm just an instrumentalist,' Poppy said.

'That's weird,' Norah told her plainly.

'It's weird?!' Poppy said.

'Yeah. I mean, you can do all of it. Why wouldn't you want to?' Norah asked her.

'I just like the guitar, that's all,' Poppy said dismissively.

'Then why did you write a song with lyrics?' Norah pressed.

'I... Well, I kind of thought... Look, I want to perform, but if that doesn't work out—which, let's face it, is very fucking likely—I've been working on my lyrics so I

can maybe sell songs to other performers. I've heard you can make a good living doing that. But to do it, you have to perform a demo in the first place so they can hear how it roughly sounds. And I know I can hit the notes enough to be able to record demos, so that's what I was doing.'

'You want to sell the song?' Norah asked.

'Notthatone,' Poppy said quickly.

'What's it called?'

'I don't know yet. I've just been calling it "Norah's Song",' Poppy said, looking at the floor.

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Norah couldn't help but smile slightly. "'Norah's Song'?"

'Shut up, OK? I know it's silly,' Poppy said.

Norah swallowed. 'I don't think it's silly.'

'What do you think?' Poppy asked.

'I don't know,' Norah replied honestly.

Poppy accepted that with sadness. 'Right.'

'Why didn't you want me to hear it?' Norah asked.

She felt nervous asking that question because it was the question. The answer was going to blow this thing wide open.

'Because I wasn't sure if I was ever going to tell you how I felt. So I told my guitar instead,' Poppy said with sincerity.

Norah understood that completely. But what she didn't understand was what made this whole thing so bloody scary to her. Why was she freaking out? Why couldn't she just say, 'Hey, it's OK. I don't feel that way about you, but we can still be mates.' That was what she should say, wasn't it?

'You could have talked to me,' Norah said.

‘You had enough going on. It didn’t seem right,’ Poppy said.

That niggled Norah. ‘You think I can’t talk about anything because of my dad?’

Poppy looked surprised. ‘I, I don’t know. Maybe? It was hard to know.’

‘Well, I can. OK? I don’t need to be tiptoed around. I thought you knew that,’ Norah snapped at her. She didn’t like her own tone, but it had snuck up on her.

Poppy gave her a long look. ‘How could I know anything? We don’t talk about that.’

‘Because I don’t want to. I thought you understood.’

‘Why do you keep saying I should understand everything?’ Poppy asked, irked.

‘Because it happened to you, too. I guess I just thought you got everything without being told,’ Norah said, and they were officially having their first real argument.

‘Well, I don’t! I know the same kind of thing happened to us, but it doesn’t make me a mind reader,’ Poppy told her.

Norah wanted to argue with that. But it was a bit too reasonable.

She suddenly felt silly. She’d thought there was some unspoken agreement. A silent understanding. But maybe it was just a way for her to let herself think she didn’t have to talk about her dad. That it would all be OK somehow without ever having to do anything. Maybe that was stupid.

She wasn’t healing. The grief wasn’t going anywhere. It was just sitting, stewing, waiting.

‘Right. Then let’s talk. Let’s talk about how my dad kept falling asleep randomly and vomiting and decided to pretend nothing was wrong until the seizures started. Let’s talk about how, by then, the tumour in his head was the size of a fucking tennis ball. Let’s talk about how that fucking tumour absorbed all his kindness and spat out a mean stranger. Let’s talk about how his last words to me were, “Fuck off!”’

Poppy’s eyes were wide with shock. And Norah did something then that she had never done in front of Poppy. The balloon had finally popped. She started to cry.

‘Oh Christ,’ Poppy whispered, rushing over to her, kneeling in front of Norah’s chair and putting a hand on her shoulder. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Before Norah knew what was happening, she was leaning over, weeping into Poppy’s shoulder, not just crying but flat-out sobbing.

It went on for an amount of time that was impossible to pinpoint. It could have been seconds; it could have been minutes. But then it ended, and she realised she was on the floor, in Poppy’s arms, released from something.

She looked up at Poppy, and Poppy looked down at her with her electric-blue eyes filled with compassion. Before Norah had time to think about it, she leaned up and pressed her lips to Poppy’s. And it was happening. They were kissing.

A second later, Poppy jumped back. ‘You’re upset. You don’t know what you’re doing,’ she said anxiously.

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‘I thought you wanted to kiss me?’ Norah asked nervously.

‘Ido,’ Poppy said vehemently.

‘Then kiss me,’ Norah told her firmly.

Poppy did as she was told.

Norah’s confusion was washed away. This felt right—so right that she couldn’t believe it had never happened before. She’d had a few kisses in her time, but not like this. Poppy’s warm, soft mouth was telling her things, secrets she couldn’t learn any other way.

Norah understood what had frightened her about the song now. The fear had just been excitement wearing a disguise. She wanted Poppy to want her. Because down deep, in a place she hadn’t dared go, Norah wanted Poppy too.

Ten

Now

Norah had to come into The Sugar Cube sometime, Poppy knew that. And dreaded it.

She was truly grateful to Lilian. The woman had rescued her. And the job was alright. She hadn’t lied to Norah about that. She’d thought when she accepted her offer that it was something she was just going to have to get through. But the cook was nice, and the customers were friendly. The pay wasn’t incredible, but it could have been worse.

Plus, the schedule allowed her to drop off Luna at school and knock off in time to pick her up. It was a pretty big gift that had fallen into her lap, all told.

But having Norah order a bagel and coffee from her had been rough. She'd looked so bloody confused by it. What did she think? That Poppy was rich because she'd been in a girl band that was briefly successful in England (and, for some reason, Mongolia) a million years ago?

On the upside, Norah had talked to her without being forced to, which was new. For a split second, it was like they could have been normal with one another. But that was crazy, wasn't it? They were not going to be friends. Too much water had passed under the bridge. They couldn't have swum back now if they tried.

But Poppy kind of wished they could. She would have liked to know what Norah's life was now and what had happened to her in these years.

How was it possible that they'd been what they'd been, and now they were this? This... nothing? Because once, for a time, Norah had seemed like the centre of the universe to Poppy. She didn't like remembering that, but now that she was back in Northwood and Norah was regularly in her line of sight, it was all flooding back.

Twenty Years Ago

Poppy wasn't completely certain if it was OK to kiss Norah under these circumstances. But Norah had been insistent enough to override Poppy's doubts. It didn't feel wrong—far from it. She could feel Norah coming closer to her every second they were kissing. Poppy's whole body was electrified by Norah's kiss. It was like she'd stuck a fork in a mains outlet. But in a nice way.

They were still on the floor, in the same position as Poppy had collapsed into, but that stopped working after a few minutes. It didn't allow for the bodily contact that Poppy

needed. She wanted it all. She had to tell herself to calm down and take it slow. This could end any second.

Norah pulled back from the kiss, and Poppy thought that was it—the miracle was over.

‘My legs are going a bit numb. Shall we get on the bed?’ Norah asked shyly.

Poppy was on her feet in a second, pulling Norah up gently but hastily.

Norah lay down on her back on the bed, scooting backwards toward her pillow, pulling Poppy towards her. Poppy slid up next to her and waited to see if Norah would initiate another kiss, which she did quickly.

They were side by side, body to body. Poppy softly placed a hand on Norah’s waist. Norah reacted by slipping her leg over Poppy’s leg, pulling her in tighter, her hand coming up around Poppy’s head. This was Poppy’s first kiss with a girl, but she knew it wouldn’t be the last. Norah was delicate and beautiful. Her hands around Poppy’s head were so firm but gentle. Her lips were soft as cake and just as delicious. No boy could have begun to compete.

Poppy was getting dangerously turned on. She could feel certain urges growing. Though it would be her first time going there with a member of her own gender, her body was pretty clear about what should happen next. She ached to touch certain parts of Norah. But she was fighting her wants as best she could. The situation still felt a little tenuous. She didn’t want to spook Norah.

But then Norah’s hand moved from Poppy’s head, ran down her back, and cupped her bum. Poppy matched her, moving hand to touch Norah’s bottom. It was bouncy and squeezable, so that was what Poppy did, softly kneading it. Norah gave a very encouraging little moan.

And then, incredibly, Norah suddenly rolled right on top of her. The weight of Norah's body on Poppy's felt so good it was almost torture. Poppy pressed into her and began to grind against her. Norah moved with her, making little sighs and moans. Poppy felt like she was seconds from coming, even with their clothes on.

And then Norah's Mum exploded through the door.

'Why is your light on so late? You should be—'

Poppy and Norah jumped apart; Norah's mum was frozen in the doorway. She knew what she'd walked in on. Her eyes looked like someone had pulled the power plug out of her brain. Eventually, something clicked back into place, and she walked back out without a sound, shutting the door behind her.

'Oh Jesus,' Norah groaned. 'That wasn't good.'

'No,' Poppy could only agree.

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‘I don’t know what to do.’

‘Neither do I.’

‘Was she angry?’

‘I don’t know,’ Poppy said, aware of how utterly useless she was being. ‘Should I go?’

Norah sighed. ‘Probably.’

‘OK. I’m sorry.’

‘What for?’

‘If this is gonna be a problem...’

Norah shook her head. ‘I mean... I think she was just shocked. I can understand that.’ She gave a nervous giggle. ‘I’m kind of shocked myself.’

Poppy nodded and kept nodding for longer than was normal or necessary. ‘Yeah, right, shock. Yeah. It’s all... Yes.’ She finally managed to stop her head from going up and down and climbed off the bed. She realised her clothes were somewhat askew, and she tucked and smoothed until she felt vaguely together. ‘Sorry. I mean, notsorry. About all of it. Just that last bit. That wasn’t good. The rest of it was... nice.’

Norah looked up at her. ‘Nice?’ she repeated. She looked slightly offended.

‘It was awesome,’ Poppy said quickly, which felt like an overcorrect. She needed to get out of here before she could completely fumble this. Why was she acting so bloody goofy? ‘Let’s talk tomorrow.’

Norah smiled. ‘OK. Tomorrow.’

She left the bedroom carefully, looking around in case Mrs Cauldwell was waiting to beat her to death with a frying pan. But the hallway was dead silent, and Poppy fled without further incident.

Eleven

Now

Well, that was that. Norah wasn’t gonna be able to go back to The Sugar Cube now. If she wanted a lunch out, she’d have to go to the newsagent for a prepackaged parody of a sandwich.

That was annoying. She liked The Sugar Cube. How much territory was she prepared to surrender to Poppy? What if Poppy turned up in Tesco? Would she quit eating altogether?

No. The Sugar Cube was one of those little pleasures that made Norah’s life bearable. She couldn’t let it go.

It was funny that it took a bagel to turn Norah’s thinking around, but that was her red line. She was going to have to figure out how to be a normal person around Poppy. There was no better time to start on that because it was almost time to get Freddie. She was going to see Norah at the school gates imminently.

She grabbed Freddie’s post-school snacks out of the cupboard and headed to the

school, arriving at the gates just in time to see Poppy pull up in her car across the road. She got out and jogged across the road.

Norah braced herself. 'Hello,' she greeted Poppy.

Poppy looked around her like Norah was talking to someone else. 'Oh, me? Hi.'

'Your shift finished?' Norah asked, trying to do an impression of how normal people sounded.

'Uh, yeah. How about you?' she asked anxiously as they headed through the gates and across the playground.

'Yeah, I work from home.'

'What do you do?'

'Customer service online.'

'Oh,' Poppy said, a chuckle escaping her.

'Is that funny?' Norah asked defensively.

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Poppy looked slightly scared, which Norah didn't hate.

'Not as such.' Poppy paused and licked her lips nervously. 'I was just... I wouldn't have expected you to do a people job.'

Norah didn't say anything.

'I just mean, you weren't really... You liked your own company, as I recall,' Poppy added.

'Not always,' Norah said, though she knew it was true.

She wasn't and had never been a Chatty Kathy. The only reason her current job was bearable was that she wasn't having to speak to anyone using her mouth. Typing on a screen left a gap between her and the customer, which made it less like dealing with an actual human and all that came with that.

'Sorry, I'm sure... Anyway,' Poppy muttered, embarrassed.

Norah was annoyed with herself. She was supposed to be developing a cordiality with Poppy. Hell of a start.

'Sometimes you just gotta suck it up and do something you hate to pay the bills,' Norah said. 'You don't always get to choose. Especially when people are relying on you.'

Poppy gave a knowing nod. 'You said it.'

They joined the queue at the door, waiting for the kids to be released. They didn't say anything else to each other, but Norah thought, OK, that was normal. Right? No one would have looked at that and known we'd been what we'd been.

Twenty Years Ago

Norah was a mess. She'd had no sleep. How could she snooze after all that? She'd discovered a new element of her sexuality and been outed all in about the span of half an hour. She couldn't process it. So she was choosing not to.

She went to school and headed to art. Joy was hard at work, moved on from her last painting of Edgar Allan Poe and halfway through a haunting depiction of Mary Shelley working in a call centre.

'She looks exhausted,' Norah said, examining Mary.

'She's got to meet unrealistic targets, and she's completely behind,' Joy explained. 'I based it on my mum's job.'

'It's great. Totally depressing.'

'Thanks,' Joy said with a rare smile.

Norah got out her latest panel and went to work on it. Unfortunately, the pencils were now linked to what had happened with Poppy, so Norah was distracted straight off the bat. But with a herculean mental effort, she pushed that to the side and managed to crack on.

But then she happened to glance over at the door, and she saw Poppy out there, looking right at her. She gave a little wave. She looked nervous. It was alarmingly cute.

Norah took a deep breath, put down her pencil, and went out to talk to her.

‘Hi,’ Poppy said, sounding different. She was usually so easy and casual about everything. Today, she looked like she was at a job interview. Formal and uptight.

‘Hello,’ Norah said, trying to work out what her mouth should do. She settled on a flat smile.

‘I wanted to check in on you,’ Poppy said. ‘Last night was... Is your mum OK?’

Norah laughed snarkily. ‘Well, she was acting totally normal this morning, put out my breakfast like usual, said bye and went to work.’

‘So, full denial?’ Poppy said.

‘It’s just the Cauldwell way,’ Norah shrugged.

Poppy sighed. ‘Wow. If that had been my mum, she’d have sat down on the bed and demanded to talk it out with both of us there and then.’

Norah snorted. ‘That sounds like a nightmare, if I’m honest.’

‘It’s just the Jennings way,’ Poppy said with a better, more sincere smile.

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They laughed together then, and that felt good. Easier.

‘Do you think you’ll talk to her about it?’ Poppy asked.

Norah mulled that over. ‘Going on experience, in about six months, we’ll talk about it for one minute, and then it will never come up again.’

Poppy nodded and then swallowed. ‘Do you think we should talk about it?’

‘I don’t know,’ Norah admitted. ‘I’m all over the place right now.’

‘Me too,’ Poppy said. ‘But I just wanted to say it’s OK. If that’s it, I wouldn’t stop being your friend.’

Norah found herself suddenly even more afraid. Was that all Poppy wanted? Had she tried it out with Norah and decided, ‘Ya know what? That’s about all I need from her. Job done.’ Had Norah been disappointing?

That turned Norah’s stomach because she hadn’t been disappointed. All kinds of crazy thoughts had slipped into her head last night during that kissing session. Norah recalled that she had gotten so turned on that she had made a decision that she wanted to lose her virginity to Poppy. If her mother hadn’t walked in, she would have gone ahead and done just that, if Poppy had been willing.

‘Is that what you want?’ Norah asked. ‘To just be friends.’

Poppy’s brow creased. ‘No,’ she admitted quietly, touching the back of her neck

anxiously.

Norah let out a small sigh of relief. She knew this was the moment to stop panicking, or it was going to be over before it started. She needed to make herself brave, or she'd never kiss Poppy again. She couldn't have that. What had happened was good. In her gut, she knew that much.

'I don't think I do either,' she said to Poppy.

Poppy's eyes widened in utter surprise. 'Oh!'

'You didn't think I was going to say that?'

'No,' Poppy admitted. 'I honestly thought... I had this feeling that you were going to say you were getting busy with exams coming up, something like that.'

'God, that show I would handle it,' Norah admitted, revolted with herself. She was more her mother's daughter than she'd have liked to admit.

'So, is this... Are we...' Poppy said, gesturing with her hands as though she was going to be able to conjure the exact right word out of thin air.

After watching it go on for a few seconds, Norah decided she'd better lend a hand. 'It's... Well, we could... It's... We...'

Jesus, what word was the word for this? The exact right word that walked the line between wanting to be together without any pressure whatsoever. Nobody wanted to say too much or too little.

But Poppy had her own way around the linguistic hole. She started laughing. 'Can I just say... the reason I'm bad at this is that boys just... ask you out. Or you snog them,

and then they assume you're their girlfriend unless you tell them otherwise. I've never had to do this bit before.'

Norah smiled. 'Me neither.'

'I don't mind it, though,' Poppy grinned. 'It's kind of nice to be... nervous.' Poppy's grin slid away abruptly. 'Sorry, that sounded stupid.'

'I think it's nice, too,' Norah assured her.

Easy, breezy Poppy was sweating this. It scared Norah a little, but it also electrified her. She wanted to kiss her right there in the hallway—not that she really would, but the thought was exciting.

Norah couldn't believe that twenty-four hours ago, she hadn't known she wanted this. And now she couldn't stop looking at her lips.

'What shall we do?' Poppy asked.

'Ummm....'

'I mean, should we... Go out? Together? Date... stuff?' Poppy asked.

'Maybe we can just do things like normal?' Norah said. 'I like it the way it is.'

Poppy nodded, looking happy. 'You're right. It was already good, wasn't it?'

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Just then, the art teacher, Mrs Simmons, popped her head out. ‘Excuse me, but we don’t have drop-in hours, Poppy Jennings. Get along to where you should be and stop distracting my students.’

Poppy rolled her eyes at Mrs Simmons. ‘Jesus, chill. I’m going.’

Mrs Simmons looked at Norah—who was far less inclined to be sassy—and raised an eyebrow.

Norah felt the pressure of that eyebrow intensely. She said, ‘Bye’ to Poppy very quickly and went back in, Mrs Simmons shutting the door behind her with finality.

Norah returned to her table and happened to glance back at the window. To her delight, Poppy’s face reappeared to give her one last wave goodbye. Norah waved back, and Poppy ducked away.

The rest of the session passed without incident. Except that Joy kept asking why she was smiling like that.

Twelve

Now

Poppy was sitting on a child’s size seat looking at a poster about believing in yourself. There was a giant owl on the poster. Poppy didn’t know what owls had to do with self-belief. Owls were bookish animals. They weren’t go-getters. A salmon would have made more sense. All that struggling upstream business was a much

better visual metaphor.

But Poppy wasn't just in the school corridor to critique the posters, she was here for parent's evening. She was due in to speak to the teacher now-ish. The teaching assistant, Mrs Bauer, popped her weary head out. 'Mrs Jennings?'

'It's Miss, actually,' Poppy corrected, standing.

'No, sorry,' Mrs Bauer said apologetically. 'I just came to say there's going to be a delay. We're talking to Julip's dad and it's... running long.'

Julip. Poppy knew the name. Mainly because Luna often came home with gleeful tails of how Julip liked to piss all over the bathroom floor for the sheer sport of it. His dad was clearly in for a long one about his behaviour.

'Are you OK to wait?' Mrs Baur asked.

Poppy had left Luna with a neighbour from two doors down, Cherry. She'd babysat Poppy as a kid, so she knew the woman was capable, if getting up there in years now. She was already helping out with Saturdays, but Poppy didn't want to take the piss.

'I can hang on a bit, sure,' she assured Mrs Bauer, though. What else could she say?

'Great. Sure it won't be long.'

A set of parents rounded the corner, but she didn't know them. She'd been back a few months now but was still treading water, socially. 'Oh, hello, are you waiting?' the woman asked. 'We thought we were late.'

'It's running a bit long,' Poppy explained.

‘Oh, umm... We couldn’t jump the queue, could we?’ the woman asked. ‘It’s just, his dad’s got the kids, and he’s a bit... We need to get back as quick as we can.’

‘He’s fine,’ the woman’s husband assured her, placing a hand on her arm.

‘He let them watch *The Exorcist*!’ she muttered to him angrily.

‘He thought it would be OK because it’s about a kid. I think he forgot all the possession stuff,’ he said defensively.

‘Josh is still having nightmares about pea soup. He’s completely scarred,’ the woman hissed at him.

‘You can go in front of me,’ Poppy said. She didn’t want the woman to come home to a viewing of *The Shining*.

The woman was relieved itself. ‘Bless you. Are you Luna’s mum?’

‘Yeah,’ Poppy smiled. ‘And yours is...’

‘Drew.’

Poppy didn’t know Drew from a hole in the wall. ‘Ah. Yes. Of course,’ she said.

‘Hey, maybe Luna would like to come to Drew’s birthday on Sunday?’ the woman asked.

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‘Oh!’ Poppy exclaimed, surprised and delighted. ‘Yeah, I think Luna would like that.’

It was Luna’s first invite since they’d moved. It was a relief to get it. Luna had been absolutely up to her neck in kids’ parties where they used to live. The party silence recently had been slightly unnerving.

‘Great, are you in the class WhatsApp?’ Drew's mum asked.

Poppy smiled. ‘No, actually.’

She’d liked not being on it. The last one had never stopped. She’d had to mute the bloody thing almost every day.

‘Give me your number, I’ll add you,’ the woman said, getting her phone out. Poppy reluctantly recited it. It wasn’t a minute later that Poppy’s phone started lighting up like a pinball machine. Poppy did not outwardly react, but if she could have, it would have been the biggest groan.

A man came out of the classroom looking a bit haggard, no doubt the infamous Julip’s originator. He was fiddling in his pocket, pulling out a vape in readiness for getting out of the building. Poppy wasn’t without pity for him.

Mrs Bauer’s top half made a reappearance out of the door again. ‘Hi, we’re ready.’

‘Umm, I’m gonna let Drew’s parents jump in front if that’s OK?’ Poppy asked.

‘Sure,’ Mrs Bauer said, gesturing to them.

They scuttled in, and the mum, whose name Poppy hadn't gotten and probably would never get, gave her a whispered, 'Thanks.'

Poppy fidgeted in the seat, starting to feel a bit numb. But her back straightened when Norah appeared around the corner. Of course, she thought.

'Hey,' Norah said with a thin smile. 'They running late?'

'Later than you think. I've just let some people in front of me.'

Norah sighed and lowered herself carefully onto a tiny blue chair across from Poppy.

'Who was the lagger? Was it Julip's dad?' Norah asked.

'How did you know?'

Norah raised an eyebrow. 'You simply cannot stop that boy pissing everywhere. I think he was a fountain in a previous life.'

Poppy smiled. 'It's a long-running problem, then?'

'He peed on my bed once,' Norah remarked.

'What?' Poppy exclaimed, louder than she meant to.

'Yeah. Freddie had a party, and I guess he snuck off to mark his territory. I had to throw the duvet away.' She shook her head.

'Christ,' Poppy said, unable not to laugh.

Norah didn't exactly laugh with her, but her mouth did go up at the corner. It was a

familiar expression. The quiet mirth of Norah Cauldwell. It was nice to see it.

It was also nice that she wasn't treating Poppy like something on the bottom of her shoe anymore. Poppy wasn't counting any chickens, but it seemed that Norah had relaxed around her to an extent. Or at least, she'd accepted Poppy's continued existence in her world.

For Poppy, that was a big move forward. If it could stop being, at a bare minimum, completely fucking hideous everytime they saw each other, that would be a load off for Poppy. She could only see now, as it was easing off, how much it had been wearing her down.

'Mrs-Miss Jennings?' Mrs Baur announced, and Poppy gave Norah a nod. Norah nodded back. It was a small gesture, but it meant a lot to Poppy.

She headed in, wanting to know how her daughter was settling in. It was all good news. For a second, she felt like she wasn't completely fucking up. It was a nice change of pace.

Twenty Years Ago

Poppy rolled the big bin out to the front of the house for collection and went inside. She washed her hands in the kitchen sink while her mother unloaded the dishwasher.

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But when she finished drying her hands, she realised her mother wasn't unloading; she was staring at her, arms crossed. 'OK, to hell with it. Spill.'

'What?'

'I've been waiting for days!' her mother cried.

'For...'

'You went to speak to Norah, and you've not said a peep since.'

Poppy was trying to be stoic about it. She wanted to enjoy her new little secret. But she should have known her mother wouldn't let that happen, the nosy mare.

'Mum, I'm...'

'Was it tough? Do you want to get it out? You can have a cry, love,' her mother said gently.

Poppy folded her arms. 'You're assuming I got rejected?'

Her mother's eyes widened in horror. 'Oh. Um... I mean, no. It's just because you didn't say anything. I thought that meant you were feeling sad about it.'

'It's private, that's all.'

Her mother's interest was piqued. 'Is it? How private, exactly?'

‘Stop being such a sticky beak, would you?’

Her mother began to smirk. ‘OK, Pop. I’ll say no more about it.’

‘And stop looking like that,’ Poppy cried.

Her mother turned back to the dishwasher. ‘I think I have all the information I need. For now.’

‘You don’t know anything.’

‘OK. Sure.’

‘Cut that out.’

Her mother put her hands in the air. ‘I’m a closed book on the subject. Anyway, what would you like for dinner? That’s if you have time. You might need to be getting out soon?’ she asked neutrally. However, the question was anything but—she was fishing.

‘Yes, I’m going out. I’m gonna grab something,’ Poppy said casually.

‘Out. Yes. With the band, I expect?’ her mother said, getting glasses out and placing them on the side.

‘I’m not saying anything else,’ Poppy told her firmly.

‘No, of course not.’

Poppy headed upstairs to shower and get ready. She could hear her mother laughing to herself.

Poppy texted Norah to say she was outside. She wouldn't have rung the bell at gunpoint.

Norah came to the door. 'Hi,' she said with a lovely shy smile.

'Hi. Your mum about?' Poppy asked nervously.

'No, don't worry. She's at her book club,' she said, stepping back to allow Poppy entry.

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Poppy tried not to seem relieved as she walked in. ‘Your mum’s in a book club?’

‘She says she is. But I’ve never actually seen her read anything besides the TV guide. Do you want a coffee?’ Norah asked.

Coffee breath? Poppy didn’t need that. Not with her hopes for the evening. ‘Water would be good if that’s OK?’

They went into Norah’s kitchen, which was identical in shape to Poppy’s, if a lot fresher. Norah poured two glasses of water. ‘So, there’s an absolutely crap thing on the Odeon about aliens...’ Norah began.

‘Sounds terrible. I’m in,’ Poppy said. She could kiss Norah in the back row if she was amenable.

Norah handed Poppy a glass of water. ‘Or...’ she began nervously.

‘Or?’ Poppy repeated.

‘I mean, the house is empty.’

Poppy nearly dropped the glass. ‘Oh, right. You’re thinking we might... hang out here?’ she said carefully.

Norah shrugged. ‘I mean, we could just watch something on TV? I don’t know what’s on, but...’

Poppy felt her stomach roll over in the best possible way. 'TV sounds good. We can just surf. In the living room?'

'If you don't mind a smaller TV, we could watch it in my room. So we don't get... interrupted.' Norah took a sip of water and glanced at her shoes.

Poppy didn't know exactly what this meant, and she didn't want to assume anything. She'd have been more than happy to just sit next to her and hold her hand. But obviously, it would have been even nicer to kiss her. To run her hands over Norah's body.

But Poppy was determined not to rush. Take it slowly, she warned herself. She just said let's watch TV.

Norah popped some popcorn in the microwave, and they took it upstairs. Poppy was more terrified with every step. It had never been like this before. Boys were simple. You knew what was what, and you got on with it. This was different. The mystery of what precisely Norah wanted lay in front of Poppy. She had to admit, it was deeply hot.

Or was it simple? Was Norah actually hinting rather hard? Poppy supposed her ability to read her was impeded by the high stakes. They were putting a good friendship on the line, and they both knew it.

Norah led the way into her room, the air thick with anticipation. Norah sat down and flicked the TV. The news was on. She flicked to the next channel, horse racing. She tried again and got an Australian soap.

'Hey, you gonna sit with me?' she asked, noting that Poppy was standing like an idiot next to the bed.

Poppy's heart raced as she settled onto Norah's bed, feeling the warmth of her proximity.

'You OK with this?' Norah asked, nodding at the TV.

'Sure,' Poppy agreed.

As they settled in to watch, a comfortable silence enveloped them, broken only by the occasional rustling of popcorn.

Poppy stole glances at Norah, admiring the way the flickering light danced across her face. She had never felt this way before, pulled towards Norah like a magnet. And as the soap played on, forgotten in the background, Poppy felt a surge of courage wash over her. It was only enough to take her hand, but the reward was a firm, light grip that made goosebumps travel up Poppy's spine.

Should Poppy try to kiss Norah? She really didn't know. She wanted to. But she also kind of liked sitting like this, too. Poppy's heart said hold her hand, but the contents of her knickers were telling her to hold other areas. Which would win?

'I'm thinking about kissing you,' Norah said quietly.

Poppy turned. 'Thank god,' she said and pulled Norah to her.

Thirteen

Now

Norah was not supposed to be alone for parents' evening. But Max texted her ten minutes before their appointment time to tell her there was some emergency at his work. What manner of emergency could arise at the franchise pizza restaurant he

managed, Norah couldn't have said.

But she was glad he'd sacked it off because if he'd had to sit with Norah and Poppy, he might have picked up on the atmosphere. That was the last thing Norah needed—she hadn't exactly told him about Poppy. He knew there were a few girlfriends in her past, but she hadn't explained that one of them had reappeared at the school gates.

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Norah didn't have the energy for any jealousy to rear its head. Max wasn't enormously secure in that department. If he saw her smile at someone a bit too long, his wheels came off.

Poppy walked back out of the room, only three minutes after she'd entered. She looked happy enough, so Luna was probably settling in OK.

'See you at the gates,' she said, sauntering past.

Norah turned to watch her go. She'd forgotten about that swagger.

'Mrs Cauldwell?'

Norah spun to her quickly, like she'd been caught doing something wrong. But she hadn't. She was just watching Poppy walk, for god's sake. No crime in it.

'Miss,' Norah corrected Mrs Bauer, standing.

She and Maxweremarried, but she had kept her name and title. There was no planet on which Norah was swapping Cauldwell for Biggerstaff.

'Sorry, yes. In you come,' Mrs Bauer said.

Norah followed her in and sat down in front of Miss Potter, both on another set of small chairs.

'Hi,' said the young woman. 'So, first of all, Freddie's doing great with his lessons.'

Just great. You don't need to worry about that at all,' Mrs Potter said.

An unnerving start.

'But I did just want a word about some behaviour that has started to crop up,' the teacher added carefully.

'Oh?'

'Yes. He's... We've observed some imagination play we thought we should raise with you. He's been playing with the dolls and making them have some rather... specific conversations. There's a repetition to it. I've seen it three times now.'

'OK...' Norah replied, tensing.

'He's been making Woody from Toy Story tell Pocahontas that she's... a cold fish.'

Norah wanted to die. 'And how does Pocahontas respond?'

'Pocahontas tells him that he should have divorced her before they had Olaf the Snowman. That's their son.'

So Freddie had caught every word of that argument a week ago after a particularly bad session with the couple's therapist. It was awful enough that he knew that his parents were unhappy together. But Freddie thought Norah regretted him, and that wasn't what she'd meant. She'd meant that she felt tied to Max because they were a family unit.

If she'd divorced Max the moment she realised she was pregnant, Norah could have raised Freddie as a single parent and shared custody with Max as an ex. Freddie would never have known this version of his family, and it wouldn't be on Norah to

tear apart the only life he knew. Freddie was the only bit Norah knew she did want, but that nuance had been lost in the argument.

‘I’m sorry. I’ll talk to him,’ Norah told Miss Potter.

Miss Potter nodded, glad to have that out of the way. ‘But his phonics is coming along beautifully.’

Norah nodded. ‘Great.’

She walked out of the meeting in a daze, wondering when her life became this. When did it all become something to get through? What had happened to her? Was she just broken? Was she not able to be with another person in any way that worked? When was the last time it had worked with Max? With anyone?

Twenty Years Ago

Norah heard the credits roll on the soap. But she didn’t know how it had ended because about twenty minutes ago, she’d thrown caution to the wind and initiated a kiss with Poppy. Things were getting steamy, fast. And now they were rolling around on her single bed, handseverywhere.

‘I’m so glad I get to do this,’ Poppy whispered into her neck.

‘I wish we’d done it before,’ Norah said.

‘Do you?’ Poppy asked, surprised, pulling back to examine her.

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Norah paused to try and explain. ‘Honestly, I wasn’t thinking about it before, but now I don’t know why. It was like there was a filing cabinet in my brain that had this information in it. About you. But I didn’t know what the hell I did with the key. And somehow, you had it.’

‘That’s nice. But at best, I had a bolt cutter.’

Norah chuckled and snuggled closer to Poppy, putting her head on her shoulder. It felt so good to be close with her like this. It was like they’d always been this way; they’d just forgotten to do this part of it.

They stayed like that for a minute, and then Norah leaned up and kissed Poppy’s neck. She was done keeping it PG. She wanted to be bold. She slid up onto Poppy’s lap. She was about to ask if it was OK, but Poppy’s hands reached around her and pulled her in tight, and that was her answer.

They started kissing deeper, harder. Norah felt that things could go somewhere very serious very quickly. And she wouldn’t have yelled about it, but there was a reason she’d pushed for tonight, the night her mother was out. She wanted space to allow what would happen to happen.

She’d felt bad for a long time. This thing with Poppy was a surprise, but the timing couldn’t have been better. She was ready to feel good again. Even happy. And Poppy was happiness.

Clothes began to be pulled off, new parts touched, and new sensations felt. As they moved together in a dance as old as time, Norah realised that this was how love

happened—how you opened up to it. With every kiss, every caress, Norah felt herself unravelling and becoming more whole at the same time.

And in that small room, illuminated only by the soft glow of the moon filtering through the curtains, Norah found herself naked with Poppy.

Poppy's body was lean and long, and Norah felt a bit self-conscious because she wasn't—and never had been—skinny. But Poppy seemed more than happy to bury her face in Norah's large chest like she never wanted to come up for air. Norah relaxed and enjoyed the attention.

No one had ever touched her like this. Those who had come close had been denied entry. Though Norah had never really thought she was waiting for the right person, it was clear to her now that she had been. She was glad. This was special. She wouldn't have wanted it to be anyone else.

Fourteen

Now

Poppy watched the coffee machine do its thing in a slight daze. She was knackered. It was Saturday, and she'd been working six days a week for months now. It was starting to wear her down. She hadn't ever had a real job before if you didn't count pop star or songwriter or session guitarist—which she didn't.

The bell on the door clanged, and suddenly, Cherry came charging in, dragging Luna by the hand. 'Poppy!' she cried in her thick Jamaican accent, which hadn't budged an inch in all the fifty years she'd lived here. 'I'm so sorry!'

'What's wrong?' Poppy asked, alarmed.

‘I’ve had a call! My mother is sick! I’ve got to get on a plane to Cape Town this afternoon!’

‘Your mother!?’ Poppy said in slight disbelief. Cherry looked good, but she had to be in her seventies. How was her mother even alive to be sick?

‘I told her she needed to cut down on the running, but she wouldn’t be told! That half-marathon was her last, I think,’ Cherry said with a shake of her head.

Poppy couldn’t even respond to that wild statement. ‘Do you need any help getting a flight?’

‘No, my nephew booked me on one, but it leaves in two hours. I’ve got to go now. I’m so sorry.’

‘Cherry, don’t apologise!’ Poppy told her. ‘You’ve got to go. Luna can sit at a table here,’ she said.

Truth be told, Poppy wasn’t sure that was going to work out. Luna wasn’t great at quiet play.

‘Thank you for understanding,’ Cherry said, and she flew back out, frazzled.

The poor woman. Poppy knew that when that moment came, all you could do was try to get there. Nothing else made sense.

Poppy looked at Luna, her eyes barely over the counter. ‘Are you OK?’ she asked, worried the kid had been unnerved by the chaos.

But Luna was not interested in the calamity; her eyes were on the glass case. ‘Can I have a cake?’

Poppy placed Luna at a nearby table with a cake and a babycino. But once Luna finished eating, there would need to be an activity for her to do. If only Poppy had the iPad at hand. She tried to be conservative about their use, but in a pinch, they were bloody effective. She'd have borne the judgy glares it would have incurred happily.

A customer pulled up wanting a bacon sandwich, and Poppy rang up the order and sent it to the kitchen. That done, she looked to see that Luna had finished her snack and was already wandering about.

'Luna...' she called.

'What's that?' Luna asked, pointing at a hairless dog sitting by a man's leg.

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‘What? It’s a dog,’ Poppy answered impatiently.

‘Where’s its hair?’ she asked. The owner looked up.

‘Luna, can you come over here please,’ Poppy hissed urgently.

Luna turned to the dog owner. ‘Did you shave it?’

The man frowned. ‘No, it’s the breed. It’s an American Hairless Terrier.’

‘It looks weird,’ Luna told him.

In her defence, she had a point. But Poppy didn’t care to back her on it, because the situation had forced her to come out from behind the counter to drag her away from the man, who was looking quite peeved about his dog’s beauty being called into question.

She pulled the girl back to her original table. ‘I need you to sit quietly.’

Luna frowned. ‘What shall I do?’

‘Uhh...’

‘Can I draw?’

‘I don’t have anything to draw with.’

‘Can I do Lego?’

‘I haven’t got your Lego,’ Poppy pointed out.

Luna let out an almighty sigh. ‘I’m so boreeeeeed.’

‘You’ve been here all of five minutes, Luna. And you’re going to have to occupy yourself for a few hours yet.’

‘Hours!’ Luna almost yelled. The few occupants of The Sugar Cube turned to the loud whine.

‘Shh!’ Poppy begged. She didn’t know how the hell she was going to get this kid to chill.

‘Can I play with Freddie?’ Luna asked.

That threw Poppy. ‘He’s not here.’

Luna pointed out of the café window at the small square opposite. Freddie was rolling around on a scooter, gleefully speeding towards birds, causing them to fly up into the air in terror. Poppy couldn’t see Norah around.

But there was a blond man with a beard yelling, ‘Freds! Leave them!’ He had to be Freddie’s dad and, therefore, Norah’s partner. He was handsome enough to match Norah in the looks department, Poppy would give him that.

‘No, you can’t play with Freddie. You have to stay here,’ Poppy instructed Luna firmly.

‘Why? There’s nothing to do,’ Luna whined.

‘If Freddie comes in, sure. But you can’t go out there to him, OK?’ Poppy explained.

Luna looked unhappy. ‘OK.’

Poppy went back behind the counter, leaving Luna sitting at the table. She was wondering if there was some app she could put on her phone quickly for Luna to look at. Educational, if possible, but anything would have done. If the kid wanted to play Call of Duty, Poppy would have been OK with it if she could just get the kid to sit down.

But then she saw Luna heading for the door of the café. Poppy flew back round the counter in time to see Luna fling open the door and scream, ‘FREDDIE!’ with every bit of air in her lungs.

The boy turned instantly. ‘LUNA!’

Poppy reached Luna at the door. ‘Luna!’

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‘You said I could only play with him if he came in. And he’s coming.’

Trust Luna to find a workaround for the rules. She was going to make an excellent lawyer one day.

Poppy watched as Freddie and his hassled dad came across the road. ‘I take it they’re friends?’ the man asked. He didn’t look too annoyed.

‘Yeah, sorry,’ Poppy said.

‘Nah, it’s fine. I could do with a coffee anyway.’

They all trooped in, and Freddie and Luna began chatting in a corner, giggling at something as Freddie’s dad came up to the counter.

Poppy ran back around. ‘What can I get you?’

‘Black coffee, please. With an extra shot.’

Poppy made the coffee, one eye on Luna and Freddie. She served Freddie’s dad. ‘Here.’ She handed it to him. ‘On the house.’

‘Thanks very much,’ he said, pleased. ‘I’m Max, by the way.’

Poppy smiled politely. ‘Poppy.’

Poppy had thought there could be a reaction to her old relationship with his wife, but

if there was one, it was too subtle to see.

He took a sip of coffee. 'Can't be easy working with a kid in tow.'

'I don't usually, but my babysitter had an emergency,' she explained.

'Well, we were just headed to the park around the corner. Yours could come with us?'

Poppy thought it over. It would have solved a problem. Trouble was, she didn't know Max at all.

'Oh, umm...'

'I'd be grateful if I'm honest,' Max said quietly. 'The trouble with having just one is that you have to do all the playing with them.' He looked pained. 'I can't do the seesaw anymore. My back was screaming last time.'

Poppy decided she'd better turn him down as nicely as she could. 'It's a nice offer...'

Max's phone beeped, and he took it out and checked it, tutting to himself. He looked back up at Poppy. 'Do you know my wife? Norah?' he asked.

Poppy was jolted. 'Yes, actually.'

Did he really not know who Poppy was? Was she not worth mentioning when romantic history came up? That stung a bit.

'Ah, great. Well, she was going to meet us at the park, but I've kinda gotta run. I was wondering... maybe I could leave Freddie here with you? She won't be long.'

‘Wait, what?’ Poppy said.

How the hell was this happening? From zero children to two in twenty minutes? They were multiplying.

‘It’ll be easier now. They’ll occupy each other,’ he vowed.

That could be true, but still, it was a lot of responsibility. ‘Um, how long will she be?’

‘She’ll be here any minute. I’ll let her know you’ve got him.’

Poppy felt stuck. ‘OK.’

Max was already moonwalking out on the second syllable of the word. ‘Great. Cheers. Freddie! This lady’s looking after you! Do as she says!’ he called and left.

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It was a full thirty minutes later that Norah arrived. She burst in, looking aggravated. 'Sorry, sorry!' she yelled at Poppy.

'No, it's fine. They were keeping each other occupied,' she told Norah, which was true.

They were playing some mysterious imagination game together at a corner table that involved a jungle, a train, and penguins.

'I was at the supermarket; I didn't see the text!' Norah looked furious. 'Freddie, you OK?'

Freddie looked around and saw his mum. 'Oh, hi. I've had cake!'

'I hope you don't mind me feeding him sugar?' Poppy asked nervously.

'God, no!' Norah exclaimed. 'Thank you so much for doing this.'

'So, I finally met your husband,' Poppy said.

'Such as he is,' Norah muttered bitterly.

That didn't sound good. But Poppy wasn't going to pry. They weren't there.

'Sit down. Let me make you a drink,' Poppy said.

Norah was still coming down from her mad dash and seemed surprised to come and

find everything was fine.

‘Oh. OK.’

‘It was a latte, wasn’t it?’

‘Yeah. Well remembered.’

For Poppy, remembering was never hard. It was forgetting that she struggled with.

Twenty Years Ago

Poppy was working her way down Norah’s magnificent naked body.

She’d had some idea of Norah’s body through clothing, and without trying to leer, she’d often found herself admiring her generous chest through T-shirts. But getting to run her hands all over her breasts, to kiss them and all the gorgeous parts of Norah’s body, was something else.

Poppy was aware that with every second that passed, she was getting that much closer to a more fixed label on her preferences, and right now, she was extremely good with that. It was all so right. What could be wrong?

Poppy kissed ever downwards toward the epicentre of Norah, and though she’d never dealt with this body part before, she was very excited to explore it. She hoped her enthusiasm would cover her amateurishness.

And it did. It really did. Norah was extremely sensitive and responded to Poppy’s mouth immediately. Her back arched, and Poppy grabbed onto her bottom to hold her still-ish while she worked to a chorus of beautiful moans. Suddenly, Norah let out a sharp cry, and her body collapsed onto the bed.

Poppy looked up. 'Did you...'

Norah looked down at Poppy, her eyes cloudy. She nodded, apparently not able to speak yet. Poppy took that as a very good review and made her way back up to Norah, to hold her. Norah turned and snuggled into her.

'Have you done that before?' Norah eventually asked.

'No,' Poppy admitted.

'Wow,' Norah smiled, 'I hope I can—'

That sentence was never able to finish because the downstairs door banged. Mrs Cauldwell was home.

'Oh shit,' Norah said, her smile falling away.

'Will she come in?' Poppy asked, alarmed.

‘Probably!’

Feet were travelling up the stairs.

Poppy and Norah looked at each other in panic. Poppy had to think fast. She rolled off the bed, still extremely naked, and shuffled under the bed frame. She threw a quick thanks up to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of lust, that Norah didn’t sleep on a divan, or such an escape would not have been possible.

She heard Norah rustling about on top of the bed, pulling the blanket over her. The door opened. It amazed Poppy that Mrs Cauldwell hadn’t learned anything from the last time she’d made an unannounced appearance, but perhaps the habit of not respecting boundaries was a hard one to break.

Poppy could see Mrs Caldwell’s feet march partway into the room. Poppy held her breath, praying not to be spotted.

‘Norah,’ Mrs. Cauldwell said, her voice laden with disapproval. ‘You’re up late?’

‘I was just... reading,’ Norah replied, her voice muffled by the blanket. ‘I got carried away, I guess.’

‘I don’t see a book,’ her mother said.

Poppy looked around quickly and saw a book under there with her. She passed it up around the side of the bed that Mrs Cauldwell couldn’t see, and it was grabbed quickly.

‘It’s this,’ Norah said. ‘It’s about... space... things.’

Mrs. Cauldwell made a sour, ‘HMMMM’ noise.

‘Speaking of which, how was your book club?’ Norah asked her mother nervously.

‘Good, thanks,’ the woman said flatly.

‘What are you reading?’ Norah asked.

Mrs Caldwell’s voice changed, becoming hesitant. ‘Umm... A book about a woman who... Likes cooking. And then she decides to become a TV chef. But people try to stop her because... it’s the eighties. No, the sixties.’ There was a pause, and then she said, ‘OK, night!’ She backed out of the room, shutting the door quickly.

Norah’s face appeared upside down over the side of the bed. ‘I think you can come up now,’ she whispered.

Poppy wiggled out from under the bed. ‘Hell’s tits! That was ridiculous!’ she said quietly. She found her pants on the floor and pulled them on, bra next. She turned to see Norah watching her nervously.

‘Sorry,’ Norah whispered back.

‘It’s not your fault.’ Poppy looked around. ‘Where’s my jeans? How do I get out now?’

Norah shrugged. ‘Not sure of either.’

She sat down on the bed. ‘Will she come back in?’

‘Unlikely.’

‘So that thing your mum said about the chef book... That was a lie, right?’ Poppy noted.

‘Yeah, whatwasthat? I know whyIwas making up a book, but why was she?’ Norah said, wrapping the blanket around her body. She gave Poppy a small smile and lifted it so that Poppy could slide under with her.

Poppy did so enthusiastically, glad to be with Norah again. That minute under the bed had been an age of separation.

‘I think you might be trapped until my mum is out.’

‘How long?’

‘I’d give it an hour for safety.’

‘An hour? But what do I do if she does come back?’

‘Look, just stay under the covers. She probably wouldn’t even know you’re there if she comes in,’ Norah suggested.

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Poppy snuggled closer to Norah. 'I wish I'd have thought of that the first time. Though I will admit, I was quite impressed by the cleanliness under your bed. No dust balls or anything.'

'My mother was just under there yesterday with the Hoover. You got lucky,' Norah noted. 'Two days ago, you'd have probably had a fit of sneezes and given the game away. Thanks for the book, by the way. Quick thinking.'

Poppy smiled at her. Though the interruption had been a close call, there was something exciting about hiding together like this. Norah's body was warm and soft next to hers.

'I guess we'll just have to keep each other entertained for the next hour,' Poppy whispered, tracing her finger slowly down Norah's arm.

Norah shivered at her touch. 'However will we manage?' she murmured, shifting even closer.

Poppy was pleased to find that the mood wasn't a total write-off from the interruption.

They picked up where they'd left off, albeit at a quieter volume, muffling moans against each other's lips as they explored and pleased one another.

When it seemed Mrs Cauldwell must surely be asleep, Poppy gave Norah one last lingering kiss. 'I guess I should sneak out now,' she whispered. 'But next time, let's go to my place.'

Norah smiled, still catching her breath. 'It's a date.'

Poppy snuck out for the second time that week and, again, made it out clean. On the front step, she took in the night sky, euphoric from a night of passion with Norah Cauldwell.

I'm definitely a lesbian, Poppy thought to herself. My mother will be thrilled.

Fifteen

Now

Norah had to admit, Freddie seemed happy playing with Luna. But Norah wanted to kill Max all the same. Poppy was a safe pair of hands, but Max hadn't known that! He'd dumped their child on a stranger and run off to yet another work emergency. Norah hadn't even seen the text until twenty minutes after it hit her phone because Freddie had been blowing it up with his usual cryptic emoji streams sent from his dad's phone. A dog, a sloth, an otter, five kisses and twelve thumbs up.

Consequently, when Max's message came through, she'd felt the vibration but hadn't thought it urgent and ignored it, up to her eyeballs at that very moment, loading up the Tesco click-and-collect order into the car. Why hadn't he called her and checked it was OK before he'd buggered off?

Well, that was the point, wasn't it? He didn't want to give her a chance to say no. He was asking for forgiveness rather than permission, one of his worst habits.

Norah couldn't wait to tell the couples' therapist about this. Hopefully, she'd join Norah in ripping Max a new arsehole, in her measured way. Norah knew you couldn't technically win couples' therapy, but she was gonna be a tiny bit victorious in the next session. Let him say everything was her fault after this.

Poppy brought her a coffee, reminding her that as well as being angry, she should be embarrassed, too. Poppy had been placed squarely in the middle of this. Of all people, it had to be her. To be so utterly frazzled in her presence was uncomfortable, to say the least. And Norah had let a jab at Max slip out when she first got in, so Poppy knew her marriage was, currently, for shit.

‘You OK?’ Poppy questioned, not leaving the table. The place was dead except for them and the kids.

‘Yeah, I’m fine,’ she responded.

Poppy nodded. ‘OK,’ she said gently.

Norah didn’t know why, but that pissed her off. ‘What?’

‘What?’ Poppy mirrored.

Norah realised she was being defensive and weird. ‘I... Sorry.’

‘Did I do something?’ Poppy asked.

‘No,’ Norah said.

Poppy hovered, looking a little pensive. And then she sat down and gave Norah an extremely direct look. ‘I can’t do this anymore.’

Norah was wide-eyed. ‘What can’t you do?’

‘Dance around this. I just want to acknowledge that I know it’s weird that I’m back. And I know you’re not happy about it,’ Poppy said plainly.

Norah felt a bead of sweat run down her spine. 'I n-never said anything like that,' she stuttered.

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‘You’re going to pretend there’s no problem? That’s how you want to handle this?’ Poppy asked her.

Norah felt a strong, inbuilt instinct to bluff her way through this conversation. It would have been so easy to run for the most convenient conversation exit—denial. But something in her, something even stronger, couldn’t do it, didn’t want it.

‘No. Obviously, it’s weird,’ she admitted.

Poppy smiled, relieved. ‘Acknowledging the problem. That’s a good start.’

‘To what?’ Norah asked.

Poppy shrugged. ‘I really don’t know.’

They looked at each other for a long moment, and Norah felt the corners of her mouth trying to move in an upward direction. She fought it bravely, but the trouble was, she knew that Poppy knew she was trying not to smile because Poppy was grinning at her. Norah cracked. She started to laugh. Poppy laughed right along with her. It felt good, like getting into a warm bath after a walk in the cold rain.

‘OK, well, I guess you can stop being so weird now,’ Poppy said.

‘Like it was just me?’ Norah shot back.

Poppy flashed her teeth. ‘You got me there, Cauldwell.’

Norah felt a funny little feeling in her tummy when Poppy said her last name. The intimacy of it recalled their younger selves so vividly.

Twenty Years Ago

Norah was lying in her bed, naked under the sheets, staring at the ceiling in sheer amazement. She had officially been devirginated by Poppy. Six months ago, she was the cool girl who lived down the street, a childhood friend, yet a stranger, and now Norah knew the ins and outs of her body. Life was officially nuts.

She wished Poppy hadn't had to leave. Norah would have loved to have kept her in her bed all night long. If only her bloody mother wasn't such a killjoy with a pathological aversion to knocking. Heaven forefend Norah have a bit of privacy. That she be allowed to have sex at the grand old age of eighteen.

Her mother should have appreciated that she'd waited for the right one. She'd slept with someone who cared about her and who she cared about. Her mother couldn't have asked for more of her. Well, Norah supposed her mother might have asked her to do all that with a different gender. But Norah felt in her heart that Poppy was the only person she could have been with. It had to be fated.

Norah was filled with the possibility of Poppy. She was nervous about her, too, but her worries simply couldn't compete with what had just happened. Her body felt like it still had Poppy's hands on it, like she'd left an impression of them, indelibly.

Was this, as she suspected, love? Was this what it felt like? Norah didn't have a point of comparison. She'd liked people. She'd had crushes. She'd even gotten a bit obsessed. But none of that was like this. This goddampullthat Poppy had on her. Norah physically ached to be with her again.

The only thing that could calm the craving was the knowledge that this was just the

beginning of things. This happiness was only the first taste. There would be so much more of this. She just knew it.

Sixteen

Now

Poppy hadn't even known she was going to address the eight-hundred-pound gorilla in the room until the words were coming out of her mouth. But she couldn't dance around it like this any longer. They had a past, and now they had a present. And if there was one thing Poppy could never do, it was live in the dark.

'So, can we do normal now, do you think?' Poppy asked, framing it as a joke. But it wasn't. She ached to be real with Norah. She didn't understand how much until she had a true shot at it.

'Yeah, I guess,' Norah said, that old, familiar wry smile on her lips.

Poppy hadn't seen that since they were teenagers. It was such a part of Norah that to separate it from her was to suck out her essential Norah-ness. But here it was. A fuller Norah, a realer Norah, a truer Norah. It was so good to see it.

Norah glanced at the kids. 'Must be tough working around Luna? Freddie wouldn't let me do that. He'd be hanging off my leg.'

'Luna's the same, which is why I never usually do this,' Poppy said quickly. 'My neighbour babysits her on a Saturday, but she had to get a flight to Cape Town at short notice.'

'Your babysitter had to leave the country? Bloody hell.'

‘Yeah, her mum’s unwell. It’s Cherry. You remember her?’

Norah’s mouth fell open. ‘Oh my god. Cherry? I haven’t seen her in forever.’ She blinked. ‘Wait, her mum?’

‘Don’t. I was shocked, too. But I guess Cherry’s family has the secret of eternal youth.’

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‘If she ever gives it to you, share it with me, would you?’ Norah said dryly.

Poppy chuckled. ‘No way. I need every drop for myself.’

‘Yeah, sure you do,’ Norah said.

Was that a compliment? Poppy wasn’t sure. Even if it was, she had to pretend she hadn’t noticed it, or she was gonna get all embarrassed and silly. She needed to make some attempt at seeming vaguely cool.

Norah suddenly pieced something together. ‘Wait, are you back on Orchid Road?’

‘Yeah, my mum’s old place. You didn’t know? I’ve seen your mum around. I thought she might have mentioned it.’

‘She never said a word,’ Norah said.

‘She doesn’t say hello to me,’ Poppy noted.

‘Don’t take that too personally,’ Norah said. ‘Her eyesight is shocking these days. She probably didn’t realise it was you.’

‘She looked in rude health to me,’ Poppy observed.

‘So, umm... Can I ask...’ Norah began, her voice wavering with slight anxiety.

‘Yes?’

‘How come you’re back?’

Poppy was glad of a chance to dispel whatever myths were in Norah’s head about her living some wealthy life. ‘I was renting in London, and I stopped being able to afford it. And I never sold my mum’s house, so it made sense to move back into it.’

‘You had to come back?’ Norah asked.

‘Yeah. I’m broke.’ Poppy gestured around her at the cafe. ‘You thought this was an eccentric hobby?’

Norah looked embarrassed. ‘Sorry. None of my business.’

Poppy actually wouldn’t have hated talking more about it. She’d been alone with all this, and it might have felt good to be able to speak to someone. But apparently, it was a dash too real for Norah. There was a limit to how personal they were going to get.

‘Hey, what time does your shift end?’ Norah asked.

‘We close at four.’ Poppy checked her watch. It was half two. Though things were quiet enough now, around three would come a last push of people. She wasn’t sure what she was going to do without Freddie to occupy Luna.

‘Well, if you like, Luna can come home with us,’ Norah offered. ‘You could pick her up after. We’re not far from you.’

Poppy was very careful about who she left Luna with, but she had no reservations about Norah. ‘That would be brilliant.’

Norah smiled. ‘Great.’ She drained her coffee. ‘Oh, you need an address, don’t you?’

‘Text it to me. I’m in the group chat now, so you can find my number there.’ She tried not to put her displeasure at that fact into her tone, but Norah heard it anyway. She rolled her eyes. ‘Get ready to put that on mute every day of your life.’

Poppy smiled. ‘I’m on it, trust me. I don’t need to know about every child-friendly event in a ten-mile radius.’

‘Yeah, it’s banal. But now and then, there’s a pretty entertaining drama.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah. Last time, it was because Susan’s kid’s very expensive water bottle went missing, and she went bonkers on the chat, demanding answers, pointing fingers, the whole thing.’

‘Did she find the culprit?’

‘Of course not. But that’s not the point for Susan. She’s just demonstrating her tiny amount of power.’ Norah immediately looked like she regretted her words.

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‘She’s one of those, is she?’ Poppy said.

Norah relaxed. ‘Oh, I thought you were friends.’

Poppy shook her head. ‘I’ve been a bit busy to do the mum friends thing. And even if I wasn’t, I wouldn’t choose Susan.’

Nora nodded with a small smile. ‘Me too. To both of those points.’

Poppy considered hinting that she wouldn’t mind being Norah’s friend, but she swallowed the words. What was the rush? If it was going to happen, it would. They were in each other’s lives now. And if a real friendship wasn’t on the cards, then Poppy couldn’t do much about that.

‘Right, better get this pair back,’ Norah said. ‘See you later.’

‘Yeah, see you later. And thanks,’ Poppy replied.

Norah gave her a shy shrug. ‘No bother.’

As Norah corralled the kids and led them out of The Sugar Cube, Poppy wondered if she had a shot at having Norah back in her life.

Twenty Years Ago

Poppy was late. Her late-night adventures with Norah had caused her to sleep in. Her composition class had already started, and she was harried as she stood on the

doorstep trying to lock the front door, which, of course, was sticky and uncooperative. As Poppy wiggled the key, she wondered if she could find the time to go and visit Norah today at school.

She didn't know her schedule, but there was only a handful of places she'd be. If Poppy wanted to find her, she could. And she wanted to find her. She wanted to hold her hand and gaze into her eyes and all that gooey stuff she'd never been interested in before now.

Poppy had to suppose that was simply because she'd never liked anyone properly before Norah. She wasn't sure she'd ever felt such pure happiness at the thought of another person.

Poppy finally got the bastard door locked, but at the moment of the click, someone behind her coughed in a way that seemed designed to catch attention rather than release a frog from a throat. Poppy turned to see Mrs Cauldwell at the bottom of her path, standing behind the gate.

'Poppy. I need a word,' she said flatly.

Poppy was immediately nervous. 'Hi, Mrs Cauldwell. Err, I'm running late. Maybe we could talk later?'

'I need to talk now,' the woman said coldly.

Poppy had never seen Mrs Cauldwell be so direct with her. She barely made eye contact usually.

'Is your mother in?' Mrs Cauldwell asked.

'No, she left for work already.'

‘Good. Let’s go inside to talk,’ Mrs Cauldwell said.

Poppy considered saying no. But there was something in the woman’s tone that said that wouldn’t fly. Poppy opened the door she’d just taken forever to lock, making peace with being crazy late.

Poppy walked into the hall, Mrs Cauldwell right behind her in the small space. ‘Do you want a cup of tea?’ Poppy asked automatically, her mother’s training kicking in.

‘No,’ Mrs Cauldwell said, standing in the hall. ‘We don’t need to go any further. This will be quick. I want you to stop.’

‘Stop what?’

‘This thing. With Norah. It’s done.’

Poppy blinked. ‘What do you m—’

‘I know what you’re up to. It’s over, OK?’

Poppy had a lot of responses jump into her head, but in the end, she settled on a simple, ‘Why?’

Mrs Caldwell’s face shifted from cold to angry. ‘Don’t treat me like a fool. I’m much older than you, and I can see what you’re up to.’

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Poppy was getting a bit angry now. 'Mrs Cauldwell, what the hell are you talking about?'

'I went to a grief group last night. My GP pushed me into it.'

'That's good,' Poppy said, confused.

'I won't be going back,' Mrs Cauldwell sneered. 'Bunch of self-pitiers. But they did say one interesting thing.'

'Yeah?'

'That you don't make decisions in the first six months after a bereavement. Because you're not in your right mind.'

Poppy nodded. 'That makes sense.'

'I bet it does,' Mrs Cauldwell said. 'Because Norah's not in her right mind, is she? And you understood that about her. Youknew better than anyone. And you used that knowledge, didn't you?'

Poppy didn't know how to respond. Her mouth felt locked from the vile accusation. To be spoken to like this by an adult was new. People liked her. Parents liked her... but not Mrs Cauldwell. There was real hatred in her tone.

'It's because I'm a girl, isn't it?' Poppy was eventually able to say.

Mrs Caldwell's face went red. 'That's not...' She took a deep breath, gathering herself. 'Someone who would take advantage of her now is not a good person. You're not a good person. You've taken her innocence.'

Poppy almost laughed. 'Innocence? Norah's an adult. We both are.'

'Don't give me that. She's grieving. And I remember what happened when your dad died. Your mum told me. You were feral, biting her and everything.'

'I was ten.'

'You were a mess. You know you were.'

Poppy felt suddenly aware that Mrs Caldwell was Norah's mother and all that came with that title. Norah complained about her all the time, but that didn't mean she wouldn't take her side if it came to a choice. If Mrs Caldwell decided to poison her against Poppy, it could ruin everything. She had to make an effort to turn this conversation around.

'Look, I care about her. I... I love her,' she said.

It was a bit weird that she was telling Norah's mother that before Norah herself, but it was the only bullet in her gun.

A hard laugh escaped from Mrs Caldwell's lips. 'You don't even know what that word means. Love is what I'm doing now. Protecting her from herself because she doesn't know what she's doing.'

That was an unfortunate turn of phrase, because didn't it echo Poppy's own words to Norah when they first kissed? Norah had assured her it was fine, and Poppy, wanting it to continue, had decided to believe her. She didn't feel very good about that choice

all of a sudden.

‘I care about her,’ Poppy said miserably.

‘If you did, you wouldn’t have done what you did,’ Mrs Caldwell said without sympathy. ‘I know what you were up to last night. It was written all over her face.’

Something that had felt lovely and right last felt suddenly twisted by Mrs Caldwell’s words. Poppy hated her for that.

‘We care about each other!’ she nearly yelled.

‘If you cared about her, you would have just been her friend. You’d have known she couldn’t make a choice like that.’

Poppy felt sick. Was that true? It hadn’t seemed so before. It had seemed like it was love happening, as pure as it came. But Mrs Caldwell’s righteousness—her utter certainty that Poppy was some kind of manipulative monster—was affecting. Had Poppy done something wrong when she’d let things happen with Norah? Should she have stopped it when she’d first thought to?

Poppy truly believed that she loved Norah, but was it loving to let things get physical with her while she was grieving? Had she made a mistake out of selfishness?

Was it wrong?

‘I know you know what you’ve done,’ Mrs Caldwell said, satisfied to watch Poppy spin out in front of her. ‘It’s in your eyes. You don’t have to admit it. Just leave her alone.’ She turned on that sentiment and walked out of the hall, leaving the door wide open.

Poppy shut it quickly behind her. She didn't go to school that day. Instead, she went up to her bedroom, put on her headphones, and blasted the loudest, angriest rock she could find into her ears. She was doing everything she could to push out Mrs Caldwell's dreadful words. But it didn't work. Not even close.

Seventeen

Now

Norah watched Freddie and Luna playing in the back garden in his little sandpit while she sat peacefully in a deckchair, soaking up some sun. They looked so happy together.

It made her wonder what it would have been like if she'd had a second. They'd thought it over, her and Max, but in the end, it seemed like there just weren't the extra resources for another one. Time, energy and money were in short supply. They'd decided to give what they had to Freddie.

Of course, there was an additional reason not to have another, but that went unsaid. Oh, and speaking of her husband, was that the front door?

'Hey, kids, you OK out here?' Norah called to them.

'YEAH!' they yelled.

Norah went indoors to rip her husband to shreds. However, she did have to find the bugger first.

She eventually tracked him down to the shower, where he was soaping himself casually, like a man who had all the time in the world and nothing to fear.

Norah wanted to take his satisfaction from him. 'Max,' she said loudly.

He turned in surprise and nearly slipped. 'Fuckme, Norah. That's how necks get broken!'

Norah took the segue with aplomb. 'No, how necks get broken is by leaving your child with a total stranger and pissing off to work without checking in with your wife.'

He frowned. 'Did you just threaten to break my neck?'

'It was a joke. Sort of,' Norah said.

'I had an emergency!' he whined. 'The weekend manager called to tell me that three people called in sick. I had to serve, for god's sake. And that woman said you knew her. I thought it would be fine.'

'You don't even know her name,' Norah said, shaking her head.

'I do. It's... Daisy?'

'Poppy.'

'I knew it was a flower name,' he said dismissively, stepping out of the shower and grabbing a towel.

'You don't even know what you did wrong, do you?' Norah said.

'My job's important, Norah.'

'More than your child?' Norah asked.

'Sometimes, yes!' he snapped.

Norah stared at him. 'I'm going downstairs now. So you can be alone with what you just said.' She walked out of the bathroom.

'Norah!' he called after her.

Norah went downstairs just in time to see through the glass front door that Poppy was coming up the path. She opened the door to meet her. 'Hi,' she said.

Poppy's mouth began to form the start of a greeting, and then her brow creased. Confusion took her face, and then horror. She was looking behind Norah. Norah knew what she'd seen before she even turned around and saw her stupid, nude husband jogging down the stairs to finish their row.

'Christ!' Max cried as he locked eyes with Poppy, cupping his junk, turned tail (so to speak) and ran upstairs, his buttocks jumping.

Norah turned back to Poppy. 'I'm so sorry,' she said, clutching her heart in true shame.

But Poppy's horror had passed, and now she was laughing. 'I thought I'd seen the last sausage roll of the day, but I guess not.'

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Norah wanted to die. 'The kids are in the backyard; Luna didn't see it... that...anything.'

'OK. You alright?' Poppy asked.

'No, yes, sorry. Come in.'

Poppy came in, and Norah led her through to the back, where she yelled, 'Hey, kiddo!'

Luna turned, 'Hi, Mum! Just playing!' Then she went back to digging a trench around a sandcastle.

'She usually runs straight for me. She must love playing with Freddie,' Poppy noted.

'He's a pretty good hang,' Norah said, still trying to get over her embarrassment.

'Hey, are you at this party tomorrow?' Poppy asked.

'What, Drew? Yeah.'

'Where the hell is it, by the way?' Poppy asked. 'I keep meaning to Google map it.'

'A farm about twenty-five minutes away. I've been there a few times. It's a good place for the kids. They have animals, of course, but it's all about the play park. It's epic.'

‘Twenty-five minutes away?’ Poppy repeated.

Norah couldn’t miss the concern in her tone. ‘Are you worried about finding it?’ Norah asked.

‘I had to sell my car,’ Poppy admitted, trying to hide her embarrassment, but Norah could see it.

She decided the best thing to do was to approach the problem practically. ‘Did you keep the kid’s car seat?’

Poppy raised an eyebrow. ‘Yes...’

‘Come with us.’

‘No, you’ve done me enough favours. I’ll figure something out...’

Norah shook her head. ‘I’ll drop by your place at about ten thirty. We’ll get the seat set up in my car.’

Poppy gaped at her. ‘You’re saving my actual life at the moment.’

‘We’re saving each other’s,’ Norah assured her.

She really meant it. There was a lot wrong with Norah’s life, but Poppy’s appearance wasn’t on that list anymore. She was glad of the shift. All it took was her selfish bastard of a husband to be his usual self, and somehow, things were different. Their past felt less like a huge balloon full of old pain that Norah was holding on to. It was deflating, shrivelling, drooping.

She just hoped she didn’t do something stupid, like attempting to address what had

happened at the end. Everything would be better if she could just let that part go. They were kids, right? Eighteen. You couldn't hold someone responsible for something that happened when they were barely out of braces.

'Wait, is there room in the car? Three adults and two kids?' Poppy exclaimed.

'Max never comes to the parties. It's his relaxation time,' Norah admitted.

Poppy didn't react to that. 'Well, his loss is my gain. Thanks, Norah.' She turned. 'Luna! Let's roll!'

'In a minute!'

'We're having pizza for dinner, but only if you come right now.'

Luna stood and started brushing sand off herself.

'We're having pizza no matter what she does,' Poppy said quietly, out of the corner of her mouth. 'Because I want it.'

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‘Let them never find out we love junk food as much as them,’ Norah replied.

And with that, Norah knew she and Poppy were mum friends.

Twenty Years Ago

Norah was seething. This was getting ridiculous. It had been a week, and she could not get hold of Poppy. She lived down the street, and she couldn’t find a single minute for Norah. Aftereverything?

She looked at the last text she’d had from Poppy for the hundredth time.

Sorry, the band is busy right now. There’s a showcase next week and someone from a label is coming. We’re practising every minute.

That was it. That was all she had to say. Nothing about them being together. Nothing about any kind of feeling. Not a thing to imply she was desperate to see her or anything like that.

Norah had seen Poppy around school, but the few times they’d bumped into each other in school, the disinterest was unmissable. ‘Oh, hi. Nice to see you. Got to run.’

Norah was pretty sure she was getting dumped. She felt so stupid, so hurt, so blindingly angry. She’d thought they were something. She’d thought...

How could someone who’d written a song about her turn out to be a user?

Norah couldn't take it anymore. She couldn't just let this happen without saying something. While she had no desire to look Poppy in the eye and have it all confirmed, she was losing her mind. She needed the truth.

She walked downstairs to see her mother coming in. 'You going somewhere?' she asked, taking her coat off.

'Yeah, just need a quick word with... Poppy,' she said nervously. She'd tried not to bring her up since the snoggus interruptus incident.

'You haven't seen her much lately?' her mother said.

'Is that a question?' Norah asked.

'An observation, that's all.'

'Yeah, I guess.' They looked at each other like there might be more to say. But no one said it, so Norah decided to tie the interaction off. 'Well, back in a bit.'

She left the house, walked down the street and up the path to Poppy's. She didn't ring the bell right away. She needed to collect herself, think up a game plan, an opening line, something. Then she realised if she stood out here much longer, someone was going to look out of a window and see her psyching herself up, which would make this whole thing that much more embarrassing. So she rang the doorbell.

She heard someone walking towards the door. It was fifty-fifty whether it was Poppy or her mum who would answer.

It was Poppy. 'Oh, hi!' she said, trying to smile, but Norah saw the fear in her eyes.

Norah licked her lips. 'Hello. Thought I'd pop round and check in.'

‘Check in?’ Poppy asked.

‘Yeah.’

That hung in the air for a while, heavy. In that silence, Norah hoped she was wrong about this and it was just a misunderstanding.

‘I’m a bit busy,’ Poppy said. ‘Homework.’

Norah pushed down the lump in her throat. ‘So that’s it, is it?’ she managed to say.

Poppy looked down. ‘Yeah.’

Norah realised Poppy was just waiting for her to get the hint and go.

It was all true. Norah had been used. She knew Poppy was more experienced than she was, but she’d never guessed she was like this. That it was all a game to her. That she didn’t give a shit about her now she’d gotten her ‘prize.’

‘OK,’ Norah said. She turned and walked down the path, hearing the door shut behind her.

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She went home, walking into the house where her mother seemed to be waiting for her.

‘Everything OK?’ she asked nervously.

She’d seen this coming, somehow. Norah supposed it was motherly intuition.

Norah began to cry, something she rarely did around her mother. Her mother came to her and held her, also a rarity.

‘It’s OK,’ she said.

But it wasn’t—it was heartbreak.

Eighteen

Now

‘I don’t think it goes there,’ Poppy said, wiping sweat from her brow.

‘There’s nowhere else for it to go,’ Norah complained just as sweatily.

They were trying to put Luna’s car seat in next to Freddie’s, and though Poppy and Norah had clicked two straps in place, there was still a third with no apparent home.

‘Can we go yet?’ asked Freddie.

‘There’s a wasp. I think it wants to sting me,’ Luna added.

She was only wearing a T-shirt. Poppy had attempted to bundle her, too, but she wasn’t having it. Poppy decided to let her get chilly and then attack with the coat.

‘They don’t want to sting you, Luna. They won’t if you leave them alone,’ Poppy assured her.

‘What if I call it a dipshit?’ Luna asked. ‘Will it sting me then?’

Poppy stopped and turned, stunned. ‘Where on earth did you hear that word?’

‘You said it about that deliveryman when he dropped that big load of milk on your toe,’ Luna explained casually.

‘Oh,’ Poppy said quietly. ‘Right.’ She turned to Norah. ‘In my defence, I didn’t know she was around to hear it. And it was a bulk amount of soya milk. My toe was big for days.’

Norah laughed. ‘Sounds like a dipshit to me.’

‘Dipshit,’ Freddie repeated.

‘Freddie...’ Norah warned.

‘DIPSHIT! DIPSHIT! DIPSHIT!’ Luna started chanting, and Freddie was quick to join in, both delighted at the horror it was inspiring in the adults.

Norah sighed and turned away from it, placing her attention back on the chair. ‘If I say something, it will only get more exciting for them to say it. So I’m just gonna let them wear it out.’

‘Good plan,’ Poppy nodded. ‘Sorry,’ she added.

‘The blame for this splits pretty evenly,’ Norah said. There was a clicking noise. ‘Aha!’ Norah said triumphantly. ‘Just need to tighten it now.’

‘Let me,’ Poppy said, tugging and pulling at the seat belt with all her strength until it would move no further. ‘OK, I think that’s as good as it’s going to get.’

‘Let’s get ‘em in.’

Happily, the chant of ‘DIPSHIT’ was dying off somewhat by this point, but Poppy wanted to expedite its demise.

‘OK, kids! To the farm!’ she exclaimed with a lot more jolliness than she felt, trying to distract them.

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The kids immediately forgot how fun it was to swear and scrambled into their seats with their hearts and minds all for the party. Poppy and Norah clicked their respective kid's seat belts into place.

Poppy was so grateful for the ride. The idea of trying to wrangle Luna onto public transport had not appealed. It was hard enough doing the walk to school now that she couldn't chuck her into a vehicle and blast her there in two minutes. There was no doubt about it, broke-life sucked.

'I've been to the farm,' Freddie informed Luna. 'It's super good. There's a massive sandpit with a pirate boat in it and a really big trampoline and ice cream.'

'I like chocolate ice cream,' Luna responded.

'I like strawberry. No banana! No chocolate,' Freddie said.

'No, you can't like chocolate. That's my favourite,' Luna told him firmly.

'You can have the same favourite as someone else,' Poppy told her as she went around to the front of Norah's Honda.

'Can we?' Luna asked, slightly shocked. She nodded at Freddie. 'You can like chocolate, then.'

'OK,' Freddie said, relieved.

Poppy knew Luna could be a bit of bossy boots, but she hoped she wouldn't push

Freddie around too much if he was a bit more laissez-faire in his approach to life.

‘Ready?’ Norah asked, clicking herself in.

Poppy belted up and nodded, and Norah pulled out.

Poppy was still working through her shock that this was happening. They’d barely been on speaking terms a few days ago. Now they were off on a jaunt together with their kids. Poppy had never really dared to dream it could get to this point. But she was truly grateful, and not just for the help. What an unimaginable gift from the universe—a second chance to know Norah Cauldwell.

Twenty Years Ago

Poppy closed the door on Norah, turned, and slid down the door, slumping onto the mat. She was in so much pain. Throw that in with the enormous amount of shame and guilt she felt, and she just about wanted to die.

She’d known she’d have to face Norah at some point, but she’d had herself convinced it wasn’t going to happen just yet. That she had time to figure out a way to end it that wasn’t completely fucking shitty. Like there could be some magic phrase that would make it OK.

Well, it had happened now, and Poppy had blown it. It had been way worse than she’d feared. In her most sweat-soaked fever dream, it hadn’t gone that poorly.

The one thing she could have done was tell Norah what her mother had said. That could have eased it somewhat. A real reason. But Poppy knew how selfish that would have been because Norah would say her mother was wrong, wouldn’t she? And Poppy would be tempted to let herself believe it because she wanted to.

She had to be stronger than that, for both of them. Ending it now—when it had barely gotten started—would give Norah the chance to get over it easily. She wouldn't give a shit in a few weeks. She might even think, 'What the hell, do I even like girls?'

Poppy didn't think she'd fare so well. It was going to hurt, but Poppy felt that was a good thing. She should suffer. She was a selfish coward.

She felt lucky she had something she could move toward, a good distraction. She hadn't lied to Norah when she said the band had a big opportunity coming up—a real showcase. She would focus on that. It was all that could save her because life was going to be harder now. She was in love with someone she couldn't have, and that was going to hurt for a long time.

Poppy bitterly regretted the day that Norah had overheard the song. That had been the start of everything. The ripple in the pond. How far would the ripples travel? She prayed not far.

Nineteen

Now

Norah's car rumbled down the winding country roads toward the farm.

It was an unusually chill drive for her. Being on the road with a full car tended to be a very different vibe. Max had the habit of monologuing about his minor work troubles while Norah was trying to concentrate on driving, which led to spats that poor Freddie had to listen to from the back, which, in turn, made Norah feel guilty.

But it was nothing but serenity in the car today. Poppy was staring out of the window while Freddie and Luna excitedly pointed out cows, horses, and the occasional rabbit darting across the fields.

‘Look!’ Freddie yelled, pressing his face against the window. ‘A tractor!’

Luna was fascinated. ‘It’s massive!’

Norah saw a sign for the entrance and turned up the road, approaching the farm.
‘We’re here!’ she announced, pulling into the gravel parking lot.

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The kids cheered. Norah loved their energy. They lived for now, and if now sucked, there was always another now just around the corner. She envied them, truly. She must have felt like that once, but she couldn't remember such a time in her life.

Well, maybe once.

The excitement in the car was hitting fever pitch as Freddie and Luna scrambled to unbuckle their seat belts, eager to get the fun started.

'My belt is stuck!' Freddie cried desperately.

Norah got out of the car and went around. 'It's OK, I got it, Freds.'

She unclipped him, and he launched himself out of the car. Luna was hot on his heels, moving around to catch him as he took off running.

'Stop, Freddie!' Norah screamed.

'It's a car park, Luna!' Poppy added in a like tone.

The kids might not have been able to hear their parents' words, but they both understood the tone enough and skidded to a halt.

Norah grabbed her bag and locked the car quickly. Poppy had already caught up to them.

'What do I always say?' Norah asked.

‘Don’t eat snails,’ Freddie responded.

‘Not that.’

‘Oh. Did you mean cars are big metal monsters that can kill you?’ he asked casually.

‘That’s the one,’ Norah said.

Suddenly, she felt embarrassed in front of Poppy about her aggressive phrasing. She turned to Poppy. ‘I know it’s a bit much...’

But Poppy was leaning down to Luna. ‘Did you hear that?’ Poppy said. ‘Big metal monsters.’

Luna’s eyes flashed fear, though she shook it off quickly. ‘I heard!’ she said angrily. ‘And I’m cold!’

Poppy, already carrying her coat in readiness, stuffed her into it quickly.

They continued walking, but both of them kept close to the adults now.

‘Thanks for that imagery,’ Poppy muttered under her breath. ‘I don’t want her to live in fear, but she’s got no sense of danger at all when it comes to cars. God knows I don’t want to spoil her childhood innocence too soon, but better I take a tiny bit than a car takes the whole thing.’

Norah nodded, pleased to hear her exact philosophy put into words. ‘Exactly.’

Norah wondered why it couldn’t be this easy to talk to Max. She’d always had this idea that when it was right, you didn’t have to talk. There was an understanding between you. But with Max, it wasn’t feeling so true lately. They weren’t in a

peaceful, silent communion. They simply didn't talk. When had it switched?

They reached the farm entrance, where a bored teenager ticked off the kids' names on Drew's guest list.

As soon as that happened, the kids looked at their parents with a question in their eyes, 'Are we free to go nuts?'

Norah and Poppy nodded.

'Head on in,' Norah said.

'We'll be nearby,' Poppy added.

They took off at a lick, running straight for an impossibly big trampoline.

'You have to take your shoes off!' Freddie said, already barefoot.

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Luna groaned but did it anyway, and they were on the big trampoline, springing like they could reach the sun.

Norah and Poppy dropped off the cards and presents on the gift table and turned to watch the children. Norah realised she felt some sort of contentment for a change. And then Poppy asked if she wanted a coffee, and she was even happier.

Twenty Years Ago

It had been four weeks, and it wasn't any better.

Norah couldn't seem to get out of this pit of misery she was in. Though Norah was no stranger to misery, this romantic rejection was an entirely fresh kind of pain.

Whatever she could have said about losing her dad, it wasn't like this. No one had said, 'You don't deserve a dad because you're a total fucking loser, and we're repossessing him.'

Terrible as it was, there was nothing malicious or vindictive about the way she lost her dad. His death from a tumour was impersonal. Though it had felt cruel, it was only in that 'The universe is a chaotic bitch that doesn't give a shit about anyone' kind of way.

But this was deeply personal. An attack at the core of her. She had shown just about every part of herself to Poppy, inside and out. And the response was, 'You don't hold my interest. Go away.'

Norah wished with her whole heart that Poppy could know how this felt. She wanted to hurt Poppy so badly, to make her know this agony. But she simply didn't have that kind of power over her. That was the whole problem. Poppy didn't care.

Norah did the only thing she could do. She worked. Her situation made the graphic novel take a hell of a turn. Dark moments filled the pages. She poured her resentment and anguish into every panel. The girl with the fresh superpowers was getting ever more bitter. She'd tried to help people, but it never turned out well, and it seemed like all she could do was accidentally hurt them. She was beginning to conclude that the only use for her super strength was to punish. She'd picked someone for retribution, a bully who had hurt her friend.

Despite this outlet, Norah's wounds remained raw. She didn't sleep well, and when she did, she dreamt of Poppy. In the dreams, Poppy was always laughing at her.

Just when she thought she was drowning completely, her phone buzzed one evening. She hesitated, heart racing as she finally unlocked her phone.

I'm sorry. Can we talk? Poppy asked.

Norah stared at the screen, her fingers trembling as her mind reeled with the possibilities.

Maybe it was all a mistake? Maybe Poppy was coming back to her? Maybe the love Norah felt was returned?

It didn't take long for Norah to throw that fantasy out. She was a realist. Poppy had used her. To still cling to hope now was pathetic. She hated the instinct in herself.

Before she could weaken, she had to do something to make it impossible. She had to burn the bridge of any kind of chance for Poppy to come back into her life. Poppy

was probably just hoping that enough time had passed that she could say, 'Hey, let's be friends again now, yeah?'

Fuck that.

No, she texted back. And then she added another message. Don't contact me again.

It hurt like hell to press send. But there was no other way. That word was her only power in all this. What could she do but use it?

Twenty

Now

Poppy and Norah stood side by side with their coffees, watching the kids go bananas on a huge sunken pirate ship jutting out of a ginormous sandpit.

Poppy was still dealing with the surrealness of the situation. She hoped it would pass soon. It had simply seemed so impossible that she'd ever get another chance to be in Norah's life that she hadn't even liked to hope. But they were moving past the past. Poppy couldn't ask for more.

'Freddie's nose is running like a tap,' Norah muttered to herself.

'Probably a touch of hay fever around all the, ya know, actual hay,' Poppy reassured her.

'I hope so. He's not fun with a cold. He gets very morose,' Norah mused.

'Morose?'

‘Yeah, he starts making plans for his own funeral. “Mummy, if I don’t wake up tomorrow, don’t give my toys away. Just put them all over me. I can sleep with them forever.” That’s a verbatim quote. Gave me the shivers.’

‘Very ancient Egyptian of him,’ Poppy smiled. ‘Luna goes full diva when she’s sick. Demanding only the finest snacks, the best made-up games, movies that don’t exist.’

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‘That don’t exist?’ Norah repeated.

‘She has this tendency to think that Netflix caters to her whims,’ Poppy explained. ‘If she dreams up a story about a unicorn that makes friends with a koala, she fully expects it to be there.’

‘And when she finds out it’s not?’

‘She’s usually philosophical about it, but now and again, full meltdown.’

‘God, the meltdowns,’ Norah said, clutching her coffee a little tighter.

Poppy turned in surprise. ‘Does Freddie have them? He seems so chill.’

‘He’s just on best behaviour around Luna,’ Norah explained. ‘But he can throw a wobbler with the best of them.’

Poppy related to that. She felt she was very much on her best behaviour today. She was trying hard not to say something stupid around Norah. She didn’t even know exactly what it was she was trying not to say. But it felt as though a mistake lurked, patiently waiting to be made.

They sat in comfortable silence for a few moments, sipping their drinks and watching the kids play.

‘Oh, what happened with Cherry, by the way? Do you know?’ Norah asked.

Poppy smiled. 'Her mum is fine. It turned out to be an insane case of heartburn. She just has to quit eating cheese, but she's gonna be fine.'

'Jesus, what a relief for Cherry,' Norah exclaimed.

'Yeah. I know everyone has to die eventually, but I'm glad Cherry gets to have her mum that bit longer,' Poppy noted.

She thought it was a pretty bland comment, but it seemed to send Norah into a thoughtful silence.

'Do you ever think about what your life would be like if you didn't have a kid?' she asked a few minutes later.

Though the question had come a little out of left field, Poppy wanted to give her a considered answer.

'I guess I've thought about it before,' she replied cautiously. 'But not really seriously. I mean, it's hard. But I couldn't have been more deliberate in the choice. So how could I complain?'

Norah paused as though she was wondering whether to press. 'How deliberate?'

Poppy was kind of glad she was fishing. She wanted to be able to tell her. 'I inseminated myself.'

'With... Someone?' Norah asked tentatively.

'No. Just me. I'd been single for a while. And it was always something I wanted to do. I wasn't sure if it was a perfect time, and I'd always hoped there'd be someone doing it with me, but my mum's health wasn't good. I wanted her to get to meet her

grandkid. So I went for it.'

Norah was fascinated. 'Wow. That must have been tough. Doing it solo.'

'Yeah, it was,' Poppy admitted. It had been extremely tough at times.

Her mum loved her granddaughter but couldn't help her health being what it was. But Poppy had been able to afford a part-time nanny, which had made it feel physically possible, if quite lonely. But around the time that Luna went to school, the money had dried up, and things became tough in a different way.

Poppy supposed that was how it always was. Every choice led you down a tough road. You became a pop star, and you realised you hated it. You let a shitty career die, but you didn't know what came next. You wanted a kid, but it was never the right time, and you worried it wasn't on the cards. You did it anyway, and it was more work than you could imagine. You left behind an old hard, and you were immediately handed a brand new hard.

Like her new job. The café had saved her arse, but it wasn't forever. She had a lot of time in front of her, and she couldn't expect her child to fulfil her in every way. If she did, one day Luna would grow up and leave, and then what would Poppy do? Be one of those sad people waiting by the phone for her increasingly busy adult child to call?

Poppy was lucky her mother wasn't like that. She'd had her own life after Poppy left. Poppy had to give that to her daughter. Show her how to be a full person with wants and dreams and all that crap. Only, she wasn't her mother. She didn't know how to do it yet.

'You ever wonder about child-free life?' she asked Norah.

'Now and again,' Norah said. 'But I can't imagine a world without him. So, like you,

not really. Though I was less deliberate about it than you were.'

'Oh?' Poppy asked, hoping she didn't sound as intrigued as she was. 'I'm interested, but by no means nosy,' was the tone she was striving for.

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‘I got knocked up, being honest. I’d been seeing Max for about six months. I was like, “It’s too soon to get serious. What the hell are we going to do?” But he thought it could work. So we went for it,’ Norah told her plainly.

Poppy was slightly amazed at the way Norah was spilling like this. It pleased her but scared her, too. The pressure was mounting to say the right thing. To tell Norah that things would get better and that she’d find a way to make it work. But she didn’t want to offer a meaningless platitude. She wanted to say something real to her.

‘Are you OK?’ she asked.

Norah looked at her in surprise, and Poppy saw pain in her eyes. But only for a second. ‘Oh, yeah. I’m great. I’m just feeling a bit tired. Sorry about the whinging,’ she said quickly.

Back in the day, Poppy would have called bullshit. But it wasn’t then. It was now. Poppy had missed a lot of Norah’s life. Half of it, in fact. This person in front of her was still something of a mystery. Poppy had to keep that in mind. The best tack to take might be to act like they were just new friends. If Norah wanted to pretend she was OK, Poppy had to let her.

She glanced over at the trampoline and saw Luna take a tumble. She made ready to fly over and pick the kid up, soothe her through some tears. But Freddie was on it. He ran over and grabbed Luna’s hands and she was back on her feet. Then he said something, and they both giggled.

‘He’s a really sweet kid,’ Poppy said honestly. ‘You’re raising a good one.’

Norah didn't say anything, but she looked touched. 'You too.'

'Sometimes I worry I'm raising a princess,' Poppy said, trying to sound flip about it.

'She's confident and knows her own mind,' Norah asserted. 'I wish I'd been raised to be a bit more like that.'

Poppy was so shocked that she couldn't speak. Raising Luna alone, there was no other voice to hear, no one to keep her in check, to say 'Too much' or 'Too little.' It made her wonder. So Norah's complement meant, well, pretty much everything.

'Thank you,' Poppy said, looking away.

She couldn't let Norah see that she was welling up like an utter dickhead. But if Norah noticed, she let it pass without comment.

Twenty Years Ago

Poppy could understand Norah's response to her message. But it didn't make it hurt less. Norah didn't want to know. She didn't want to hear an apology or an explanation. Poppy had wanted to try to give her something now the dust had settled. She felt up to explaining her decision.

But the friendship was dead.

The worst thing was feeling so alone with this. She and Norah had been becoming so close before this happened, and she was precisely the person she wanted to talk to. But obviously, that was off the table.

Her mother had always been a good shoulder, but Poppy was too embarrassed to talk to her about it. Her mum only knew what had happened with the song, but anything

else was pure speculation. Poppy had kept quiet on the building romance. Now, she was glad she'd shut her mouth. She wasn't sure how her mother would receive it all. She might think Mrs Caldwell was in the right.

Well, Poppy didn't need that. She felt bad enough. She didn't need anyone else to see her shame. Especially not her mum. She needed her to keep thinking well of her even if it was inaccurate.

She looked at Norah's message again, at the one word.No.

What a terrible word. Only two letters and look at all the pain contained in them. Who invented it? A cold bastard, that's who. One with no concern for the feelings it would provoke in all who heard it. They could have made it just a bit less harsh. Added a few letters on it to make it feel less like getting slapped. 'Noggle,' perhaps. Or sillier: 'Nobewobbee.' Or fun: 'Noaroonny.'

But it was justNo. Like a door slamming in your face. Bang, over.

Her phone beeped again, and Poppy leapt at it, hoping Norah had second thoughts. But it was just Sammy, the bassist from the band.

Get here now.

Where?Poppy replied.

Rehearsal room. The man is here.

Man?

The man from the thing!

Poppy couldn't be doing this cryptic shit right now. What are you talking about?

'The A and R guy. He wants to talk to the band.'

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Poppy wasn't excited, only confused. The guy Sammy meant was Jeff Park, and he worked for Jam Records, a small label. He had come to the showcase and the after-party and had talked to a couple of performers who were very much not them. She'd assumed they'd blown it. But he'd come down to the school? For what?

Poppy walked into the rehearsal room to find Jeff talking to the three other guys in the band. Sammy was talking about his influences.

'Lemmy, man. He was a bassist, and he was still the star. And that's hard because no one ever pays that much attention to the bassist. But he rocked so hard, you had to pay attention.'

'Well, he was also the lead vocalist of Motorhead,' Jeff pointed out, sounding bored.

'I guess that helped, yeah,' Sammy said.

Jeff noticed that Poppy had walked in, and his boredom evaporated. 'Poppy!' he exclaimed.

Poppy, who had no idea this man would have any way of knowing her name, was shocked by the familiarity of the greeting. 'That's me.'

'I'm so glad you could come down. Fancy a chat?' he asked, and it was pretty clear he meant just her.

Poppy glanced at the other band members. Sammy, Barnaby (the lead singer) and Micky (the drummer) didn't look happy. Barnaby looked like he might throw a full tantrum. No one had understood what was happening until this moment. But it was obvious now. He had come for Poppy.

Poppy should have felt elated. But she was just scared. 'Umm, OK,' she said to Jeff. What else could she say? Noaroonny?

'Great, let's go to the refectory,' he said, ignoring the rest of the band's daggers.

'Sorry I didn't have a chance to talk to you at the showcase,' Jeff apologised. 'I had to run to another thing.'

'Right...' Poppy said. She was still a bit confused as to what this was.

'I want to tell you I thought you were great.'

'Who, me?'

'Yes.'

'But I'm just the rhythm guitarist,' Poppy told him. 'You get that, right? Barnaby is on lead guitar and vocals.' Poppy felt that if anybody from the band was getting plucked from obscurity, anyone would assume it was going to be Barnaby—including Barnaby.

'But you sing backup, don't you? And someone told me you're the lyricist, too.'

'Yeah, I do.'

‘I thought the lyrics were good. Your backing was strong, too.’

‘Oh. Thanks,’ Poppy said, absolutely baffled.

‘I was wondering if you had any demos? Maybe you write stuff that you perform by yourself?’ he asked hopefully.

‘Why?’ Poppy asked him outright.

He laughed. ‘Straight to the heart of it? I like your style. I’m trying to find someone for a group.’

‘A group?’

‘Yes, all female, three members. We could do with someone like you.’

‘Me?’ Poppy exclaimed, shocked.

‘We need someone who can compose. And your look could be perfect, with some minor tweaking.’

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Poppy frowned. ‘Do you mean a girl group?’

‘It’s a group with girls, yes. I can see you’re thinking that’s not your bag, but this would be different. You’d all play instruments.’

Poppy was spinning out. On the one hand, she was being potentially recruited. On the other, she had never wanted to be a Spice Girl—not even slightly. She wanted to be PJ Harvey in an ideal world.

‘Look, I know what you’re thinking. But you have to remember, this kind of thing can be a stepping stone. If you get the job, it’s just the start. You can move in a lot of different directions with a high profile.’

Poppy had to admit, it was a persuasive argument. Still, she was unsure. She wanted to make music. But like this?

‘So, a demo?’ Jeff asked hopefully.

‘I’ve been working on some stuff,’ she admitted. ‘I’m not sure if I have anything you’d be—’

‘Send me your most polished track,’ he said quickly. ‘The thing you’re most proud of.’

It wasn’t hard to choose. It was “Norah’s Song.” It was easily the one she poured the most hours into. Still, she’d never actually thought anyone else would ever hear it. Showing it to Jeff seemed a bit mad. It would be like flopping her diary and saying,

‘Check it out. I got my heart smashed to bits, and it was all my own fault.’ Poppy didn’t love the idea.

Jeff was watching her carefully. ‘What is it?’

‘What? Nothing.’

‘You have a song in mind, I can tell,’ he said smugly.

‘I mean, yes. Sort of. But I wasn’t thinking it was for... consumption,’ Poppy explained carefully.

‘If it’s your best work, you’d be selling yourself short by not letting me hear it, wouldn’t you? And I’d hate you to miss your shot at a real career because you didn’t put your best foot forward,’ he explained smoothly.

Though Poppy didn’t know if this was a shot she wanted, something was compelling about Jeff’s tone. What if this was it? What if this was the only real opportunity she’d ever get in her whole life, and she was sitting here, considering letting it pass her by? She was going to feel so fucking stupid in twenty years, knowing she was a miserable failure who could have had it all.

But more than that, Poppy was in so much pain right now. She needed something else to think about other than Norah. She needed to stop missing her with her whole body and soul. She needed to lock onto something, anything else.

‘OK, I’ll send you the song,’ Poppy agreed.

Twenty-One

Now

Spring was springing, and winter was finally packing its bags and fucking off. Norah was glad for more than just a weather change. Christmas had not been fun. They'd hosted Max's parents, who were divorced for good reason. Watching them pretend to be polite to each other (while being passive-aggressive on an unholy level) set Norah's teeth on edge.

And she was no stranger to a pass-agg parent. Luckily, her own mother was on a winter cruise, so she hadn't added her dark little soul to the proceedings. The dinner table probably would have collapsed under the weight of bile.

But it wasn't all bad. Freddie had loved the visit to Santa, getting his new bike, and a trip to the ice-skating rink. Watching him experience joy was like feeling it herself.

As the days grew longer and warmer, Norah felt a sense of relief. She could finally take Freddie out to play in the park without having to bundle him up in multiple layers. She'd taken to meeting Poppy there with Luna on a Sunday afternoon, and it was a regular thing now.

Little did Norah know that the end of winter hadn't seen off the dark days. There was so much worse to come.

But sitting next to Poppy, watching the kids trying to double mount the rope swing, she thought things were getting better. Good, even. She and Max were rowing much less. If that was because he was out all the time, then so be it. Peace was peace. They'd decided to stop the counselling. They agreed that they'd gotten all they could out of it.

And things were growing ever more comfortable with Poppy. She was becoming a good friend. It was very nearly like the old days, before... Well, before. Norah was shocked at how grateful she was for that. She hadn't noticed it, but a lot of her friendships had fallen off when Freddie came along. She was just so busy and tired

that there wasn't time for things like hanging out with someone who understood her. Having it in her life again was pretty wonderful.

Poppy was now her best friend. The girl who broke Norah's heart was gone. One night of passion and a few dozen days of tears couldn't count for much in the thousands of days spent on this silly blue marble. It was a blink. Something to be forgotten.

But Norah hadn't forgotten, exactly. But she didn't focus on it. And that meant it was past, didn't it? Like the time she broke her wrist coming off the swing when she was seven. She hadn't forgotten how it felt, but it didn't hurt anymore. It was just a memory of pain, not pain itself. Though, just occasionally, when it was damp, her wrist did ache a touch. But the metaphor tracked, for the most part.

'Hey, are you going to that PTA thing on Friday?' Norah asked as they watched the kids flying across the zipline together, screaming with delight.

Poppy looked at her in surprise. 'No, are you?'

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‘Not if you’re not.’

‘Then we’re not.’

‘I wish Susan would stop putting the meeting times in the chat. It makes me feel guilty,’ Norah said wistfully.

‘Don’t talk about guilt,’ Poppy complained. ‘This is supposed to be a slacker mums’ club.’

‘Since when?’ Norah asked.

‘Since we’re both slacker mums.’

‘I’m not a slacker, and neither are you,’ Norah said with an eye-roll.

‘Fine, but I’m too busy to take on shit I don’t have to. Which—by some people’s definition—makes me a slacker,’ Poppy said.

‘OK, OK, my bad,’ Norah said. She paused. ‘Quick question. Would you rather go to a PTA meeting or shit yourself?’

Poppy paused, and Norah wondered if she was being a bit gross. But then Poppy said, ‘PTA. But it’s a close-run thing. You?’

‘I’m fifty-fifty because they have free wine at the PTA. No one gives you free booze if you crap yourself,’ Norah explained.

Poppy's eyes lit up. 'Free wine? They should lead with that.'

'You considering it? We could be like those cool, effortless mums who are always organising events and fundraising,' Norah said.

'I'm cool already. I listen to cool, youthful music like... What do kids listen to?' Poppy asked.

'Freddie likes Taylor Swift,' Norah said evenly.

Poppy sighed. 'She's banned in my house.'

'Why's that?' Norah asked, interested.

'Because I hate her,' Poppy said flatly.

'Oh, I thought you were gonna say something more parent-y.'

'When have you known me to do that?' Poppy asked, aghast.

'MUUUUUUM!' Freddie suddenly said from right next to her, shocking her eardrum.

Norah needed to put a bell on that kid.

'What's up, Freds?' Norah asked.

'I'm thirsty.'

Norah pulled out his water bottle, and he sucked on it like a baby. He was a very thirsty child. He was like a little steam engine that needed water thrown on the coal at

regular intervals, or he was apt to crash.

‘Mum, I need water, too!’ Luna said, running over.

‘Funny coincidence,’ Poppy remarked with a smile at her child, who was soon necking her water.

‘Mummy, did you see my message?’ Freddie asked, still gasping from his mega drink.

‘What message?’

‘I sent it from Dad’s phone before we left.’

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‘Sorry, I didn’t see it,’ she said, checking her phone to find one of his cryptic emoji streams. ‘It’s lovely,’ she said. ‘Thank you.’

He ran off, and Luna ran after him.

Norah glanced back at the phone, intending to lock it. But she paused on the message, something about Freddie’s emoji message catching her attention. Freddie would generally just text from the most used emoji section of whichever parent’s phone he was using. After re-examining the child’s message, a chill went down Norah’s back.

‘What’s wrong?’ Poppy asked.

Norah hadn’t realised how much her face was giving the game away. ‘Oh, nothing.’

But it wasn’t nothing. The message her lovely, innocent child had sent was full of eggplants, hot dogs, and bananas. Norah knew what that meant.

‘What’s wrong?’ Poppy asked again.

‘Poppy, could you stay with the kids for a minute? I just need to run home.’

Poppy didn’t ask what was wrong a third time. She just nodded. ‘Go, we’re fine.’

Norah did the five-minute walk in two. She burst into the door and ran upstairs. Max was in the shower. He’d been showering a lot lately, at strange times. Norah had not thought anything of it until today. Norah had also not wondered why he was suddenly disappearing for shifts at the drop of a hat. But she’d been handed the last piece of the

puzzle.

Max turned at her entry into the bathroom. 'Hey, what do you doing back so—'

Norah put her phone screen against the shower door. 'Youfucker,' she said.

Max looked at the message, and he was confused for a second. Then clarity washed over his features. He knew what the message revealed. He was cooked.

Twenty Years Ago

Norah took a deep breath as she walked down the hall toward Mrs Simmons's classroom. The weight of her finished graphic novel in her backpack was heavy in every way. It was all that had kept her sane this year. It was more than just a schoolassignment; it was a piece of her soul. Her tattered, fucked up soul.

She knocked lightly on the door before pushing it open. Mrs Simmons looked up from her desk, a warm smile spreading across her face.

'Ahh, the big project,' she said. 'Must feel good to turn it over.'

'It's kind of scary, actually,' Norah admitted. 'Feels like I don't want to let go of it.'

'Yeah, that makes sense. You've worked hard on this. Harder than most.'

'Have I?' Norah asked, surprised. Mrs Simmons had never paid her much attention.

'I've kept out of your way because that seemed like the best way to handle your way of working, but I've been keeping an eye on you,' Mrs Simmons explained. 'I know your year has been rough.'

You don't know the half of it,Norah thought sadly.But at least my main character didn't murder anyone.The protagonist had walked right up to the line before she'd realised it wasn't what she wanted, throwing away the source of her power and becoming a normal girl again, albeit a disappointed one.

'Did it help?' Mrs Simmons asked. 'Working on this?'

Norah nodded. 'I think so.'

Mrs Simmons nodded. 'Well, from what I've seen of it, you can expect a good grade.'

Norah was surprised. 'Oh, well... Thanks.'

'You earned it.' She placed the graphic novel into a pile with everyone else's work.
'You've got a conditional offer for Edinburgh, right?'

Norah nodded. 'Yeah, but I gotta nail everything.'

Mrs Simmons waived her concern off as trivial. 'It's a good school. You'll learn a lot.'

'If I get in,' Norah said, feeling shy suddenly.

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‘I wouldn’t worry about that,’ Mrs Simmons said.

‘Well, I have some safeties just in case.’

‘Other art schools?’ the woman checked.

‘No, actually. Business school. My mum insisted I leave myself some options.’

Mrs Simmons laughed. ‘Yeah, they do that. But when it comes to crunch time, I think you should listen to the voice that made the graphic novel. That’s a strong voice. I don’t think it will steer you wrong.’

Norah felt a blush creep up her cheeks. ‘Thanks. Better go.’

Mrs Simmons smiled. ‘See you around, Norah.’

As she left the classroom, the fear began to shake off her. She had made something, and she was proud of it. It was something to cling to. God knew good feelings were not abundant of late.

Part of the problem was living on the same street as Poppy. Norah kept seeing her on the street and having to duck into the house. She didn’t feel good about that, but she couldn’t go back to the hi-and-bye routine they used to have. She just couldn’t. It had to be nothing because it had been everything.

Still, it wasn’t long now. Norah would be leaving soon, as would Poppy—off to music school. She’d probably be very successful. Norah hated her, but she still

believed that.

Norah went home, walking carefully down her street, keeping an eye out for heartbreaking arseholes. She was relieved to make it into the house unscathed by fresh humiliation or heartbreak.

Her mother was in the kitchen. 'Hi,' Norah said brightly before seeing the look on her mother's face.

'Norah, we need to talk,' she said, her voice cold and stern.

'Oh Christ, what?' Norah asked.

Her mother gestured to the kitchen table, where bills and paperwork were piled in one corner, a few red letters peeking out of the stack.

'You took your coursework in today, didn't you?' her mother asked pensively.

Norah nodded quickly. Was that what this was? Was she in trouble because her mother thought she'd missed deadlines? 'Everything's in. Art, business studies, English.'

'OK. Well, I can't put this off much longer,' her mother said with a long-suffering sigh.

'Put what off?'

'We need to talk about your future.'

Norah got it now. She folded her arms across her chest. 'I'm going to art school.'

‘Art school?’ Her mother scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest. ‘Art school is pointless, Norah. You need to face up to reality. You need a real job, something stable. Do you think drawing pictures is going to pay the bills?’

Tears of frustration welled up in Norah’s eyes. ‘But I’m good at it. Don’t you care about that? I’m good, Mum,’ she said.

Funny how someone had been telling her that not an hour ago, and she’d felt uncertain and modest. But now she needed to fight for it. She knew the truth. She could do this.

‘And I love it too, though I don’t imagine you care about that part.’

Her mother’s expression softened slightly, but her tone remained firm. ‘You’re talented, Norah. But talent doesn’t always translate into a paycheque. You need to be practical. You need to think about your future.’

Norah’s anger flared again, but it was mixed with a growing sense of resignation. She wasn’t going to talk her mum around. But she couldn’t give in either. ‘I get it. I do. But I’d be miserable.’

‘You’ll be miserable if you struggle all your life,’ her mother replied. ‘You don’t know about that yet. I’ve protected you from that reality.’

‘Mum, do you think I’ve just been swanning about in fur coats and diamonds with my head up my arse? I live here. I know we’re broke.’

‘You think you know what that means, but you don’t know what it is to have the responsibility for it. You’ve never known that,’ her mother told her. ‘But once you leave, it’s gonna hit you hard. That’s what life is. Hard and brutal. Don’t put more on your plate than you need to.’

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Norah sat back, deflated. She could feel the fight draining out of her. Because she couldn't deny that her mother had said something undeniably true. The world was brutal. It had taken two giant dumps on her head just this year.

'OK,' Norah said quietly, her voice barely above a whisper. 'I'll think about it.'

Her mother reached across the table, placing a hand on Norah's. 'I know you hate me right now. You think I'm shitting on your dreams. But I'm hurting you now to save hurt later. It kills me to have to do it, but I'll bear it. That's what love is. Sacrifice.'

Norah looked at her mother. 'I hope that's not true.'

'You'll see,' her mother said.

Norah stood and went up to her room. A heaviness settled over her heart. She sat down at her desk, looking at the sketches and drawings that covered it. And she thought about her mother's words.

Twenty-Two

Now

Poppy watched Norah stare blankly at the PowerPoint presentation on the screen in the school hall. She looked defeated, as well she might. Norah's life had just imploded.

She hadn't said much about it, just that the marriage was over. From the suddenness

and the vagueness, Poppy guessed there had been infidelity involved. And she would have bet her entire paycheque that it wasn't Norah playing away. But if Norah didn't want to talk, Poppy wouldn't push.

That was why they were at the PTA watching Susan do a full presentation on the bake sale planned for later in the year. Poppy had to do something to take Norah's mind off it. Dragging her here had been her best idea. Her second-best idea was sitting with Norah in the back row so she could mock the ever-loving shit out of the presentation.

'Norah, did you hear that? Fruit cake is banned due to low demand,' Poppy whispered, her tone laced with mock horror.

Norah blinked, snapping out of her daze just long enough to respond. 'Oh, that's... tragic,' she mumbled, barely masking her sarcasm.

Poppy sighed, tapping her pen against the notepad in front of her. 'You know, for someone who loves sarcasm, you're not giving me much to work with here.'

Norah forced a smile. 'I'm sorry, Poppy. I just can't find much to laugh about at the moment.'

'Yeah, I know,' Poppy replied softly. 'But there's entertainment to be had here. It's just the ironic kind.' She nodded at Susan. 'I mean, would you look at that lunatic? She's got a laser pointer.'

'True,' Norah agreed, her smile becoming a bit more genuine.

Poppy snickered, glad to see a bit of her friend's old self shine through. 'Now, let's pretend we're taking notes before Susan kicks us out for whispering in class.'

‘Do you remember our teacher's name when we were Freddie and Luna's age?’
Norah suddenly asked.

‘Umm... Was it Mr Bendy? Something like that?’ Poppy posited.

‘Bandy,’ Norah recalled. ‘He seemed like he knew everything, but he was probably only in his twenties,’ she sighed. ‘Funny to realise that.’

They both went quiet, listening to the absurd PowerPoint. Poppy felt somewhat jolted. They'd been operating an unspoken agreement that they didn't talk about the old days, and Norah had just violated it.

‘Right, now everybody knows what is allowed. But we don't have enough bakers. I need volunteers.’ Susan stated.

The room went quiet. Susan looked around the room, and her eyes landed on Norah and Poppy. ‘The newbies. Care to lend a hand, or are you just here to make jokes you think I can't hear?’

Poppy cracked like an egg. ‘We'll help.’

Norah rolled her eyes. ‘Oh Christ,’ she muttered.

‘Right, now I've accidentally locked us into producing a hundred cupcakes. I better come to collect my little monster,’ Poppy said as they walked out of the school gates. Norah had been kind enough to share her very responsible babysitter cousin, and both kids were with her now at Norah's place.

‘What were you thinking?!’ Norah asked.

‘There was no thought at all. I was acting in pure fear,’ Poppy told her.

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‘Can you bake?’ Norah asked.

Oddly, Poppy had not asked herself that until this very moment. ‘Ummm... I don’t know. I never tried.’

‘I think that counts as a no,’ Norah told her. ‘And I can’t either.’

‘You don’t have to do anything. Except maybe help me on the day with the stall. I’ll handle the rest. I got us into this mess,’ Poppy said guiltily. This was supposed to be funny. They weren’t supposed to have todoshit.

‘It’s a deal,’ Norah agreed.

‘Good. Let’s go and relieve your third cousin.’

Norah raised an eyebrow. ‘Or...’

Poppy raised both eyebrows. ‘Or?’

‘I paid the sitter for two hours. It’s barely been one. We could get a drink on the way.’

‘God, you’re such a bad influence,’ Poppy said, delighted.

They stopped at the Crow, a horrible pub. As they walked in, Poppy couldn’t help but cringe at the smell of stale beer and sweat that seemed to permeate every corner. She shot a glance at Norah, who seemed completely unfazed by the less-than-ideal

atmosphere.

‘Seriously? This is the only pub on the way?’ Poppy asked, trying not to breathe in too deeply.

Norah shrugged. ‘Well, it's either this or home.’

Poppy frowned. ‘Is he there?’

‘No, he’s working late, allegedly. Hence the babysitter.’

‘Just checking if...’

‘If I’m avoiding going home?’ Norah asked plainly.

Poppy was caught. She didn’t know how to broach this. Subtlety had never been a strength.

‘Sorry,’ Norah said. ‘I’m being rude.’

‘You’re not at all,’ Poppy assured her. ‘Come on, let’s get a drink.’

It was still early, so it wasn’t too leery in the pub yet. Just a handful of football watchers standing near the TV, glued to a match between a blue team and a red team that Poppy couldn’t have named with a gun to her temple.

‘What are you having?’ Norah asked.

Poppy scanned the menu, trying to find something remotely appetising. ‘Um, how about a gin and tonic?’ she suggested.

‘A classic choice,’ Norah replied. ‘I’ll have the same.’

The barman poured the drinks, and they paid and took them to a sticky, wobbly table.

‘So...’ Norah began, taking a sip of her drink. ‘How’s life as a single mum? Does it suck, or is it actually not that bad?’

Poppy nearly choked on her drink at the blunt question. ‘It’s... busy,’ she managed to say after coughing.

‘I can only imagine,’ Norah said. ‘But I won’t have to now, will I?’

OK, it was becoming clear that Norah needed to talk, and Poppy could do that. ‘What’s the status?’

‘How do you mean?’

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‘I mean, is there a timeline? Have you talked to Freddie?’ Poppy asked.

‘Not yet. We’ve agreed that I’m moving out.’

‘Really? Why not him?’ Poppy asked.

‘I can’t afford the place solo, and he reckons he can swing it. My mum is taking me in.’

‘We’ll be on the same street again,’ Poppy observed.

‘So we will,’ Norah said.

There was an awkward pause.

‘We could walk together in the mornings,’ Norah eventually said.

‘Yes, please. Freddie can keep Luna focused,’ Poppy said, happy to move past the weirdness.

But then Norah went quiet again before sighing heavily. ‘He met her on an app. She lives in the next town, so I don’t know her. Which is something.’

Poppy’s jaw tightened, a spike of rage surprising her. ‘I see,’ she said. ‘How long?’

‘About six months. Not long after we started couples’ counselling,’ Norah explained dispassionately.

‘What a fucking dick,’ Poppy growled.

‘I guess that once we started the counselling, he realised just how fucked we were, and he decided to check out fully,’ Norah mused.

‘He didn’t have to go about it like that, did he? If he thought it wasn’t working, he could have just officially ended it.’

‘Maybe he thought I would understand. That I’d be happy to have a stay-together-for-the-kid situation,’ Norah shrugged.

‘Again, he could have been upfront. Asked you if you wanted to do that,’ Poppy insisted.

Norah chuckled, tiredly. ‘The funny thing is, I might have said yes.’

‘Stop it,’ Poppy tutted.

‘No, I’m serious. I didn’t want to be in the marriage anymore. Not for years. I might have told him to have at it. I think he probably sensed that and thought, Why ask?’

‘You’re blaming yourself,’ Poppy said.

‘I’m not, I’m actually... relieved. What he did let me off the hook. I don’t have to make it work anymore.’ Norah said. Suddenly, a tear ran down her cheek. ‘It’s only ever been Freddie stopping me from ending it. He’s gonna be so sad when I tell him.’

Poppy felt deeply for Norah. She wondered if she should hug her. But they didn’t do that. She decided to comfort her with words. ‘He’d have been sadder with an unhappy mum. He might not have known now, but with time, he’d have picked up on it,’ Poppy assured her.

Norah nodded and wiped away the tears. 'Yeah, maybe.'

'It's true. I've noticed it,' Poppy admitted.

Norah looked surprised. 'Have you?'

'I haven't seen you in a long time, so I don't want to compare you to your teenage self,' Poppy said nervously. 'But you didn't seem... at your best.'

Norah sighed. 'I wasn't. You're right.'

'But you can be, now,' Poppy told her.

'Are you sure? I don't even know what that looks like anymore,' Norah said sadly.

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‘When things end—things you’ve invested a lot in—it takes time. Give it that. It’ll be better eventually. You’ll come back to yourself,’ Poppy vowed to her.

Norah raised an eyebrow. ‘Did you have a marriage end?’

‘No, but I did have a pop career that ended. Sorry, that’s a bloody stupid comparison, isn’t it?’ Poppy said, rolling her eyes at herself.

‘I don’t know, is it?’ Norah asked.

Poppy steeled herself to get very real. She had to. Norah needed it.

‘I wasn’t sure if it was what I wanted, but I went all in anyway because what else was I going to do? And when it ended, I was relieved but also scared to death because it was all I’d known for years, and I didn’t know what the fuck was going to come next. Who was I without it?’ She stopped, scared that she’d said too much. ‘Am I warm?’

‘Boiling,’ Norah said with a smile.

Poppy was glad to know that Norah felt understood. She badly wanted to be there for her once again. But this time, she wasn’t going to screw it up.

‘You ever get recognised these days?’ Norah asked.

Poppy smiled. ‘Never.’

‘How?’ Norah asked, stunned.

‘That was the great thing about the way they dressed me in the band. As soon as it was over, I went back to dressing like me, and I was incognito,’ Poppy explained.

‘Smart.’

‘I think Dolly Parton patented the system. If you look like a painted clown on stage, real life doesn’t have to change that much off it.’

Norah laughed. Poppy was glad to see her friend look happy again. She would help her find that laugh every chance she got.

Twenty Years Ago

Poppy couldn’t understand how she’d gotten here. Stuck in a drafty rehearsal space, practising with two other girls she didn’t know well, dressed like this: belly top, high heels, and a skirt that was more in line with the definition of a belt. She felt almost naked. All she had to protect her was her guitar. It was all that stood between her bare midriff and the rest of the world.

The other two girls, Rebecca and Annalise, didn’t seem unhappy. They both seemed fucking jazzed, actually. Annalise was on lead guitar, Rebecca on drums. Everyone sang. Though Poppy didn’t think Rebecca had been playing for very long. Poppy was pretty sure she’d been hired based on her looks and not bad singing, and the drums had been thrown at her quite recently. Rebecca was decent on guitar, though her singing voice was a little weak. Again, her looks probably went a long way to making up for that lack.

And then there was Poppy. She didn’t think she matched the prettiness of the other girls, but she could play better, sing better, and she wrote the songs that weren’t covers. It was important that they had their own songwriter. It was part of the ethos of the band that Jeff had designed. The band built the music in every way—music,

vocals, lyrics.

Jeff said a certain kind of demographic would be into this corn-fed organic pop. They needed to seem raw and real. People were getting a bit tired of bands slapped together by cynical labels, he said. So the members of Velvet Smack were supposed to have found each other without any kind of label interference. The band had been formed as a result of friendship and a shared feeling that they wanted to sing slightly angry yet catchy music about how they were going to live on their terms, and boys could get on board with that or get out of the way.

Poppy had been working on some stuff for them with Jeff's direction. He wanted 'love songs with attitude.' He suggested that the influence for these songs should be in the vein of Sugar Babes, All Saints, The Pussycat Dolls, and Girls Aloud.

Those bands were not Poppy's cup of tea at all, but she'd tried to write stuff in their vein. She'd composed three songs for Velvet Smack (she hated that fucking name so much), and Jeff said they were good, but they were only album songs. They didn't have their debut single yet. Poppy didn't know if she was going to be able to produce what he was asking for. Was she gonna get kicked out before they'd even released the first album?

In a way, that might have been better. Poppy wasn't happy. She wanted to throw it in. But she couldn't quite bring herself to do it. The same thoughts kept bouncing around her brain. This is your start. And if you leave now, nothing else will come your way. Take the gift.

But it didn't feel like a gift. Poppy wanted to be home with her mum, playing in her bedroom, rehearsing with the band who no longer talked to her. And more than anything, she wanted to see Norah. That fever had yet to break.

As the rehearsal ended and everyone began packing up, Poppy grabbed her guitar

case and headed towards the door, ready to escape for the day.

‘Hey, Poppy! Wait up!’ Jeff called out from behind her.

She turned back, trying to hide her annoyance with a fake smile.

‘Just wanted to say, great job today,’ he said with a pat on her shoulder. ‘I know it's not exactly your style, but you're killing it. Could we have a quick chat about something?’

‘Umm, what about?’ Poppy asked.

‘I wanted to ask about something,’ Jeff said with a grin.

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‘Yes?’ Poppy asked anxiously.

‘The songs you’ve done for Velvet are solid. But I want to talk about that debut we need,’ he said.

Poppy nodded, thinking, If you’re gonna kill me off, at least make it quick.

‘The thing is, I think we could have it. I want your demo track. “Norah’s Song.”’

Poppy’s stomach turned like a pre-pubescent gymnast. ‘What?’

‘I know you said it wasn’t something that you wanted people to hear, but I think it has hit potential,’ he went on. ‘I mean, we’d have to change the lyrics for a male name, pump up the rhythm a bit, but I think it could be a hit.’

‘It’s... I wasn’t... It’s not for people to hear,’ Poppy stuttered.

Jeff looked at her, puzzled. ‘Why not?’

‘It’s just... personal,’ she mumbled.

‘Poppy, you have to understand, we need a hit, or no one buys the album and all this collapses,’ Jeff insisted.

Poppy felt like she was backed into a corner. After all the pressure and insecurity she had been feeling, this was the last thing she needed. She couldn’t give him that song.

‘Jeff...’

‘Look, there’s going to be other opportunities around the corner for you if you can prove yourself now. You can produce anything you want after this is done. If we make this work.’ His voice dropped to a more confidential tone. ‘You know how every band has one member that makes it solo. In this band, that’s going to be you.’

Poppy couldn’t help but roll her eyes. ‘Jeff...’

‘Poppy, I want you to hear this. You might not see your potential, but I do.’

God, this was awkward. She was looking down on this whole situation, and here Jeff was saying he believed in it. She felt ungrateful.

She wondered what her mum would say. She wondered what her dad would have said. But she couldn’t ask him, and she was embarrassed to go crawling back to her mum for advice. She was an adult now. She was in the world. It was her choice.

‘You think the song’s a hit?’ she asked.

‘With the right producer, I feel it could be. It’s hooky, with a good riff and catchy chorus.’

‘But you want to put in a male name?’ Poppy checked.

‘Just to make it saleable to a large cross-section of the audience,’ he said like it was no big deal.

Poppy paused. ‘You know I’m gay, right?’

Jeff laughed. ‘You’re eighteen. You might be a lot of things before the dust settles.’

Poppy didn't love that comment, but it was hard to argue with. She was not quite nineteen, and Jeff was a fifty-year-old music producer. He probably did know more about everything. He almost certainly knew more about what made a pop hit.

'I just want you to know I'm not gonna have a footballer boyfriend or any of that shit,' Poppy told him bolshily.

'No one's asking you to. I think Annalise and Rebecca have that side of things covered,' he said with a chuckle. He seemed fine with her being herself, up to a point. So that was something.

'What name did you have in mind?' Poppy asked. She could feel the strength to fight him going out of her.

'We're thinking "Noah". It's sensitive but masculine at the same time,' he explained. And went on, in his smooth persuasive tone, about demographics and the future of the band. By the time he was done, Poppy couldn't do anything but sign over her most personal song.

And that's how "Noah" was born, an utterly bastardised version of "Norah's Song." Loud, fast, and lacking in anything that Poppy felt had ever made it special.

It was number one for three weeks and played all over the place. It was indeed Velvet Smack's breakthrough hit. Though, it turned out to be the biggest hit they ever had, and things kinda went downhill from there. Not that they didn't push out two more albums that made a bit of money before Jeff called time on the whole thing.

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After that, Jeff gave Poppy some work with his newer bands, writing for them, but she was writing songs that made her want to smash her head against her guitar. The solo career never materialised. When the songwriting dried up, it became session work as a simple guitarist. Then the session work slowed down. And one day, Poppy realised she was just a has-been living off royalties of work she was ashamed of.

It hadn't been her shot. It had simply been a waste of her time, talent, and name. She'd spent it on something she'd never even wanted. She hadn't seen Jeff in years, but she knew now he'd been a bullshit artist from the very start. He'd pushed her in a direction she'd never have gone by appealing to her vanity and ambition.

Poppy had to wonder who she could have been if she'd never met him. She could have stayed the course, clung to her talent, held on to her own voice, cultivated it, grown it. She could have been a real musician.

Now she'd never know what she could have done. She was just a mum now, sliding towards middle age. The time of adventure and possibility was over. Where once she'd been full of piss and vinegar, it all had turned to sour milk poured into the lattes she served others.

Twenty-Three

Now

Norah sat on the couch, staring at her son. Freddie was playing with his toys on the floor next to her, completely oblivious to the gravity of what she was about to tell him.

Taking a deep breath, Norah turned to face Freddie and cleared her throat. 'Hey buddy, can I talk to you for a minute?'

Freddie looked up from his toy cars and nodded. 'OK.'

There were two points to hit, and they would go in order of importance.

'I know that you heard that argument between me and your dad recently,' Norah began.

He picked up his car and started fiddling with it.

'I just wanted to explain something. I know you heard me say that I didn't want to have a child with your dad. But I didn't mean it the way you think. I just meant that your dad and I don't work together as parents. I would have had you no matter what. It was the best thing that ever happened to me.'

Freddie looked up from his car. 'Was it?'

'You're the coolest kid in the world, Freds. I'm lucky to have you.'

'I knowthat,' he said, irritated. 'You tell me all the time.'

Norah had to laugh. 'Should I stop saying that?' she checked.

'No, it's OK,' Freddie said with a small smile. 'You can keep saying it.'

Norah was sad that she was going to have to take that smile away. Norah hesitated for a moment before finally blurting out, 'But the other thing, about me and your dad... What do you think about that?'

‘You and Dad argue a lot,’ Freddie said.

‘Yes, we do,’ Norah agreed. ‘And we want that to stop. So your dad and I are not going to be married to each other anymore. We’re going to live in different houses.’

Freddie's eyes widened for a split second before he shrugged. ‘OK,’ he said nonchalantly and went back to playing with his cars.

Norah couldn't believe his reaction. She had been dreading this conversation for weeks, years actually, preparing herself for tears and questions from her young son. But here he was, completely unfazed by the news of his parents' impending divorce. It worried her.

‘Don't you... don't you have any questions?’ Norah asked.

Freddie looked up at her with a serious expression on his face. ‘Is it because Daddy isn't very good at cooking?’

Norah couldn't help but laugh at her son's innocent reasoning. ‘No, sweetheart. It's not because of that. We just... We don't get on very well anymore.’

‘Oh, OK.’ Freddie went back to playing with his toys, seemingly satisfied with her answer.

Norah couldn't believe how little Freddie seemed to care about the breakup of his parents' marriage. Did he not understand?

‘Freddie, are you feeling feel sad?’

He turned to look at her again. ‘Umm, well...’ he began anxiously.

‘Yes?’

‘Can I live with you?’ he asked.

‘Oh! Is that a worry?’ Norah asked, eager to settle it for him.

‘I don’t want to live with Daddy. He never plays with me. And he’s grumpy,’ Freddie said, frowning.

OK, Norah was starting to understand now. Freddie wasn’t worried his dad wasn’t going to be around because it wouldn’t be that different.

Though Norah had noticed Max’s absentness as a parent, she wasn’t sure how Freddie felt about his dad until just now. Hearing it broke Norah’s heart for him. She couldn’t change it, but she could give him a family where he was the most important person in it for everyone concerned, even if that was only her.

‘You’ll be with me most of the time and your daddy a bit of the time,’ Norah explained.

That was the deal they’d worked out without court involvement, thank god. He hadn’t fought her for even custody. She hadn’t thought he would. But that was for the best. If Max only had Freddie for one day a week, Norah thought he might focus on him a bit more than usual. Partly because he wouldn’t have a choice. He wouldn’t be able to bugger off at a moment’s notice anymore.

Norah doubted his new girlfriend would be very interested in covering his arse all the

time. And why the hell should she? Why had Norah, come to think of it? She'd given Max such grace to do as he pleased. She'd expected practically nothing from him. Perhaps because she hadn't thought much of him, she was sad to realise.

'We're going to be at grandma's for a while until I can find a place for us, a flat probably,' she explained.

Freddie nodded, and then he got a twinkle in his eye. 'Can I have a new bed with a slide when I get my new bedroom?' he asked.

'Yes, honey,' Norah said, happy to give him anything he wanted. He could have asked for a visit from the cast of The Avengers, and she'd have gotten straight on the phone to Marvel.

'I can't wait to tell Luna about my new bedroom,' he said to himself and turned, once again, to his toys, smiling.

Norah watched him play, feeling tentative relief. Freddie wasn't completely devastated, not even close. There could be stuff down the line; she wasn't discounting that. But Norah felt in her heart that as long as he had his mum (and a bit of therapy), he'd be OK. They'd be OK.

All this time, this had been what had stopped her. This conversation. Not ending her marriage, not leaving Max. Breaking her son's heart. Hers wasn't all that broken in the grand scheme of it because the millstone of Max would no longer hang around her neck. She was free from the misery of this crap marriage. She could move forward.

She texted Poppy. I need help moving. You in? There's a pizza in it for you.

The text back was brief yet warming. Good opening offer. My counter? Pizza plus

garlic bread.

Norah felt a truly happy smile slide onto her face. Deal.

Twenty Years Ago

Norah sat in the back row of the lecture hall, her notebook open but untouched. The professor's droning voice about market analysis and financial projections felt like a distant hum. She couldn't focus, couldn't muster the enthusiasm that her classmates seemed to have. Business school was supposed to be a stepping stone to a stable future, a practical choice that her mother had hammered into her head. But it felt like a prison sentence, a daily grind that wore away at her spirit.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, and she glanced at the screen. A text from Joy: Turn on Channel 7. You won't believe this.

Curious and desperate for a distraction, Norah slipped out of the lecture hall and found a quiet spot in the student lounge. She grabbed the remote and flipped the TV to Channel 7, some music show.

And there was Poppy, standing on a brightly lit stage, guitar in hand.

Norah had heard about this, of course. That Poppy had been recruited into some girl band. It seemed so wildly out of character for her that Norah hadn't believed it at first. But there was no denying it now.

It had been a year since she'd seen Poppy. Seeing her now, in the flesh, was like a punch to the gut. Poppy looked older and more polished, but the essence of the girl Norah had fallen for was still there.

The camera zoomed in on Poppy's face, and Norah's heart hurt. It was only then that

the music Poppy was playing filtered through to Norah. She knew this song. Norah's irritation turned to cold disbelief.

It was "Norah's Song". A twisted, upbeat version, with her name replaced with 'Noah'.

She sank into a chair, the weight of the moment crashing down on her. Business school, the constant pressure from her mother, the loss of her artistic dreams—all of it paled in comparison to this. This was the final straw, the cruellest blow.

Norah heard that song many times that year, in pubs and clubs and at student parties. It hurt every time. But that first time was the worst. The moment she realised how little she truly meant to Poppy Jennings.

Twenty-Four

Now

As Norah and Poppy made their way through Norah's soon-to-be former living room, carrying boxes of Norah's stuff, they could hear Max in the kitchen muttering, 'No one better touch my pint glasses.' He had been arguing with Norah about what belonged to him for the past hour but had thankfully retreated to regroup.

'Do you think he'll ever stop being a massive pain in the arse?' Poppy asked Norah as she struggled to keep her box balanced.

'Probably not,' Norah replied with a sigh. 'But it won't be my problem soon.'

Just then, Max made a reappearance, arms crossed and scowl firmly in place. 'What are you two doing?' he demanded.

'I'm moving my stuff out because you had an affair,' Norah said wearily. 'Did you forget?'

That flustered him, but only briefly. 'No, I mean... That's mine,' he said, pointing to a cream lamp poking out of Poppy's box. 'And that picture frame, too.'

Poppy rolled her eyes. The bloody gall he was displaying. He should have been crying and begging for forgiveness for betraying his marriage and his family. And he was nitpicking over lamps. She wanted to smack him. But Poppy knew it wasn't her place to pop him one. She was here to pack.

'Hey, Max,' Poppy said from between gritted teeth. 'Why don't you go fetch us some

drinks? We could all use a break.'

Max shot her a look. 'Daisy—' he began.

'POPPY,' Norah said loudly.

It was the first time Poppy had seen her get angry with him all day.

He rolled his eyes. 'Poppy, I need to talk to my wife. Alone.'

Poppy looked at Norah, and she shook her head.

'No, I'm good where I am, thanks,' Poppy told him.

Max looked incensed. He pointed at Poppy's box. 'Fine. But that bloody lamp stays.'

'Are you serious? I'm giving you all the big furniture,' Norah said.

'Only because it won't fit at your mum's,' he said smugly.

Norah shook her head. 'Fine, take the lamp, you petty...' She let the sentence trail off.

Max stepped towards Poppy, a smug smile on his annoying face.

'No, allow me,' Poppy said, putting the box down and taking the lamp out. He reached out, and Poppy proffered it towards his greedy little hands. Just before his fingertips made contact, Poppy dropped the lamp. CRACK. It was shattered beyond repair. 'Oh, god, sorry!' she said.

'You did that on purpose!' Max raged.

‘Who, me?’ Poppy asked, picking up the box and turning to take it out to the van.

She caught Norah’s eye, expecting to see annoyance. Instead, they were twinkling with delight.

She took the box out, and Norah was right behind her with her own box. They loaded them into the back of the white van together.

‘You’re the best,’ Norah said.

Poppy felt something about that compliment but tried to play it cool. ‘I’m a drama queen,’ Poppy said. ‘But he had it coming.’

‘He sure did. This whole thing has been a nightmare, but knowing you have my back is... It’s nice.’ Norah pushed the boxes deeper into the van and went back into the house for the next box.

Poppy realised she was blushing. She never blushed. What the hell?

But it got worse. As they continued to move boxes and furniture, Poppy found herself thinking about how nice Norah looked with sweat on her brow and determination in her eyes. She quickly shrugged off those thoughts, chalking them up to exhaustion and stress from the move.

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But deep down, the small flutter of attraction towards Norah was building. Or maybe it was more accurate to say that it was reigniting.

Twenty-Five

When Norah pulled up to her mother's house in the white rental van, an unconsidered problem smacked her in the face. Poppy was with her. Norah didn't know if her mother had noticed Poppy was back living on Orchid Street, but she definitely didn't know Norah and Poppy were friends again. She didn't know because Norah had made very sure never to tell her.

The whole situation had felt a bit fraught. Despite the length of Poppy's absence, Norah didn't know what her mother thought of Poppy now. She'd never liked her, and she was a legendary grudge holder.

But that wasn't exactly what was worrying Norah at this moment.

'Just wait in the van for a second. I'm going to get my mother ready for my arrival,' Norah said carefully.

'But she knows you're coming?' Poppy asked, confused.

'Yeah, but she doesn't know...' Norah trailed off.

Poppy's lips parted in horror. 'Oh. She doesn't know I'm coming today?'

Norah licked her lips anxiously. 'It just might seem a bit odd to her...' she began. But

she didn't want to end the sentence. Because the end of the sentence was, 'If you suddenly appear, it's going to look to my mum like I left Max for an old flame, so maybe hang back?'

But Poppy wasn't picking up on the subtext. 'Does she still hate me after all this time?' she asked.

Well, that was a simpler question to answer. 'She never hated you.'

Poppy's brow deepened. 'Maybe she won't realise it's me.'

Norah considered that. 'Maybe.'

'So I just... won't introduce myself. You just say I'm your friend, your very vague friend. I doubt she'll ask,' Poppy said.

Norah nodded. 'OK, let's try that.' Honestly, she wasn't sure it was gonna work, but what else could she do?

They climbed out of the van.

'Hold on,' Poppy said, running around to the back of the van and coming back with a large rolled-up rug held in front of her face.

Norah laughed. 'Jesus. Are you scared of her?'

Poppy looked at her in astonishment. 'Obviously. Where have you been?'

Norah chuckled her way to the door and rang the bell. Freddie opened the door. He'd been there all morning, under his grandma's/new roommate's watch.

‘Hey, look at you answering doors, big kid!’ Norah greeted him and swooped in for a hug.

As Norah was squeezing him, she saw her mother step out into the hall. She looked straight past Norah, at Poppy, hiding behind her rug.

‘Poppy Jennings, is that you?’ she said immediately.

OK, so that was that.

Norah turned to see Poppy give a little sigh from behind the rug. She lowered it, fear in her eyes. ‘Hi, Mrs Cauldwell.’

‘She moved back to the area recently,’ Norah jumped in.

‘I’m aware of that. You have that ridiculous car,’ Norah’s mother said.

‘I sold it,’ Poppy said apologetically.

It was weird for Norah to see her like this—so apologetic and cowed.

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‘Her daughter is in the same class as Freddie,’ Norah said, trying to steer things in a different direction. ‘That’s how we met again.’

‘And where is your child right now?’ Norah’s mum asked archly.

‘I left her in a crack den,’ Poppy replied with a smile.

Norah snorted, but her mother didn’t crack a smile.

‘She’s at kids’ camp today,’ Poppy tried again. ‘For dancers. She loves to dance, and I love her being tired out by someone who isn’t me.’

‘Right,’ said Norah’s mother. Then she arched an eyebrow at Norah. ‘So, she’s back in with you, is she? Funny timing.’

‘Mother...’ Norah warned.

‘Well, I better put the kettle on,’ her mother said coldly and vanished into the kitchen.

Norah turned to Poppy. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘That went better than I thought it would,’ Poppy said, wiping an actual bead of sweat off her brow.

‘What did you think she’d do?’ Norah asked.

‘Slap me round the face?’ Poppy suggested.

‘God, she didn’t hate you likethat,’ Norah assured her. ‘She’s just like that with people. Don’t take it personally.’

Poppy went quiet for a moment, and then something struck her. ‘Hey, what did she mean about timing?’

Norah knew full well, but she wouldn’t say it without a threat to her life. ‘Beats me,’ she shrugged.

Poppy didn’t look like she fully bought that, but she only said, ‘Where the hell am I putting this rug, anyway?’ She looked down at Freddie. ‘Sorry for the swear word, buddy.’

Freddie looked confused. ‘What swear word?’

Norah snorted. ‘That curse wouldn’t even crack the top ten in our house.’

That reminded her that there wasn’t such a thing as ‘Our house’ anymore. As much as Norah believed that was going to be a good thing in the long run, it would be an adjustment for all concerned. Including her mother. She just hoped she could curb her bloody rudeness toward Poppy.

Poppy was being a really good friend. She didn’t deserve this bullshit. She’d dropped a lamp for Norah. Not everyone would have seen it as a sweet gesture, but Norah wasn’t everyone. To Norah, it beat a bunch of flowers any day.

But thinking about how much Norah liked having Poppy around automatically led to a worry. Poppy wouldn’t just vanish on her again, would she?

That was then, and this is now, Norah told herself. And it wasn’t the same anyway. They were just friends, as they always should have been.

They should never have crossed that line when they were young. That was where it went wrong. But this was just a good buddy situation. Norah had much less to fear under these circumstances.

So why was she still anxious about it?

‘Where’s my toy box?’ Freddie asked.

‘I’ll get it next,’ Norah assured her son.

‘I know exactly where it is. I’m on it,’ said Poppy. ‘You guys chill for a minute.’

‘Thank you,’ Norah said. She turned to Freddie. ‘Give me another hug, you!’ she said.

He jumped up into her arms, and she squeezed him. Her back would pay the price later, but she didn’t care. She desperately wanted him to feel minimal upheaval. That’s why it was probably good they were moving to his grandma's for a bit, at least for him.

He knew the house, and his grandma was a comforting presence. She bought him sweets and made a fuss of him. Nothing complicated there. For Norah, it was a little different, of course. But you couldn’t have everything.

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‘Toy box coming in hot,’ said Poppy not a minute later, staggering into the house with Freddie’s very full and pretty heavy toy box. ‘Fuck me!’ she yelled as she dropped it.

‘That’s a swear,’ Freddie pointed out.

Norah’s mother was drawn in by the noise. ‘What have you done to my floor?’ she demanded.

Norah had a quick look, and it was indeed scratched.

‘It’s OK, I can sort that out,’ Norah tried to assure her mother.

‘Oh, you’re a floor fitter, are you?’ her mother snapped at her.

‘It’s just a scratch. It’ll come out,’ Norah said.

‘That’s a permanent mark,’ her mother said.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Poppy said. ‘I’ll pay to get it sorted.’

Her mother let out a noise that was somewhere between a tut and a scoff. ‘Flinging your pop-star money at it, are you?’ she asked with horrid derision.

Norah would have loved to have told her to get a grip and let them fix the mistake, but unfortunately, the woman was now her landlord. She couldn’t afford to piss her off.

Poppy cleared her throat anxiously. 'Mrs Cauldwell, I don't have pop-star money anymore. That was a long time ago.'

'Yeah, she works at The Sugar Cube,' Norah added despite herself.

'I don't go there. Three pounds for a cup of tea?' her mum snorted.

'I don't set the prices,' Poppy said. 'But if you come in, I'm sure I could slip you a freebie.'

'Hmm,' she said. 'I think I'll stick to my own tea.' She waltzed out.

The second she was out of earshot, Poppy had her phone out. 'Apparently, I need to get wood putty.'

'Right, off to B&Q,' Norah said decisively. She turned to her son. 'Freds, you coming?'

Freddie already had his head jammed in his toy box. 'No,' he said flatly. He pulled out a sack of Legos. He would be good for about thirty minutes. They had to make the best of the time.

'Mum, we're nipping out!' Norah called. 'Keep an eye on Freds, would you?' She pulled Poppy out before her mother could start a fresh row about babysitting duties.

'Is this it?' Poppy asked, holding up a jar of wood putty.

'God, I don't know,' Norah shrugged, baffled.

‘Fuck’s sake,’ Poppy groaned.

A young woman with a tight ponytail suddenly appeared. Her name tag read Sally.
‘Can I help?’ she asked.

‘I scratched some floorboards, and I need to fix it, fast,’ Poppy told her.

‘How deep was the scratch?’ the woman asked, a little smile curling up her lips.
Norah realised why she’d dashed over to help.

‘What do you think?’ Poppy asked Norah.

‘They weren’t that deep,’ Norah said.

‘You might just want to try a stain pen,’ the woman said. She led them down the aisle to the right section. ‘Do you know the colour?’

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Poppy's eyes widened in horror. 'Uhh...'

'It's dark walnut,' Norah told her.

'How do you know that?' Poppy asked.

'She had the floor redone about five years ago and it was dark walnut this, dark walnut that for weeks,' Norah explained.

Sally grabbed a stain pen. 'That will do it.'

'Great,' Poppy said, relieved.

Sally smiled brightly. 'No problem. If you have any problems with it, come back. I'll sort you out.'

I just bet you would, Norah thought.

They paid and got back on the road.

'Thank god for that saleswoman. I'd have bought the wrong thing,' Poppy noted.

'Yeah, lucky she was such a horndog,' Norah said, putting her turn signal on.

'What?' Poppy asked, confused.

'You're gonna tell me you didn't notice she was trying to hit on you?' Norah asked,

stunned.

There was a big pause. 'I think she was just doing her job.'

'Poppy, she was on the bloody till!' Norah said, exasperated. 'She left a queue of five to come and help you.'

'I did think that was a bit odd,' Poppy said, befuddled.

'Man, you're oblivious,' Norah laughed.

'My mind was on your mother's wrath,' Poppy pointed out.

'What if it hadn't been?' Norah asked carefully.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, are you... dating?' Norah asked. They hadn't touched this subject. Norah wasn't sure why she was delving into it now.

Poppy looked as though she'd forgotten what the word meant. 'Oh. No. Not since Luna.'

That made sense. But it was only half of what she wanted to know. 'So, if you were, would you have been... shopping from that side of the store?'

Poppy exploded with laughter. 'Good god,' she managed to splutter. 'Where the hell did you come up with that little expression?'

'What's wrong with it?' Norah asked, offended.

‘Horrible euphemism, Cauldwell,’ Poppy said, bright red from laughter. ‘It was like something from the forties.’

Norah realised she actually should be embarrassed. Why was she being so euphemistic about it? ‘You know what? It’s the kind of thing my mum would say.’

‘She’s rubbing off on you,’ Poppy said.

‘That was quick. I’ve only been back twenty minutes.’

‘Give it a week. You’ll be wearing gilets and talking to me like shit,’ Poppy said. She paused before clearing her throat. ‘And yes, I’m only “Shopping from that side of the store.”’

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Now that she had that confirmation, Norah didn't know what the hell to do with it. She wasn't even sure why she'd asked. Maybe it was just the sudden realisation that she had no idea what Poppy's sexual orientation was. It was bound to come up sometime. Poppy wouldn't be a nun forever. She was probably fighting them off daily.

'Speaking of dating, I assume you're not ready to jump back in?' Poppy asked casually.

'Not bloody likely,' Norah told her, suppressing a shudder. 'I think I'll just wait until Freddie leaves for university. I might think about it, then.'

'Shutting up shop?' Poppy asked with a grin.

'Shut up,' Norah said with an eye-roll.

They fell into silence until Poppy cleared her throat. 'Which side of the store do you shop at, by the way?'

'Oh,' Norah exclaimed, surprised. 'Both.'

'Yeah?' Poppy questioned sceptically.

'Yes, obviously,' Norah said. She should have known that. Why was it such a surprise?

But Poppy said no more about it. Eventually, they pulled into the house, and Poppy

said, 'OK, gimme that thing.'

'I could do it,' Norah offered.

'No, I can't let your mum think I don't own my mistakes,' Poppy said.

Norah thought that was a rather intense reaction to a scratched floorboard, but she handed her the pen.

They went in, and Poppy set to work with the pen (after watching a YouTube video several times).

Norah checked it out. 'Perfect.'

'You reckon?' Poppy asked anxiously.

'Yeah. Let's get my mum in and watch her try to find fault with it. It'll be fun.'

'If you say so,' Poppy said with a nervous smile.

'Mum!' Norah yelled.

Her mother came in from the back garden. 'Yes?'

'Poppy fixed the scratch.'

Her mother raised a cynical eyebrow. She pulled up her specs from a chain around her neck and slid them on, bending down. 'Where was it?' she asked.

'Exactly,' Norah said with deep satisfaction.

Her mother gave her an irritated look. She got up and turned to Poppy.

‘I think that’ll probably do.’

She left. Norah turned to Poppy, who looked oddly ecstatic.

‘I don’t know what you’re grinning about,’ Norah said. ‘We’ve still got to unload the rest of the van.’

‘Ahh, fu...dge,’ Poppy said with a glance to Freddie, who’d built a large castle in their absence.

‘I know what she was going to say,’ he told them smugly.

Twenty-Six

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As Poppy and Norah settled into their seats at the PTA meeting, Poppy wondered what Susan would go to eleven about today. She looked rather over-caffeinated, even for her.

‘Right. Let’s talk raffle,’ the woman began. ‘It’s a week away, and we’ve already got a ton of food donations to make up hampers, but I need more. We need more. I want serious showstoppers. Blue sky thinking, guys.’

‘I can do a personal training session,’ said one guy eagerly.

‘Good. Next.’

‘I got an ice cream maker for a gift two Christmases ago from my aunt, and I’ve never opened the box. You can have that,’ a woman said.

‘Good. Next.’

And on it went. Everyone offering surprisingly impressive shit. Well, everyone except Poppy and Norah.

As the pressure mounted, Poppy tried to think of something good she could contribute. Maybe a voucher for The Sugar Cube? She’d have to ask the boss, but it was possible.

‘What are you going to offer?’ Norah whispered, looking a bit pressed.

Some guy with purple hair was telling Susan he could maybe do a free tattoo session.

‘Sugar Cube voucher,’ Poppy shrugged. ‘But I need to ask the boss first.’

Norah stared at her. ‘What? You can do a bit better than that.’

Poppy was confused. ‘What do you mean?’

‘You used to be a famous pop star,’ Norah pointed out.

‘For about ten minutes, years ago,’ Poppy said uncomfortably. ‘No one gives a shit about that now—’

‘You used to be a what?’ someone behind her said. They turned to see a middle-aged man with wire-rim glasses staring at Poppy.

Poppy turned. ‘Umm, no, nothing.’

The guy stared at her, the cogs in his brain visibly whirring. ‘Bloody hell! You were... Shit, I knew you looked familiar. From, from...’

Everyone in the room was turning to stare.

‘What’s all this, James?’ asked Susan.

‘Nothing!’ Poppy answered for him.

‘She used to be in, oh shit! What the hell was it called?!’ James said, still wracking his brain.

‘Dude, please, don’t,’ Poppy begged quietly.

The man clicked his fingers. ‘VELVET SMACK!’ he yelled, triumphant.

‘Wait, what?’ said a woman from the back of the room. ‘God, I used to love that song, err... “Noah!”’

Poppy could have sworn she heard Norah groan. What she had to groan about, Poppy couldn’t imagine. Poppy was the one who was about to get flayed alive.

‘Excuse me, but what the hell have you done!’ Poppy demanded of Norah.

‘I’m so, so sorry,’ Norah grovelled.

The room erupted into excited chatter as people all, little by little, recalled Poppy’s embarrassing past. She’d skated under the radar for so long that she thought she was safe from recognition. But it was blown now.

Susan was grinning ear to ear, a frightening thing to behold. ‘Well, that seems like something we could use. What have you got?’ she demanded.

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‘How do you mean?’ Poppy asked, shrivelling by the second.

‘Well, you must have something from your pop days?’

‘Nobody wants old Velvet Smack merch, I can assure you of that,’ Poppy told her firmly. She barely had anything, anyway. She’d chucked a few boxes of T-shirts and mouse pads in the skip before she moved.

‘Seriously, Poppy? That’s very disappointing,’ Susan said.

‘But you’ve got to have something cool from those days,’ said James, piling on, the bastard.

Poppy sighed. ‘I don’t have anything. And nobody would want it if I even did.’

‘Oh, come on,’ the guy persisted. ‘You’re underestimating yourself. Velvet Smack was a big deal. For a bit.’

Susan’s eyes lit up again. ‘Wait, how about this? You could offer a private performance. Sing a song or two from your Velvet Smack days.’

Jesus, what a haunting image. Poppy, in someone’s living room, performing old pop to some random family. ‘No, absolutely not. I haven’t performed in years.’

‘Please, Poppy,’ Susan said, her tone edging on pleading. ‘It would be such a draw. Think of the money we could raise for the school!’

The room collectively held its breath, waiting for her response. Poppy's mind raced, trying to find an escape. But as she looked around at the eager faces of her fellow parents, she realised she was cornered.

'I could offer a guitar lesson,' she sighed.

'Guitar lesson?' Susan muttered to herself. 'Yeah, I think that could work.' She smiled and began to write it on the board: GUITAR LESSON FROM A MUSIC STAR. She paused and turned. 'Did any of your songs go platinum?'

'I guess,' Poppy sighed, rolling her eyes.

"Noah" had met the number of sales to merit that award, but Poppy didn't have the disc hung up. It was sitting in a box in the attic, an accolade for a song she hated.

Susan amended the board. "GUITAR LESSONS FROM A PLATINUM MUSIC STAR."

Wait, I said, "Lesson." Single,' Poppy said quickly. 'Don't pluralise my offer.'

But that went unheard as the room erupted in cheers. 'Great! It's settled then,' Susan said, clearly pleased. 'Thank you, Poppy. This is going to be our best fundraiser yet!'

As the meeting continued with more ideas squeezed out of parents, Poppy and Norah exchanged glances. Norah mouthed, 'I'm so sorry,' and Poppy just shook her head with a small smile. 'Doesn't matter,' she mouthed back.

When the meeting finally adjourned, everyone began to file out as Poppy and Norah gathered their things slowly.

'Are you really OK with this?' Norah asked, her brow furrowed with concern.

Poppy shrugged. 'I guess I don't have much of a choice.'

'If it's any consolation, it's for the kids, though. Worthy cause, right?'

Poppy smiled evilly. 'Good point. We all need to make sacrifices for the kids.'

'Right...' Norah said nervously.

Poppy turned to Susan, who was packing up her dry markers. 'Hey, Susan, did you know that Norah's an amazing artist? You can do something with that, right?'

Susan was delighted. 'Absolutely. Can you do portraits?'

Norah was horror-struck. 'Huh?!'

'Portraits, Norah. You could auction your talents off. Right?' Poppy chimed in.

Norah looked like she wanted to murder Poppy on the spot. 'I suppose so,' she said from between gritted teeth.

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‘Great. Wow, guys. This is shaping up to be a hell of a raffle!’ Susan said, happy as Larry.

‘Ain’t it just,’ Norah said.

Poppy smiled at Norah. ‘Anything for the kids,’ she said with a wink.

Outside, on the journey back to what was now the street, Norah, clearly stewing, exclaimed, ‘You don’t even know if I draw anymore!’

That was a good point. ‘Oh. Do you?’ Poppy asked.

‘A bit, yes,’ Norah said somewhat shyly. ‘I’ve been dipping in again lately.’

Poppy smiled, heartily pleased Norah. It would have saddened her deeply to hear otherwise. Then her smile dropped. ‘Now, how the fuck am I going to get out of this guitar lesson?’

‘You’re not,’ Norah told her. ‘We’re both locked in. And it’s lessons, multiple of.’

‘It’s a lesson,’ Poppy insisted.

‘You still play?’ Norah asked.

‘I haven’t played in a couple of years, actually,’ Poppy admitted. ‘But I can probably

handle teaching a newbie. They won't know I don't know shit anymore.'

'I doubt that's true.'

'That I can't fake it?' Poppy replied dryly.

'That you don't know shit,' Norah corrected her just as dryly.

'I guess we're both gonna learn,' Poppy said.

'You never do stop,' Norah commented.

Poppy had to admit that was true. There was no end of things to learn. For example, Norah was bi. That was interesting. Very interesting indeed.

Twenty-Seven

What felt like every parent of every child at Northwood was jammed into the small school hall for the raffle. It was hot and loud.

The headmistress, Mrs Lock, a tall woman with blonde hair that perpetually had black roots, was standing on the small stage looking stressed. 'I'm going to do the raffle now!' she announced. 'Get ready because I'm not repeating myself,' she told the crowd firmly.

'OK, so we're starting small and working our way up. First off, the voucher for a family meal at Murrey's Pizzeria!' Mrs Lock called out, holding up a small, shiny envelope.

The crowd fell into a hushed anticipation, though not for the right reasons. Murrey's pizza sucked. Norah would just as soon win a box of dogshit. The difference in taste

would be negligible.

Norah shifted uncomfortably in her seat near the front, Freddie next to her, while she tried to catch a glimpse of Poppy through the sea of people. She spotted her standing at the back near the refreshments table, laughing with a random dad about something. Norah's heart gave a little jump at the sight of her. She didn't read anything into it. She was just excited to see her friend.

Mrs Lock was fumbling with the raffle tickets. 'And the winner is... number 34!'

A man made his way to the stage, forcing a smile badly. That voucher was going in the bin.

'Next, we have a voucher for a haircut from Ray's Barber!' Mrs Lock continued, waving a beautifully wrapped basket. 'The winning number is... 142!'

A bald man went up to claim the prize.

'They also do beard trimmings,' Mrs Lock offered.

The man rubbed his clean-shaven face. 'Great.'

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Norah wished Poppy was sitting next to her so they could laugh about this. But Poppy was late, and Norah felt weird trying to save her a seat. She hadn't seen her much lately.

Last Sunday, their regular park time hadn't happened because Luna was unwell. Then, this week, they couldn't seem to coordinate the morning walk, just missing each other time and again. Norah had missed them both.

Mrs Lock bumbled through a few more prizes as Norah glanced back at Poppy again, and this time, they caught each other's eyes. Poppy gave a waggle wave, and Norah waved back.

Mrs Lock's voice droned on, 'Next, we have an ice cream maker! The winning number is... 93!'

An elderly woman with a walking stick hobbled her way to the stage, receiving a polite round of applause. Norah stifled a yawn, wondering how much longer this would drag on.

'Next, a session with a personal trainer... 21!' A fuller-figured guy went up to collect. 'I bet you're excited for this,' Mrs Lock noted as she gave him the voucher.

'Why's that?' he replied, irritated.

Mrs Lock froze. 'Err... no reason.'

The man walked off, seething.

Mrs Lock shuffled her notes. 'Our next prize is a hand-drawn portrait session with local artist Norah Cauldwell.'

Local artist? That was pushing it.

'Four hundred and twenty-nine.'

A man in a baseball cap shuffled up and accepted the voucher Norah had printed off. He looked at it and mumbled something.

Mrs Lock looked at him. 'What?' she pushed the mic under his nose.

'I don't want this,' his voice boomed out to the entire hall.

Norah wanted to die.

'Oh!' Mrs Lock said, slightly shocked. 'Well, I don't know what to tell you. You won, so...'

'Can I swap it for something?' he asked.

Norah didn't just want to die now, she wanted to be chunked into a bath of lye and dissolved to the extent that her dental records wouldn't have identified her. All that would be left was a puddle of humiliation.

'No,' Mrs Lock said, confused. 'Sorry.'

'What about store credit?' he asked.

'Sir, this is a school. What would you do with credit?' Mrs Lock asked, looking tired.

‘I could get some money towards uniforms. They cost a bloody arm and a leg.’

Mrs Lock sighed, exhausted. ‘Look, that’s not how any of this works. Haven’t you been to a raffle before?’

In the man’s pause, Norah could feel the second-hand embarrassment of two hundred people for her as clear as day.

‘Hey, can I buy it?’ said a voice. Norah turned and wasn’t surprised to see Poppy pushing her way through. ‘I’ll give you fifty quid for it?’ she said to the man.

The man nodded happily. ‘Yeah, alright then.’

‘Great. Get off the stage,’ Mrs Lock said to the man.

He trotted off, and Norah watched as they went into the back. Poppy had saved her arse. It wasn’t completely un-embarrassing, but quite a bit of the poison of the moment had been sucked out. She didn’t know how she was going to pay Poppy back for this.

‘Now, onto the grand prize. Guitar lessons with a globally famous multi-platinum pop star.’

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A big 'Ooh' noise moved through the crowd. The hyperbole was officially out of control. Poppy was not going to like that description at all. She turned to see Susan, who looked right back at her and shrugged. She didn't look even slightly embarrassed. Oh, to be so shameless.

'Who is it?' someone yelled.

Mrs Lock looked down at her clipboard. 'Umm... Poppy Jennings of Velvet Smack.'

There followed a dreadful silence.

Mrs Lock cleared her throat. 'Ticket number two-hundred-and-sixty-eight.'

A woman with a tiny crying baby strapped to her front headed for the stage. As the woman passed Norah, she heard her mutter to herself, 'When the bloody hell would I have the time for that!' But she wasn't going to make a public nuisance out of herself like Norah's voucher winner, and she headed up and grabbed her prize with a fake smile.

'Right. That's your lot!' Mrs Lock said, thrilled. She fiddled with the mic, trying to turn it off. But as it turned out, all she'd done was turn the volume up because then she said, incredibly loudly, 'Fiona, you can do that next time,' to her deputy. Realising everyone had heard it, Mrs Lock turned to the crowd. 'Because it's so much fun,' she added with a toothy smile. She handed the mic to the deputy, who turned it off with a click.

Everyone began to disperse. Norah stood and scanned the crowd. She found who she

was looking for quickly. ‘Come on,’ she said to Freddie, grabbing his hand. She ran up to the woman with papoose and said, ‘Hey, I’d buy those guitar lessons if you don’t want them?’

The woman looked surprised. ‘Oh, yeah? How much?’

‘How much do you want for it?’

She looked down at the slip of paper, mulling. ‘A hundred?’

‘A hundred!’ Norah exclaimed.

The woman shrugged. ‘If it’s worth that to you.’

Norah sighed. ‘Gimme your email. I’ll send you the payment.’

They fussed over that for a moment, and then, when the woman was certain she’d been paid in full, she handed over the voucher.

‘Do you want to learn to play the guitar?’ Freddie asked, confused.

‘Why not?’ she replied.

‘That’s weird,’ Freddie noted.

Well, yes, it was. But Norah didn’t want the lessons to go to someone who didn’t want them. That was actually still sort of the case since Norah had never wanted to make music in her life, but she’d take those lessons anyway. Poppy had made Norah’s voucher go from a total dud to a semi-desirable item. Norah wanted to give her the same thing.

Norah pulled Freddie through the throng, outside, where he found Poppy and Luna.

Poppy held up her voucher triumphantly. 'You owe me a portrait,' she said with a grin.

Norah held up her voucher. 'Snap.'

'What?!' Poppy exclaimed.

'I bought them.'

'Why?'

'I want to learn guitar?' Norah lied.

'You chased down the woman who won them and bought them off her?' Poppy asked.

'It's weird, isn't it?' Freddie said.

Poppy looked at him. 'Very weird, Freddie. Very weird indeed.'

Twenty-Eight

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A few weeks later, Norah was setting up her easel in Poppy's living room, arranging her pencils and charcoals on a small table nearby.

It was around nine at night. Once Freddie conked out, Norah had asked her mum if it would be OK to go out and leave her with the sleeping kid for an hour. Her mother didn't look happy but agreed. So she was free to make a tit out of herself in front of Poppy by drawing a crappy portrait of her.

Poppy was lounging on the couch, trying to find a comfortable pose. 'How do you want me?' she asked, trying to keep a straight face.

Norah shot her a look. 'Preferably not smirking.'

'Well, there goes my first idea,' Poppy said, settling into a more relaxed position. 'How's this?'

Norah tilted her head, studying Poppy. 'That'll do. Try not to move too much.'

'So, what's the plan? Are you going to draw me like one of your French girls?' Poppy asked.

Norah rolled her eyes, trying to cover her nervousness.

Poppy chuckled. 'I still can't believe you let me push you into this,' she muttered.

'I must honour the voucher I printed off from the internet,' Norah told her.

Norah looked at her friend, taking in the details of her face. Her large, expressive, electric-blue eyes were the first thing you noticed, though her rose-coloured lips, with their fundamental cheekiness, were a close runner-up. It was not a bad face to have to stare at for an hour, all told.

‘Are you gonna draw me at some point?’ Poppy asked.

Norah realised she’d been staring at Poppy for a few minutes. ‘Let the dog see the rabbit, would you?’ Norah shot back, trying not to show her self-consciousness at getting called out.

They settled into a comfortable silence, Norah’s pencil moving swiftly across the paper.

‘So,’ Poppy said, breaking the silence. ‘When did you start drawing again?’

‘A couple of years ago,’ Norah replied without looking up. ‘I needed something to help me unwind. Turns out it’s pretty therapeutic. But I don’t do anything grand, just a little sketching now and again.’

‘I’m glad you picked it up again,’ Poppy said. There was a lot of sincerity in her tone. ‘You were good.’

‘I was just one of a million art kids,’ she said dismissively.

‘You weren’t,’ Poppy instantly replied. Her relaxed expression settling into something more concerned. ‘You had something.’

‘You’re remembering it through the fog of time,’ Norah told her.

‘Remember that mural you did for the school play? Everyone was blown away.’

Norah was amazed she'd remembered that. 'Ah, yes, "The Magical Forest of Wondrous Wonders,"' Norah laughed. 'What a title. And what a fucking nightmare to paint.'

'It was worth it. You made that production look like a Broadway show.'

'You were in that show, right?' Norah countered. 'In the band?'

'Yup.'

'I remember you being like the only person who wasn't fucking up half the notes.'

'Oh, please,' Poppy said, rolling her eyes. 'I was off-beat half the time.'

'You weren't,' Norah said firmly.

Poppy shifted awkwardly. 'Well, thank you.'

Norah smiled, her eyes flicking up from the paper to meet Poppy's. They fell into another silence.

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‘Anyway,’ Norah said, breaking the silence this time. ‘How does it feel now that people know you were a pop star?’

Poppy scoffed. ‘Mostly like being a coffee shop manager.’

‘Do you ever miss it?’ Norah asked, curious.

‘I miss knowing what happened next,’ Poppy said plainly. ‘And that’s about it.’

That surprised Norah. ‘Really? Nothing about that time was fun?’

‘I was miserable,’ Poppy told her.

‘Then why did you do it?’ Norah asked.

Poppy sighed thoughtfully. ‘Because everyone kept telling me I was lucky to be offered the opportunity.’

‘It wasn’t luck. Anyone could see you were going to be a success one way or another.’

‘I don’t think that’s true,’ Poppy said with a frown.

Norah looked at her like she was bonkers. ‘You had star quality, Poppy.’

Poppy looked abruptly self-conscious. ‘It never felt that way.’

‘Well, you did. Do, actually,’ Norah found herself saying.

‘Oh, stop,’ Poppy said, waving her hand dismissively, the confident clown making a reappearance. ‘You’re just saying that because you have to look at my face for an hour.’

‘No, I mean it,’ Norah insisted. ‘It’s what made you a great performer.’

‘You saw me perform?’ Poppy asked, her eyes widening.

Norah felt like they’d strayed into tough territory. What was she going to tell Poppy that she’d taped Velvet Smack on Top of the Pops and watched it over and over in her darkest moments, her feelings bouncing between anger, grief, and occasionally, horniness?

‘You were on TV a lot at one time,’ Norah said in the most bored tone she could summon. ‘You couldn’t miss it.’

Poppy was staring at Norah in utter astonishment.

Norah felt a bead of sweat trickle down her spine. ‘Can you go back to your original expression?’ Norah asked abruptly. ‘I need to add detail on your... philtrum.’

‘My what?’

‘The place between your nose and your mouth.’

Poppy made her face neutral again, and they continued the session. But there was a new tension in the room. Norah could do nothing but ignore it and focus on her work. She’d forgotten how good it felt to be able to do that. She was in it, and she could stay in it if she chose.

Finally, Norah stepped back, surveying her work. 'Alright, I think I'm done.'

Poppy stood and stretched, eager to see the result. 'Let's have a look, then.'

Norah turned the easel around, revealing the portrait.

Poppy's easy smile was replaced by shock. 'Oh my god. I mean... Oh mygod.'

'I can't tell if that's a positive response,' Norah said truthfully.

'You made me look... beautiful,' Poppy said.

Norah looked back at the picture, and she saw it as Poppy did. It was like a funhouse mirror of Norah's feelings, and it bounced back something she hadn't wanted to see, something staring her in the face for a while now.

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She couldn't deal with it. So she decided not to.

'You're welcome,' Norah replied evenly, doing her best to affect a no-big-deal attitude. But she was as far from that feeling as she could get. But she was not going down this path again. Not a bloody chance. She'd had twenty years to grow and get over it. What kind of a dumbass would find their way out of hellish heartbreak and go back just to check it was as bad as they'd thought?

Not this dumbass, Norah decided.

'You can just shove that in a drawer. I won't expect you to hang it or anything,' Norah said flippantly.

Poppy shook her head. 'Absolutely not. I'm going to frame the ever-loving fuck out of this.' She suddenly looked at Norah very seriously. 'Norah...'

Norah felt suddenly nervous. 'What?'

'Why did you stop doing this?'

Norah was relieved. She thought Poppy was going to say something else. 'Oh. Well. You know, life,' she shrugged.

'You were supposed to go to art school,' Poppy recalled. 'Did you do that?'

Norah shook her head. 'No, I changed my mind. I got a bog-standard business studies degree in the end.'

‘Norah!’ Poppy almost yelled in horror. ‘What the fuck? Why?’

Norah shrugged. ‘My mother kept banging on about how hard it was to make a living as an artist.’ She laughed. ‘And here I am, working in a shitty customer service job with people who didn’t bother getting a degree at all. Still paying off the bloody student loan. Great advice, Mum.’

Poppy frowned and looked back down at the picture. ‘I’m sorry.’

Norah looked at her in confusion. ‘What for?’

‘If I’d been around, I wouldn’t have let you do that,’ Poppy said frankly. ‘I’d have banged on and on about your talent until you couldn’t ignore it. I’d have annoyed you into following your dream.’

Norah smiled sadly. ‘I think you’re giving yourself a bit too much credit to think you could have competed with my mum’s nagging.’

Poppy arched an eyebrow. ‘You underestimate my ability to irritate, Cauldwell,’ she said dryly.

Norah chuckled. ‘Well, you should have gone to music college, like you planned. You were good.’

‘I might have been good, but I never really got to find out.’ Poppy shrugged. ‘But whatever happened to your graphic novel?’ Poppy asked.

‘It got an A plus,’ Norah shrugged.

‘I never got to read it, did I?’ Poppy mused.

‘No. And I’m afraid you never will. It got water damaged in a box in the garage.’

Poppy let out a sigh of despair. They both stood for a moment in the sadness for all that was lost.

‘You know, you’re not dead. It’s still in you, all that talent. It doesn’t have to be too late,’ Norah said, trying to shake off the melancholy.

Poppy gave her a meaningful look. ‘You think there’s still time to get back what we lost?’

Norah paused, stuck for an answer. It felt like it was a very loaded question, and she didn’t know what the hell to do with it.

Suddenly, there was a slight wail from upstairs. Poppy looked at the ceiling, stricken. ‘Sounds like she’s having a nightmare.’

‘I’ll let myself out. You go to her,’ Norah said.

Poppy nodded and went to her daughter.

Norah crept out the front door and walked down the street back to her mother’s place—her place. She wasn’t sure what to think right now, but she knew what she felt. Frightened.

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Twenty-Nine

Poppy was sitting at the kitchen table, Norah's drawing in her hands. She'd been there a while now, transfixed.

The drawing was beautiful, capturing her likeness with incredible detail. But it was more than that—it was how Norah saw her. The eyes were filled with warmth and strength, the smile genuine and full of life. Poppy didn't know what to take from it.

Was it just Norah's talent? Could she make anybody look like this? Or did it mean something?

Luna came in. 'Can I have juice?'

Poppy got up. 'Sure, kiddo.'

While she was pouring Luna a glass of apple juice, Luna noticed the picture on the table. 'Is that you?'

Poppy put the carton back in the fridge. 'Yeah.'

'Who drew it?'

'Freddie's mum,' Poppy told her.

'You look pretty,' Luna observed.

‘Thank you, sweetheart.’

Luna's curiosity was piqued. ‘You must like her.’

‘Why?’ Poppy asked, slightly shocked.

‘It looks like you’re happy while she’s drawing you. Really happy,’ Luna said thoughtfully.

Poppy nodded, stunned at her daughter’s perceptiveness. ‘Yeah, it does, doesn’t it?’

Luna hopped onto a chair and leaned in closer to the drawing. ‘I didn’t know Freddie’s mum could draw so well.’

‘Yeah. She’s good.’

‘I wish I could draw like that.’

‘Yeah?’

‘But it looks hard,’ Luna frowned.

‘If you keep practising, you could be this good,’ Poppy told her.

‘Could I?’ Luna asked hopefully.

‘What, you? You’d be great,’ Poppy told her daughter sincerely.

Luna looked up at her mother, eyes wide with excitement. ‘You think I could be an artist when I grow up?’

‘Of course you can,’ Poppy said, touching the top of Luna’s head.

Whatever she wanted to be, Poppy encouraged. Last month, she wanted to be a chef in the daytime and an astronaut at night. The world was open to her, and Poppy wanted her to enjoy that for as long as she could. Whatever she ended up landing on, Poppy just hoped she chose it for the right reasons.

As Luna bounded off to play, Poppy returned her gaze to the drawing and admonished herself for being stupid. She was seeing what she wanted to see. Norah was just good. She could have brought this out of anyone.

This developing crush was stupid. Giving it any brain space was stupid. She’d only recently gotten into Norah’s good graces, and that was by the skin of her teeth. She couldn’t risk all that by bringing up the one thing they couldn’t talk about. Keeping it buried was the only way this worked. It was a deadly zombie they’d knocked down once, and if anyone was dumbenough to dig it up, it was gonna bite everyone in the arse. That’s what Poppy and Norah’s past was. A monster lurking, waiting to destroy. She would have to let it go.

Poppy took a deep breath, forcing herself to push the thoughts away. She carefully placed the drawing back on the table and went to check on Luna. The little girl was engrossed in her colouring book, her tongue poking out in concentration as she carefully filled in the lines.

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‘Luna, you ready for some lunch?’ she suggested, trying to distract herself from getting silly about Norah.

Luna nodded enthusiastically, and Poppy led the way to the kitchen, grateful for the simplicity of the task. As they prepared sandwiches, she chatted with her daughter about school. She was building friendships beyond Freddie now; Poppy was glad to learn. But he was still her best friend because he was good at Lego, which Luna valued highly.

At bath time, Norah texted her. Hey, when do I get my lessons?

She texted Norah back. It’s ONE lesson, and you seriously want it?

Don’t you dare try to renege! Norah shot back.

Poppy had guessed why she’d bought that voucher. The same reason she bought Norah’s. The winner didn’t want it. That didn’t shock Poppy, and she appreciated the gesture, but she was surprised she was going through with it. Poppy had thought it would be one of those things where they’d say, ‘Hey, we gotta do that lesson sometime,’ occasionally. And then never, ever do it.

But now she was going to have to get the guitar out, blow the dust off it, and teach Norah how to play. She’d have laughed if she hadn’t wanted to cry.

With a sigh, Poppy texted back: Sure, let’s do it. When are you free?

Almost immediately, Norah replied: Is it doable this weekend?

Yeah, how about we try it again after Luna's asleep? Hopefully, with fewer nightmares.

Thirty

Poppy opened the door to Norah, acoustic guitar in hand. 'Are you ready to rock?' she asked.

'No,' Norah told her plainly. It had been a long day. She'd had a meeting with her boss, and he informed her that she was 'Not meeting targets.' Norah actually knew that because the targets were ridiculous. She assumed they were suggestions rather than true expectations. Apparently not.

'Good, because rocking might be a bit much after the day I've had. We'll just learn a few easy notes,' Poppy replied, relieved. 'Come in.'

They went into the living room. 'Drink?' Poppy asked.

'Do you have anything with a proof?' Norah asked.

'Lemme check,' Poppy said and went into the kitchen.

Norah sat down on the battered old couch, and a moment later, Poppy came out with a bottle of wine. 'I don't know how long it's been here. I think it was my mum's.'

'But wine gets better with age, doesn't it?' Norah said.

'I don't know if that applies to Blue Nun,' Poppy fretted.

Norah laughed. 'I'm willing to risk it.'

Poppy sat down and cracked open the bottle, pouring them both a conservative glass apiece. 'Let's start small, just in case.'

Norah took a sip. 'I've had better, I've had worse,' she pronounced.

'I'll drink to that,' Poppy said, sipping tentatively.

'Your daughter asleep?' Norah asked.

'Yes, is your son?'

'Just about,' Norah said. She flopped back on the sofa with her glass. 'Man, I'm knackered.'

'I thought you were jazzed for guitar lessons?' Poppy said.

'Yes, I'm very excited to embarrass myself,' Norah assured her. Something caught the corner of her eye on the wall. The portrait, framed and given pride of place above the mantel. Norah felt a blush building in her that she didn't have time for. 'Gimme that thing,' she said, nodding to the guitar.

Poppy grabbed her guitar and sat across from her. 'Let's start with the basics.'

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Norah struggled at first, her fingers fumbling over the frets, but she was determined not to quit. Poppy was patient with her and very nonjudgmental about errors, which helped.

After about half an hour, they knocked off. Poppy poured them both some more crap wine.

‘You’re not nearly as bad as I might have thought,’ Poppy said.

Norah raised an eyebrow. ‘I’ve had better compliments.’

Poppy decided to try again. ‘I didn’t think this wouldn’t be your thing. But you have a natural dexterity with your fingers.’ Then she added quickly. ‘Probably from the... art.’

‘Well, it helps that I got a guitar lesson from a globally multi-platinum-selling artist. Great day for the diary,’ Norah snarked.

‘It was one platinum. One time,’ Poppy groaned.

‘Was it for “Noah”?’ Norah asked hesitantly.

Poppy nodded, but she didn’t say anything.

‘Hey, crazy question, totally random... Was “Noah” originally “Norah’s song”?’ Norah found herself asking.

Poppy looked stunned. 'You recognised it?'

'You played it a lot back in the day. I only heard it once with lyrics, but... when I saw you on TV, I recognised the tune,' Norah explained. She hoped she sounded casual about it.

'It wasn't really "Norah's Song", of course,' Poppy said quickly. 'The arrangement changed it. It was sped up significantly, and the lyrics were unrecognisable by the end.'

'I still knew it,' Norah confessed.

'Even though they broke it? Must have played it around you more than I thought,' Poppy said, rubbing the back of her neck.

'They broke it?' Norah asked.

Poppy sighed. 'Totally.'

'It was a hit, though, right?' Norah said, trying to keep her voice light.

'Our biggest one,' Poppy admitted.

'People liked it. So that seems like a good thing.'

'But it was personal, and I let them pressure me into handing it over so they could chew it up and spit out money,' Poppy said bitterly. 'I'll always regret that.'

Norah felt oddly breathless, and she took a second to collect herself. 'It was personal?'

Poppy gave her an intense look. ‘Obviously.’

‘But...’ Norah started. But then stopped. What the hell did she think she was doing? This was the no-no zone.

‘What?’ Poppy pressed.

Norah didn’t want to say more. She didn’t know why she’d started in this direction. She wanted to put the guitar down and run out.

But unfortunately, she wasn’t Freddie’s age. She was a grown-up, and she was supposed to act like one, annoyingly. ‘I guess I thought maybe it was just... not that meaningful,’ Norah admitted.

Poppy frowned. ‘Itoldyou it was. Don’t you remember that?’

‘I remember. But then...’ Norah let the sentence hang.

‘I ended things,’ Poppy completed.

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Norah shrugged. 'It doesn't matter.'

Poppy looked at Norah, making her feel see-through. Norah's eyes darted away, her fingers nervously tapping on the glass in her hand. The air between them felt charged.

'I'm sorry,' Norah finally blurted out, her voice slightly shaky. 'I shouldn't have brought it up.'

Poppy swallowed, her fingers absently playing with the rim of her glass. 'The song or...'

'The song, yeah. The song,' Norah said quickly.

'I don't think that's what you meant,' Poppy said.

Norah found the will to look Poppy in the eye. 'It doesn't matter.'

'OK, but you should know... That song was for you. And it was real,' Poppy said.

Norah said something then that she later attributed to a mini-stroke. There was no other explanation. 'Would you play it for me? The original?'

She was sure that Poppy was gonna say no. But Poppy picked up the guitar. 'I think I can probably remember how to play it. But I can't look at you while I do it,' she said, closing her eyes.

Poppy's fingers began to dance across the strings of her old acoustic guitar, picking

out a familiar tune. Across from her on the couch, Norah reclined, a half-empty glass of wine cradled in her hand.

‘She finds solace in the stroke of a pen,’ Poppy sang quietly.

Her voice was different than it had been in her pop years. It was worn smoother from use, its sound richer from a life lived. Norah was entranced as she continued.

‘In the colours that bleed, she finds a friend.

Through the sadness that clouds her gaze,

Her drawings weave through the darkest maze.’

The song was like a time machine, transporting Norah across the years, back to the nights they used to spend together as teens.

‘In the silence of her room, where shadows play,

Norah's drawings come alive in their own way.

With tears like ink, she paints the night,

Sketching her sorrows in the fading light.’

Poppy strummed a little bridge, her eyes still squeezed shut. She looked a little scared, Norah thought.

‘In shadows cast by flickering light,

I watch you draw, lost in the night.

Each line you trace, my heart does ache,

For love I hide, for your sweet sake.'

Norah drank Poppy in as she sang. The way her hair fell loose around her face, the concentration furrowing her brow, the gentle sway of her body as she lost herself in the music—it was all so intoxicating.

'In the gallery of her mind, where dreams reside,

Norah's sketches bloom, where emotions collide.

In shades of hope and shades of despair,

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Her canvas whispers secrets only she can bear.

Norah, I can only implore,

That you let me be the one you adore.

With each stroke of your pen, let your story unfurl,

Norah, let me be the colour in your world.

In shadows cast by flickering light,

I watch you draw, lost in the night.

Each line you trace, my heart does ache,

For love I hide, for your sweet sake.'

Poppy's fingers slowed and stopped. She opened her blue eyes and met Norah's gaze, licking her lips nervously. Poppy's last chord hung in the air, the sound slowly fading into the quiet of the room. 'That's all I can remember. I think there were probably a few more verses, but...'

Norah felt her heart speed up. At that moment, the tension that had been building between them since Poppy had arrived back in Northwood seemed to reach a tipping point.

Norah put her glass down.

‘What are you doing?’ Poppy asked, fear in her voice.

‘Putting my glass down,’ Norah said.

Poppy gave her a long, meaningful look. ‘Should I put my guitar down?’ she asked.

They both knew what they were talking about now.

Norah nodded, trying to hold her nerve. ‘Yes,’ she said simply.

Poppy put the guitar down. Before either of them could say another word, Norah leaned forward, closing the distance between them. Their lips met in a soft kiss. It was tentative and bumbling at first but soon moved to something more confident and deliberate, filling with the unspoken desire that had simmered beneath the surface all evening.

Sometime later, when they finally pulled away, they both wore matching expressions of surprise and disbelief, as if wondering if what just happened was real.

Just then, Norah’s phone went off.

‘I should check that. In case something’s wrong,’ Norah said, flustered.

Poppy nodded, smiling shyly.

But it wasn’t her mum, it was Max. Now that things have cooled down a bit, I think we should talk about everything.

Norah frowned at the message.

‘Is something wrong?’ Poppy asked.

‘Yes. Well, no. Well, yes,’ she stuttered.

She felt suddenly panicked. Her marriage had only just ended. She shouldn’t be doing this. Not with Poppy, of all people. As much as Norah wanted it, Poppy’s track record was unignorable. She’d let herself forget for a moment. She’d been hypnotised by the song.

But reality had come back into focus. Norah couldn’t jump into anything with Poppy. It would end badly, like last time. And then Norah would be that person, running from doomed relationship to doomed relationship.

‘What are we doing?’ Norah asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Poppy replied, confused. ‘What are we doing?’

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The panic in Norah's system ramped further up. 'I'm stupid.'

'Stupid?' Poppy said, hurt in her eyes.

'Totally stupid. I've got to go.'

'Because you're stupid?' Poppy checked.

'Yes.'

'Because this was a mistake?'

'That's right.'

'You've had too much to drink, and you didn't mean it,' Poppy went on.

Norah thought that had the ring of a passable lie. 'That's it, yeah. Wine and impending divorce.'

Poppy's eyes filled with sudden horror. 'I did it again,' she muttered to herself.

That caught Norah's attention, dragging her from her own crisis straight into Poppy's. 'Did what?'

Poppy shook her head. 'No, it's fine. You're right. You should leave.'

Poppy was now matching Norah's freak out, which made it all that much worse. She

wanted to press her, but she was in the midst of her own panic. It was all such a mess. What the hell had they done?

‘We shouldn't have kissed,’ Poppy blurted. ‘You’re right. It was a mistake.’

Norah blinked, taken aback by Poppy's sudden change in demeanour. ‘OK, good. We’re in agreement,’ she said, trying not to be hurt. Which she knew was a bit bloody rich when Poppy was only repeating what she had said a moment ago. She was only getting rejected in the middle of her rejection.

Norah shook her head, trying to be an adult in the situation, if a little late. ‘We... we kissed. It happened. Let’s move past it.’

‘Yeah. OK,’ Poppy said. ‘Fucking Blue Nun.’

‘Right. Blue Nun,’ Norah agreed before looking at the bottle.

They’d hardly touched it, but it was a way out. It would make it OK if they could blame booze.

But it didn’t feel OK. It felt fucking awful. Norah had handled this whole thing so badly. All the more reason to get out before she made any more mess.

‘I should go,’ Norah said softly, her voice breaking the silence.

‘Yeah,’ Poppy replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

Poppy saw Norah at the door, and they said goodbye briefly before Norah legged it down the street back home. She knew that whatever had sparked between them tonight wasn't something she could dismiss lightly. But she was gonna give it a hell of a try.

Thirty-One

Poppy closed the door behind Norah and went back into the living room. She glanced at her guitar leaning against the coffee table, a silent witness to the evening's unexpected turn.

'You bastard,' she whispered to it. 'You just had to make everything sexy, didn't you? Couldn't help yourself!'

The guitar, obviously, didn't reply.

'Oh, now you've got nothing to say?' Poppy spat.

She sat down on the couch, turning the anger away from the guitar to the place it needed to be—on her. She shouldn't have played the song. She'd known what she was doing, what she hoped the music would achieve. But getting what she wanted had been the worst thing that could have happened.

Because Norah had pulled back, she didn't want this. She'd never wanted it. She was just in a bad spot, yet again. Poppy's lips were never more than a life raft.

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But she wasn't going to let it go the way it had last time. The first chance she got, she was going to face this head-on, talk to Norah, and air it all out. Then, they could go back to being friends. Poppy could manage that. She was an adult now.

Right?

Poppy was behind the counter of The Sugar Cube, but her brain was elsewhere. She'd had a rough morning.

It had taken just about every drop of will she had this morning to convince Luna that she wasn't going to school as Elsa from Frozen. Luna had negotiated masterfully, saying she wasn't going to school otherwise.

Poppy didn't have any cards to play at that point except bribery, winning her over with a promised visit to McDonald's at the weekend. Poppy had felt like a failed parent as she took an appropriately dressed Luna to school. But she got the kid in the door, a thin victory and a draining one.

Poppy had been hitting the coffee hard as a result, and she was on the jittery side by the time Norah came in at twelve fifteen.

'Hi,' Norah said, smiling widely. Poppy could have counted all her teeth.

'Hey. Missed you at the gates this morning,' Poppy observed.

‘I was running early for a change,’ Norah said, the hundred-watt smile still going strong.

Poppy couldn’t match it. So she went the only way she knew. ‘What’s up with your face?’

Norah’s smile fell off. ‘What?’

‘You’re smiling like... It’s a bit Joker if I’m honest,’ Poppy said frankly.

Norah laughed nervously. ‘Sorry. I’m just trying to be normal. I guess I missed.’

Poppy nodded. ‘Sit down, I’ll bring your usual.’

Norah went and sat down while Poppy made a coffee.

Poppy scanned the cafe. It was not busy yet, but it would be shortly. Hard to squeeze in a heart-to-heart around the lunch crowd. She’d have to make it quick. The rush was upon her.

She took the coffee over to Norah. ‘Can I sit with you a minute?’

Norah nodded, looking slightly daunted. ‘I hoped you would.’

They were on the same page, at least. This was going to be a good old-fashioned air clearing.

‘Right, so...’ Poppy began, lacing her fingers together across the table, which was weird. She felt like she was interviewing Norah for a job. ‘So last night... happened.’

Norah nodded. ‘Yup,’ she said.

Poppy hesitated in case there was going to be more. There wasn't. Norah was letting Poppy do the heavy lifting. Poppy didn't know if that was fair, but she was willing to do it anyway.

'We'd had wine, and then you watched me play the guitar, which is, of course, a known aphrodisiac,' Poppy said, trying to keep things light for both their sakes.

A nervous giggle escaped Norah. She was quick to shut it down.

'But that's not... We're not going down that road again, are we?' Poppy asked.

It was a real question. Part of her still clung to the tiniest hope that she might not seem sure that she wasn't travelling that way with Poppy.

'I can't,' Norah said with conviction.

A little bit of Poppy shrivelled up and died. Another part of her sighed and fetched the shovel.

'I don't mean to imply you wanted anything else. Like, I'm sure you're just as... I mean, I know it was an accident for you too,' Norah babbled.

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Poppy didn't quite know what to say to that. She didn't want to lie, and she didn't want to tell the truth. So she just stayed silent. You couldn't use someone's silence against them, could you? That was why you stayed quiet during arrests. What you said could be used against you. That also applied to awkward post-snog chats.

Poppy and Norah looked at each other for a long moment, the weight of unspoken truths hanging between them. Poppy was no longer sure whether the silence was a strategic move or just sheer panic-induced paralysis. Either way, it was buying her time.

Norah was the first to drop the eye contact. The moment had passed. 'So, we're good, right? We can just go back to normal?' she asked as she fidgeted with her coffee cup, her voice hopeful but tinged with doubt.

Poppy cleared her throat, trying to find her voice again. 'Sure, yeah. Normal. Like it never happened,' she said, forcing a smile that felt as natural as Norah's.

Norah's face softened with relief. 'Great. I was worried we might get weird.'

Poppy raised an eyebrow. 'Weird? Us? Never.'

They both laughed, though it was more of a nervous titter than genuine amusement. Poppy could feel the lunch crowd beginning to trickle in, the murmur of voices growing louder. She needed to wrap this up before the café turned into a bustling madhouse.

'Look, Norah,' Poppy said, leaning in slightly. 'Whatever happens, we're still

friends. Always.'

Norah smiled. 'I hope so. I would hate for this to go sideways. I like having you as a friend.'

'Me, too,' Poppy said. 'Right, I better get back behind the counter.'

Norah gave her a small nod, and Poppy got up from the table. She headed back to the counter, bracing herself for the lunchtime rush. As she started taking orders and making coffees, she couldn't help but steal glances at Norah, who was finishing her coffee and scrolling through her phone, looking as if nothing had happened.

But something had happened. Something significant. Poppy felt it in the pit of her stomach, a gnawing sensation that wouldn't go away. She tried to push it down, focusing instead on the steady stream of customers. But the feelings kept bubbling up, no matter how many lattes she made.

As the lunch rush hit its peak, Poppy found herself in a rhythm, exchanging pleasantries with customers, flashing her best customer-service smile, and keeping things moving. But her mind kept tripping over the night before. It had felt so good before it felt so fucking awful.

She glanced at Norah again, who was now chatting with another customer, some bloke. He was clearly trying it on.

Poppy watched them talk, and she thought, She turned you down because it's just not going to be you. Ever. Because you're never in the right time or place, and you're never the right someone. But it will be someone else one day. And you'll have to watch.

As Norah slid out of the café a minute later, Poppy put in an order for a bacon

sandwich, and she thought about her guitar, sitting at home. She wondered if she might have the energy to smash the thing to bits tonight.

Thirty-Two

Jesus, this was what you got for making even a slight effort. Unwanted male attention.

‘I need to go. Catch you later,’ Norah said, taking two steps back from the random guy with a dad goatee who was trying to engage her in inane chitchat.

‘Can I get your number?’ he begged.

‘I don’t have one. I’m a Luddite,’ Norah lied. ‘Never touch technology.’

‘So, how does anyone contact you?’ he asked suspiciously.

‘I’m psychic. I sense that someone wants to talk to me, and I find them. See you around,’ she said. She’d have preferred to simply say, ‘No’, but you never knew how they’d take it. Better to be weird.

Norah looked over at Poppy, who was busy with some pretty young woman at the counter. She watched Poppy giving the woman a genuine smile she couldn’t seem to summon for Norah. She felt a pang of jealousy, which was extremely stupid. All was well now. They’d had a silly moment, but they would move past it.

Norah walked briskly away from the café. She walked back to Orchid Street and let herself into her mother’s house, the familiar scent of her mother's plugin air freshener wafting up her nostrils aggressively.

‘Norah, is that you?’ her mother’s voice blared from the kitchen.

‘Yeah, Mum. Just got in,’ Norah replied, picking up her laptop from the table and opening it. She had about a minute to get logged in.

Her mother appeared in the kitchen doorway. ‘I didn’t see you come in last night. Must have been a long guitar lesson.’

Norah sighed, already feeling the fatigue from dodging her mum's probing. ‘I guess so.’

Her phone buzzed. Max again. Hi, how’s it going? She muted him and stuck her phone back in her pocket. They’d already put together a Freddie custody schedule. What more was there to say? Norah had no interest in being buddies.

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‘You and Poppy seem to be spending a lot of time together,’ her mother tried again, her tone sly.

Norah forced a laugh. ‘We’re friends, Mum.’

Her mother’s eyes narrowed. ‘Of course you are,’ she said.

Norah sat on the pull-out sofa, now in day mode, and logged in. ‘I’ve got some work to do, so I need to focus.’

‘What is it you do, again?’ her mother asked, following her to the sofa and plonking down next to her.

Norah groaned inwardly. ‘I work for an online flower retailer, Mum. Ihavesaid.’

‘Of course, of course. But you can talk to me while you work, right?’ her mother pressed, budging closer on the sofa.

Norah’s screen lit up with a barrage of customer inquiries. ‘Mum, I need to concentrate.’

Her mother peered at the screen. ‘Who are all these names?’

‘Customers,’ Norah replied, trying to maintain her patience. ‘People with flower-related questions and complaints.’

‘Like what?’ her mother asked, not getting the hint.

Norah sighed. 'Like delivery issues, wrong orders, stuff like that.' She cued up the next customer and pasted in her form opener.

Her mother nodded thoughtfully. 'Interesting. So, what's this one about?'

Norah glanced at the complaint coming up on the screen. 'It's about a missing bouquet. I need to check the tracking and get back to them.'

As she started typing a response, her mother was practically sitting on her shoulder. 'Why would a bouquet go missing?'

'Mum, please,' Norah said, her tone edging towards desperation. 'I need to do this without distractions.'

Her mother huffed but stayed put. Norah tried to focus on the task at hand, but her mother's presence was like a persistent itch she couldn't scratch.

She clicked through the order details, trying to make sense of the tracking information. She cued up another complaint, identical in nature, moving between them for speed. She could feel the pressure to get the cue down mounting.

'Looks like it was delivered to the wrong address,' she muttered, more to herself than to her mother.

'Maybe you should have used a different courier,' her mother suggested.

Norah gritted her teeth. 'Mum, I really—'

Her mother's landline rang. 'Hold on, dear, I need to take this,' she said, stepping away to answer the call.

Norah let out a sigh of relief and quickly typed up her response to the customer. In her haste to finish, she accidentally sent them the tracking information for the other customer. She realised her mistake a second too late.

Thirty-Three

Poppy was trying to wind down from a long day by watching some reality dating thing. Well, her face was pointed at it. She wasn't taking a thing in. Her brain was whirring around the night before and the conversation that followed.

No matter what she tried, she couldn't seem to switch it off. Her brain was behaving like a computer, analysing every moment for any kind of positive insight. So far, it hadn't produced anything but sadness.

There was a knock at the front door. Poppy checked the time. It was nine. Too late for an Amazon delivery, and she wasn't expecting anyone. Yeah, not really up for a home invasion; please and thank you, Poppy thought and stayed sitting where she was.

The door went again. Poppy turned the volume up on the TV. There was a guy with a shirt that showed his nipples, telling a girl whose top showed her nipples that he just wasn't ready to go forward with her.

'Why?' the girl asked. 'I thought we connected.'

'I did too, but then Brandy came in, and we just connected a bit more,' the guy said.

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‘How?’ the girl begged with tears in her eyes.

‘Mainly at the pelvis,’ Poppy sniggered to herself and then glanced up at the window to see Mrs Cauldwell standing right outside, looking through the gap in the blinds at her. Poppy screamed and stood. ‘What the hell are you doing?’ she yelled.

‘What?’ Mrs Cauldwell asked boldly through the window.

Poppy paused the show and went to the front door, where Mrs Cauldwell was waiting. ‘You scared the piss out of me!’ Poppy said.

‘I knew you were in.’

‘So you decided to peep at me through the window?’ Poppy said, still trying to shake the adrenaline out of her system.

Mrs Cauldwell tutted. ‘I was just trying to get your attention. I don’t derive pleasure from watching people watch terrible television.’

‘My viewing habits are not on trial,’ Poppy said, embarrassed.

‘I don’t care about that,’ Mrs Caldwell dismissed. ‘I need to speak to you.’

Poppy blew out a breath, calming a bit. ‘You could have called.’

‘I don’t have your number.’

‘Then ask your daughter,’ Poppy said.

‘She can’t know I’m here.’

Poppy was struck by a strong sense of déjà vu.

‘What’s up, Mrs Cauldwell?’ Poppy asked.

The woman gathered herself up to her full height—which was around five foot two—and fixed Poppy with a terrible stare. ‘Whatever you’re trying to do, stop it.’

‘What am I trying to do?’ Poppy asked.

‘Break up a family,’ Mrs Cauldwell said.

‘What family are you talking about?’ Poppy asked, though she knew where this was going now.

‘My daughter’s.’

‘Do you mean her marriage?’ Poppy asked.

‘Yes.’

‘I didn’t have anything to do with that ending,’ Poppy told her plainly.

‘Maybe. Maybe not. But don’t do anything to stop it getting back together.’

Poppy burst out laughing. ‘What?’

‘It’s over with that woman. He knows he made a mistake. He wants them to move

back in,' Mrs Cauldwell explained.

'He told you that?' Poppy said, unsurprised. Of course, he was crawling back. It was the next step in the shitbag playbook when an affair petered out. Take another run at your ex, see if there's any drama left to squeeze out! Pathetic.

'He's been to see me,' Mrs Cauldwell said. 'He explained everything.'

Poppy was appalled. 'Has he talked to Norah? Seems like she's the one who ought to be consulted on whether they're getting back together.'

'She's being obstinate,' Mrs Cauldwell said with a tut. 'But she'll talk to him eventually. Just make sure you don't stand in the way.'

‘Why would I...’

‘I know you. I know my daughter. I see what’s going on.’

‘Nothing’s going on,’ Poppy said, but it came out weakly. The trouble was that something had gone on. And Poppy had never been a great liar.

Mrs Cauldwell took a step forward. She was half a foot shorter than Poppy and shrinking by the second, but that didn’t matter. Her eyes could have made Dwayne Johnson feel five inches tall.

‘That little boy has a chance to have his family back together. Don’t ruin it for him,’ she warned icily.

‘What about her? Norah? You don’t think she deserves more than him?’ Poppy asked.

She didn’t mean herself; she was only talking generally. Norah deserved a lot better than Max, and she thought someone should at least say so.

‘Life is compromise. Didn’t your mother teach you that?’ Mrs Cauldwell asked. ‘I know she tried, but I guess it didn’t take. She’d be ashamed to see the example you’re setting for your child.’

‘Don’t bring her into this,’ Poppy said, getting angry. She was being accused of something she wasn’t doing and wasn’t planning to do. Norah didn’t want Poppy that way, and Poppy had accepted that, hard as it was.

But Mrs Cauldwell wasn't disturbed by Poppy's building anger. She seemed happy to have an excuse to go a bit harder at Poppy. 'You know, I saw you on the TV, and I knew it wouldn't last. And here you are, back in this house. Back down to reality with a bump. So you should know better than anyone that you get the hand you get, and you play it as best you can. Getting big ideas is the best way to get your heart broken.'

That was a pretty direct hit to Poppy's fast-disintegrating self-esteem. She needed to get the woman out. 'Look, this has nothing to do with me,' she pled. 'If Norah wanted to get back with him, that's her call.'

'Not if you fill her head with ideas.'

'I wouldn't know how to do that if I even wanted to,' Poppy told her honestly.

'Just stay out of it, OK? Think of that little boy. What's best for him.' With that, Mrs Cauldwell turned and left.

After she heard the door click shut, Poppy sat back down and unpaused the reality show. The pretty people carried on with their self-created romantic dramas as Poppy watched on, still not taking in a thing.

She hadn't thought it possible to feel worse, but here she sat, doing just that. She didn't need this. She didn't need people coming to her home to tell her not to get involved with people who didn't want to get involved with her.

Thanks, universe. I got it, OK? Poppy thought and turned up the volume, hoping to drown out her sorrows with someone else's.

But of course, it still wasn't working.

Thirty-Four

‘Oh no,’ Norah groaned as the email notification popped up from her boss.

****Subject: URGENT: Customer Complaint****

Norah’s stomach dropped as she opened the email. The customer had complained about the incorrect information yesterday, and her boss was not pleased. The email was pretty direct: this was not the first mistake she’d made recently, and it was the final straw.

‘What’s up with your face?’ her mother asked, reappearing just as Norah finished reading the email.

‘I just got sacked,’ Norah said flatly. She felt curiously disconnected from the information.

Her mother’s eyes widened. ‘Oh, Norah! I’m so sorry. What happened?’

Norah closed her laptop with finality. ‘I made a mistake.’

‘They sacked you for onemistake?’ her mother asked, shocked. ‘You can appeal that.’

‘It’s not my first. I’ve been late a few times to log on. They’re cutthroat about error. So that’s that,’ Norah told her with a shrug.

Her mother reached out to touch her arm. ‘You’ll find something else.’

Norah sighed, pulling away gently. ‘I need some time, Mum. Just give me a minute, would you?’

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Her mother gave her two seconds before she started up again. 'With your degree, you'll find something better in no time. I don't know why you were even doing that job at all. It sounded rather basic.'

'Because it's what I could get, and it allowed me to pick up and drop off Freddie,' Norah explained with dwindling patience.

'Well, I can do that now,' her mother said.

Norah looked at her mother in astonishment. Not because it was a generous offer but because there was no way she meant it. Ordinarily, Norah let something like that go. But she was in no mood. She was calling the woman's bluff.

'Oh, you could?' Norah asked. 'Great. I'll look for a nine-to-five, then.'

She watched her mother squirm. 'Well, I mean, I don't think I could do it every day,' her mother said.

'No,' Norah said. 'I don't suppose you could. Which is why that was a good job for me at this very moment.'

'There'll be others,' her mother said easily. 'You'll have something else by the end of the week.'

'It's not that easy,' Norah began.

'You haven't even tried yet,' her mother scolded.

‘You get one, then!’ Norah exclaimed.

‘What? I’m retired,’ her mother said, confused.

‘You don’t have to do the job. Just get one. Hell, just secure an interview. To show me how easy it all is,’ Norah said, aware they were getting into a really dangerous situation.

‘What’s up your arse?’ her mother snapped.

‘Well, for a start, you were the one that distracted me into making the mistake that got me fired,’ Norah said.

‘Wha—’ her mother began.

Norah interrupted the protest before it could get started. ‘The other thing that is “up my arse”, mother, is that I’m sick of you telling me how simple everything is when you don’t know what the world is now. It’s changed. Things are harder. Sparser.’

‘But you have a business degree!’ her mother cried.

‘Which are ten a bloody penny,’ Norah told her. ‘So thanks for pushing that onto me. It’s barely been any use; it was expensive, and I hated getting it. Brilliant work, Mum. Top-notch.’

‘How dare you! You don’t know the sacrifices I made for you!’ her mother spluttered.

‘I do because I make them now. For Freddie. So you can put that card away,’ Norah said with satisfaction.

‘I was a single mother!’ she screeched.

‘That happened when I was eighteen years old, which is an adult, so it doesn’t even really qualify. And I’m a single mother to a five-year-old. So what else have you got?’ Norah dared her.

She loved having her mother on the ropes like this. She hadn’t ever managed it before. But now they were both mothers. The playing field was levelled. Norah had seen behind the curtain. Her mother couldn’t keep telling her she didn’t know what was what when she was the one in the dark about the realities of Norah’s life.

But as her mother gasped for her next gambit, it occurred to Norah that if they kept going at it like this, her mother might have a heart attack. Norah should stop now.

‘Mum...’ she began, taking her tone down several notches.

‘You don’t know!’ her mother screamed.

Norah could see that it was too late for cool heads. Her mother was in the zone. She wasn’t coming down until she’d tired herself out.

‘Mum, let’s just calm down,’ Norah tried, knowing the futility of it.

‘You think you get it because you’ve got a child. But he’s five. It’s not complicated yet. But you wait. You wait ‘till you have to protect him from himself!’

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Norah tutted. 'When have you ever had to do that?'

'That terrible Jennings girl!' her mother yelled at her. 'She preyed on you! Disgusting!'

Norah didn't have the first clue what her mother was trying to say. She was truly off on one now. 'What are you talking about?' Norah asked.

'I had to tell her to leave you alone! And I will keep doing it as many times as it takes until she leaves this family alone!' her mother yelled.

'What?' Norah asked.

Her mother stopped to catch her breath. She was out of puff. 'It doesn't matter now.'

'It bloody does!' Norah said, her anger reignited. There was something to know here, and she sensed it was significant.

Her mother sat down on the sofa. 'God, I need to sit down. I'm feeling woozy.'

Norah didn't know if that was bullshit, but she wasn't taking the chance. She went into the kitchen and boiled the kettle, assembling a cup of tea for her mother. She went back into the living room and handed it to the woman. She accepted it with a nod, not meeting Norah's eyes.

Norah waited for her to take a few sips and then said, 'Mother?'

‘Yes?’ her mother replied.

‘Are you OK?’

Her mother nodded. ‘Yes. Thanks for the tea.’

Norah smiled. ‘Good,’ she said calmly. ‘So now, with no shouting and no explosive rage, we’re going to talk about exactly what you meant just now.’

Her mother looked cornered as if she was considering how to get out of this. But Norah could wait her out. She’d been sacked, after all. She had all the time in the world.

Thirty-Five

Poppy was at the bake sale, which was being held in the school playground. It wasn’t going smoothly. Parents were manning besieged tables with panicked looks in their eyes, kids were clamouring for cookies and cakes, and freshly sugared-up ones were running around and smacking into people queuing. It had the slight air of a purge to it, if purges were catered.

Poppy was standing behind her stall with her frankly rubbish cupcakes (knocked together at six this morning), trying to serve the throng, but it wasn’t easy on her own. She had Luna by her side, but she was no help, too focused on trying to sneak items off the table into her mouth.

‘Luna! I can see you,’ Poppy warned her daughter.

Luna giggled, not that worried that she was anything other than a charming cheek monkey. ‘Mummy! It’s chocolate! I can’t help it!’

Poppy didn't have time to be cute. 'Luna, if you eat anything from this table, you better enjoy it because it will be the last time in your young life you ever know the taste of sugar again.'

An old guy who looked like someone's grandpa asked for two cakes, just as Luna exclaimed. 'Well, fuck!'

The old guy tutted.

'Don't tut at me, or you don't get a cake,' Poppy told him.

'Fine,' he said and walked off.

He was quickly replaced by a mum with twins. 'Two cupcakes,' please, she said a touch desperately.

'Hold on a sec,' Poppy said. She looked at her daughter. 'Where did you hear that word?'

'From you! When you missed a parking spot at Tesco.'

Poppy sighed. 'OK, well, that's on the no-no list, alright?'

'Yousaid it.'

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‘I know, and that was wrong. So we’ll both stop, yes?’ Poppy asked, aware of the pleading that had entered her voice.

‘You want me to stop saying fuck?’ Luna checked.

Poppy tried not to flinch. ‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it’s bad.’

‘But why is it bad?’ Luna asked.

Poppy thought it over, wanting to come up with a really strong argument. But she didn’t have one. ‘Actually, that word is... just a word. But if you get too used to saying it, it’s going to come out in front of a teacher, and then you’ll be in trouble because schools don’t like swear words. I can’t explain it any more than that,’ she said honestly.

Luna chewed that over. ‘Oh. OK.’

For a split second, Poppy felt like her own mother. That was not a bad thing at all. Poppy’s mum had always known how to put things honestly, but in a way that Poppy could understand. And for once, Poppy had achieved the same. Her mother might just be in her after all.

Poppy turned back to the mum of the twins. ‘Sorry for the hold-up.’

‘I get it. You gotta nip that swearing shit in the bud,’ the woman shrugged. ‘How much for two cakes?’

‘Sixty pence,’ she said and awkwardly exchanged the cakes for cash.

The woman left, but the cue wasn’t getting shorter, lengthening into a curved tail at the back.

But then Luna’s eyes fell upon something that cheered her up from not being able to eat cakes or swear. ‘Look, it’s Freddie!’

Poppy turned to see Freddie running across the playground, weaving through the throng. But, of course, Poppy’s eyes were only searching for Norah. She wasn’t far behind him.

She looked great. Her standard ponytail was gone, and it looked like she’d gotten a new haircut, her dark locks bouncy and fresh. Her clothes looked new too, her usual loose-fit sweats and T-shirts replaced with tight jeans and a black camisole top with a pretty plunging neckline. Norah could look good in a hessian sack, but dressed up? Poppy had to work quite hard not to look like a horny cartoon wolf, complete with eyes popping out of her head.

‘Hi,’ Norah greeted her, walking around the queue. ‘You need help back there?’ she asked.

‘I wasn’t sure you were coming?’ Poppy said, trying to appear unfazed by the new look.

‘Yeah, sorry about the lateness. It’s been a weird long day,’ Norah said. ‘And then my haircut ran late.’

‘Well, you look great,’ Poppy said, trying not to sound aroused. Which she was. ‘Like the new outfit, by the way.’

‘This old thing?’ Norah said, seeming suddenly shy. She led Freddie around the back. ‘Here we go, Freds. Backstage at the bake sale.’

‘Can I have a cake?’ Freddie asked naturally.

‘Err...’ Norah said, looking to Poppy for permission.

‘You can both take something at the end if there’s stuff left, which there probably will be,’ Poppy explained to Freddie, as well as Luna. ‘But be warned, they’re as dry as chalk.’

Luna high-fived Freddie.

‘OK, cake sellers, let’s sell some cake,’ Poppy said, slapping her hands together.

The horde fell upon them. But now Norah was on the cash box while Poppy wrapped cakes. It became a hell of a lot less overwhelming. The adults worked in a frenzied harmony, as the cue got longer and long, and then shorter. Poppy and Norah exchanged amused glances, the awkwardness between them forgotten for the moment in the whirl of crumbs, chaos, and loose change.

After about forty-five minutes, Poppy looked down to see an empty table. She turned to the next customer. ‘Sorry, I’m out!’ she said in amazement.

‘I’ll take your money!’ Susan called over.

The customer shrugged and moved down the row to where Susan was working with about three times the amount of goods.

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Poppy turned to Norah. 'I really thought no one was gonna want my stuff. It's very mediocre.'

'I think you overestimated the standards at a school bake sale,' Norah told her. 'It's thirty pence a cake. They were willing to risk it.'

'Nothing's left!' Luna suddenly wailed.

'Yeah! We wanted cakes!' Freddie huffed.

'Sorry, guys,' Poppy said sincerely.

'What if we go to the park and find the ice cream van?' Norah suggested. 'Would that be OK?'

The kids both screamed like Santa was doing a live drop-by.

Poppy smiled, pleased. It would be nice to all go to the park—like nothing was different. 'Alright, let's pack up.'

Thirty-Six

The kids were going hard at their ice creams next to the van that had just dispensed them. Luna had an Oreo sundae in a plastic cup, while Freddie had gone with a more traditional cone and flake situation.

Norah watched Luna eating her ice cream. 'Why didn't I get one?' she muttered to

herself.

Luna shrugged. 'Go and get some then. The van is right there.'

'She makes a strong case,' Norah said to Poppy. 'You in?'

Poppy smiled and turned to the kids. 'You two head into the park,' she said, gesturing at the nearby gates. 'We're getting back in the queue.'

The kids didn't need telling twice, and they legged it with their treats into the play park. Poppy and Norah joined the back of the queue.

'What are you getting?' Poppy asked.

'Something absurd,' Norah said with delight.

'Yeah?'

'I'm feeling daring,' Norah added. Buthowdaring did she feel exactly? Enough to treat herself to looking good for a change. But what was she hoping to achieve with that, besides boosting her own self esteem?

They moved forward a place in the queue. 'Oh, guess what?' Norah said.

'What?' Poppy asked with an interested smile.

'I got fired,' Norah said.

'What?!' Poppy squawked in shock.

'Yeah. I made a mistake and that was that.'

‘They fired you for one mistake?’ Poppy said.

Norah laughed. ‘That’s exactly what my mum said.’

Poppy looked disturbed by that.

‘But it’s OK,’ Norah said.

‘Is it?’ Poppy asked.

‘It shouldn’t be, right? Everything’s gone wrong. I got fired from my job and my marriage in the same year.’ Norah laughed, but she couldn’t think why. Her life was in the toilet.

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‘You do seem lighter,’ Poppy observed.

‘Yes, I am. I feel like I’ve shed some stuff that was holding me down.’

‘The marriage or the job?’ Poppy asked.

‘Both. Among other things,’ Norah said. She realised she was setting up a segue, so her mouth wanted to do this, even if her brain wasn’t so sure. ‘I was arguing with my mum, and she told me something,’ she began tentatively.

Poppy immediately tensed. ‘What?’

Norah inhaled deeply through her nose. ‘She told me why you ended things with us back in the day,’ she said quickly.

Poppy was wide-eyed with horror.

‘Because she told you to,’ Norah continued. ‘Right? That’s what happened?’

Poppy’s mouth opened and shut a few times before it could achieve any speech. ‘God, how did that come up?’

‘We were fighting. She lost her marbles and confessed, James Bond Villain style,’ Norah said with a half-smile. ‘You could have told me what she said to you. At the time. Or now.’ She was doing her best to keep her tone light as air. She wanted this to seem like a very casual conversation. Precisely because it wasn’t.

‘I couldn’t,’ Poppy said shortly.

‘Why?’ Norah asked.

At that moment, they got to the front of the ice cream queue. ‘What do ya want, love?’ the guy in the van asked.

‘Why?’ Norah said, ignoring the man. She needed to know.

Poppy looked between her two interrogators. ‘It’s too much. I can’t find the words.’

‘OK,’ he said evenly. He turned to Norah. ‘What about you?’

Norah shook herself, quickly scanning the board. ‘Er, I’ll have a Nutella sundae.’

‘I’ll have that too,’ Poppy said quickly.

The man began putting together the first sundae, and Poppy looked at Norah. ‘I think we should leave this topic.’

Norah was handed her sundae. ‘Do you?’

‘Well, it seems like you already know what happened,’ Poppy said. ‘I don’t have anything to add.’

Norah spooned ice cream into her mouth, trying to drown her disappointment in refined sugar.

‘Here’s yours,’ the man said, handing over the next sundae to Poppy.

Norah decided that if Poppy didn’t want to talk about it, she should respect that. And

then promptly changed her mind. ‘Yeah, but I’d like to hear it from your angle.’

‘What for?’ Poppy asked, looking like the most miserable person to ever hold a sundae.

‘Have I upset you by bringing this up?’ Norah asked. ‘Because you don’t seem...’

‘I’m not upset,’ Poppy said.

Norah could see that was bollocks.

‘Sorry to interrupt, but is someone going to pay for these?’ the ice cream man asked.

‘Oh, yeah.’ Poppy tapped her phone on the card reader.

‘I owe you for mine,’ Norah said.

‘My treat. You just got sacked,’ Poppy pointed out.

‘Not that I don’t appreciate the snapshot of your lives, but can you move?’ the ice cream man asked. ‘I’ve got other customers.’

‘Jesus, we’re going,’ Poppy said.

They shuffled off to the side and were quickly replaced by more ice cream lovers.

Norah and Poppy walked over to the park and went through the gate, finding a free bench to sit and watch the kids going up and down on a seesaw with a bit too much vigour. They’d already finished their ice creams, and both of them were wearing a not-small percentage of them on their respective faces.

‘Look, I’m sorry for bringing this up. If you don’t think it matters, then I guess it doesn’t,’ Norah said, working her way down her ice cream at what she hoped was an adult pace.

‘I didn’t say it doesn’t matter,’ Poppy began. ‘I just think... It’s in the past. And you’ve got more important things to think about.’

‘What does that mean?’ Norah asked, confused.

‘Ask your mum,’ Poppy said, stuffing ice cream into her mouth.

‘About?’

‘Max.’

‘Why would I ask her about him?’ Norah replied, mildly disgusted to have to think about Max right now.

‘Because she thinks you’re getting back with him,’ Poppy told her through some more ice cream.

‘What?’ Norah nearly yelled.

‘Yes. She came to see me and told me to back off. She loves a good warning, your mum.’

‘She came to see you? When?’ Poppy said.

‘The other night.’

‘And she said what, exactly?’

‘To leave you alone because I would be depriving a family of the chance to get back together,’ Poppy said quickly, shovelling the last bit of ice cream into her mouth.

‘That’s nothappening,’ Norah assured her.

‘Are you sure?’ Poppy said.

‘Yes,’ Norah said quickly.

‘But...’

‘But what?’ Norah asked, feeling frustrated about the circles they were going in.

‘That’s not what you said the other night,’ Poppy said, sadness in her eyes that Norah couldn’t miss.

‘You mean...’

‘Yes. Then. It was pretty clear you weren’t over him.’

That pissed Norah right off. ‘I am. You know I am. Better than anyone.’

‘But you said you were...’ Poppy began and then stopped.

‘What?’ Norah demanded.

‘Stupid. And making mistakes. And sad about your divorce,’ Poppy said plainly.

Norah didn’t know what to say. Because shehadsaid that stuff, but it wasn’t the whole truth. But she didn’t know how to walk this back from that. If she said she didn’t mean it, she was a liar. If she said she’d changed her mind, she was a flake.

‘FREDDIE! SLOW DOWN!’ Luna suddenly screamed.

‘I CAN’T!’ Freddie yelled back.

‘Bloody sugar. It’s like we gave them cocaine,’ Norah muttered, just looking for something normal to say.

‘Have you everhadcocaine?’ Poppy asked, amused.

‘No, but I had a coffee once with eight shots in it,’ Norah told her philosophically. ‘I got a lot done that day. None of it done very well, but itwasdone.’

Poppy laughed softly, and then she went quiet. Eventually, she sighed deeply and said, ‘I think your mum is right. I should stay away for a bit.’

Norah’s heart sank. ‘Poppy...’

‘You need time to know what you want. I think Luna and I should probably head out.’

Norah nodded, hiding her disappointment. She'd hoped for... What had she hoped for?

That wasn't so hard to pinpoint. What she'd hoped for was that an obstruction could be removed. Norah couldn't pretend what had happened between them at eighteen didn't matter anymore, and time had made it irrelevant. It mattered. It just did. If they could clear the clog, Norah thought that she could letherself feel exactly what she felt and do with those feelings what she wanted to do with them.

But Poppy didn't want to unclog. So Norah's satisfaction was, as ever, thwarted.

'If you gotta go, you gotta go,' Norah said.

Poppy nodded. 'Luna!' she called to her daughter as she stood and tossed her empty ice cream container in a nearby rubbish bin.

Luna looked over and sensed her fun about to be put to a halt. 'Not yet!'

'Now, please,' Poppy said firmly.

'Five more minutes?' the kid begged.

'Luna,' Poppy warned.

Luna looked at her mother's face and got the message. 'OK, OK!' Luna said. She waited until her end of the seesaw hit the ground and jumped off.

Freddie promptly smacked down on his side with an 'Ugh!'

And off they went.

‘Mummy, can you take over?’ Freddie asked.

Norah poured the remaining melt of her ice cream into her mouth and chucked the container. She headed over to the seesaw. She could see Poppy and Luna walking in the distance.

I’m in love with her, Norah realised. But, of course, it was too late. It was always too late.

Thirty-Seven

It was the annual summer fayre at Northwood School, and the joint was jumpin’.

The air was filled with the aromas of popcorn and hot dogs and the sounds of kids having a good time. At the heart of the playground, a huge neon pink bouncy castle stood tall, the centrepiece of the day. Next to it, there was a teacup ride, going a bit faster than the little kids on it might have liked as their parents waved from the sidelines, capturing the heartfelt screams of terror on their iPhones.

On the far side of the yard, an animal corner had been set up. It was filled with reptiles of all shapes and sizes, displayed in glass enclosures under the shade of a large tent. Children pressed their snotty noses against the glass while a woman in a safari hat explained facts about the snakes and lizards contained within.

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Dotted around the edge of the fayre were a variety of stalls, and families moved from stall to stall, trying their luck at the tombola, eating hot dogs, and browsing through the handmade crafts for sale.

‘Susan’s outdone herself,’ said Poppy to herself, looking around. ‘I’ll give her that.’

‘What does “outdone herself” mean?’ Luna asked, eating popcorn by the fistful.

‘It means she’s made this fair great,’ Poppy told her.

‘Who did?’ Luna asked.

‘Susan. She runs the PTA.’

‘What’s the PTA?’ Luna asked.

‘The Parent-Teacher Association. They make sure there’s money for cool things like trips and fairs. And Komodo dragons, apparently.’

‘What’s a Komodo—’

‘Hey, you wanna go on the bouncy castle?’ Poppy asked, gesturing at the big pink palace.

‘YES!’ Luna screamed, already slipping her shoes off.

The morose grey-haired woman running the bouncy castle took money from Poppy as

Luna jumped around with a lot of other kids. Roughly twenty, by Poppy's count.

'Is that within the legal limit?' Poppy asked the woman.

'Yeah, sure,' the woman said.

Poppy googled it. Google seemed to think the limit on a bouncy castle was actually five. A collision was inevitable.

Poppy prepared herself to withdraw a crying Luna at any moment. She was so focused on a potential head injury that she didn't even realise that Freddie was on there too until he screamed, 'Hi, Luna's mum!'

Poppy waved and turned to look for Norah, frightened. They hadn't seen each other for weeks. Which was a hard thing to finagle, given the bi-daily drop-off. But Poppy fixed that by being five minutes early to drop off and five minutes late to collection every day, which had a pretty shitty knock-on effect on the rest of her life. But she had to do it. She couldn't be around Norah. It hurt too much.

But where Freddie was, Norah was. Poppy did a full revolution to scan the crowd of parents, watching the kids leaping about, searching for her.

Instead of Norah, she found Max. 'Hi,' he said, giving her a chipper little wave.

'Hello,' she said coolly.

What the hell was he doing here? He never came to school stuff. And why did he look so pleased with himself?

A moment later, Norah appeared at his side with her mother, and Poppy felt the answers to that question had been revealed.

‘Here’s your beer,’ she said, handing him a can.

‘Cheers, babe,’ he said, taking it with a smile.

Mrs Cauldwell watched the interaction, looking pleased with herself. So Grandma’s prediction had come to pass. Norah was back with Max. Poppy’s heart felt like a balloon in a threshing machine.

Norah turned and saw her. Poppy turned away quickly, fixing her eyes back on the castle. It was the hardest thing in the world, but she was not letting herself get in the way. She didn’t think it was a good idea for Norah to get back with Max; he wasn’t even close to good enough for her. But Norah needed to be able to make that call without Poppy getting in the way. It was her family and her choice.

Not that she’d held out any real hope for anything to happen between them. She knew it was silly. A fantasy of what might have been.

Well, love wasn’t for her. She had to accept it. She had Luna, and that would be enough. She’d be OK. She would let this go.

She would do her best to be, if not happy for Norah, then at the very least, cool with this. Poppy was glad she’d made the choice she’d made. It was the right call.

She. Would. Let. This.Go.

Thirty-Eight

‘Here’s your beer,’ Norah said through a strained smile. She’d been getting drinks for everyone; it had felt a little churlish to exclude him. God, she hated being the bigger person. It was so much fucking work.

‘Thanks, babe,’ Max said.

She shot him a look. ‘Sorry, force of habit,’ he mumbled.

Norah was annoyed her mother had invited Max to this. Come to think of it, Norah was pissed at her mother’s presence, too. But she’d invited herself when she heard Norah talking to Freddie about the fayre.

And then Max had suddenly shown up at the door, acting like they were all going on a lovely family jaunt. Clearly, there was some behind-the-scenes business going on between the two of them. Poppy had implied as much.

Norah knew what Max wanted. He’d had his fun, and he was crawling back, cap in hand, expecting his family to come home. There was no way. Norah had tasted her freedom, too, and it came with a gift of purchase. Perspective on their attempt at family. It was clear to see now that it had never functioned at the most basic level. Respect, kindness, empathy—they hadn’t had it. Norah couldn’t show Freddie that that was what a relationship was. He’d only grow up to repeat it. He needed to see a true partnership.

Though, of course, Norah was going to have to find it first. But she worried it wasn’t

on the cards for her. She might just be one of those people who couldn't do it.

Like her mother. She could have found someone else after her father died, but she hadn't. Norah suspected the trouble was that hiding her difficult nature had gotten tougher as she got older. If that was Norah's future, too, then so be it. She was done compromising everything, compromising herself. She could be alone forever. It wouldn't be that bad.

But if Max wanted to watch his son have fun, she wouldn't have denied either of them that. So here they all were, at the summer fayre. A collection of adults tied together by resentment and need.

Norah watched Freddie jump about on the bouncy castle. Suddenly, she spotted Luna bouncing next to her son. Poppy had to be nearby.

Norah picked Poppy's long figure out of the crowd quickly and her heart jumped. Poppy turned at that moment, and they caught each other's eyes. Then Poppy turned away from her to watch Luna bounce on the castle.

Norah heard a mournful sigh escape her own lips.

She wanted to go to Poppy. She wanted to say, 'Poppy, please, I miss you. Let's work this out.' But Poppy had made it clear that she was stepping back from Norah, and her reasons were not unfair. Norah could only hurt herself trying to repair it. The opportunity with Poppy was gone.

'Something wrong?' Max asked.

'Nothing,' she told him. As if he could understand.

Susan appeared, armed with her usual weapon, a clipboard. 'That looks fun,' Susan

said, looking at the bouncy castle.

‘You should head in,’ Norah joked.

‘God, no. What? Me? I’m an adult,’ Susan said.

But she watched the kids with longing. She was clearly stressed as fuck. It was the first time Norah had ever felt pity for her.

‘Is that... Is that over the limit?’ Susan asked, frowning.

Norah examined the castle. There was something like thirty kids on the thing now. That did seem a bit...

‘Perhaps I ought to have a word with...’ Susan’s voice quavered.

But she broke off mid-sentence. Because she was too late for ‘a word’. Slowly at first, then with alarming speed, the castle was beginning to tilt.

Children shrieked and slid to one side. Dozens of adults ran forward to help, but no one could scale the moving beast. Norah attempted to push her way through the adults, but they were a thick mass of panic that was impossible to penetrate.

No parenting book had prepared any of them for a rogue bouncy castle, and while the adults yelled to each other, hoping someone knew what to do, the bouncy castle was dragged ever further over by more kids rolling toward one side. It was now balancing on a knife's edge. Norah finally wriggled through a gap and tried to jump on but was quickly bounced right back onto her arse on the grass.

Then, inevitably, the last few kids who’d managed to hold their position anywhere else on the castle lost their grip and were tossed sideways, pulled into the castle’s new

centre of gravity.

That final force tipped the scales. The runaway castle flipped right over—throwing the kids onto the grass with a thump—and immediately rolled right on top of them. In the process, it ripped free from the pump and began to deflate on top of them at astonishing speed. The whole thing was like a collapsing star of bouncy horror.

The grownups attempted to leap into action yet again, struggling against each other to get a grip on the deflating castle, Norah among them. But there was no organisation to the effort and no one was getting a good purchase. The material was too heavy and the parents too panicked.

Poppy suddenly appeared on the far side of the castle, ‘Norah! Come with me!’ she screamed.

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Norah didn't hesitate and pushed out of the throng, noting that Susan had fainted onto the grass nearby. Norah decided to deal with that later, following Poppy around the back, where the castle had scrunched to create a gap.

'Hold it up. I'll get them,' Poppy directed.

Norah grabbed the gap and yanked upwards. In went Poppy, like a mole in a hole. Moments later, her head popped back out. 'I got him!' And like a damn superhero, Poppy climbed out from beneath the wreckage with Freddie under one arm.

Relief washed over Norah as she rushed to his side.

'Freddie, are you OK?' she asked, checking him for injuries.

Freddie nodded, rubbing his head, dazed. 'I think so,' he mumbled.

'I couldn't find Luna!' Poppy said. 'I'm going back in.' And off she went, back under the plastic scream box.

Max appeared with Norah's mother. 'My son!' Max yelled, the bloody drama queen. 'My only boy!'

Norah turned to Max. 'There's more kids.'

Max was holding on to Freddie, and he looked at her in bafflement. 'So?'

She rolled her eyes. 'You look after him.' And Norah followed Poppy in.

Inside the overturned bouncy castle, it was confusing and hot. The once vibrant pink fabric was now a suffocating blanket, trapping the hot summer air beneath it.

Norah pushed forward until her hands brushed against something soft, and she quickly scooped up a small girl—she thought her name was Maryam—her face streaked with tears. Norah held her close, whispering words of comfort as she navigated through the labyrinthine tunnels of deflated plastic. She found the gap and encouraged her through, watching her crawl toward the light.

She turned back around, and right away, she found another child, and it was Luna. ‘Freddie’s mum!’ she cried.

‘Come on, Luna. I’ve got you,’ she said.

Suddenly, she collided with another figure, their bodies bumping in the cramped darkness. A familiar voice gasped, ‘Norah?’

‘Poppy, I’ve got her!’ she said.

She pushed Luna in the direction of her mother, and she watched Poppy lead her out.

Norah decided to keep going. She didn’t know how long it would take to get this thing overturned, and it was bloody hot. Kids might be passing out.

‘Norah, you in here?’ Poppy said from behind her. She’d come back in. ‘They’re out there trying to get it sorted, but it might take a minute.’

‘We’ll have to do it,’ Norah said.

‘If we just stand up, maybe we can lift it enough for the kids to find us?’

‘Let’s try,’ Norah said, and both of them started pushing upwards. But the material was heavy. They weren’t making much headway.

‘Get closer to me. Let’s push the same part together,’ Poppy said.

Norah crawled over to her, and they reached up, their bodies accidentally pushing into each other. Though Norah was in the middle of a minor calamity, she found the time to feel a little awkward and stimulated by the contact.

But they were making progress, pushing up until they were both able to stand. They stepped back from each other to make a gap and a lot of kids were suddenly unveiled. More and more appeared in the centre.

‘I’ll stay here,’ Poppy said. ‘You get them back to the gap.’

Norah led the kids out, and she watched them shuffle out, some of them crying, some of them thinking the collapse was pretty funny now it was over.

Once she was sure they were all out, she went back in to get Poppy. ‘Poppy?’ she called.

She was still standing up in the centre of the castle, her arms shaking under the pressure. ‘They out?’

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‘Yes. You can drop it,’ Norah assured her.

Poppy did, and it came down fast, smacking them both down into a pile, their limbs entangled. Norah realised that Poppy was on top of her.

‘You OK?’ Poppy asked, millimetres from her face.

Norah looked up at her, and she was simply overwhelmed by all the words trapped inside her, like kids in a bouncy castle disaster. They had to escape her, at long last.

‘No! You don’t want to talk to me anymore, and I hate it! I want you around. Ineedyou around! Because, because... I’m in love with you!’

Poppy looked down in pure astonishment. ‘I loveyou!’ she yelled back.

And then the entire castle was suddenly ripped up and away, the parents outside having finally managed to synchronise their efforts to right the rubber monster.

Everyone looked down to see Poppy on top of Norah. Norah and Poppy looked back. Max was agape. Norah’s mother had her hands on her hips, enraged to see her daughter mounted by Poppy.

‘What onearth!’ she yelled.

Poppy climbed quickly off Norah, and they stood up, hot and sweaty. Around them, kids were being reunited with their loving, if a little useless in an emergency, parents. There were a lot of tears, mostly from the adults.

Luna and Freddie ran to their mothers.

Poppy leaned down and hugged her daughter. 'You OK?'

Luna laughed. 'That was brilliant. Can we do it again?'

Poppy shook her head. 'Not a chance.'

'Everyone got their kids?' Norah called to the crowd.

There was a chorus of yeses and thank yous between the weeping noises of children coming down from their brief ensnarement.

Norah gave Poppy a lingering, soft look that said, 'We'll talk.' Poppy nodded.

Norah spotted someone giving a dazed Susan a drink of water. 'God, Norah!' she called over to her. 'That was terrible.'

They walked over to her together. 'I mean, it was unlikely anyone was going to die, but they were scared,' Poppy said.

'Don't downplay it. You were a hero today,' Norah told her with a light arm bump.

'If I am, you are,' Poppy said, bumping her back.

Norah realised they were grinning at each other a bit too much. She turned to Susan. 'Do you think that's all of them?'

'I took a quick tally. I think you got them all,' Susan said. 'Thank god you were both here. Everyone else was pathetic. You're both supermums.'

Norah smiled. 'Wow,' she said. To get such an accolade for once in her life and from Susan was... absolutely meaningless.

Norah had done her best today. But that was all she'd ever done. Which meant she'd always been good enough. She'd just never been able to see it until someone she assumed was better than her had said it. Only then was it obvious that they were all in the same boat. Trying to raise their kids as best they could. It could look a lot of ways, but true love was the effort.

At long last, Norah knew a moment of peace in herself. She knew it couldn't last.

Poppy turned to the grey-haired woman running the bouncy castle. 'You let this happen. There were too many kids on that thing.'

'Don't sue!' the woman said automatically. 'I'm on the edge as it is. The cost of air is putting me out of business. I have to go over the limit to keep the thing going.'

'Don't worry, Poppy. I'll handle her,' Susan said, rolling up her sleeves, becoming her usual intimidating self with delight.

'Get her, Susan,' Poppy said with a grin, patting Susan on the back.

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‘So you’re happy to let kids get concussions to stay in business, are you?’ Susan asked the woman in her bulldog tone. ‘You should work in the boxing industry.’

Poppy turned from the developing row, grabbing Luna’s hand. ‘I should get her home,’ she said to Norah.

‘We’ll walk with you,’ Norah said with a smile. ‘I better just tell...’

But she didn’t have to tell anyone anything. Because her mother and Max were coming over. Max’s face looked like a slapped arse, but her mother’s expression put it in the shade. She looked ready to choke Poppy to death.

Thirty-Nine

‘Well, that wasquitethe show,’ Mrs Cauldwell spat, her furious eyes locked on Poppy.

Poppy tried not to look away, but it was like looking straight at bloody Medusa. But Poppy was determined not to turn to stone today. What Norah had said inside the bouncy castle... Poppy wasn’t sure what it meant for them. She hoped Norah hadn’t simply been suffering from a lack of oxygen.

‘Mum, can you just let everyone breathe for a second,’ Norah begged.

‘I just can’t understand why I keep finding this person...onyou,’ she sputtered, jabbing a thumb in Poppy’s direction.

‘Yeah, what’s that all about?’ Max asked.

‘Max, you don’t get an opinion about this,’ Norah said, glancing at Freddie anxiously.

‘Doesn’t he?’ Poppy checked.

‘No, of course not,’ Norah said.

‘So he’s not... back with you?’ Poppy asked quietly. She was aware Freddie was listening.

Norah looked horrified. ‘That was never on the cards.’ She looked at her mother. ‘Not for a second.’ Mrs Caldwell held her daughter’s gaze, unashamed.

Max jumped in. ‘Are you sure? Because your mum seemed to think maybe we might... ya know...’

Norah shook her head. ‘No. Never. Move on.’

Max’s shoulders slumped. He turned to Mrs Cauldwell. ‘Thanks a bunch!’ he said and stomped off. He stopped and turned, realising something. ‘Oh. Bye, son!’ he said.

‘Bye, Dad,’ Freddie waved.

Poppy couldn’t believe she’d listened to Mrs Cauldwell again. Norah had never even considered reuniting with Max, which meant that the declaration of love under the bouncy castle was an even bigger deal.

It was time to rip the Band-Aid off in one quick move.

Poppy leant down to Freddie. ‘Freddie, I just wanted to warn you that, with your mother’s permission, I’m about to tell your grandma off.’

‘You’ve got it,’ Norah said, looking amazed and slightly impressed, which Poppy didn’t hate.

‘You OK with it, both of you?’ Poppy asked Freddie, as well as Luna.

Freddie looked confused. ‘Was she naughty?’

‘She was,’ Norah told her son.

‘But it’s going to be alright,’ Poppy added. ‘Sometimes grownups have to do this. When it’s something that you have to fight about. Fightfor. You understand?’

‘Yeah,’ Freddie said.

Luna yawned. ‘Hurry up, Mum. I’m hungry, and I need a wee.’

‘I’ll be as quick as I can,’ Poppy assured her daughter. She stood and turned to Norah’s mother. ‘Mrs Cauldwell, I need to say something to you,’ Poppy said.

‘And what might that be?’ the woman answered coldly.

‘I love your daughter,’ Poppy told her.

Norah's eyes were shining. ‘And I love Poppy.’

Poppy took her hand and squeezed it. Norah squeezed it back. Poppy felt a shot of pure joy.

Mrs Cauldwell was less impressed. ‘Is that right?’ she scoffed.

‘Yes,’ Poppy said, turning her attention back to her for a moment. ‘And I’m going to ask her on a date. I think she’s going to say yes,’ Poppy said, trying to sound more confident than she felt.

‘That’s right. I am,’ Norah said quickly.

Poppy smiled at her. ‘Great.’ She turned back to Mrs Cauldwell. ‘I don’t want your opinion on that. The only opinion that I will give any credence to is Norah’s. You won’t get between us again.’

Mrs Cauldwell stared, open-mouthed, but Poppy wasn’t quite done. ‘Oh, and don’t try to shame me by dragging my mother into this again. I know she loved me, and I know she was proud of me, and I knew her better than you ever could by quite a long way. That’s another subject you should keep quiet about.’

Mrs Cauldwell’s face was as tight as a duck’s arse, and Poppy thought she was about

to get screamed at. But the woman just shook her head, looking at her daughter. 'I guess you can't save someone from themselves.'

'That's right. You can't,' Norah said pointedly.

'I'm going home,' Mrs Caldwell said. 'But you should find somewhere else to live.'

'I just lost my job,' Norah pointed out. 'I need a minute to get that sorted. I trust you won't make us homeless just yet?'

Her mother sighed. 'Of course I wouldn't. I'm not a monster, Norah.'

Norah looked at her mother. 'I know that. You're just very afraid.'

Mrs Caldwell's eyes welled. 'I've only ever been afraid for you,' she said.

'Well, don't,' Norah said. 'I don't need it. I never needed it.'

Mrs Caldwell looked like she wanted to say something, but she seemed empty of retorts at last. She turned and walked away. Poppy watched Norah watch her mother leave. There was sadness in her eyes, but also relief.

'You guys want to come to ours for a bit?' Poppy asked Norah and Freddie.

'You got snacks?' Freddie asked.

Poppy laughed. 'Of course.'

'Let's just go! I'm desperate to go the toilet,' Luna said.

'I went under the bouncy castle,' Freddie admitted glumly.

‘I packed spare trousers, Freds,’ Norah assured him.

Poppy and Norah took the hands of their children, as well as each other’s hands, and left the madness of the fayre, heading to the peace of Poppy’s house.

Forty

The kids were fast asleep, both tucked into either end of Luna’s bed. Downstairs, the adults were talking about the past on the old couch.

‘And you believed that I was too grief-stricken to understand what I wanted?’ Norah said.

‘It made sense at the time,’ Poppy shrugged.

‘But why didn’t you come and tell me what she said? I would have told you it was bullshit,’ Norah asked.

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‘She had me convinced you weren’t in your right mind. I thought it was selfish to involve you in the decision to break it off. I didn’t want to give myself the chance to let you change my mind,’ Poppy explained.

‘You didn’t just leave because you were bored?’ Norah asked.

‘Bored?’ Poppy repeated in disbelief. ‘Norah, I was mad about you,’ she assured her. ‘It’s half the reason I went into that horrible band. I was broken. I needed something else to think about.’

‘I was broken, too,’ Norah said. ‘For a long time.’

‘I’m sorry. I should have talked to you. I did try. Eventually,’ Poppy explained.

‘Yeah, I remember that. I was too angry to listen by then,’ Norah sighed.

‘But you really don’t want to get back with Max?’ Poppy asked tentatively. ‘You’re certain?’

‘I went to a solicitor last week if that answers your question,’ Norah said.

Poppy smiled, relieved. ‘That’s what’s held me back recently. I didn’t want to mess that up. And your mother said...’

‘God, that woman,’ Norah said, simmering with anger.

‘It’s a shame she’s too old to slap now,’ Poppy noted.

‘Tell me about it,’ Norah concurred.

Norah moved closer, her free hand cupping Poppy’s cheek. ‘Actually, forget her. We can fight for us now.’

Poppy closed the gap between them, kissing Norah deeply, pouring all her pent-up love and regret into that kiss. When they finally pulled apart, both were breathless.

‘I want to take you upstairs,’ Poppy said. ‘But the kids...’

‘The sofa is fine,’ Norah assured her, closing the distance between them, her lips meeting Poppy’s in a tender, yet urgent kiss. The years of separation and unspoken words melted away as they clung to each other, the kiss deepening with every passing second.

Poppy’s hands began to explore, tracing the contours of Norah’s body through her clothing, feeling the warmth and softness beneath. Norah responded eagerly, her own hands slipping under Poppy’s shirt, savouring the feel of her skin.

Their kisses grew more passionate, clothes quickly discarded in their urgency to know each other completely. Norah marvelled at the beauty of Poppy’s body; every curve and line more perfect than she remembered. She took her time, kissing her way down her neck, her hands exploring every inch.

Norah’s breath hitched as Poppy’s mouth found more sensitive spots, her body arching in response. She pulled Poppy closer, their bodies pressing together, the heat between them rising.

As the early morning light began to filter through the curtains, Norah and Poppy lay

entwined, sated and content. Poppy rested her head on Norah's chest, listening to the steady beat of her heart.

'The kids will be up soon,' Norah whispered.

'Great. Let's take them to get breakfast,' Poppy suggested.

'You have the energy for that?' Norah asked, stunned.

They'd had a long night in the best possible sense. Norah's body was humming with more usage than it had known in forever.

'I'll find it,' Poppy told her.

Norah snuggled up to her. 'It's gonna be a bit harder, us dating. With the kids, I mean. Less free time for all the...' Norah began, looking for the right word.

'Romance?' Poppy filled in.

Norah chuckled, embarrassed. 'Yeah. That.'

'I think we're gonna find a way,' Poppy said confidently.

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Norah snuggled in deeper. She was pretty sure that Poppy was right. They'd find the time for this love to grow once more. Norah knew it was going to take work, but she believed they could make it. She was deeply determined never to let this love be misplaced again. She felt like the universe had smiled on her by bringing Poppy back into her life. And you didn't throw away that kind of luck. You'd have to be an idiot.

Forty-One

Three Years Later

Poppy frowned at the Zoopla listing that Norah was showing her on the couch. 'That's too much.'

Norah took the iPad back with a sigh. 'But it's so nice.'

'It's pokey,' Poppy pointed out.

'It's high spec,' Norah declared passionately.

'Great. The kids can sleep in the two lovely storage boxes, and we can climb into bed in a simply gorgeous airing cupboard,' Poppy said.

'Which would you rather, a tiny, nice house or a large, grotty house?' Norah asked.

'I don't see why it has to be either,' Poppy said.

Norah gave her a look.

‘Fine, I guess it’s the small nice one,’ Poppy admitted.

‘I knew it. I knew one day we’d agree on something,’ Norah said.

‘I agree in general, but that place is still ridiculous for the price,’ Poppy smiled at her beautiful wife. They’d been married six months, living together with the kids for a year. Luna’s bedroom currently had a dividing wall built into it, so the now eight-year-olds could have their own rooms, but it wasn’t a long-term solution. The new family had outgrown Poppy’s mother’s house, and it was on the market.

‘Are you sure you want to leave this place?’ Norah asked. ‘I know it’s going to be hard to let go of it. Lots of memories.’

Poppy’s smile faded, but only a little. ‘I think my mum would like to know the house was here when I needed it. But she’d understand that we have to move on.’

‘From what I remember of your mum, that sounds about right,’ Norah agreed.

Poppy sighed. ‘Speaking of mums...’

‘No,’ Norah said automatically. ‘We’re not talking about her. I’m in a good mood. Let’s not spoil it.’

‘She called me today,’ Poppy told her. She was waiting for the right moment to bring it up, but with two kids, two jobs (Norah now had a part-time admin job in the school office), Norah’s art degree, and Poppy’s work on a handful of new solo tracks, there was never a great time. The only time to talk was always right now. And sooner was better for difficult conversations, anyway. Poppy had learned that the hard way.

‘She what?!’ Norah asked, agog.

‘Yep. She wants to sort it out,’ Poppy explained neutrally.

‘And she called you?’ Norah asked.

‘I think she knew that was the only way this was going to work. She says she accepts the situation. And she wants to see her grandson again.’

‘I hope you reminded her she’s got two grandchildren now,’ Norah said.

Poppy smiled. ‘I wouldn’t hold your breath on that.’

‘Luna is my daughter now, and Freddie is your son,’ Norah said. ‘If she’s talking about acceptance, that’s gonna have to go in that bloody head of hers.’

‘But I don’t have a spouse. And Max is still around. So my role is probably a bit confusing to her,’ Poppy mused.

‘Yeah, Max is doing better,’ Norah acquiesced. ‘And he is and always will be Freddie’s dad. But this is my family. We’re a package deal. I’m not letting her get away with pushing her will on me anymore.’

‘I’m pretty sick of that too, believe me,’ Poppy assured her. ‘But she sounded bloody miserable. I felt sorry for her. I’m not saying you have to, though.’

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‘Poppy, I know that if this was your mum, it would be different. But she’s... Well, you know what she is.’

‘Well, I think change may be happening,’ Poppy said philosophically. ‘Very,veryslowly, of course. But she said she was sorry she missed our wedding.’

Norah was further amazed. ‘Shedidn’t.’

‘She did,’ Poppy said. ‘I actually think she meant it.’

Norah shook her head. ‘Great. I just got used to her being a stubborn old bigot, and she’s gone and turned it around. Just perfect.’

Suddenly, they heard Luna and Freddie thundering down the stairs, their small eight-year-old bodies somehow managing to imply that a pack of hippos was in the house. They exploded into the living room.

‘Is it tea yet?’ they both questioned.

‘We’re getting pizza delivered because we’re both knackered,’ Poppy told the kids.

They turned and high-fived each other. Well, they attempted it. But Luna accidentally missed and slapped Freddie in the face. ‘Sorry, Freds,’ she said with a sly grin.

‘Luna!’ Poppy said sternly.

But Freddie wasn't waiting for his sister to get a mere telling off. He gave her a shove, and she fell over, surprised. But she recovered quickly, grabbing him by the ankle and pulling him down to the floor. Before the parents knew what was what, the kids were in full wrestling mode.

'Jesus!' Norah yelled. 'Stop it!'

But Poppy was thinking this was oddly good for both of them. Luna was learning that when she acted like an arse, there would be pushback, and Freddie was learning to stick up for himself when he needed to. A little resistance might not be the worst thing for either of them.

But after a few seconds, it didn't end. They were slapping and shoving each other all over the living room. It was time to weigh in before the furniture was broken. Both parents jumped up and grabbed one kid apiece.

'She started it,' Freddie said, held back by Poppy.

'And I'll finish it, too,' Luna warned him, trying to struggle out of Norah's grip.

'Do you think we can't cancel a pizza order?' Poppy said to both of them.

'SORRY!' Luna yelled instantly. 'OK? Don't cancel the pizza!'

'I'm sorry, too,' Freddie added. 'But she did start it!'

'She did, and she's gonna lose her iPad for a week for it,' Poppy told him with a look at Luna. She fully expected a fresh row.

But Luna's rebellion only went so far as a big tut. 'Fine,' she said.

The doorbell went. 'Pizza,' the kids yelled in unison.

Poppy and Norah released them, and Norah went to the door to get the food. Poppy went to fetch the plates.

The family gathered around the table, and the argument was forgotten. Poppy was glad it had ended so easily. This blended family thing could be tricky at times. But she and Norah wanted it to work, and she knew in her heart that the kids did, too, the little terrors. They were very much brother and sister now, and most of the time, they liked it.

After dinner, Luna and Freddie started whispering to each other in the kitchen, and then they came in.

Freddie cleared his throat. 'If we promise not to fight, and we do all the cleaning up from dinner, can we stay up later with you guys to watch TV?'

Poppy and Norah swapped a quick look. Norah looked amenable, and so was Poppy. 'Yeah, sure,' Poppy said.

They high-fived again. This time, no one missed.

While they clattered about in the kitchen, Poppy and Norah settled on the sofa, their fingers intertwined. 'You've got a gig tomorrow night, haven't you?' Norah checked.

'I'm not sure I'd call it that,' Poppy said. 'It's just a pub with an open mic night.'

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‘I can’t wait,’ Norah said with a delicious grin. She added more quietly. ‘I hate to be such a star-fucker, but it turns me on so much to watch you perform.’

Poppy knew right then that when the gig was over, she was gonna make a hell of a lot of love to her wife. But then a realisation blew a cold wind on her plans. ‘Who’s gonna look after the kids?’

‘I’ll call Jane,’ Norah said easily.

‘It’s term time. She’s gone back to Manchester,’ Poppy pointed out.

‘Cherry?’ Norah suggested.

‘She’s visiting her mum to watch her run that 5K for cancer,’ Poppy reminded her.

‘Then I guess I’ll just bring them to your gig,’ Norah shrugged.

‘It’s a pub!’ Poppy said.

‘I’m not gonna buy them shots,’ Norah said wryly. ‘We’ll just stand at the back.’

‘I don’t know...’ Poppy said.

‘They keep asking to watch you perform,’ Norah added. ‘Especially Freddie. He said he wants a guitar for Christmas, actually.’

That gave Poppy serious pause. It was nice that they wanted to watch her trying to

start up again and even more lovely that Freddie wanted to follow in her footsteps. Poppy knew she had a long journey ahead of her and might never get back to any kind of career in the industry. But as long as she still breathed, she had to go back to the music. Life wasn't quite whole without it.

And she had so much now that it made her greedy for more happiness. She wanted everything: to love her wife and kids, to watch her family flourish, to watch her wife go back to school and restart her career as a graphic artist, to keep making music. It was all in front of her.

Still, she was a bit nervous to be watched by the only people living whose opinions mattered to her. 'That's so much pressure, though. You all watching? I'll forget the notes.'

'You could play ABBA covers, and they'd still think you were the coolest mum of all time,' Norah told her plainly.

'Second coolest,' Poppy said with a cheesy wink.

But Norah wasn't to be diverted. 'That's cute, but you're not getting out of it. We're all coming.'

'Fine,' Poppy gave in. 'But if I fuck it up...'

'If you fuck up, you just start again,' Norah told her.

Poppy grabbed her wife and pulled her close. 'I guess I can't do anything else,' she said and called the kids to bring in some popcorn.

She immediately began googling the worst kids' movies she could find. Freddie and Luna's education began tonight. They needed to learn to dig out the best from the worst. Poppy felt surer than ever that it was a crucial life skill. Because she'd come

crawling home a few years ago, broke, lonely, feeling like a failure. And she'd found love and passion right here, as well as a second chance.

It went to show that you never could know where the good life might be hiding. Sometimes, it was exactly where you started.