



The Mended Hearts Bookshop

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Description: Life isn't all sunshine and roses. Is it?

When loner Ash Wells inherits a bookshop from an aunt she doesn't remember, she thinks a jaunt to the seaside to figure things out is just what she needs to escape from her annoying London neighbors. The plan is simple: have a holiday, sell the bookshop, move on with her life. Oh, and maybe find out who this mysterious Aunt Mary is.

Plus-sized baker Pen Robson is an eternal optimist. So when she meets her grumpy new next door neighbor, she's determined to win her over, no matter how many sticky buns and biscuits that takes. But her tall, dark, and handsome neighbor doesn't even seem to like the ever-generous Pen, let alone want to settle into a story book grumpy-sunshine romance.

Yet when Pen comes up with a madcap plan to save the little bookshop, Ash decides she might as well stick around for a while, especially after an unexpected revelation leaves her wondering just who she really is.

Pen's relentless optimism slowly starts to melt Ash's frozen heart. But as the tiny seaside town begins to grow on Ash, and her plans for life begin to change, her suspicions are beginning to grow as well. And what happens if this all turns out to be a mistake? Does love really conquer all?

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Chapter One

The day the letter arrived was a perfectly normal day. Ash worked in the morning, lining up the neat columns of numbers until everything balanced out nicely, and at twelve fifteen precisely tucked in her chair and pulled on her down jacket. The weather was surprisingly chilly for March and she was glad of the jacket as she walked down the Embankment.

She spent a satisfactory forty five minutes at the Royal Opera House attending a free lunchtime concert, and by two o'clock was once again walking back down the Embankment toward her building.

The first odd thing that happened was that her phone rang. Pausing by the railing overlooking the river, Ash stared at the tiny screen. The number was unknown, but that didn't mean anything. After all, it could be a client. She was a freelance accountant, it wasn't beyond the realms of possibility that someone would phone her.

On the other hand, she currently only had long-term jobs and all of those had, so far, been dealt with online.

It might be spam or the phone company, she supposed. Or perhaps it was a wrong number.

She sighed and decided there was only one way to find out.

“Hello?”

“Ash?” The voice on the other end of the phone was crackly and sounded far, far away. Which, given that it was her mother, and given that her mother was currently on an around the world cruise with her latest husband, was probably true.

“Mum?”

“We’re in port,” her mother said. “So Ted said I should ring because it’s impossible to call from the ship.”

“Is everything alright?” Ash asked, perhaps a little anxiously because her mother had, once, left a husband on what was supposed to be their honeymoon.

“Wonderful, darling. We’re in Patagonia.” There was an infinitesimal pause. “Or Paraguay. Peru?”

“South America,” Ash said helpfully.

“That’s the one,” said her mother “Everything’s beautiful and all in Spanish, which does make it all sound more... passionate, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose,” Ash said, looking into the dismally brown-gray river. She’d heard somewhere that at any one time there were at least a dozen bodies bobbing along down there. “So if there aren’t any problems...”

“Yes, I’m calling to check on you,” her mother said. “You’re my only child. Is that so wrong? I just want to know that you’re alright.”

“Mother, I’m almost forty years old, you don’t need to do welfare checks.”

“You live alone, for all I know you choked to death on a steak three weeks ago and no one’s found you yet,” retorted her mother.

“I’m sure the neighbors would have complained about the smell,” said Ash. Later she cursed herself for this because perhaps, just perhaps, she’d brought all of this on herself by mentioning the word neighbors. Maybe she’s awakened some ancient neighbor spirit or something. “And anyway, as you can tell, I’m perfectly fine.”

“Work?”

“Fine.”

“Other... things?”

“Fine.”

“Seeing anyone?” The question was almost but not quite casual.

“Mother.”

“Right, yes, alright, well, I suppose since everything’s fine then you don’t really need to talk to me, do you?”

Ash sighed, put one hand in her jacket pocket and started walking down the embankment again. “I was at the Opera,” she said, and began filling her mother in on the concert.

By the time she could see her building her mother had become bored with the run down of concerts and exhibitions and books that Ash had read, and had decided that Patagonia (or Paraguay or Peru) held greater interest.

“Well, I’d better be going,” her mother said cheerfully. “Or the boat might go without me. I’ll call again when I can. But it might be a while, I’m afraid. We’ll be at sea for quite a while this next stretch.”

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Ash thought about how many dead bodies were potentially bobbing around under the giant cruise ship and shuddered. “Fine. There’s nothing to worry about. I’m perfectly fine. And if I do choke to death in my sad lonely flat, I’ll make sure to show up and haunt you, just so that you’re not left uninformed.”

“There’s no need to be flippant. Love you.”

Ash sighed. “Love you, Mum.”

Her mother had a habit of assuming that Ash had never grown up, and to be honest, after a ten minute conversation, Ash was left feeling like she’d never grown up. Like she was a sulky fifteen year old on her fourth step-father, rather than an almost forty year old with a flat and a job and interests.

She unlocked the building door and walked into the foyer, where she was greeted by rows of mailboxes. Without much thought, and definitely without thinking that she was about to change her life for good, Ash opened her box and pulled out a tiny slip of paper with something scrawled on it.

A tremble of anger went up her spine.

Honestly, she’d been out for all of a couple of hours, and spent most of her time at home. How come the only time she went out was when the postman actually came? Was he watching and waiting for her to leave?

And surely the point of a registered letter was that it was supposed to be delivered to her. Not to a neighbor.

She blew out a breath and closed her eyes, standing in front of the now empty mailbox.

She could attempt to avoid the situation. If she didn't knock on the Brown's front door then perhaps they'd knock on hers, leaving her slightly more in control of the situation.

Or maybe they'd slide whatever it was into her mailbox.

Or perhaps they'd just forget about it.

But then, it might be important. Not that she was expecting anything important. But you never knew.

She ran her hand through her short, dark hair and squared her shoulders. As much as she disliked her neighbors, this was ridiculous. They had something that belonged to her, and she needed to go and get it. It was that simple.

And, as her mother often told her, it was better to eat the frog for breakfast. By which she meant it was better to do the thing you didn't want to do first and get it over with. Ash had already eaten muesli for breakfast, and had uncharacteristically had a protein bar for lunch due to the concert. She was planning cheese on toast for dinner.

Right, fine. She stomped up the stairs. But see if the postman got a Christmas tip this year from her. She marched her way to the Brown's door and then tapped on it before getting angry with herself for being pathetic and rapping on it smartly.

"Yes?" said a voice as the door opened. Then Amanda Brown stood there wreathed in smiles, her hair newly colored and in tight curls close to her head. "Ashley, how lovely to see you. How can I help you? Oh, yes, that's right, the postie did leave something for you. Come in, come in."

“No,” Ash said quickly. She swallowed. “No, thank you. I’m in a hurry.”

“Nonsense,” said Amanda, holding the door further open. “Come in, come in, now let me think, where did I put that letter?”

Only when it became clear that the woman wasn’t going to look for the letter until the door was closed did Ash step inside.

“How are you dear?” Amanda asked. “Now let me see, where is that letter?” She poked ineffectually around a messy hall table.

“Fine,” Ash said through gritted teeth. How hard could this be? She’d literally just received the letter, it couldn’t have gone far.

“Good, good,” said Amanda. Then she grinned, holding up a brown envelope. “Here we go.”

Ash reached out for it, thinking perhaps she’d gotten lucky this time. But Amanda held it back, slightly out of reach.

“Now, let’s see, what about Thursday?”

“Thursday?” Ash asked, knowing what was about to come and dreading it.

“Yes, for dinner. You haven’t been round for months Ashley, we’re starting to think that you dislike us.” She giggled here. “So Thursday at seven then?”

It wasn’t that Ash disliked the Browns. Though she sort of did. It was more their insistence at being friends that she didn’t enjoy. After all, this was London, people were supposed to be cold and uncaring, something that Ash very much enjoyed. “I’m afraid...” she began.

“Nonsense,” Amanda said again. “We won’t take no for an answer.”

Which was a shame, since that was the very answer Ash wanted to give. The thought of an evening surrounded by Amanda, her husband Jim, and their two blonde-haired children who had an awful predilection for recorder playing and impromptu concerts, made Ash feel slightly sick. “But...” she began again.

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“So Thursday at seven,” Amanda interrupted.

The problem was that as much as Ash might dislike the Browns, she could definitely see the advantages of staying on their good sides. Like having someone to pick up her post, for example. Or having people invested enough that if she did choke alone in her flat and die then at least she wouldn’t rot for too long before she got found.

Or having someone to water her plants when she went on holiday.

And it wasn’t like Amanda was going to listen to excuses anyway.

Finally, Ash sighed. “Fine,” she said. “I’ll see what I can do. Must run.” She made a lunge for the letter, grabbed it, and let herself out of the front door all before Amanda had a chance to move. “Bye then,” she said, practically running to her own front door.

“Thursday at seven,” Amanda said again.

Ash cut off any further conversation by slamming her front door and leaning back against it to catch her breath. The brown envelope was stiff under her fingers and she almost didn’t open it out of spite. The stupid thing had caused her to interact with the neighbors.

In the end, curiosity got the better of her. She slid her finger under the flap, pulled out an official looking letter, read it, read it again, then read it for a third time before leaning back on the front door to consider things.

On the whole, an inheritance was probably a good thing, she decided before she looked down at the letter again. The only problem was, she had no idea who had died. She frowned at the letter but it declined to answer any further questions.

Ash tapped her fingers on the wood of the front door, thinking. There was nothing for it, she'd have to have another telephone call. What a day this was turning out to be.

Chapter Two

There was a faint scrabbling sound as Pen moved the sack of flour and she felt a shimmer of anxiety in her stomach. No matter how often she did this, and she'd owned a bakery for a decade at this point, she just couldn't get used to it.

"Ready?" she asked.

George, who was standing with a tupperware box in one hand, a broom in the other, and a look of complete resignation on his face, nodded.

"I'm going to pick it up," she said, feeling it only fair to give him another warning.

"Just get on with it."

"Why?" she asked. "It's not like you have a job to go to." She picked up the sack and the mouse fled, slithering across the tiled kitchen floor only to find itself in a semi-transparent prison.

"Got it," George said, sliding the lid under the box and then flipping it over expertly.

"Back yard?"

"Maybe out in the alley," Pen said. "Give it a chance to move somewhere else."

“Don’t know why it’d want to, given that it gets free food and board here,” George grumbled. But he took the mouse out anyway.

“You really should get the mouse man in,” he said when he came back, throwing the tupperware into the sink.

“Nope,” said Pen, who was busy scrubbing her hands even though she hadn’t touched the creature. “No way, no how.”

“Pen.” He settled against the counter beside her, the sun streaming in through the window and glinting on his dark hair. “I get that the exterminator, well, exterminates, but this is a bakery. And a café. You won’t be able to keep a mouse infestation from the health department for long.”

“It’s not an infestation. It’s one mouse.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “I don’t think it’s the same mouse that keeps coming back.”

“It is,” she said with certainty. Then she considered things. “Maybe I could borrow Fabio?”

George shrugged. “You could try. But first up, I don’t think Fab would do much unless looks of disdain can kill. Second up, he’s not mine to lend out.”

Pen grabbed a band from around her wrist and tied back her blonde curls. “Still no news?”

“Not a word.” George looked strained. “I mean, we all knew that Mary was no spring chicken. But I don’t think any of us expected her to go so soon.”

“Still, it’s a blessing,” said Pen. “Just going in your sleep like that, you can’t ask for a

more peaceful way to go, can you?" She sighed. "I suppose it all leaves you in a bit of bother though, doesn't it?"

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She went out into the front, George trailing her, and put the coffee machine on.

“There’ll be someone soon,” she said comfortingly.

“There’d better be. Apart from anything else, I’ve got bills to pay.”

“You could come and help around here,” Pen said.

“With the millions of customers that you’ve got?” He grinned at her and pressed the button on the machine to deliver caffeine. “Nah, I’m alright for a wee while yet. I’m just... anxious I suppose. I mean, Mary’s the only person I’ve ever worked for. What if the new boss is... not nice.”

“What if the new boss is a tall, dark handsome man who sweeps you off your feet?” Pen asked, picking up two cups and carrying them over to one of the small round tables by the window.

“What if the boss is a tall, dark, beautiful woman who sweeps you off your feet?” asked George in return.

“Then I shall gladly be swept,” Pen returned with a grin. “I mean, there aren’t that many options in town.”

“And you’ve been through most of them.”

“Cheeky,” she said. Though it was true. She had, as far as she knew, dated every woman with an inclination toward women. Which was three women. Three. She’d

been determinedly single for the last half decade and not through choice.

“You could try online dating,” said George, sitting down and picking up his cup.

“With what time exactly? Between running around here, going to council meetings and looking after you, I don’t have time to worry about that sort of thing.” She picked up her own cup. “Unless that sort of thing moves next door. That would be quite convenient.”

George sighed. “Whoever inherits the place might want to sell it. Or close it.”

“It’s a bookshop, who wouldn’t want to own a bookshop?” She sipped her coffee. “Plus, it’s a romance bookshop. Come on, you’d need a heart of steel to sell a romance bookshop.”

The bell over the front door dinged and Pen turned around.

“Oh, hello Moira, help you?”

A harried looking woman smiled at her. “Just a small loaf.”

“Help yourself,” said Pen. “Take one of the big ones though, no extra charge. They’re going to get stale so someone might as well make use of them.”

Moira hesitated for only a second before picking up a large loaf from one of the baskets by the counter. “If you’re sure?”

“Sure I’m sure,” Pen grinned. “No one wants to waste food. Be off with you, just put a pound on the counter.”

“You’ll bankrupt yourself,” George said when the door closed behind Moira.

“She’s got four little ones under five, she could use the extra money,” Pen said. “And it does no harm to be kind, does it?”

George sighed. “I suppose not.” He looked out of the window onto the little high street with its assortment of shops. “Do you ever wish life was different?”

Pen, who had lived in Tetherington her entire life, laughed. “Different? From what? You might go chasing differences, but it’ll all end up the same. Besides, what have we got to complain about? We live in a nice town with nice people and we all look after each other. Better than living in London or the like. Nobody knowing anybody, it must be chaos down there.”

“I don’t know, the chances of meeting a dark, handsome stranger are probably a bit higher.”

“So are the chances of meeting a dark, handsome murderer,” Pen laughed.

George turned to her with faked shock. “Penelope Robson, was that... was that cynicism?”

“Not a jot,” she said, draining her cup and standing up. “But you’re talking nonsense. You’re just upset about the shop and about Mary, we all are. Things are changing and change makes people uncomfortable, out of sorts. It’ll all settle down again, don’t you worry.” She took his cup from him. “The offer stands though. If you need work or a couch to stay on.”

“You’re too generous for your own good,” he said, standing up and stretching. “But thanks. You’re right. It’s nice to be looked after, nice to know that whatever happens there’s someone here. Even if that someone couldn’t possibly afford to pay me.”

“What do you know about my finances?” Pen asked, feeling a slight squirm in her

belly.

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“Not a thing,” George said. “And I’d better be off. The shop might be closed, but if I don’t go in and dust once a day it’ll be buried by the time the new owner makes an appearance. And Fabio can’t survive on mice alone.”

Pen put the cups down on the counter. “It’s going to be fine,” she said, patting his arm. “The town needs its bookshop and whoever owns it now will see that. If they don’t, well, we’ll just have to persuade them, won’t we? Mended Hearts isn’t going anywhere, it’s a town institution, think of the fits the summer tourists would have.”

“They come for the beach, not the books,” George said.

“Pessimist.”

“You know that being an optimist can be pathological.”

Pen shook her head and laughed. “Get out of here before I trap you in a tupperware and set you free in the alley, go and get your dusting done. And stop by when you’re finished, you can take some of yesterday’s buns home with you.”

He grinned. “If the new owner turns out to be tall, dark and beautiful, I’ll definitely put in a good word for you,” he said.

“Off, out, I’ve got cakes to sell.”

He was still grinning as he left and turned toward next door. Pen sighed. George worried too much, it was bad for someone only in his twenties to worry that much. The new owner was sure to turn out to be just lovely, George really should have more

faith.

Mind you, it wouldn't hurt if the new owner was attractive. She leaned on the counter and stared dreamily into space.

Someone curvy and comfortable, just like herself, she thought. Someone who could laugh on Monday mornings and who didn't mind taking out the rubbish because every job should be done with a smile. Someone who was friendly and kind and nice to be around. It really shouldn't be asking that much.

She was sure that her princess would come one day, absolutely convinced of it. But sooner would be better than later at this point. And she didn't think she was being too picky.

The bell over the door rang again.

"Post," said Billy the postman.

"Thanks," Pen said. "Bun?"

"Don't mind if I do." Billy swapped a pile of letters for a currant bun and left the shop with a smile on his face.

Pen didn't even notice that he hadn't paid as she went through the pile of letters. Mostly junk, she thought, as she ditched flyers into the bin under the counter. Except one. She looked at the envelope, tapping her finger on the top of it, then slid it under the till.

There was no point in opening it if she couldn't do anything about it. At some point a solution would present itself. Until then, well, she'd take the letter upstairs to her little flat when she was done for the day. That way she could put it on the table by the

front door. With all the others.

Chapter Three

Somehow, Ash had expected a solicitor's office to be... different. Piles of papers and files on filing cabinets, dusty horsehair wigs, that sort of thing. So she was slightly put out to find that the offices of Daniel J. Snythe Esq. were sleek and smooth and had plate glass windows overlooking the river.

"We don't just hand out inheritances willy-nilly, you know," Snythe said, lifting a bushy eyebrow at her.

"I'm well aware of that," said Ash who hadn't been aware of that at all but thought it was pretty much common sense. After all, you couldn't just go around handing over... things to people.

"So I will need to see your paperwork. A passport will do, a driving license at a pinch."

Ash handed over a folder of documents. "Can you tell me what exactly the inheritance is?" she asked, curiosity burning hot in her stomach.

Just this morning she'd finished a set of accounts and she'd almost let herself be distracted by the thought of this afternoon's meeting. Almost. But Ash didn't daydream, it was a waste of time and she never, ever wasted time.

"Hold your horses," Snythe said, surveying the paperwork she'd provided. He grunted and closed the file. "This was a rather... unusual case," he said, glaring down his nose at Ash.

"Really?" Ash said. She didn't like people glaring at her down their noses. Well,

mostly she just didn't like people. They wasted her time and had penchants for small talk, which annoyed her. She had things to do, work, concerts, books to read. Things that didn't require talking about the weather or dogs or whatever it was that people thought was interesting.

"Really."

"Huh. I'd have thought that it was far more unusual for me than for you," she offered. "I mean, I don't inherit things everyday, whereas I assume you deal with inheritances all the time."

He glared harder and she bit her lip. Better not to irritate him too much, she was after his help. On the other hand, she was starting to feel like he might need to be punched. The Germans had a word for that. *Backpfeifengesicht*. A face in need of a fist. English could do with an equivalent.

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“In what way, exactly, is this unusual for you?” he asked.

“Well, there’s the fact that you won’t tell me what I’m supposed to inherit,” she said. Then she shrugged. “And I suppose the fact that I can’t think of anyone that’s died recently that might want to leave me something.”

“Ah, that I can help with,” he said, scanning down a document. “Here we go. Mary Wells.”

Which enlightened her not at all. “Mary Wells.”

“Mmm.” He lifted an eyebrow. “Doesn’t ring any bells?”

Ash thought hard then shook her head.

“Looks here like she was of a decent age. Perhaps a grandmother, an aunt maybe?”

She narrowed her eyes. Now that he mentioned it, Aunt Mary did sound a little familiar. “Perhaps.”

“Well, like I said, we don’t just hand out inheritances to anyone that comes knocking,” he said, putting down his sheaf of papers. “This is an unusual case in that generally, a person either mentions the familial relationship in the will itself or, in most cases, there is an extended family to provide answers. In this case, neither of those things happened.” He grunted again. “Which is what happens when one writes a will on the back of an envelope and doesn’t employ a solicitor.”

“It’s on an envelope?” Ash asked, worried now that she was wasting her time.

“Don’t worry, girl, it’s all legal. Signed and witnessed.”

Ash decided that if he called her girl again she would punch him. “So what makes you think that I’m the person in question then?”

“We do our research,” he said grandly. “Wells is your surname, so there’s a start. But a birthname isn’t enough in cases like this, obviously. However, according to the electoral role you were born and lived in Ecclestown, Kent.”

“Right.”

“As did Mary Wells at an overlapping point. Furthermore, both she and your father, a Mr. Allan Wells, were born in the Queen Elizabeth University Hospital, Glasgow, which adds another layer of respectability to your claim.” He did the looking down his nose thing again. “I would suggest that you question your father. His sister, perhaps.”

“If I knew where he was, I might,” Ash answered. Her father had left her mother when Ash herself had been less than two years old. She’d never spent time wondering why or where he was. She didn’t particularly care.

“Your mother then?”

Her mother was busy eating guinea pigs in Peru or tangoing in Patagonia and was therefore unreachable. Ash shrugged. “I suppose I’ll just have to take your word for it.”

“That would be advisable,” Snythe sniffed. He fumbled with another file.

Aunt Mary. Auntie Mary. Now that she thought of it, she was sure there'd been an aunt there somewhere. She could even almost conjure up a picture of her. A cap of unnaturally dark hair and a scent of something too strong and alcoholic smelling. She sat forward in her chair. "So, the will?"

Snythe frowned at her, then returned his attention back to the paper in his hand. "Let's see then. Ah, yes, it appears that you have been left... a bookshop."

A BOOKSHOP? WHAT was she supposed to do with a bookshop? Ash stared at the map on her computer screen. According to Snythe, the obvious thing to do was to visit her inheritance, which, given that she had yet to sign the papers wasn't technically hers yet.

So perhaps she shouldn't waste her time.

Tetherington was by the sea though, which had a lot to offer. Ash liked the sea, liked walking down long isolated beaches. She could, perhaps, do with a break, getting out of London for a while. She could work from anywhere, so that wasn't a problem.

She was, she admitted, curious about the bookshop. She was more curious about Mary Wells, whoever she'd been. But there was one huge factor that was weighing into her current decision. Today was Wednesday.

Tomorrow was Thursday.

She clicked over to a new tab and started the process of renting a car. A car would waste less time than the train and she'd be independent, which was important to her. And by this time tomorrow she would have some idea of what this inheritance business was all about.

Property was a sensible investment, she thought as she filled out her credit card

information on the site. But then again, house prices were at a high, so she might be better off selling the place and investing elsewhere. Rental properties required management and she wasn't willing to add to her list of things to do.

She finished the rental process and stood up, time to pack.

It took her precisely thirty minutes to pack. She then ate a healthy and balanced dinner of Pot Noodle and microwaved broccoli, spent half an hour watching the news, took a shower, read her latest book and turned out the lights by eleven.

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Before she fell asleep she found herself wondering just what kind of person ran a bookshop. Then what the bookshop would look like. Then whether or not one sold whole bookshops or had to sell the books first and then the shop. Which all resulted in a troubled night's sleep plagued by dreams of books falling off shelves onto customers' heads.

When the alarm went off, Ash woke up, made coffee, ate muesli, showered again, and was tugging her suitcase out of her front door exactly forty five minutes later.

Which was just in time to see Amanda Brown open her own front door to see one of her blonde children off to school

"Oh," said Amanda. "This is unexpected."

Ash, who had been planning on knocking on Amanda's door anyway and who was pleased with the added efficiency of her already being out and saving her the knock, nodded. "Very unexpected," she said seriously. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to water the plants."

"I see," said Amanda. "But it's Thursday."

Ash let herself smile a little. "Yes," she agreed. She forced herself to look serious again. "So I won't be able to make dinner tonight, I'm afraid."

Amanda squinted at her as though testing to see if she was serious.

"Death in the family," Ash added. Technically true.

“Oh dear,” said Amanda, looking suitably consoling. “I’m so sorry. Don’t worry about dinner, obviously.”

“Thank you,” said Ash who hadn’t been worrying about dinner, at least not since she’d realized that going to Tetherington to see the bookshop would give her an excellent excuse to miss dinner.

“We’ll just reschedule for when you get back,” Amanda said brightly. “I’ve got your key, I’ll take care of the plants. And my condolences to your family.”

For just a second Ash seriously considered not coming back at all. That way she’d be sure to avoid an excruciating evening of baby pictures and talking about Amanda’s husband’s job. Ash could never remember what exactly it was he did.

“I’d, um, better be off,” Ash said, pulling at her suitcase. “Don’t want to get there too late.”

“Right, yes, of course. Have a safe trip.” said Amanda. “And do knock when you get home.”

“Mmm,” said Ash, which she hoped conveyed both the positive answer that Amanda was looking for and the truth which was that she had no intention of ever knocking on the Brown’s door ever again if she could help it.

She carried her case down the stairs and out into the early spring sunshine perfectly on time for her pick up at the car rental office. Then it was the matter of a couple of hours of driving and she’d be in Tetherington in time for lunch.

She’d probably even have time to get a little work done this afternoon and maybe take a walk by the sea. After all, how much attention could a bookshop really need?

Chapter Four

Pen hummed softly to herself as she opened up the can of window paint. She was about to dip her brush in when the bakery door opened.

“Morning!” Councilwoman Thurst barked as she strode in.

“Good morning,” Pen said cheerfully getting up from her knees. “What can I help you with this morning?”

“We need this week’s town council meeting catered,” the woman said, stripping off her gloves and holding them in one hand.

“You do?” Pen asked, feeling herself flush a little. They needed catering and they’d come to her? She was flattered and stood up a little straighter.

“Mmm, Duncan’s usually do it, but, well, with his current situation we took a vote and didn’t think it quite appropriate.”

Pen nodded in agreement even though she didn’t quite agree. Mike Duncan was running for town council and, she suspected, he rather wanted Councilwoman Thurst’s seat. Which shouldn’t mean he wasn’t eligible for catering, because what did cakes have to do with votes? Still though, this was an opportunity and she shouldn’t overlook it.

She cleared her throat. “I can come up with some catering plans,” she said brightly.

“Won’t be necessary,” Thurst said. “A few sandwiches, an urn of tea, and a plate of buns will do us nicely.”

“Oh, of course.”

Thurst nodded. “You’ll charge us cost, of course. Bring your bills to show the treasurer and we’ll make sure you get paid.”

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Ah, not going to make her rich then. Still, people would taste her bread, that's what counted, right? Pen beamed and thanked the councilwoman profusely before offering her a trial bun.

"I don't snack," Thurst said.

"Ah, I see," Pen said, hand hovering over the basket of buns. "Perhaps for later?"

"No, no, my meals are planned. Besides, I've got a busy day and no time for interruptions." She leaned in confidentially. "The council are applying for a development grant and we're very excited about it."

"A development grant?" Pen asked. "To develop... what?"

"Well, that's the thing, isn't it?" said Thurst. "It could go in one of a million directions. Perhaps we'll use it to rebuild the pier, perhaps for a new leisure center, perhaps a town museum. The list of options is exhausting." She said this like it was personally exhausting, like she'd been lying awake thinking of buildings to build.

"Important work," Pen said with a nod.

Thurst returned the nod seriously. "So, we'll count on you for the catering then?"

"I'd be delighted," said Pen.

"Have everything at the town hall by seven."

Majorie Thurst walked out like she had a rod down her back, walking down the high street like it was a military parade ground, and Pen grinned to herself. Surely catering a council meeting had to be a doorway to something. Or were opportunities supposed to be windows, not doors? Speaking of windows.

She found her paintbrush on the window ledge and carefully dipped it into the chalky paint, starting the first curved line in the very corner of the window. When Mr. Gupta from down the road came in, she was so involved in her painting that she had him leave his money on the counter, and when Moira Hadley came in with her youngest on her hip and leading a toddler by the hand she downright insisted that they help themselves to the jam tarts.

“These two will eat you out of house and home,” Moira said.

“They’re growing children,” said Pen firmly. “And the tarts will go bad if someone doesn’t eat them.”

“It’s not even lunchtime, surely someone will actually buy them,” protested Moira.

Pen cocked her head to one side to survey the flower that she’d painted and smiled. “Just take a couple, for the kids.”

It was half past ten when she heard the familiar whistle from the back door. She carefully scraped her paintbrush clean and laid it over the top of the paint can, wiped her hands on a rag, and went off to the kitchen to find Joe standing there a sack of flour at his feet.

“Just put it in the normal place,” she said, thinking about asking him to check for mice and then deciding it was better not to. He might tell someone. Or, god forbid, hurt the creature.

Joe blushed red and didn't move. "Um, about that, Pen."

Pen stopped, putting both hands on the cool metal top of the baking table. "About what?"

Joe scratched his head. "See, if it were up to me, I'd not have a problem with it. The trouble is my boss, see? I mean, it's not as though it were a fortune, but he says every bit adds up and I'm sure it's not intentional and all, but you see there's not much I can do it about it since he says we're running a business not a charity and all."

It took a second to parse the river of words, when she did the meaning wasn't much clearer. "Come again?" she asked.

With a sigh, Joe pulled an invoice out of his top pocket. "It's probably an oversight is what it is," he said.

Pen took the paper and frowned down at it. "I thought this all went through the business account?" she said. "It's automatic, isn't it?"

"Yeah, well, it got declined," Joe said, scratching his head again so that Pen was starting to wonder if he had nits.

Pen's stomach contracted. "Ugh, I must have forgotten to transfer funds over into the account," she said. She eyed the amount. "Let me get you some cash and we'll sort this out."

Joe grinned in relief. "Sounds like a plan," he said, hoisting up the flour sack and placing it easily next to the others. "Got a coffee going?" He followed her into the front of the shop.

She flicked the switch on the coffee machine and put a cup down before opening up

the till and lifting the drawer to count out the notes under there. She handed them to Joe almost embarrassed until he shoved them in his pocket and she couldn't see them anymore.

“Smells good in here,” Joe said, looking around until he caught sight of the windows. “Nice painting job, Pen. That window looks like a field of sunflowers.”

She grinned at him. “Figured the high street could do with a bit of a glow up. Coffee's up.”

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“Ta.” He took the cup. “Any news on next door?”

“Not so as I’ve heard. It can’t be long now though. I just wonder who it’s going to be. Mary didn’t have any family that I know of.”

Joe shrugged and slurped at his coffee. “I know she wasn’t from town. My mum said she moved in in the late eighties or so. Before that, the place was a radio shop.”

Pen chuckled. “Probably not much demand for radios these days.”

He nodded in agreement. “The bookshop is a good idea and it’s part of the local landscape now. I hope whoever does take it over doesn’t try and make it one of those newfangled vape shops or something.”

“Buy a lot of romance novels, do you, Joe?” she teased.

He blushed. “Might have read the odd one. Anyway, it makes shopping for mum’s birthday easier. Mary always knew which ones mum had read and all.” He sniffed. “It won’t be the same without her.”

“Times change, Joe, and we change with them. Not much point in focusing on what’s gone and done, not when the future’s bright and our options are open.”

He laughed. “I get a dose of cheerful every time I come in here, Pen, you do a soul good.” He drank up the rest of his coffee. “And I’ve got the rest of my rounds to do. I’ll leave you to your painting.”

Pen was merrily finishing up the rest of her painting and wondering whether or not to take cinnamon buns to the council meeting when she saw George rush past the window. She straightened up just as he barged through the front door, sending the bell into a frenzy of dinging.

“Pen,” he started, then he saw the window and took a step back. “Huh. That looks... cheerful.”

“That’s because it is cheerful,” Pen said, wiping her hands. “It adds a touch of springtime, don’t you think?”

“Mmm,” said George noncommittally surveying the window that was now crowded with white-painted flowers.

Pen rolled her eyes. “You’ll get used to it. It’s beautiful. And you didn’t come running in here like a bat out of hell to admire my flowers, what’s wrong?”

“Oh, oh god, yes,” George said, putting a dramatic hand to his breast. “Pen, there’s burglars.”

“Burglars?” Pen said, shocked. “Where?”

George took a breath and stepped closer as though there might be someone to hear. “Well, I was going in to dust and open a can for Fabio when I heard noises. Actually, no, that’s not the beginning of the story.”

“What is then?” Pen asked, grabbing a seat and sitting down because her legs were wobbly.

“On the walk down I saw a car,” he said. “A strange car, one I didn’t recognize, and it was parked just right at the corner and I thought to myself, that’s a strange car, I

definitely don't recognize that. Then when I got to the door of the shop it was sort of... cracked open. Like not really open, but only the lock keeps it tight closed, you know? I was always after Mary to fix it."

"Right," Pen said slowly, thinking that things might not be quite as dramatic as George thought. "And then?"

"And then I heard noises. I don't know what, there's nothing there to steal. But I definitely heard someone swear. Well, I heard someone trip over a box and then swear."

"Man or woman?" Pen asked.

"Woman," George said, shifting uncomfortably. "But burglars can be women. Equal opportunities and all that."

"George... do you think you might be over-reacting a tiny bit?" Pen asked, biting her lip to keep herself from laughing.

George flushed. "Oh god, you think... You think it might be..."

"Well, it could be the new owner," Pen said. "I mean, that would make sense, wouldn't it?" She stood up. "How about we go and have a look?"

George drew himself up to his full height which brought him more or less exactly as far as Pen's earlobe. "Alright," he said. "But I'm taking one of your big pans, just in case."

Chapter Five

Weak sunlight streamed through the clouds and even Ash had to admit that

Tetherington didn't look half bad. The sea stretched away from the promenade, blue and twinkling, and she promised herself a walk on the beach later. She smiled in satisfaction at the thought that she'd be walking on the beach when she should be having dinner with the Browns.

Then there was a neat little high street, complete with tiny boutiques and striped awnings. The place looked like it was stuck in the fifties, and that was no bad thing. As much as Ash liked the anonymity of living in the city, she was far from a fan of the vape shops and American candy stores that had sprung up everywhere.

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She drove carefully and slowly down the street until she found a parking spot, parked neatly and efficiently, and got out of the car, pulling her duffle bag with her.

The bookshop was the third building along and she approached from the opposite side of the street, wanting to get a good look at it.

From down here the roof looked good, the guttering was in decent shape. The building itself was dark red brick and looked fairly well maintained. She nodded to herself. Given the condition of the place and its positioning right on the high street, she was probably looking at a low six figure price range.

Not that she needed the money. She was an accountant, after all. Her investments and pension plans were all in order.

She let herself take in the big windows, the merry red front door. Then she cocked her head to one side. Mended Hearts. Huh. Weird name for a bookshop, but then maybe it had been something else before. Was that a good name for a pub? It sounded like a dating agency.

The thought of dating agencies made Ash feel a bit funny so she hurriedly crossed the road and fished the big set of keys that Snythe had given her out of her pocket.

Ten years ago, her mother had signed her up for a dating agency. It hadn't gone well. Mostly because Ash hadn't met a single person. Not that there hadn't been interested parties, she just... she just refused to meet any of them.

In the end, life was simpler and easier the way she liked it and adding someone else

into the mix, well, that just sounded like asking for disaster.

“You can’t want to be alone forever,” her mother had protested.

“Why not?” Ash had asked. “I’m happy, it’s not like I’m sitting in my flat depressed or anything.”

“But...”

“But what? Just because you’ve had eleven husbands doesn’t mean that I need eleven husbands,” Ash had said.

“Chance’d be a fine thing. You’ve barely got time for three husbands at the rate you’re going,” her mother had said.

It hadn’t hurt though. Because Ash truly couldn’t imagine having a man around the house. Sharing her intimate space with someone big and lumbering. Cooking dinner every night. Having someone mess with her things and talking all the time. She didn’t like it when people talked, for the most part.

The door creaked open and Ash got a whiff of mold and damp paper before her searching hand found the light switch and she bathed the shop in soft, yellowing light. Tall shelves lined the walls, a little cash desk sat at the back, there were a few display tables and some comfy chairs, and one large sagging couch under the window.

She let the door swing shut behind her. Not a bad space, she thought, putting her duffle down on the couch.

Something rustled and Ash’s heart began to beat double time. Surely there couldn’t be anyone here? Her mouth was dry as she searched for something, anything to defend herself with. She picked up a large coffee table book and was raising it over

her head when a fat orange cat picked its way around a bookshelf and meowed at her.

“Jesus,” she said, breathing out. “Well, you’ll have to go, for a start. I can’t sell a bookshop with a cat.”

She made a mental note to call the local animal rescue to have the cat picked up.

She put down the book and picked up her bag, the shop itself was good, but what about the rest of the place?

A few minutes of exploring led her through a small kitchen space behind the shop, then up the stairs to find a tiny apartment that hadn’t been decorated since the early nineties by the look of it. There was a hatch that she assumed led to the attic, but she wasn’t prepared to deal with spiders yet, so she decided to go back down and investigate the kitchen.

Maybe there’d be tea.

She rounded the corner of the staircase to find a woman standing in the middle of the kitchen.

In the space of a moment, Ash took her in. She was small and curvy making a ball come to mind, her hair in blonde curls and her eyes deep blue and dancing. She had a comfortable body, one that didn’t mind biscuits but equally didn’t spend all day on the couch.

And she was smiling.

Which was probably why Ash didn’t look around for a coffee table book to hit her with.

Instead, she took another two steps down and then cleared her throat. The woman grinned broadly and extended her hand just as a large frying pan appeared around the door frame and a gruff voice shouted.

“I’ve called the police, drop your weapons!”

The blonde woman retrieved her hand, which was a good thing because Ash hadn’t been at all sure about taking it. “Jesus, George, you’ve got to stop watching Line of Duty. Come in here, won’t you?”

A short, dark haired young man poked his head around the door. “Oh,” he said.

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“Oh,” the blonde said back.

“Why do you have a frying pan?” said Ash, since that seemed like the most pressing question currently.

“Defense,” said the man.

“From...?”

“You?” he tried.

“Huh,” said Ash. She couldn’t think of a response to that.

“You must be the new owner,” the blonde said, still smiling and Ash wondered if her face hurt.

“Maybe,” Ash allowed.

“Maybe?” asked the man.

“So you’re Mary’s...?” tried the blonde.

“Don’t know,” said Ash.

The man put the frying pan down on the kitchen table. “Hold on a second. Who are you exactly? And why are you here? I don’t really have to call the police, do I?”

Ash could see how this probably didn't look great. "Alright, well, I've apparently inherited this bookshop. I haven't signed all the paperwork yet, which is why I'm not the actual owner. And I've got no idea who Mary is, which is a whole other thing. The solicitor seems to think that she's my aunt. Or was my aunt, I suppose."

"Right," said the man, looking doubtful.

"I've got the keys," added Ash.

He seemed to relax a bit at that. "Alrighty then, it looks like you're on the up and up." He started to smile a bit. "I'm George, by the way. I work here. Or I suppose I worked here. Whether or not I work here now is sort of up to you."

Ash considered this. She hadn't thought about staff. It might be helpful to have someone around though, someone to sort through things, to tell her where things were. Plus, the nice thing about staff was that you could send them home when you were tired of them.

"Alright," she said. "You can stay on for the time being, if you like. I could do with some help sorting things out." He grinned and Ash turned to the blonde. "Do you work here too?"

"Pen," she said.

Ash looked around. "I don't have one at the minute," she said, confused as to why the woman would need one.

"No, no," the woman laughed. It was a nice sound, a good belly laugh, not some well-mannered titter. "That's my name. Pen. Short for Penelope."

"I see," said Ash, who did see even though she thought Pen could have been clearer

from the start. “But you don’t work here?”

“No. I’m the next door neighbor,” Pen said.

Ash had a sudden flash of Amanda Brown’s face. Oh no, she wasn’t doing this again. No interfering neighbors, no dinners she couldn’t say no to, absolutely not.

“Right, well the shop’s not open at the moment,” she said, walking toward the woman with her arms open, ushering everyone back into the shop itself. “And I’ve not got my bearings yet.”

“Of course, of course,” Pen said, still unbelievably smiling. “I’ll leave you to get on with things. I’m sure I’ll see you soon.”

Not if I see you first, thought Ash grimly. “Bye then,” was what she actually said.

“That wasn’t terrifically polite,” George said as Ash closed and locked the door. “You didn’t even introduce yourself.”

“Ash,” said Ash. “And I don’t have to be polite. This is my shop.”

“Not yet it’s not,” George reminded her. “You didn’t sign the paperwork, did you?”

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Ash sighed. Maybe having staff wasn't the best idea in the world. "Alright, you're done for the day."

"It's barely lunchtime."

"I need to have a poke around and see what's what. Are there accounts somewhere?"

"Everything's on the computer," George said, pointing to the cash desk. "The password is under the desk on a post-it."

"Security conscious, huh?"

"It's never been a problem," he said, backing toward the door. "I'll come back tomorrow morning then?"

"Nine o'clock," agreed Ash. She took a look around. "What kind of name is Mended Hearts anyway?" she asked as George opened the door.

He raised an eyebrow at her. "You didn't know?"

"Know what?"

"This is a romance bookshop," he said with a chuckle as he left.

Ash frowned. What was she getting into? Men who wanted to hit her with frying pans and were disconcertingly not at all subservient, books that featured heaving bosoms and manly throbbing rods, and comfortable blonde neighbors with eyes like the sea

and enchanting laughs.

Maybe coming here had been a mistake after all.

Chapter Six

“She’s perfect,” squeaked Pen, unable to contain herself.

“What exactly about her is perfect?” George said, pulling out a chair.

“Well, she’s tall and dark, for a start.” Pen closed her eyes and thought about her new neighbor.

Tall, thin, her hair was short and dark, curly on top, her eyes were deepest blue and her arms looked strong. She was capable and efficient, and, Pen thought, very sexy. In a sort of cool way. The kind of effortless way that meant she didn’t know quite how sexy she was. It was enough to make Pen’s heart quiver with excitement.

“You’ve literally just met her,” George said. “And if my opinion counts for anything, I think she’s kind of a bitch.”

“George!” said Pen.

“Well, she sort of is. The way she threw you out like that, it wasn’t polite. She didn’t even introduce herself.”

“She’s tired and grieving,” Pen said stoutly.

“She doesn’t even know who Mary was,” George protested. “How can she be grieving?”

“Mary was lovely, I’m sure... whatever her name is would be grieving if she’d known her.”

“Ash,” said George. “That’s her name, apparently. And I’m under orders to show up tomorrow morning bright and early at nine a.m.” He looked suddenly pained. “Oh god, I forgot to tell her about Fabio, do you think she’ll feed him?”

“She looked very intelligent,” Pen said dreamily. “Very competent, I’m sure she’ll take wonderful care of Fabio.”

George groaned. “Pen, you’re not serious about this, are you?”

“What’s not to be serious about?” Pen asked with a sniff. “Fate has thrown an attractive woman into my lap and I shall make the most of it.”

“She barely gave you the time of day.”

“I’ll grow on her,” Pen said, honestly believing that she would. She’d have to make a start on things though. She mustn’t let the grass grow under her feet, not when there might be other interested parties.

“What if she’s married? Or... or straight?” George asked, picking up a currant bun and putting a pound coin on the counter.

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“Psh,” Pen said, except now that George mentioned it, both those things could be a problem. Except... “There was no wedding ring. And everybody’s a little bit gay, aren’t they?”

“That seems insulting,” said George through a mouthful of bun. He swallowed. “I mean, I’m not even a little bit straight. The thought of a woman with all those... curves and things.” He pulled a face. “I wouldn’t know what to do with a boob if it was shoved in my face.”

“I would,” Pen said, waggling her eyebrows suggestively. “And now, if you don’t mind, I’ve got things to do, so you’re going to have to entertain yourself.”

“Are you throwing me out?” George asked indignantly.

“Nope, you’re welcome to come and wash up after me.”

“Why, what are you doing?” he asked, following her into the back.

“I thought I’d whip up a batch of chocolate chip cookies, just the thing to present to a new neighbor.”

George sighed. “You can’t bribe people into liking you with baked goods.”

“I can help things along,” Pen said with a grin. “And they’re baked with love, so they’ll provoke love, that’s what my grandma always used to say.”

“Your grandma drank too much whiskey,” George said, popping the rest of his bun

into his mouth. “And I might as well make good use of my day off, since I’ve rejoined the ranks of the employed and all. I’ll see you later.”

“Bye,” Pen said, pulling out a bag of chocolate chunks.

“Don’t try too hard, Pen,” George said, stepping in and giving her a hug. “You shouldn’t need to try hard if she’s the one for you. It should just sort of... happen.”

“Wise to the ways of romance now, are you?” Pen said.

“No, but desperation isn’t a good look, everybody knows that.” He patted her cheek. “And you deserve good things, Pen. Whoever you finally meet should want you just as much as you want them. Don’t settle for anything less.”

“I’ll be the picture of cool, calm, and collected, I swear,” said Pen.

George rolled his eyes. “You won’t. But you can try. Good luck.”

THE BISCUITS SMELLED perfect, warm and comforting, and Pen licked her fingers. She’d had to sample a broken one, of course. Now she packed up the rest in a box and tied a ribbon around it just for good luck.

She wasn’t being desperate, was she? Well, maybe a little bit. She was tired of being alone. All she wanted was someone to feed biscuits to, someone to talk to at the end of the day, someone to shower with love and affection, someone to complete her. Surely that wasn’t asking too much.

It was true that she’d only seen the new bookshop owner for a few minutes. But what she had seen had been... well, it had been lovely. She could see Ash’s long legs swung over the arm of her sofa upstairs even now. As that dark-haired head lay in her lap and they talked about the things they longed to do.

It would be terribly convenient too. Next door neighbors, and they could definitely knock through a wall, joining the bakery onto the bookshop, having a place where people could read and drink coffee.

It was too perfect for words, Pen thought to herself as she went out through the front door of the bakery and took the five steps to the bookshop.

The shop might not be open, but the door was unlocked. Pen knocked once, then pushed it open. “Hello?” she called. “Hello?”

Being surrounded by books made Pen feel safe, but then she’d always felt safe in Mary’s shop. It had always smelled like paper, like stories, like love. And as much as people might scoff at a romance bookstore, the truth was that Mended Hearts had always done very well for itself. Combine the summer tourists with the online sales and Pen knew that Mary had been a very successful bookseller.

“Hello?” she tried again, peering over the counter trying to see through to the kitchen.

“What?”

Ash appeared from behind a bookshelf and Pen almost thought she might have been hiding. But what reason would she have to hide?

“I brought you these,” said Pen brightly, holding out the box of biscuits. “A sort of welcome to town present. I thought what, with losing your aunt and coming all the way out here you might not have time to think about food. So...” She remembered that she wasn’t supposed to be sounding desperate. “So, um, did you come far?” she tried.

Ash squinted at her. “London. I thought I told you that the shop isn’t open yet.”

“I’m not here to shop,” Pen said, standing on one leg then the other before putting the box of biscuits down on the counter. “I just, um, wanted to welcome you to the neighborhood?”

“That’s not necessary.” Ash took a step forward.

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She was taller than Pen had thought. A good head taller than Pen herself. And her hips were narrow in tight jeans, a shirt tucked into them. It looked like a man's shirt, thought Pen. Her mouth got a bit dry at the thought of what might be under such a shirt.

"You bastard," Ash said suddenly.

"What?" asked Pen, jumping back.

But Ash had bent over. She stood a second later holding a wriggling orange bundle.

"Ah, that would be Fabio," said Pen in relief. "He's the shop's cat. Mary spoiled him a bit, but he mostly looks after himself. He'll catch the mice around the place, but you should open a can for him once a day."

"No," said Ash.

"What?"

"No," Ash said again quite firmly.

Before Pen knew what was happening, Ash was thrusting the cat at her and she had no choice but to take him or risk being clawed to shreds. Once in her arms, Fabio settled and started purring.

"You take him," Ash said. She looked down at the box of biscuits. "And presents aren't at all necessary. Feel free to take the box back."

For a second Pen felt a sting of hurt. Then she remembered that Ash was probably tired and overwhelmed and more than a little confused, so she should be excused for not having the best manners in the world. And maybe she was suspicious of gifts. Pen supposed that Londoners probably were a bit more naturally suspicious.

She decided to smile.

Ash stared back at her.

Pen started to feel slightly uncomfortable and could feel her smile starting to tarnish slightly.

Fabio began to wriggle.

“Ah,” said Pen, spotting a way out. “I can’t carry the box and the cat, I’m afraid.” She took a couple of steps backward. “I’ll have to leave the biscuits here so you might as well enjoy them.”

She felt the door against her back and scrabbled for the handle with one hand, the other arm firmly holding Fabio.

“So, I’ll be next door if you need anything...” she said, trailing off as Ash raised a single eyebrow, then she escaped.

“Looks like we’ve both been thrown out,” she said to Fabio when she got back to the bakery. She lowered him to the floor. “Go and check the flour sacks for mice.”

Fabio looked up at her hopefully and she sighed.

“Fine, I’ll find some food for you. But then you’re on mouse watch, alright?”

He meowed in return and Pen went to the kitchen

Fabio was snuffling down his food when the front door bell chimed. Pen went into the bakery to see Moira and all four of her children, one in her arms, the other three hanging on to her wherever they could.

“Oh, Pen, I’m sorry to just appear like this. But I need to take Lea to the doctor and Mikey’s not home and I thought...” she looked around at her children. “It’ll just be for an hour or so.”

Pen bit her lip thinking about the council catering. “I do need to get up to the town hall,” she said. “I’m catering the council meeting.”

“That won’t be a problem,” Moira said, backing toward the door. “The kids’ll help. They can carry things, they’re no trouble.” Her eyes were pleading.

Pen saw her quiet afternoon of preparing the catering swirling down the drain. But she smiled anyway. It might be nice to have some cheerful voices around. “Alright then, glad to help.”

“Thank you,” said Moira, looking relieved as she disappeared out the door.

Pen watched her go as she handed each child a small cinnamon bun. Just before she turned away from the window, Ash came out of next door, locking the door behind her before loping off easily down the high street.

And Pen was sure that her heart skipped a beat as Ash disappeared around a corner.

Chapter Seven

The sand stretched away, yellow and wet, into the distance as the sea hissed on the shore and the wind blew Ash's hair into her eyes. She walked steadily over the beach, continuing until she hit rocks and then turning to walk back, feeling the air fresh in her lungs.

There was a lot to be said for being able to walk on the beach. Enough that by the end of her walk she was seriously considering a move. After all, she worked from home, it wouldn't be like she had to totally up-end her life or anything. Walking on the beach every morning could be a good thing. An excellent thing.

She could sell her flat in London. She could even, if she wanted, keep the little flat here and sell the bookshop.

Because she had to sell the bookshop. What the hell else was she supposed to do with it? She knew as much about book-selling as she knew about stamp collecting. And even less than that about romance novels.

In fact, she still blushed slightly every time she walked into the shop as though the dirty parts were leaking out of the books and infecting her or something. Which was definitely ridiculous.

Not that Tetherington itself was a bad place. It seemed very nice actually. She couldn't think of much of a reason why she shouldn't stay here. The fact that she was already in possession of property just made things more convenient.

When she got back to the shop, she put the kettle on and switched on the computer on the shop counter, fully intending to go through the shop's accounts. Without thinking, she untied the ribbon on the box that the bouncy blonde woman had left and helped herself to what was inside.

"Huh." She eyed the biscuit. "Not bad," she said to herself, taking another bite. Actually, that was uncharitable. It was more than not bad. It was very good.

She helped herself to another as she opened files and scanned numbers.

She was snapped back to attention by a velvety thump. Looking up, she saw the orange cat on the counter.

"I thought I threw you out."

The cat regarded her stonily and Ash sighed.

"Fine, but you're leaving again in the morning."

It stretched, yawned, and curled itself up on the counter, still watching her.

"It looks like old Auntie Mary was doing alright for herself," Ash said, scrolling through a spreadsheet. "In fact, selling books is a lot more profitable than I'd have thought. Although, I suppose your stock never goes off, that's got to be a big advantage."

She closed down the spreadsheet and opened another file.

"She's into online sales as well, good for her." Ash paused for a second. "She was into online sales, I suppose."

She stood up straighter, frowning at the cat. “What was she like? You knew her. You probably knew her better than anyone. I’ve been picturing a doddering old lady, but now I’m thinking she might not have been quite that at all.”

The cat yawned again and closed its eyes.

“You’re not staying,” said Ash.

It wasn’t staying. She didn’t want a cat and besides, she was selling the place, she couldn’t have random animals wandering in and out at all times of the day, could she?

The cat didn’t respond to her.

Ash sighed and looked around. If she wanted to know more about Aunt Mary then she supposed she was in the right place. After all, how better to find out about someone? She had Mary’s entire life at her disposal.

Okay, it was slightly creepy, but the lady was dead and, Ash told herself, she was doing the right thing. Snythe may be convinced that Ash belonged here, but she wasn’t entirely comfortable with the idea herself. Maybe she could find some evidence that this Mary really was her aunt.

Of course, that might lead to knowing more about her father. She wasn’t sure how she felt about that. She’d never had any burning desire to track him down or anything. Then again, maybe she should. Maybe she ran the risk of developing some horrible genetic disease, or birthing twins, or growing a third nipple or something.

She tapped her fingers on the counter and took another biscuit. They really were very good. Except they did now remind her that there would be a downside to deciding to live in a small town. Neighbors and plenty of them. And people poking into her

business. She didn't like that idea.

She sniffed and the cat on the counter breathed a deep sigh of irritation and opened one eye to glare at her.

"Alright, alright, I'm going," she said. "I'll be in the back if you need me." She paused to glare back at it for a second. "But you're not staying."

The cat closed its eye again and went back to sleep.

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THE KITCHEN YIELDED little information other than that Mary liked PG Tips and full fat milk. She wasn't much of a cook, apparently, since the cupboards were filled with tins of soup and spaghetti.

Ash sucked on her teeth and made her way upstairs.

She wasn't completely alright with this digging around, she realized. She was self-aware enough to understand that her discomfort came from the fact that she'd hate anyone digging through her own things. The very thought of it made her shudder.

But then what would that somebody find?

She thought of her own neat flat. Books on the shelves, computer on its table, ready meals in the freezer. She wasn't exactly giving much away, was she?

That was how she liked it though. She'd never been one for other people, not really. She was comfortable in her own skin, comfortable alone, and that was that. She was indisputably the polar opposite of her mother, something that Ash was satisfied with and her mother was bemused by. But Ash didn't need a parade of men in and out of her life to make her feel like she was beautiful or something.

In fact, beautiful didn't factor into her life at all.

If she had to think about beautiful, she supposed she'd think of someone like Pen next door, with her blond curls and her luscious curves and her bright smile. That was beauty. Ash herself was just... stringy.

There was a set of pictures on the mantelpiece, the same woman appearing in a few of them, enough times that Ash assumed it had to be Mary. She grinned. Mary was stringy too, all long legs and narrow hips, more masculine than she might have cared for. Or maybe not, maybe she liked the androgyny.

Ash frowned at the picture. How did a woman like this end up owning a romance bookshop?

She put the picture carefully back in its place and started opening cupboards and pulling out drawers.

But after an hour she'd found nothing more incriminating than a secret stash of crime novels, which she supposed a romance bookseller might consider contraband.

She sighed and ran her fingers through her hair. There was little here that let her know who Mary really was. She eyed the hatch to the attic and her back groaned in protest.

It was late, the attic would have to wait for another day. It was time to open a tin of spaghetti and start winding down for the night.

There was plenty of spaghetti in the kitchen cupboard, and Ash heated it up in a pan on the stove. While it was heating she went into the bookshop, the cat was nowhere to be seen. She sucked on her teeth as she looked around, before finally selecting a book from a shelf marked 'Our Bestsellers.' It had a bird on the cover. That couldn't be too bad, she figured.

Almost as an afterthought, she grabbed a couple more biscuits on her way back to the kitchen.

"GET THAT CAT out of here," Ash said when she came down in the morning to find

George feeding the animal.

“He lives here,” pointed out George.

“Well, he needs to not live here. Either he moves in with that woman next door or he goes to the rescue center,” said Ash, putting the kettle on for coffee.

She watched as George stroked the cat and had a thought. “You must have known Mary pretty well.”

“As well as anyone else,” George said.

“So what was she like?”

He smiled. “Fun, smart, loving. She was kind and had a good word for everyone.”

“Sounds like a veritable saint,” Ash said, thinking that Mary might have looked slightly like her but was apparently her opposite when it came to personality. She poured water over instant coffee and went out into the shop.

Light streamed through the windows and the sign on the door was turned to open.

“Um, what’s happening here?”

George had followed her but now he stopped. “What do you mean?”

“We’re open?”

“Aren’t we?” he asked. He started to flush. “I mean, I sort of assumed when you said you wanted me to work, and well, maybe I shouldn’t have, but then, what’s the point of a shop that’s not open?”

“It’s not quite my shop yet,” Ash said thoughtfully. She sniffed. “You’ve got a point though. A closed shop makes no money. We’ll be open for now.”

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“For now?” asked George.

The shop door opened and Ash sighed.

The irritating blonde was smiling and proffering a plate of what looked like croissants. “Morning,” she caroled.

“Room service?” Ash asked acidly.

“Just a few leftovers,” said Pen still smiling. “They’re still warm, want one?”

Ash’s stomach grumbled and much against her better judgment she took a pastry.

“What do you mean for now?” George asked again, taking a croissant of his own. “You said we’ll be open for now, what does that mean?”

Ash tore the warm croissant apart with her hands and looked him steadily in the eye. “I mean we’ll stay open for now, providing you know what you’re doing to run this place. It’s adamn sight easier to sell a going concern than it is to sell a closed one.”

“Sell?” George said.

“Sell?” said Pen. And for the first time since she’d known her, Ash saw the smile drop from Pen’s face.

Chapter Eight

“It’s a catastrophe, that’s what it is,” Pen said, holding the twenty pound note Mr. Gupta had just given her and waving it around.

“Really, I just came in for a croissant,” said the newsagent patiently. “I have no idea what’s catastrophic about that in the slightest.”

“Not you!” laughed Pen. She put her elbows on the counter. “So, the new owner of the bookshop just moved in.”

This perked Mr. Gupta’s interest. “Indeed? And what are they like?”

Pen grinned thinking about Ash. “Oh, tall, dark and attractive, now that you mention it.” She stared sternly at Mr. Gupta. “Not that you should get any ideas.”

“I should think that Mrs. Gupta would erase any such ideas from my mind,” he said. He winked at Pen. “So, are you in with a chance, as the kids say?”

Pen sighed. “I do hope so. I’ve been wooing her with cakes, but so far I’m not getting quite as far as I’d like.” She screwed up her mouth. “She does keep throwing me out.”

“I can see why that could be a catastrophe,” said Mr. Gupta, holding onto his paper bag.

“But that’s not the catastrophe,” Pen said patiently. “The catastrophe is that she wants to sell the bookshop.”

“I see.” He scratched his head. “I mean, I suppose someone else nice might buy it.”

“Or someone terrible might,” Pen said. “Or someone might buy it and turn it into a... a flower shop or an estate agents... or...” She lifted an eyebrow at Mr. Gupta. “Or a

newsagents.”

His face paled a little. “Yes, I do see how that might not be quite what the town needs.”

“What the town needs is its bookshop,” said Pen. “And I’m going to save it.”

Mr. Gupta smiled at her. “That’s what I very much admire about you, Pen. Your can-do attitude, your sunny smile, the world would be a better place with more people like you in it. So, what’s your plan.”

Pen pulled a face. “That’s where I fall down. I don’t exactly have a plan just at the moment.”

“Perhaps you can use your womanly charms on this bookshop owner.”

“Trust me, I’ve been trying. I’m starting to think she might be immune. Or gluten intolerant,” Pen said with a shudder. “But never fear, I’ll think of something.”

“Well, the town is behind you on this,” Mr. Gupta said. “And I shall put on my thinking cap.”

“Very much appreciated,” Pen said, finally opening the till and making change. “Enjoy your breakfast.”

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Mr. Gupta chuckled and left, holding the door open for Moira Hadley. “Pen, I just wanted to say thank you for yesterday, you were a life saver.”

“Not a problem,” Pen said, thinking about the pleasant couple of hours she’d spent making sandwiches while the children colored. “I’m happy to step in any time.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Moira said, ducking back out of the shop with a smile.

Pen started to arrange pastries on the shelves, sliding things forward so that they looked neater. She sighed as she did so, because this wasn’t quite what she wanted.

At the beginning, when she’d used the small inheritance her mother had left her to buy the bakery, she’d made everything by hand. Everything. She’d prided herself on it. Nowadays, there were plenty of products here that she had to buy frozen and bake. The croissants, for example.

She just didn’t have the time or the money to do things the way she wanted.

Not that she planned on letting that stop her. The bakery was a lovely place to be, and she was proud of it. She was certain that one day something would show up. Maybe she’d win the lottery, she played faithfully every week. Or maybe, she thought with a flip of her stomach, she’d fall in love with a rich stranger.

Was Ash rich?

She looked well dressed enough. But it was so hard to tell. Even if she weren’t rich, there was a lot to be said about her. About those narrow hips and those wide eyes and

the way she brushed her short hair off her forehead.

Mind you, there were equally plenty of not so positive things to say about her. Like the fact that she kept throwing Pen out of the shop even though it was now clearly open.

Pen was determinedly not losing hope though. She'd seen Ash slope away to the beach last night, had followed her as far as the promenade where she'd watched as Ash strode along the sand. And as Pen had turned away to head to her crochet circle at the pub, she'd thought that anyone who liked to walk by the sea had to have some romance in them.

Perhaps working at Mended Hearts would rub off on Ash. Perhaps it would soften her. Perhaps when she got used to things and had settled in the corners would get knocked off and she'd change her mind.

"I'm dying of thirst," said a voice as the door opened.

"Then allow me to sustain you," Pen said as George draped himself over the counter. "Things not going well, I take it?"

"If you consider the shop getting sold from under my feet and me becoming unemployed for the second time in a week not going well, then no, they're not."

Pen switched the coffee machine on. "She's going to change her mind, George, she'll fall in love with the town, with the shop, and she'll change her mind."

"She'll fall in love with you, you mean," George said, getting his own cup from the stack by the machine. "And she's not going to change her mind. You haven't spent as much time with her as I have. She's... I don't know."

“She’s what?” Pen prompted.

“She’s... strict. Cold. I don’t know. It’s like she only thinks about things, not about people. The only non-business related thing she’s asked me all morning was about Mary, and she didn’t seem especially satisfied with my answer when I told her Mary was nice.”

“So, she’s interested in her aunt, that’s good, we can use that,” Pen said.

“We can lure her with songs of her lost family, like sirens or something?” George said, rolling his eyes. “She’s not like you, Pen. She’s not a romantic. She’s a realist.”

“I’m a realist,” Pen protested, handing George his coffee. “I don’t live in a fantasy world.”

The shop bell dinged. “Morning, Pen.”

“Morning, Elspeth,” Pen said to the cheerful red-head. “What can I help you with?”

“I’m just in for those cakes for the kids.”

“Oh, right you are,” said Pen, pulling out the cardboard box that she’d filled earlier. “On break time, are they?”

“They are,” agreed Elspeth. “And they’re right little heathens today, I tell you. Twenty-five five-year-olds and they’ve all got the devil in them. I’m hoping the cakes will work as some kind of reward system and keep them behaving.”

“What have you got them doing?” Pen asked as she taped the box up.

“We’re working on our community project for the term,” Elspeth said, holding down

the flaps so Pen could tape them better. “We’re going to plant a garden and then sell the vegetables to raise money for some new playground equipment. But all these kids know about nowadays is fast food. They’ve asked me if we can grow tacos twice already this morning.”

Pen laughed. “Still, it’ll be good for them,” she said, pushing the box toward the teacher. “Enjoy.”

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“Thanks, Pen,” Elspeth said, taking the box.

“Right, you’re a realist,” George said when the primary teacher had left. “You don’t live in a fantasy world at all.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Pen asked, sweeping crumbs from the counter.

“It means that you’ve just handed over a box of cakes to someone without asking for money in exchange. You do actually understand how a business is supposed to work, don’t you?”

“I understand how a community is supposed to work,” said Pen sharply.

George sighed. “I don’t know how you make a profit when you give away half your stock every day. Mind you, if Ash could be as nice as you, I suppose I’d still have a job, wouldn’t I?”

“I’ve told you that you can come and work here,” said Pen.

“You can pay me in cakes,” George said with a grin. “And if I don’t get back to the bookshop, she’s going to have my head. I’m only supposed to be on a ten minute break.”

He was finishing up his coffee when the thought struck Pen. Something in what Elspeth had said stirred something inside her.

“A community project,” she said.

“Hmm?” asked George, putting his empty cup down.

Pen put both hands on the counter. “A community project,” she said again.

“Yeah, repeating that isn’t going to help,” said George. “I’m going to need more info.”

“Listen, this community needs a bookshop. And it’s a good business according to you, right?”

“It is,” agreed George.

“So we can agree that Ash selling the bookshop might not be in the best interests of the community. After all, we’ve got no idea who might buy it next, or who might want to change it. And Tetherington is known for the fact that it has a romance-only bookshop. In fact, it could almost be considered a cultural monument.”

“That’s putting it a bit strongly,” said George carefully, eyeing Pen.

“Is it though?” Pen asked. “Because I think that Mended Hearts is an important part of our town community.”

George’s eyes opened wide as he cottoned on to what Pen was saying. “You’re thinking that Mended Hearts should be a community project,” he said.

“Why not?” Pen said. “We could take it in turns to run it, we could donate profits to charity, we could keep our bookshop.”

George blew out a breath. “Yeah, that’s all very well. But you do realize that before we do any of those things, we have to do something a lot bigger and more important.”

“Of course,” Pen said with a gleam in her eye. “We have to buy the bookshop.”

Chapter Nine

As a child, Ash spent plenty of time alone. What with being an only child and her mother being busy arranging weddings and divorces, it wasn't like there was a constant stream of children in and out of her house. Not that she'd really minded. She'd been happy with a book or a game or a TV program.

And being up in the little bookshop attic reminded her a lot of being a child, maybe it was the solitariness of it. Maybe it was just the idea of sneaking away from normal life for a while.

She poked through dusty boxes, finding Christmas decorations and discarded books. A whole set of boxes contained clothes and she pulled some out, trying to gauge what Mary had liked to wear. Trousers was the overwhelming answer. Trousers and shirts and a few hippy kind of dresses.

There was a set of smaller boxes near the roof hatch and Ash had to sit down to get to those. As she sat, she heard a meowing from the bottom of the ladder. The orange cat was standing on its hind paws with its front paws on the third rung.

“Pshht, get away from there,” Ash said. “Go on, get.”

Instead, the animal bounded up the ladder and Ash groaned. She had visions of chasing the thing around the attic.

“When I'm done here, we're leaving. And if you don't leave when I tell you to, I'm going to close the hatch on you,” she warned it.

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The cat gave her a baleful glare before strolling off into the shadows.

The smaller boxes held letters, mostly bills and financial things, and pictures. Ash flipped through them but didn't recognize anything. Not that she would. She'd never even seen a photo of her father, so she couldn't identify him if he was in any of them.

The only face that was starting to look familiar was Mary's. And Ash found that she was beginning to be curious about the woman herself. Really curious. Who was she? How did someone so... unromantic looking end up running a romance bookshop?

Was it just a case of being a good entrepreneur? Maybe Mary herself was no fan of romance, but the business was such a good one that it didn't matter?

She flicked through the photos again.

It wasn't just the business, she realized as she watched Mary's face. It was the fact that she was happy. Really happy. You could tell just by looking at her that Mary was content and comfortable in who and what she was, in her role in life. That she was alone, Ash saw no signs of any serious relationships, but not lonely.

That was what was speaking to her. She could see herself in Mary, just a touch, yet Mary seemed to have this big life, this happy life, and Ash wondered just how she did it.

And from there she wondered where Mary had come from, and from there she started to think about herself and where she'd come from. It all came back down to her father.

Alright, she could excuse all this by pretending that she wanted to make sure that the inheritance was hers by right. But it was also a question of finding herself.

She put the boxes away and the cat appeared again, meowing at her before standing in front of the hole in the floor that led down again.

“I’m not carrying you,” Ash said.

The cat looked at her.

She sighed and picked him up. She couldn’t have him running around all by himself upstairs. The noise would keep her awake.

She was carrying him down the ladder when she heard knocking on the front door. Who could it be now? The shop was closed for the day, George had left, she’d been promising herself a walk on the beach. Interruptions were not welcome.

She deposited the cat on the landing, pushed the attic ladder up, and closed the hatch before she went down to the shop.

There she found two faces peering through the window, hands cupped around their eyes trying to see inside.

“Jesus Christ,” she groaned.

“It’s us, let us in,” George said.

Ash hesitated. If she stayed very still, maybe they’d think she was out.

“We can see you,” Pen said, her nose smushed against the glass. “I’ve got brownies.”

Ash gritted her teeth and went to the door, unlocking it and yanking it open. "I do wish you'd stop trying to bribe me with baked goods, it won't work."

"What makes you think it's bribery?" Pen said, with wide innocent blue eyes.

"Isn't it?" Ash asked.

Pen wrinkled her nose. "Well, perhaps in this case it sort of might be?"

"It definitely is," George said. "But on the bright side, Pen's brownies are amazing."

Ash sighed and rubbed her eyes. "You're not going to go away, are you?"

"Um, not really," said Pen. "Not until we've talked to you anyway."

Ash ran her tongue over her teeth. "If I let you in here, you've got five minutes to say your piece and then you're to leave me alone. The shop's closed and I have things to do." Like trying to figure out who my father is. Huh. She hadn't realized she'd decided that. And trying to figure out how Mary made such a nice life for herself being alone.

Not everyone had to get married. She'd explained that to her mother countless times, not that she listened. Ash had never had that girlish desire to march down the aisle. Nor, apparently, had Mary. Which made Ash want to get to know her better, because as far as she could tell, most everyone else in the world wanted to be with someone.

She eyed Pen who was practically jumping up and down with excitement, then George, who was looking at her with puppy dog eyes. If she let them in she could perhaps tease a little more information out of them about her alleged aunt.

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She stepped back and let them in. “Five minutes.”

“Shall we go in the kitchen?” George said.

“Are you inviting yourself into my kitchen?” asked Ash, following them both in.

“It’s not your kitchen yet,” George reminded her.

“And I’m beginning to regret letting you stay on,” Ash said. Pen put a box on the kitchen table and George put the kettle on. “I did say five minutes.”

“Let’s sit,” said George.

Pen looked like she was holding something inside, like a kid with a secret. She was bouncing and Ash took a seat with a sigh. “What?”

Pen and George shared a look. “Alright, so we sort of need to ask you a favor,” Pen said.

“No,” said Ash.

“You haven’t even heard it yet,” said George.

Ash saw Pen take a very deep breath. “The thing is,” said Pen. “The thing is that the bookshop is very much a part of town. It’s a part of our community and we’re famous for having it.”

“So you’re here to persuade me not to sell it,” Ash interrupted, feeling slightly irate. The shop was hers, well, almost hers, nobody could tell her what to do with it.

“Have a brownie,” said George, opening the box and pushing it toward her.

“Stop bribing me,” said Ash. But the smell was tempting, rich and chocolatey. She took a small square. “Is there anything in these?” she asked suspiciously. “Drugs?”

“Love,” Pen said.

Ash growled at her.

“Um, would we be able to persuade you not to sell the shop?” asked Pen hopefully.

“I’m an accountant, not a bookseller. I have no desire to run a shop.”

“Why not?” asked George. “It’s a good business, you could make money.”

“And have to deal with people all day?” asked Ash. “No, thank you.”

Pen shared another look with George. “Alright then,” she said.

“Alright then? It’s that easy?” Ash scoffed. She took a bite of her brownie and found that it was just as gorgeous as it smelled. Rich and decadent and just perfect. She relented just a little with the sweetness of the dessert. “You aren’t trying very hard if you want me to keep the place.”

“We can’t force you,” Pen said with a shrug. “I’m pretty sure that all the baked goods in the world wouldn’t make you do something that you don’t want to do.”

“Know me that well, do you?” Ash asked, squinting at her. Good lord, that hair was

almost golden in the kitchen light, sparkling like something out of a shampoo commercial.

“No,” Pen said, smiling. “I don’t know you well at all. Not through lack of trying.”

“Hmmp,” was all Ash said, taking a bite of brownie.

“But we know we can’t force you not to sell if that’s what you want to do,” George put in.

“So where does that favor come in then?” asked Ash.

Yet another deep breath from Pen. Many more like that and she’d be hyperventilating. “Well, we’d like to ask you to, um, to give us a little time before you sell so that we can come up with a plan to, um, to buy the shop ourselves.”

Ash felt her eyebrows rise so high they were in danger of shooting up off her face. “You two?”

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“Not exactly,” said Pen. “The community. We, um, we don’t have an exact plan yet, and we want to do this properly. We just sort of want the right of first refusal when you sell. If, um, well, if you could see your way to sticking around Tetherington for a little while longer that is.”

Ash looked from one to the other.

It would be easier in the long run, she thought. Having a buyer already lined up. And it was no skin off her nose. If the two of them couldn’t come up with the money, she could always sell to someone else.

It would give her time to find out a little more about Mary. About her father.

She sniffed. “What’s in it for me?”

“As many baked goods as you can eat?” offered Pen with a hopeful look on her face.

“And the shop practically runs itself, so you’ll be making money while you wait,” added George.

The cat strolled into the kitchen and hopped up on the table, giving the brownies a desultory sniff before going over to headbutt Pen.

“You take the cat,” Ash said.

“This is his home,” George protested.

“You take the cat and I’ll give you three months to come up with the money.”

Three months would be long enough. Long enough to find out what she needed to. Long enough to figure out if she could live in a town like this, if she wanted to live by the sea instead of in London. Maybe long enough for Amanda Brown and family to forget that she existed and never invite her for dinner again.

Pen jumped up from her chair and came around the table. “It’s a deal,” she squealed.

And before Ash knew what was happening she was being squashed against a prodigious bosom and practically suffocated in a sweet-smelling hug.

Chapter Ten

Practically as soon as she wrapped Ash up in her arms, Pen knew that she’d potentially made a mistake. But she couldn’t help holding on for an extra second, feeling the slightness of Ash, the warmth of her. It was only when George cleared his throat that Pen finally let go.

Ash was looking red and flustered, a look that made Pen’s blood warm.

“That’s settled then,” George said.

“Not quite,” said Ash. “I mean, for a start, there’s the question of how exactly you’re going to go about this.”

George shook his head. “Oh no, I agreed to be here for the actual telling part, but I’ve got hot yoga at the community center in half an hour and if I’m not in my leotard by quarter till I’ll have to have a mat at the back.”

“You’ve done your bit for tonight,” Pen said, because she had promised him he could

leave. Not just because him leaving would mean that she and Ash were alone. Actually, now that she thought about it, being alone with Ash was a bit terrifying. “Unless you want to stay?” she added.

“I do not, I’ll be back in the morning for work,” George said. “And your kettle’s boiled, by the way.”

He took himself off and Pen busied herself with the kettle and pouring tea so that she didn’t have to look at Ash sitting at the table with her arms folded.

“Are you really serious about this?” Ash asked.

“Deadly,” said Pen, putting tea mugs down on the table and sitting. “The bookshop is part of our community and I think we should keep it.”

“Got enough cash on you to finance a bookshop then?” asked Ash with a raised eyebrow.

“Of course not,” Pen grinned. “But we’ll get there. Don’t worry. Something will turn up, it always does.”

Ash pushed her lips out in a doubtful expression. “Well, as long as you remember that you’re on a time schedule and that I’m not hanging around here forever.”

“Not a problem,” said Pen, patting Fabio as he purred on the table. “And I’ll get Fabio out of your hair as well.”

Ash looked at her watch. “Your five minutes is more than up, by the way.”

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“Oh, come on, let me finish my tea at least,” Pen said. “Have another brownie.”

“It’s not good to eat chocolate so close to bedtime,” Ash said, taking a square anyway.

“Says who?”

“Says anyone. Eating sweets before bedtime seems like a crazy idea.”

“So seven o’clock is your bedtime, is it? Good to know.” Pen breathed in the steam of her tea, looking at Ash in the fading kitchen light. She was older than she’d supposed, maybe close to forty. And though she sounded prickly, she didn’t look like she was especially uncomfortable.

“It’s my walk time, actually.”

“Noted,” said Pen, sipping her tea. “So, you’re an accountant then?”

With a sigh, Ash nodded and picked up her mug.

“Interesting?” asked Pen.

“Mmm.”

Pen put her mug down. “How are you finding Tetherington?”

“It’s fine.”

Pen sighed. “You could try a bit harder, you know? It’s just small talk. It’s not rocket science. It’s a politeness, something to make people feel at ease.”

“I don’t need to make people feel at ease,” Ash said. “Especially people that barge into my shop uninvited and make themselves cups of tea.”

“There’s no need to be mean.”

“And in real answer to your question, the town seems fine but very full of people that seem to think my business is their business.”

Pen grinned. “That’s small towns for you. You’ll learn soon enough that there’s no keeping secrets around here. Why, do you have a few skeletons in your closet?”

“I have not a single bone in a single cupboard, thank you very much,” Ash huffed. “I just happen to like being alone, that’s all.”

Pen sipped quietly at her tea. Ash took a bite of brownie and almost, almost smiled as she chewed on it. Okay, she could see George’s point. Ash was a bit... spiky. But that was what you got from living in London. Being surrounded by anonymity all the time, maybe that made you lonely, and being lonely made you grumpy. Ash just needed to practice her manners, that was all.

“Tell me what you know about Mary,” Ash said, breaking the silence and nearly making Pen drop her cup.

“Mary was lovely.”

“So says everyone. Or at least George. Anything a little more helpful than that?”

Pen wrapped her hands around her cup thinking of all the evenings she’d spent in this

kitchen with her friend.

“She came to town yonks ago, bought the shop immediately, and said she’d always wanted a romance bookshop.” Pen smiled. “A lot of people thought she was batty, but Mary just said that romance was dreams and she wanted to sell dreams. She liked making people happy. Not in a people-pleaser kind of way, but in a genuine way. She had a big heart but she also had a sharp tongue. Never afraid of telling people what she thought.” She gave Ash a look.

“What?”

“Nothing, just thinking that might run in the family.”

“What about her personal life?” Ash asked, ignoring this.

“She was everyone’s friend. Never had a quiet night. Between the WI and crochet, bookclubs and dinner parties, Mary was a social butterfly.” Pen considered this. “Maybe that part doesn’t run in the family so much.”

Ash sipped her tea. “Alright, but what about more... personal stuff. Did she have, I don’t know, a dead husband or a boyfriend or something?”

Pen shrugged. “Not that I knew of. She always seemed happy though, so I’m not sure that’s what she was looking for.”

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“Isn’t that unusual though?” Ash pushed. “I mean, most people seem to want to get married, don’t they? Most people want to be with someone?”

And Pen could tell that she was walking on shaky ground here even if she didn’t quite know why. “It might be unusual,” she said carefully. “But it was just the way Mary was. She wasn’t lonely and I don’t think she suffered from it. I think it was more that she gave so much of herself to other people that maybe when she got home she needed a little alone time?”

“Huh.” Ash shifted in her chair, ate a mouthful of brownie and swallowed. “What about getting a mortgage?”

“A mortgage?” Pen asked, surprised that they were talking about the shop again.

“Yes, it’s where you borrow money from the bank to buy property and pay it back in installments over several years.”

“I know what a mortgage is,” Pen said indignantly. She was also a hundred percent sure that there wasn’t a bank in the world that would give her one. “But if this is going to be a community project, then the community should be involved, it’s not just about me.”

“Church fetes and jumble sales aren’t going to buy a bookshop,” pointed out Ash.

“We’ll see about that,” said Pen with a grin.

Ash sighed and stood up. “You’re one of those people, aren’t you? Someone who

always thinks things are going to turn out alright. A glass half-full person, a wake up with a smile person.”

“And what’s so wrong with that?” asked Pen, standing up as well. She was obviously being dismissed.

“That’s the kind of person that always gets disappointed in life,” said Ash. “Make sure you take the cat.” She picked up the tea mugs and turned toward the sink.

For a second Pen remembered that hug. But it seemed far away now. She picked up Fabio without protest and held him close. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said.

“Not necessary,” said Ash, not turning around. “Come when you’ve got something to tell me. You don’t need to drop in all the time.”

Pen bit her lip but said nothing, leaving quietly with Fabio in her arms.

THE MORE SHE thought about it, the better the idea seemed. But she couldn’t get around the fact that money was going to be an issue. With Ash being an accountant and all, they weren’t likely to get a bargain.

She’d been up since four, stirring bread doughs and putting egg washes on pastries, working automatically and humming to herself as Fabio chased invisible mice before disappearing out of the back door to be about his business. The bakery smelled delicious and was quiet and light. It was Pen’s favorite time of the day.

Starting at around eight there was a small morning rush, and she had to wipe off floury hands to deal with children on their way to school and mothers hurrying back from dropping younger ones off. It wasn’t until after ten that she had time to go back to the kitchen and start cleaning up.

She was whistling a cheerful song when the shop bell dinged.

“With you in a second,” she shouted through, sweeping up the pile of flour and dirt into a dustpan and then washing her hands before going into the shop.

Marjorie Thurst was standing at the counter looking impatient. Pen greeted her with one of her best smiles.

“What can I help you with today?” she chirped.

“I just came in to see if you can cater a small lunch today,” said the councilwoman. “Just some quick sandwiches and coffees. Deliverable at around twelve. We’re having a special meeting.”

Pen beamed. So she had impressed the council. Alright, she was only getting paid cost, but still, the more people ate her food, the more people would buy it later. She could see it now, catering children’s parties and business deals and even people coming in for lunchtime snacks.

“I’d be happy to,” she said. “How many people?”

“Eight to ten,” said the councilwoman.

“Consider it done,” Pen said, making a note for herself. “What’s this special meeting all about then?”

If Marjorie Thurst had been the kind of woman to roll her eyes, she would have done so. Instead, she just tutted. “The development grant again,” she said. “We’re on the cusp of being accepted, but we’re not quite there yet.”

“Alrighty,” said Pen. “I’ll get those things over to the town hall by twelve. Best of

luck with the meeting.”

It wasn't until the councilwoman had left that the penny dropped and Pen realized that actually, Marjorie Thurst might have given her exactly the answer she was looking for.

Chapter Eleven

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Ash came downstairs with her nose in her book and narrowly avoided tripping over the cat, which was lying on the third stair from the bottom.

“Jesus Christ,” she said. “I thought you’d been evicted.”

“I told you,” said George. “It’s his home. He doesn’t want to leave. Besides, you can’t have a cat called Fabio anywhere other than a romance bookshop, can you?”

“He’s going to have to get used to being elsewhere,” Ash said crisply. She eyed George. “You’re here early.”

“It’s almost half past nine,” he said. “What are you reading?”

“Nothing.”

“Is that...” George craned his neck to see. “Huh, A Crown of Hearts and Desires. It was alright, what do you think?”

Ash felt herself blush. “I only took it because I didn’t bring a book with me.”

“You’re a bookseller, at least temporarily,” George said. “It’s sort of expected that you read the stock. And you didn’t answer my question.”

“It’s alright, I suppose,” said Ash, putting the book down.

“A rave review then.”

She sighed. “Listen, it’s fine. If you want the honest truth, I like the actual story, the plot is sound and I want to know what happens next. It’s the romance I’m having a problem with. I just don’t believe it, and I think it’s ruining the book.”

“Fair enough.” He walked over to another bookshelf and picked up a book. “Here, try this one when you’re done. It might speak to you more.”

She looked at the colorful cover and shrugged. “Fine. Now, in terms of what you need to be doing today, I want a full stock-take so I know what’s on hand and, obviously, you’ll be dealing with the customers.”

“Um, yeah, that’s not going to work.”

“And why not?” asked Ash. She’d turned on the computer already and was searching for genealogy websites.

“Because most of our stock is downstairs in the cellar and customers tend to be up here. I can’t be in two places at once,” George said. “So, if you wouldn’t mind a suggestion, perhaps I’ll go down and do the stock-take and you stay up here and deal with customers.”

Ash stared at him, running her tongue over her teeth. “Because you think that my face should be the face that customers see?”

“Unless you’re planning on hiring more staff,” said George. “Or you magically know how to run a stock-check in a bookshop.” He considered her for a moment. “And you don’t have a bad face, at least you don’t when you smile, which I’ve seen you do precisely once since you’ve arrived.”

“Is cheek all a part of the service, or am I supposed to pay you extra for that?”

“I’ll bill you,” he said. “And Pen thinks you’ve got a nice face, just by the way.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” George said hurriedly, blushing a little. “Listen, it’s Monday morning, the shop’s going to be quiet, you’re not likely to have to deal with many people. And if you get stuck, then just shout down to the cellar and I’ll come up and help you.”

“Fine,” Ash said, her attention taken up by the list of results on the screen in front of her. “I suppose that’ll have to do.”

George disappeared down to the cellar and as it turned out, he was completely correct. Not a single person came in all morning, leaving Ash free to do all the genealogical research that she wanted. Not that she turned up much.

She really needed to talk to her mother, she decided over lunch. Not that that was going to happen any time soon.

IN FACT, IT wasn’t until much later that anyone came to the shop at all. George had left for the day, having done part of a stock-check and some of the online orders. Ash was about to take herself out for a walk, and was searching for the cat so that she could deposit him at the bakery next door on her way, when someone tried the shop door handle.

“We’re closed,” she shouted, ducking behind a shelf to see if the damn creature was hiding there.

Whoever it was knocked once and then twice. Ash gritted her teeth. She could make a solid guess who was going to be there. It had to be Pen, with her annoying smile and delicious biscuits. Maybe even a cake this time.

Ash's stomach rumbled with hunger. "No," she said to herself. "I'm not doing this."
If she ignored the knock for long enough, Pen would go away.

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She stumbled out from behind the shelf and then spotted the cat on top of another shelf. "There you are," she said.

There was another knock. "Excuse me?" said a voice that wasn't Pen's.

Ash turned around. She could see three clearly defined shapes through the glass door.

"Oh, just open the door," said one shape.

"The sign says closed," said another.

"Yes, closed for customers, but that's obviously not us, is it?" said the first.

Which was about when Ash remembered that the door wasn't locked at all. The handle turned and the three shapes materialized into three people, two women and one man. As they stepped inside, another two people came in behind them.

"Um, excuse me?" Ash said.

"Ah, you must be the new owner," said one of the women. "We're so glad you're here." She looked around. "Haven't had time to arrange things, have we? Never mind, never mind, I'll get on that. Sarah, can you get the other end of the sofa?"

Another woman came to help and they began shifting the couch.

"No coffee on yet?" asked the man, circling the counter. "I'll get the water heating, shall I?" And he disappeared into the kitchen.

“Excuse me?” Ash said again, louder this time.

“Yes?” asked an older lady that barely came up to Ash’s shoulder.

“Who exactly are you all?” asked Ash.

“We’re your bookclub, dear,” said the woman smiling. “Now, shall we get started?”

Ash looked around, there were now seven people in the shop, plus a man in her kitchen. They vastly outnumbered her. She took a deep breath, then another, and there was only one thing she could think of to do.

“Um, actually, I just have... I just... I’ll be one moment,” she said, dashing out of the front door.

“Oh, hello,” Pen said as Ash pushed into the bakery.

Ash took a millisecond to take things in. This was her first time in the place and it looked clean and smelled good. She was iffy about the weird flowers painted on the window, but all in all, it looked cozy.

“Are you alright?” Pen asked, coming out from behind the counter.

“No,” said Ash. “No, not at all. There’s a group of people in the shop and they’re moving furniture around and making coffee and I don’t know who any of them are.”

Pen’s face wrinkled into a smile. “Oh, you brought the bookclub back, how lovely.”

“No, no I didn’t. I had nothing to do with this.”

“Hmm,” said Pen, putting a hand on one hip. “Well, I suppose everyone heard you

were here and just assumed that the club would go on as normal.”

“Well, it can’t,” Ash said. “I don’t know the first thing about bookclubs.”

“I’m sure they’ll forgive your inexperience,” said Pen. “We’re an understanding bunch.” She untied her apron. “I’ve got the book around here somewhere, it was a nice little one this time.” She started to hunt behind the counter.

“No,” Ash said. “You don’t understand. They have to leave.”

Pen popped her head up. “No, no, that’s a terrible idea. You’ll have all sorts of gossip if that happens. And people will start avoiding the shop, that’s the last thing you need.”

Which was a fair point. And left Ash with only one choice. She cleared her throat. “I, um, I don’t suppose...” She trailed off because she really didn’t want to ask for this, she didn’t want to be indebted in the slightest.

“Give me two minutes,” Pen grinned. “I’ll bring some buns too, that’ll keep them too busy eating to talk much.”

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Ash felt her chest relax a little. She breathed out and her muscles unwound. She didn't even complain when Pen linked an arm through her own and practically escorted her into her own shop. Almost her own shop.

THE COUCH was back under the window and the coffee cups were up-ended on the draining board by the sink. Ash had even ensured that the bookclub's next read was the book she was currently reading. That way if George couldn't come in to take control of matters at least she wouldn't have to ask for too much help.

Not that she had any intention of actually running a bookclub. She did want to keep the business viable though.

"There, that wasn't too bad, was it?" beamed Pen, draping her tea towel over the back of one of the kitchen chairs. "Although it might have been a bit better if you hadn't been glowering at everyone from behind your computer."

"I was going about my own business," said Ash. "And I wasn't glowering."

"Mmm, well, you might want to work on that a little bit," Pen said. She paused as though waiting for something. Apparently, whatever she was waiting for didn't appear, because after a couple of moments, she said: "So, I'll be off then."

"Right," Ash said, wondering if it was too late for a walk on the beach now.

Pen cleared her throat. "I'll, um, get going."

"Right," Ash said again. Then she thought of something. "Take the cat."

But Pen was still hesitating.

“What?” Ash asked, anxious to get on with her evening.

“Um, nothing you want to say?” Pen asked, lifting her eyebrows suggestively.

Pen liked her face. Ash just remembered that, remembered George saying it and then dismissing it. What did that mean? Liking someone’s face? As far as Ash was concerned her face was neither likable nor unlikable. Maybe that was what Pen was waiting for, some kind of... face appreciation?

“A thank you wouldn’t go amiss,” Pen said finally.

Ash once again felt her chest loosen and her breath come easier. “Oh, right, yes, obviously. Sorry, I was distracted. Thank you. Your help was appreciated.”

Now was when Pen would ask for something in return, Ash was sure. She just hoped it had nothing to do with liking faces. Or cats.

But Pen simply smiled. “You’re very welcome,” she said as she scooped Fabio up off the kitchen table and let herself out.

Chapter Twelve

Pen was sweeping up behind the counter when Billy the postman came in.

“Morning, Billy,” she said as he pulled out a stack of letters.

“Oops, almost didn’t see you there, Fabs,” said Billy, neatly stepping over the cat to place the letters on the counter. “Since when does Fabio live over here?”

Pen sighed. “Ash doesn’t like him. Well, pretends not to like him. I’m not sure which. I mean, who couldn’t like a cat?”

“Especially one as lovely as Fabio,” Billy agreed, taking the bun that Pen offered him.

“Exactly. Anyway, she keeps sending him over here, but he just keeps going back.”

“There’s no keeping someone from home,” said Billy, leaning against the counter. “So, she’s not all that then, this Ash?”

Pen smiled a little at the memory of hugging Ash. She shouldn’t have done it, but she just hadn’t been able to help herself.

“Oh, so she is alright then?” Billy said. “You’re grinning like the Cheshire cat over there.”

“She’s... a tough nut as my mum used to say,” Pen said loyally. That had to be the truth though, didn’t it? After all, no one could be quite as cool and detached as Ash pretended to be. She had to be hiding something, covering up her feelings so people didn’t see her vulnerabilities. And Pen could definitely work with that.

“You know what my mum used to say?” Billy said. “That you can’t change a leopard’s spots. You be careful Pen, getting involved with someone who doesn’t want Fabio might not be the best thing.”

“Your mum still does say that, due to the fact that she’s very much alive and kicking. I saw her at crochet circle just the other day,” Pen said. “And since when did you become a font of romantic advice?”

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“Since Mary got me into those fantasy romance books,” Billy grinned. “Can’t get enough of ‘em. In fact, I’ll have to go and see this Ash of yours at some point to get my fix.”

Pen felt a glow at the idea that Ash could possibly be hers. “You’ll have to go and see her at some point to deliver letters,” she said. George’s head bobbed outside the window, heading into the shop. “Or you could just hand the bills over to George, he’ll do the job for you.”

“What are you volunteering me for now, Pen?” George said, coming in. “I’ll have two coffees to go.”

“She’s saying you’ll take the shop’s letters is all,” Billy said. “But as it happens, there aren’t any, so you’re getting off easy. But I’ve got a full sack, so I’m off.”

George opened his mouth and Pen jumped in before he could speak. “You know what he meant, George, don’t be juvenile.”

George giggled as Billy left and Pen put on the coffee machine. “Quite the stack of letters you’ve got, Pen-pen,” he said, his hand patting the pile of envelopes Billy had left on the counter.

Pen’s heart flickered and the back of her neck got sweaty. She tugged the letters away from him and shoved them under the counter. “I’ll deal with them later,” was all she said, knowing that dealing with them just meant adding them to the pile by the door of her little flat.

“You can’t possibly be grumpy,” George said.

“And why not?” asked Pen, placing a take away cup under the coffee stream.

“Because you’re never anything less than a hundred percent sparkly rainbows and unicorns,” laughed George. He leaned over the counter and managed to plant a kiss on Pen’s cheek. “And we do love you for it, you’re our little sunshine.”

“Alright, alright,” said Pen, blushing at the compliment.

The shop bell rang and Sarah Hanson came in, collection box rattling in her hands.

“What are we collecting for today,” Pen said cheerfully.

“Same as always at this time of year, Pen. The lifeboat fund. Morning, George,” said Sarah, gray curls stiff against her head and lipstick spreading slightly in the corners of her mouth.

“It’s no good asking me,” George said. “I’m skint. I’ve only just started working again and who knows how long that’s going to last.”

“Oooh, I heard about the new one,” said Sarah, placing her box on the counter. “I’ve heard she’s quite the little madam. Didn’t even participate in bookclub, if you can believe it.”

“Because she’s new and hadn’t read the book,” said Pen, pulling a twenty pound note out of the till and stuffing it into the collection box.

“That’s very generous, Pen,” Sarah beamed, picking up her box. “Thanks very much. I’ll be around later for a loaf of white, so set one aside for me.” She was still smiling as she left the shop.

“You don’t have to defend Ash,” George said when Sarah was gone.

“I wasn’t defending her, I was just telling the truth.”

“You were being overly generous, just like with the lifeboat fund. I mean, honestly, Pen, giving to charity is important, but you have to look after yourself as well.”

“I’m very well looked after,” Pen said, not at all believing it but equally not wanting to fight with George about anything. She probably could have used the twenty pounds for something else.

“Mmm,” was all George said about that. He sniffed. “So, had any more bright ideas about the shop then?”

“As it happens,” Pen said. “I have. In fact, I was going to text you to come around for lunch, but since you’re here now I might as well run it past you.” She took a deep breath. “So, here’s what I’m thinking: development grant.”

George frowned. “Huh?”

Pen shook her head. “Honestly, don’t you pay attention to anything in the Tetherington Times? Or, for that matter, a word that comes out of Marjorie Thurst’s mouth?”

“Nope and definitely nope,” George said.

Pen put both elbows on the counter and explained what she was talking about.

“So you think we could apply for part of the grant to buy the shop?” George said when she was done.

“I don’t see why not,” said Pen. “I looked into it a bit. The money is supposed to be allocated to projects that improve cultural life or in some way bring a sense of community, which seems like us to a T.”

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George blew out a breath. “It’s a fine idea, Pen, but are you sure you can convince the council to go along with it?”

Pen shrugged. “We can but try. And you’re going to help.”

George picked up both coffees. “Of course I am.” He pushed the shop door open with an elbow and Fabio sneaked out of the gap. George sighed. “She’ll send him back again,” he warned.

Pen felt a tingle of warmth. “I’ll come and get him a bit later,” she said. It would give her a chance to bring Ash some of the Battenberg cake she’d been working on.

IT WAS AFTER lunch by the time Pen had time to leave a note on the bakery door and take a small box to the bookshop.

“Oh no,” Ash said, when Pen walked in.

“Oh no?” Pen asked lightly. Not really the reaction she’d been hoping for.

“I thought we talked about this. There’s no need to drop by all the time.”

“I bought cake,” Pen said temptingly.

“If I ate cake every day I’d be the size of a house,” Ash said. She turned back to the computer screen. “Come back when you’ve got something to tell me about buying the shop.”

“I’ll just leave this here then, shall I?” Pen said, putting the box on the shop counter and catching a quick glimpse of Ash’s computer screen. “Oh, I used that site once. Me and my cousin did a family tree for my uncle’s birthday.”

“Right, well maybe you know how to add a record then,” Ash said, turning the screen. “I keep getting an error like this.”

“That’s because you haven’t filled in the title box at the top,” Pen said. “Here, let me.” She typed quickly and pressed the ‘add record’ button. “There you go.”

“Huh,” Ash said. “Thanks.”

“No problem, happy to help.”

Ash turned to her, eyes dark blue and nose sharp and Pen could just kiss her in the early afternoon light. “And is there something I can help you with? Other than gossip, attempts to feed me cake, or things of the like?”

Pen caught a glance of Fabio. “I came for the cat. He escaped.”

“Oh, good.” Ash looked a bit unsettled and Pen had to smile again. “Make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“I’ll try,” Pen said. “But this is his home, he doesn’t seem to want to be anywhere else.” She cleared her throat. “And on the subject of the shop, George and I have had an idea about finding funding. Nothing concrete yet, but I wanted to let you know that we are working on it.”

“Good,” said Ash. She paused, raising an eyebrow. “Anything else?”

She’s just not used to living in a small town, Pen reminded herself. She’s not used to

being a part of a community. A little patience, a little time, and she would get used to it, maybe even grow to like it. And then, said a little voice at the back of her head, she might even want to stay.

“Um, yes, actually,” Pen found herself saying. “There’s a pub just down the road, just on the sea front, you can’t miss it.”

“I haven’t missed it. I’m not blind,” Ash said, attention on her computer screen.

“Yes, well, there’s a sing-along tonight. I’ll be there. George too. If you fancied coming?”

Ash finally turned her full attention to Pen. “I don’t think so,” she said. “Do you?”

Pen sighed. “I suppose not,” she said. She took a breath. “I’ll be going then.”

“Mmm,” said Ash.

Maybe she really was as cold as George said she was. Pen went out into the sunshine. It was only when she got back to the bakery that she realized she hadn’t even asked Ash what she was doing on the genealogy website.

Chapter Thirteen

Ash sighed and closed the final page of the book. She contemplated throwing it at the wall but decided that would probably be bad form for a bookshop owner, however temporary she might be. It just wasn’t... satisfying. Okay, so the couple had beat their obstacles, fallen in love, but so what? She’d finished the book only because she hadn’t wanted to leave it incomplete.

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In the end she tucked the book tidily under the counter and wiggled the computer mouse to make her screen come to life.

She checked her email, flicked through a few sites, and then sighed again.

Her original plan hadn't been amazing, but she'd figured she'd get at least something from one of the genealogical websites. Some kind of... what? Now that she thought about it, it wasn't like she had that much information to give herself.

After all, what did she know other than her own name and her mother's? She didn't even... Quickly she clicked onto Google and made a search request. Alright, that might be a start. She clicked again, filling in the appropriate information and her credit card number. A copy of her birth certificate would be with her within three weeks, she was promised on the final screen.

Great. Only almost a month. She gritted her teeth. Why was it so hard to find anything out? She was beginning to sympathize slightly with solicitor Snythe. Tracking down families was a lot harder than she'd imagined.

Mind you, if her father was anything like the idiot she'd just read about in that stupid book, all illogical feelings and doing anything for love, she didn't think she'd be able to stand him. Not that she actually planned on meeting him. Probably.

Mostly she just wanted to sort out this bookshop business. She wanted to be sure that she was the right person and that some rightful heir wasn't going to come tracking her down years from now to demand money from the sale.

Then she wanted to know more about Mary. She still couldn't shake the feeling that there was something she needed there, some secret that Mary was keeping about who she was, the life she led, the happiness she had.

There was a faint meow as the damned cat slipped around the counter and then hopped up on top of a bookshelf. Ash bared her teeth and growled at him. He ignored her completely.

"Nice look," George said, coming up the stairs from the cellar just in time. "A bark or growl won't do you any good though, Fab loves dogs. All the online orders are done, Billy will pick them up in the morning when he's done with his rounds."

"Billy?" Ash asked.

"Um, postman?" George said. "Do you not know his name yet? You've been here nearly two weeks."

"Why would I know the postman's name?"

"Because..." George shook his head. "Never mind."

"No, I want to know, why would I?"

"Because he drops in here nearly every day and asks how you are and gives you your letters and because why wouldn't you? You live here now."

"Temporarily," Ash reminded him, though the idea of keeping the flat upstairs was growing on her. She walked on the beach every day and the quiet evenings were perfect for getting her work done. She was starting to like it here, to like the way the days were all the same.

There was no opera, of course, or lunchtime concerts, or museums to go to. But she supposed she could still take the train up to London for those things from time to time.

“Right, temporarily,” George said. He sniffed. “Pen thinks you’ll end up staying, you know.”

Ah, there was the current obstacle standing in her way. If she did stay, how was she supposed to persuade the blonde to just leave her alone? Or at least to knock before coming in, and to limit her visits to no more than once a week rather than two or three times a day.

“Mmm,” was all Ash felt comfortable saying to this.

“You should give her a chance,” said George. “She’s really lovely, you’ll like her if you give her a chance and you never know, you two might—”

“We two nothing, she’s an interfering little... something,” Ash said sharply.

George rolled his eyes. “Fine, well, then, I suppose I’m off. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Hold on,” Ash said, putting her hands on the counter. “Where do you think you’re going? It’s only one o’clock.”

“It’s my half day,” said George, picking up his jacket from behind the counter. “You’ll be fine, don’t worry.”

“Well... what if I’m not?” she said, starting to panic slightly. “What if... I don’t know, what if there’s some kind of book emergency?”

“There are no book emergencies,” George said, pulling his coat on. “And if there

were, well, I suppose you'd just have to deal with them. This is your shop, after all. Temporarily, that is."

"But..." Ash took a breath. "How about we ask Pen to come in and help?"

George looked at her as if she'd grown two heads. "Pen has her own shop to run, she doesn't have time to run around after you. Which is something you should remember. All those biscuits and cakes she brings you, they all take work, you know?"

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“I know,” Ash said, coloring a little and suddenly feeling just the tiniest bit ungrateful. She did know that. She should have said something.

“And Pen is about the busiest person I know. In between baking and running the cafe, she volunteers to help reading at the school, she fund-raises for the WI, she looks after Moira’s kids when Moira needs a break, she’s in the crochet circle and the bookclub, she’s the first to stand up and help when help’s needed.”

He took a step toward the counter, picked up a small collection box that Ash had seen but not registered.

“She’ll give to any charity going, she contributes to everything, and maybe you could keep all that in mind before you start thinking of her as an interfering little anything. Because Penelope Robson is about the kindest, most caring, most generous person I know, and frankly, you’re lucky that she even gives you the time of day.”

Ash’s mouth had gone dry and she blinked rapidly a few times before swallowing. “Um... right,” she said weakly. “Right, okay.”

George shook his head and smiled a little. “Alright, I might have got a bit carried away defending her honor. But it’s all something to keep in mind, eh? Pen’s brilliant, and you could be a bit kinder.”

“Right,” Ash said again. He was right. She could afford to be a bit more charitable she supposed. Especially since it turned out Pen was some kind of saint. Not that she needed a saint in her life, but it wouldn’t kill her to have a bit more patience, she supposed.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” George said. “Oh, and I see you finished that book. Don’t forget the new one I gave you. I think you’ll like it better.”

“Yeah, okay,” said Ash. “Bye then.”

She tried not to stare after him piningly as he walked out the door and up the street, but she couldn’t help herself.

She still felt oddly uncomfortable in the shop. All those heaving bosoms inside the closed pages of all those books made her feel odd, almost embarrassed. She looked down at her own chest. It didn’t heave. In fact, she wasn’t even sure it merited the word bosom.

But maybe that was the problem, maybe she felt uncomfortable because she’d never exactly been the heaving bosom type. Sure, she’d had dates, even a few short-term relationships. But she’d decided early on that none of that stuff was for her, it just never felt right. She’d always been better alone.

So she’d left the heaving bosoms to other people, better endowed people, and moved on. So, it seemed, had Mary. Except in her case she’d sold heaving bosoms to other people. So maybe they had more in common than Ash might think.

She went into the back and made herself a cup of tea. If she was lucky, the shop would stay quiet until closing time and maybe even she’d get the chance to make a start on George’s colorful book before she took her evening walk.

As the kettle boiled she thought she felt a stir of air, thought she almost heard something. But when she went back into the shop, there seemed to be no one there.

For the next half an hour she ran through the shop’s email accounts to see if she could find any clues there about who Mary was, finding nothing, but feeling the whole time

like she was being watched.

Fabio seemed on alert too, his head not bending in sleep, eyes wide open.

Finally, Ash closed the email program, grumbling to herself, and feeling very stupid, walked around the shop, poking her head into all the corners until, to her surprise, she looked around a shelf and found a young woman in a comfortable armchair fast asleep.

It took her a second to register what was happening. The unkempt look of her, the overloaded rucksack by her side, the stale smell. Ash wrinkled her nose.

“Come on, up you get,” she said. “You can’t stay here.”

The woman opened her eyes, blinked and yawned before stirring. Ash seriously hoped she wasn’t going to start anything, that she wasn’t going to have to call the police.

“Alright,” the woman said, stretching and picking up her bag. “Alright, keep your hair on, I’m going, I’m going.”

Ash followed her to the shop door and out onto the street, seeing Pen peek out of her door as they both went out into the sunshine. She had just a glimmer of a memory of what George had said and the young woman looked even dirtier in the sunlight. With a sigh she dipped into her pocket and pulled out a ten pound note.

“Here,” she said. “Get yourself something to eat.”

The girl’s eyes opened wider. “Thanks,” she said. “Thanks very much, that’s really kind.”

Well, maybe I could stand to be a bit kinder, Ash thought as she went back inside. But as she turned to close the door she noticed that Pen had come out of her shop and had put her arm around the girl, was ushering her into the bakery.

And somehow she knew that her ten pound note wasn't going to be good in the bakery. That Pen was going to feed the girl and help her and ask for nothing in return. Ash was as jaded as they came. But finally, she realized, George was right about Pen. She really was a good person. A truly good person.

Chapter Fourteen

Pen put a hot cup of coffee down in front of the woman.

"I can pay," the woman said, pulling out a ten pound note. "Um, the lady next door gave me this." She sounded a little defensive, as if Pen had accused her of stealing the money.

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For a second, Pen found herself lightening up, a warmth inside her belly. She'd been right about Ash, she wasn't as cold as she seemed. She'd found it in her heart to help this girl, even if she had rather obviously been throwing her out of the bookshop. She wrapped the glow up inside herself. There was hope for Ash yet.

"It's on the house," she said about the coffee, pulling out a chair and sitting down opposite the girl. "Have you got a name?"

"Lucy," said Lucy.

"Pen, pleased to meet you." Pen cleared her throat. She didn't quite know how to put this, but she guessed that being up front was probably the way to go. "Um, are you... without somewhere to stay?" she tried.

"Homeless?" Lucy said, grinning at Pen. "Yeah, you can say the word. And yeah, I am just at the moment." She sipped the coffee. "This is good."

Pen looked more closely at her. She was a pretty girl, with dark hair and merry dark eyes. And now that she was looking beneath the grime, she suspected that Lucy was younger than she'd initially thought. "How old are you, Lucy?"

"Nineteen," said Lucy immediately. "So no need to be calling child services or anything. I've had enough of that." She rummaged around in a pocket. "I've got ID."

"Not necessary," Pen said. How could she help? It was clear that Lucy was struggling. How or why, Pen didn't know. Maybe that needed to be the next step. "Fancy telling me how you ended up like this? You don't have to, if you don't want

to.”

Lucy closed one eye and surveyed Pen, then shrugged. “Give me one of those buns over there and I’ll tell you, how about that?”

“Sounds fair,” Pen laughed, getting up and fetching one. “Go on then, how’d you end up with nowhere to go? I’ve not seen you around here before.”

“Long story short, got taken off me mum when I was seven, grew up in care and foster homes.”

Pen was about to say something, but Lucy put up a hand.

“Nah, nothing bad. I know things happen, I’ve seen things and heard things, but I was lucky. I got to know some nice people, some good people, was always well looked after for what it’s worth. It’s more what came after that was the problem.”

“What did come after?” Pen asked as Lucy tore off a piece of bun and popped it in her mouth.

“Nothing,” Lucy said, mouth full. She chewed and swallowed. “Which is my point. I got some money, got a bit of help finding somewhere to stay, even got enrolled in some sixth form classes. But once I was eighteen, the system was done with me.” She sighed and rubbed her eyes. “I’m not blaming anyone.”

“I would,” said Pen. “I’d blame the system for assuming that you know how to live an independent life.”

Lucy shrugged. “That’s just how it is. Anyway, I had to work more hours so I dropped out of sixth form, then I ended up losing my job then the room in the house I was living at. And here I am.” She took another bite of bun. “It’s not exactly easy to

start over again, you know?”

“I’m sure it’s not,” Pen said. She looked at the girl. “Alright, let’s get you upstairs.”

A look flickered over Lucy’s face. “I’m not like that,” she said. “Nothing personal, but—”

Pen realized what she might have implied. “I mean let’s get you cleaned up is all. I’ll put your clothes in the washer, you can take a shower or a bath, you’ll feel better once you’re clean. Then we can talk about what we’re going to do.”

“We?” Lucy asked, the word muffled as she crammed the last of the bun into her mouth.

“If you want some help,” Pen said, aware that she might have over-stepped. “I, uh, I’d like to help, if you wouldn’t mind.” She saw another flicker on Lucy’s face. “Not charity though.”

“Right,” Lucy said.

Pen sighed. “You can work a few hours a day here, you can stay on my couch if you want. Then we can find out together what kind of official help is available. If you want to get back on your feet, that is?”

For a second, she thought Lucy might cry. But she just scowled instead. “What’s in this for you?”

Pen laid both hands flat on the table. “Nothing. Not a thing. You need help and I’m able to give it. That’s the top and bottom of it. I can’t force you to accept help, but it’s here if you want it.”

“But... but why?”

“Because I can,” Pen said honestly. “And because I want to. I like helping. This is a small town and we’re close-knit. We all help each other where we can, and I don’t see why that help shouldn’t extend to you. I hope that you’d help me if I was in need.”

“Dunno,” Lucy said, still staring at her like she was doubtful Pen really existed. “I might. Depends.”

“There, well, I don’t think anything should depend. There’s clearly a right thing to do in this situation and I want to do it. That’s all. I promise. You owe me nothing.”

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Lucy pressed her finger to her plate, picking up the rest of the crumbs and slipping them into her mouth. “Alright,” she said after a minute or so. “A bath sounds nice.”

“SO, YOU’RE JUST going to let a stranger live in your flat?” George hissed.

“She’s not a stranger, her name’s Lucy,” said Pen. “And keep your voice down, she’ll be down any minute. She’s quite lovely, you’ll like her.”

“Most con artists are good at making people like them, it’s sort of a qualification for the job,” said George. He frowned in disapproval. “Pen, you can’t do this. You can’t just... help people like this.”

“Do you hear how ridiculous that sounds?” asked Pen. “Of course I can help people. The world would be a better place if we all helped people. Lucy’s a good person, a nice person, who’s had some bad luck. It could happen to any of us.”

“I don’t understand how you can be like this,” George said, but he was getting used to the idea, or becoming resigned to it, one or the other.

“I’d be a hypocrite if I weren’t like this,” Pen said, pushing over a mug of hot chocolate. “Don’t be cross with me, I hate it when you are.”

“I’m frustrated, not cross. Well, maybe a bit cross. I worry about you. And how would you be a hypocrite?”

“You’re the one always telling me that I always think everything will be alright, that I’m the eternal optimist. Well, I’d be a hypocrite if I thought that and then wasn’t part

of the solution to actually make things alright, to make things better for other people, wouldn't I?" Pen said reasonably.

George shook his head. "You're one of a kind, Pen. I'm not at all sure that the world deserves you in any way."

Pen's phone buzzed and she picked it up, checking the notification and then punching the air in glee.

"What?" asked George, a mustache of chocolate on his top lip.

"This," said Pen, handing him her phone and a napkin.

He scanned the email on the screen and grinned. "You know, sometimes things really do turn out alright, don't they?"

"Do they?" asked Lucy. She was clean and shining, dressed in an old shirt of Pen's and jogging pants that were far too big. "I'm Lucy, by the way."

"George," said George, not quite as warmly as Pen might have liked.

"So what's turning out alright?" asked Lucy, coming behind the counter and regarding the coffee machine.

"Well, we want to buy the bookshop next door," Pen explained. "I mean, the community does, as a project, and we've just heard that the council is getting a special grant for development and councilwoman Thurst, who you haven't met but she's lovely—"

George cleared his throat. "She's a harridan," he put in.

“She’s lovely,” Pen repeated, glaring at him. “Has just told me that the council will be accepting presentations for ideas on how best to use the grant money.”

“Which you want to use to buy the bookshop from that woman next door,” Lucy said uncertainly.

“Her name’s Ash and she’s also lovely,” said Pen.

Lucy didn’t look convinced. “What if the council says no?”

Pen shrugged and grinned. “Then we’ll have to come up with another plan, won’t we? Something will turn up.”

“This looks complicated,” Lucy said, still looking at the coffee machine.

“It’s not at all. I’ll teach you how to use it,” said Pen.

“How to use it?” George asked. “Um, why would you do that?”

“Because I work here now,” said Lucy.

George opened his mouth to object, but Pen jumped in just in time. “And given that today’s your afternoon off, you can be our test subject, right, George?”

“I came to pick you up to go to the pub,” grumbled George. “And why can’t you be the test subject for her terrible coffee?”

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“It might not be terrible,” Lucy said. “It might be great.”

“And now it looks like Pen’s optimism is contagious,” George muttered.

“You can help out because helping is a good thing,” said Pen. Then she grinned, her heart fluttering a little. “Besides, I’m going to have to go and talk to Ash about planning this council presentation, aren’t I?”

George rolled his eyes and Lucy looked clueless, but Pen was so happy to have an excuse to really talk to Ash that she didn’t care.

Chapter Fifteen

“We’re closed.”

“No, you’re not,” Pen said, marching straight into the bookshop and stooping to pet Fabio who purred ferociously.

“I was just closing,” Ash said, slipping her finger into her book to mark her page.

“You were reading,” said Pen, coming up to the counter. She tilted her head to read the title of Ash’s book. “Oh, I’ve read that, it’s fabulous, isn’t it?”

Ash, who had been so engrossed in the book that she hadn’t even noticed Pen passing the window, grunted. “It’s alright.”

“It’s brilliant,” said Pen. “There’s the part... oh, wait, no spoilers, sorry.”

“You mean the part where they meet under the pier,” Ash said, who had just finished the chapter in question and was itching to move on to the next.

“Right,” Pen said, grinning. “It’s about the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard of.”

“Really?” asked Ash. “I mean, it was pretty romantic, with all the moonlight and stuff, I suppose. But I could think of more romantic things.”

“Like what?” Pen asked, leaning one elbow on the counter.

“Like a picnic on the beach at midnight,” said Ash. “During a meteor shower. Or an eclipse.”

“Huh, alright, I see where you’re going with that. I like it.” Pen brushed her hair back over her shoulder.

Ash thought the gesture made Pen’s neck look longer and for a quick instant she remembered Pen hugging her, the way her body had felt, those curves pressed up against her. It had been warm. Cozy even. She sniffed. “Anyway, what do you want?”

“To talk to you,” Pen said. “Oh, how’s the genealogy going?”

“Badly,” Ash scowled.

“What exactly are you doing anyway?”

“Trying to find out who Mary was,” said Ash, not seeing much point in denying it. Besides, the faster she answered Pen’s questions, the faster Pen might up and leave. She definitely wanted Pen to leave. Her perfume was annoyingly close and even though it smelled sort of delicious, Ash had a book to read.

“Maybe I can help,” Pen said quickly. “I knew her as well as anyone.”

Which reminded Ash that she’d seen Pen take in the homeless girl. “You like helping, don’t you?”

“Don’t you?” asked Pen. “And there’s nothing wrong with being helpful.”

“Is there not?” Ash asked. “I mean, I saw that homeless woman go into your shop. And alright, so she’s probably had something to eat and a hot drink, and maybe you let her use your bathroom. But in the long run, you’ve only helped her out for this afternoon, haven’t you? You haven’t changed her life or anything.”

Pen was blushing, a look that made Ash feel a bit funny. “Um, actually, Lucy’s going to be staying with me for a while. She’s working at the bakery.”

Ash didn’t know what to say to this. She was... shocked perhaps. But also surprised in a good way. Pen put her money where her mouth was, she wasn’t messing around. Maybe George had a point about her being a truly decent and kind person.

“Oh,” said Ash eventually. She swallowed and looked out of the window. The sun was still shining, but the light was more orange now. It was time to close up.

“Listen, how about I tell you everything I know about Mary. Then we can talk about the bookshop,” Pen said. “I need to make a presentation to put to the council as part of applying for a grant.”

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“A grant?” Ash said. She breathed out. “You really are taking this seriously, aren’t you?”

“Why don’t we go to the pub?” said Pen. “We can sit and talk there. It’ll save you from washing up the tea cups.”

“No,” Ash said. “I’m going for a walk on the beach.” She hesitated, looking again at the beautiful sun and thinking about how Pen had just taken in a stranger. How maybe she wasn’t interfering. How maybe she was that rare thing, an actually good person.

Ash didn’t know how many truly good people she’d met in her life, but she was quite sure it was no more than she could count on one hand.

Pen’s perfume made Ash’s nose twitch and, she decided, she quite liked it. Maybe she should ask Pen what it was so she could buy some herself.

“I’m going for a walk on the beach,” she said again, as Pen’s face fell. She took a breath. “You could come with me, if you like?”

Pen beamed. “I’d like that.”

Ash nodded. “Give me five minutes to close up then. I’ll meet you outside.” She switched off her computer. “And take that damn cat with you.”

THE SAND WAS wet and firm underfoot but Ash was careful not to walk too fast. Pen was more than a head shorter than her, her legs weren’t as long, so Ash guarded

her pace and Pen bobbed along beside her.

“I like the smell of wet sand,” Ash said for no reason other than to fill in the gaps.

“It smells like home to me,” said Pen.

“So you grew up here?”

“Born and bred.”

“Not a bad place to live in,” said Ash.

“Getting used to it, are you?” asked Pen with a grin. “I knew you would. Tetherington grows on people. Maybe you won’t need to sell the shop after all.”

“First of all, I’m still not totally convinced the place belongs to me.”

“Which it does,” Pen said firmly. “After all, a solicitor said it did, so it must be true.”

“How nice to be assured that everyone in authority is looking out for your best interests,” said Ash, walking along with her hands in her pockets. “Ever heard of police brutality? Or government corruption?”

“Of course I have,” said Pen. She paused for a second. “I just... I don’t think constantly assuming the worst about people is the best thing to do. I mean, I could have assumed the worst about you, but I didn’t.”

“Like what?”

“Like... you’re a gold digger who wants to steal the shop and... and... you’re a serial killer or something.”

Ash laughed. “Where did the serial killer come from?”

“Well, you are a bit... cold. Detached. That seems like a serial killer-y thing to be,” Pen said.

“I’m not a serial killer,” said Ash. “But equally, I don’t go around making friends with everyone by default. And there’s nothing wrong with that. In my view, if everyone just minded their own business, life would be a damn sight better.”

Pen snorted.

“What?”

“Nothing, just... Well, you’re not exactly minding your own business when it comes to prying into Mary’s life, are you? You want to know all about her.”

“So that I can determine whether or not the shop is rightfully mine,” Ash said. She breathed in cool salt air. “And she was supposed to be my father’s sister. I, uh, I don’t know much about him.”

“Oh,” Pen said.

There was a few seconds of quiet as the gulls called and the sea murmured on the sand. Then Ash felt something, Pen’s arm sliding into her own. She considered pulling away, but actually, it was quite nice to have some support there. The sand wasn’t as flat as it could be. And the breeze was a little chilly, so Pen’s warmth was equally welcome.

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“I’m not sure I can help you with any of that,” Pen said as though nothing had happened. “I mean, Mary never mentioned a brother. But I’ll ask around. Maybe some other people in town know more than I do. Have you tried requesting her birth certificate? Or your father’s?”

“I didn’t think about that,” Ash said. “But I don’t know his first name, so that might not help.”

“If you don’t mind asking, what about your mum? Can’t she help?”

“She’s on a ‘round the world cruise. I haven’t told her anything, she’ll call me at some point, but I can’t get in touch with her at the moment.”

“Inconvenient timing,” said Pen.

“That would be my mother all over,” Ash said. “And I’m really not being nosy about Mary.”

“You are a bit,” qualified Pen. “But it’s alright, I can understand why.”

“I just...” Ash stopped and looked out over the sea. “I just wonder if we’re alike.”

Pen didn’t say anything and Ash started walking again. “Alright then, what about this presentation?”

As the breeze blew their hair, Pen filled her in on all the details, almost breathless with anticipation. “So, I’ll need your help,” she finished with.

Ash shook her head. “Oh, no.”

“No?” Pen asked, stopping in the sand.

“No,” said Ash firmly. “I’ll talk to the solicitor about a valuation and get a fair price for you, but that’s the extent of my involvement in all this. I don’t interfere with other people’s lives just like I don’t want them to interfere with mine.”

“But this isn’t interfering,” Pen started, staring up at Ash with big blue eyes.

“I mind my own business,” said Ash. “End of story. You want to make some presentation then I wish you all the luck in the world, but it’s none of my business.”

“Right,” Pen said.

She blinked and Ash thought that maybe she was going to cry. Her lip trembled a little until Ash wondered why on earth she was looking at Pen’s lips in the first place. She had no business doing that. She tore her eyes away and focused instead on the soft downy hair on Pen’s cheek, but that was no better. In the end, she went back to looking at the sea, that was a far safer bet.

“Right,” said Pen, pulling her arm away from Ash’s. “I suppose that’s just the way it is. I’ll deal with things with the council.” She bit her lip. “And, um, I’m late for crochet circle, so I’d better be going.”

She walked unsteadily away across the sand and Ash watched her go, wondering why she suddenly felt awful. She’d only told the truth, done what she always did. Yet for some reason, telling Pen she wasn’t going to get involved was a lot harder than telling anyone else.

Chapter Sixteen

Pen could hear the sound of the shower when she woke up. She could still hear it after breakfast. In the end, she splashed water on her face from the kitchen sink before hurrying downstairs to get the oven heated and her day started.

The morning was bright and cool and Pen tried to be her normal jolly self. She whistled as she moved sacks of flour, hummed cheerfully as she pulled frozen goods out of the freezer. But a little tiny piece of her was slightly dented.

For a minute there, walking along the beach last night, she'd actually thought that she'd cracked Ash's hard shell. But obviously she'd done no more than scratch it and Ash was probably already in the process of repainting.

She sighed. Ash truly wasn't interested in any kind of relationship, or was too damaged to accept any kind of friendship, or too stubborn, or too cold, or whatever her reasons were. And maybe, just maybe, it was time to leave her alone, to stop trying. You couldn't force someone to be friends with you.

Besides, she'd probably be gone soon. At least if all went to plan. Pen tried not to think about doing all the work of presenting a plan to the council for buying the bookshop. She barely had time to think as it was.

By the time Lucy came downstairs, Pen had very nearly talked herself into a funk. Then she turned around to see Lucy wearing an old wrap skirt of hers that could just about be wrapped around her tiny waist three times and yet still only came half way down her thigh.

"You look like some kind of sixties mummy," she cackled.

Lucy stuck her tongue out. "You said I could borrow what I like, and I like this."

"I haven't worn that for years," said Pen, wiping her eyes. "You're welcome to keep

it, if you like.”

Lucy grinned for a second, then sighed. “Actually, I probably shouldn’t. I mean, I’m accepting a lot from you as it is.”

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“You’re accepting a roof over your head and a decent wage, and those things should be rights, not privileges,” Pen said stoutly. “Don’t ever be ashamed of accepting what’s your due.”

“Yes, but Pen, you can’t do all this alone. I mean—”

“I won’t be. We’re going to go over to the council building tomorrow and we’ll find out what kind of help is available for you then. And I’ve got business over there too, so we’ll be killing two birds with one stone.”

“What kind of business?” Lucy asked, picking up a hot croissant off a baking tray. “Ow!”

“Mmm, lesson number one of working in a bakery, things that just came out of the oven are hot,” laughed Pen. “Come on, you can help me get this lot on the shelves and then we’ll test out your coffee skills. The morning rush’ll be in before you know it.”

As they were sliding rolls onto trays in the bakery, George came bustling in.

“Morning,” Pen said, smiling. “Coffee?”

“Depends,” said George, eyeing Lucy. “Am I to be poisoned again by your apprentice, or are you making it?”

“My coffee is delicious,” Lucy said, putting hands on her hips. “You said so yourself yesterday.”

“Only because you force fed me eight cups and I was in danger of dying from caffeine poisoning,” George said.

Lucy raised an eyebrow.

“Fine, fine,” he said hurriedly. “Beggars can’t be choosers. Two coffees and make them strong ones, Her Royal Highness is in quite a mood this morning.”

“The queen?” Lucy asked, getting to-go cups.

“Ash, my boss, the woman who owns the bookshop next door.” George winked at Lucy. “And Pen’s potential soul-mate, the Darcy to her Elizabeth, the Romeo to her Juliet, the Marc Antony to her Cleopatra, the—”

“The Moriarty to my Holmes, the Joker to my Batman, the... I’ve run out of rivalries,” Pen said.

“Oh,” said George. “That’s why she’s in a mood then, is it? The two of you have had a bust up?”

“We haven’t,” said Pen. “If only because there was nothing there in the first place to break. But she did make it quite clear last night that she really doesn’t want to help me or be involved in things. So...”

George rolled his eyes. “So what? Since when has that stopped you? You know she’s just thick skinned or tough shelled or whatever it is. You never give up, Pen.”

“Then maybe it’s time I learned a lesson. The woman isn’t even interested in being friends with me, let alone anything else.”

“She didn’t seem terribly friendly,” Lucy said thoughtfully. “But then she did throw

me out quite nicely and she gave me a tenner too. So she's not all bad."

"And she's definitely out of sorts this morning, so maybe she regrets being sharp with you," put in George.

"Maybe," said Pen as Lucy handed George his coffees.

"Alright, I'd better get back to it," George said. "I'll see you later for some lunch."

He disappeared back off to the bookshop and Lucy jumped to close the door before Fabio could sneak back out again. Bending, she picked up the furry bundle who protested with a loud meow and then settled into her arms.

"You shouldn't worry about it," she said.

"Worry about what?" asked Pen, forming croissants into neat lines on their tray.

"Ash," Lucy said. She put Fabio down and shooed him back toward the kitchen. "It's probably nothing personal. It's just... some people find it hard to accept help or even friendship. Those people take longer to crack, but they tend to be worth it."

"Mmm," said Pen because Ash was an ostrich egg at this point.

"If you like her, you should try harder but not so hard."

"Lovely and clear that," Pen said, chuckling.

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“I mean, if you think she’s nice you shouldn’t just give up. But also, maybe, you could be... I don’t know, a bit more respectful of the fact that she finds it hard to get close to people, that’s all. We’re all different, we can’t all be paragons of virtue like you are.”

“I’m no paragon of virtue,” Pen said.

“Are you not?” asked Lucy.

“Definitely not. I shoplifted once when I was a child and I’ve smoked my share of the green stuff and...” Pen trailed off trying to think of other bad things she’d done.

“See?” Lucy laughed. “You’re a lovely person, Pen. But I can see how somebody who’s a bit cooler, a bit more reserved, might find you a bit much, a bit far outside of their experience. Do you see what I’m saying?”

“You’re saying that I need to back off a bit,” Pen said.

“Exactly.”

“Alright,” said Pen. After all, it couldn’t hurt. “I’ll steer clear of the bookshop today and I won’t take her any biscuits until tomorrow afternoon.”

“Very stand-offish,” agreed Lucy. “Is she really your soul-mate?”

Pen laughed again. “That was just George being over the top. He spends all day around romance novels, he can’t help it.”

“If you buy the shop then you’ll be around romance novels all day,” Lucy said. “And, presumably, Ash will move away.”

“Mmm, that is the downside,” agreed Pen, who actually really hadn’t thought this through.

“Which seems like a shame,” said Lucy, neatly slicing some bread for sandwiches. “I mean, I think she’s alright.”

“Alright? High praise.”

Lucy shrugged. “She could have been nastier to me in the shop, plenty of others were. She could have called the police to have me thrown out. She could have told me how bad I smelled. She didn’t do any of those things. She politely told me I had to go and then handed me some money that she could see I badly needed. So maybe she’s not as cold and unfeeling as she comes across.”

“Post,” Billy said, pushing open the door.

Lucy got to it before Pen.

“What’s all this?” said Billy. “A new employee?”

“One who makes excellent coffee,” Lucy said with a grin, still looking at the letters Billy had handed her.

“I’ll take those,” Pen said, sliding the post out of her hand. “And if you’re so cocky about those coffee skills, you’d best get to making Billy one or he’ll think you’re full of hot air.” She tucked the letters safely into her skirt pocket and hoped that Lucy hadn’t seen too much.

“Happy to,” chirped Lucy.

“So, the whole town’s talking about this bookshop business,” Billy said, leaning on the counter as Lucy worked. “Sounds like you’re going to save us all from... well, I’m not sure? Save us all from big book franchises maybe?”

“I’m not saving anything,” Pen said, thinking about the presentation she was going to have to make, about how persuasive she was going to have to be. “But the shop is a part of town and I don’t see why it shouldn’t stay. We get enough tourist business during the summer.”

“Yeah, but the government owning private businesses and shops, isn’t that just communism?” Billy asked, taking a coffee from Lucy.

Pen frowned. “Is it?” she asked unsurely.

“Dunno,” Billy said. “Maybe. Sounds a bit fishy to me at any rate. Mind you, I’d definitely prefer the shop to go to someone we know rather than a stranger.”

“It’s currently in the hands of a stranger,” Lucy pointed out.

Billy scratched his head. “True, true. But then... she did give me a two pound tip yesterday.”

“Why?” asked Pen.

“Dunno,” said Billy again. “Something about delivering mail to her hand and not just leaving it with her neighbors?”

“Must be a London thing,” said Pen.

“Could be,” Billy agreed. “Alright, I’ll be off then. See you later.”

“See, even the postman likes her,” Lucy said when he was gone. “So Ash can’t be that bad. She’ll come around.”

Pen smiled, she was feeling better than she had earlier that morning anyway. “Well then, let’s see if your sandwich making skills are up to scratch, shall we?” she said. “And no more talk of soul-mates.”

“Things’ll turn out for the best,” Lucy said. “I mean, look at me, all warm in a bakery with a job and everything.”

“Things always turn out for the best,” Pen said with great certainty. It was the one thing she always held onto. But somehow she couldn’t see herself hugging Ash ever again and that thought made her sad.

Chapter Seventeen

Ash was nose-deep in her book when George came through the door bearing coffee. “Thanks,” she murmured, turning a page.

“Like it, huh?” he said.

“Mmm.”

“Yeah, I thought that might be more your speed,” said George. “You know we have an entire shelf devoted to the genre.”

At this, Ash finally looked up. “A whole shelf devoted to...?”

“Lesbian romance,” he said, pointing to a shelf close to the door. “All that your little heart could desire, and we can always order more in if there’s something that you fancy. That’s definitely one advantage of owning a bookshop.” He paused. “Temporarily owning.”

“Right,” Ash said. Her head was trying and failing to make connections. It wasn’t as though she hadn’t known the book was a lesbian romance. Of course she had. She just hadn’t quite processed that information. “Um, can we just back that up for a second, you thought this would be more my speed?”

“Yes,” said George, putting both coffee cups down on the counter. “I mean, not that gay people should only read gay romance and straight people should only read straight romance, that’s ridiculous. But you said you didn’t feel a connection when you were reading that straight book, so I thought lesbian romance would maybe hit more of a nerve, so to speak.”

The connections were starting to get there, fuzzy and tenuous. “Lesbian romance,” Ash said slowly. “Because... because you think that I’m... Because you think I’m gay.”

George’s mouth dropped open and his face went as white as the page that Ash was currently not staring at. “Um, uh...” he stuttered.

And Ash tried very hard to take all this in. Was it something she’d said? Something she’d done? Did she accidentally get the word lesbian tattooed on her forehead?

“Uh, Jesus, Ash, I mean... Oh God. I’m really, really, truly sorry. I’ve fucked up.” George had passed the white stage and was now heading toward crimson. “I should never have assumed and... I just... I thought. Oh God. I don’t know what I thought. Christ, I feel awful. I’m so sorry.”

Ash closed the book carefully. “No,” she said quietly. “No, there’s nothing to be sorry for. It was an honest mistake, I’m sure.” An honest mistake.

“Really?” George asked. “I mean, how rude could I be? Assuming like that was horrible. I hate it when people do it to me, and I’m a hundred percent gay, so I should never have done it to you.”

“No,” Ash said. “No, seriously, really don’t worry about it. It’s nothing.” She cleared her throat. “The book’s good by the way. Definitely more my speed.”

A curious look passed over George’s face. “It is?”

“Yes,” said Ash, because it was true.

“Oh, um, I guess that’s good.”

“Uh-huh.” All sorts of things were starting to swirl in her brain, starting to piece together and make coherent thoughts. And Ash wasn’t at all sure she was ready for any of those thoughts. Except... except maybe the world made a little more sense than it did ten seconds ago.

“I still feel terrible, Ash, if I could take it back...” George started.

And he looked truly devastated. So much so that even Ash took pity on him. “Don’t feel bad,” she said carefully. “You’re not... I mean... It’s not...” She blew out a breath. “I just hadn’t really thought about it before.”

George narrowed his eyes. “You mean, um...?”

Ash shrugged. “I mean, maybe?”

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George picked up his coffee and took a big slug. “Um, I don’t mean to pry, but...”

“Then don’t,” Ash said sharply. Was this what the problem had been all along? Was this why she’d never dreamed of walking down the aisle into the welcoming arms of a man? It seemed stupid but suddenly so clear.

“Aren’t you a bit old to have, well, you know? A revelation.” George said.

“I thought we’d established that you weren’t going to pry,” said Ash. “And I’m not that old. I’m sure plenty of people realize that sexuality is fluid when they’re far older than me.”

“Mmm,” agreed George looking thoughtful. “I’m not sure that too many women have a gay man to thank for their lesbian awakening though.”

Ash scowled at him and then, to her astonishment, George reached out across the counter and put his hand on hers.

“Ash, if you want to talk to someone about this, I’m here. If you’re serious about this and you’re only just realizing that life could be different, and if it’s confusing for you, I’m happy to listen whenever you like.”

“No,” Ash said, withdrawing her hand. “But not just because all that touchy-feely stuff makes me nauseous. I’m not confused. Actually, I’m a lot less confused than I was a few minutes ago.”

“You’re not having some kind of crisis then?”

“Why?” Ash asked honestly. “I mean, who cares whether I’m gay or not or half-way gay or whatever integers come in between that? It makes no difference in the long run. But it does give me a few more options.” A thought came to her. “Was Mary gay?”

“What?” asked George, eyes opening wide again. “No, not a bit.”

“Huh,” said Ash. It had been a bit of a stretch, she admitted to herself. But it would have been nice to package things neatly like that, to solve the mystery of why Mary was so happy alone at the same time as she started to make sense of her own world.

Ash’s phone started to ring. She pulled it out of her pocket to silence it, wanting to continue to explore this idea even if George wasn’t the sounding board she’d have chosen, but then she saw the number. A long number with far too many digits, strange ones too. Which could mean only one thing.

“Go fill the online orders,” she said. “I need to take this.”

George bit his lip and looked at her.

“I’m fine, Jesus, go do your job,” Ash barked.

He fled off down the stairs and Ash finally picked up the call.

“Mum?”

“... boat... call...”

“Mum? I can’t hear you,” Ash said.

There was crackling in response.

“Mum?” Ash said again. “The line is terrible.”

“...stupid Chilean phone system.”

“Mum?”

“I can hear you, stop saying mum!”

“That’s better.”

“Not much, and I’m running out of coins, I just wanted to check in. We’re fine. You?”

“Fine,” Ash said.

“I’m on my last few pesos,” her mother said.

Ash thought quickly. “Mum, do I have an Aunt Mary?”

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“... coin... who...” There was another crackle. “Of course you remember Auntie Mary.”

“No, actually,” said Ash. “But—”

She was interrupted by a click and a dial tone. With a sigh, she ended the call. Not exactly all the information she’d wanted, but she supposed it was enough. Her mother had seemed sure she had an aunt, even though Ash herself had no real memory of whoever Auntie Mary was.

That should seal things, right? Mary really was her aunt, the shop really was hers, everything was as it should be. She bit her lip. She should go and tell Pen.

Wait. What?

Why was her first thought that she had to tell her nosy neighbor? That was silly, ridiculous even. Although, while she was in this mode, she supposed she could call Snythe and then, well, then she’d really have occasion to go and tell Pen, wouldn’t she? She might as well. Get all the news over with at once and then... well, then she’d only have to visit once.

Before she really knew what she was doing, she was placing the call to Snythe.

“Offices of Daniel J. Snythe, Esquire.”

“I know that’s you,” Ash said, recognizing his voice immediately. “Why do you answer your phone like you’re someone else?”

“I don’t,” said the solicitor gruffly.

“Yes, you do. It’s a little odd. And this is Ash Wells, by the way.”

“Mmm. I’m well aware. Don’t think I’ve forgotten you, Ms. Wells. It’s not often I grant an inheritance to someone as... un-thrilled about it as you. But as it happens, I’m glad that you called. I really must insist that you make an appointment as soon as possible to sign off on the estate papers.”

“That’s why I’m ringing,” Ash said. “Can you tell me if a property valuation was done as part of the estate process?”

There was the sound of papers being moved around. “Yes,” said the solicitor finally. “Shall I have those papers sent to you?”

“If you could scan and email them, that’d be perfect,” Ash said.

“And that appointment?”

“Let me go through the paperwork and then I’ll call back and make an appointment.”

“So you’ve decided I know how to do my job then?”

“I never questioned that,” said Ash.

“It was quite heavily implied,” said the solicitor.

“There are no other possible heirs?”

“No one mentioned in the will,” the solicitor said. “Your aunt’s financial assets go to various charities, that’s pretty much it.”

“Hm. Alright, thank you,” Ash said.

She hung up and picked up the coffee that George had brought her. Her eye caught her book.

For a second she felt a blooming of warmth in her chest.

Was this really all that it was? For so long she’d thought there was something wrong with her. Not that she let it show at all. But the fact that she never seemed to want what everyone else seemed to want just didn’t sit right.

Now she’d found out that actually, there were more options at the buffet than she’d imagined. And maybe she might be hungry after all.

She downed her coffee, tossed the cup into the bin behind the counter, and grinned to herself. She really did need to see Pen now, it was only fair to keep her in the loop about what was happening with the shop.

“Keep an ear open for the bell,” she shouted down the stairs to George. “I’m going out for a few minutes.”

Chapter Eighteen

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The first thing that Ash saw when she walked through the bakery door was a familiar, and yet oddly clean, face.

“You,” she said.

“The one and only,” smiled the once upon a time homeless woman. “The name’s Lucy, by the way. I, um, I work here now.”

“Of course you do,” said Ash. Pen really was the real deal, huh? She wasn’t just handing out advice and putting on a front, she actually truly was a sickeningly decent person. Ash sighed. “Is Pen around?”

“She’s just upstairs,” said Lucy. “I stole her shower time this morning so—”

“Because obviously you live here too,” Ash said, shaking her head. “Right, I suppose I’ll wait.”

But Lucy already had her phone out, fingers flying. “Uh... she says she’s out of the shower and you should just head right upstairs.” She looked up. “Just go back through the kitchen.”

“Yeah, no, that seems... personal,” Ash said, determined to wait.

“Hold on... the second message says that you shouldn’t be weird about it and you should just go up,” Lucy said, giggling.

“Fine,” said Ash. She might as well get this over with.

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Pen zipped up her dress and examined herself in the mirror. She loved the bright reds and yellows of the pattern. She turned to the dressing table and found an eye pencil that would clash terribly but that she loved too much not to use.

“Hello?”

“Ash?”

“Do you always let other people randomly walk into your flat?” Ash called back.
“Actually, no, strike that, I met Lucy downstairs.”

“I’m just getting ready,” Pen said. “Feel free to come into the bedroom.”

“Yeah, um, no.”

Pen laughed. “Then make yourself comfortable out there, I’ll just be a minute.”

“Fine.”

As quickly as she could, Pen started putting on her makeup. She could hear Ash walking around in the living room. Secretly, she was pleased that Ash had bothered to make the visit. She assumed that she was about to apologize for being cranky on the beach, and maybe even offer her help with the council presentation.

Perhaps Lucy had been right. She came on too strong, maybe Ash needed a little space to see what was the right thing to do. As always, something had turned up and everything was going to turn out fine. Pen grinned at herself in the mirror, then remembered something.

“Oh, by the way, I had Doris Renton in the shop this morning,” she called out.

“Who?” Ash asked.

“Doris. Renton.” Pen paused while she put on some mascara. “She’s about a hundred and eighty, the oldest person in town.”

“Huh,” was all Ash said to this.

“So I asked her about Mary and she said that as far as she knew Mary had no family until she found Jesus.”

“Jesus?” Ash’s voice had gone up half an octave.

“Yeah, Mary wasn’t especially religious. I think Doris might not have quite as many marbles as she did originally,” Pen said, surveying her colorful face in the mirror and nodding in approval.

“Pen?”

“Mmm?” She brushed off her dress and turned to leave the bedroom.

“What are all these?”

“What are all what?” asked Pen, stepping through the door.

Ash was holding a sheaf of letters in her hand, a look of absolute disbelief on her face.

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Ash saw Pen visibly deflate, like all her blood was pouring out, leaving her weak and pale and lesser somehow. She held the letters out like she was presenting them to Pen, but Pen didn’t make a move to take them.

“They’re none of your business,” Pen said sharply.

“They’re not even opened.”

Pen rolled her eyes. “They’re fine. Nothing for you to worry about.”

Ash shook her head. “No, Pen, no... This is very much something to worry about. You know that all of these are bills, right? And most of them are past due notices. I’m pretty sure that there are even a couple of legal summonses in that pile.”

Pen did step forward now, taking hold of the letters that Ash was still holding. “It’ll all be fine,” she said. “Something will turn up.”

“Yes,” said Ash. “The bailiffs. Or the police. Or someone like that.” She snatched the

letters back from Pen. “Pen, these things won’t go away. You can’t just pretend that they don’t exist. Are you listening to me?”

The smile finally dropped from Pen’s face. “For someone who doesn’t like other people interfering in her life, you not exactly doing a fantastic job of not interfering in mine.”

Ash took a deep breath, still unable to believe quite what she was hearing and seeing. How had things gotten this bad? Pen must be in thousands of pounds worth of debt. How could she not see what was happening to her?

Except... except this was Pen all over, wasn’t it?

“Pen, are you listening to what I’m saying?”

Then to her horror, Pen’s face started to crinkle, tears started to bloom, and then she was full on sobbing in the middle of her living room and Ash didn’t know what to do.

It would have been so easy, she supposed. So easy for Pen to focus so hard on helping everyone but herself. About as easy as it was for Ash to focus on helping no one but herself.

And then things spiraled out of control and suddenly Pen was left with only the hope that something would turn up, that some miracle would occur. And why wouldn’t she believe that? She was the miracle for other people often enough, the miracle for people like Lucy.

Still Pen sobbed, heart-wrenching cries from the depth of her insides and Ash’s heart crumbled the tiniest amount and she did the only thing she could think of to do.

She stepped in, wrapped Pen up in her arms, and held her as tightly as she could.

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Before she knew what was happening, Pen was sobbing into Ash's shirt until the material stuck to her face and she wanted to move, to look up, but she just couldn't stand the shame of it. So instead she stayed where she was, letting Ash's arms hold her until eventually Ash moved.

"I've got a cramp. Not used to hugging people," Ash said.

Pen managed a snorted, soggy laugh and Ash took her hand, leading her to sit down on the couch with its uncomfortable springs.

"Pen, it's going to be alright," Ash said softly.

"How can you say that?" Pen said. "You've just said it won't be. You've said the police will come and everything. And I know I've been stupid, I know that. But I can't change it and... and I don't know what to do about it anymore."

"You do just what everyone else does to you," Ash said. "You ask for help. Or, I suppose, in your case you just give the help because it's the right thing to do, don't you?" She sighed. "You're just that kind of sickeningly good person."

"If that's an attempt to make me feel better, it's a very, very bad one," said Pen, still looking at her hands.

"It is," said Ash. "So let's try this instead. I can help you fix this."

Now Pen did look up, she looked up and saw that Ash was completely serious. "You... you what?"

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“I can help you fix this,” Ash said simply. “I’m an accountant, remember? I’m not saying I can magic money out of thin air, but I can get you sorted with a debt counselor, get all of this consolidated, start a payment plan. You’re not the only person in the world to get into this state. There are places that will help you, you’re not alone.”

Pen took a breath feeling like she could really breathe for the first time in months. She hadn’t realized just how much she’d been packing away, hiding, pretending. “You... you can do that?”

“Obviously,” Ash said. She sighed and looked away. “And I suppose I could help with that thing for the council as well, if you wanted.”

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“I don’t know what to say,” Pen said.

“Thank you would be fine,” said Ash. She sniffed and didn’t look at Pen. The sight of her sad and tear-stained was suddenly a little much for her to stand.

“I think this deserves more than a thank you.”

“Well, you don’t have any money to pay my bill, so perhaps we should stick with thank yous for right now.”

She heard Pen sigh next to her. “Ash... I know that this must be hard for you as well, to offer to take something on like this, to become tangled with someone else. I get the

feeling that you see yourself as alone all the time.”

“Maybe,” Ash said. She swallowed. She supposed she might as well be honest. “Except that George told me something today that made me think that maybe I might have, um, misjudged things a bit. Or at least not considered all my options.”

“George did?” Pen asked. “What did he say?”

“That he thought I was gay,” Ash said. It sounded weird just saying it. She thought she felt Pen move a little further away from her.

“Oh... oh. You’re um, you’re not then?”

“What? You thought it too?” Ash said, turning to look at Pen. Pen’s face was upturned, looking up at her with eyes smeared with make up. Which made Ash remember that Pen liked her face and that in turn made her think that actually... actually she quite liked Pen’s face as well. “Am I wearing a big old lesbian hat or something?”

“No,” Pen said. “Not at all... I just... Well, I suppose it’s just one of those things. I mean, I’m gay so I suppose I default to other single women being gay too. I didn’t mean anything by it and I apologize if I’ve made you uncomfortable or anything.”

“You’re gay?” Ash said, opening her eyes wide.

“Yes, you, um, didn’t know?”

“Why would I?” said Ash. Although she supposed things were starting to make more sense now. Jesus, being a lesbian must be a nightmare. How were you supposed to know who else was and wasn’t? Unless they told you, she supposed.

Like Pen had just done.

Pen with her nice face and kind heart and massive debts.

“Well, I am,” Pen said. “Gay, that is.”

“Huh,” said Ash. “Well, I’m... not sure but maybe I am?”

“Wait, I thought you weren’t,” Pen said, looking confused.

Her lips pushed forward when she was confused, like someone would do if they were about to kiss you. Like men did at the end of a date when they left you on a doorstep, at which point Ash would usually duck inside and cry out a thank you as the door closed behind her.

That wasn’t what she was supposed to do. She could see that now. She could see how that little lip thing could make your stomach turn somersaults and your mouth dry up and your heart beat a bit too hard and then...

And then she did the unthinkable.

She kissed Pen right on her candy-red lips.

Chapter Nineteen

“Oh, God,” Ash said, practically jumping up off the couch. “That was horrifically inappropriate.”

It took Pen a second to recover her senses. Ash’s lips had seemed so sure, the touch of her had been like coming home in a way that Pen hadn’t known she’d needed. “Inappropriate?” she said when she found her voice. “Inappropriate?” She couldn’t

think of a word that was more, well, inappropriate.

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“You’re upset and vulnerable and I’m in your flat and... and...”

“And there was nothing inappropriate in the slightest about what you did,” Pen said calmly standing up. “You have my full consent, if that’s what’s worrying you.”

Ash paused, looking uncomfortable. “I, uh, I didn’t mean...” She took a breath. “Actually, I don’t know what I meant, if I’m being honest. Is that terrible?”

Pen bit her lip. She’d rather like another kiss, but she could see that Ash was honestly having trouble with this. “Out of curiosity, when did this conversation with George happen that resulted in your lesbian revelation?”

“This morning,” Ash said. “Why?”

“Because most of us have a lot longer than that to get used to the idea,” Pen grinned. “And whilst I very much agree with kissing, and admire your go-getter attitude in that regard, perhaps you need to take a step back and think about things?”

Ash sat back down again. “Yeah, yeah, that makes sense,” she said, rubbing her face. “Um, sorry if I came on too strong.”

“You didn’t at all,” Pen said, sitting back down too and taking her hand. “I like you, Ash, I’ve liked you since you moved in, I’m not going to hide that. But I’m equally not interested in taking advantage of someone vulnerable.”

“You like me?” Ash said. “But... why? All I do is shout at you and throw you out of the book shop.”

“True,” Pen said. Squeezing Ash’s hand. “But I’m of the opinion that your bark is worse than your bite.” Ash’s hand felt nice in her own, perfect and smooth. “Listen, you’re going to help me get my problems sorted out, so why don’t I help you with this?”

“With... this?” Ash said doubtfully. “You mean the gay stuff? Is there a lot to learn? Because, you know, I could just be celibate.”

“Which would be a great loss to the world,” Pen said solemnly. “But we could, I don’t know, hold hands and things, go really slowly, and you could figure out if it’s something you really want.”

“Would there be more kissing?” asked Ash, her eyes twinkling.

“There might be,” Pen said, hoping very much that there would be.

“And in return you’ll accept my help and stop burying your head in the sand like some kind of demented ostrich?”

“I will,” promised Pen. “And your first lesson is that calling women demented ostriches is not the way to their hearts.”

“Got it,” Ash said. “And your first lesson is that there’s no way you can afford an employee or a non-paying lodger.”

“Oh god. Lucy.” Pen’s heart sank. “I can’t just throw her out.”

“You can’t,” agreed Ash. “But we do need to make other arrangements. So while I take all these bills back to the bookshop and figure out what’s what, you need to make some phone calls and see who might have a job for Lucy, got it?”

“Got it,” Pen said, feeling sad and small until Ash wrapped her up in another hug that made the world seem better again.

“SHE’S ALSO VERY tall,” said Mr. Gupta approvingly.

“Which is important because?” asked Pen.

Mr. Gupta took his coffee and croissant. “Because she will be able to reach the top shelves that I myself cannot reach.”

“I am right here,” Lucy said, sliding Mr. Gupta a napkin. “Although I suppose I am quite tall. I’ve never had that listed on my CV though.”

“What I meant was that I think you would be perfect for the job,” said Mr. Gupta. “If you’re interested, that is? My wife has been complaining for months now that she wants to spend more time with the grandchildren. It would be a perfect solution for us all, I think. You could start on Monday, I offer a fair wage and half days on Wednesdays.”

“It sounds wonderful,” Lucy said. “As long as you don’t mind, Pen?”

“It sounds like a great opportunity,” said Pen, relieved that Lucy was taking leaving so well.

“There is only one caveat,” Mr. Gupta said sternly. “You may eat only a maximum of fifty pence a day in pick-and-mix sweets, no more!”

Lucy laughed. “That sounds very fair,” she said. “I’ll look forward to it.”

Mr. Gupta nodded in satisfaction. “In that case, I’m about to make my wife a very happy woman, so my thanks to you, Penelope.”

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“You’re sure you don’t mind?” Pen asked when the newsagent had left. “I’m not throwing you out or anything.”

“Pen, you’ve been my guardian angel, my miracle, I don’t know how to thank you enough.” Lucy blushed. “But, um, I did see that most of those letters that Billy gave you were bills. It looks like it’s best for us all if I stand on my own two feet as quickly as possible.”

Pen’s mouth turned sour. She hated that other people knew, she couldn’t help but find it shameful. But it wasn’t like she’d spent the money on wine, women, and song. She’d just... She sighed. It had just got out of her control. The giving to charity, the lending money, the money that had to go into the bakery. One minute she’d been on top of it, the next she’d been ignoring letters so hard she’d practically turned cross-eyed from it.

“Pen, Pen!”

Both women turned as George rushed into the shop.

Pen’s heart sank again. Oh god, now George must know as well. Which was not only embarrassing, but he’d be angry that she hadn’t told him. He was supposed to be her best friend.

“Pen, Billy,” George said.

“Billy... what?” Pen asked.

George leaned on the counter getting his breath back.

“You know, the bookshop is only just next door,” Lucy said. “You might want to work on your cardio.”

“I. Do. Yoga,” panted George. He took a deep breath, then another. “I just had a brainwave and I rushed up the stairs from the cellar and then right over.” He glared at Lucy. “And my cardiac health is excellent, thank you.”

“Mmm,” said Lucy disbelievingly.

“So what’s this brainwave?” Pen asked.

“Billy,” said George. “He’s got a spare room and was talking about renting it out except he didn’t want to run it like an AirBnB or anything just for the summer tourists. He wanted someone long term and no one bit, so he gave up on the idea. But it’s a nice place, close to the beach, light and nicely furnished.”

“How would you know about that?” Pen asked, squinting at George who was rapidly beginning to flush.

“Um, well, it’s...” He gulped. “It’s all a bit new and I didn’t want to say anything too soon and it’s only been a couple of dates really.”

“George! Have you got a boyfriend?” Pen screeched.

“And what a boyfriend,” said Lucy. “Those broad shoulders and big muscles from carrying sacks of letters. He’s gorgeous, Billy is.”

“Yeah, well,” George said, still blushing. “He’s also got a spare room if you’re interested?”

“Does that mean I’ll get to make you coffee every morning?” asked Lucy innocently.

“Get on with you,” said George. “Go and get your coat and I’ll take you over to have a look at it, if you want? I’ve already told Billy someone might be interested.”

Lucy bounced off grinning, leaving George and Pen alone.

“I can’t believe that I didn’t know you had a crush on Billy,” Pen said. “I was so immersed in my own thing that I was blind to it. Oh, I’m sorry, George. I’ve been a crappy friend.”

“No, you’ve been a worried friend,” George said. He came closer, took Pen’s hands. “Why didn’t you tell me, Pen?”

“Because I was ashamed,” she said.

“Not that,” said George, scowling. “I get that. I mean, it’s terrible but Ash says we can help work things out and I cantotally see how getting into debt happens. I meant about you and Her Royal Highness making out in the middle of the day.”

“We didn’t make out, it was one kiss,” Pen said. “And it literally just happened, I haven’t had a chance to tell you about it yet.”

George grinned at her. “I’m happy for you, Pen.”

“Nothing big has happened yet. It’s just... it’s just a little tingle right now. We’ll see if anything comes of it.”

“Maybe she’s not that bad,” George said grudgingly. He sniffed. “Listen, Pen, I want to talk business for a minute. I’ve got a bit saved up and—”

“And no charity,” Pen said, pulling away from him.

“I wasn’t offering it,” said George. “I would, on the other hand, be willing to make an investment in the bakery if you needed one. Think it over. We’d do it properly, with contracts and things. No pressure, but the offer is there if you need it.”

Pen blinked away a fresh tear. “I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve all this,” she said. “People like you and Ash just helping me without getting anything back.”

“Well, Ash got a smacker of a kiss, apparently. Not that that’s what I’m looking for,” he added hurriedly. He took her hands again. “You deserve this because you’re always the one giving, Pen. You deserve a little help in return.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“But you do need to learn a lesson from this,” he said. “You can’t feed people from an empty pantry, Pen.”

She rolled her eyes and pretended like she didn’t know what he meant, and they had no time to finish the conversation as Lucy came barreling in with her coat on.

Pen watched them walk down the street together and marveled at how her world had changed in just a few minutes. And then she wondered if Ash was her guardian angel, like she was Lucy’s. And then she remembered the kiss and warmth flooded her skin and suddenly debt was the least important thing she could think of.

It was a chilly afternoon and Ash wrapped her jacket around herself as gray clouds scudded across the sky.

By all rights she should be feeling... confused, angry perhaps, uprooted maybe. But she felt none of those things. Alright the last couple of days had been big ones, but far from being overwhelmed she was almost relieved. Relieved that perhaps she fit in better in the world than she'd imagined.

Not that that had ever worried her before. Or maybe she just hadn't let it worry her, it was hard to tell.

But there was something about all this that was slowly starting to feel right. It was a strange feeling and one she wasn't quite used to. One she didn't really know how to examine.

It wasn't until she turned around at the end of the beach to head back that she saw someone wildly waving and yelling at her. She grinned to herself because Pen looked for all the world like a beach ball, her comfortably round body wrapped up in a bright red and yellow coat.

"I've been shouting for ages," Pen said when she finally caught up. Her cheeks were pink with chill and her long blonde curls whipped around in the breeze.

"It's windy out, I couldn't hear you." Ash pulled out her phone. "Why didn't you text or something?"

"I didn't think about it," said Pen, beaming up at her.

Ash felt a sudden need to kiss her again, to hold her close, to feel her heart beat. She swallowed and took a breath because she still didn't know what the rules were here. But as they started to walk again, Pen naturally slid her hand into Ash's and Ash

found that she too was smiling slightly.

“Did you get everything I sent you?” Ash asked.

Pen nodded. “All the appointments are in my calendar already.”

“Do you want me to go with you to the debt counselor?”

Pen’s fingers tightened around Ash’s.

“Let me rephrase that, I’ll go with you to the debt counselor,” said Ash. “It’s nothing to worry about. I’m not going to pretend that the situation is all sweetness and light, but once your debts are consolidated and payment plans are set up, you’ll do just fine.” She stopped on the sand. “As long as you start paying attention to what’s in the accounts before you start taking things out.”

“I do,” Pen started.

“Do you?” asked Ash. She sighed. “You’re a very good person, Pen. But half the direct debits from your account are donations to the animal shelter or UNICEF or half a dozen other things.”

“But I have to help.”

“You can’t help if you don’t have any money at all, can you? How helpful are you going to be if you’re living in a box under a bridge somewhere?” asked Ash reasonably, looking down into Pen’s wide blue eyes.

Pen swallowed but nodded. “Got it.” They started walking again, Ash slowing her pace to match Pen’s. “Any news on the inheritance front?”

Ash sighed. “Those stupid gene sites are worthless. Not a hit on any of them. As for the rest, well, I don’t think I’ll ever get a real hold on who Mary was. I never knew her, I suppose I just have to accept that.”

“But it’s important to you, why?”

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Ash gave another sigh. “Because, I suppose, I saw something in Mary that I’d have liked for myself. It’s hard to explain. She was alone and yet not alone, she was so happy in every picture I saw of her.”

“Probably because we don’t tend to take pictures of the sad times,” said Pen. “Though Mary was a pretty happy person. She was never alone though, not really. She had a whole town full of family, even if we weren’t blood relatives.”

“I guess.”

“And that made you jealous?” suggested Pen.

Ash nodded.

“You don’t have to be alone though, Ash. Not if you don’t want to be. I mean, it seems like you’ve set things up so that you can be alone and I don’t really understand why.”

“Because it was easier,” Ash said, stopping again and looking out over angry gray waves. “Because I didn’t fit in, I never did, and when you don’t fit in, you have two choices. You can pretend to fit in and fake it, or you can pretend that you never wanted to fit in in the first place and spend your time alone.”

Pen let go of Ash’s hand and moved her arm up so that their arms were linked, their bodies closer. “There’s a third choice. You could find another place to fit in, one that’s better for you. We’re not always born into the place where we fit, or around people we fit with, sometimes you have to go out and find it. Actually, quite often

you have to go out and find it.”

“Not you,” Ash pointed out. “You seem pretty happy here.”

“I was lucky,” said Pen.

“And what does that feel like? To be lucky?” Ash asked.

Pen moved around so that her arms were around Ash’s waist. “Why don’t you tell me? I mean, you washed up here eventually, that’s pretty lucky. You inherited a whole building with a bookshop, that’s quite lucky too, isn’t it? I think luck is how you look at things.”

This time, Ash didn’t stop herself. She leaned down and pressed a kiss onto Pen’s soft and cool lips, letting herself properly taste what she was doing, drinking it in for a long minute as the gulls cawed above them.

“You get to kiss me,” Pen grinned as Ash pulled back. “That’s lucky too.”

“We’ll need some of that luck when we go to this council meeting on Friday,” Ash said, taking Pen’s hand and walking on.

“It’ll all be fine,” said Pen. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Doesn’t that constant optimism ever get old?”

“Nope,” Pen laughed. “Besides, I don’t see another way to be. I mean, I suppose I could walk around expecting the worst all the time, but then I’m not sure I’d be able to get out of bed in the morning.”

“Maybe don’t expect the worst, maybe just be realistic?” suggested Ash.

“But the best case scenario is just as realistic as any other outcome,” Pen argued. “And whilst we’re discussing best case scenario, there’s something that I’ve noticed.”

“Which is?”

“The numbers you’ve given me, the presentation for the council, it all involves the bookshop.”

“Mmm,” agreed Ash. “Since I, as a pessimist, loner, and general grump am the last person on earth that should be running a romance bookstore, as I’m sure we can all agree on.”

“I’m not so sure about that. You might be a grump but you’ve got a squishy inside like one of those chocolates.”

Ash rolled her eyes. “I swear to god, if you say that to anyone else...”

“Your secret is safe with me,” said Pen. “And, back to the subject at hand, my point is not that the presentation talks only about the bookshop, it’s that it doesn’t mention the flat above the bookshop.”

“Ah,” said Ash. She’d been wondering when Pen was going to mention this and had equally been wondering just what she was going to say when asked.

Pen cleared her throat. “I, um, I was wondering if that meant something.”

“It means that selling a private flat to the council would probably be a tough ask,” Ash said. “You want to get them interested in the business, which is what we’re doing. And I’ve got to say, you’re a lot more optimistic about that than I am.”

“I told you, something will turn up,” said Pen. “If the council won’t give us this grant

then we'll run the world's biggest jumble sale or something. It'll be fine."

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“Mmm,” was all Ash could think of to say. She started walking again.

“But does that mean you’ll be, I don’t know, selling the flat privately?” pushed Pen.

“Or does it mean that you’re thinking about staying around town?”

Ash sighed. “I can’t answer that question right now, Pen. I’m sorry. I know you’d like me to say that I’m staying but I honestly don’t know. I have been toying with the idea of moving out of London. But I don’t know if this is the place for me. It’s... small.”

“But lovely.”

Ash laughed. “Not the point. It is a very pretty town. But everyone knows everything and I don’t know if that’s something I want.”

“You don’t want a community?” Pen asked, sounding surprised.

“I don’t know what I want, not yet. And anyway, who’s to say that the community wants me? Not only that, but you do know that I haven’t actually signed any paperwork at all accepting this inheritance yet.”

“I thought you said that your mum said that you definitely had an Aunt Mary?”

“Mmm,” Ash said again. She loved her mother, but the woman was scatter-brained and the phone line had been bad and she wasn’t quite ready to risk everything on that just yet. What if this wasn’t right? What if someone showed up five years down the road demanding their rightful inheritance?

“Tetherington is a nice place,” Pen said, sliding her hand back into Ash’s. “You’ll learn to love it.”

“You sound confident.”

“What’s not to love?” asked Pen, swinging her arm so that Ash’s swung with it. “Couldn’t you imagine living like this? Walking on the beach every evening hand in hand with the love of your life.” She paused for a second, their hands stuck up in the air. “Not that I’m saying that’s me, of course, just, you know, a general love of your life.”

“They come in general kinds, do they?” Ash asked, pulling their hands back down again and swinging them. “I might prefer a more specific flavor.”

“Really?” Pen said, stopping once again. “What flavor is that then?”

“Sunshine flavor sounds quite good,” Ash said, pulling Pen in again.

With each kiss she grew more confident, she relished the feeling of something actually feeling right, comfortable. She liked the idea of having someone like Pen. Or maybe even Pen herself. She just wasn’t completely sure that this was the life for her. Not yet.

But, an hour later, when she’d bid a reluctant goodbye to Pen and sent her home, as she opened the bookshop door and Fabio slid inside, as she walked past the shelves full of books knowing that whilst not all of them spoke to her, a certain section really did, she thought that perhaps she could get used to this.

Chapter Twenty One

“Ash and Pen sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G,” George sang.

“How old are you, five?” asked Pen, shifting on her uncomfortable plastic chair.

“Old enough to know that the two of you are getting dirty.”

“We are not!”

“Are so!”

“George, we’ve literally just kissed.”

His eyebrows almost shot off his head. “You’re kidding? It’s been like, two weeks.”

“Which is a perfectly acceptable amount of time to kiss for,” Pen said. “Not that we’ve been kissing for the whole two weeks. Not that I’d mind if we had, but we didn’t.”

“Uh-huh,” said George. “Not interested in more then?”

“Stop it,” said Pen. “She’s new to all this, new to the idea that she might like other women, we’re taking things slowly.”

George sighed and sat back, banging his head against the window behind him. “Ow. If you go much slower you’ll stop.” He gave Pen a sideways glance as he rubbed his head. “Sure it’s not because you don’t want to get too attached because she might be moving away?”

“She also might not be moving away,” Pen said. “She hasn’t decided yet.”

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“She hasn’t decided yet whether or not she actually owns the damn place,” complained George. “You should see her ferreting around the shop looking for evidence that she’s actually supposed to be there.”

“She wants to do this right, I have to respect that.” Pen stretched her legs out, her feet were already aching in her heels.

“It’s almost like she’s looking for excuses not to own the shop.”

“Listen, as much as I appreciate you coming for moral support, you’re not actually helping me feel better right now.”

George looked around the town hall corridor which was conspicuously empty. “There’s no one else here to support you.”

“Ash is at the shop, as you well know, and it wouldn’t be right for her to be here, it would look like she was trying to make money off the council. This has to come from us, the community, not from Ash who’s trying to sell the place.”

“The place she doesn’t actually own yet,” put in George.

“Not helpful.”

“Fine.” He sighed. “What are we going to do if they say no?”

Pen grinned at him. “Come up with a plan B, just like we always do.”

“Sarah Hanson came around with her collection box this morning,” George said, steering into safer waters.

Pen bit her lip. It had been a difficult moment, but she’d overcome it. “I put in twenty pence.”

“A fair amount,” agreed George. He took her hand. “You’re doing okay then?”

“I’m waiting for the debt councilor to get back to me with a payment plan, but on the whole, yes. She was nice actually, kind, and she said that plenty of people get into trouble like this and the most important thing is to be willing to fix the problem.”

“Good advice.” George paused. “Thought anymore about whether the bakery needs an investment?”

Pen, who had thought about it and was still on the fence looked down at her hands. “I don’t know. I don’t want to ruin our friendship. I feel like adding money into the mix might not be a good idea.”

“A fair point,” said George. “But the offer’s there if you want to take me up on it.”

Pen was about to thank him when the door opposite them opened. “We’re ready for you, Ms. Robson,” said councilwoman Thurst.

“Break a leg,” George whispered as Pen got up. “I’ve got everything crossed for you.”

Pen looked back and saw that George did indeed have his arms, legs, fingers, and from the odd bumps in his shoes his toes, all crossed.

She smiled and followed councilwoman Thurst into the room.

PEN BREATHED OUT a sigh of relief that it was all over. The council members shook her hand and she felt like she'd made a decent argument as to why buying the bookshop would be a good use of the development grant.

It was a bit weird to see people that she'd known her whole life acting as town government rather than buying biscuits, but she'd taken it seriously and was proud of herself.

“What did you think?” she whispered to councilwoman Thurst as she was shown out of the room.

Thurst regarded her then gave a brief nod. “You impressed me,” she said. “You’re more than just a pretty face, that’s clear. I can’t speak for the rest of the council, but I’ll be giving your suggestion some serious thought.”

“It was alright then?” Pen asked, still panicking just a little.

“It’s a strong candidate,” Thurst said, giving her a rare smile. “We’ll let you know when a decision has been made.”

“Thank you,” said Pen, opening the door and letting herself out.

“So?” asked George, bouncing up and down in his seat with excitement.

“They’re seriously considering it,” Pen squeaked. “See? I told you everything would turn out for the best. Come on, let’s get back so we can tell Ash.”

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Once back on their street, Pen rushed into the bakery to relieve Lucy who'd been watching the cafe for her and George went to tell Ash the good news.

Five minutes later, just as Lucy left, Ash came rushing in. "That's amazing," she said, a bright smile on her face.

"Making for two amazing things in one day," Pen said.

Ash stopped. "Um, what's the second?"

"The fact that you, little miss grump, have just walked into my shop uninvited for the purpose of gossiping rather than, say, buying coffee or a bun."

"I could buy both a coffee and a bun if that would make you feel better," Ash said.

"No," said Pen, coming around the counter. "It actually makes me feel good that you can just drop in. I like that."

"Which does not give you full permission to just walk into the bookshop whenever you feel like it," Ash said, eyes twinkling.

"Does it not?" asked Pen. "What about if I walk in to do this." She stood up on her tiptoes and brushed her lips against Ash's. "Or this?" She let her lips brush against the soft skin on Ash's neck. An alarm buzzed from the kitchen and Pen jumped back. "Oops, I'd better get that."

Ash followed her into the kitchen and Pen could feel her eyes on her as she lifted a

tray of warmed buns out of the oven. She carefully placed the tray down on a cooling rack, then turned back to Ash.

“So...” she said, unsure now of where this was going. She didn’t want to pressure Ash or influence her in any way.

“So?” Ash said, taking a step toward her. “Weren’t we in the middle of something?”

Pen grinned. “Yeah, we sort of were, weren’t we?”

Ash put her hands on Pen’s waist and bent to kiss her, letting their lips touch softly, then more urgently. Pen felt Ash’s hips start to push into her and her heart was beating harder and her pulse was starting to race and she was responding to Ash in ways that she hadn’t responded to anyone in a long time.

It was intoxicating.

But she pulled back anyway.

“Are you okay with this?”

Ash’s face was flushed, her hair was falling over one eye, she was breathing a little fast. And then she was smiling. “I’m more than okay with this. In fact, um, I was sort of thinking that this is what I might be wanting. If that was alright with you? I mean, are you okay with this?”

“Are you kidding?” Pen asked, warmth flooding her core and her legs starting to feel wobbly.

“Not even a little bit,” Ash said. She looked down at Pen. “I like you, Pen. I have feelings here. And, well, we’re both grown ups, we’ve been doing all this kissy stuff

for a while now and it might be time to take things a little further.” She grinned. “I do own a romance bookshop, so I’m somewhat of an expert in these matters.”

“Are you?” Pen asked, laughing. “Alright, well, I’m definitely a consenting adult, and you assure me that you are, so I could close the shop up for a little siesta.”

“That sounds... fun,” said Ash.

Pen tilted her head to look her directly in the eyes. “We stop whenever you want, there are no expectations here, Ash.”

“Good,” Ash said. “Because I have no idea what I’m doing, just that I want to do it.”

Pen was standing up on her tiptoes again, wrapping her arms around Ash’s neck when the front door of the bakery dinged open. Immediately, the sound of children’s chatter filled the room. Pen groaned. She pulled back. “Just a second.”

“Oh, Pen, I’m really sorry to ask,” Moira said as Pen came out into the front. “But Harley has an ear infection again and I can’t drag all of them to the doctor. Is it alright if I leave these three with you?”

Pen looked at the children who were already sitting on chairs and looking up at her with happy shiny faces. She bit her lip and turned back to Ash, who was standing in the doorway to the kitchen. Then she took a deep breath.

“Of course you can leave them,” she said to Moira. How could she leave her in the lurch? It wouldn’t be fair and honestly, the kids had to come first, didn’t they? She crossed her fingers that Ash wouldn’t be cross with her.

“Thank you, thank you,” Moira said, dragging Harley by the hand.

“You’re not cross are you?” Pen asked, turning back to Ash.

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But Ash was already smiling. “No, I’m not cross. A bit disappointed maybe, but there’ll be other times, won’t there?”

“Absolutely,” Pen said fervently.

“Just don’t give all your energies to these little ones,” Ash said, walking toward the door. “Make sure to save a bit for yourself.”

“I will,” Pen said. She watched as Ash left, walking past the window, and then turned her attention to the children.

There would be other times. And when those times happened, well, she was pretty sure that Ash was going to be a natural.

Chapter Twenty Two

Fabio meowed and Ash dumped an open can of cat food onto a plate. Before she could put it on the floor, the cat had pounced on it, lapping at it on the kitchen table.

“You really do have a cheek, do you know that?” Ash said. Fabio didn’t even look up at her.

The shop was open, George was filling the online orders downstairs, the sun was shining, and it was a beautiful day. Beautiful enough that Ash just couldn’t stop thinking about Pen. About the way she smiled, the way she felt.

This really was something, Ash thought. She hadn’t understood for so long what

other people wanted, and now she felt, well, normal wasn't the right word really, but something along those lines. How odd that what she'd really needed was someone else.

She picked up her tea and headed into the shop. It was quiet, but the bookclub would be in tonight. She blew on her mug as she switched on the computer. The smell of books was everywhere, papery and warm and as Ash sipped her tea and waited for the computer to prepare itself, she seriously wondered for the first time if she could stay here.

Stay here and run a bookshop.

After all, she hadn't had any disasters so far, had she? It didn't seem that hard. She had the financial stuff covered, obviously. George could help with most of the rest. And Pen... Pen could be next door and available and there whenever Ash wanted her.

She smiled to herself. It sounded like some kind of dream world. An unrealistic, silly world where suddenly people could just do as they liked.

She had no business running a bookshop.

She clicked through some emails until she got to one that she didn't recognize. She had a message on one of the genealogy sites she'd registered with. With a frown, she opened up the site, found the message box, and read what she'd been left. She glanced up at the top of the message, seeing a green dot. The user who had sent the message was online.

Quickly, she typed, her fingers flying over the keys, leaving her phone number and a short message of her own.

Then she waited, staring at her phone. Maybe he wouldn't call. Probably he wouldn't.

Who would call a stranger from the internet? She certainly wouldn't.

Her phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Hello," drawled a soft Scottish accent. "This is Peter, from the site?" He gave a soft chuckle. "By my reckonings, I'm your first cousin, first removed."

"Right," said Ash. "I'm not actually sure what that means."

"Well, I'm your grandma's brother's son." He paused for a moment. "And you're Allan's girl, are you?"

"Allan?"

"Your father?"

Ash's heart filled up a little and she was starting to feel shaky. "You know him?" She wasn't sure how she felt about that, what she wanted to know or not know. Her father had never been anything to her.

"Not really, love, I'm sorry if that comes as a disappointment. I've been doing this genealogy thing for a while now. My wife got me into it, got me one of those testing kits for Christmas a few years ago, and I've been working on a family tree ever since. Gives me something to do since my retirement, you know?"

Ash let her breath go. Okay, no imminent danger of a long lost father walking into her life. "Must be interesting," she said.

"Aye. Well, as far as I can see, your father disappeared. He went off to America in

the mid eighties, that must have been right after you were born. And that's the last anyone heard of him."

"Right," Ash said. "I see." It was better that way, she instinctively knew. She had little desire to meet someone who'd left her and her mother so easily. "Actually, it's more my dad's siblings I'm interested in."

“Ah, right, well then, there was only one, a sister.”

Ash’s pulse sped up again. “A sister,” she said. “My aunt.”

“Aye, she would be.” Peter cleared his throat. “I, uh, I don’t really know how to say this. I feel like I’m just some harbinger of doom at the moment. The thing is, your father’s sister, she died.”

“Oh, I know,” Ash said quickly. “Don’t worry, I know that already.” She was just about to tell him that she was standing in her aunt’s bookshop, when he spoke again.

“It happened a lot in those days, of course. The late fifties were an odd time, what with the new NHS and all. We’ve come a long way since then, thankfully. Leukemia isn’t the death sentence it once was.”

“Wait,” Ash said. “Wait, she died when she was a child?”

“Yes,” he said in surprise. “I thought you knew that?”

Ash had started to shake again. “Right, of course,” she lied, just wanting to get him off the phone now. “Thank you so much for your help.”

“It’s nothing. If there’s anything else I can help with, I’m happy to. And if you’d like to return the favor, I could use your mother’s email address, there are some things I’d like to ask her for the family tree.”

Ash promised that she’d ask her mother the next time she called and hung up just as

soon as she could.

And then she stood in the bookshop for what felt like hours taking in what she'd just heard. The bookshop that was indisputably really not hers at all.

PEN PUT THE teapot on the middle of the kitchen table and shook her head. "I'm so sorry, Ash, I truly am. It must have been a bit of a shock."

"Not really," Ash said, realizing that she'd sort of been expecting this all along. "I mean, up-ending in a way, but not completely a shock."

"I don't really know what to say." Pen sat down opposite her, wringing her hands, her face sad in a way that was unfamiliar and new.

"There's nothing to say," said Ash, picking up the teapot and pouring for them both. "I'll call the solicitor in the morning and tell him everything and then, well, then I suppose I'll have to pack up."

Pen's whole face widened, her eyes, her mouth. "No!"

"What choice do I have, come on, Pen."

"Of course you have a choice," Pen said.

"You just want me to stay for your own nefarious means," said Ash, trying to make light of the situation. She leaned forward a little. "I won't be leaving you, Pen. I hope you know that. I'll stay in touch, we can visit, I feel like we've just started to make a connection and I won't walk out on it, not now."

"That's not at all what I'm talking about," Pen said. She sighed. "Well, okay, maybe a little bit. You can't just leave the shop though."

“I can if it’s not mine,” said Ash.

“Who says it’s not yours?” Pen countered.

It was Ash’s turn to sigh. “Pen, I told you what Peter said.”

“You told me what some stranger off the internet said. Maybe he’s wrong. Maybe your aunt didn’t die. Or maybe it’s not this aunt, it’s another one. Maybe Mary was your aunt by marriage, or your aunt first removed or a great aunt or... I don’t know. Just because this one alley didn’t work doesn’t mean that the whole thing is lost.”

“Pen,” Ash said gently. “I know you’re disappointed.”

“Why don’t you just leave it all alone?” Pen said, pleadingly. “Just sign the papers and get on with life. Why do you have to pick at it all? Maybe there aren’t any real answers.”

“So I should just accept the shop and what? Hope that the real heir never shows up?”

“They might not,” Pen said. “They haven’t so far, have they? And maybe you are the real heir. And even if you’re not, what difference does it make at this point?”

“A big difference if the inheritance isn’t mine,” Ash said, her voice getting tighter and louder.

“You know, some people might think that you don’t want to stay at all,” Pen said, almost snapping.

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Ash shook her head. “This is all like a dream,” she said, remembering what she’d been thinking earlier. “It’s lovely and nice and even the town is idyllic, but dreams end, Pen. You have to wake up.”

“So you’re accusing me of being a fantasist?”

“Aren’t you?” Ash was getting angry now. “This isn’t your decision to make, Pen. Which is a good thing, since apparently you seem to think that committing fraud is an appropriate thing to do.”

“That’s not what I said at all,” said Pen. Her cheeks were flushed. “There’s uncertainty here, even you can see that.”

“And you’re recommending that I just ignore it and... what? Hope that the best happens and the worst doesn’t?”

“The best might happen if you ever give it a chance to,” said Pen. “But you never do.” She stood up. “And that’s because you don’t want to stay here anyway, you don’t want to have ties here.”

“I don’t want to live in a dream and be afraid of waking up every second,” snapped Ash, standing up too, leaning on the kitchen table.

“Then maybe you should think about what you do want,” Pen said. She took one last look at Ash and then turned and walked away.

Ash heard the shop bell dinging as Pen left.

She groaned and bent over, laying her head on the table.

She really hadn't meant to argue with Pen. She'd needed to talk to someone, needed someone to tell her what to do. But of course Pen would want her to stay, would want her to take the bright road.

But Ash really didn't know if she could do that. She didn't know if she could accept something that she didn't know was really hers.

And, to be completely honest, she didn't know if she could stay here or have ties here or anything else. Having the inheritance taken away would make that decision for her. Without it, she could go back to London and have her old life back.

Chapter Twenty Three

Pen didn't often cry. Whenever she felt the need, she either talked herself out of it or disappeared down to the beach to let it out.

But this time she broke down in the bakery. It was just all too much. She locked the doors, pulled down the shades, and then stood in the middle of her precious business and the tears started to fall.

So much change, so much that she'd gotten wrong, she didn't know how she was going to become herself again.

Who was she if she couldn't give freely, couldn't be generous, couldn't be optimistic?

And Ash... As much as she had feelings, and she really did, she was worried about Ash going away, whatever she said. She was just being so stubborn wanting everything to be just so, why couldn't she see that some things were better left alone?

The fates had handed her this bookshop, this town, this family if she wanted it, and all she could do was try to find reasons not to have any of it.

This might all have started off as something silly, stupid sunshine Pen falling over the ice queen next door. But something had happened when Ash had kissed her, a feeling that Pen had never had before, no matter how many other women she might have fallen for over the years.

For just a second, kissing Ash had been like coming home. It had fit so perfectly, been so comfortable, that Pen was sure that even if she'd have been the world's biggest pessimist she would have thought this was somehow going to work out.

Now Ash was saying that she didn't belong here, that she'd probably have to leave, and Pen couldn't handle it. For once, her optimism wouldn't stretch that far.

She took deep breaths, trying to calm herself, trying to stop the fear from taking over.

This was idiotic, in fact she needed to tell herself that.

"This is idiotic," she said, her voice hiccuping and sad.

Not good enough.

She took a deeper breath.

"This is idiotic."

Still not good enough.

She took the deepest breath she could.

“This. Is. Idiotic.”

Say it with confidence, believe it, change is a good thing, the sun always comes after the rain, there is always a happy ending.

There was a knock on the door.

Jesus. For once, Pen stayed silent. She couldn't do this. She couldn't deal with not donating to Sarah Hanson's charity of the week, she couldn't deal with Moira's kids, she couldn't referee a fight between Lucy and Mr. Gupta, she couldn't even talk pre-school with Elspeth.

The knock came again.

Pen froze in place.

“Pen, it's me,” said a voice from outside. There was a pause. “I know you're in there.”

Ash. Against her will, Pen's heart started to beat harder, her mouth started to dry, she wanted to let Ash in.

“Pen, I can hear you yelling ‘this is idiotic’ to yourself,” Ash said.

With a groan, Pen went to the door and unlocked it. “You didn't have to tell me that part,” she said. “Now I look like I'm crazy.”

“We’ve all got a little crazy in us,” said Ash, leaning against the doorframe. “Can I come inside?”

Pen nodded and stood back. Ash came in, closing the door behind her and then, after a second of thought, locking it too.

“I’m sorry,” Ash said. “That conversation we just had was... not a good one.”

“It wasn’t,” Pen said. “And I’m sorry too.”

Ash shrugged. “When two people are as different as you and I, there are bound to be disagreements and miscommunications, that’s how life works.”

Pen nodded slowly. “I, uh, I have no right telling you what to do about the bookshop. You’re right, I don’t want you to leave, but I promise that’s not the only reason I said what I said.”

“I get it,” Ash said. “I get that you want all this to work out, that living next door to each other and loving each other and selling books and buns together is some kind of idyllic dream. I can see it myself sometimes. But I also see the reality of things, and the reality is that life just isn’t that way. It doesn’t come that easily. We have to work for things.”

Pen sighed. “I know. You’re right. And you’re honest and want to do the right thing.”

Ash held on to the back of one of the chairs. “I do want to do the right thing. For everyone. About everything. I’ve definitely got feelings for you, Pen and I’m not running away from them. Even if I have to go and live in Argentina, I’ll still have feelings for you.”

“Argentina?” Pen asked. “Why Argentina? Is that a possibility?”

Ash grinned. “No, not really. It was just the first place that came to mind. I think I’m just saying that even if the dreams don’t all come true, I’m still willing to put the work in?”

“Right,” Pen said. She found that she was smiling. “That works for me. I suppose I could use someone to keep me a little... grounded.”

“And I could use someone to teach me how to dream a little bit,” Ash said. “So maybe we’re good for each other.”

“I think that’s how it’s supposed to work,” Pen said. She looked at Ash. “At least if you believe the grumpy-sunshine and opposites-attract books that you’ll find on the shelf to the right of the counter.”

“Huh, maybe I should read some more of those,” said Ash. “You know, it turns out that romance books actually have quite a lot going for them.”

“They do,” Pen said. “Mary always said it was like selling dreams. You’ll know that by now, of course, she said it so often she must have written it down everywhere.”

Ash frowned. “Written it down? You know, now that you say that, I don’t think I’ve seen more than a telephone number or shopping list written by Mary.”

“No, no,” said Pen. “She kept one of those line a day journals. Except most of the time she couldn’t just write a line a day, she added little sticky notes to each day and folded them over so she’d have more room. George used to tease her about buying an actual journal.”

“Where did she keep it?” Ash asked.

“Um, under the phone in the shop. The big green book at the counter, you must have

seen it.”

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“I thought it was an address book,” said Ash, looking surprised.

“Who keeps an address book nowadays?” asked Pen.

“Well... Mary was... older?”

“Not ancient. Jesus,” said Pen. She took a step closer to Ash. “Did you call the solicitor?”

Ash shook her head. “Not yet. You’re right. There’s too much conflicting information here. Whatever that Peter guy said, my mum seemed to know about Aunt Mary, so I suppose I should at least check with her first. And maybe read that journal.”

“Maybe,” said Pen. “But whatever happens, I’ll support your decision. Even if you move to Argentina.”

“Not really an option. But good to know.”

Pen looked down at the table. “I, uh, got my debt consolidation paperwork today. I’ve got a payment plan and everything.”

“Good, good,” said Ash.

She swallowed. “So, uh, want to go and check out that journal?” She peeked a look at Ash, whose sharp features were disappearing into the shadows now that it was starting to get dark.

“No, not right now,” Ash said softly. “Want me to check out that debt consolidation paperwork for you?”

Pen shuffled a little closer. “No, not right now.” She took a breath and could smell Ash’s scent. “Want to take your evening walk on the beach?”

This time it was Ash that moved closer, close enough that if Pen reached out she could touch her. But she kept her hands to herself, being patient, letting Ash control whatever was happening here.

“Not right now,” said Ash. She swallowed. “So, uh, I guess we had our first fight, huh?”

Pen nodded. “Yeah, a bit of a milestone that. But, you know, there is a silver lining.”

“With you there’s always a silver lining,” Ash said. But it didn’t sound like a criticism this time, it sounded like Ash was charmingly exasperated.

“After a fight, you get to make up.”

Ash was even closer now, and Pen could feel her warmth. “I see,” she said. “So that’s the accepted thing to happen now? We make up?”

Pen grinned. “If you want to.”

“Hmmm.” Ash looked serious. “That sort of depends. I mean, what exactly does making up look like?”

Pen had a flash of Ash’s naked body writhing on the cool tiled floor of the bakery. She coughed. “Um, well, firstly, it probably looks like it should happen upstairs maybe? Where it’s a bit more comfortable.”

“That sounds good,” said Ash. But she wasn’t moving toward the stairs. She was moving toward Pen, reaching down and tucking a curl behind Pen’s ear, cupping her chin with her hand, leaning in until their lips brushed and Pen’s heart did a weird triple-beat.

Pen pulled back, breathless now. “I didn’t mean we had to, um, you know.”

“You don’t want to, um, you know?” Ash asked, half smiling in the dim light.

“No, I mean, yes, I mean...” Pen took a breath. “I mean, I want you to know that you’re in control here and that things move as fast as you like, that’s all.”

“In control,” Ash said. Her face relaxed a little. “Mmm, yes, I like the sound of that. I think I can do in control. So, are you inviting me upstairs, Pen?”

A little of Pen’s confidence came back. Ash really did want this. “I am inviting you upstairs,” she said. She took Ash’s hand and turned, leading her toward the stairs. “Let’s just see how in control you can stay, little miss grump.”

Ash growled but it was unclear whether she was cross at the nickname or turned on by the implications of what Pen had just said. Pen was very much looking forward to finding out.

Chapter Twenty Four

Ash’s heart was jumping and flipping in her chest like a caught frog. She’d honestly never felt like this before in her life. But she wasn’t foolish enough to be afraid. Nervous, sure, nerves were natural, not afraid though.

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She followed Pen up the stairs, admiring the shape of her from behind, and marveled at how this all seemed so... natural, so normal almost. If she thought hard about it she realized that they'd known each other for only a few weeks. If she stopped thinking she felt like they'd known each other forever.

Pen's hand was tight in hers as Pen led her into the flat and turned to lock the door behind them.

"Sure?" Pen asked, big blue eyes looking up at her.

Ash half wanted to eat her, half wanted to hold her, half wanted to kiss her, and had suddenly grown to a whole 1.5 persons apparently. Her heart fluttered again. "Absolutely sure." She looked around. "So... where?"

"Bedroom?" suggested Pen.

Ash grinned and nodded and let herself be taken by the hand again into Pen's bedroom. It was precisely how she would have imagined it if she'd taken time to imagine it. Lamps, throws, too many pillows on the bed, all Pen, fluffy and light and comfortable and lovely.

She swallowed, feeling suddenly a little awkward. Pen squeezed her hand.

"It's going to be fine. We go slow, we stop whenever you like, and we communicate, okay?" said Pen.

Ash nodded, her mouth dry. "Can I kiss you?"

“Of course.”

Ash leaned in, letting their mouths meet, letting their bodies mold together until she felt the familiar heat rising again, felt her instincts taking over. Pen moved against her, breathing gently, moaning as Ash’s hands went to her waist.

The sounds gave Ash more confidence. She pulled back a little to see Pen’s half-closed eyes and then, in an instant, she wanted so much more. Her hands started to fumble with the zipper on the back of Pen’s dress. Pen grinned up at her. “Shall we do this properly?”

Ash nodded dumbly and Pen turned around so that she could pull the zip down fully. Ash’s hands slid over Pen’s shoulders as she pushed the dress off her until Pen was standing in the middle of the bedroom floor in her underwear, a puddle of material around her feet.

Hands shaking now, Ash reached for the clasp of Pen’s bra. “Is this okay?” she asked hoarsely.

“Perfectly,” Pen said.

She undid the bra in a thankfully swift movement and then, before she had time to think, Pen turned back around and there she was, pale and beautiful standing in the half-light, her breasts full and large, her grin full and large, and Ash about fainted on the spot.

“Your turn?” Pen asked.

Given that she was busy not fainting, Ash could only nod as Pen casually and slowly unbuttoned her shirt, as she slid it over her arms, as she flicked open the button on her jeans, as she slid them over her legs. Until Ash too was standing in the half-light

wearing only sensible knickers and a dark tank-top.

Pen's hands reached for the hem of the tank-top and Ash reached up to stop her. "I'd rather not," she said. "If you don't mind?" She was small there, men had always said so, and she'd disliked taking off her shirt since school when the other girls would make fun of her. Pen simply smiled and took her hand again, walking them to the bed.

"Come on," Pen said, lying down and patting the bed next to her. "I won't bite. Unless you want me to."

If everything up to now had been like a dream, this was some kind of fantasy. Ash climbed onto the bed, hesitant to touch Pen in case she disappeared. Finally, she reached out one hand and stroked Pen's arm.

"That's nice," Pen said, settling back into the cushions.

Feeling daring, Ash let her fingers stroke up Pen's arm and tickle against her shoulder.

"Mmm," said Pen.

Feeling a mixture of anxious and daring, Ash let her fingers further trail down until they rounded the swell of Pen's breast and Pen let out a moan that Ash felt all the way down to her core. She melted, wetness flooding between her legs until she thought there might be something wrong with her. This had never happened before.

"Why don't you try kissing them?" Pen suggested. "Or sucking them perhaps? I'd like that."

Obedient, Ash bent her head, letting her lips feel the softness of Pen's skin, letting her

mouth find the wrinkled hardness of anipple and then she sucked once and heard Pen suck in a breath of air.

Her breath coming faster, she sucked more, sucked harder and Pen began to wriggle underneath her, began to push up so that her breast was pushed into Ash's face. Ash couldn't breathe and she didn't care.

Finally, Pen pushed her upward, detaching her mouth from her nipple. Ash was on her hands and knees over her, looking down at her blonde hair sprayed over the pillow.

"The other side now," Pen said, calmly and quietly like she wasn't at all melting on the inside in the way Ash was.

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Ash bent again, and the same thing happened, and as Pen started to moan, started to move, Ash was filled with a feeling she couldn't name, a need for something, a yearning that started in her soul and spread outward.

Pen reached up and put her hands on Ash's hips and Ash began to buck, began to move, so Pen moved her hands down, placed a palm against Ash's center and even through the material of her underwear Ash could feel it, could feel a pulse there and she didn't know if it was her own or Pen's.

"Let's take them off, shall we?"

Ash couldn't speak. She knelt up, stripped her knickers off, baring herself without thinking and went right back to Pen's breasts, alternating between the two, letting her hands stray to Pen's waist, pulling her up, devouring her.

So she didn't see what Pen was doing, didn't see her hands moving. But she certainly felt them.

For a millisecond, she paused, froze really, as Pen's fingers dipped straight into her wetness, dragging it up and out of her, until those same fingers pressed against her, lubricated, wet and slippery.

Then Pen moaned again and Ash lost herself. Her hips moved against Pen's hand and her lips and tongue and teeth scraped against Pen's nipples and Pen was moaning and breathing and Ash was moaning and breathing and she truly thought that she might explode until...

A brief second of silence and stillness...

Then like a thousand fireworks she was off, nerves firing and sensations sparking and her breath god-know-where and... and... and Pen, all around her, in her and on her and under her and everywhere.

"It's alright, it's alright," Pen said, cradling her, stroking her hair. "Get your breath, it's alright, my love."

Ash's heart was still hammering as she looked up. "I'm sorry."

"What for?" asked Pen, giggling. "That was only maybe the hottest thing I've ever seen."

"It's not supposed to be longer?" Ash asked anxiously.

"You're not a man," said Pen. "And we are far from done."

"I thought I was going to, um, you know, take care of you first and then... I got carried away."

"In the sexiest sense," Pen said. "And any time you're ready for that taking care of me part, I'm game."

"You are?" Ash asked, starting to grin. Her hand was on Pen's generous stomach and she began to slide it down, reaching the waistband of Pen's knickers before looking up to find her biting her lip. "You're not going to last any longer than I did, are you?"

"No," sighed Pen, mouth widening into a smile.

Ash started to feel warm again as she slid her hand into Pen's knickers, feeling the

wet warmth of her and hearing Pen sigh again in her ear.

“I DON’T WANT to talk about this if you’re not comfortable with it,” Pen said, her head on Ash’s chest. “But, um, this?” She stroked Ash’s tank top. “I completely understand not wanting to take this off, but if you’re interested, you know there are binders, right? They’ll keep everything flat and hidden but you’ll be able to get a little more skin-on-skin contact.”

Ash frowned. “Binders? For... oh, you mean, right, yeah, okay.” She swallowed. “Um, that’s not really the problem. It’s just...”

“You’re shy?” Pen asked, lifting her head up. “I get that. I’m not exactly a super-model myself.”

“Stick thin isn’t sexy to me,” Ash said, feeling offended on Pen’s behalf.

“Psh, you know what I mean. I’m a big girl, Ash, and I’m not ashamed of it. In fact, I dress to flaunt it. I’m comfortable in my skin, but it took me a long time to get there. A lot of crash dieting and feeling bad about myself.”

“So what changed?” Ash asked, stroking the soft skin of Pen’s back.

“I decided not to feel bad about myself,” Pen said simply. She snuggled back into Ash’s chest. Ash pushed her away. “What?” She looked shocked.

Ash sat up and pulled off her tank before lying back down again naked.

Pen snuggled again, this time their skin touching, warmth on warmth.

“You know, there’s only one problem with this,” Pen said.

“Mmm, what’s that?” Ash was starting to feel pleasantly drowsy.

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Pen ran her hand over Ash's torso, across her flat stomach, over the bump of her rib cage, gliding across the sensitive point of her right nipple. Ash felt a stab of heat and gasped. "Mmm, that's the problem," said Pen, sliding over a little so that her tongue could reach Ash's left nipple. "Do you think you might have a little more energy left to give?"

But Ash was too busy concentrating on breathing to answer that question.

In fact, she was busy for most of the rest of the night, in between touching and tasting and trying and napping. She didn't get back to the bookshop until after dawn had broken golden and orange and sea-salty.

And what she saw when she pushed the door open made the blood drain straight out of her face and her heart stop beating for an instant.

Chapter Twenty Five

"Good grief," Pen said, peering into the bookshop. She turned back to Ash. "I'm so sorry this has happened to you."

"The little bastards, I'll string up whoever did this."

Pen, slightly shocked by the venom in Ash's eyes, patted her arm. "It's a break in. A horrible invasion of privacy, but in the end, you're safe, the shop isn't burned to the ground, and just at the moment, we have no idea how bad the damage is. So maybe let's hold off on stringing people up for the time being. Did you call the police?"

Ash nodded. "First thing."

"Alright, I'm sure Arjun will be here as soon as he can, so first—"

"Arjun?" Ash asked.

"Mmm," said Pen. "He's Mr. and Mrs. Gupta's son, you know, from the newsagents? He's the local police constable. He'll be around ASAP, he's a good boy. Man, I suppose now."

"I had no idea." Ash paused for a second. "I've never been into the newsagents."

"You should, make yourself known," Pen said. "The Guptas are lovely. As is Rosalee down at the pub, and Moira's a doll when she's not overwhelmed by the kids, oh, and speaking of kids, Elspeth from the school is a scream. You'd like her. Very dry sense of humor."

Ash looked at the cracked shop door. "I suppose I haven't made much of an effort to meet people."

"You've met most of the bookclub," pointed out Pen. "And you've got plenty of time for socializing. Besides, I thought you were a lone wolf."

"So did I," said Ash.

She said it in such a way that made Pen think that she was doubting it now. Pen managed to keep her small secret smile to herself. "Alright, let's handle the basics here. Is this just mischief, or is there real damage?"

"From what it looks like, there's plenty of book damage," Ash said, peering in through the door at the once tidy books now scattered over the floor.

“Did they get upstairs?” Pen asked.

Ash sighed. “I’ll look.”

“And check the money,” advised Pen.

“I went to the bank last night,” said George from behind them. His face was pale but he’d already put together what was going on. “There can’t be more than ten pounds in the place. Anyway, most of our sales are online.”

“We got broken into,” Ash said.

“I can see that,” said George. He examined the crack in the door. “Looks like they took a crowbar to it.

“You know what happened before the crowbar was invented?” Pen asked.

Both Ash and George looked at her.

“Crows just drank at home,” said Pen. “What? I’m trying to lighten the mood. Like I was just telling Pen, at least no one got hurt.”

“This is the third break in on the street in the last couple of months,” George said. “Arjun thinks it’s kids looking for trouble, opportunists.”

“They still deserve to be locked up,” said Ash. “And how do you know the town policeman by his first name?”

George stared at her. “We went to school together.”

“Of course you did,” said Ash.

“Here’s Arjun now,” said Pen. “He’ll settle things.”

THREE HOURS LATER, the sun was higher in the sky, a mist was coming off the sea, and Arjun was draining his cup of tea and bidding them all farewell.

“I’ll be in touch if there are any developments,” he said, as he put his cup down. “But, to be honest, I wouldn’t hold your breath. There’s been a lot of it about lately. They’re clever enough to wear gloves, so I doubt we’re going to find much in the way of evidence. Luckily, they seem more intent on mischief than actual robbing.”

“You’re lucky that they didn’t get upstairs,” said George to Ash.

“Nor down in the cellar,” added Pen.

“And you’re sensible enough to have insurance,” Arjun said. “I’ll get you a case number so that you can file. The stock damage and door should be covered. If you want, I’ll pop around in a couple of days and give you some advice on new locks and theft prevention strategies.”

Ash nodded. “Yes, thank you. And thank you for coming, you’ve been very... helpful.”

Pen showed him out, carefully picking her way over books to open the door, then

turned back to Ash and George.

“This is going to take days to clean up,” said Ash miserably.

For a second, Pen saw her as she was last night, relaxed and unbound, laughing, kissing. She hadn’t quite had time to process what had happened, but she knew that she’d liked it. More than liked it. She knew that Ash was something special. She could feel herself burning at the memory of her.

“Leave it to me,” she said, grinning at Ash. “Give me five minutes and a telephone.”

THE WOMEN LOOKED at the shop. Kashvi Gupta nodded. “The same happened to us last month,” she said. “You should have seen the state of the place, magazines everywhere.”

“You’re lucky it’s a Saturday,” said Elspeth Gray. “No school means we can help clean up.”

“And no work means Mikey can stay with the kids for once,” agreed Moira Hadley.

Pen grinned at them. “Thanks for helping out.”

“Of course,” said Kashvi. “Why wouldn’t we?”

“Because you hardly know me,” said Ash, stepping in. She looked from one woman to the other. “Um, I very much appreciate the help, I just... Well, there’s a lot of shelving to be done, so everything’s going to have to go past George to make sure it goes into the right spot, and...”

Elspeth Grey laughed a big, round laugh. “Oh dear, my love, I think between the three of us, four if you count Pen, we’ve read every book in the place. We could

shelve them with our eyes closed now, couldn't we?"

"Except those reverse harems," said Kashvi, pulling a face. "Not my thing."

"Oh, I can handle those," said Moira, blushing slightly. "As long as you take the rom-coms, that's not my cup of tea at all."

"Deal done," said Kashvi, rolling up her sleeves.

"See? There's something for everyone," Pen whispered to Ash as the women started picking books up off the floor. "That's the nice thing about romance, there so many different kinds, we can all find something that fits."

"You didn't have to do this," Ash whispered back as the women around her started to chatter.

"None of us have to do any of this," shot back Pen. "We're a community, this is what we do. We help each other. Not because we have to, but because we want to." She eyed Ash. "Even when the person who needs help is a misanthrope who thinks she's better off alone."

"Oooo," said Elspeth, holding up a book. "Have any of you read this?"

Moira looked up and cocked her head to one side. "Is that the one where his, um, endowment is so big he can't find a woman to fit him?"

"And in the end he finds that alien girl who fits him like a glove," cackled Kashvi.

"Which reminds me of the alien in that Sarah Whatsit book with the five dangly bits that needs a condom like a glove," laughed Pen.

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“I can’t be doing with aliens,” said Elspeth, shelving the book she was holding. “I’ve got enough on my hands with human men. Mind you, I’m not saying I’d turn one down if he showed up in my bed.”

“Chance’d be a fine thing,” said Kashvi. “Those three cats of yours would scare him off.”

“Or he’d eat them,” said Moira. “Like in that old TV show ALF.”

Pen grinned at Ash who rolled her eyes but smiled, and then they all got down to work.

An hour or so later, Ash was holding up yet another book and Elspeth was directing her where to shelve it yet again, and the bookshop was a cheery chatter-filled place.

“You must think I’m an idiot, not knowing where half my stock’s going,” Ash said.

“Not at all,” said Elspeth. She side-eyed her. “Well, maybe a wee bit. But we all have to learn.”

“Even Mary had to learn,” put in Kashvi.

“Did she?” asked Pen.

Elspeth shelved the book she was holding and then stretched. “Maybe you don’t remember, you hadn’t bought the bakery back then. But when Mary moved in here she was quite the little madam. All airs and graces and business plans and contract

signing and all the rest. We thought the place was going to be a solicitor's office, so we did. Well, imagine our surprise when the doors opened and it was a romance bookshop."

"Not that Mary liked romance," said Kashvi. "She made that very clear at the start. This was just a business plan. Romance books are the best-selling genre in the book world, and Mary was determined to be a success, so romance it was."

Elspeth snorted. "Until she started reading her own stock."

"Until she came to her senses, you mean," said Moira. "By the end, Mary was a town institution. She knew everyone, cared for everyone, she looked after my two youngest when I was in hospital having my third."

"She took over the newsagents and closed the bookshop when I had those heart problems," said Kashvi. Her dark eyes turned to Ash. "She learned to love. It sounds trite, but that's what it was. Being surrounded by this all day, maybe that did it. Or maybe it was always in her. But by the end, your aunt was a loved and loving person."

Moira pulled a book out of a pile and when Elspeth saw it, she shrieked again, and then they were all off talking about a fairy king and his reluctant human bride.

Pen stood by Ash's side for a moment, drinking in the smell of her, wanting to touch her but not wanting to force her to acknowledge their relationship in front of anyone else.

It was Ash that turned, Ash that took Pen in her arms, Ash that held her in front of everyone and kissed the top of her head.

"Thank you," Ash said simply.

Pen looked up. “Maybe it’s not all bad here, huh?”

Ash wrinkled her nose. “You mean other than the recent crime wave?”

“I mean having friends, having a community, having...” Pen took a breath. “Having whatever I am.”

Ash looked around at the half full bookshelves. “No,” she said quietly. “No, it’s not so bad.”

Chapter Twenty Six

By Tuesday morning, Ash had almost forgotten the break in. Almost in that it occupied almost none of her thoughts at all. Those were reserved for Pen and the two nights they’d now spent together, Ash being insistent that she spend at least every other night in her own bed.

It seemed sensible, even if she did miss the warmth of Pen’s body beside hers.

But she’d done everything she was supposed to do, followed up with Arjun, who had treated her to ‘cop coffee,’ which had turned out to be a cappuccino from the restaurant on the corner, and filled in the insurance paperwork. Arjun had had George sign all the papers as the manager of the shop, given that the place technically still wasn’t Ash’s.

Which was what she was pondering when the tall, bulky man came into the shop.

“Good morning,” he said cheerfully, with a slight accent. He had long hair that was dark and graying, tied back in a ponytail at his neck. But he wore a nice shirt, clean trousers, shined shoes, and was carrying a large box.

“Morning,” Ash said from behind the counter. Now who could this be?

“Publishing rep,” said the man with a grin, like he could read her mind.

“Ah, right,” said Ash. “Um, George?”

“What now?” George yelled back from the cellar.

“Publishing rep?” shouted Ash. She turned and smiled at the man. “I’m new here,” she said by way of an explanation.

“Got it,” he said, giving her a friendly smile back. He seemed nice, comforting in a way that Ash didn’t really understand.

George trotted up the stairs. “Ah, right then, shall we go and sit in the kitchen, have a cup of tea while you show me what you’ve got?” He turned to Ash. “Unless you want to...?”

“No, no,” Ash said. “Go right ahead, don’t mind me.”

The two men disappeared into the kitchen, leaving Ash alone with her thoughts.

Her thoughts that were rapidly turning to signing paperwork. Maybe she should just go ahead and do it, maybe Pen was right. Probably Pen was right. After all, no one else had shown up by now, had they?

She’d prefer to talk to her mum about Aunt Mary first, but time was ticking and Snythe had left three messages for her by now, each one slightly more irate than the one before. So maybe she should just go and sign the papers, make the shop really hers.

And then what?

She'd come here all confused about the shop but certain about her life. Now here she was more or less certain about the shop but confused about her life.

She could live here, that was the truth. She'd been here only a few weeks and Tetherington had grown on her in ways she could never have imagined. Just this morning she'd plucked yet another book from the shelves and begun reading, finding that she was seeing more and more of herself in the pages, finding that it was nice, safe to read something where the ending was pre-ordained and the story was simply the journey of how two people reached that ending.

The community was pleasant, she could see that now. Could see how sacrificing a little privacy, a little independence for the support and strength of a group of people could be a fair exchange, a nice one even.

She could live with people banging on her door if those same people were the ones that helped her pick up broken pieces.

And then there was Pen. Beautiful, odd, forever happy Pen.

What was she supposed to do about a woman that made her feel weirdly complete and yet exasperated? All of the books here said that all she did now was wait for her happy ending and... and she was starting to believe them. Starting to think that Pen was what had been missing from her life.

It was easy. So easy. Too easy perhaps. The way they'd fallen in together, the way Pen made her smile, the way she didn't feel embarrassed or shy or any of the other things in front of her. Did that mean that Pen was the one?

Maybe.

Ash would like to think so, but she wasn't naive. She was well aware of the fact that this was her first experience with a woman and maybe she was blind to flaws and faults that would appear over time.

Time was the issue though, wasn't it?

She and Pen needed time to see things through, time to build something or destroy something. Time was what all the books on the shelves could skip over so easily. Flick a few pages and months had passed and lovers loved each other.

Ash didn't have pages to flick. She had to actually put the work in, actually change things. But, she thought, if the possibility of the shop weren't there, she'd still feel the same way. Even if she had to go back to London tomorrow, she'd want to see where things went with Pen. Which made her think that this was serious, that she really did want to figure out where things were going.

She was about to call Snythe to make the appointment when George and the rep came back out of the kitchen, George thanking the man who stopped in front of the counter.

"Yes?" Ash asked politely, phone still in her hand.

The man cleared his throat and his darker skin blushed a little. "I, uh, I was just wondering when Mary would be around? You see usually I deal directly with her, there must have been some mix up, I mean, I'm sure I'm in her diary, I just..." He slowed down, seeing the look on Ash's face.

Ash swallowed. "Yes, I see, unfortunately, I have to say that Mary passed away a few weeks ago." She was about to say more, but the man's face crumpled, the lines around his eyes joining up, tears spilling, his lips shaking.

"Oh," said George. "Oh, dear." He took the man by the elbow, steering him back

toward the kitchen.

Ash stepped to the front door, turned the sign to closed, locked it, and followed them in, wondering just what the hell was going on.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” the man said. “Lo siento. I’m sorry.” He took a tissue that George offered him and blew his nose. “You must think that I’m some kind of mad man,” he said, smiling waterily at Ash. “Let me start at the beginning. My name is Jesús Delgrano. I was Mary’s... partner.”

There was a click in Ash’s brain as the pieces started to come together. Jesús. Jesus. Mary wasn’t religious, Pen had assured her. But Pen had asked someone, hadn’t she, an old woman, and the woman had said that Mary was alone until she found Jesus. Except she hadn’t found Jesus. She’d found Jesús.

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“Her partner?” George said. “But... But you’ve never, I mean... I mean, I’d know.”

The man smiled. “Would you?” he asked. “Mary and I, we had something special. Something that worked for us. I travel a lot for my job, as you can imagine. But I always arranged my trips here with a vacation attached. Once a quarter I come here—”

“And Mary closes for a stock-take,” George said, understanding. “I thought it was odd that she never wanted me to help her. She said she knew the books best.”

“She knew that she wanted to spend a week in bed,” grinned Jesús. “And don’t pull faces like that, we’re not so old that we can’t enjoy pleasures of the flesh.”

“But... but why didn’t Mary tell anyone?” Ash asked.

Jesús shrugged. “She said she shared enough with the community, and when it was time, she would tell them. Though I think some people suspected, or even knew, we weren’t always as discrete as we thought.” He looked down at his hands. “And I am a little younger than her. Perhaps that played its part.” He looked up again defiantly. “But I am retiring next year and the plan was always that I would come here, that we would spend time together to find if we wanted more than what we already had.”

“Oh God,” George said, sitting down. “That’s so sad.”

“No, no,” Jesús said. “Please, don’t think like that. What we had was beautiful and good and everything that either of us wanted.” He bit his lip. “I left a wife and a son in Spain a long, long time ago now. I had a normal family life. But this was more

than that, it was true love, like a fire inside your heart and I am lucky to have had even a taste of it.”

“I’m so sorry,” Ash said. “I’m so sorry you had to find out like this. But... why didn’t you phone or write or something?”

“I did,” Jesús said. “I texted and got no answer. But Mary was so busy, so involved, it didn’t strike me as so odd that she didn’t reply. And we didn’t text often. We had our own lives, separate from what he had together.” He smiled again. “It was our way, we always said, and it worked for us.”

Which was fair enough, Ash thought. She was beginning to see that her own narrow definitions of what a relationship could be were far from being correct.

“If you don’t mind me saying,” said Jesús. “You have me at a disadvantage here. I’m afraid I don’t exactly know who you are?”

George looked at Ash and Ash sighed and finally, finally made her decision.

“I’m the new owner of the bookshop,” she said, the words filling her with tingles as she said them. George grinned at her. “I’m Ash Wells, Mary’s niece.”

Jesús frowned. “No,” he said.

“No?” said George and Ash together.

“No,” repeated Jesús a little more certainly. “No, you’re not Mary’s niece.”

“How do you know?” asked George, looking annoyed.

Jesús looked at Ash. “Well, if you’ll forgive me for saying so, you’re a little too old,

and far more strikingly, you are not exactly the right color.”

Chapter Twenty Seven

Pen felt like she'd eaten rocks, like they were weighing her down and she was sinking, breathless and panicking into the darkness.

“But, but I don't understand,” was all she managed to say.

“It is simple,” said Jesús. “Ashley is the daughter of an old friend of Mary's. They once lived together in some English village. When Mary moved here, she kept in touch with Ashley. They wrote letters, it was almost like, what do call it in English? Pencil pals?”

“Penpals,” Ash said.

“So where is she now?” asked Pen, demanded really, her voice felt high and tight. “I mean, if she was so important, where is she?”

Jesús shook his head. “I have no idea,” he said. “She left three months ago, which is why I know what she looks like. The last time I was here, Mary and I went to see her off at the airport. We drove a long way, got up really early, all to wave this girl goodbye. So I know she was important to Mary.”

“Where did she go?” asked Ash.

Again, Jesús shrugged. “I think she's in Australia, maybe? I'm not sure. She's doing what they call a gap year. Except, as Mary explained to me, many people do this gap year between school and university, whereas Ashley had just finished university.”

Pen was playing catch up. She'd come to bring Ash lunch, a croissant sandwich fresh

from the oven, and to bring George his favorite biscuits, and found the bookshop door locked. Now here she was, sitting at the kitchen table being told that the happy ending she'd believed in was all a lie.

If anything, she was offended. How dare her optimism be punished like this?

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“So what happens now?” George asked.

Ash ran her tongue over her teeth and Pen knew what she was going to say before she said it. “I have to call the solicitor,” she said.

“But from what you’re saying, this girl isn’t even Mary’s niece,” Pen put in, trying desperately to think.

“And neither am I,” Ash said carefully.

George took a breath and laid a hand on Jesús’s shoulder. “You’ve had a shock. Do you feel like a drink? I certainly do.”

Jesús looked curiously at Pen and she saw that he had brown, kind eyes. The sort of kind eyes that she knew Mary would love. And her heart crumbled a little more because this man had just lost the woman he loved, whether they lived together or not, and he must be hurting and yet here he was patiently explaining to Pen why her life couldn’t be the way she wanted it to be.

“Yes,” Jesús said. “Perhaps that would be best.” He looked at Ash. “And so...”

Ash grabbed a piece of paper and a pencil and scribbled down her number. “That’s my mobile, text me so I have your number. I’ll talk to the solicitor this afternoon, tomorrow morning at the latest, and let you know what he says. He’s going to need to track down the real Ashley and I think he’ll want your help with that.”

“Of course,” said Jesús. He cleared his throat. “I wonder if, perhaps...”

Pen was about to speak, to tell him that of course he should go upstairs, but Ash got in before her. “Please, take your time, if there’s something of Mary’s you’d like, help yourself. And, uh, I’m sure that George will be happy to fill you in on the details of what happened and where her memorial is.”

“Absolutely,” George said.

It took another forty five minutes before Ash was closing the shop door behind George and Jesús, leaning back against it, facing Pen. “I know what you’re going to say,” she said.

“You do not,” Pen said.

Ash crinkled her face into a smile. “Give me some credit, Pen. I have gotten to know you at least a little over the last few weeks.” She bit her lip. “And let me just put this out there: I want to continue to get to know you.”

The weight in Pen’s chest lifted a little. “You do?” she said. “So you’re not leaving?”

“You’re about to tell me to pack my things up and move them into your flat, aren’t you?” Ash said.

Pen shifted her weight to her other foot. She had been about to say exactly that. “Um, well, you could sleep on the couch if you think it’s too soon to officially move in and everything.”

Ash shook her head. “I can’t do that, Pen. It wouldn’t be fair on either of us.”

“Why not? I’m inviting you. You said that you liked it here, you said that you were thinking of staying. Or did I imagine all that?”

Finally, Ash moved from in front of the door, coming and looping her arm through Pen's, leading her back through to the kitchen and sitting her down. Fabio chirped and rolled over on the table that he'd just jumped up on so that Pen could scratch his belly.

"Pen, let's be sensible here."

"What's not sensible? I like you, you like me, you like it here. I see that things aren't quite as easy as they were a couple of hours ago, but I don't see why we have to change so much."

"Because..." Ash sat down opposite her. "Because, in words that maybe you can understand, perhaps it wasn't supposed to be like this."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Pen said, her voice sharp again because she didn't want to cry. "I thought you said you wanted to get to know me more."

"I do," Ash said reasonably. "But two hours ago, I had a potential home and a business to run here in town, one conveniently located next to a woman that I find very interesting indeed. Now I don't have those things and, realistically, I do have a flat and a life in London."

"Which is very far away," Pen said dismally.

"It's not that far."

A thought suddenly came to Pen. "What if he's a scammer?"

"A scammer literally called Jesus?" asked Ash, raising an eyebrow. She sighed. "Did he honestly seem like he was lying to you?"

Pen thought back to the hurt in his eyes, painted across his face, and shook her head.

“No, I suppose not.”

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Ash leaned forward, putting out her hands so that Pen could take them. “Pen, this isn’t the end of the world, you know? I’m literally sitting here at this table telling you that I like you. I like you a lot.”

Not enough to stay though, said a little voice at the back of Pen’s head. But she forced herself to smile at least a little. “I know,” she said. But it wasn’t going to be the same, was it? Ash was already independent enough, already set in her own ways, and Pen was worried that without a constant reminder, Ash would simply... disappear off into the smoke of the city.

“We can make this work,” Ash said, squeezing Pen’s fingers. “You can come and visit me in London.”

“Mmm,” said Pen, because she really didn’t want to go to London. She found it dirty and overwhelming and not at all nice. Mind you, if Ash were there, perhaps it would be nicer.

“And I can come here and visit,” said Ash.

“Mmm,” Pen said again.

“And in a while, maybe a few months, maybe a year, we can re-evaluate,” Ash said, sitting back and letting go of Pen’s hands. “What do you think?”

“It sounds... sensible,” Pen said. Because it did. Eminently sensible. And not at all romantic, not even a little.

“It is sensible. It’s a good plan, a solid one.”

“But it doesn’t take into account the fact that I’ll miss you,” Pen burst out, unable to keep her feelings inside. “The fact that I want to have you right next door, I want to have you here with me, I want to see you every day and be able to touch you and hold you and all the rest.”

Ash’s face had gone pale and Pen knew that she was overdoing it, that she was scaring her, putting her off, so she slammed her mouth shut. But she’d already said too much.

“Pen, I can’t do this. Not that way. I just... I can’t. It’s too much, too soon, I need my space.” Ash’s eyes were pleading. “I need you to be my sunshine, I need your optimism, please. Just for this. Just for now. I need you to have hope.”

She was being selfish and unfair wanting Ash to stay, she could see that. So she nodded. “Alright, I’ll try.”

“It’s a shock,” Ash said. She smiled a little. “You know, I was just getting used to the idea of owning a bookshop and now it turns out that I don’t own one at all. It’s a shame really, I’m going to have to find a new way to finance my new-found romance book addiction.”

Pen sighed. “Maybe the new owner will want to sell. There’s always hope in that. We haven’t heard back from the council, but maybe they’ll give us the money and we’ll try.” She tapped Ash’s hand. “You can have a discount if we all buy it.”

Ash smiled back. “Thank you. And... if there’s something that I can do to help with all that, just let me know.” She scratched her head. “At least I don’t have to learn to crochet. I looked it up online, it looks like tying very complicated knots with sticks.”

“Mmm, yes, maybe the crochet circle isn’t for you,” Pen said, holding onto Ash’s fingers. She was quiet for a minute. “Ash, I have to ask. Are you really sure about all of this?”

Ash looked down at their twined hands. “Yes,” she said softly. “I’m sure. I need to go home, we need more time, but I honestly think we can do this.”

Pen’s heart hurt. “It’s odd, you being the optimistic one,” she said. And she tried very, very hard not to think of being alone.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Ash looked around the little flat that wasn’t hers and imprinted it on her memory. This was an important place and one that she wouldn’t forget. As she hauled her case downstairs she almost tripped over the cat, lying sprawled across the bottom of the stairs.

“I hope you luck out with your new owner,” she said.

Fabio meowed in return.

It was early still, the light gray and muted, as Ash walked out into the bookshop, smelling the scent of it, feeling the stories in their pages, knowing that she could have been happy here if things had turned out differently.

She made it all the way to the door before she turned back.

The book was lying exactly where Pen had said it would be, on the counter, under the phone. She’d seen it every day and ignored it. But not now. Now, without thinking too hard about it, she picked up Mary’s journal and slid it into her bag.

She had no right to it, it wasn't hers. What it contained was none of her business. But she felt like she'd gotten to know Mary just a little here and she wasn't quite ready to let her go. Nobody would notice, she thought, as she unlocked the door and stepped out into the grayness.

The little rental car was still where she'd left it and she stowed her case in it before she went back to the bakery. The door pushed open easily and she walked inside.

"Pen?"

Pen appeared in the doorway, a smudge of flour on her nose, wiping her hands on a towel. "So, you're going?"

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Ash nodded. They'd said their real goodbyes. Not forever goodbyes, as Ash kept telling her. Just their for now goodbyes. Ash had left the bakery at three in the morning, needing to pack her final things, wanting to enact this decision now that it was made.

"Here," Pen said, handing over a paper bag. "Just something for the journey."

Ash grinned. "I'm going to London, not Timbuktu. There's enough in here to feed an army."

"You might get stuck in traffic," pointed out Pen. "Or meet a friend on the way."

"If someone climbs into my car then they're probably not going to be a friend," Ash said. But she held tight to the paper bag. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Pen's face without a smile was like a sandwich without butter or a storm without rain, just not quite right.

"It's going to be alright," Ash said, stepping in closer. "Just you wait and see. And I'm going to see you in three weeks, that's not so long."

Pen nodded and bit her lip and Ash knew she was trying not to cry.

"Come here," Ash said, pulling her into a hug. "I'll be with you very, very soon," she said, dropping a kiss onto Pen's head.

"You're squashing your sandwich," said Pen, pulling back.

“Okay, I’d better go before the traffic gets too bad. I’ll see you very soon, Pen, please don’t cry.”

But it was Ash that was blinking away tears as she walked away from the bakery, away from the bookshop, and back toward her old life.

AFTER THE OPENNESS of the seaside, London seemed cloying and dark. Ash went through the kerfuffle of returning the rental car and paid an exorbitant amount for the privilege of having it parked in front of the bookshop for longer than necessary.

Then she pulled her case behind her and began the slow walk back to her flat.

The river churned brown beneath the embankment, and nobody looked at her, there were no smiles or greetings as she walked. This was what she liked about living in the city, she reminded herself. The anonymity, the fact that she could be anyone or anything and everyone would ignore her.

By the time she got back to her building she was cold, tired, and wondering whether she’d made the right decision at all.

Of course, she’d made the logical decision. Moving into the tiny flat above the bakery with Pen would be far too soon, put far too much pressure on a relationship that was fragile and new. Still though, it didn’t stop the strange empty feeling inside her.

She dragged her case into the lift, and then out again when the lift refused to move, before hiking it up the stairs, dropping it when she got to the top. Why did suitcases have to be so unwieldy?

A door cracked open and an eye appeared, followed by the rest of the face and then the body. “Oh,” said Amanda Brown. “It’s you.”

“Yes,” said Ash, standing upright with the case behind her again. “I do live here, remember?”

“We were all beginning to think that you’d forgotten.” Amanda sniffed. “Nice hols?”

“It wasn’t really a holiday,” said Ash. “More of a... a work thing.”

“Mmm. Well, your plants are healthy and the place is clean. I ran the Hoover around since you were gone so long.” She looked Ash up and down. “Wait there a minute.”

She disappeared and Ash barely had time to wonder where she’d gone before she was back, holding a canvas tote bag.

“Here you go, you’ll be needing these, I expect. It’s about to chuck down and you look tired, you’ll not want to be going out again.”

Taking the bag, Ash opened it to see a small carton of milk, a couple of eggs and half a loaf of bread. Suddenly there was a lump in her throat that she had to swallow down. “Um, thank you. That’s very kind.” Which wasn’t enough to say. She took a breath. “So, how are the kids?”

Amanda beamed. “Fine, fine, very well. Well, Sanzia has her recorder recital next week and she’s worried, but you know how they get. And Luke’s struggling with maths, but nothing horrific.”

Ash nodded. “Good, good to hear.” She held up the bag. “I’d best be getting in then. I need to unpack.”

“Right you are. I’ll let you get on with it.” She hesitated in the doorway. “Nice to have you back.”

“Thanks,” Ash said, unlocking her own door, feeling the milk carton bumping against her back in its canvas bag as she did so.

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THE PHONE RANG as she was getting out of the shower, the number on the screen long and foreign looking, and Ash had to hurriedly wipe her hands dry before she picked it up.

“Mum?”

“Thank God,” her mother said. “They actually have decent phone lines in Ecuador. Who would have thought? They eat guinea pigs, you know.”

“Guinea pigs?” Ash asked.

“Guinea pigs,” confirmed her mother. “But they know how to make a good phone line, and that’s what counts.” There was a slight crackle on the line. “It’s a blessing to be off the ship, if you can believe it. Ted won’t eat a thing that’s not steak, and there’s only so many shows and casinos you can go to before they all start to look the same. I’m beginning to think that half way around the world would have been enough.”

“Mother,” said Ash. “I’m sure it’s lovely.”

“Well, the state room is nice. And I suppose it’s nice to have someone do all the washing and cleaning. By the time we get back I’ll have forgotten how.” She paused for another crackling second. “And what about you, my dear? How are you?”

“Fine,” Ash said automatically even though she didn’t feel fine. She felt untethered and unsure in an unfamiliar way.

“No news?”

Ash sighed. It was a long story and she really didn't want to get into it now. Besides, her mother would only run out of phone credit or have to run to catch the ship half way through. “Nothing big,” she said eventually.

“Wasn't it funny, you asking me about auntie Mary like that,” said her mother, as if her phone call from Chile had been just yesterday. “I haven't thought about her in years.”

“Yes,” said Ash. “About that, she wasn't really my aunt, was she?” Only a guess, but a pretty good one.

“Oh, of course she wasn't,” laughed her mother. “She lived next door but one and gave you sweets every time you walked past her garden, so you called her auntie.”

Ash sighed. “I don't suppose she's still around, is she?”

“She'd be ancient if she were,” said her mother. “She was well into her eighties when you were tiny.”

Which tied up all the loose ends, really, Ash thought.

She bid her mother goodbye, making her promise not to jump ship and leave her latest husband no matter how bored of shows and casinos she got, filled the washing machine with clothes, made herself some scrambled eggs, and then, by seven o'clock, had run out of things to do.

Just what had she done before, she wondered. How had she filled her days and nights? Without George to distract her or Pen to feed her or Lucy to bother her or Fabio to trip her up, the flat seemed terribly empty.

It was just the time for a walk on the beach. Except there was no beach, obviously. She sighed and picked up her mobile, texting Pen. Miss you xxx

Within a second, the phone was vibrating in her hand.

“Already?” Pen said when she picked up. “You’ve only been gone a few hours.”

“I can stop missing you if you prefer?”

“No,” Pen said, laughing. “I like that you miss me. It makes me feel better.”

“Glad that you’re wallowing in my misery then,” said Ash.

“You know what I meant. How’s London?”

“Big,” Ash said, looking out of the window toward the river. “Empty.”

“Jesus, has there been some kind of zombie apocalypse I haven’t heard about?”

“Not that kind of empty. There’s plenty of people here. Just... lonely, I suppose.”

“Ah, I see,” Pen said. She was quiet for a moment. “Still, it’s only three weeks, right?”

“Two weeks and six days tomorrow,” said Ash. She could picture Pen now, sitting on her couch with too many cushions.

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“It’s only your first night back, it’s natural that you’ll be missing us all,” Pen said. “I’m sure everything will go back to normal soon. You’ll be busy with work and, well, whatever else it is you do.”

Which wasn’t much now that Ash thought about it. “I suppose you’ll be off to basket weaving or church choir or something tonight?”

“It’s crochet circle in half an hour,” said Pen. “We’ll all sit around making complicated knots together, you’d hate it.”

“Alright then, I’ll let you go,” said Ash. “I just wanted you to know that I was thinking of you.”

“And I’m glad to know it,” Pen said.

When the phone was hung up and Pen’s voice was gone, the flat seemed even emptier than before. Ash sighed and picked up her book from the kitchen counter. She might as well go to bed and read. The quiet was too hard to hear.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Pen put her elbows on the counter and leaned her chin in her hands. The sun was shining through the window and the morning rush was over, which meant there was nothing to distract her at all. And she needed distraction. If she wasn’t busy, all she did was think about Ash. About the way her hair fell over her eyebrow, the way she rolled her eyes, the way she smelled and tasted and felt.

It was hard enough when there were other people around, but when she was alone it was even worse.

“Meow,” Fabio said, rolling on the floor in front of the counter.

“Sorry, bud, you don’t count,” she said, then felt bad about it. She was about to go and stroke his belly when the bakery door opened.

“Pen, just who I wanted to see,” Councilwoman Thurst said, marching in.

Pen refrained from asking her who the hell else she thought she’d find in the bakery, after all, she was the only one working here. Instead, she straightened up, smiled, and asked how she could help.

“I thought I’d come and tell you the news myself,” the councilwoman said, iron gray curls bobbing as she talked. “The council has come to a decision.”

“About?” Pen asked, one eye on Fabio as he slunk around the corner into the kitchen.

“About the bookshop that you were so very eager to buy,” Thurst said, raising an eyebrow at Pen.

“Oh, right,” Pen said, snapping back to attention. She really wasn’t herself today. “Sorry, it’s been a tough week and I’m distracted.”

“Be that as it may, this is important business,” said Thurst. “As I said, the council has come to a decision and we have decided that the development grant will be awarded elsewhere.”

Pen swallowed, the bottom finally falling out of her little world. She should never have been so hopeful. If she hadn’t been hopeful, this wouldn’t hurt as much. Her

hands gripped the edge of the counter and the councilwoman's face softened.

"I'm sorry, Pen. I know that you were hoping for a different answer. But the truth of the matter is that we just couldn't justify buying the place. It's a private business and there are things our community needs more."

"I understand," Pen said, stomach sinking, the sun disappearing behind a cloud.

"I've shopped at Mended Hearts enough in my time," Thurst said. "And I don't want it leaving the town anymore than you do, Pen. But the money is going to go to a new children's center, a place that children can go to after school when parents are still working, or a drop in where they can be left safely for a few hours. Surely you can agree that's important?"

Pen, thinking of Moira Hadley, nodded. "It is, it really is."

Thurst stepped closer to the counter. "The council can't be seen to fund the purchase of a private shop. But perhaps there are other things we could do? The shop is a part of our town, maybe you can talk to Sarah Hanson about taking up a collection for the place. Or talk to the vicar about running a fundraiser."

"It's a lot of money, Marjorie," Pen said dismally.

"But you have a lot of hope," Thurst said, eyes twinkling a little. "With some determination and effort maybe you can save the place, if that's what you truly want?"

Pen sighed.

"I'll take three of those buns, if you please," Thurst said.

Pen served her and then watched as she left, heart falling as she realized that everything she'd hoped for over the last few weeks was really gone.

“WHAT ARE YOU doing?” Lucy asked when she came into the shop to find Pen with a cloth in her hand washing the inside of the windows.

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“What does it look like?” asked Pen, busily cleaning the painted flowers off the window.

“But... but they’re nice,” said Lucy.

“They’re silly,” said Pen. “Unrealistic and sunshiney and just plain silly.”

Lucy stared at her for a moment, then gently tugged the cloth from her hand. “Come and sit down,” she said. “Let me make you a coffee.”

“I don’t want a coffee.”

“Fine, tea then,” Lucy said firmly, placing Pen in a chair and pulling out her mobile phone. “Just sit right there and don’t move.”

She went behind the counter and a minute or two later, George came crashing into the bakery. “What? Where is it? What’s the emergency?”

Lucy nodded over to where Pen was sitting and Pen rolled her eyes. “I’m not an emergency,” she said.

“When I came in she was washing the flowers off the windows,” said Lucy, pouring hot water over a tea bag. “She’s said hardly a word since I came in and she hasn’t smiled once.”

George shook his head and pulled out a seat opposite Pen as Lucy brought over three cups of tea. “Pen, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” she said. “Except the council put the development grant toward a new children’s center.”

“Well, we knew it was a stretch,” said George. “I know it’s a disappointment, but there must be other things we can do. Let’s brainstorm, shall we?”

“But what’s the point?” asked Pen. “Ash is gone and the place doesn’t belong to her anyway, does it?”

George took her hand. “That’s not what this was about though, was it Pen? This was about keeping the bookshop open, keeping it in town, not about keeping Ash here. In fact, it was about buying the shop from Ash so that she could leave town.”

“Yeah, but...”

“But you thought she might stay in the end,” Lucy said. “But she hasn’t exactly left you in the lurch or anything. I mean, you’re still together, just a bit further apart is all.”

“It’s not ideal though, is it?” George said.

Pen snorted. “Ideal doesn’t even begin to cover it.” She sighed. “I had this picture in my head, about Ash in the bookshop, me in here, maybe knocking through and having the two places be one. The sun was shining and the tourists were coming and every night we went up the stairs to bed and... and...” She couldn’t finish, her throat felt like it was full of cotton wool.

George looked at Lucy who shrugged back at him.

“Pen, come on, this isn’t like you,” George said. “You’re the optimist, remember? The sunny one? The one with hope that thinks that every cloud is lined with silver

and unicorn tears?”

“That’s the problem though, isn’t it?” Pen asked. She’d been thinking about this for a long time now, since Ash had left the morning before, since she’d been alone and the air had seemed to go out of her life.

“It’s not a problem being optimistic,” Lucy said.

“But it is,” said Pen. “I need to stop living my life like a sixteen year old convinced that everything is always going to turn out alright. Because I’m not sixteen and because sometimes things don’t turn out alright. Just look at me, almost forty and in debt up to my eyeballs with the woman I love a million miles away and stupid flowers painted on my stupid windows.

“I like the flowers,” George said. “And you’re not stupid. You’re... you. You dream, Pen, and that’s what’s so nice about you. And your debts are being taken care of, they’re under control, you only have them because you help so many people out.”

“They’re under control because someone with half a brain, namely Ash, came in and did the realistic and sensible thing, rather than what I did, which was to bury the letters under a pile of mail and forget about them. Which sort of proves my point, doesn’t it?” Pen asked, looking at them both in turn. “I need to straighten up, be more sensible, stop believing in unicorns.”

George looked at Lucy and Lucy looked back at him and Pen felt like she was being excluded from some kind of decision.

“Listen,” said George. “I only came by to check on the shop and Fabio, so I’m not exactly doing anything. Why don’t you take a break, go have a walk on the beach, get some clarity. Lucy and I will look after things here for a while.”

“I don’t want a walk on the beach.”

“Nonsense,” said George, standing up and offering his hand to pull Pen out of her chair. “Of course you want a walk on the beach. Go on, off you go. The bakery will still be here when you get back.”

Pen felt herself being ushered out of her own shop, bundled onto the pavement until she had no choice but to start walking toward the promenade.

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Lucy and George were being kind, she could see that. But she thought that she had a fair point. It was time for her to grow up a bit, to stop being eternally optimistic about everything. To stop dreaming so big.

Maybe if she were a little more realistic, Ash would come back and realize that they could build a relationship together, a proper grown-up one.

Or maybe Ash would realize that this was never going to work out. That the silly little baker next door wasn't the woman she wanted to be with.

Pen couldn't help but blink back a few tears as she made her way down onto the sand. She hadn't expected her life to end up quite as empty as it currently felt. She was surrounded by people who loved her, yet she felt alone. The only person who could make her feel better was Ash, and Ash now had no ties at all to the place that Pen loved so much.

The place she'd thought they could be happy in.

Chapter Thirty

Ash puffed out her cheeks. "So, there's nothing that you need me to sign or... anything?"

Snythe looked at her over his glasses. "Nothing, Ms. Wells. Your role in this little play is over, I'm afraid." He sat back. "Once again, you have my deepest apologies. There really was no way we could have known."

“I suppose not,” Ash said. By right she should be angry at having her life disrupted in this way, upended, something offered and then snatched away. She couldn’t quite bring herself to be more than mildly irritated though. She’d found Pen, and that had to count for something.

“We honestly did try everything, and you were by far the closest match that we found. I mean, there were enough small coincidences to tie you to the deceased that you really did seem like the best possible choice at the time.”

“What happens now then?” Ash asked.

Snythe sighed. “Well, we’ve found the woman. She’s in Australia and we’re arranging a power of attorney for her so she can deal with the inheritance from abroad. That’s really all I can tell you.”

“Right,” Ash said. She didn’t really know why she’d come, except that she’d wanted some kind of closure perhaps. Snythe had been polite, walking her through things, but he was right, she had no business here anymore. “Thank you then, I suppose.”

“Sometimes,” Snythe said, “I’m extremely happy that I don’t practice in a more litigious country, the United States, for example.” He gave her a toothy grin. “I don’t imagine you’ll be attempting to sue me.”

“Wasn’t thinking of it,” said Ash. She took pity on him, this really wasn’t his fault. She thought that in his shoes she’d probably have made the same kinds of decisions. After all, how was he supposed to know that the niece Mary bequeathed the shop to wasn’t actually a biological niece at all? “I won’t be making any kind of complaint either, so don’t fret.”

His grin widened. “In that case, I am in your debt. Should you need legal help in the future I hope that you’ll call on me.”

“I hope I won’t need to,” Ash said, getting up. “But thank you anyway.”

She walked out of the smart office and started her walk home. Her fingers itched to pick up the phone and call Pen, but she behaved herself. Pen had a business to run, she couldn’t be phoning all the time.

Honestly, she’d thought this would be easier. She’d thought that the distance would mean little. They had phones, WhatsApp, Facetime, plenty of ways to stay in touch. In fact, she messaged Pen far more often now than she had in Tetherington.

It just wasn’t the same though.

As much as Pen had annoyed her at the beginning with her constant visits and gifts of cake, she missed it now, she realized. She missed having her pop in during the day. And now that she was on the subject, she sort of missed having George around to make her cups of tea. And stroking Fabio’s belly. And, she thought, as she entered her flat building, she’d literally never seen her postman in London. Presuming she had one and it wasn’t just a host of different people.

It was still the right decision though, she told herself. It really was. She liked Pen a lot. More than she’d ever liked anyone ever before. But living together so soon in such a small space was not the way to proceed.

If she’d have kept the shop, on the other hand, well, that would have been different. If the place had been hers and they could have kept working at things, she could have made a home there.

She sighed as she walked up the stairs, the lift was still broken. For such a long time, London had been enough. Her life had been enough. Work and walks and concerts. She’d managed to fill the hours quite nicely. Now she wondered how she’d ever done it.

It just seemed like there was too much time in the day.

And, as odd as it seemed, she missed talking to people.

She went into her empty flat and closed the door behind her to echoing silence and suddenly just couldn't deal with it anymore.

Flinging open a cupboard in the kitchen she searched through the contents until she found a box of biscuits she'd bought the Christmas before. They'd been two for the price of one and she'd never opened the second box. Grabbing it, she went straight back out of the door and into the corridor.

Clutching the biscuit box in one hand, she knocked with the other.

"Yes?" Amanda said, opening the door. "Oh. It's you." She looked surprised.

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“Yes,” said Ash. “Um, it’s me. I just... I... Er, this.” She held out the box of biscuits and Amanda took it. “I wanted to say thank you. Thank you for looking after the flat and Hoovering and the plants and everything. So, um, thanks.”

Christ, if this was what passed for conversation in her brain no wonder she didn’t have any friends. Amanda looked down at the box in her hand, and Ash thought that probably she’d done the wrong thing. She was so desperate for company that she wreaked of it. But when Amanda looked up, she was smiling, a smile that reached her eyes.

“How lovely,” she said. “That’s really kind.” She hesitated for a second. “Do you want to come in? For a coffee, I mean. Unless you’re busy and need to rush off or something.”

“No,” Ash said quickly. “No, um, I don’t have to rush off. A, er, a coffee would be nice.”

“Come on in then,” Amanda said, beaming.

Uncertainly, Ash walked into the flat, letting herself be shown into the living room.

“Just have a sit down, I’ve already got the machine on, it’ll just be a mo,” Amanda said.

Now that she was sitting down, Ash thought she might have made a mistake. Okay, so she wanted company, someone to talk to, but Amanda? What were they supposed to talk about? She looked around anxiously, looking for some kind of point of

reference and had just picked up the book that was sitting open on the coffee table when Amanda came back in bearing two cups.

“Oh, ignore that, it’s just my silly addiction,” Amanda said.

Ash looked at the cover of the book and it was very familiar. Too familiar. “A Crown of Hearts and Desires,” she read.

“It’s really nothing, just a little something to pass the time. You must think I’m so silly.”

“No,” Ash said, putting the book down. “In fact, I’ve read it.”

“You have?” Amanda said, putting the coffees down. “The plot’s quite good, but I’m finding the romance a little stretched.”

For just a second Ash seriously considered recommending one of the lesbian romance books that George had given her. But that probably wasn’t Amanda’s problem, was it. It was more likely that the romance plot in A Crown of Hearts and Desires was actually not very good at all. “It wasn’t my favorite,” she said instead.

“Do you read much romance?” Amanda asked, settling down in an armchair opposite her. “I wouldn’t have put you down as the type.”

“Um, I’ve just started actually,” Ash said politely, picking up her coffee.

“Then you’ve plenty to look forward to. I’ve got stacks of books if you want some,” Amanda said. She leaned forward a little. “To be honest, I just can’t get enough of them.”

Ash cocked her head to one side. “Why?” she asked. She was honestly interested.

She'd wanted to ask customers at the bookshop but couldn't bring herself to potentially offend them.

Amanda laughed. "You'll think it's stupid."

"No," said Ash. "Go on, try me."

"I like them because they're not real," Amanda said. "Because every morning I wake up and put breakfast on the table and settle arguments and comb knots out of hair and find car keys and all the rest of it. And sometimes, sometimes, I want the life in these pages. When there's nothing but love and sex and all the rough edges of life are smoothed over."

"But if you want that, then, well, why are you here?" Ash asked.

Amanda laughed. "I didn't mean that I hated my life or anything like that. I have love here, because this is what real love is. It's lost car keys and knots in hair and being irritated but biting your tongue. It's all the things altogether. The escape, the fantasy is nice, but it's not real." She smiled. "I told you it was stupid. But having a little bit of both, the reality and the fantasy, that's what works for me."

"Someone once told me that selling romance books was like selling dreams," Ash said carefully.

"Sounds about right," Amanda said. "And there's nothing wrong with dreams. As long as you remember that when you make those dreams into reality that, well, reality will put its stamp on them."

"Huh," Ash said. "I never thought of it like that."

"Tell me what you're reading then," Amanda said, settling back with her coffee.

So Ash did.

IT WAS NONE of her business, but that didn't stop Ash picking up Mary's journal. She'd spent long enough wondering about the woman, long enough mystified by her life and how she'd lived it. So it seemed sort of fitting to turn to her now that she was wondering about her own life.

The diary was a simple one, just like Pen had said. A line a day, no more, though Mary had stuck in enough post-it notes to make the book bulge at the seams.

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For the most part, it was predictably pedestrian. A line about a knitting circle, a line about a book she'd read, something about Billy the postman here, something about Fabio there. As Ash flicked through it, she smiled. Line by line she built up a picture of a life well-lived, a life led as part of a community, the ins and outs of a little town. And she found that she missed Tetherington more than she'd expected.

It wasn't until a handful of pages in that she found the first really personal entry.

He is twice my size and yet half my heart.

One line. No post-it necessary.

And the pure simplicity of it, the raw honesty of it, was enough to bring stinging tears to Ash's eyes.

Chapter Thirty One

"Pen, Pen!" George came into the bakery like a whirlwind. "Pen!"

"I heard you the first two times," Pen said. "Is there some kind of bread emergency? A croissant accident? What's going on?"

"I've had an idea," George said, leaning on the counter and puffing.

"You look like you've had a heart attack."

"Rude."

“Sorry,” Pen said. “Here.” She poured a glass of water and pushed it George’s way. “Drink this, take your time.”

“I’ve had an idea,” George said again between gulps of water. “I was talking to Billy and I’ve had an idea.”

“How serious is this thing between you and Billy?” Pen asked. Truthfully, she’d never thought of Billy and George together. Actually, now that she thought about it, she hadn’t known that the postman was gay. But they did make a cute couple.

“Oh, serious,” George said. “We’re probably going to move in together. But were you listening? My idea!”

“You and Billy are moving in together?” Pen asked. It hurt like a splinter. George making things look so easy like that, when she couldn’t even get Ash to consider the idea of moving in. Maybe this was it, maybe it was all over, maybe this was Ash’s way of letting her down easy.

“Stop,” George said, fully recovered and eyeing her. “You’re having doubts, stop it right now. Ash told you she liked you, she told you she wants to be with you and work on your relationship, the least you can do is believe her. She hardly seems like the kind of woman who’d spill feelings like that if she didn’t have to.”

Pen took a deep breath. “Right. You’re right. I shouldn’t doubt her.”

“Not if she hasn’t given you a reason to, and she hasn’t so far, has she?”

Ash had texted multiple times a day and called every evening. So, no, no reason for doubting. Pen sighed. It was just so hard doing things this way and she didn’t like it at all. This whole being realistic thing was not fun at all. “No, no reason to.”

“Right, well trust her then,” said George.

“Do you trust Billy?”

“With my life,” grinned George. “We’re thinking about getting a dog.”

“That seems like a big step.”

George shrugged. “Why not? We’ll have kids one day so it seems like good practice.”

Pen lifted an eyebrow. “Okay, two things. First, you two are already talking about kids? Second, I don’t think a dog is a practice piece for a child.”

“Why wouldn’t we have kids?” asked George. He grinned. “Billy’s the one. It’s that simple. Actually, none of this is really complicated. When someone’s the one you know and, well, things just work out, don’t they?”

“Mmm,” Pen said. She’d thought that for a long, long time but she couldn’t help wondering if she’d been too optimistic. After all, plenty of things didn’t work out. Maybe it was some kind of confirmation bias, you only remembered the things that did work, not the ones that didn’t.

George took a step back from the counter and put his hands on his hips. “Penelope Robson, you’d better tell me right now if you don’t think this thing with Ash is going to work out. Because if I’ve put in all this effort having ideas and you’re just going to break up then I’m going to be quite cross.”

“No, we’re not breaking up,” Pen said.

George's face relaxed.

"I just... I don't know what's going on. This is hard, being apart is hard."

With a sigh, George leaned on the counter. "Alright, here's the big question then. Do you love her?"

Pen opened her mouth to answer and then closed it again. Did she love Ash? Is that what all this was? Is that why this was so difficult? Not because they were far apart, not because things were falling apart, but because she loved her.

"Pen," said George softly. "You love her, don't you?"

Pen didn't trust herself to speak. She nodded.

George laughed. "Don't look so distraught about it."

"But... but how did it happen?" Pen asked.

He laughed again. "Sneakily, apparently. Oh Pen, this is a good thing. Did you honestly not realize?"

"I knew I had feelings, I... I just didn't expect them to get so big so fast. I didn't expect Ash not being here to make them stronger, I suppose." She began to smile. Things were starting to make sense. Pining after someone leaving was one thing, but actually falling in love, that was quite another. Falling in love was more than enough to stop one feeling like oneself. "I love her," she said wonderingly.

“Good,” said George. “Because like I said, I’ve had an idea.”

“Go on then,” said Pen. “What’s your big idea?”

“We rent the shop.” He stood back with his arms open like he was expecting applause.

“We... rent the shop?” asked Pen.

“Yes,” said George, as though the rest of the plan was obvious.

“Alright, okay, you’re going to have to take me through this one a bit, I think.”

George rolled his eyes but pulled out a chair and sat down, gesturing for Pen to do the same. Fabio screeched as she withdrew the chair he’d been sleeping on, and fled back into the kitchen.

“Okay, so we know that this girl, this niece, has inherited the shop, right?” George said.

“Yes.”

“And quite conveniently, we also know her name since it’s the same as Ash’s,” he went on. “Plus, we know from Jesús that she’s a recent uni graduate on her gap year. So I started asking myself, what are the chances that someone like that wants to take over a dusty old bookshop?”

“It’s not dusty,” Pen said. “You dust it all the time. It’s lovely.”

“Not my point. My point is that the girl probably wants nothing to do with the place. Which means we might be able to rent it from her. At least for the short term.”

“Rent it,” Pen echoed.

“Listen, it could work out for everyone. The girl won’t have to worry about anything until she’s back in the country, she’ll have time to think about things, and in the meantime, we can rent the place, install Ash in the flat and have you two together.”

Pen thought about this. “Ash would hate us doing this,” she said. “She doesn’t like asking for help.”

“She’s not asking for help. But come on, Pen, this ticks a lot of boxes. We get to keep the shop, keep it open, I keep my job, Ash can potentially move back in next door. It’s not a bad plan.”

Pen nodded then slowly, slowly started to smile. “It’s not a bad plan,” she said.

“And it’s not a fantastical plan either,” George said. “It’s a realistic one. We’re not talking about buying the place, just renting it for a while. It’s a short term solution to give everyone time to come up with something better. And a few months from now, well, maybe we’ll have come up with the cash to actually buy the place.”

Sunshine was growing inside Pen as the idea warmed her. It was actually quite a brilliant idea in that everyone could get what they wanted. She had no idea why she hadn’t thought of it herself. “Okay,” she said. “Okay, so where do we start?”

George flushed. “That’s the thing, we’ve sort of already started.”

“We?”

He rubbed his nose. “Alright, so Billy’s working on finding the girl, and I’m going to help, obviously, since I can track down Jesús through his publisher.”

“Okay, then—”

“I’m not done,” George said. “Then Sarah Hanson is working on a collection and the vicar is going to the WI to set up a jumble sale. The Guptas have agreed to help run a bake sale as well. Oh, and I talked to Elspeth and she’s up for having the kids do some sort of sponsored thing, we thought a sponsored swim since they’re doing swimming this term. Oh, and Lucy’s working on something too but she won’t tell me what it is.”

The warmth spread even further through Pen, reaching the ends of her fingers and tingling her toes. Her chest felt heavy and her throat felt full. “You talked to everyone?”

“Well everyone wanted to help,” George said, shifting uncomfortably. “See, Billy and I were talking about it in the pub and I suppose they overheard and before we knew it we had more help than we could deal with. Billy said we’d need money, we’ll have to pay some kind of deposit of course as well as the bills and we’ll need a fund to run the shop from at first, since we can’t expect to use Mary’s money anymore.”

“And everyone just...”

“Just jumped in,” George said. “Oh, and Marjorie Thurst said that we’re more than

welcome to use the field behind her house for a fete if we want to raise money that way. But I thought we probably have time to stretch out the fundraising a bit, don't we?"

"Yes," said Pen, warming to the idea. "We won't need everything all at once." She checked her watch. "We should get the bookclub onto a sponsored read as well. They'll like that. And I should call Ash, let her know the news."

George tilted his head to one side. "You sure? You said she wouldn't be pleased about asking for help, even though we're doing it without her asking."

"I have to tell her, George!"

"Yeah, but maybe wait until it's a bit more of a fait accompli?" he suggested. "I mean, we don't even know if we can actually rent the place yet. So let's deal with that first, and once we know for sure, then we can ask her if she wants to stay in the flat? That seems like a more sensible plan."

Sensible plan. Pen considered it. "Alright," she said. "I suppose that makes sense. Let's not get her hopes up yet."

"But this is going to work," George said, eyes gleaming and taking her hand. "Just you wait and see."

And Pen was far too busy being full of the realization that she loved Ash and that she could have her back here, in Tetherington, to worry about anything at all.

Chapter Thirty Two

The river rumbled below her, pouring on through its channel, churning and muddy in the rain. Ash pulled up her hood and kept walking.

She had thinking to do, and she thought best while she was on her feet. She tromped down the embankment, waiting for her thoughts to order themselves, waiting to bring all the pieces together.

The truth was that she wasn't happy here. There were a lot of reasons for that. Most of which had to do with Tetherington and the people in it. Yes, Pen was a big part of things, but she'd put a pin in that and come back to it. There was more though.

The town had taken her in, whether she liked it or not. When the bookshop had been burgled, they had come unquestioningly to help her. And, Ash realized, she liked that. She liked the feeling of being helped and it prompted her to want to help.

Living in London had always been a question of anonymity for her. Growing up in small towns, her mother's constant marriages had been fodder for gossip and Ash had become used to everyone knowing who she was. So once the opportunity had arisen, she'd left, started out in the big city, become the person she wanted to be. Or thought she wanted to be.

She wasn't foolish enough to think that she couldn't change, that she shouldn't change. She obviously had changed, through pure luck and happenstance, and she was okay with that. She found something there, not just someone, but something. Things about herself that made her feel more... well, more herself.

She'd been avoiding thinking about the issue of Pen because she didn't want to tie any decision to one person. To Ash that seemed unfair. She didn't want Pen to be the sole reason that she changed her life. She needed to know that she was changing her life for herself.

Pen was unavoidably part of things though. Pen provoked feelings that Ash had never known and as uncomfortable as that sometimes could be, she found that Pen occupied more and more of her thoughts.

It wasn't just sex either, though that was part of it. She thought about Pen's smile, her cakes, she thought about telling Pen things and hearing her laugh. She thought about Pen being a part of her every-day life and that singular thought made her happy. Actually happy.

Which all led to the inescapable conclusion that she had strong, deep feelings for Pen and that, logical or not, she didn't actually want to be far away from her.

Pen was her other half. The words from Mary's journal struck a chord with her. Finding Pen was like finding an entire other side of herself that she hadn't known existed.

Pen was good and kind and beautiful and generous. She was so giving she'd almost given herself into debt. Pen was more than good though, more than in the sense most people were good. Because Pen didn't just talk the talk, she acted. She might be foolish and optimistic and hopeful, but she put herself out there and acted on what she believed.

And in the end, that's what made the difference to Ash.

She'd had enough of being hopeless, enough of being alone, and yet here she was pushing herself into the exact same situation that she'd left just because it was the sensible thing to do.

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Turning on her heel, she started to stomp back to her flat, hurrying now because there were things to do, people to see.

If Pen had taught her anything it was that being optimistic wasn't a bad thing, not if you were willing to do the work to make the world the kind of place that you wanted it to be. And Ash knew how she wanted her world to be. Knew without the slightest doubt.

The river continued its journey on and on, and Ash turned off the embankment, speed walking toward home. Except she didn't think she could really call it home anymore.

SHE WAS JUST locking the front door behind her when Amanda came up the stairs. "The lift's still broken."

"I know," Ash said. "It's a pain in the backside." She was in a hurry now that she had a plan, her keys clutched in her hands. There was a lot to do.

"Fancy a coffee?" Amanda said. "I've put aside a couple of books for you that I think you might like."

Ash smiled. "Thanks, that's kind. But I've got a lot on this afternoon."

Amanda frowned a little. "You know, I'm not sure I've seen you looking happy before. It's a nice change. What's going on?"

"Nothing," Ash said. "Well, everything." She couldn't stop smiling now that she'd started. "I just... Well, you know the other day when you said you liked the mixture

of reality and fantasy?”

Amanda nodded. “Yeah, you asked me why I read romance.”

“I think you might be right about the balance between the two,” Ash said. “I’ve had an awful lot of reality, maybe it’s time to let a bit of something else in.”

Amanda’s eyes widened. “Don’t tell me, you’re chasing down your Prince Charming.”

“Um, it’s a Princess actually,” said Ash.

“Oh, Christ, sorry, I shouldn’t have assumed. I didn’t know,” stumbled Amanda.

“It’s alright,” beamed Ash. “I didn’t know until recently either. It’s sort of a... new thing.”

“And this is in with the new and out with the old, is it?”

Ash laughed. “Yes, I think that about sums it up.”

“And it’s not just sparkles and funny feelings in your tummy, right?”

Ash thought about Pen turning up all the time with cakes, thought about how she’d give until she had nothing left to give, about her massive debt problems, about how she never saw the bad side of anything, and shook her head. “No, there’s some reality thrown in as well.”

“She sounds perfect then,” said Amanda. “Best of luck. Um, anything I can do?”

It went against everything Ash was to ask for real help, but here she was and Amanda

was offering and, well, in the end, nobody could stand alone, could they? “Actually, there might be a few things you can do. I’m thinking of selling this place.”

Amanda smiled. “That I definitely can help with.”

“You can?” Ash asked. She’d been about to ask if Amanda would mind being the key holder so that the estate agent could show people around, sort of a contact person. She hadn’t expected more than that.

“Um, Jason’s an estate agent, remember?” laughed Amanda.

Ash cursed herself. All those dinners and recorder concerts and she’d never really paid much attention. “Ah, right, yes, of course he is.”

“I’ll get him to give you a knock when he gets home tonight,” Amanda said. She paused as she put the key in her own door. “You’ll be missed though, Ash.”

“Thank you,” said Ash. “I’ll miss you too.” Which was, surprisingly, actually the truth.

ALL THOSE YEARS of never asking for help, and here she was doing it twice in one day. Ash crossed her legs and tapped her fingers on the arm of the chair impatiently. She checked the clock again.

“Can I get you a coffee?” asked the receptionist.

“No, thank you,” Ash said. The last thing she needed was more coffee to add to her jitters.

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It wasn't that she was unsure. Not now that she'd decided. It was more that she wanted to get things started, was anxious to begin this whole new section of her life.

And maybe she was a little nervous. Who knew whether this whole plan was going to work out or not? Which was why she'd decided not to say anything to Pen. Pen was the eternal optimist, she'd be sure everything would work out, and Ash couldn't stand to disappoint her.

Pen had been so disappointed when Ash hadn't inherited the bookshop, even though Ash had known from the start that she hadn't belonged, that something had been off about the whole thing. Now though, she had a chance to set things right and that was what she was going to do.

Her phone buzzed.

Thinking of you.

She grinned to herself. Every message from Pen filled her with a warmth that had started out unfamiliar but that she was very much growing to like.

Always thinking of you, she typed back.

Doing anything interesting?

Ash looked around at the white-walled office. Not really.

Want to do something interesting?

Ash felt herself color. Surely you're not suggesting what I think you're suggesting?

There was a brief pause. Well, I was thinking of a video call. But I'm more than willing to indulge in whatever it was you were thinking, Pen wrote back with a laughing emoji.

"He's ready for you," the receptionist called to Ash.

Ash bit her lip. Hold that thought for later, she wrote. Got a work thing.

She didn't want to lie, but she couldn't tell the truth yet.

Hoping that she looked a lot more confident than she felt, she got up and walked into the office. A familiar face greeted her, looking over his glasses.

"I have to say, Ms. Wells, I didn't expect to see you back here again so soon," Snythe said.

Ash took a seat. "Well, you did say to come back to you with any legal problems I had."

He sighed and took off his glasses. "I do hope you haven't been arrested, Ms. Wells, I'm afraid I'm not really that kind of solicitor."

"Why would you think..." Ash took a breath. "Never mind. You are the kind of solicitor that can help with property though, aren't you?"

Snythe nodded and Ash began to outline exactly what she wanted.

When she was done, he leaned back in his chair. "This is a little unorthodox," he said. "I can't represent two people on opposite sides of the same contract."

“I’m not asking you to represent me,” Ash said. “I’m asking you to present the option to your client, that’s all.” She stared him down. “I think you owe me after everything, don’t you?”

Snythe took a deep breath, then nodded. “Very well, I’ll do what you ask,” he said, putting his glasses back on again.

Chapter Thirty Three

Pen shifted to one side and tilted her head. “It’s very nice,” she said. “But... what is it?”

“A painting,” said George. “Obviously.”

“You’re looking at it the wrong way up,” said Lucy, turning the canvas on the table.

Pen grinned. “It’s the ocean.”

“It’s... actually, it’s really beautiful, Luce,” George said in surprise.

“I like art. There’s not much painting on the streets though.”

“Is this what you’ve been locked up in your room doing for the last couple of weeks?” George asked.

“This and a few more like it,” said Lucy. “Billy helped me get the canvases stretched and promised to keep it a secret. So don’t be mad at him. I thought we could sell a few of them to help raise money for the shop.”

“That’s a great idea,” said Pen with a yawn.

“If it’s so great, why are you making it look like it’s so boring?” asked Lucy.

“Because she’s been up all night baking for the Gupta’s bake sale,” said George. “And I’ve got to run.”

“Why?” Lucy asked.

“I finally managed to get a hold of Jesús and he’s agreed to meet me for lunch,” George said. “That way I can put the proposal to him face to face and hopefully, he’ll talk to the other Ashley about it for us.”

“I can’t imagine why she wouldn’t be in agreement with the plan,” Pen said. “But you’re right, you need to be off.”

“Have you really been baking all night?” Lucy asked, perching on the shop counter as George showed himself out.

“Yes,” Pen said. She didn’t add that she’d been up most of the night the night before as well, getting her crochet animals finished for the jumble sale at the church.

“Why don’t you go and take a nap?” Lucy asked. “I can handle things here. The Gupta’s have closed the newsagent for a few hours while they set up the bake sale.”

Pen started the coffee machine for what was probably her dozenth cup of the day. “I’ll be fine, I’m a big girl.” She was aching with tiredness. But she was doing her part, and that’s what counted. She’d stay up every night for a week if she needed to. “If you want to help, you can start ferrying boxes over to the school playground for the bake sale though.”

Lucy hesitated. “You’re looking a bit pale, Pen. Are you sure?”

“Definite.”

“Maybe you’ve taken a bit much on?”

Pen leveled a look at her. “I’m fine, Lucy. Now, do you want to help or not?”

“Obviously.”

“Then the boxes are all piled in the back, go on, get started.”

Pen drank down the scalding hot coffee black and strong, letting it burn all the way down. Her phone buzzed before she’d finished the cup.

Still thinking of you, said the message.

And me you, she wrote back.

Was thinking about moving my visit up?

Pen's heart started to beat harder. Seeing Ash sooner than planned was all that she wanted. Except...When were you thinking?

I thought I might come up this weekend?

Except Pen wanted to keep everything a secret so that Ash wouldn't stop them from helping her. She took a breath. What could she do? I'd love to see you,she wrote.But it's a bit short notice.

There was a long pause.

Pen's legs started to feel funny. Had she offended her? She didn't want Ash to think that she didn't want her to come.

What about Tuesday?

Pen breathed a sigh of relief. By Tuesday the fundraisers should be over and she could even tell Ash the news in person.Sounds perfect, she wrote back.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:05 pm

The bakery bell rang as the door opened. Moira Hadley came in, trailed by all four of her children. “Hi, Pen,” she grinned. “I’m helping set up the bake sale. I thought I could pick up some boxes for you and help out, take them over to the school.”

“Amazing,” Pen said. “Thank you so much. Anyone want a bun?” All four of the children nodded and Pen started handing out buns. “You’re not taking this lot with you to set up are you?” she asked Moira.

“Mikey’s at the football until after lunch,” she said. “So there’s not much else I can do.”

“Leave them here,” Pen said, looking at the kids quietly eating their buns. “You can pick them up later. Or I’ll bring them over when I come. It’s not a problem.”

Moira looked at her children, then back at Pen. “Are you sure?” she asked.

“Definite,” Pen said.

“It’s just...” Moira looked a little more closely. “You do look a bit pale, Pen. You’re not coming down with anything are you?”

“I’m strong as a horse,” Pen said. “Just a bit lacking in sleep what with all these fundraisers we’ve got going on.”

“It is a lot,” Moira agreed. “Mind you, we should have enough to get the shop up and started again, and that’s what counts, isn’t it?”

“George is putting the proposal together as we speak,” Pen said. “I can’t believe how many people have come together to help.”

“Why wouldn’t you believe that?” Moira asked. “You help so many of us, Pen, of course we want to help you. Anyway, the shop is for the community, not just for you. We’d all rather it stay in the family, so to speak. Who knows what a new owner would be like. Even renting it is better than having a whole new person move in and potentially change it into a massage parlor.”

“I wouldn’t mind a massage parlor today,” Pen laughed. “There’s cake boxes in the back, Lucy’s back there to help. Don’t worry about the kids, I’ve got them.”

THE OVEN ALARM rang and Pen rushed to get it, almost tripping over Lea Hadley, who was sitting on the floor chewing on something that Pen really hoped was part of a croissant. She grasped hold of Harley as he chased after Fabio. “No running in the bakery,” she said.

“Sorry!” said little Harley. “But I wanted to play with Fabio.”

Fabio was sneaking out of the cracked front door and Pen hurried over to close the door before one of the children went after him. Her muscles weren’t responding properly, and she was slower than she thought she would be.

She took a breath, her head spinning a little with the effort, and then the oven alarm rang again and she ran off to the kitchen to pull out the brownies she’d baked before they burned.

Her breath seemed not to be filling up her lungs properly and by the time she’d pulled out the brownie tray, she was almost panting.

She walked slowly back into the shop, where the kids were pressing their noses up

against the window, breathing and then drawing pictures in the mist clouds.

Harley leaned in and breathed, then Lea joined him and the cloud they created started to spread up and over the window until Pen realized that the mist was impossibly big, until the window was completely covered, until the edges of it began to go dark until...

"I'M FINE," PEN said, struggling to sit up.

"You're lucky that those Hadley children have the sense to pay attention when I do school talks," said Arjun Gupta, helping Pen up so that she could sit on a chair. "Harley ran straight to the police station when you collapsed, knew exactly what to do. Good lad," he said to the boy approvingly.

"I'm just a bit tired," said Pen.

"I've heard all about it from George," Arjun said. "You've been overdoing it. I'm sure you just fainted, but we'll get you to the doctor just in case."

"No, no, I've got too much to do. Anyway, I can't leave these four by themselves," protested Pen.

Arjun looked doubtfully at her. "I think we should see the doc."

"I'm fine," Pen said again.

"Don't believe her," said George, rushing in.

"Ah, you got here fast," said Arjun.

"I wasn't far away," said George. "And I was on my way here anyway."

“Then I’ll leave all this in your capable hands,” said Arjun. “Pen, I think you should see the doc, but I’m not going to force you. At the very least, you need to get some sleep.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:05 pm

He left just as Lucy was coming in. “I just heard,” she said. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Pen said. “Absolutely fine.” She was getting sick of telling people that. She was fine. She’d just had a moment, that was all.

She saw George look at Lucy.

“Listen, I get it, I’ve been doing too much,” Pen said. “And I’m slowing down as of right now. There’s a tray of brownies to go in the oven and I could use another coffee, so why don’t the two of you get on that?”

They scurried off and Pen breathed deeply and evenly, the children watching her wide-eyed. It was only because the kids were being so quiet that Pen could hear what was happening in the kitchen.

“We should take her to the doc,” George was saying.

“She doesn’t want to go and she’s probably just exhausted,” said Lucy.

“Well, she won’t be when she learns that all this was a wasted effort,” said George.

Wasted effort? Suddenly, George’s voice had lowered and Pen couldn’t hear what he was saying. She got up, her legs wobbly and her head still a bit dizzy, and crept toward the kitchen.

“There’s no chance at all?” Lucy said.

“How can there be?” said George.

“No chance of what?” Pen asked, going through into the kitchen and hoping she looked a lot better than she felt.

“It’s nothing,” George said quickly.

“Tell me,” said Pen.

George looked at Lucy who shrugged and then nodded.

“Fine,” he said. “I talked to Jesús. And, um, well, he’s been in contact with Ashley already. In fact, he’s got power of attorney over her inheritance.”

“That should make things easier,” Pen said, forcing herself to smile.

“Except... except we can’t lease the shop,” said George, not looking her in the eye.

“Why on earth not?” asked Pen.

George looked up now. “Because it’s already been sold,” he said quietly.

And Pen’s legs gave way again so that she sank to the ground.

Chapter Thirty Four

At half past two in the afternoon Ash should have been firmly entranced by the neat rows of numbers on her computer screen. Instead, she was staring out of the window, wondering just what to do next.

She had a long list of things that needed taking care of. She should buy a car, for

example. Living in London without one was all very well, but outside of the city she was going to need transport. She should also hire a moving company because she really didn't fancy moving boxes herself.

Her stomach jumped with excitement when she thought about it.

The only tiny fly in the ointment was that she couldn't tell Pen until Tuesday. She'd decided that she definitely had to tell her in person. But for some reason, Pen didn't want her there over the weekend. Something that Ash was determined not to let bother her.

She was sure that Pen had her reasons. She was sure that Pen had feelings for her. And she was sure that whatever was keeping Pen busy had absolutely nothing to do with, well, with anything that should have her thinking bad thoughts.

"This optimism thing is really starting to work out," she said out loud. She looked at the empty couch. "And talking to thin air looks a lot less crazy when there's a cat around. Maybe Mary had a point there."

She wondered idly whether Fabio would come with the shop. Of course he would, she decided. And she'd let him live there because, as George was desperate to point out, it was his home.

The first phone call came just as Ash was debating how exactly she was going to buy a car when she had zero mechanical knowledge to stop her getting ripped off.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:05 pm

“Hello?” she said, not recognizing the number.

“Hello?” said a voice. “Is that Ash?”

“Speaking.”

“You don’t really know me, my name’s Moira Hadley.”

“With the children,” Ash said, she’d heard the name often enough. Why the woman was calling her was anyone’s guess though.

“Er, yes, I suppose that’s me,” Moira said. “Um, I got your number from Arjun, he was going to phone you, but then he said it wasn’t really a police matter and he didn’t want you to panic. And, well, you would panic if you got a phone call from the police, wouldn’t you?”

Ash was already starting to feel wobbly. “I’ll panic at a phone call from you if you’re not careful,” she said. “What is it?”

“Nothing, please don’t panic. It’s just, well, Pen’s had a funny turn is all. My kids were with her and she’s alright, I think. I just... I thought you should know and Pen could really use someone with her. I’m not sure she should be alone no matter what she says.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” Ash said, already pulling out a bag and starting to cram clothes into it.

“Oh? Really? Oh, well, that’s nice. Thank you.”

“Thank you,” Ash said, clicking the end call button.

What was all that about? What was Pen up to now? Maybe she was ill, maybe there was something going on that Ash knew nothing about. She grabbed clothes faster, stuffing everything she could think of into the bag.

The phone rang again just as she was about to leave the flat. She picked it up, thinking it might be Pen, but it was Lucy that answered.

“Ash? Is that you?”

“You called me, I should hope so,” Ash snapped. “And if you’re calling about Pen, I already know. I’m on my way.”

“Oh, good,” Lucy said, sounding relieved. “But don’t worry, she’s fine.”

“So everyone keeps telling me. Except they also keep calling me, so she can’t be that fine,” said Ash. Her stomach was heavy with worry and she really didn’t like the feeling at all

“She is fine, I swear,” said Lucy.

“I’ll come and see for myself,” Ash said, hanging up the call again.

She made it out into the corridor and suddenly had an awful thought. That car that she was planning on buying didn’t actually exist yet at all. She had no way of getting down to Tetherington without a rental car and she hadn’t booked one.

Stealing herself, she knocked on Amanda’s door.

“Oh, going away again?” Amanda asked in surprise as she opened the door.

“Yes, sort of, I mean...” Ash took a deep breath. “I mean a friend of mine is ill and I need to see her.”

“Don’t worry about the flat then, I’ll take care of everything. A place like that won’t be on the market long,” Amanda said.

“Yeah, right, thanks,” said Ash. She swallowed. “It’s just... I have to go out of London and I don’t have a car rented and I wondered if you might know someone or something or...” She trailed off. She’d knocked on the door because it was the first one there and because she knew Amanda and because she’d panicked. Probably it hadn’t been the best idea.

“Wait, a friend?” Amanda said, tilting her head to one side. “This wouldn’t be your Princess Charming, would it?”

Ash managed a slight smile thinking that Pen made the perfect princess with all her golden curls. “Yes, actually, yes it is,” she said.

Amanda disappeared behind the door for a moment and when she came back she was holding a set of very expensive looking car keys. Ash’s eyes opened wide.

“I can’t take those,” she said, seeing the BMW logo on the back.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Amanda. “Jason will just have to take the Tube to work like everyone else.”

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The keys dangled temptingly in front of her and Ash eyed them, biting her lip. “I... I shouldn’t.”

Amanda reached out, took her hand, and planted the keys directly in it. “Nothing stands in the way of true love,” she said. “Nothing.”

“Who’s at the door?” Jason’s voice floated through from the living room.

Amanda gave Ash a secret smile. “Go on then. I’ll deal with him. The car’s in the parking garage, just press the unlock button and you’ll find it.”

And Ash fled, the keys in her hand.

Her phone rang again as she was running down the stairs.

“Ash? It’s George.”

“I know. I’m coming. Pen’s fine,” she gasped, lugging her bag down yet another flight of stairs.

“Oh. Yes. Right.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Good,” said George.

“You’re the third person to call me.”

“Huh. Well, we’re worried.”

“About someone that three people have assured me is absolutely fine?”

“We can still be worried,” George said. “Just... drive safe.”

THE CAR DROVE like it was floating on air but Ash didn’t have the time to truly appreciate it. What she did have time to do was thoroughly chastise herself for ever getting into this mess in the first place.

“If I hadn’t been stubborn, if I hadn’t been stuck in my ways, I’d never have left,” she said to the empty car. “And then Pen wouldn’t be alone.”

Well, Pen wasn’t exactly alone. After Moira, Lucy, and George had called she’d had another call from Mr. Gupta and then one from someone called Elspeth, who apparently worked at the school. All in all, half the town seemed to have got her phone number from somewhere and she was beginning to suspect Arjun Gupta of leaking official police information.

It was after eight by the time she was pulling into a parking place on the high street. She’d hit every traffic jam between here and London. She grabbed her bag from the car and walked down the street, past the shuttered bookshop, to the bakery where the lights still gleamed from the window.

George and Lucy were sitting at a table, coffee cups and empty plates in front of them.

“Oh thank god, we thought you’d never get here,” George said, jumping up as Ash came in.

“Actually, we thought you’d changed your mind and decided to stay in London,” said

Lucy, as George turned the bakery sign to closed and locked the door behind her.

“Why would I do that?” Ash asked, stung.

Lucy shrugged. “Changed your mind, like I said.”

Ash felt a prickling of heat on the back of her neck. “Changed my mind about what? About Pen? About the nicest, best, most decent person any of us will ever have the chance to know? About the most beautiful, loving, generous person I’ve ever met? Why would I do that?”

“Well, you did leave,” pointed out Lucy.

George shook his head. “This isn’t helping anything.”

“Where is she?” asked Ash.

“Upstairs, asleep,” said George. “Which is exactly where she needs to be.”

“Tell me what happened,” Ash said.

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With a sigh, George began to tell her about the fundraisers, the jumble sale, the crocheted animals, the cakes, the babysitting, and everything else that Pen had been doing.

“And I painted pictures,” Lucy added at the end.

Ash shook her head. “She was doing all that?”

George nodded. “She was over-tired. Hadn’t slept, I think. Then she just fainted dead away in the middle of the shop. Moira’s kids had to go and find a policeman.”

“I don’t understand,” said Ash. “Why was she doing all that? What for?”

Lucy and George looked at each other, then George told her everything, the entire flimsy plan that they’d had. And when he got to the end he looked bereft and sad.

“The worst part is,” he said. “It was all for nothing. We can’t rent the shop and Pen overheard us talking about it and had another funny turn and then we had to put her to bed and the doctor came in and checked her over and gave her something to make her sleep for a while.”

Lucy nodded earnestly. “And the bookshop’s sold,” she said, just to be clear.

Ash looked at them both, their sharp, peaked faces tired and sad and then she did the unthinkable. She laughed.

Chapter Thirty Five

Pen's eyelids felt heavy but she struggled to open them anyway, blinking and then blinking again as the light hit her eyes. She yawned and stretched and had no idea how long she'd been sleeping for. It felt like years. Like she was Sleeping Beauty. The idea made her smile until she remembered about the bookshop.

Then she just wanted to close her eyes again and disappear back into sleep.

She was about to do exactly that when she registered quite a heavy weight on her right leg. Experimentally, she tried to move her leg and couldn't. Jesus. Maybe she'd broken her leg? Maybe she'd fainted and fallen and broken her leg. Then she'd never be able to help at the bake sale.

Except they really didn't need a bake sale now.

Lifting her head just slightly she managed to look up far enough to see something on top of her leg. No, not something. Someone. Someone with dark, messy hair, someone collapsed over her, her head in her arms, sleeping and maybe even... Pen strained to listen. Yes, maybe even snoring just a bit.

Pen cleared her throat.

Ash didn't move.

Pen cleared her throat again, louder this time.

"What? Who? What?" Ash said, bolting upright.

"I thought I was the patient here," Pen said, her heart filling up at the sight of Ash's face.

"You've spent all night flat on your back, I'm the one that's been slumped over your

bedside,” said Ash, pulling a face as she stretched. “Not a comfortable position.”

Pen considered this. “Was there anything preventing you from actually getting into the bed with me?”

Ash raised an eyebrow and Pen turned to her left to see Fabio stretched out across the other side of the bed.

“I thought he might bite,” said Ash. “He seems quite protective of you.”

“He’s a teddy bear,” said Pen. She closed her eyes and opened them again, just to check that Ash was actually real and actually here, and then she again remembered all the reasons that she really wanted to go back to sleep and ignore the world again.

She turned to look at Ash. “I have to tell you something,” she said.

“No,” said Ash. “Enough is enough. I need you to listen to me first. There are some important things to discuss here. I know what you’ve been doing.”

“George spilled everything, didn’t he?” Pen said, shaking her head.

“Good thing he did, since we’ve been at cross-purposes pretty much since I left,” Ash said. “Which was my mistake, by the way.”

“The being at cross-purposes?” asked Pen.

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“No, the leaving,” Ash said. “And you’re supposed to be listening to me. So listen up and listen well and we’ll try and get all this business sorted efficiently so we can go back to lounging in bed and eating biscuits, or whatever you like to do when you’re ill.”

“I’m not actually ill,” Pen began. Then she saw the look on Ash’s face and she closed her mouth again.

“This cannot go on,” Ash said. “In any way, shape, or form. You can’t give so much of yourself that there’s nothing left for you. Ever heard the saying that you can’t feed the village from an empty pantry? Well, that’s you. You emptied your pantry out and you paid the price for it. From now on, I want your word that you’ll look after yourself in order that you are able to help look after others.”

Pen thought back to the shaky feeling she’d had as she collapsed, the way the world had darkened. She nodded. “Deal.”

“Right, moving on then,” said Ash in a business like fashion. “I shouldn’t have left. I was being stubborn and pig-headed and stuck in my ways, which I’ve got a tendency to be, you know? If you’re going to concentrate on looking after yourself, well, those are the things I need to concentrate on to look after myself better. I shouldn’t have left.”

“You shouldn’t?” Pen said anxiously.

“No,” Ash said. She sniffed, then looked directly at Pen. “Because I love you. I think.”

Pen felt the happiness brewing up inside her, felt her lips twitching into a smile. “Well, if that isn’t the most romantic thing I’ve heard. I love you, I think.”

“I’m not done yet,” Ash said. She took a breath and then took both of Pen’s hands in her own. “You are the kindest, most lovely person I’ve ever met. And for a while there I hated you for it. I hated your sunshine and I thought you were interfering and annoying and one of those people that always has to be involved.”

Pen’s eyes narrowed. “Are we getting to the romantic bit soon?”

Ash ignored her. “And then I realized that you were genuine. That you’re actually sunshine. You don’t just sit around hoping for the best, you make the best happen, Pen. And I don’t know why it took my stupid, annoying, and yet strangely nice London neighbor, and a handful of crazy romance novels to realize that, but it did.”

Pen struggled to sit upright, pushing herself up so that she could better see Ash.

“What I’m saying,” Ash said. “Is that I want to be a part of all this. I want a little slice of sunshine. I want to be optimistic, I want to build something with you. Even if that something only lasts a little while. Because you’re the best person I’ve ever met, Pen. And you make me better just by being with you.”

“I see,” Pen said, finally finding her voice, and now not knowing what she wanted to say with it.

“But I understand if you don’t want to live with a grump like me,” Ash said, squeezing Pen’s hands tight. “I get that. Just... just maybe we can give us a real chance. I never should have left and I’m not leaving again. In fact, even if you say no, I’m still staying. Because I’ll always hope that you can love me back and I’ll stay here until the end of time if I have to.”

Tears began to press behind Pen's eyes. "You don't have to wait, Ash. I'll love you until the end of time. There's no waiting required. You might be grumpy and snappy and irritable, but you're realistic and kind and I think maybe you just didn't learn how to let people like you, because it is a choice. Nothing would make me happier than to see you every day, to love you every day."

Ash's eyes were filling up now, the tears spilling over, until she was half-laughing with them, still clinging on to Pen's hands. "If this is so good, then why are we crying?" she sputtered.

Pen held out her arms and Ash crawled into them and they lay together, holding each other, as the morning light streamed into Pen's bedroom. Slowly, Pen started to stroke Ash's hair and she could feel Ash's heart beat next to her.

She sighed.

"This is all I've ever wanted," she said.

"Is it?" Ash asked, looking up at her. She grinned. "It's nothing that I've ever wanted at all. At least until right now, that is. But change is a good thing, right?"

Pen smiled back. "It'll have to be. There's a lot of changes to come." She paused and hugged Ash close to her. "Do you really think you can get used to living in this small space with another person?"

"Oh shit." Ash pulled out of the cuddle, sitting upright, and Pen's heart started to hammer in her chest. Had Ash really not considered any of the consequences of living in Tetherington, of them sharing the bakery?

"Ash, we don't have to stay here, I suppose. I mean, I'd love to, but what, with the bakery being so small and the bookshop being sold already, I can see how it might

not be ideal.”

Ash was grinning like a maniac. “I didn’t mean ‘oh shit, I have to live in a small space with you.’ I meant ‘oh shit, I haven’t told you.’”

“Told me what?” asked Pen, Ash’s grin was becoming infectious.

“The bookshop’s sold because I bought it,” Ash said.

“You... you what?” asked Pen.

“You heard me.”

“But... but you don’t know the first thing about selling books,” Pen said.

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Ash shrugged. “George will teach me. I’ll learn. Change is a good thing.”

And Pen was reaching up for her, pulling her in, and then hands were too busy moving and lips were too busy kissing and hearts were too busy beating for any conversation to happen for a long, long time.

IT WAS MID-MORNING by the time they both came down the stairs. Pen, who had been expecting a cold, dark kitchen, was surprised to see all the lights on. An alarm went off on one of the ovens and Lucy bustled in. Pen could hear voices out in the shop.

“Ah, there you are,” Lucy said, pulling a tray of croissants out of the oven. “Wondered when you’d get around to getting up.” She looked at Ash. “You two get everything sorted out then? All loved up?”

Ash smirked and Lucy rolled her eyes.

“Thought we’d better open for you,” Lucy said to Pen. “George is running the till, and, well, things are a bit busy out there.”

“They are?” asked Pen, because the bakery really shouldn’t be busy at half past ten on a Thursday morning.

Lucy nodded through the doorway, and Pen and Ash walked through, only to be greeted by what looked like half the town. When they saw Pen there was a flurry of conversation and a smattering of applause. Pen found herself being hugged and doted upon and only escaped when Ash pulled her away to the counter.

“What’s all this?” Pen asked George.

“They were worried about you,” he said. “And I told them that if they wanted to help, the best thing they could do was support your business, so that’s what they’re doing. Oh, and I’ve got a half dozen catering orders as well.”

“Hold on,” said Ash.

“It’s all under control,” George said. “Lucy’s staying on to help fill the catering orders. And I’m here behind the counter. Well, at least I am as long as my new boss doesn’t turn out to be quite as grumpy as the old one.”

“Hey, watch it,” Ash said. “I haven’t promoted you to full manager yet.”

“Mmm, but you will,” beamed George.

“I don’t understand,” said Pen. “Why were they all so worried about me?”

Ash shook her head. “Because they love you, Pen.” George turned away to make coffee and Ash pulled Pen in close enough that she could whisper in her ear. “But not as much as I do.”

Pen laughed and the sound lifted her heart and for the first time in a very long time she felt absolutely complete.

Epilogue

The alarm clock buzzed in the darkness and Ash turned over, her arm finding Pen’s waist automatically.

“You don’t have to get up now,” Pen whispered.

“I’ve got no intention of getting up now,” Ash said, rolling over so that her leg could wrap around Pen’s. She nuzzled into Pen’s neck and was rewarded with a sigh as Pen pressed her body against her.

“Are you starting things you can’t finish?” Pen giggled.

“Would I do that?”

Ash felt Pen’s hands creep up along her back, felt the delicious shiver of anticipation as Pen pulled her in and slid a thigh between her legs. Pushing herself up, she began to kiss down Pen’s neck as she rubbed against her warm thigh. Her lips found Pen’s nipple and she began to suck as Pen’s breath started to come harder.

She was just about to continue her trip downward when something launched itself onto the bed, bouncing off her backside and making her screech.

“Fabio!” she shouted, sitting up.

Pen dissolved into laughter. “He’s just reminding you that if you’re going to be getting up early, he can easily eat an early breakfast.”

“That cat is some kind of birth control. Maybe that’s why lesbians don’t get pregnant,” Ash grumbled, settling back down into bed and pulling up the covers.

Pen leaned over and kissed her. “I have to get to work,” she said. “But hold all those thoughts until I get back.”

Ash pulled her in closer, giving her a proper kiss. “Just so you remember and hurry back,” she said when she pulled away.

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“As though I could forget,” said Pen, hurriedly jumping out of bed and pulling on some clothes for the short trip next door.

One of the problems with dating a baker, Ash thought as she listened to Pen go down the bookshop stairs, was that they had to get up so early.

Mind you, that did mean that Ash got a precious hour or so in bed alone, listening to the gulls outside the window and stretching out to take up the whole bed.

Ten months since she’d bought the bookshop, eight months since she’d officially moved to Tetherington, and it was almost home. Almost, but not quite.

Ash rolled over and closed her eyes, trying to go back to sleep again and failing.

For the past few months she and Pen had been living in two flats and there were definite inconveniences. Like leaving a toothbrush in one bathroom when she was in another. But there were also some advantages. Like still having her own space.

But all that was about to change.

Ash gave a sigh and opened her eyes. She was awake. She might as well get up and feed Fabio. Once she started thinking about the future, she had a tendency to spiral which meant there was no hope of getting back to sleep again.

“ABSOLUTELY NO FRUIT cake.” George crossed his arms.

“I’m taking that as a hard no,” said Pen, crossing out an item on her list. “Alright,

chocolate?”

George’s face twisted in thought. “I don’t know, is that too... common? Expected?”

“It’s a favorite for a reason,” said Pen. “My only issue with it is that a chocolate cake is moister and lighter than a fruit cake, so tier building can be more difficult. But if you and Billy are sticking to three tiers, that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“And definitely fancy?” asked George.

Pen grinned. “Bows, flowers, silver balls, the whole nine yards. Do you honestly think that I’d make you a wedding cake without all the frills?”

“No,” said George, grinning back. “And thank Pen, we really appreciate it. We’re on such a budget, I don’t know what we’d do if everyone wasn’t helping us out.” He sighed. “We just need to deal with the flowers now.”

Pen beamed at him. “I can do that,” she said. “I mean, it’s just advanced cake decorating really, I’d be delighted to help.”

For a single second George looked relieved, then he sagged again. “No.”

“No?”

“No,” he said more firmly. “You’ve got enough to do with the cake and you’re not stretching yourself too thin. We’ve had this conversation, Pen. You can’t—”

“—feed people from an empty pantry,” Pen finished, with the air of someone who had heard the phrase entirely too often.

“It’ll be fine,” George said. “Something will work out. Now, on to more interesting

things. The renovations. Tell me everything.”

The sun was shining outside and it hurt Pen’s eyes to look out of the window. But she didn’t want to look George in the eye. He’d see her doubt in her face and that was the last thing she needed. Not that she had doubts about finally living together with Ash, it was just...

“Pen, what’s going on?” George asked.

“Nothing,” sighed Pen.

“Liar.”

She blew out a breath. “It’s really nothing. I’m probably being silly.”

“Why don’t you let me decide that?” asked George kindly, stroking her arm.

She shrugged. “It’s just... I don’t really know anything about the renovations. Ash doesn’t talk about it and, well, I’m a bit worried that she might have changed her mind.”

It had seemed like such a good idea, and at the beginning, Ash had been thrilled. They’d knock through the upper walls joining the two flats together and they’d add in a door between the bookshop and bakery so that customers could go between the two. It wasn’t even that much work, not once they’d thought about it.

Then things had gotten complicated. With her debts, Pen couldn’t get any kind of loan. So Ash had declared that she was taking over and would pay for the flats at least, and ever since then she’d been... secretive.

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“Why would you think that?” George asked. “Ash is devoted to you. Quite sickeningly so. I’m surprised she’s not hanging all over you right this minute, I nearly never see you alone anymore.”

“She just doesn’t talk about things,” said Pen, aware that she sounded sad.

“Then ask her,” George laughed. “It’s a little thing called communication. Everything will be fine, Pen, you know that.”

She should know that. Really she should. She forced herself to smile. “You’re probably right. Alright, let’s talk icing, royal or buttercream?”

Her worries about Ash could wait. She had other things to do right now.

AT HALF PAST two the bookshop door was flung open so hard that the little bell rang dementedly, bouncing on its spring. Ash looked up from her book to see a familiar figure struggling in with a far too large suitcase. Her stomach sank.

“Mum.”

“Darling,” said her mother, dropping the suitcase and opening her arms wide as she swooped on Ash. “Darling, I’m so glad to see you.”

“Where’s Ted?” Ash asked, suspecting that she already knew the answer.

“Ted? Ted?” screeched her mother. “Don’t get me started on Ted. In fact, no, let’s never mention his name again. Not once.”

“So you’ve left him,” Ash said. It wasn’t a question. Her mother’s marriages tended to last around a year, so poor Ted was already getting to his expiration date.

“I have. And I thought what better way to mend a broken heart than... well, in The Mended Hearts Bookshop,” she said. “A little sea air will do me good.”

Ash eyed the suitcase. “Mum, I don’t mean to be uncharitable but, um, there’s only one bedroom.”

“Oh don’t worry about that,” said her mother, beaming. “I’ve got a room at the pub, I just wanted to stop by here first. Where’s Pen?”

Ash rolled her eyes. Her mother had taken an unexpected shine to Pen and the two of them together could talk the ear of a donkey. In fact, there was a solid chance that her mother was here more for Pen than for her. “She’s working.”

“Right, well, I’ll just pop next door to say hello, shall I?”

A second later, her mother was gone, leaving the enormous suitcase sitting in the middle of the shop. Ash groaned. She had enough to deal with right now without her mother visiting as well.

PEN WAS SWEEPING the floor when she saw Lucy walking by the window, she banged on the glass and Lucy came in. “I wasn’t going to stop,” Lucy said. “I’m on my way to the town hall.”

“I won’t keep you,” said Pen. “I just wanted to ask if you’ve got catering for the opening yet?”

Lucy opened her mouth then stopped, her face getting pale. “I hadn’t even thought about it,” she admitted.

Pen laughed. “You’re having an art exhibition opening, I think you have to have some hors d’oeuvres at least. Shall I knock up some quiches or something for you?”

For an instant, she saw the same look pass over Lucy’s face as she’d seen on George’s just that morning when they’d been talking about flowers. A mixture of relief and... guilt perhaps?

“It’s alright, thanks though, Pen. I’ll handle it,” Lucy said. She checked her watch. “And I have to run, see you later.”

Pen watched her go, a little unsure of what had just happened. It was almost as though no one wanted her help anymore. Was she really that useless? Thinking back on it, she couldn’t even remember the last time Moira had dropped by with the kids, or Sarah Hanson with her collection box.

It was like people were avoiding her.

She finished the sweeping in a glum state of mind, but as she turned the shop sign to closed and left the door unlocked she couldn’t help but start to smile again. Ash would be closing up the bookshop right about now, which meant it couldn’t be more than ten minutes before they were safely ensconced upstairs together. Her heart sped up a little at the thought.

Until she remembered Ash’s mother was in town.

Not that she disliked her, not in the slightest. In fact, she found Ash’s mum pleasantly upbeat and optimistic, particularly for someone who’d been married as many times as Lisa Whatever-Her-Last-Name-Now-Was.

But she could use a little time alone with Ash. Things weren’t right and instinctively, Pen knew it. She just didn’t quite know what was wrong or why or anything else.

She was surprised a quarter hour later when Ash climbed the stairs alone, carrying a sheaf of papers.

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“Where’s your mum?” she asked as Ash came in and planted a kiss on her cheek.

“Ah, I sent her off to the new debate club at the town hall,” Ash said, pulling a face. “I told her that all the eligible bachelors would be there. I hope you don’t mind, but I’m exhausted and I just couldn’t deal with her tonight.”

“It’s fine with me,” said Pen. “But is it okay with her?”

Ash shrugged. “She’ll deal. It’ll be fine. She’ll be fine.” She collapsed onto the couch. “I need to go over these plans for the renovation.”

“Not a problem, I can help with that,” Pen said, getting ready to snuggle in next to Ash.

But Ash brushed her off. “No, no, I can handle it. Why don’t you put the telly on, or read a book. You could use some down time.”

Stung, Pen stood up again. “Anyone would think that you don’t want my help.”

“But I don’t,” Ash said, flicking through her papers. “I can handle this, I told you.”

“Apparently, everyone can handle everything nowadays,” Pen said, the sentence coming out more bitter than she’d intended.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Ash.

“Oh, just that George can handle his wedding flowers and Lucy can handle her

opening night catering and Moira can handle all the kids and you can handle all the plans. It's like no one needs me anymore." She could feel the tears rising up in her throat, could feel them almost starting to choke her.

"Oh, Pen, don't be like that," Ash said, finally putting her papers down.

But Pen didn't even want to look at her. She knew that Ash was keeping something from her. Probably the fact that she didn't want to give up her independence after all, that she didn't want to live together.

"I'm going for a walk," Pen said, grabbing her jacket. It was the best thing she could think of to do. The beach wouldn't mind if she cried and the last thing she wanted to do right now was listen to Ash try to come up with excuses for why the renovations shouldn't go ahead.

THE SUN WAS balancing on the horizon, turning the sea orange, a sight that never failed to make Ash glad that she'd finally decided to move.

Not that everything was going great. Apparently, she was an idiot. In her defense, this was her first real relationship and she'd had good intentions. Clearly, those intentions had been misguided. She put her hands in her pockets and jogged down to the water's edge before turning and walking in the direction she knew Pen would have gone.

She should have followed immediately, she thought, as she hurried along the beach. But it had seemed important to try and fix her mistakes first, so she'd had a few phone calls to make. And now, well, she just had to hope that she'd guessed right and this was where Pen had come.

She walked for another five minutes before she saw Pen's round figure materializing out of the dimming light. Her heart skipped a beat as it did every time she saw her, her perfect, kind, loving, giving little ray of sunshine.

Skipping into a run, Ash closed the gap between them as quickly as she could.

“Don’t say anything,” Pen said, looping her arm through Ash’s when they met up. “I was being overly sensitive and I’m sorry.”

“No,” Ash said. “You weren’t at all. And this is all my fault. I’m really sorry, Pen.”

Pen stopped. “What’s all your fault?”

Ash groaned. “I thought... Well, with all these things coming up, George and Billy’s wedding, Lucy’s exhibition, the renovations, I thought that... I thought you might try to do too much again. So I told everyone that they had to rein things in and take care of their own problems so that they don’t over-load you.”

Pen frowned. “So... you told everyone not to accept help from me?”

Ash nodded. “I’m an idiot. I’m sorry. I was trying to protect you and I ended up making you feel like you’re useless and I never intended that.”

For a moment, Pen stood still, then she came in closer and closer still until Ash could feel her warmth, smell her scent. “That’s about the most lovely thing anyone’s ever done for me.”

“Made you feel useless?” Ash said.

“No, tried to look after me,” said Pen.

“I should have talked to you about it instead of just doing it,” Ash said, looking down in concern at Pen’s wide blue eyes. “I’m sorry, I won’t do it again. And just so you know, I’ve fixed everything.”

“You have?” asked Pen.

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“Mum’s going to take care of the flower arranging for the wedding, because who knows better than her? But she’d like you to help her choose some colors. Lucy has only the vaguest idea of what a quiche actually is, but she’d like to come over so you could show her and then she’ll make them under your supervision.”

“Okay,” said Pen, smiling. “That sounds like a good plan. But, um, there was something else. About the renovations...” Her smile dropped now and she looked away. “We don’t have to do them if you don’t want. I mean, I don’t mind us living in two separate flats if that’s better for you, more comfortable.”

Ash took a large step backward. “What?”

“I mean it, Ash. If this is too much, too soon...”

“You think...” Ash rubbed her face with her hands. “Christ. I really am bad at this, aren’t I?” She reached out and took both Pen’s hands. “I just didn’t want to bother you with all the details is all, you’ve got enough to handle. George practically runs the bookshop so I’ve got time on my hands to deal with all the little things.”

“Are you sure?” Pen asked anxiously.

“One hundred percent definite,” said Ash. “I can’t wait, Pen. I can’t wait to start planning things together and decorating things together and all the rest of it.”

“And I want to help,” Pen said gently.

Ash nodded. “I know. I’m sorry. I’ll involve you. I just... I want you to have

everything Pen. I want you to have the happiest, most trouble free life anyone can ever have because you deserve it.”

“You can’t keep trouble from me,” Pen said, squeezing Ash’s hands. “As sweet as the thought is. The idea is more that from now on we handle things together instead of alone, not that you handle things for me.”

“I get it,” said Ash, breathing out. She pulled Pen in closer. “I need to be better about communicating things.”

“You do,” said Pen. “And I need to be better about not assuming things. So we both have things to work on.”

“I’m not good at this,” Ash said, putting her arms around Pen. “I haven’t done it before.”

“And I haven’t done it before with you,” Pen said, smiling up at her. “It’s alright, we’ll figure things out together. That’s what this is all about.”

Ash smiled at her. “I don’t tell you how I feel often enough.”

“I know how you feel.” The breeze stirred Pen’s hair.

“No, I don’t think you do,” Ash said quite seriously. “You’re my everything. I never intended this to happen, I didn’t think it could happen. But I wake up next to you every morning thinking how lucky I am, dreading the day that you realize that you’re not as lucky as I am.”

“I would never think that,” Pen said. She looked down at the sand. “But maybe I dread the day that you realize this isn’t what you want and you leave.”

Ash swallowed. “I’m not leaving. Not ever.”

“Are you sure about that?” asked Pen, looking up.

“As sure as I can be about anything.” Pen’s eyes were so soft, so full of love, that Ash felt her heart swelling up. She cleared her throat. “Um, I’ve read enough romance novels to know that this is absolutely not the right way to do this.”

“To do what?” asked Pen, a curl of hair escaping from behind her ear and tickling her face.

It wasn’t the right way to do it. But it was suddenly the most right thing that Ash could ever imagine, the most perfect and beautiful thing she could think of, so right that she couldn’t hold the idea to herself for one more second.

“To ask you if maybe you might want to marry me,” Ash said.

Pen looked up at her. “To marry the tall, strong, grumpy woman of my dreams and live in a bakery stroke bookshop with a cat and my friends in a town that I love by the sea?” she said. “That doesn’t sound perfect at all.”

“Your friends can’t live in our flat, just to clarify,” Ash said, her body feeling lighter than she thought it had ever done before.

“Oh, well, I suppose I could compromise on that,” said Pen, standing up on tip toes so that the top of her head almost reached Ash’s lips.

“Um, you didn’t answer,” said Ash.

But Pen was already pulling her head down, already brushing her lips against Ash’s, already smiling. “What do you think?” she whispered.

“I think... I think I’m the luckiest person on the entire planet right now,” Ash said.

“See?” said Pen. “I told you everything would turn out for the best.”

They kissed for a long time with the waves lapping against the sand and the gulls crying above them and the sun sinking below the horizon. And when they were done they walked hand in hand back toward home saying not a word, because there was nothing more that needed to be said.