



Faking It (and falling in love) (The Second Chance Chronicles #3)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: When Philippa comes out at 46, she has no idea what to expect.

Juggling a high-powered job as a family lawyer, lone-parenting a 10-year-old daughter and navigating her new life push her to the limit.

She doesn't have time to fall in love, but when she meets carefree graphic designer Alex at a professional networking event, people think they are a couple.

For both women this is a convenient way to present themselves to the world, so they keep up the pretence.

To Philippa's surprise, her feelings for Alex start to grow, but the graphic designer doesn't want to settle down with anyone so their fake relationship status can't become real.

But when Alex comes to Philippa with a problem that only she can help with, things get complicated.

Can Philippa resist her growing feelings towards Alex while trying to help her gain access to her child? Or should Philippa steer clear of Alex and her hedonistic lifestyle for the benefit of her own daughter?

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Chapter One

Philippa sighed at her young assistant. “Sienna, are you really sure about this?”

Sienna nodded, her large brightly coloured hoop earrings wobbling with the movement. Her short afro hair was newly trimmed, setting off her grin. “Totally.” She brandished her mobile. “You need new clients, and TikTok’s where they are.”

At forty-six, Philippa had thus far avoided the social media video feed, preferring to stick to Facebook and Instagram.

But this was why she’d hired Sienna, a twenty-eight-year-old paralegal with ambitions to become a major force in legal circles.

Philippa thought back to her own training in family law, more than two decades earlier, when social media just wasn’t a thing.

She remembered the crusty old men – and it mostly was men – waxing lyrical about the glories of the British legislature. She had no intention of being crusty.

“Ok,” said Philippa. “Hand me that script, then.”

Sienna grinned again, passing it over while Philippa put on her reading glasses and checked her face in the phone camera. Her perfectly coiffed chestnut bob was neatly in place, along with her trademark red slash of lipstick. She frowned. “Hey, besties? I have to say that?”

Sienna nodded. “Trust me,” she said.

Philippa laughed. “Right, ok, I’m trusting you on this, but if I’m the laughing stock of the city networking group next week, I’m never tikking or tokking again.”

“Deal,” said Sienna. “Ready to go?”

Philippa nodded, breathed in, and Sienna pressed record.

Professional Philippa kicked in. She looked down the phone’s lens with the same intensity she’d use to stare into the face of a magistrate or judge.

“Hey, besties,” she said. “I’m Philippa, and we are Samfire and Partners.

We’re here for you when you enter your divorce era, and we understand the assignment.

Slay.” Philippa paused and raised an eyebrow before continuing.

“Don’t have a menty B about your family legal issues, because we’re here, and we are very mindful, very demure, very cutesy.

No cap. For a legal firm with lawyers with main character energy that hit different, come to us. Slay.”

Sienna stopped the recording. “You are a pro, Philippa. I loved the way you kept so deadpan. Honestly, this will be a hit.”

“Hmm,” said Philippa. “We’ll see about that.”

Sienna left the office and Philippa looked down at the picture of Dottie, her ten-year-

old daughter, grinning maniacally from the plain white frame.

She smiled. Life had changed a lot in the last few months, but Dottie was the constant.

The photo on her desk had replaced the old one of her and Paul, Dottie's dad, with two-year-old Dottie. That one had been quietly retired.

Her phone vibrated to remind her she had an appointment at 11am.

She logged out of her computer, put her blazer on, grabbed her sunglasses and made her way out onto Colmore Row, the centre of Birmingham's finance and legal district.

It had been ages since she'd seen Charlie, and she had lots to update him on.

The May sun shone through the trees in Pigeon Park – the name that every local used for the grounds of Birmingham Cathedral.

Philippa picked an outdoor table at the Syrian cafe overlooking the park, having ordered herself a Turkish coffee.

Charlie was famously late for everything, but he did it with such charm that she instantly forgave him.

Philippa, on the other hand, was always early, so had learned long ago never to wait for him to order.

The coffee arrived in its tiny jug, next to a silver cup with cupola lid and a cube of Turkish delight beside it.

She smiled. She was a fan of a double espresso, but they had nothing on this rocket fuel.

She knew she probably shouldn't drink this much caffeine, but, she reasoned with herself, she didn't smoke or vape, and she didn't drink much alcohol either. Everyone needed a vice.

"Good morning, Lady Philippa," said Charlie as he approached her table, a wide smile on his face. He leant down and kissed her cheek before heading in to order his drink. Once back, he sat down. "So sorry I'm late. The Aston Expressway was a disaster as always."

"Of course," said Philippa with a laugh. "Lovely to see you, Charles, it's been ages."

"It has." Charlie's cheekbones were more prominent when he smiled, his greying hair short and smart, styled to within an inch of its life. "And I know you've had a lot going on."

"I have," said Philippa.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" Charlie looked serious for a moment, and Philippa could see why so many men fell for his charms, with his piercing eyes and carefully tailored suit. "I know you and Paul have divorced, but you've not said much more."

"Yes, well that's why I contacted you, as it happens. I have something to tell you," said Philippa, holding her coffee cup tightly.

Charlie nodded, saying nothing, just waiting.

"Paul and I split up, as you know. I mean, we hadn't really lived together properly in years. He mostly worked overseas, and I was here with Dottie and the firm. Things

came to a bit of a head when he was made redundant and decided to retire.”

“That will have been an adjustment,” said Charlie.

“More than that. It changed my life completely, and it became clear that we weren’t really a married couple any more.

We had nothing in common, and I honestly didn’t want to share my precious spare time with him.

It sounds awful, I know, but it just didn’t work.

” Philippa thought back to that time, through all the soul searching and the hard questions she’d forced herself to answer.

“It must have been rough,” said Charlie.

“It improved a bit when he started playing golf most days, but I realised we couldn’t carry on that way.

We were both miserable. He’s a great dad to Dottie, of course he is, but I had to face the truth,” said Philippa.

She could feel her heart rate increase, and knew it was only partly due to the strength of her coffee.

A barista appeared with Charlie’s latte.

Charlie nodded his thanks and turned his attention back to his friend. “You had to face what truth?” he asked.

“That it’s time to act on something I’ve known for a few years now. I didn’t want to blow up our family, and with Paul gone most of the time, it wasn’t such a big deal. But the truth is, I’m gay, Charlie,” said Philippa, her eyes focused on his, using his preferred name for once.

Charlie’s mouth formed a small ‘o’. He blinked a couple of times.

“My goodness, Phil,” he said, finally. “I had absolutely no idea.” Then he put his hands up as if to apologise.

“But this isn’t about me. I guess the first thing I should do is to welcome you to the wonderful world of the queer community. You’re part of the family now.”

Philippa heaved a huge sigh of relief. She’d come out to a few people already, but telling Charlie had felt particularly charged because he was gay himself.

She didn’t know how he would feel about someone coming out later in life.

“Thank you,” she said, “although I’ll be honest, I haven’t really met many of the ‘family’, as you call it.

I’m glad to be part of it, though. I feel more me than I’ve ever felt, even though I’ve not actually changed anything about my life. ”

“Apart from giving Paul the elbow,” said Charlie with a wink.

“Well, yes, apart from that,” admitted Philippa with a wry smile.

“Tell me everything,” said Charlie. “And I’m going to order some of that balaclava, because I suspect we’re going to need it.”

Philippa relaxed and smiled. This was the kind of thing Charlie was good at. “I think you mean baclava, Charles.”

“Tomayto, tomahto, let’s call the whole thing off,” countered Charlie, his hand already up to summon the waiter.

It wasn’t until they were onto their second coffee that Charlie asked through the honeyed pastry crumbs if she was dating anyone.

“Oh heavens, no,” said Philippa. “I’m far too busy for that. Between the firm and Dottie, I don’t even know where I’d fit anyone else.”

“Damnit,” said Charlie, “I was hoping for some kind of erotic awakening from an uber-lesbian of note.”

“What’s one of those?” asked Philippa, incredulous.

“Oh, you know, Sue Perkins, Sandi Toksvig...” he trailed off.

“Well, sorry to disappoint you, Charles. Besides, I’m not twenty any more, I can’t just go to a bar and just meet someone.”

“Oh my God,” said Charlie, “we’re going to have so much fun. I am going to introduce you to every eligible lesbian I know.”

“You’re incorrigible,” replied Philippa, pursing her lips.

“So I’ve been told,” he confirmed. “And we can get you on the dating apps, too. A friend of mine did that a while back.”

“No,” interrupted Philippa. “Absolutely not. I am not going to be swiped upon.”

“Oh, you are so delightfully haughty,” said Charlie with a laugh. “I can think of legions of women who’d go weak at the knees for that.” Philippa rolled her eyes. “Ok, so I won’t try and set you up, but perhaps I can help you widen your social circle? Or perhaps to widen your?—”

Philippa interrupted. “Thank you.” She glared. “But helping me widen my social group would be lovely.” She felt a happy warmth growing inside her.

The conversation was easy, and Philippa was relieved to have said those words out loud to her friend. They spent an enjoyable hour catching up.

“Well, my dear, I need to dash. I’ve got a meeting at the Children’s Hospital, so I’m going to head over there.”

“Thank you, Charlie.”

“Don’t thank me, thank yourself for letting you be you,” he said, kissing Philippa on the cheek before walking swiftly across Pigeon Park.

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Chapter Two

“ Mummy!” Dottie shouted from the classroom door. Philippa smiled. She wondered at what age she would go from being called ‘mummy’ in an excited voice to becoming ‘mum’ in a more sullen one.

“Dottie, how are you doing? Did you manage to get your volcano sculpture finished today?” she asked, grabbing the rucksack her daughter had dropped unceremoniously at her feet.

“Yes,” she said breathlessly. “It’s drying over there in the window. Look.”

“Ooh, yes,” said Philippa, “I can see it in the corner there. What a fantastic achievement. Well done.”

“Thanks,” said Dottie. “I think it looks good, but Hardev says it looks like an exploding toilet.”

Philippa gave a wry smile, remembering the cheeky boy well from her experience supporting Dottie’s class on a school trip.

“Ignore him,” she said, “he’s definitely not looking at it from the right angle.

” Philippa looked back at the sculpture, and decided never to admit to thinking it did look very slightly like an exploding toilet.

“That’s what I told him, but then the teacher told me to be quiet,” sighed Dottie.

“I expect that was because you were talking too much,” said Philippa, taking Dottie’s hand and leading her from the playground.

“But I couldn’t just let him say that about my volcano,” huffed Dottie. “What’s for tea?”

“Er, well,” hedged Philippa, “it’s a surprise.”

“Ooh,” said Dottie, her eyes lighting up. “Pizza?”

Philippa immediately regretted her tactical error.

Tea would indeed be a surprise – not least to her, as she didn’t know what she was going to throw together that evening.

But calling it a surprise had raised Dottie’s hopes to the realms of pizza.

She usually tried to limit pizza to once a week, but she didn’t always succeed.

“Well, if I told you that, it wouldn’t be a surprise, would it?”

Now, tell me about what you did in PE,” said Philippa, mentally going through the cupboards in her kitchen.

She wondered if she could smuggle the lonely tin of chickpeas into something her wayward child would actually eat. She wasn’t convinced.

They walked home slowly, Dottie regaling her mother with stories of her attempts to play hockey.

Philippa thought back to her own school days, and her pride at making the hockey

team.

She smiled, remembering the team captain, a girl who, she could see now, she'd had a massive crush on.

She shook her head. Why on earth hadn't she realised sooner?

But when she looked down at her chattering child, she knew she couldn't regret the path her life had taken. She wouldn't change her daughter for the world, and she would never have had Dottie had she not met and married Paul.

As they neared home, Philippa cracked and pulled Dottie into the supermarket.

"Ok," she said, leading her to the refrigerated section.

"Choose the pizza you want." Surely having two pizzas in a week couldn't do the girl too much harm, especially after a day of running around the school field with a stick.

"Yay," cheered Dottie, rushing gleefully towards the shelves to make her selection.

At least the pizza and garlic bread Dottie had picked out didn't require much by way of cooking. They sat together at the kitchen table, as they had done so many times before, just the two of them.

"Do you miss Daddy?" asked Dottie, taking Philippa by surprise.

"Er, well, that's an interesting question," said Philippa, unsure how to answer. Paul had spent most of the last five years working in the Middle East, only coming home for a few weeks here and there. "I suppose we both got used to him working away a lot, didn't we?"

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Dottie.

“And as you know, things have changed now between me and Daddy,” continued Philippa, rehearsing the key points she always reminded her daughter of – key points she had agreed with her ex-husband, and even provided in writing to Dottie’s class teacher to ensure consistency of message. Philippa was nothing if not thorough.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” said Dottie through a mouthful of garlic bread, “you don’t want to be married anymore but you’re still friends and it’s... Definitely. Not. My. Fault. You’ve both told me a hundred times.” Was there the hint of an eyeroll there?

Philippa laughed. “Sorry. Although I am glad you’ve remembered all that.”

“Well of course I have,” dismissed Dottie with a toss of her hair. Philippa considered what the teenage years might hold in the years to come, imagining a fifteen-year-old Dottie. She shivered slightly. “I’ll tell you what I miss, though,” said Dottie, bringing Philippa out of her thoughts.

“Please do,” she said, putting on her most understanding face, and setting down her knife and fork so as to demonstrate that she was paying full attention.

“I miss there being chocolate spread in the cupboard. Daddy always used to buy it, and you don’t.” Dottie fixed Philippa with a hard stare.

“Ah,” said Philippa, both surprised and relieved at the harmless nature of the confession. “I hadn’t realised that. I don’t eat it, so I didn’t notice it had run out.”

“Well,” said Dottie, wafting her fork in the air, “it ran out last Tuesday. That’s ten days ago. Ten days,” she said, organising her face into a pleading expression. “Ten days I’ve been without chocolatey sustenance.” She pursed her lips.

“I hear you,” said Philippa. “Loud and clear.” She mimed a salute towards the child and smiled. “I will buy some tomorrow, and I’ll ensure we have a constant supply from now on.”

“Thank you,” said Dottie. “Can we watch Ghosts after tea?”

“Of course, darling,” said Philippa. This had become their routine. They had watched every episode of the BBC sitcom numerous times, but it had become comfort viewing and a good way to round off the day together.

“Good,” grinned Dottie.

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Chapter Three

“Good morning, Philippa,” said Sienna. “I’m just doing a coffee run for Roderick – can I get you anything?”

“A coffee run? For Roderick?” said Philippa, pausing to hang up her coat. “Didn’t you do that yesterday?”

“I do it every morning. He likes me to,” said Sienna, smiling. “And it seems unfair not to include you.”

Philippa felt her hackles rising. “What’s Roderick’s order?”

“Extra hot cappuccino with a double shot and a squirt of hazelnut.” It rolled off Sienna’s tongue with the confidence of someone who had ordered the drink many times before.

“I see,” said Philippa. “Well, as it happens, I wanted to grab some breakfast from the coffee shop myself, so I’ll pick up Rod’s order. You sit tight.”

“Oh, really? Ok. I mean, I could get your breakfast for you if you like?” said Sienna, looking a little confused.

“Oh no,” said Philippa, “I’m very picky, and I’m more than capable of ordering my own breakfast.” She smiled and then looked at Sienna. “What would you like to drink?”

“Oh, um, a skinny chai latte, please,” the paralegal said, apparently surprised she’d even been asked.

“Jolly good. A croissant, too?”

“Oh, I mean, yes please. But only if it’s not too much trouble,” said Sienna, retreating to her own desk.

“No trouble at all,” replied Philippa with another smile. She was going to enjoy this.

Twenty minutes later she arrived back in the office from the cafe over the road.

“Here you are,” she said, dropping Sienna’s order on her desk.

“Oh, thanks,” said the young Black woman. “Shall I take Roderick’s into him?”

“Oh no,” said Philippa, “that won’t be necessary.” She made her way towards the new lawyer’s office. He’d only been part of the firm for a few weeks, and she had some feedback for him.

“Good morning, Roderick, how are you?” said Philippa, as she swept into his space.

“Ah, Philippa, good morning,” he said. She eyed his pinstriped suit, shiny shoes and well-oiled hair appraisingly.

He was in his thirties, and she’d met plenty like him during her years in the legal profession.

“I sent the girl out for my coffee,” he frowned.

“Don’t tell me she got you to do it?” He rolled his eyes.

“You did indeed send Sienna out. That’s her name.

In fact, she’s a talented paralegal working hard to progress her career.

I think she could learn a lot from you. I’m not sure, however, that she will learn much by ordering your coffee every morning,” said Philippa, painting a sweet smile onto her face.

“Oh, well, no, but it’s part of the pecking order, isn’t it?” said the man, his face flushing.

“Is it?”

“I did it when I was a junior, making my way,” he said.

“And now it’s her turn?”

“Yes. Well I suppose so,” he replied, plunging his hands into his pockets.

“How are you finding it, working for Samfire and Partners?” asked Philippa, placing his coffee on the desk in front of him before taking a seat opposite him. She took a sip from her own drink and made herself comfortable.

“Well,” said Roderick, his eyes roaming desperately about the room. “It is of course a privilege and a wonderful opportunity for me. I’m, er, really enjoying the challenge.”

Philippa smiled and allowed for a moment of silence. It was a cardboard cutout of an answer. She knew it and he knew it. She took another sip from her coffee. “Well,” she said, “I’m very pleased to hear that. You came with excellent references, and I have high hopes for you.”

“Thank you,” said Roderick, now looking exquisitely uncomfortable. “Um, can I give you some cash for the coffee?”

“Oh no,” said Philippa, standing. “This one’s on me. But from now on, please remember that Sienna, and other junior colleagues, are not here to do your bidding. You will fetch your own coffee in future.”

“Of course,” said Roderick, his face turning a deep shade of purple as he shifted in his seat.

Philippa turned and left the office, before returning to her own.

She sat in her office chair and gave herself a celebratory spin.

The full three-sixty. She’d had her suspicions that Roderick wasn’t behaving appropriately towards the junior staff, and she was glad to have been able to pick him up on it at last. There was no place in her firm for those who thought younger staff, particularly women, were there to run errands.

If Roderick wanted to remain in her employ, he needed to learn that, and fast.

She opened her email inbox to find a reminder for that evening’s so-called entertainment, a professional networking event being held in consultancy offices the next street along.

She sighed. It was crucial for her to be seen at events like that, to maintain the profile of her company and make connections.

But it was incredibly tiring. She grabbed her phone and texted Charlie.

He often came along, too, and at least if he was there, she wouldn’t be without a

friendly face.

Her first appointment of the day was with a woman navigating her divorce from a man who had controlled her for years. Philippa had been working with the woman for a few months. She strolled out into the reception area to find Daria waiting.

“Lovely coat,” said Philippa. “Is that new?”

“It is,” said Daria, smiling a little more confidently today than she had done in the past. “I’ve got my own bank account now, and I thought it might be ok if I bought myself something new.”

“Gorgeous,” said Philippa, grinning. “It’s a fabulous shade of green.

” As far as she could recall, this was the first time Daria had done anything entirely for herself since she’d escaped the clutches of the man who had abused her.

It made her happy. She ushered her client’s slim frame into her office.

“I think today we should look at the options for the division of assets, particularly around the house.”

Daria frowned and appeared to shrink into her new coat. “Do you think we can do that? Won’t his solicitor try to stop us?”

Philippa smiled. “His solicitor’s job is to get the best deal for their client. My job is to get the best deal for you. And you have every right to it.”

“Do I need to be in the same room as my ex to do this?” asked Daria, her eyes wide.

“Not if I can help it,” said Philippa. “Most of this will be done by letter, but

remember, I'm here to represent you, and that's what I intend to do."

Daria gave a cautious smile and breathed out. "Ok. So, what are the options?"

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Chapter Four

“It’s show time,” said Charlie, ushering Philippa into the glossy corporate offices of the finance consultancy. There was a sign directing them to the networking event on the seventh floor, and they walked over to the lift, which arrived with a polished ding just as they stopped outside it.

“Ugh, I hate these things,” she said.

“Rubbish. You always say that,” said Charlie. “But then you make conversation all evening and come back with a brilliant new contact or idea or, on one occasion, as I recall, a new member of staff.”

“Ok, I’ll admit, they can be useful, but that’s not the same as enjoying them,” she said, looking at herself in the lift’s mirrored wall. She smoothed down her bob and checked there wasn’t any lipstick on her teeth.

“You look gorgeous,” said Charlie. “And who knows who you might meet...” He trailed off and gave her a wink.

“I don’t think I’ll be picking up any hot lesbians here, Charles, but I love your optimism,” she said with a laugh. “Besides, everyone here thinks I’m straight. I’ve been knocking around corporate Birmingham for years. My straight and somewhat dull reputation goes before me.”

“I’m sure we can change that,” said Charlie. “Although, my love, you have never been dull.”

“Well, thank you,” said Philippa, placing a hand on Charlie’s arm. The lift doors opened. “Once more into the fray.”

They headed straight for a table to their left, laden with red and white wine and soft drinks.

Philippa grabbed herself a glass of red, while Charlie went for the white.

Philippa spotted Roderick at the other end of the room.

She gave a wry smile, predicting he would give her a wide berth this evening.

She spotted a lawyer from a neighbouring firm and walked over to say hello to her, leaving Charlie chatting to a fundraising director from a local charity.

Halfway through the evening, Philippa realised she’d spoken to all the people she needed to in order to keep the right relationships warm.

She’d never realised how important this sort of thing was when she was doing her law degree at university, but while she was a lawyer, she was also a business woman, and relationships were critical.

She’d just returned to the table to refresh her glass when a new face appeared at the door.

She was slim with long brown hair, ruffled and wavy, and a nonchalant air.

She sauntered in, jeans fitting her perfectly, and bangles jangling round her wrist. The woman wore a dark blue shirt and a light blue blazer, and Philippa couldn’t keep her eyes off her.

She was familiar with most of the people in the room, but she was sure she'd have remembered this face.

The woman, hands in pockets, advanced towards the drinks table where Philippa was still standing, staring back at her.

She gathered herself hurriedly, smiled at the woman, and then hastened her way to the other side of the room where she'd spotted Gerry, the chief operating officer of the firm that held this monthly event.

She always made a point of saying hello to him.

"Lovely event as usual, Gerry," said Philippa. "Always a valuable place to do business."

"Thank you, Philippa. Always a delight to see you," replied Gerry. He was in his early sixties, wore what looked like an expensive designer suit and gave off the scent of sophisticated aftershave. "I think I saw Paul at the golf course the other day, so I gather he's not overseas at present?"

"Ah no," said Philippa, gathering herself for the conversation she needed to have.

One of the things about getting divorced, or coming out, was that she found herself having to tell people over and over again.

"He retired last year, so he has more time for golf. Although I should probably say that we actually separated a little while ago."

"Oh," said Gerry, his eyes softening. "I'm sorry to hear that. Are you ok?"

"Yes, thanks," said Philippa, "and actually I..."

She trailed off. Just over Gerry's shoulder, she could see the woman in the blue jacket talking to a man who was standing with Roderick.

The man reached his arm around the woman's shoulder, and Philippa recognised the look on her face immediately.

The woman was distinctly uncomfortable. Philippa felt blood rush to her face.

"Excuse me," she said to Gerry. She made her way towards the group of three.

"Maybe I can get you a drink, love," the man was saying, his words slurred. The woman's eyebrows shot up and she tried awkwardly to slide his arm off her.

"I don't think she wants a drink," said Philippa, addressing the group and inserting herself between Roderick's companion and the woman.

Roderick looked ashen and the other man staggered slightly.

"What are you?" said the clearly inebriated man. "Her girlfriend?"

"Yes," replied Philippa without thinking. "I am. And I am also a solicitor, so I would advise you to step away." The woman's face whipped round to face Philippa's, whose cheeks were now burning with fury.

"Yeah," said the woman, her voice low and treacly. "I wouldn't cross her if I were you." She put her arm around Philippa's waist. "I've been looking for you all evening, babe." She kissed Philippa's cheek.

Within seconds Roderick and his friend had melted away, and Philippa wondered if she had fallen into some kind of parallel universe where this woman really was her girlfriend. Her cheek tingled where the woman's lips had touched it.

“Hi,” said the woman with an amused smile. “I’m Alex.” She removed her arm from around Philippa’s waist. “Thank you.”

“Oh, yes, well, you’re welcome,” said Philippa, reeling slightly. “I’m Philippa. And I hope that was ok. He looked like he was being a horrible leech, and I can’t bear that kind of thing.”

“Hey, that was fine,” laughed Alex. “By far the best networking event I’ve ever been to. I suspect it wouldn’t have been long before I had to give him a slap, so you’ve saved us all some embarrassment.”

Philippa laughed. “He could probably have done with a slap, but as your legal counsel, I’d advise against it.”

“Ah yes, you’re a lawyer,” said Alex. “I’m sure you would have made mincemeat of him. I’m just an arty graphic designer, so I don’t do anything that contributes to the betterment of society or justice.”

“Yes, but everyone needs a bit of creativity,” said Philippa, still slightly shaken by the last few minutes. “That said, I’m a family lawyer, not a criminal defender, so I suspect my job is less dramatic than you might imagine.”

“Fletch!” came a voice from behind them.

“Charlie!” said Alex, throwing her arms around his neck. “I didn’t know you’d be here.”

Charlie put her down. “I see you’ve met Philippa already.”

“Oh, we’ve done more than just meet,” said Alex with a wink.

Before they could talk any further, Gerry appeared. “Sorry, Philippa, I can see you were about to impart some news to me before, but I think I know what you were going to say. I’m so thrilled to see you happy with your new partner – Roderick told me all about it.”

Philippa felt a bubble of panic. She wasn’t afraid of Gerry knowing she was gay, but she didn’t know how she could explain that Alex wasn’t actually her girlfriend, that in fact they had only just met.

“Enchanted,” said Alex without missing a beat, taking Gerry’s proffered hand. “Philippa’s told me all about you.”

Charlie’s eyebrows hit his hairline. He gave Philippa a questioning look. Philippa just stared back at Alex as the other woman talked for them both.

“She’s too kind,” said Gerry.

“That’s my girl,” said Alex. “Kind to a fault.” She reached out her hand and took Philippa’s.

“She is kind,” said Charlie. “Surprising, too, sometimes. Full of ways to keep me guessing.” He side-eyed Philippa.

“Mmm, well,” said Philippa. Her hand felt strange, as if it had caught light where Alex touched her. “We’ve not been together for long.”

“If you’ll excuse me,” said Gerry, “I must catch up with Erin over there.”

The trio waved Gerry off, and Charlie turned to face them both. “What the actual hell is going on?”

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Chapter Five

“ A n espresso martini for you, Phil, and porn star martinis for me and Fletch,” said Charlie, setting the drinks down.

The three had taken residence around a high table in a cocktail bar in the smart hotel a few doors down from the networking event.

“Now,” he said, setting his face expectantly, “explain.”

Philippa hadn't spoken since they'd left the event, letting Alex do the talking.

She and Charlie clearly knew each other well, as they fell into what looked like a comfortable routine of making fun of one another.

She'd allowed their voices to fade into the background as Charlie ushered them out, declaring the event duller than ditchwater and insisting that they find somewhere else to hang out.

In truth, Philippa suspected this was mostly because neither she nor Alex would explain what had happened while they were still in the corporate whirl of cheap wine and artificial smiles.

The sun was starting to go down and the light into the bar was red and orange.

Philippa felt her face warming, but it wasn't from the sun.

She was still conscious of the imprint, where Alex's lips had touched her cheek, a sense that she ought to check for lipstick or something.

Although Alex didn't appear to be wearing any.

"What can I say?" said Alex, "Philippa was my knight in shining armour."

Philippa rolled her eyes, the comment doing nothing for the warmth in her face. "Hardly. I just stepped in when some terrible leech looked like he was about to paw at you, and you didn't look at all keen."

"Well, you've made my day. It's not every day a gorgeous strident lawyer comes to my rescue by declaring me her girlfriend!" Alex gave Philippa a wink.

Charlie's eyes went wide. "Well now, that was a story worth waiting for. Although I'm tickled by the idea of Fletch needing rescuing. Generally it's others that need rescuing from her. Ow!" Charlie clutched the ankle Alex had just kicked.

"Oh be quiet. I am a delight," she said, raising her glass. "Here's to confusing and confounding boorish straight men."

"Yes," said Philippa, clinking her glass, while wondering what Charlie meant about people needing rescuing from Alex.

"Well congratulations, darling," he said, turning to Philippa. "As comings-out go, that was pretty spectacular. Gerry looked rather starry eyed about the whole thing."

"Oh God, don't," said Philippa. "I have no idea how I'll explain that at the next gathering. I need him to take me seriously!"

"Then don't explain," said Alex, laying a hand on Philippa's forearm, causing her

hairs to stand on end. “Just go with it.”

Philippa wasn't sure what she meant. Did she mean she wanted to be with Philippa? “I mean, I don't really know you very well,” she began, falteringly.

“Ah, all that's overrated. I'm always available for corporate shindigs, weddings and bar mitzvahs,” shrugged Alex. “It'll keep me out of trouble.”

Philippa's stomach dipped slightly. Alex was talking about continuing the charade. Or was she just joking?

Charlie snorted. “Well, perhaps that will halt the endless trail of tearstained women following you around after you sleep with them and abandon them.”

“Shhh,” said Alex with mock anger. “There's no need for my new girlfriend to know about all that. And anyway, I might be mending my ways.” She took a pensive sip from her cocktail, watched by Philippa, who was trying to keep up.

“Hmmm, I'll believe it when I see it,” said Charlie, taking another swig from his glass. “In the meantime, we need to get Philippa out onto the scene so she can start breaking hearts herself.”

Philippa laughed, feeling slightly uncomfortable. “Well, I'm not sure about that. I'm just keen to make a few friends who are like me.”

“Oh,” said Alex, putting down her glass and looking serious for a moment. “You're new?”

Philippa smiled warmly. “Brand new.”

“Well, bab, I've got to hand it to you, you didn't strike me as someone who was in

any doubt about who she was or what she wanted back there,” said Alex. She grinned. “I’m sure I can show you the ropes.”

“Oi!” said Charlie.

“I mean I’ll introduce her to a few people, you old mother hen. It would be entirely inappropriate for me to seduce her when she’s freshly laid, as it were.”

“Well, quite,” said Charlie.

“Excuse me,” said Philippa, interjecting into the two friends’ conversation, “I am here, you know. And surely it’s up to me whether or not I’m available to be seduced.” She took a mouthful of the sweet coffee-flavoured martini and tried to look more poised than she felt.

“Fair point,” said Alex, and Charlie nodded, too.

“So, how did you two meet?” asked Philippa, desperate to move the conversation away from herself and the fact that she had shivered slightly when Alex said the word ‘seduce’.

Alex and Charlie gamely took up the story, explaining that Alex had done some freelance work for an organisation Charlie worked for years ago and how they had struck up a friendship.

The conversation flowed freely between the three of them. Charlie went off to the gents and for a moment Alex and Philippa were alone. “Well done,” said Alex, her voice low.

“Well done?” Philippa furrowed her brow.

“Yes. People imagine that coming out is easy and quick and straightforward these days. But everyone has their own story, as I am sure you do. There are always hurdles to cross, and we all do it in our own way. Well done for getting this far and knowing yourself well enough to be who you are.” Alex’s gaze travelled across the bar.

Her words were warm, but she was obviously thinking about more than just Philippa.

“Well, thank you. I guess it all came to a bit of a head when my husband – my ex-husband now – retired. I figured it was never too late to make a change. And so I did,” said Philippa.

“I guess in your industry there’ll be a few raised eyebrows,” said Alex, turning a softer gaze onto Philippa than she had seen earlier that evening.

“Maybe a little, but I’m sure it’ll all be fine.” Philippa gave a small smile.

“Well, I’d like to apologise for coming on quite so strong during our theatrics.” Alex put her hands up. “If I’d known you were so new, I’d have toned it down a bit. You just seemed so confident.”

“Oh, don’t apologise. It was nice,” smiled Philippa, before amending herself, “amusing, even.” She remembered the words Charlie had spoken about a trail of broken hearts. Even so, she was curious to know more about this woman, who seemed to say so much while giving almost nothing away.

“Well, good. I hoped I hadn’t scandalised you.” Alex drained her glass. “And I meant what I said, by the way. If it’s useful to have me as a bit of a foil at corporate events, then I’m always willing. It might even be useful.”

“Useful?” queried Philippa.

“Well, Charlie might have overstated it, but he’s not entirely wrong.

I’ve been a bit lacking in judgement recently.

I don’t actually have a trail of tearful women weeping behind me, but it’s true that I’ve broken a couple of hearts by prioritising hedonism over maturity.

Perhaps you can help me with that.” Alex sighed. “You seem like a proper grown-up.”

Philippa laughed. “A proper grown-up? What’s one of those?”

“Fair point,” said Alex with a laugh. “But anyway, the offer is there, should you need it.”

“Noted,” said Philippa, as Charlie returned to the table.

“Ooh, what are you noting?” he asked. “Is she giving you sapphic lady-loving tips?”

“No, Charles,” said Philippa, side-eyeing her friend. “She and I were discussing what a proper grown-up really is.”

“Oh my goodness,” said Charlie. “Well, you are definitely one,” he said, pointing at Philippa. “You, not so much,” he added, as he elbowed Alex.

“Charming,” she said, smiling. “But perhaps being a grown-up is overrated.”

“I quite agree,” said Charlie. “So, Philippa, we need to know what your type is.”

“Oh, I see, back to the freshly laid lesbian,” said Philippa, curling her lip. “I don’t know, really. I mean, I thought men were my type for more time than might be

considered realistic.”

“Fair,” said Alex. “But what about celebrities you’ve had a crush on? Who makes you weak at the knees?” She grinned and raised an eyebrow, causing Philippa to forget her train of thought.

Philippa played for time by taking a sip of her drink. “Hmm, ok, well, I would definitely say Gillian Anderson.”

“Good choice,” said Alex, “and she’s definitely on my list.”

“You are sooo predictable, you two,” said Charlie. “Gillian Anderson’s the obvious answer. I’ve never met a lesbian who didn’t love her.”

“Because we all have exceptional taste,” said Alex.

“I beg to differ, but let’s not digress,” said Charlie.

“Ok, I always had a thing for Janet Ellis when she presented Blue Peter in the eighties.” Philippa braced herself for hoots of laughter.

“Oh, niche,” said Alex, “I like it. I mean, there is a rich vein of Blue Peter presenters we could examine. I always had a rather odd thing for Anthea Turner.”

Philippa’s jaw dropped, and she turned to Charlie to see a similar reaction. “Anthea Turner!” he exclaimed.

“Yes,” said Alex. “And I will not be crush shamed!”

“Tell me why,” said Philippa, intrigued.

“Well, she was always so wholesome, so organised and clean. I always sensed that behind the facade she could be a bit bossy and, I don’t know, sexy.” Alex looked away from Philippa and Charlie, clearly conjuring some less than family-friendly vision of the blonde children’s presenter.

“I refer you to my original comment about taste,” said Charlie.

They all laughed.

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Chapter Six

Philippa was distracted while she walked Dottie down Kings Heath High Street to her school. Her daughter kept tugging her arm.

“Mummy, are you thinking about work again?” she asked, with a clearly visible eye roll.

“Oh, sorry, darling.” Philippa knew she should probably do something about the eye rolling before it got Dottie into trouble – if not with her, then with her teacher.

“Yes, there is rather a lot going on at the moment.” She wasn’t going to admit that the main cause of her distraction was the woman who had kissed her cheek at the networking event.

She had plenty of cases to think about, too, so it wasn’t an outright lie.

“Well, I won’t be this young for long,” said Dottie. “You need to make the most of me before the hormones descend.”

Philippa laughed out loud. “Before the hormones descend? What on earth do you mean?”

“Hardev’s mum was talking about it the other day,” said Dottie, a serious expression on her face.

“He’s got older brothers, and she was saying to Orla’s mum that she was trying to

enjoy him before the terrible hormones descend and turn him into a grunting lump like them.

But she did say that she wouldn't mind if he talked slightly less than he does now. ”

Philippa stifled a laugh. She recalled the school trip she'd volunteered on with Dottie's class, when Hardev talking slightly less had been the fervent wish of every adult present. “What have you got in your lessons today?”

“Mr Harvey is going to teach us how to sew a cushion cover,” said Dottie, “once we've done our numeracy and literacy. I'm going to make a Taylor Swift one.”

“Of course you are,” said Philippa, who still hadn't been forgiven for failing to secure tickets for The Eras Tour.

They approached the school gates, where other parents congregated.

Philippa had always found it quite uncomfortable being there, never entirely sure how to converse with them.

They had nothing in common apart from the school their children were at, and she never knew how to instigate suitable small talk.

As Dottie ran off into the playground to catch up with her friends, Philippa saw movement at one of the classroom windows from the corner of her eye.

It was Chrissie, a trainee teacher, waving at her.

Philippa waved back, smiling. Engaging with people she already knew was a very different matter from small talk with relative strangers, and Chrissie had become a friend since they'd got to know each other better on that school trip.

The bell sounded and the children lined up untidily for their classrooms. Philippa dropped a kiss on Dottie's head and headed to the Jam Pot, a cafe she often frequented when she didn't need to go straight to the office.

The small cafe was the perfect place for a second breakfast and a decent coffee. The wifi was good, too, so she placed her laptop on the table in front of her and logged in.

"Morning, Philippa," said Seymour, the co-owner of the cafe.

"Morning," she replied, warmed by the knowledge that she was a familiar face here.

"Your usual?"

"Yes, please," said Philippa, smiling at the blonde. Seymour always seemed to have everything under control in her establishment, even when it was busy.

A few moments later Seymour brought her a plate of wholemeal toast with strawberry jam and a double espresso. Perfection.

"Thank you," smiled Philippa.

She had received more than fifty emails overnight, and the first order of business was to scan them quickly and make sure there weren't any urgent cases or court orders that needed her attention.

She donned her turquoise reading glasses and began to sort through her inbox.

She took a bite of the sweet toast and chewed as she went.

There was some correspondence about Daria's financial settlement from her husband's solicitor.

As Philippa had confidently predicted, he was trying to leave Daria with almost nothing.

She pursed her lips and drafted a curt reply.

Nice try , she thought. She moved onto a series of emails about other cases she was handling, including a complicated one for a father trying to regain access to his children.

She always found these cases the hardest. Children and where they resided, who they saw and what they did so often became battle grounds in divorce cases, and it always seemed so unfair.

While Philippa found these situations hard, they were rewarding, too: there was nothing like the satisfaction of helping a client get the access they and their children needed.

There was an email from Gerry, too, which reminded Philippa of her fictional girlfriend.

She opened it, expecting a routine ‘thanks for coming’ note.

What she read, though, was something very different.

The words in the email made her stomach twist. She took a mouthful of strong coffee, but it did nothing to calm her nerves.

She picked up her phone and scrolled until she found Alex’s WhatsApp message from a few days earlier. “I meant it,” she had typed. “Happy to be your wing woman any time x”

Philippa's finger hovered over the reply box. She sighed. Surely this was madness.

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Chapter Seven

Philippa took down the magazine from the stand. Diva . She'd eyed it so many times, but until now she'd never had the courage to take it off the shelf. Diva was the British magazine for queer women and non-binary people, and she wanted to see what secrets it held.

She wondered what the man at the till might think as he scanned it, but he barely looked up. Philippa laughed at herself. No one really cared, did they? She put the magazine in her bag and walked home, still pondering the email from Gerry and what she should do about it.

At home, she put her bag into the boot of her electric MG and drove into the city centre. She needed to go to the office for a few hours.

The morning sped by, filled with appointments and meetings. She met a new client who was trying to get access to his child. Philippa spent time listening to his story and learned that his wife had moved away when she separated from him, taking his daughter with her.

His name was Marcus. He was in his thirties, wore a shirt and trousers, and had sandy coloured hair. He sat in front of Philippa, his face strained and pale.

"I just don't understand why she'd do that," he said, his eyes pleading with her. "I knew she wanted out, I knew that," he continued, running a hand through his fringe. "But when she actually did it, it came as a surprise, ok. I didn't see it coming."

“I see,” said Philippa. She’d learned, over the years, that the best thing to do was give her clients the time and space to tell their story before she started giving any advice.

“It was hard, and I was shocked, but it was what Tania wanted. So I moved out. I wanted to make it easy for Fi. I found somewhere a few minutes’ walk away so I could still take her to school and see her all the time.” Marcus twisted his hands together.

Philippa gave him an encouraging smile.

He sighed. “But she says she’s leaving. She says she’s met someone and she’s taking Fi with her to be with him in Wales. It’s a hundred and fifty miles away.” His eyes filled, and for the first time Philippa saw some colour in his cheeks.

“And you don’t want your ex-wife to move Fi?”

“Absolutely not,” said Marcus. “I can’t let her take her away from me. I see her every day right now. If she was that far away, I wouldn’t be able to do that.” A tear dropped down his cheek.

Philippa looked at the paperwork she had so far on Marcus’s case. “No fault divorce, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. And it all went through fine, and we agreed on all the money and everything.”

“Hmm. Ok. Well, the good news is that she hasn’t moved yet. You have options and I can talk those through with you. If all else fails, we could put in place a court order, although I’d advise trying to negotiate before we go there,” said Philippa.

Marcus’s face visibly relaxed. “So it might be ok?”

“I can’t guarantee that,” said Philippa, knowing how important it was to remain transparent. “But I can tell you that you have rights, and so does your daughter, and this isn’t over yet. I’m hopeful that we can do something to improve your situation.”

“Thank you,” he said, allowing a small smile to creep onto his face.

Philippa asked a series of questions and jotted down notes before starting to outline his options.

It was a story she heard often, and one that made her sad.

She was glad she and Paul were in agreement that Birmingham was Dottie’s home, and that it would therefore remain their home for the foreseeable future.

One day she would grow up and decide for herself where to live, but for now, she needed the security of knowing where she was and that her parents were nearby, even if they weren’t together.

Once her appointments were done, Philippa popped out for a bite to eat. She took her copy of *Diva* with her and began to flick through the articles. One immediately drew her eye, about women who come out later in life.

Was that her? She supposed it was.

One woman in the piece referred to herself as a ‘late lifer’ and talked about the response of her family and friends.

Philippa felt a rush of energy surging through her as she recognised some of the thoughts, feelings and fears these women shared.

She smiled to herself and texted Alex. Perhaps her new friend could help her after all.

Back in her office, Philippa reread Gerry's email.

He had an opportunity he wanted to discuss with her, but he was really keen to meet her new partner and had invited her and Alex to dinner with him and his wife, Alison.

It was perhaps a bit rash, but the idea of being seen in the world for who she really was, and possibly even celebrated for it, was intoxicating.

She replied to Gerry, asking when and where they should meet.

After work, Philippa went for a run, enjoying the spring air, the smell of new life and possibilities.

She replayed the moment Alex had kissed her cheek and imagined what it would be like to arrive at dinner with Gerry, with Alex on her arm.

The route around the canals in the city centre was routine to her, and she enjoyed the meditative nature of the regular movement.

While she ran, she felt a warmth, recalling the women in Diva who talked about being 'late lifers'.

It felt good to know she wasn't alone. She had loved discussing celebrity crushes with Alex and Charlie the other night, but they'd both been out forever.

Philippa was the new kid on the block. She liked the idea of being part of a community of people who had taken a little longer to know themselves.

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Chapter Eight

Philippa walked into the bar to see Alex waiting with a half pint of lager in front of her, scrolling through her phone. Her hair was ruffled in a way that looked effortlessly stylish, and Philippa felt a small thrill at the thought that people might see them together and think they were an item.

“Hey,” said Philippa, affecting a nonchalance she didn’t feel as she approached the table. “Do you want another drink to follow that one? I’m going to get a glass of wine.”

“Hey, yourself,” replied Alex, with a warm smile. She put down her phone, stood and kissed Philippa on the cheek. “Thanks, yes, I’ll have another half to complete this one.”

Philippa grinned, probably too widely, and went to the bar. Alex had suggested they meet after work once Philippa had told her about Gerry’s dinner invitation.

“So,” said Alex, once they’d both sat down with their drinks. “Tell me where we’re going.”

“We’re going to that restaurant on Colmore Row. The one on the twenty-third floor, you know it?”

“I do know it,” said Alex, her eyebrows hitting the top of her forehead. “I’ve been wanting to go there for ages but haven’t had a good enough reason. It looks like I do now.”

“You do,” said Philippa, “if you don’t mind being my plus one.”

“It would be my pleasure,” said Alex. “Nice food, nice wine, nice company. I can do all of that, it’s really no hardship.”

“Really? That’s brilliant,” said Philippa, feeling her face go warm. “And of course, if I can return the favour at any time, please do let me know.”

“I might well take you up on that,” said Alex, with a glint in her eye. “I may have a thing coming up in a few weeks, but I’ll let you know.”

“You do that,” said Philippa. “Anyway, I feel like we should get to know each other a bit better, don’t you? We need to do this justice.”

“That sounds very sensible. In another life I’d have suggested a round of ‘never have I ever’ to get things cracking, but in the spirit of being a proper grown-up, I’ll keep that on ice.”

Philippa giggled. “For today, at least. Tell me about you – are you an only child? Do you have siblings? What kind of holidays do you like?”

“Yes, no and hot ones,” said Alex, raising an eyebrow. “But I get where you’re going with this. You need to know who I am and what I’m all about if we’re going to pull this off.”

“Exactly,” said Philippa, taking a sip from her wine glass. She settled back into her seat as Alex told her about her life, her studies at university, travelling around Asia in her twenties and settling down to a career in graphic design in her thirties.

“And here I am now,” said Alex, draining her glass, “forty-something and drinking beer in a queer bar I’ve been frequenting for twenty years. Summarised like that, it all

seems rather insignificant.” She sniffed.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” said Philippa. “You’ve known who you were for the last twenty years.

It would seem I haven’t.” She felt the warmth from her glass of wine settle pleasantly in her stomach.

Part of her wanted to reach out and take Alex’s hand, tell this woman how impressive it was that she had had such adventures and had always been who she was, but she held herself back.

She didn’t want to risk becoming what Sienna in the office would call a ‘fangirl’.

“There are lots of ways to know yourself,” said Alex, gazing out of the window. “Sexuality is just one small part of a person.”

“It doesn’t feel very small to me,” said Philippa, suddenly slightly irked at the casual way Alex spoke.

“No, I’m sorry,” said Alex, immediately turning her head to face Philippa.

“That didn’t come out right. I know you’ve just turned your whole life upside down and it is a really, genuinely, massive thing.

Perhaps I need reminding of that sometimes.

” She searched Philippa’s eyes before continuing.

“I guess there are just many different ways we do or don’t know ourselves. ”

“Yes, well that’s definitely true,” said Philippa, allowing her shoulders to drop and relax again. She knew she was very sensitive about this at the moment, and she appreciated Alex’s openness. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to snap.”

“No, you didn’t, you just told me how you felt,” Alex replied, with an easy smile. “I quite like that, actually. It’s surprisingly rare.”

“I’ve never been able to keep my mouth shut. Sometimes it works in my favour. Other times, not so much,” said Philippa with a sheepish grin.

“Come on then, your turn to answer questions. Have you been on any dates yet? Kissed anyone?” Alex was looking straight at her, and Philippa suddenly felt the other woman’s eyes penetrating deep into her soul, in a way that made her lose concentration.

Philippa took a deep breath to collect herself. “No and no.”

“Ha, well, I kind of asked for that,” said Alex, fidgeting with one of her bangles. “You like Gillian Anderson, huh? Good choice. I was a big fan of The X Files .”

“But she’s so much hotter now,” said Philippa, revelling in being able to have this conversation without second guessing what the person she was with might think.

“Oh yes,” said Alex. “I think in general, we all get more attractive as we age.”

“I guess in my case that’s rather fortunate,” said Philippa.

“Oh yes?” said Alex, a smirk on her face.

“Um, well, you know,” said Philippa, stumbling over her words, “given I’m a little late to the party.”

“To hell with that, this party is only just getting started, my dear.” There was a sparkle in Alex’s eyes that thrilled Philippa.

Perhaps this relationship wasn’t quite as false as she’d thought.

And perhaps that was no bad thing. Being here in this bar surrounded by other queer people, with Alex, feeling relaxed and enjoying herself, she could begin to imagine that they were more than just recent acquaintances.

They continued their conversation, comparing celebrity crushes, until Philippa summed up the courage to ask Alex about herself. “So what about you? Anyone special in your life?”

“Oh no, not for a while,” said Alex, her eyes clouding for a moment, “but I have my fun here and there.” She waggled her eyebrows.

“So I gather,” said Philippa, smiling, but worrying at the same time that Alex might not be open to relationships that lasted more than a short time.

She knew herself well. She wasn’t the kind of person to have a fling.

She knew she wanted a meaningful relationship.

She knew she wanted to settle down, and make sure that this time, it was with the right person.

“So,” said Alex, leaning forward and gazing into Philippa’s face. “I’ve had a thought...” she began, but before she could say any more, her phone pinged. She looked down and immediately stiffened and sat up. “Ah, sorry, something’s come up. I need to go.”

“Of course,” said Philippa, trying to mask her surprise and disappointment.

“Send me the details of the dinner, I’ll be there,” said Alex, standing up and flinging on her jacket in one movement, then advancing towards the bar exit.

“Thanks. See you then,” said Philippa, suddenly alone at the table, a half drunk glass of wine in front of her.

Had she just imagined that something interesting had been happening?

Were her baby gay spidey senses misfiring?

For a moment there, she’d had the impression that Alex might actually really like her.

Philippa breathed out. She remembered Charlie’s warning, the trail of women and broken hearts Alex had left behind her.

In fact, Philippa reasoned, it had probably been one of those woman texting her right then.

She drained her glass. Yes, that was probably it.

She had a silent word with herself and encouraged herself not to behave like a thirteen-year-old with a crush.

She wasn’t a thirteen-year-old with a crush.

It was worse than that.

She was a forty-six-year-old with a crush.

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Chapter Nine

It was Saturday. A day with neither work nor Dottie.

Philippa made herself a double espresso and sat at the kitchen table.

There was something wonderful about sitting in the house alone without expectation from anyone else.

It was something she'd only really found herself doing since she and Paul had separated, and he'd begin to spend time with Dottie without her.

Philippa luxuriated in the sun shining through the window from the garden. The cherry tree had burst into pink blossom, and she was filled with a sense of the new beginning she'd created for herself. Maybe she too could blossom now.

After her coffee she went to the bathroom to shower and caught sight of herself in the mirror.

She looked at her brown bob, streaked with grey.

She'd had the same haircut since the nineties.

It had remained a classic, always stylish even if not actually in vogue.

She paused. New beginnings came in all sizes.

After her shower, Philippa flicked through the magazines on her kitchen table, including Diva , and started making a shortlist of haircuts.

It was time for a change. She took out her phone and snapped her favourites, before grabbing her jacket and strolling into Kings Heath.

There was no time like the present, and she had an idea of where she could go.

The sun was warmer than it had been, a hint of summer around the corner, and all the new possibilities it might bring.

She crossed All Saints Village Square, where the trees were adorned with pink blossom, blowing in the wind with the church as their backdrop.

She smiled at the children running after the pigeons that congregated in the maze pattern on the ground.

For years, Philippa had gone to a hair salon in the city centre.

She had a six-weekly appointment with a lovely lady who did her hair just the way she liked it, always exactly the same.

The idea of going somewhere else felt quite dangerous, and alongside it there was a hint of something like infidelity.

She shook her head. She was being ridiculous.

People broke up with their hairdressers all the time, right?

The High Street was bustling with people carrying shopping bags, teenagers lingering over cardboard boxes of fried chicken and children being dragged into shoe shops

against their will.

She found her way to York Road, taking her off the main road and into a recently pedestrianised street.

Populated with independent shops, restaurants and cafes, Philippa knew she was in the right place.

She'd walked past No Entry Barbers so many times, and she'd often spotted women inside getting their hair cut.

There was a man and a woman inside, and what appeared to be a relaxed atmosphere. Yes, this was the place.

She opened the door and sat herself down in the chairs along the back wall. She'd seen others, mostly men, doing the same.

"Alright, bab?" said the man, who was finishing a fade on a teenage boy. Philippa knew that wasn't what she wanted, but she was excited, if a little anxious, about the change she was about to make.

"Hiya," said Philippa. "Ok if I wait here?"

"Sure, make yourself at home. You can hang your jacket over there if you like." He gestured towards a coat rack in the corner.

It smelled different to her usual hair salon.

There wasn't a strong aroma of perfume and hairspray.

Instead, there was a subtler scent of hair wax, shampoo, sandalwood and leather.

Philippa picked up her phone and swiped through the shorter styles she'd picked out, reminding herself of the one she liked the most.

"Right," said the man, whose designer stubble and perfectly quaffed hair was impressively arranged. Philippa arranged herself in his chair as he examined her hair through the mirror in front of her. "I'm Ted. Nice to meet you. What are we doing, then?"

"Well," said Philippa, "I want a pretty major change, please. Here, look at these pictures. Do you think I could pull off something like this?"

Ted reached down to take the phone from her. He swiped through the pictures, thoughtfully. She dreaded the thought that he might look at them and tell her that she was being ridiculous, that she was too old for such a change, that she wouldn't suit the style.

"Ok," he said, bringing Philippa out of her thoughts.

"You're going to look amazing," he continued, with a grin.

"I love this for you. I think this one works." He held up her phone, frozen on an image of one of the styles she'd loved: quite short around the back and sides with more length on top, especially at the front.

"It would give you the choice of wearing your hair forwards, all floppy and swoopy, like, or you could comb it back with some wax to get a little quiff."

Philippa grinned. A quiff. Secretly, she'd always wanted one. She thought back to when she'd been twelve. The year she grew out her fringe. She would pin it up like a quiff and spend ages looking at herself in the mirror like that. "Yes," she said, "that sounds perfect. You think it will suit me?"

“Oh yes,” he said, smiling. “You have great hair. Gorgeous condition and lovely and thick. It’ll suit you perfectly.”

“Then let’s do it,” said Philippa, feeling excited. Fleetinglly she wondered what Alex would say, but then she reminded herself that she barely knew the woman, and shouldn’t be dwelling on what anyone else’s opinions were.

Ted got out his scissors and paused. “No turning back now. You in?”

“Yes,” said Philippa.

And so he began. Even though her bob wasn’t a long one, it was amazing just how much hair he cut off immediately. She’d thought it would be a frightening experience, but as he continued to cut and reshape her hair, she realised how ready she was to shed her past life, her past image.

Within forty-five minutes, Ted’s work was done.

While he bent over her, carefully blow drying his creation, Philippa couldn’t keep the smile from her face.

It was hard to describe the feeling she had, looking at the familiar face gazing back at her in the mirror.

It was still her and at the same time it was a huge change.

But the strongest sense of all was that she looked like herself.

She hadn’t even realised she didn’t look like herself before.

This felt like an image that had been inside her for so long, and only now was she

finally realising it.

Philippa paid Ted double, much to his delight, and made a beeline for the Vine.

This called for a celebration. She texted Chrissie, who she knew lived nearby with her girlfriend Nisha, on the off chance she might be around.

Not that it mattered; Philippa had learned long ago that you could perfectly well celebrate alone.

She walked up to the bar and ordered herself a glass of Prosecco.

She was delighted when the young member of bar staff's eyes widened as they looked at Philippa.

"Prosecco, yes! Amazing new haircut. You look hot." They blushed right to the tips of their carefully arranged purple hair.

"Sorry, I probably shouldn't say that to a customer, but honestly, you look incredible."
"

Philippa smiled and nodded. "Thank you," she said, feeling every bit as gorgeous as the purple-haired person before her thought she was.

"I'll bring your fizz over."

Philippa took a seat. Yes, celebration was definitely called for. She took a selfie on her phone and sent it to Charlie, knowing he'd be interested to see her transformation. She thought for a moment and then sent it to Alex, too.

Chapter Ten

Chrissie squealed when she saw Philippa's new look.

"Oh my God, you look amazing! Women will be positively throwing themselves at you," she said, taking a seat opposite her friend. Chrissie had become a close friend in the last year or so and had been one of the first people Philippa had come out to.

"Thank you. But as of yet, aside from being called hot by our friend over at the bar," Philippa nodded her head in the direction of her admirer, "who is at least twenty years my junior, I seem to be safe from projectile women."

"Hmm," said Chrissie. "For now. I'll get some more Prosecco. It looks like you've started celebrating already. Good for you. You deserve it."

They caught up on their respective life news, Chrissie full of excitement about how her life was working now she and Nisha were living together.

"I never thought I'd do that with anyone again," she confided, "but honestly, it's perfect.

I'm enjoying it all, except perhaps the muddy football boots on a Saturday afternoon.

She always leaves them on the front door mat as though the fairies will clean them. "

"Ha," said Philippa. "If that's your biggest problem, you're doing ok."

“I’m inclined to agree,” said Chrissie, her long, wavy blonde hair pulled back into a plait. “I feel very lucky. So, if you haven’t had any projectile women, have you at least met some?”

“Well,” said Philippa, “after a fashion. Her name’s Alex. She’s a bit of a mystery. I’m not sure exactly whether we’ll be anything more than friends. But I’m enjoying getting to know her.”

“Oooh,” said Chrissie, “sounds positive. And I think you’ve got the right idea. Getting to know someone is the secret to all of this. Chemistry isn’t always instant.”

“No, but...”

“Oh, I see,” said Chrissie. “It’s there for you, then?”

Philippa nodded and quickly took a sip of her drink in a bid to hide her reddening cheeks.

“Well, my advice still stands. Get to know her, see where it goes.” Chrissie smiled.

After Chrissie had left to spend the rest of the day with her girlfriend, Philippa picked up her phone. She had three messages. The first was from Charlie.

“OMGeeee, darling,” he wrote, “you look gorgeous! What an amazing transformation. Let’s do drinks soon xxx”

Philippa replied with a heart and moved onto the next message, which was from Alex. Her heart leapt at the sight of the name on her screen. “Wowsers, you look like a sapphic dreamboat! x”

Then, a few minutes later, there was a second message from Alex. “I mean it.

Looking good, Samfire. You'll be fighting them off xx"

Philippa tried to discern the meaning of the messages. Was Alex saying she thought Philippa was hot? Or was she trying to say that, objectively, she looked good? The closing line about fighting off her admirers suggested that maybe Alex was just being nice, right?

Philippa sighed. She didn't recall ever trying to understand the minutiae of communications between her and Paul when they had met. But then, perhaps, there was a good reason for that.

She had an empty stomach, and she slowly walked home to prepare herself something to eat.

Walking home was a bit of an anticlimax after such an exciting day so far. The Prosecco had gone to her head, so it was something of a wobbly walk. And perhaps it was the Prosecco that inspired her to pull her phone out of her pocket and send Alex a message.

She thanked Alex for being so enthusiastic about her new look, then asked if she fancied coming over to game plan for the dinner with Gerry and his wife, in just a few days' time.

She knew in her heart of hearts that she had no interest in game planning anything.

She was curious to see if Alex really meant the things she said in her texts.

She was just pressing send when a man with a small yappy dog overtook her gentle stroll.

She wasn't a fan of dogs at the best of times, but this one seemed determined to snap

at her heels.

Its owner, oblivious, did nothing to get his mutt under control, and before Philippa could say anything, she found herself tangled up in the dog's extending lead, and she tripped over.

Her first feeling was mortification. Her phone had skittered along the pavement when she put her hand out to save herself.

As a result her left hand was badly grazed, and her wrist was throbbing.

Both knees felt sore. She sat up slowly, praying that no one was there to witness her shame.

But this was Kings Heath High Street on a Saturday.

Everyone was there, not least, the man whose dog had tripped her up.

He stood still, his mouth open, his dog jumping up and down and barking.

"Are you ok?" he asked, quietly.

"Yes," lied Philippa. She didn't want his help, and she certainly didn't want his pet anywhere near her.

"Oh bab," said a woman wearing a dog collar under a brightly coloured fleece. "Let's get you up."

"Er, thanks, Reverend," replied Philippa, wishing she could just disappear into the ground.

The man sloped off, his dog following him, noisily. “I’m Rebecca,” said the woman. “I’m the vicar at All Saints,” she nodded towards the church.

“Nice to meet you,” said Philippa with a grimace. What was it about falling over past the age of twenty-five that made you feel like you were going to die?

“I think you need that wrist looking at,” said Rebecca with an appraising glance. “It’s swollen up already. Probably needs X-raying. Look, I’ve got my car at the church over there. I could drop you at the QE?”

Philippa badly wanted to say no, but the woman was both kind and correct. The pain in her wrist was intense and she knew already that she wouldn’t be able to drive to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital herself. “That’s good of you,” said Philippa. “Yes, if it doesn’t take you away from your duties.”

“You’re within spitting distance of my church. You are one of my duties,” said Rebecca with a smile. She picked up Philippa’s scuffed phone and handed it back to her, and they walked slowly over to the vicar’s car.

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Chapter Eleven

An accident and Emergency was as full as Philippa had expected, but given the state of her wrist, she knew she had no choice but to stay.

She needed an X-ray at the very least. Rebecca had dropped her right outside the doors of the department.

Philippa thanked her, and insisted she head back to her parish immediately rather than waiting with her.

It was going to be a long, dull wait, and she had a book in her bag.

She'd be fine, although she wasn't sure she was prepared to risk the vending machine's coffee.

Philippa was quickly triaged and given a sling, before being told she needed to wait for a slot in X-ray.

She picked up her phone for the first time since she'd dropped it, to see if it was working.

The screen was shattered but the phone was working, after a fashion.

She had a text message from Alex. Her blood chilled.

In her Prosecco-induced buzz she remembered she had invited Alex over to her

house.

She shuddered. Alex would see her as desperate and inexperienced.

How naive she had been. Inwardly, she rolled her eyes.

But she knew she had to open it to see what polite excuse Alex had given.

“Sure,” she read. “Game planning sounds good and I’m at a loose end, so let’s do it. What’s your address? x”

Philippa’s eyes widened. Perhaps she was less naive than she’d thought.

Alex had said yes to meeting her. But was this as a friend or as something more than that?

Philippa’s experience told her that if you invited a straight man to your house after a few drinks, most of them would interpret that in only one way.

But her experience wasn’t valid any more. The rules of dating had changed.

She quickly typed a message back, explaining her detour to the hospital and suggesting a rain check. She sighed. How frustrating. Her first sniff of something resembling lesbian romance, and she’d wound up in an episode of Casualty . She put her phone back in her bag and got her book out.

One of her new discoveries since coming out had been sapphic romance.

She’d never seen the point of romance fiction before now and had been quite dismissive of it.

But around the time she was preparing to leave her husband, she'd picked one up from her local independent bookshop.

She was unexpectedly gripped by the story and felt thoroughly seen by the characters.

The sex scenes had confirmed to her that she definitely was one hundred percent gay, which was unexpectedly affirming, but it had also left her feeling strangely bereft.

She was finally the person she wanted to be, but she was in her mid-forties, with a child.

That wasn't how it was shown in the movies.

Her current book was an ice queen romance, with a standoffish executive being charmed by a roguish delivery cyclist. She was thoroughly ensconced in the story when she was called to go down to X-ray.

"Lovely hair," said the male healthcare assistant who showed her the way. Philippa smiled. In all the drama, she'd forgotten about her hair.

"Thanks," she smiled.

"Sit yourself down here and someone will call you in a while," he said, before having a quick word with the receptionist.

Philippa breathed out. This was the third place she'd sat and waited and as yet, very little had happened. She reminded herself that it could be a lot worse, and at least she wasn't in too much pain – as long as she didn't move her wrist. She was just relieved it was her left one.

The X-ray took a few minutes, and then she was sent back down to the first waiting

area. She would be called again once the doctor had reviewed the pictures. She looked over at the coffee machine and decided to take the risk.

For the next ten minutes, Philippa battled with the vending machine, valiantly and with just one hand.

It was ridiculously complicated, and she swore under her breath.

Using only one hand wasn't easy, and when liquid that seemed hotter than the sun poured into the improbably thin plastic cup beneath, she knew it had all gone horribly wrong.

It was the wrong colour entirely. She swore under her breath again.

"Yes," came a voice from behind her. "That's definitely chicken soup."

Philippa swung round to see Alex's amused grin and smiled. "Hi!"

"I get the impression you weren't trying for soup," chuckled Alex.

"Try double espresso," said Philippa, raising her eyes to the ceiling. "Anyway, what are you doing here?"

"You said you were at the hospital after bashing yourself up, and we still need to game plan, so it seemed only right to do that at the same time as checking you're ok.

Two birds with one stone and all that," said Alex.

She placed a hand on Philippa's good arm.

"Come on, sit yourself down. I'll get you a proper coffee from the cafe in

Outpatients. ”

“Oh, you are kind,” said Philippa, pleased not to be on her own any more. “Thank you. I could murder a double espresso that’s been made with actual coffee beans rather than cardboard and brake fluid.” She took a seat.

Alex gave a little bow. “Your wish is my command,” she said.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can.” She turned to walk away, then looked back over her shoulder.

“By the way, the hair looks even better in real life.” She’d gone before Philippa had a chance to reply, but not before her face had turned bright red and her stomach was awash with butterflies.

Philippa sat for a few minutes, smiling, before amending her features. The last thing she wanted was for Alex to return to a stupidly grinning wounded solicitor.

The coffee Alex returned with was a distinct improvement on the insipid chicken soup, which Philippa had abandoned at the vending machine. “Thank you. You really didn’t have to, but I appreciate it,” said Philippa.

“You’re welcome. There are very few things duller than sitting in an A&E waiting room. How’s your wrist?” Alex pointed at Philippa’s sling.

“Sore, but bearable. It’s about three times its usual size though, so I suspect something’s gone ping.”

“I think you’re probably right,” said Alex. “So let’s distract you from this place and your giant arm. Tell me about this Gerry bloke.”

“He’s a decent guy,” said Philippa, “and he’s a partner at one of the big finance firms in the city.

I’ve been running into him on the corporate circuit for the last few years, and we’ve always got on.

His wife’s called Alison. I’ve met her a few times.

He reckons he has an opportunity for me.

It used to be that if there was something to talk about, he’d invite me and Paul for dinner with him and Alison. ”

“Your ex?”

“Yeah. But obviously, things have changed. And now he’s found out I have a new partner, well, he’s invited you, too,” said Philippa.

“Lucky me,” said Alex. “Do I need to say or do anything specifically?”

“Nope. There’ll be a bit of him and me doing business talk. I’m not sure what it is he thinks we can do together, given I’m a family solicitor, but he always has interesting things to say. I think he just wants the four of us to have a nice evening.”

“If it’s in that swanky restaurant, I’m sure we will,” grinned Alex. “We probably need some kind of backstory. How did we meet?”

Philippa had already thought about this. “The truth is always the best option. I think we say we met at a networking event. It’s not a lie, although he doesn’t need to know which one it was. Keep it simple, I’d say.”

“You’re a genius,” said Alex. “I was trying to think of something much more creative, like we met in a bar, and you chatted me up, all confident and bossy.”

Philippa screwed up her eyes momentarily, feeling her stomach clench with a sensation that was not entirely unpleasant. “I think that’s a little far-fetched.”

“How so?”

“Well, I’ve never chatted anyone up in a bar, male or female, and I wouldn’t have the first idea how,” said Philippa.

“Oh, I think you’d be better than you think,” said Alex.

“There speaks an expert,” said Philippa, just as her name was called. “I’ll be back soon, hopefully.”

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Chapter Twelve

Philippa's wrist was badly sprained but not broken, much to her relief, so she didn't need a cast. She left the hospital with a wrist brace and some heavy duty painkillers.

"I'll drive you home," said Alex, leading Philippa to the carpark.

Philippa was grateful not to have to find a taxi. She was exhausted after all the waiting around, the poking and prodding. She was also unexpectedly enjoying having someone look after her. It wasn't a sensation she was familiar with.

"You've been so kind," said Philippa. She looked across at Alex's face. She was concentrating on the road, which gave Philippa a chance to appraise her freckles and her row of delicate earrings. She wondered what it might be like to kiss the skin just below Alex's ear.

"It's nothing, really," said Alex, turning briefly towards Philippa, who abruptly turned her own head away.

"It's not nothing, Alex," said Philippa. She paused for a moment before speaking again. "You said before that I might be able to help you get back on the straight and narrow. Tell me about that."

Alex sighed. "I was with someone. For a long time, but it didn't work out."

"I'm sorry," said Philippa, who could tell from the tension in Alex's jaw that she was still affected by her heartbreak. "It's always hard to lose someone."

Alex paused before answering. “Yes. Anyway, over the last couple of years, let’s just say I’ve enjoyed being single and without ties. And obviously there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Of course not.”

“But I know there are a couple of people I’ve hurt along the way, and that wasn’t ok.” Alex’s jaw twitched. “I need to sort myself out a bit.”

“I get it,” said Philippa. “I guess there are always those moments when we need to take stock in our lives. Mine came when Paul and I were watching a film, and he started talking about how attractive the female lead was. And inside, I agreed. The thing that struck me was the fact that I knew instinctively that I shouldn’t say it out loud.

I knew then that something had to change.

” She looked ahead on the road. “Yes, this one on the left, you can pull into the drive behind my car. Do you want to come in for a cuppa?”

Alex brought the car to a stop. She’d just opened her mouth to reply when her phone pinged.

She pulled it out of her pocket and glanced at it quickly, then frowned.

“Sorry, that means I need to go and sort something out,” she said.

Her jaw was tense again, which somehow enhanced her freckles.

Philippa berated herself for ogling a woman who clearly had bigger things to deal with than a middle-aged baby lesbian.

“Of course,” said Philippa. “You go do what you need to do. Thanks so much for helping me out today, I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it.”

Alex put her phone down and rested her hand on Philippa’s shoulder.

“I really did very little, and it’s a pleasure to spend time with you,” she said with a small smile.

“I’ll see you in a few days when we meet Gerry and Alison.

And you just wait there, I’ll open the car door for you.

I don’t want you hurting that wrist any more than you need to.

” She got out and ran round to the passenger side.

“Milady,” she said with a laugh as Philippa stepped out.

“Thank you, driver,” said Philippa in her best cut-glass Lady Penelope English accent.

Alex laughed. “Take it easy, ok.”

“I’ll try,” said Philippa, wondering who Alex was being messaged by.

By the following morning the swelling had gone down a lot, for which she was very grateful. Her wrist was still sore, but the pain eased after a couple of paracetamol.

Philippa eyed herself in the mirror, and hoped she’d know how to make her freshly washed hair look as good as it had yesterday after Ted had done it.

She took out the wax he'd sold her to try and create the right shape.

He'd promised her it wouldn't be too difficult to recreate at home, although understandably, he hadn't factored in a sprained wrist.

After about twenty minutes of tousling and trying to look at her head from every possible angle, she smiled. Yes, this was it. She was both nervous and excited about going back into the office today and showing off her new look.

"Wow," said Sienna, "I love it. You look awesome. At least ten years younger!"

"Um, well, thanks," said Philippa, not entirely sure she'd needed to lose a decade. Had she really looked so old before? She pushed back her shoulders. "It was time for something different."

"Well, you're rocking it. Definitely need to get you TikToking again now you've changed it up." Sienna's eyes sparkled and she added a note to her to-do list. "Oh no," said Sienna, her eyes falling to Philippa's wrist brace. "What happened?"

"Oh, I sprained it. I'm fine, really. Looks far worse than it is," said Philippa, keen not to dwell on tumbling head over heels on Kings Heath High Street.

She put her bag in her office and headed to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. Roderick was in there already, using the coffee machine to make some kind of flavoured latte. She wrinkled her nose. She didn't understand why coffee needed to be flavoured with anything else.

"Oh, good morning, Philippa," said Roderick, standing to attention. He turned to face her, and performed what she could only think of as a double take. "Well, that's really... Er... Good for you," he said, going pink and seeming to trail off, apparently afraid to say anything more.

Philippa raised an eyebrow. “What’s good for me?”

“The new, look, um, hair,” said Roderick, stirring his coffee for perhaps the seventeenth time.

“Well, I’m glad you approve,” she said, applying her best poker face. She knew she was making him feel uncomfortable, but after what he’d done to Sienna, she didn’t really care.

“I do,” he said, before quickly correcting himself, “I mean it isn’t for me to approve, of course. You can do as you please.”

Philippa raised the other eyebrow. “Well, thank you. That’s good to know.”

Roderick was starting to sweat and opted to take himself and his coffee back to his office, wishing Philippa a good morning as he left.

She giggled to herself once she was alone.

He’d looked like Dottie did when she knew she’d done something wrong but wasn’t entirely sure what it was or how to make it better.

This morning her first client was a woman who was managing the sale of the home she’d shared with her former husband. Lesley Clarke was a police officer – a detective – and Philippa often had the sense that the sometimes dour woman could tell some pretty hairy stories.

Lesley had moved to Dorset following her divorce, and remarried, to a woman. It pleased Philippa to know that there were other women like herself who’d come out a bit later in life.

“How was the journey?” asked Philippa.

“Smooth run this time, thanks. What’s the plan today?” Lesley took a seat. Philippa had the distinct impression she wasn’t much into small talk.

“So, we need to finalise the division of the house now it’s selling. You and your ex-husband have a Financial Order, so this shouldn’t be too complicated. We just need to make sure we’ve done all our due diligence,” said Philippa.

Lesley grimaced. “I’ve got no idea why this stuff takes so long,” she said. “I feel like we’ve been trying to get it over the line for months.”

“I understand,” said Philippa, unruffled. “I think we’re on the last lap now. Just some paperwork to sign and we should be nearly there, assuming your ex isn’t going to throw up any last minute objections.”

“He won’t do that,” said Lesley, her face set.

“Good,” said Philippa, deciding that she liked the woman in front of her. She meant business, and that was a good thing.

Chapter Thirteen

Philippa had managed to get the hair coiffing time down to five minutes after her initial twenty minute session a few days earlier.

Her wrist was much less painful now, which helped.

She'd chosen her favourite dark blue suit to wear, along with a silky, light blue, fitted shirt.

Makeup on, complete with trademark red slash of lipstick, she looked in the mirror and liked what she saw.

She looked like she felt. She'd never known that was even a thing.

She picked up her phone to see a text from Alex confirming she was ready and would meet her at the restaurant bar early, so they could have a drink and appear to have arrived together.

Philippa felt butterflies in her stomach and had to keep reminding herself repeatedly that this wasn't a real date.

It had occurred to her that someone as experienced as Alex wouldn't be interested in a 'newbie' like her anyway.

She took a deep breath and stepped out of her front door. There was a cab waiting for her.

“Ooh,” said the taxi driver as she got in, “who’s the lucky guy?”

Philippa rolled her eyes, and for the first time in her life, said: “Lucky girl, actually.”

“Oh, yes, of course. I shouldn’t have assumed,” bumbled the driver, holding one hand up in apology. “I love Gay Pride.”

Philippa sighed. She’d never even been to Pride. She looked down at her phone, hoping not to have to engage in further conversation. She was still concentrating on the upcoming evening.

“And of course, love is love, isn’t it, darling?” he continued.

“Yes, of course.” Philippa smiled politely, starting to feel uncomfortable and wondering if she should have just smiled and nodded at the man in the first place. But she knew, deep down, that she had no reason to doubt her own behaviour.

Happily, the man piped down, allowing Philippa to continue to obsess over her date that wasn’t really a date. She hadn’t even started to consider the pressure of maintaining the fake relationship in front of Gerry. She’d managed to lock that up in the black box in her brain, thankfully.

She arrived on Colmore Row at the bottom of a large new tower block. The restaurant was on the twenty-third floor, while the bar was on the ground floor. She brusquely waved off the taxi driver and headed inside the bar.

The bar was tastefully decorated, exuding a subtle flavour of luxury without losing its elegance. The central bar was lit perfectly, and a barman was already mixing cocktails.

“Good evening,” said Alex. Philippa’s head whipped round.

Alex had a habit of sneaking up on her and this time, once she'd turned her head, Philippa's mouth dropped open.

Alex was wearing a draping sleeveless top that showed off her arms to perfection, over some well-fitting black trousers.

She had a chunky silver chain around her neck, her trademark bangles, and her highlighted light brown wavy hair glowed.

Philippa wondered briefly whether Alex might be a mermaid, tempting her to her death, before mentally slapping herself. She needed to get a grip.

Alex smiled and leaned forward to kiss Philippa's cheek.

God, she smelled heavenly, too. She was wearing some kind of perfume or cologne that somehow enhanced everything.

Philippa could feel herself flush as Alex spoke again.

"You look gorgeous, love this suit. Very classy." She nodded approvingly.

"I've just ordered a porn star martini. Can I get you an espresso martini?"

Philippa finally found some words, "Yes, please." She smoothed down her jacket.

"And you look lovely, too." She knew she sounded prim and starchy, but it was all she could do not to melt in a puddle on the floor.

This could well end up being a terrible, terrible mistake, she realised, not just for her personal life but for her professional one, too. She felt like a fawning school girl.

Or a seaman being tempted onto the rocks.

Philippa took a seat beside Alex at the bar. “How’s the wrist?” Alex pointed at the brace poking out of Philippa’s sleeve.

“Oh, much better, thanks.” Philippa absent mindedly covered the brace with her other hand. “I should be able to take this off soon.”

“Well that’s good,” said Alex, her freckles dancing. “First rule of being a lesbian, wrist injuries can be very inconvenient.”

“How so?” Philippa furrowed her brow.

Alex gave her a wicked grin. “Same reason we all have short fingernails.” She wiggled her perfectly formed hands, and Philippa suddenly realised what her fake girlfriend was saying.

Philippa blushed. “Honestly,” she said, feigning disapproval.

“You love it,” said Alex. “But seriously though, I’m glad you’re feeling a bit better. It looks so much better and less swollen than when you did it.”

Philippa nodded and asked Alex about her day.

“Oh, it was fine,” said Alex. “I’m working with a new client, so lots of conversations today about vision and brand and stuff like that.

They came to me for a new logo. And of course, as I’m sure you know, a new logo in isolation is of fairly limited value.

Don’t get me wrong, I’d happily do that for them and charge them for the pleasure,

but I feel like it's right to have the bigger conversation with them.

What do they do? Why do they do it? How do they want people to feel?

That's where the really interesting conversation comes through. "

"That's really interesting," said Philippa.

"I'd never thought about it like that. I guess it's a bit like with my clients.

I always start by asking what it is they want.

I can obviously advise on the law, but ultimately, it's their choice how to proceed.

Very few of my cases end up in court, it's mostly mediation and paperwork, but navigating even that in family cases is incredibly stressful for my clients, and they need to understand that.

My job is to support them, advise them and then take forward their wishes. "

"I bet you see all sorts of challenging scenarios," said Alex, taking a sip from the cocktail that had just been placed in front of her.

Philippa picked up her own drink. "Cheers," she said, clinking her glass with Alex's. "Here's to, well, us."

"Cheers!" said Alex. "So, how about your dating exploits. Have you met anyone you want to date for real?"

The question threw Philippa. Because, of course, she had. But it didn't sound like that was the question Alex was asking. "Nope, too busy working and parenting, I'm

afraid,” said Philippa, breaking eye contact.

“We need to get you out there,” said Alex, gesturing to the space around the bar.

“Hmm. I’m not sure I’m going to be any good at being ‘out there’” air quoted Philippa.

“I reckon you’d be better than you think,” said Alex. “But for now, let’s keep up the artifice. I Googled Gerry, and it looks to me like he just walked in.”

Philippa wasn’t sure whether to be relieved about the reprieve from this conversation, or anxious about the appearance of Gerry.

It was show time.

Chapter Fourteen

The views across Birmingham from twenty-three floors above were impressive. The sun was beginning to set on the vast city, and from the restaurant the pink sky lent a beauty to the higgledy piggledy tower blocks and brutalist buildings that wasn't often associated with the city.

"I've always loved this city," said Philippa as they were seated. "But from up here it looks especially fabulous."

"It really does," agreed Alison, Gerry's wife. She was wearing a casual evening gown in dark green, accessorised with expensive-looking jewellery. "I love coming here and watching the sun go down over Birmingham."

"And that is why we're here, ladies," said Gerry, looking very smart in a Savile Row suit. "Alex, it's so lovely to meet you again. I can see by the colour in Philippa's cheeks that you're a good influence on her."

Philippa's eyebrows shot up. Alex smiled and placed a light hand on Philippa's knee. Philippa's stomach flipped.

"I think she's a good influence on me, actually," said Alex, with a gentle smile on her face.

Philippa had no idea how to follow that, but fortunately Gerry filled the silence.

"Then it sounds like you've both fallen on your feet. Very happy to hear it. You look

great together.” He raised a full wine glass, and the others followed suit. “To love.”

“To love,” they echoed, all except Philippa, who’d frozen. Realising everyone was looking at her, she abruptly raised her glass, too.

“To love,” whispered Philippa, feeling Alex’s hand squeeze her knee slightly.

She took a large gulp of her wine, which resulted in a coughing fit.

On balance, she thought, that was probably better than falling off her chair because everyone was talking about love, and a hot woman had squeezed her knee.

Alex’s hand moved up to rest on Philippa’s back. “You ok, babe?”

“Yes, sorry, it went down the wrong way,” said Philippa, relieved that Gerry and Alison had met her before and knew she wasn’t normally this inept.

Conversation flowed more smoothly after that, with Alison asking Alex about her job and Gerry talking about the changes being made by the government that would impact on his firm.

The starters were tiny and perfectly formed. Various foams and petals arranged beautifully on plates.

“Well,” said Gerry, “I’m just relieved they serve food on plates here. I had sausage and mash in a pub a few weeks back, and it was served in a pint glass.” He rolled his eyes.

“That’s plainly ridiculous,” said Philippa with a smile. “Food needs to be easily accessed. That’s what plates are for.”

“I once had scampi and fish served on a flip flop,” said Alex.

Alison looked incredulous. “You’re making it up,” she said.

“Nope. No word of a lie. Two of the chips had been squashed by the toe post,” continued the graphic designer. “If it hadn’t been so funny I’d have sent it back.”

They all laughed and continued to exchange stories.

Philippa couldn’t help but admire Alex’s ability to easily blend into conversation and make people laugh.

It wasn’t something she’d ever been adept at.

She watched as Alex related an anecdote about a snail dish she’d eaten in France, and she appreciated the way her eyes glittered in the candlelight.

Taking a deep breath, she placed her own hand on Alex’s knee.

Alex didn’t move a muscle, just carried on talking.

“I must say,” said Alison, “I can see why the two of you work so well together. You have excellent chemistry. I feel as though you’ve been together a while, but I know this is quite new for you both, right?”

” A waiter came to take away the plates, clearing the space for the main courses. She continued. “How did you meet?”

“At one of the many networking events I end up frequenting,” said Philippa, pleased she and Alex had agreed a plan for this story. “Didn’t we?” she said.

Alex drained her glass before speaking. "I will always count my lucky stars we met that day." Gerry refilled her glass.

"I was having a terrible day, all sorts of stuff going on. I wasn't even going to go to the event.

But I knew I needed to get out of my funk.

" She nodded her thanks to Gerry. "And I'm so glad I did.

I walked in and noticed Philippa straight away.

I mean, who wouldn't? She's so elegant and distinctive. "

Philippa blushed, unable to look at Alex while she spoke.

"She's always so shy about this story, aren't you?

" said Alex, turning her head to look at Philippa, who felt as if she might vaporise on the spot.

She kept having to remind herself that this wasn't real.

"I was talking to this bloke about what I do and if I'm honest, he was starting to behave a bit leery towards me. "

"Ugh," said Alison. "I'd hoped those days were over, but clearly not. Poor you."

"I was trying to work out how to extricate myself," said Alex, "when suddenly an arm appeared around my shoulder from Philippa, who told everyone she was my girlfriend. That got rid of him pretty sharpish." Philippa had recovered herself and

was looking at Alex. “And now look at us.”

Alex turned to face Philippa, reached out her hand and stroked Philippa’s cheek. Philippa froze. She looked into Alex’s eyes, and the panic building inside her began to ease.

Philippa raised her own hand to rest on Alex’s for a moment before they resumed their positions.

Alison looked thrilled by their demonstration of affection, while Gerry was paying more attention to the arrival of the main courses.

Philippa had chosen a delicately presented beef wellington, perfectly laid out on a bed of greens surrounded by a red wine jus. She opted to admire her food rather than look at anyone else at that moment.

“Now then,” said Gerry. “We ought to get down to business, I suppose.”

“Yes,” said Philippa. “You said you had a proposal for me. I’m interested to hear more about it.”

“Well,” said Gerry. “As you know, the big finance firms tend to have staff support arrangements as part of their benefits packages. So we contract with a counselling provider, life insurance companies, and health insurance, too.”

Philippa nodded. He continued. “As part of those arrangements, we have legal support for those who need it, too. Now historically we’ve used big national firms for that, but I feel like we have a responsibility to do business with our neighbours wherever possible – you know, supporting the Brum economy. ”

“That makes sense,” said Philippa.

“The contract with the firm that provides our family law services is ending soon, and I wondered whether Samfire and Partners would be interested in bidding to replace them. We’ve had an influx of younger staff, and I think we need a new approach to this sort of thing.

I obviously couldn’t guarantee you’d be successful, but before I go any further, I wanted to see if you’d be interested. ”

Gerry picked up his knife and fork and began to dissect his seabass fillet.

Philippa took a deep breath, knowing that this could be a significant opportunity, especially given how many people worked for Gerry’s company.

“Of course I’d be interested. I’d have to talk to the other partners, of course, but I can tell you now that I know this is a great opportunity to form a strategic partnership that could be beneficial to both us and you.

” She fixed Gerry with a confident look, aware that this was what she was good at.

She could feel Alex looking at her, but she knew she shouldn’t look back and break the spell.

“Good,” said Gerry. “I’m pleased to hear that.

You’ve always struck me as very capable and strategic.

I admire people with vision, and I can see that in you.

It’s important to me that we support our staff, and while I know we’d need to work through the details, bringing in Samfire and Partners would give our teams the reassurance that we care about them.

When our people went through difficult times, we'd know they'd be able to get a certain level of support through you that we'd paid for, and they might go on to have a longer relationship with your firm in the future. ”

“Exactly,” said Philippa.

“We'd have to work out the financial details, of course.”

“Naturally,” said Philippa. “But count us in.”

“Excellent,” said Gerry, summoning the waiter to order another bottle of wine. “In that case, we have something to celebrate.”

Chapter Fifteen

“Wow,” said Alex, as she and Philippa climbed into the cab Gerry had insisted on ordering for them, unaware that they had no official plans to go home together.

“Wow, what?” Philippa shuffled across the seat to make room for Alex. She was working on the basis that they could just get the driver to take them to one home then the other.

“You’re bloody impressive, do you know that?”

“You’re drunk,” said Philippa with a wry smile.

“Perhaps I am, but that doesn’t negate my point.

” Alex fastened her seatbelt and gave the driver her address.

“You exuded such confidence and poise in that conversation. Given the size of his firm – it’s just possible I googled it – this could be a massive deal for you.

And yet you stayed so cool and calm. I loved it! ”

“Ha! Well, that is my job, after all. Calm and poised at all times, whether with one’s client, or facing the opposing side.” Philippa was flattered to have impressed Alex, who seemed to exude effortless cool at every opportunity, professional or otherwise.

“He asked you if you had the capacity to handle additional business, and you didn’t

bat an eye. You said yes, without hesitation,” said Alex as the taxi sped down the A38 south of the city. “Do you have the capacity?”

“No!” replied Philippa, with a laugh. “But I’ll make sure I do. If I win this contract, I can bring in new staff.” She paused. “Really, he was asking if I could handle it.”

“And you can?” said Alex.

“I can,” said Philippa.

“Well I, for one, would not disagree. You seem to be able to handle anything. I’m a bit envious, really,” she said, a rueful smile on her face.

“But you have it all worked out,” said Philippa, frowning. “You have your freelance work, your social life, a woman in every port... I’m a little envious of that.” The car was turning into Kings Heath High Street.

“It might look like that,” said Alex, “but I’ll be honest, it’s not as straightforward as that.”

“Hmm,” said Philippa, sensing there was something she wasn’t being told. “A likely story.”

“Fancy a nightcap?” said Alex as the taxi pulled up outside a small terraced house.

“Sure,” said Philippa, resolving not to overthink this. It was just a drink, right? With every straight man she’d ever met, inviting a woman in for a drink after a meal meant only one thing. But the rules were different here. They were friends.

Or were they?

It was hard to divine the line between reality and fakery after such a successful evening. Philippa wondered if it was all artifice. It didn't feel like it was.

"Don't worry." Alex was getting out of the car. She seemed to have an uncanny ability to read Philippa's mind. "I'm not making a move on you. I just thought we were having a nice conversation, and it seemed a shame not to finish it."

"Of course," said Philippa, joining Alex on the pavement. "This is all a charade." She felt a dull weight in her stomach as she said the words.

Alex's head dropped slightly, as she searched for her front door keys in her pocket. "Naturally," she agreed.

The atmosphere seemed to change in that moment, and Philippa couldn't quite work out why.

Alex's house was a small two-up, two-down Victorian terrace, of which there were many in Kings Heath.

Philippa had been in countless versions of this house throughout her life.

It was fascinating to her how even though they were all structurally the same, each resident managed to make their house completely different.

Alex's house was small but beautifully formed.

Philippa should have expected nothing less of a graphic designer.

The living room was painted a deep blue with a slight hint of green.

It was like stepping into another world.

A calm and thoughtful world. Perhaps not what she might have expected from the effervescent Alex.

“I’ve got some hot chocolate I was given for Christmas,” said Alex. “It must be too late for coffee, even for you, so I say we break into that.”

They walked through into the kitchen. “Perfect,” said Philippa.

“Sounds like a suitable way to celebrate the possibility of a new contract.” She knew she was safe if she stuck to work.

That was where she was confident. The complexity of a friendship crossed with a fake romantic relationship was unfamiliar territory.

“Too right,” said Alex.

They took their hot chocolates into the living room where they sat on a battered leather sofa. “This may be the most comfortable thing I’ve ever sat on,” said Philippa, making herself at home.

“I picked it up at the vintage place in Digbeth. It’s very old, but properly good quality.” Alex took a sip from her hot chocolate and smiled. “Mmm.” Philippa’s stomach flipped.

“I have to say,” said Philippa, forcing herself to talk. “You seemed very at home this evening. I was impressed with your story of how we met, very smooth.”

“Well, it was true. No need to embellish much, to be honest,” said Alex. She looked at Philippa, her eyes darkening.

“I guess,” said Philippa, recalling how Alex had said she’d noticed Philippa the

moment she saw her. Was that not an embellishment, then?

They both fell silent for a moment, sitting side by side, hot chocolates in their hands, half turned to face one another. The air stretched between them and Philippa felt her ears prickle. She wasn't sure what was happening, but she didn't dare speak to find out. What would she even say?

Alex looked for a moment like she was about to lean closer. And Philippa couldn't help but gaze at her full lips.

Then Alex put her hot chocolate onto the coffee table nearby. "Right, so how are we going to get you a real date?" she said, and the moment evaporated. Had Philippa imagined it?

"Oh heavens, I don't know," said Philippa. "When we went out to that bar with Charlie, everyone was so young. Far too young."

"I reckon between us, me and Charlie must surely know someone we can set you up with," said Alex, picking up her phone and beginning to scroll through her contacts.

"Oh no, please don't," said Philippa. "If you set me up, you'd be asking me how it went and whether I liked your friend, and they'd report back to you on what I was like. It would be too weird. I'm just happy to see who I meet through the natural course of time."

"Ooh," said Alex, "old school." She put down her phone. "Ok, well, let me know if you change your mind."

"I will. And anyway, what about you? Don't you want to meet someone and settle down?" Philippa took a luxurious mouthful of the hot chocolate. It was really very good.

“Me? Ha! I’m the rolling stone that gathers no moss. I wasn’t built to settle down.” Alex drained her cup, her eyes roaming everywhere but at Philippa, who couldn’t help wondering what the real story there was. But tonight wasn’t the night to delve deeper.

“I can feel my eyes beginning to droop,” said Philippa. “So I’m going to take a stroll home. I’m only a ten minute walk from here.”

“On your own?” said Alex. “I don’t think so.”

“Oh for goodness’ sake,” said Philippa, “so you plan to walk me home?”

“Yes,” said Alex, a tone of indignation in her voice.

“And then who would walk you home? Me?” Philippa laughed. “Because then we’d get stuck just walking back and forth between our houses and neither of us would get any sleep.”

“You are annoyingly smart,” said Alex with a smirk. “Ok, well text me when you get in.”

“Deal,” said Philippa.

Alex opened the front door for Philippa, who wasn’t sure what they were supposed to do now.

Should they hug?

Before she could worry any further, Alex pulled her in for a tight bear hug that made her want to squeal with delight.

“Thanks for tonight,” said Philippa, her voice muffled through the hug. “I enjoyed it.”

“Me too,” agreed Alex, letting Philippa go. “Now remember to text me when you get in or I’ll come and knock your door down.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Philippa saluted. “See you soon.”

Alex waved and then slowly closed the door.

Philippa walked through the dark, silent streets of Kings Heath, feeling an excitement bubbling inside that was probably entirely unwarranted.

This was fake. Alex herself had been trying to find her a date.

But in spite of that knowledge, Philippa enjoyed the feeling.

It was so different to the disappointing boys she’d spent time with in her teens and twenties.

There had been nothing wrong with them, but she’d never been able to muster up any real excitement or chemistry with any of them.

She’d assumed that romance and attraction was massively overstated, in the films and books she’d seen and read.

She knew now, for a fact, that it wasn’t.

That was reassuring, even if Alex wasn’t the one for her.

Chapter Sixteen

“It’s quite a depressing thought,” said the man. “Planning for our deaths.”

“Dan,” said his wife, a warning tone in her voice. “Talking about it doesn’t make it any more likely to happen. We’ve talked about this before.”

“I know,” said Dan. They were in their forties, sat together in Philippa’s office.

“And we have children. We need to take care of Ferny and Billy, make sure that if anything were to happen to us, everything would be ok for them. And we need to make sure we’re each taken care of if the other one goes first.” The woman, who’d introduced herself as Lou, smiled at her husband, and his brow softened. He smiled uncertainly.

“Right,” said Philippa, “this won’t be too complicated based on the information you’ve already shared with me.

I would agree with you, Lou, that having things in place is really important.

People who die without a will – intestate we call it – can unwittingly leave behind a lot of confusion and difficulty for their loved ones.

If the worst should ever happen, the last thing you want to be worrying about is money.”

Lou looked at Dan kindly, as if to underline what Philippa was saying. He gave a

grim smile. “Yeah,” he said.

Philippa went through their options carefully, explaining each step. She knew that one of the most important things as a solicitor was to avoid blinding her clients with terminology, as she’d seen so many of her colleagues do.

She was meeting Charlie for lunch at a Japanese restaurant on Colmore Row, so once she’d agreed the details she’d be drafting for the couple, she headed out of the office.

“Loving the hair,” said Charlie.

“You said that already,” Philippa laughed.

“Hair like that deserves to be loved more than once. So, have you had any hot dates yet?” he asked as he tucked into his poke bowl.

Philippa speared a piece of sashimi on a chopstick. “Well, not a real one.”

“Good lord, you’re not still keeping up that charade with Fletch, are you?” He rolled his eyes.

“It’s just a convenient arrangement,” said Philippa, slightly embarrassed.

“And it’s all just pretend, is it?” said Charlie, holding her in his stare.

“Well, I think so.”

“You think so?” He raised his eyebrows.

Philippa drew in a deep breath and sighed. “Ok, so there might have been a couple of moments where I’ve wondered if it might not be entirely pretend.”

Charlie pursed his lips. "Be careful, Phil." His voice was low. "Fletch is an awesome friend and great fun to spend time with, but she's more complicated than she'd have you believe."

Philippa felt a cold shiver. "What do you mean?"

"Only she can talk about her life, her history. It's not my place," said Charlie. "And I'm sure I've made this sound far more than it is." He ran a finger along his tiny moustache. "Look, I love you both, and I care about you. I don't want either of you to get hurt."

"I don't think she's getting hurt any time soon," said Philippa.

"Don't be so sure," said Charlie. "Just, well, be careful, like I say."

She nodded. "In other news, I may be about to land the biggest contract of my career."

"Ooh, get you, I love it when you come over all Miranda Priestly, tell me more and promise not to shout at me!" He grinned.

Philippa laughed, putting Alex out of her mind, and told him all about the opportunity Gerry had described.

"And how about you?" asked Philippa. "Any love interest on the scene? You've always been the love-'em-and-leave-'em sort. Except for Ralph, of course." She whispered the name of Charlie's ex-husband, a man he'd not seen in years, a name they generally avoided mentioning.

Charlie glared but then smiled. "Actually, I may have met someone worth seeing more than once."

“Ooh,” said Philippa, “I’ve never, ever, ever heard you say that. What’s his name?”

“Jack,” said Charlie, his cheeks turning pink.

“Oh my God, you’re blushing, that never happens.” Philippa was stunned.

“Oh be quiet over there, you with your fabulous hair,” said Charlie with a smug smile. “We’ve been friends for a while. My friend Kiera’s engaged to his sister, Seymour. Jack and Seymour run the Jam Pot.”

“Ooh yes, the best toast in Kings Heath is served in there,” said Philippa, making a note to go back there soon. So many different flavours of jam.

“We were hanging out more and more. I honestly thought he was straight. His sister went away for a few days with her fiancée, and I helped out at the cafe for a couple of days. It quickly became abundantly clear that far from being straight, he was pan, and somewhere between switching off the coffee machine and cleaning the floors one night, things changed.” Charlie grinned, blushing to the tips of his ears.

“Oh my God, you’re totally smitten,” said Philippa laughing. It was lovely seeing him happy. “Well, good for you.”

“And we need to make sure you get to be smitten, too. I’m sure I know someone I can set you up with,” replied Charlie, picking up his phone.

“Oh, don’t you start,” Philippa laughed. “Alex was on about this the other night. I’m fine as I am, thanks.”

“Well, ok, for now. How’s Dottie doing? Is she ok with you and Paul and stuff?”

“Yes,” said Philippa. “She’s doing well. One thing I haven’t got round to is

explaining to her that I'm gay, though. It's not like we don't have gay friends, so I don't think it'll be a big deal. But it's a thing I need to do."

"It is," said Charlie. "And I suspect it'll be a far bigger deal for you than it is for her. She seems to take life in her stride."

"That she does," chuckled Philippa. "She asked me when Taylor Swift was going to tour the UK again and I said I thought it would be a while. So now she's started a letter campaign and enlisted all the children in her class."

Someone in Taylor Swift's entourage is currently being besieged by messages from Birmingham pre-teens begging her to come back to the UK, poor thing. "

"Well," said Charlie with a wry smile, "at least when the restraining order comes through, you can draft a suitably legal eagle response."

Chapter Seventeen

There was a predictability to the school run that was both tiresome and therapeutic.

Philippa had always enjoyed having a routine; there was something soothing about it, but she didn't enjoy the eyes of all the other parents on her.

She knew that Dottie would, inevitably, have told her classmates about her parents' separation.

Philippa was glad about that, but she knew it also meant that Dottie's friends would have told their parents.

She wondered what people were thinking as she strolled in, and she was sure she'd felt a sense of curiosity from some of them when she'd had her hair cut.

She'd been avoiding Hardev's mum for a while.

A renowned gossip, Nav Shah seemed to know everything about everyone, and was always delighted to talk about it.

Today was to be the day that her avoidance strategy failed. It was also World Book Day. Dottie hadn't thought to tell her this fact until half past eight the night before.

"But I don't want to be the witch from Room on the Broom," whined Philippa's daughter, dragging her heels along the high street.

“I’m afraid with only twelve hours’ notice, that was as good as I could muster,” replied Philippa, brusquely. She’d remembered the witch’s hat from a Halloween party the year before.

“But I wanted to be Taylor Swift in the Reputation outfit from The Eras Tour.” Dottie’s mouth had turned downwards in a huff.

“Right,” said Philippa. “One, Reputation is an album and not a book. Two, The Eras Tour is a live music event and not a book. And finally, that outfit would be entirely inappropriate for you to wear to school.” She pictured the sparkly one-piece Dottie had pointed out to her on her twenty-third rewatch of the filmed version of the concert.

“There are loads of books written about Taylor Swift. Loads.” Dottie was petulant, but only for about five paces, because then she bumped into Hardev.

“Cool,” she said. “Are you a knight?”

Hardev grinned. “Yep, I’m a knight of the Round Table from King Arthur. I’ve got loads of books about them. I am Sir Lancelot.”

Philippa briefly admired the costume, which had clearly been assembled with significantly more than twelve hours’ notice. If Hardev could manage to tell his mum in time, why couldn’t Dottie?

“Oh, Philippa, so lovely to see you,” said Nav. Her eyes looked both kind and hungry. Philippa knew she was done for, but she smiled her best business-like smile.

“Morning, Nav.”

The children walked on ahead, discussing the various merits of their costumes.

Meanwhile, Nav moved almost uncomfortably close to Philippa as she walked alongside her. “Hardev tells me you and your husband have separated. I’m so sorry to hear that. Is everything ok?”

It was the sympathy that got to Philippa. The inevitable curiosity, dressed up in a head tilt. “Yes, thank you. It hasn’t been acrimonious or anything, thankfully. Just one of those things.”

Nav looped her arm through Philippa’s, and Philippa tried not to shudder. She wasn’t a fan of physical contact with anyone, unless she really wanted it, and then she’d usually be the one to initiate it. And harmless though Nav was, Philippa barely knew her.

“Family life can be a struggle, can’t it?” said Nav, her voice laden with sympathy.

“Well, I think we’re getting on quite well,” said Philippa, determined not to share any of her personal affairs with the playground gossip.

“That’s so good to hear. Dottie’s such a credit to you both. And by the way, I love the new look,” added Nav, using her other hand to gesture to Philippa’s hair.

“Thanks.”

“Very brave,” said Nav, somehow making Philippa feel like an outsider.

“It’s just a haircut,” said Philippa, removing her arm and finding an excuse to call Dottie back to her.

“Some of the mums were saying you look like a young Sandi Toksvig, but I said of course not, you’re straight, aren’t you?”

” Nav’s eyes glowed, as if they were burning into Philippa’s soul.

Philippa knew that cutting her hair short made her more readable as a lesbian, but she hadn’t quite been prepared for this.

“Why would you think that?” asked Philippa, before she turned to Dottie. “Come on, darling, let’s return those library books before we head into school.” Nav remained rooted to the spot, still as a statue, looking as though she’d just won the gossip lottery.

Later that day after she’d dropped Dottie with Paul, she went to Chrissie and Nisha’s house for dinner and relayed the story. “Oh my God,” said Nisha, “that’ll have gone round the playground like wildfire.”

“Well, I guess it gets it all over with. I hadn’t realised how often one has to come out after you’ve come out to yourself,” said Philippa, admiring the couple’s home. They’d been living together for a while now and had worked hard to make their place a welcoming and cosy space.

“Well, props to you,” said Nisha. “I applaud you. You’ve certainly taken the bull by the horns.”

“Yes,” said Chrissie, smiling. “I’d have done anything to see her face when you said that.”

“I’ll be top of the gossip list now,” said Philippa, sampling Nisha’s new dahl recipe.

“Only for a few days,” said Chrissie. “You’ll be old news the moment another of the dads has an affair with a mum he’s not married to.”

“Anyway,” said Nisha, “what do you think of it? I’m trying to learn to cook

traditional Indian food for the first time.”

“It’s really delicious,” Philippa told her.

“People always assume that because I’m mixed race and my name is Indian, I was taught to cook this stuff from birth, but I really wasn’t. My dad raised me, and he was a Brummie through and through, so aside from regularly visiting Balti houses, it was all beige food for me and him,” said Nisha.

“I think you’ve done a fantastic job, Nisha,” said Chrissie, putting a hand on her partner’s shoulder and kissing her on the cheek.

Philippa thought back to the school trip, where the pair had pretended to be simply colleagues and friends, when it was abundantly clear something more was going on between them. Things had moved on a lot since then.

“How’s the training going?” asked Philippa.

“Oh, really well,” said Chrissie. “I wasn’t sure I’d be capable of upskilling from being a teaching assistant to being a teacher, but actually it’s been really enjoyable.”

“She’s really good,” said Nisha. “I don’t half miss her as my TA, though!”

“I bet,” said Philippa. “All those longing glances across the classroom...”

“Oi!” said Nisha. “As if we ever did that!”

They all laughed, thinking back to the previous year.

“And how about you?” asked Chrissie.

“The million dollar question,” said Philippa. “Everyone’s desperate to pair me up. I’m enjoying just being me, really.” She took a breath. “But there might be someone, although I’m not entirely sure where it’s going.” Chrissie and Nisha waited expectantly.

“Oh yes, you mentioned you’d met someone the other day, but you weren’t sure,” said Chrissie, filling the silence.

“I’d love to have something like what you two have. You’re so lucky to have found each other,” deflected Philippa.

The couple looked at each other and smiled. “See,” said Philippa. “You’re altogether too cute, but I like it. My time will come.”

“You’re not going to spill any details, are you?” said Chrissie, looking back at Philippa.

“Nope,” replied her friend. “I have to have some secrets.”

“Fair dos,” said Nisha, “but the minute anything becomes official, you have to tell us. Promise?”

Philippa laughed. “I promise.”

Chapter Eighteen

“ H elp!”

The single word lit up on Philippa’s phone and instantly had her attention. She was about to meet with Sienna to review a few cases but quickly picked up the phone.

The message was from Alex, and Philippa’s mind immediately raced. She was desperate to know what had happened, where Alex was, and what she had to do to help her. Had she been in a car accident? Been mugged? Kidnapped?

She waved her hand at Sienna through the glass windows of her goldfish bowl office, indicating she needed a couple of minutes. She smiled at the younger woman apologetically. Sienna put her thumbs up and returned to her desk.

Phone still in her hand, Philippa texted back a business-like: “What’s wrong?” The bouncing dots of a response appeared, and Philippa relaxed slightly. If Alex was able to respond, at least she wasn’t at death’s door.

“I need a date ;) x” came the reply, eventually.

Philippa rolled her eyes and put down her phone.

She was annoyed. She was also a tiny bit amused.

But mostly she was annoyed. What grown woman did that kind of thing?

She sighed. Well, at least she didn't need to race in to perform some kind of daring rescue, although she was aware that there were few situations in which a family solicitor tended to be called upon for that sort of thing.

Philippa resolved not to respond until after her meeting. She had standards, after all.

Sienna came back to her door and Philippa ushered her in. "Hi, boss," said Sienna.

"Oh, do stop calling me that," said Philippa, with a smile. "It makes me sound like some kind of mafia kingpin. Or queenpin."

Sienna laughed. "Fair point, Philippa." Sienna's cheeks went slightly pink. "So, you wanted to go through the new cases before you meet them this week?"

"Yes," said Philippa, opening the file on her laptop that Sienna had shared with her earlier that morning. "And I also want to talk to you about a new opportunity we've got coming up."

"Sounds intriguing," said the paralegal.

Was it Philippa, or did she seem slightly breathless?

Philippa had continued to be impressed with her work and could see her progressing well through her legal career with the right opportunities and support.

She resolved to make sure Sienna got them.

Sienna might not have been part of the golf-playing old boys' club, but Philippa was determined that wouldn't stand in her way.

She'd had to fight to get where she was, and if she could make it easier for Sienna,

she would.

“We’re pitching for a big contract at Marshall, Singh and Parker, the financial consultancy in Brindley Place.

Gerry Marshall is keen for us to bid, and I think we have a good chance.

I’ve done the initial paperwork, and we’ve been invited to present next week.

I’d like you to come and present with me.” Philippa looked up from her screen.

“Me?” said Sienna. “Don’t you want Roderick, or one of the others?”

“Well, I’m sure they could do it,” said Philippa, placing her hands on the desk in front of her. “But I think you could, too. And I want to show that as a firm, we prioritise developing talent. I think you’d do a really excellent job.”

“Really?” The flush spread down Sienna’s cheeks to her neck.

“Really,” said Philippa. “Can I count you in?”

“Er, well, yes,” said Sienna. And then, more confidently, “Yes you can. What do you need from me between now and then?”

“I’ve started to make a plan for the pitch, but I’d like to go through it with you and see what you think. The other partners are already aware and on board. So maybe we could look at it tomorrow afternoon?” said Philippa.

“Count me in,” said Sienna, her smile now confident. “Thank you,” she added. “I really appreciate it.”

“It’s no more than you deserve,” said Philippa. “Right, can you run me through the new clients we’ve got on the books this week?”

Over lunch, Philippa picked up her phone and opened the message from Alex. “I see it was a life-or-death emergency you contacted me with, then?” she wrote.

“Ha ha! I thought you’d appreciate that. Ok, I’ve been invited out for a few drinks with some friends I haven’t seen for a while on Friday night, and it would be super helpful to me if I had a date xx” replied Alex.

Philippa wondered what was so special about this Friday night in particular that Alex needed a date for it, but she knew she’d agreed to help Alex out when they’d originally hatched their plan.

And a deal was a deal. Alex had been her plus one with Gerry and Alison, and she needed to return the favour at least once.

The problem was that she enjoyed the idea of being Alex’s date rather too much for her own liking.

She knew it wasn’t real. She kept telling herself that.

But nothing was telling the adolescent hormones that were swirling around her body.

She rolled her eyes at herself and checked her diary.

Dottie would be at Paul’s, so she would be able to go.

“You have a deal,” wrote Philippa. “Just tell me when and where x”

A heart emoji immediately appeared on the message before Alex sent through the

details. Philippa thought about her own heart, and how quickly it appeared to have attached itself to the infuriating but irresistible Alex Fletcher.

Philippa allowed herself a moment to enjoy the fantasy of Alex turning up alone at the venue, holding a cocktail for them each, confessing that in fact the whole thing was an elaborate ploy to profess her undying love.

She then allowed another moment to berate herself for behaving like a teenage girl filled with hormones and longing.

Was this what being a lesbian was all about?

She thought back to the moment when Alex had held her stare while holding her cheek in that restaurant.

She remembered the tingling sensation she'd experienced.

Part of her had loved it: it made her feel alive, reminded her what she'd missed all these years.

The control freak in her hated it. She was used to knowing what to do, how she felt, what she thought and why.

Meeting Alex seemed to have turned all that on its head.

But was that such a bad thing? The point of coming out was to be able to change her life, live as her true self, fall in love.

Perhaps it was about making mistakes, too.

And she knew, deep down, that Alex was likely to be a mistake.

She didn't want to be one more broken heart in the trail Alex had already left behind her.

Apart from anything else, Philippa didn't like to think of herself as someone who followed the herd.

Although perhaps it was unfair to think of Alex's exes as a herd. What precisely was the collective noun for a group of heartbroken sapphic women?

Chapter Nineteen

The planning for the contract bidding presentation was going well. As Philippa had hoped, Sienna had some creative ideas as to how to change things up. She was confident her bid would at least be competitive, if not successful.

She sat at her desk flicking through the slides. It was almost there, but there was something missing.

She couldn't quite put her finger on it. She'd used the corporate template for consistency, and incorporated Sienna's ideas, but it still seemed a bit flat. It was, however, Friday afternoon. Her mind really wasn't on the presentation or the bid, it was on the evening ahead.

Philippa closed her laptop, switched off the office lights and put her coat on. She was done for the week. "Come on, Sienna," she said, standing in the open plan area, "I think it's time for a Friday night drink."

It was pay day, and traditionally, Philippa and the partners would take those who wanted out for a drink, alcoholic or otherwise, to celebrate the end of the week.

Sienna smiled, finished the sentence she was typing and looked up.

"Great. I think Roderick and the guys at the other end of the office are coming, too."

Philippa resisted an eye roll, but knew she had to get on with her new colleague, even if he was a bit of an idiot.

“Ah,” came Roderick’s familiar voice, almost drowned out by the pinstripes on his suit.

“Time for drinkypoos then? Marvellous. Come on, guys,” he said, his voice booming around the office.

“And of course, girls, too,” he added, seemingly pleased with himself for recalling that he worked with female staff as well.

“Or even, women,” said Philippa dryly.

“Of course,” said Roderick, plastering on a slightly alarmed-looking smile. “First round’s on me.” He paused and looked at Philippa. “If that’s ok?”

Philippa gave a half smile. “But of course, Roderick.” She could see Sienna snickering behind him.

There was movement around the office as those who were joining them gathered their belongings. It was a beautiful sunny afternoon. They headed to a bar that looked over the cathedral, with outside seating. There was pink blossom on the trees and the promise of summer in the air.

Roderick was true to his word, buying everyone a drink and then sitting down with a flourish. “How’s the bid coming along, Philippa?” he asked.

“Good, thanks. I think we’ve got a really good chance,” she said, taking a sip from the small white wine she’d ordered. It would help to calm her nerves for later in the evening. She didn’t want to arrive half cut, though.

“Do you need any assistance? I’m very happy to present for you,” he said, spreading his legs in his chair and taking up more space than seemed humanly possible.

“I think we’re good,” said Philippa mildly. “I hold the relationship with Gerry and the company, and Sienna has done an excellent job bringing together the ideas into a narrative.”

“Yes, she’s very promising,” he said. “Vibrant and youthful, just what we need.”

Philippa wondered if he’d have described a male colleague in similar terms, but before she could ask, Sienna came and joined them. “Thanks for the Prosecco, Rod, a great way to end the week.”

“You’re welcome,” said the man, clinking his beer glass with her Champagne flute. “I’m hearing good things about your work on the bid. Well done.”

Sienna smiled. “Thanks. I’ve really enjoyed being able to get involved with it, especially working with Philippa. Such a great experience.” Her eyes shone. “So many paralegals end up only doing the administrative stuff. It’s brilliant to be able to do this sort of thing.”

“Enough shop talk,” said Philippa. “What do we all have planned for the weekend?”

“I’m playing golf tomorrow,” said Roderick, somewhat predictably, “and on Sunday morning I’m checking out the new model Tesla have just brought out. I might take it for a test drive.”

Philippa raised an eyebrow at the name of the controversial business. “And you, Sienna?”

“Me and my friends are spending the weekend in the Peak District. We’re going to do some walking, so I hope the weather stays like this,” she said, gesturing to the blue skies and fluffy clouds.

“It is glorious,” said Philippa. “Sounds like a lovely plan.” Sienna smiled.

“How about you?” asked Roderick, turning to Philippa. “Will you be making the most of the weather with your partner?”

Philippa froze for a moment. She’d forgotten that Roderick knew about Alex, or at least thought he did. It was, after all, Roderick who had told Gerry about her and Alex in the first place.

She stalled by taking a slow sip of her drink. “Yes, Alex and I are going out for drinks with some of her friends this evening.”

A few heads turned nearby. Philippa tended to keep her private life private, but it was no secret that she’d been married to a man and was recently divorced.

That she was now dating a woman – whether real or fake – was news.

She opted to ignore the eyes on her and continued.

“But other than that, I’ll be enjoying my new book and hopefully at some point going for a run. ”

“Sounds nice,” said Sienna. “Where are you going for drinks this evening?”

“The Black Swan in Hurst Street, I think,” said Philippa, trying to sound more casual than she felt about dropping the name of a queer bar into the conversation.

“Ah yes,” said Sienna. “I used to go there all the time with my ex-girlfriend.” She smiled. “You have to try the cosmopolitan in there, it’s unreal.”

Philippa smiled. She’d never really considered that Sienna might be anything other

than straight and was pleasantly surprised to find that she wasn't the only gay in her particular village, as it were.

It also reminded her, were it needed, that you never really knew who a person was until you got to know them.

The conversations with the rest of her colleagues flowed freely.

She made a swift exit after her first drink to get home and changed.

She wanted to be properly prepared for her date, whether real or imagined.

The idea of going to a gay venue pleased her.

She was still new to queer spaces and found them affirming and friendly in a way she'd not experienced elsewhere.

She got a cab home and got straight into the shower.

She let the water wash off work and parenting and all the other facets of the day that she was now done with.

She'd had a text from Paul, telling her that Dottie had had a good day at school and was looking forwards to McDonalds for tea before watching a film.

It was ironic that now they were divorced, he was more involved in Dottie's life than he'd ever been before.

Philippa supposed that his retirement had played a part in that, but whatever the cause, it allowed Philippa her own space and time, something she'd not really had for years.

Once showered she pulled on her new dark blue jeans and a fitted black shirt that showed off her slim figure.

She dried and styled her hair as per Ted's instructions and made a mental note to make an appointment for a trim.

Hair this short was unforgiving and needed regular cutting.

She put in some dangly sparkly earrings which matched her pendant necklace, and liberally applied eyeliner and mascara.

The final touch was her trademark red lipstick and a dab of perfume.

She looked in the mirror. She looked good. She felt good. Whatever the evening held, she was ready for it.

Chapter Twenty

Philippa arrived at the Black Swan. The last Friday of the month meant it was payday for everyone, and the pub was full.

Philippa peered across the room. She'd told Alex not to wait for her, as she'd be a bit later arriving. As she felt the warmth of the bodies hit her, she wondered if she'd made a mistake. She tried to peer through the crowd but couldn't spot her date.

She looked around the room. She'd not been to this pub before, and she was struck by how many women and non-binary people there were. It made her smile. There was a safety in being there that she felt immediately. She'd never felt that about the pubs on Broad Street she'd frequented in her youth.

An arm complete with bangles appeared from the sea of bodies, followed by the rest of Alex. "Who are you smiling at?" she asked Philippa.

"Hello, you," said Philippa. "I was just happy to see so many queer people in one place. I'm still trying to get used to this stuff."

"That is lovely," said Alex. "I should really be more appreciative of living so close to the community."

"Well," said Philippa, "it's good to see you. I love your necklace. Is it new?"

"It is," said Alex.

A face appeared behind Alex's. "Yep," said the woman. "I bought it for the birthday girl. And as for you, we've all been dying to meet you."

Philippa's mouth dropped open, but she closed it quickly at a warning look from Alex. They walked over to a table where a handful of others were sitting. "It's your birthday?" asked Philippa in a stage whisper.

"Yes," hissed Alex. "I didn't want to do anything for it, but this lot insisted."

"That would have been helpful background information before I arrived," whispered Philippa, sitting in an empty chair and trying to organise her face into an expression that wasn't incredulous.

The woman who had spoken to them was called Clodagh, and her blonde curly hair framed her smiling face. "So, Philippa, how did you and our girl here meet?"

Philippa looked at Alex, before launching into the story. Alex added the embellishments about how she had spotted Philippa straight away, and everyone around the table lapped it up.

"That is gorgeous," said Clodagh. "It's about time someone tamed her. This is my partner, Rae."

Philippa smiled and held her hand out for Rae to shake.

Their curly modern mullet made them look achingly cool, and Philippa couldn't help feeling a little square in their presence, until they said, "I love your eye makeup. I've been trying to achieve that kind of smoky look for ages. Can you show me how?"

"Sure," said Philippa, who'd been doing her eye makeup that way for years and didn't really think about it anymore.

There was an assortment of people around the table, all of whom welcomed Philippa warmly. She was struck by how friendly Alex's people were. She wondered why Alex needed Philippa there with her, why she didn't feel she could turn up to her own birthday gathering alone.

Philippa was asked the usual questions about what she did, and she also talked about Dottie. "Ooh," said Clodagh, "I definitely need to see a pic. She sounds awesome. Have you met her yet?" she asked Alex.

"Not yet," said Alex. "It's important not to go too quickly when kids are involved."

Philippa was once again impressed with the smoothness of the lie.

Although, she reflected, it was less a lie, more a fact with embellishment.

Again. And of course she was right. Dottie didn't even know her mum was gay, so meeting a new partner was still some distance away.

Also, she reminded herself, Alex wasn't actually her partner.

"But I can't wait," added Alex, smiling warmly at Philippa and popping a hand on her thigh, making Philippa almost jump out of her skin.

"How about Seren? How's she?" asked Rae, addressing Alex.

Philippa hadn't heard that name before. She wondered who Seren could be.

An ex, perhaps? But would Rae ask about an ex in front of Philippa, her supposed 'current'?

She had a sudden flash of jealousy and forced herself to think rationally.

Alex wasn't hers to get jealous about. Her leg tensed, and as if sensing her thoughts, Alex rubbed her palm up and down.

"She's ok," said Alex. Her face clouded, and Rae pressed their lips together. Alex looked around her. "But enough of all that. Where are my other presents?"

"We thought you'd never ask," said Rae, whipping out a gift bag from beneath their seat.

Alex's friends had bought her beautiful and thoughtful gifts. Rae had excelled herself in particular, with a tiny watercolour set that could be put in a pocket.

"This is great," said Alex, taking her hand from Philippa's leg to examine each of the tiny pieces of the set. "I haven't painted properly in ages. It takes so long to get everything out, but I can just chuck this in my bag and get it out anywhere. Thanks, Rae, I really appreciate it."

"I didn't know you painted," said Philippa, curious to see the sort of art someone like Alex might produce.

"Well, I don't at the moment," said Alex. "That's the problem. This might kickstart me back into it."

"I'd love to see your work," said Philippa, momentarily forgetting the others.

"Any time," said Alex. "I'll show you the studio in my house next time you're over."

"Now that's a euphemism I haven't heard before," said Clodagh with a chuckle.

Philippa smiled at the gentle teasing from Alex's friends. She enjoyed being seen as part of a couple. As part of this couple.

“Alex!” came a high-pitched squeal from two tables away. Footsteps followed, heralding the appearance of a younger woman with purple hair and multiple piercings. “Oh my God, where have you been? You never called!”

Alex looked startled. Her friends looked at her expectantly. “Oh, hi, er...” she trailed off.

“Olivia, you remember me,” said the woman, who looked like she’d had a few drinks too many. “We hooked up after that drag show here a couple of months back.”

Philippa followed the conversation between the two like a tennis match, unsure of what to do or say.

Was this one of the broken hearts? She wasn’t sure Olivia looked particularly broken hearted.

That jealousy was back. Alongside something else she couldn’t quite place.

Something that sat uncomfortably in the pit of her stomach.

“Of course. Hi, Olivia. How are you?” said Alex, standing to leave the table. She walked away with Olivia, her hand on the other woman’s back. She was saying something to the younger woman and pointing back at the table.

Olivia nodded and said something, then put her arms around Alex’s neck. “Our girl’s always been popular,” whispered Clodagh, who had moved over to sit by Philippa. “But I get the sense you’re different.”

Philippa turned to say something, but before she could speak, Alex was back.

“So sorry,” said Alex. “Right, my round.” There were shouts of dismay from the

group.

“No, be quiet, I know it’s my birthday, but I like to pay my way.

” She stood and reached out a hand to touch Philippa’s shoulder. “Help me carry the drinks?”

Philippa followed Alex to the bar, not sure what to ask her, or whether she even should.

Alex wasn’t actually her girlfriend, after all.

But she remembered what Clodagh had said, that she was different.

Was that true? Or was it just that she was fake, and something about that made the relationship seem different to the ones Alex’s friends had seen her in before?

“Sorry,” said Alex, “Olivia was someone from a little while ago.”

“Don’t worry,” said Philippa instinctively. “I’m not actually your girlfriend, so we’re all good.” Her stomach was in turmoil. Somehow, she felt as though she was lying, although of course she wasn’t.

Alex looked at Philippa for a few seconds before speaking. “Of course,” she said, finally. “But still.”

“Your friends seem really nice,” said Philippa. “I can see they care about you.” Alex smiled and nodded. “And I meant what I said before, I’d love to see your paintings.”

“Really?” said Alex, looking thrilled. “I’d like that.”

“Good,” said Philippa, “we’ll do that.” She smiled back at Alex, lost for a moment in her perfect skin and shining eyes.

“What can I get you?” came a bored-sounding voice from the bar.

“Er sorry,” said Alex, and delivered the long drinks order for herself, Philippa and her friends.

“And we’ll have a tray, please,” said Philippa, observing that they didn’t have enough hands between them.

“You’re so good at this stuff,” said Alex, while their drinks were being prepared.

“What stuff?”

“Adulting,” said Alex, smiling with one side of her mouth.

Philippa laughed. “What is it you’re doing, then?”

“I’m not sure. I think perhaps just making it up as I go along,” said Alex.

“And you think I’m not?” Philippa leaned one arm on the bar. “You look like you have adulting pretty sorted.”

“I’m not convinced,” said Alex.

“I am,” Philippa told her. “You seem to have it all worked out. You’re so creative and funny and popular. You’ve got a successful business, and you always manage to look effortlessly cool. I know I’m just a bit sensible and square and boring.”

Alex frowned. “You’re not.”

“I am, I...” Philippa began, but before she could say any more, Alex’s finger was on her lips.

“No, you’re amazing,” said Alex. “You did the scariest thing ever. You changed your whole life because you realised who you really were. You left your husband and became a single parent. You’ve started again without looking back, at the same time as being a really hot, high-powered lawyer.

And don’t get me started on your hair and how you never leave the house without your lipstick on and an amazing jacket.

” She moved her finger. “You are probably the most impressive, cool, attractive person I know.”

The bar was busy, and the crowd moved, pushing the two women together so their faces were nearly touching.

Philippa parted her lips to respond, but she didn’t know what to say.

It was the most Alex had ever said in one go, and it was taking a little time to process it.

Alex reached out her hand to touch Philippa’s side, steadying them both against the bar.

In the crowd, they had somehow found a moment of privacy to themselves.

Philippa felt Alex’s eyes on her before she felt her lips.

Alex’s lips on her lips. The gentlest touch.

Her brain froze, but her body didn't. She'd not kissed a woman before, but somehow, that wasn't even a consideration.

What stunned her was the way this had seemed to happen organically.

That was new. She'd never been in a moment where a kiss had felt inevitable before.

She pressed into Alex, who moved a hand to her back.

"Here you go, ladies," came the bored bartender's voice, and the women sprang back. Their drinks. Philippa had forgotten about those. She'd forgotten about everything.

"I need a moment," said Philippa, pushing through the crowd and racing to the door of the bar, before hitting the cold night air.

Chapter Twenty-One

Philippa was reeling. She stumbled out of the pub and made her way down the street alone.

The pouring rain soaked her almost immediately, but she didn't notice.

She walked blindly towards the taxi rank, trying to work out whether it was fear she felt, or elation. Either way, she couldn't stay in there.

The surface water on the road reflected the car headlights and revellers' feet. Music blasting out of different bars fell on her ears, a low bass drum beat echoing the beat of her heart. Everything had changed. But she didn't know what came next.

Running feet, behind her. "Phil, Phil," called a voice. She paused for a moment and looked back. "I'm sorry," said the familiar face. "Please, just wait. God, this rain, where did that come from?"

Philippa stopped on the pavement and allowed Alex to catch up.

"Are you ok?" asked Alex, approaching Philippa and placing a hand on each of her shoulders.

"I'm not sure," said Philippa, opting for honesty and looking up at the falling raindrops.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that." Alex was biting her lip.

“You’re sorry?” said Philippa looking down again, trying to get to grips with the swirl of emotions inside her. The rain was still falling, and she was getting steadily wetter.

“It wasn’t fair to you,” said Alex. “It was a momentary lapse.”

“A lapse?” Philippa frowned. “A lapse in what? In reality? In fakery? This isn’t real.”

“No,” said Alex, “I know. Which is why I’m sorry.”

Philippa took a deep breath. If she was going to be true to herself, she needed to be honest. She spoke quietly. “I sort of don’t want you to be sorry, though.”

Alex looked at Philippa, but didn’t speak.

“I wanted you to kiss me,” said Philippa. “I liked you kissing me. It was the perfect full stop to the sentences we’d been speaking. It felt right. And yes,” she said, pushing her drooping soggy hair out of her eyes, “I know you’re not my girlfriend and I’m not yours, but that felt real to me.”

Alex raised her eyebrows. “Well, I suppose that’s why I’m sorry. It was real. It felt real to me, too.”

Philippa’s heart rate increased. “So what does that mean?”

“It means we need to be careful. I don’t want to hurt you, and I know I could. I don’t think you want casual right now, and I don’t know that I can offer you anything meaningful.” Alex looked down at her feet and Philippa felt her heart sink.

“I mean, you’re right,” said Philippa. “I don’t want casual.”

I can't do casual at the same time as being a proper mum to Dottie.

I want to meet someone, but only if they're the right person at the right time.

I don't want to put you under pressure to be in anything you don't want to be in. Can you look at me for a minute?"

Blood was rushing in her ears as Alex looked up, her eyes red. Philippa had to say this, even though she knew the likely outcome.

"You're a far, far better person than you give yourself credit for.

So what if you've had casual flings? It doesn't sound as though you've ever lied to anyone or pretended you're more available than you are.

And I need to be completely honest with you, because I spent so much of my life not being true to myself.

I am attracted to you. I think I could be with you and even feel things for you.

So yes, I don't want casual, but I do want you. "

Philippa held out a hand to take one of Alex's.

"And it's fine. I'm not putting you under any pressure here, but I couldn't leave and not tell you how I feel.

I think we could be something, given the chance.

Perhaps I'm being na?ve, but I do. And I know that's not what you want.

I'm not telling you to try to persuade you to change your mind.

I'm telling you because I want you to know.

I need you to know. Nothing needs to change, we can still be friends.

Although I do wonder about the wisdom of pretending to be together, given we're now standing here in the pouring rain like Hugh Grant and Andie McDowell. "

Alex laughed. "Am I Hugh or Andie?"

"Neither," said Philippa. "You're Alex, and I'm rather fond of you. But if you had to be one, I'd say Hugh."

"Fair," said Alex. "Thank you for saying such nice things to me. You really are very kind. And thank you for understanding." She squeezed Philippa's hand and dropped it.

"You're right. There is something here, but it's my turn to be honest with you.

I told you I was in a long relationship. Well, I got divorced last year."

Philippa raised her eyebrows. "Yeah," said Alex. "I try not to talk about it. It was bad. I'm still working it all through. I'm not as good at this as you are. And I've not been able to maintain as good a relationship with my ex-wife as you have with your ex-husband."

"I didn't realise," said Philippa. That must be who Seren was.

"That makes more sense now. And I guess our situations are quite different. I'm not heartbroken over the end of a marriage to someone I essentially hadn't lived with for

years.

He'd worked away for so long, it was like we separated long ago. ”

“I guess. But what I’m saying is, I’m a bit of a mess,” said Alex. “You deserve better than that. Especially as you haven’t had a relationship with a woman before. You don’t need my baggage.”

“Hmmm,” said Philippa. “I’m not sure anyone over thirty comes without baggage. And if they do, they’ve probably led a very dull life. But I do understand what you’re saying.”

The rain was getting lighter, more of a drizzle now.

“Will you come back to the bar?” asked Alex.

“Would you mind if I didn’t?” said Philippa. “While I know we’ve just had a very grown-up conversation about all this, I have to confess that I need a bit of time to process it. I loved kissing you, and I laid my heart a bit bare there. I could do with taking a bit of time.”

“Totally,” said Alex. “And again, I’m sorry. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t regret kissing you, but it was poor timing and in the wrong place. In another time and place this could have been different.”

Philippa gave a half smile. “Yeah,” she said. “Tell your friends it was lovely meeting them. You can tell them I had an emergency with Dottie, or something.”

“Sure,” said Alex, who looked sad now. “Can we still be friends?”

“I really hope so,” said Philippa, who could feel the sadness begin to overtake her as

well. Worse, she thought for a moment she might actually cry, and she had no intention of doing that in front of Alex. “I’m going to jump in that taxi.”

Alex patted her shoulder awkwardly. “Text me when you get in.”

“I will,” said Philippa, quickly turning to wave at the black cab. She climbed in and it sped away, leaving Alex on the pavement, her wavy hair dripping down her back, her face unreadable.

Philippa’s head was spinning. That had, without question, been the best kiss of her life.

Her whole body had responded to it in a way she’d never expected or even thought possible.

It was less mechanical than any kiss she’d ever shared with her husband, and it was imbued with more emotion.

She was relieved to know that it had been real for Alex, too, but disappointed that Alex couldn’t see herself as able to have a meaningful relationship at the moment.

That was the hardest part. But she knew she owed it to her daughter to make sensible choices.

Philippa texted Chrissie to see if she was still up. She needed some kind of debrief from the evening’s revelations. Chrissie replied quickly, and she advised the driver to take her straight there.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“So, she kissed you, and she meant it, but you’re only fake dating her?” said Chrissie, her head on one side.

“Yes,” said Philippa, pressing her lips together. “When you say it like that it all sounds very adolescent.” She sighed. “But, crucially, she kissed me. And I kissed her. And it was amazing.” She folded the towel Chrissie had given to her to dry her hair when she arrived.

“Well, I’m here for that.” Chrissie smiled. “But explain to me again, why it is that Alex doesn’t want to date you.”

Philippa cupped her hands around the tea Chrissie had brewed.

It was too late for coffee, even for Philippa.

“She says she’s got stuff going on and she’s still heartbroken over her ex-wife – Seren or someone.

” She took a sip of her drink. “And I respect her honesty. But I must confess it’s acutely frustrating to have met someone I’m attracted to, who’s attracted to me, but who can’t follow it up. ”

“Or won’t,” said Chrissie.

“Well, yes,” said Philippa. “You think she’s a player, don’t you? I can see it in your

face.” She pursed her lips.

“No,” said Chrissie. “No, that’s not what I’m thinking. I promise. I just wonder whether someone with that much going on is good for you to be with anyway? It sounds like she was honest with you for very good reasons. She knows she’s not in the right place. And I think that’s good.”

“Yeah,” chimed in Nisha’s voice from the other room.

Her head appeared around the door to the kitchen, where Philippa and Chrissie were sat at the table.

“I couldn’t help but overhear. Sounds like she’s got complications, but she’s owning them.

It sucks though that your first kiss will also be your last – with her at least.”

Philippa smiled at Nisha, who was always good at telling it like it was. “It does indeed suck.”

“I need to introduce you to my footy team, there are a couple of likely girlfriend prospects there, I reckon,” said Nisha with a wicked grin.

“Um, girlfriend prospects?” said Chrissie, her eyebrows raised in faux annoyance.

“For lovely Philippa, darling, not for me, of course. I have you. I couldn’t possibly want anyone else,” replied Nisha with a wink.

“Apart from Cate Blanchett,” said Chrissie with a laugh.

“True,” said Nisha, “but who among us couldn’t say the same?”

“Seconded,” said Philippa.

“Thirded,” said Chrissie, raising her hand.

“Well thank you, both, for listening to my gay panic. I appreciate it,” said Philippa. “And now, I really must go home. Think of me this weekend coming down from my first ever kiss with a woman and trying to deal with my adolescent hormones.”

“Thoughts and prayers,” said Nisha.

“Take care,” said Chrissie.

Philippa walked the short distance home.

Thankfully, the rain had finally stopped.

She replayed the kiss in her head three more times before she reached her front door.

Was this what her straight friends had felt like when they kissed boys while they were at school?

No wonder they’d all seemed to go a bit mad when they had a crush. The pieces were falling into place.

Saturday morning dawned, and Philippa found herself at her own kitchen table this time, going through the presentation for Gerry. It was only a few days away, and while she tried not to work at weekends, she knew this was something she had to get right for the whole company.

Her phone pinged with a text. She closed her laptop and glanced at the display.

It was from Alex. She had wondered how long it would be before she heard from her pretend/real/pretend love interest. And even though she knew this was going nowhere, she could feel her heart pounding at the sight of Alex's name.

Her head knew this couldn't work. Why wouldn't her body understand?

“Hey, Phil. Sorry again about last night. Are you ok? Let me know if you wanna talk x”

Philippa didn't want to text straight back like a lost puppy. So she did the next best thing – obsessed over how to respond for the next hour.

Like a lost puppy.

As part of that obsession, she checked in on TikTok to see how the posts Sienna had been creating were doing.

Surprisingly, they seemed to be gaining some traction.

Sienna had explained that the secret was regular posting, and she certainly had been busy.

Philippa's impression of Sienna as a capable member of staff on the up only increased.

Scrolling through the social media platform reminded Philippa of Gerry and the contract.

Was there something they could do in this area, something creative, that would set Samfire and Partners apart from the pack?

She hurriedly emailed Sienna, careful to schedule the message so it wouldn't hit Sienna's inbox until the other woman arrived back in the office at eight on Monday morning.

Philippa carried on scrolling. There was a reason people called it doom scrolling, she supposed, but she was fascinated by how quickly the algorithm picked up the sort of videos she was interested in, and those she wasn't.

Within ten minutes, Philippa's videos were dominated by queer women discussing their experiences of coming out later in life.

Somehow, thanks to technology and her innate interest, Philippa had found her people – or at least, people she shared a major life event with.

The films were a mixture of women giving heartfelt testimony, those who shared funny stories about coming out to their children, sweet stories about their families' acceptance, and incredulity that they'd never realised it sooner.

"I'm fine," texted Philippa to Alex. "Just discovering the joys of TikTok! I don't think we need to talk.

But thank you for offering x" She pressed send.

Then she reread the message. Perhaps it would come across as cold.

All she'd intended to say was that it was all ok.

That she was disappointed and sad that Alex didn't want a relationship, but that it would work out.

She screwed up her face, and then a thought occurred to her.

She typed: “Actually, you might be able to help me with a work thing. You don’t have any time for a coffee on Monday morning, do you?”

Alex texted back immediately. “Sure. I’m all yours. Tell me where and when. Have a good weekend x”

A moment later, another text came through.

“p.s. glad you’re ok, bab”

Philippa smiled. Yes, things would be ok. She would get over her crush and move on and Alex would still be her friend. She decided to ignore the part of her heart that still felt a little bruised. She was a big girl, after all.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Dottie was struggling at the kitchen table with her maths homework. “Let me help,” said Philippa, moving round the table to sit next to her daughter.

“Well, ok,” said Dottie, without lifting her head from the page she was focusing on. “But I warn you, this is incredibly difficult. Even the teacher says so.”

“Goodness me,” said Philippa, stifling a smile, “I consider myself warned.” She put her reading glasses on. “Hmm, yes. Very difficult. I think this might be the hardest homework you’ve had yet.”

“Exactamundo,” agreed Dottie, throwing her hands in the air.

“But look, if you line those numbers up over there, and carry the four, I think you may be able to solve this one,” said Philippa, gently pointing at one of the sums.

Dottie pressed her lips together, looking doubtful, but she did as Philippa suggested. “Oh!” exclaimed the girl. “You are correct!”

“Would you look at that,” said Philippa. “Well done, you!”

“Well done you, too. You’re a genius!” said Dottie. Philippa grinned. She knew that the days of Dottie being impressed by her were numbered, so she made the most of moments like this.

“Why thank you.” Philippa took a breath. Was this the right time? Would any time be

the right time? “Is that the last one?”

“Yep,” said Dottie, closing her homework book with a flourish.

“Brilliant. Now, I have something to talk to you about,” said Philippa.

“You do?” Dottie’s eyes went wide and then narrowed. “Last time you said you needed to talk to me, you told me you and Daddy were splitting up. What is it this time?”

“Oh, please don’t worry, darling. No, it’s not like that.

It’s just something you need to know. It’s sort of neither good nor bad.

Just a thing.” Philippa felt out of her depth already, but now she’d started she knew she couldn’t back out.

“It is partly about me and Daddy splitting up, I suppose.” She reached out and took her daughter’s hand.

It was clammy from gripping the pencil. “Do you remember we told you that we split up because we’d grown apart and we wanted different things? ”

“Yep. I figured that was about Daddy wanting to play golf and you wanting to concentrate on your business,” said Dottie, expectantly.

“Perhaps a little,” said Philippa, not in the mood to unpack her daughter’s view of her as a workaholic right now.

“But part of it was also because your dad and me were really just like best friends and not like husband and wife. And that’s because I’ve have realised more recently that

actually I'm gay. ”

Dottie's eyes widened again. “Gay like LGBTQIA plus?” she asked, pronouncing each letter individually and with great care.

“Er, yes,” said Philippa. “Just like that.”

“Cool,” said Dottie. “Miss Anderson and Ms Rajan love each other and they live together.”

Philippa's eyebrows rose. She wasn't sure how Dottie knew about Chrissie and Nisha, but she reminded herself of her daughter's penchant for listening to and sharing playground gossip. “They do,” she agreed.

“Have you got a girlfriend?” Dottie fixed her with one of her unavoidable stares.

“Not right now,” said Philippa, sounding more casual than she felt.

“Does Daddy know?”

“Yes. He was one of the first people I told,” said Philippa, “and he was very kind to me, even though I knew he was upset as well.”

“Good,” said Dottie. “Daddy's a nice man, isn't he?”

Philippa nodded. “He is. And maybe one day I might have a girlfriend. Would that be ok?”

“That would be great,” said Dottie. “I think it would be good if you were able to meet someone who stopped you working all the time.”

“I don’t work all the time!” exclaimed Philippa.

“Hmm,” said Dottie. “But anyway, now I’ve done my homework can we have strawberry milkshake?”

“Yes,” said Philippa, relieved the conversation was over and marvelling that it had been a far bigger deal to her than it had been to her girl. “In fact, let’s go out and get celebratory milkshakes. Let’s go down to the Vine.”

“Awesome!” said Dottie. “Can I have pancakes, too?”

Philippa had to give Dottie credit – she knew when to ask for a treat!

The Vine was busy, with other Sunday morning parents looking for an easy way to feed their children. The pancake and milkshake option was a popular one.

“Uncle Charlie!” said Dottie, racing over to a table where Philippa’s old friend sat with a man with close cut fair hair. He looked familiar; no doubt Philippa had seen him working in the Jam Pot.

“Hey, Charles,” said Philippa. “Don’t worry, we won’t crash your party, just coming over to say hi.”

Charlie put up his hands. “No apologies needed, you are, after all, my two favourite ladies. In fact, why don’t you join us?”

” Charlie gestured to the table. It was big enough for Philippa and her girl to join, and Dottie slid into a chair without any further invitation.

Philippa followed at a more sedate pace.

“Thanks.” She smiled at Charlie and his companion, assuming this was the man who had inspired Charlie to turn away from his love-’em-and-leave-’em ways. “And is this the debut of your new person?”

Charlie reddened, the man beside him giving a small laugh. “Well, I suppose it is. Dottie, Philippa, I’d like to introduce you to Jack.”

“Go on,” said Jack with a twinkle in his eye. “You know you can say it. I believe in you.”

Charlie elbowed Jack before taking a breath. “And Jack is my boyfriend.”

“Oooh,” said Dottie. “That’s exciting! We’re celebrating today because Mummy is gay, too. Did you know?”

“Well,” said Charlie, “if I didn’t, I do now. But yes. I know. And I am thrilled that your mum is now part of the cool gang.”

“The LGBTQIA+ gang?” asked Dottie, the acronym rolling off her tongue a bit more easily now.

“That’s the one,” said Jack. “I like you. Would you be my friend as well as Charlie’s?”

“Oh yes,” said Dottie. “Question first, though.” She looked intently at the newcomer.

“Right, ok, I’m ready,” said Jack, looking serious.

“Do you like Taylor Swift?” asked Dottie.

“Well that’s easy. Yes, of course,” said Jack. “Although I’ll let you in on a little

secret, and I hope you won't judge me for it. I like Billie Eilish a tiny bit more." He widened his eyes as though readying himself for an onslaught of criticism.

"Hmm," said Dottie. "Ok, I'm willing to let that go, because I like her, too. We can be friends." She held out her hand for Jack to shake.

"Now the formalities are done with, I'd like to say how nice it is to meet you, Jack," said Philippa. "You help run the Jam Pot cafe, right?"

"Yeah," said Jack, "with my sister, Seymour."

"I'm a big fan," said Philippa. "Can I get either of you a drink when I order a stack of pancakes at the bar?"

"Ooh, pancakes," said Charlie. "I went to the gym this morning, so I've definitely earned some."

"I'm not sure lounging about in the sauna counts as a full gym session," said Jack, looking at his boyfriend fondly. "But no one needs an excuse for pancakes."

Dottie laughed and Philippa reflected that she hadn't seen Charlie so at ease with someone in a very long time. It was good to see him settled.

The four of them chatted and tucked into pancakes, enjoying the lazy Sunday morning vibes.

"Have you seen Fletch recently?" asked Charlie.

Philippa paused before answering, certain her face had given away the fact that she very much had seen Alex recently. And that the meeting had not been uneventful.

“She had birthday drinks on Friday, and I went along.” She kept her voice as smooth as she could.

Charlie raised an eyebrow. “Me thinks the lady doth underplay that. Something has clearly happened.”

“What’s happened, Mummy?” asked Dottie, swivelling her head in order to favour Philippa with her customary hard stare.

“Nothing,” said Philippa, keeping her voice light and breezy. “I went out to celebrate a friend’s birthday while you were at Daddy’s.”

Jack looked at Charlie, who appeared to have no intention of giving up on this one. Philippa side-eyed her daughter, trying to remind Charlie that this might not be the right conversation to have in front of Dottie.

Jack smiled. “Dottie, did you see there are some board games over there? Do you fancy choosing one for us to play?”

Jack winked at Philippa and Charlie, leading Dottie away.

“What happened?” said Charlie. “I was supposed to go, but I had a terrible headache. I need to live vicariously through you. And you know I love a spot of lesbian drama.”

Philippa rolled her eyes, but smiled. “No drama here. But you’re right, of course. We kissed.” She looked down to try and hide her heating cheeks.

“You kissed!” exclaimed Charlie.

“Shh, I don’t need my love life debacles shared with everyone in here, least of all Dottie,” said Philippa in a stage whisper.

“She strikes me as someone who would give pretty good advice,” said Charlie. “But ok, tell me what happened.”

Philippa sighed and gave him what, in her professional life, she would have called a high level summary.

Charlie frowned for a moment. “Sounds both good and bad. I mean, well done for being honest and saying how you felt. Just tread carefully. I wouldn’t want either of you getting hurt.”

“Yeah, I know,” said Philippa, disappointed that her first kiss with a woman seemed mired in complexity.

“She’s more vulnerable than you might think,” said Charlie.

“Really, how so?” asked Philippa.

“Not my story to tell, I’m afraid, darling, but she is a good egg. Know that,” said Charlie.

“I’m getting that sense,” said Philippa, remembering how Alex had come to rescue her at the hospital.

Chapter Twenty-Four

As she walked, she imagined a different scenario, one in which Alex had followed her out into the rain and kissed her again, but this time more passionately.

It would be the kind of kiss that would make her forget about the rain, and not even mind the destruction of her quiff.

She shook her head at herself. This wasn't helping.

She needed to pull herself together and get a grip.

She crossed Pigeon Park, admiring the cathedral and its William Morris stained glass as she went. Birmingham was a more beautiful city than so many people gave it credit for.

The office lights were already on. Sienna was tapping away at her laptop in the open plan area, hardly noticing Philippa as she swept through.

“Morning, boss,” said Sienna, popping her head up at the last moment before Philippa opened her office door.

“Oh for heaven's sake, don't call me that,” said Philippa. “But good morning to you, too.”

“Ha ha, ok then. I was heavily influenced by watching The Devil Wears Prada last night, and am clearly channelling Andie,” said Sienna with a grin, before continuing

with her work.

Philippa chuckled and then went into her office.

She wondered if this meant Sienna perceived her as a Miranda Priestly-like figure.

Part of her hoped so, the egotistical part of her, but most of her hoped not.

The Meryl Streep character was not someone who championed the team around her, and Philippa liked to think that she was.

Half an hour later, having had a coffee and ensured she looked professional and in control, she watched as a familiar face entered the office floor.

Alex.

Natural blonde highlights shone through the light brown waves of her hair. She was wearing a chic blazer over skintight black jeans that made Philippa feel slightly weak at the knees. Was this a bad idea? She hoped not. This was a professional meeting only, right?

Sienna showed Alex to her door, and Philippa ushered them in before either of them was forced to knock on the glass.

“Good morning,” said Philippa, “lovely to have you here, Alex.” She smiled, trying to exude as much nonchalance as she could.

“Morning, boss,” said Alex with a wink.

“Oh, don’t you start,” said Philippa and Sienna laughed. “Ok, come and take a seat.”

“This is seriously impressive, Phil,” said Alex, taking in her surroundings. “I knew you were high-powered, but this is amazing. A bit different to the cosy co-working space I use in Kings Heath, that’s for sure.”

“Thank you,” said Philippa, wanting to move on swiftly. “And that’s why you’re here. Sienna, this is Alex Fletcher, a graphic designer and artist. Alex, this is Sienna Pierce, one of our paralegals.”

The women shook hands. “Great to meet you, Sienna,” said Alex. “So tell me, how can I help?”

“Well,” said Philippa. “I’ve been thinking about this presentation, about our company offering family law services to Gerry’s firm. We have the content drawn together – huge thanks to Sienna for that. But I think we need something to set us apart. And I wonder if that could be a visual identity?”

“I like the idea,” said Sienna.

“What kind of thing are you thinking?” asked Alex, grabbing a notepad from the messenger bag across her shoulder and starting to jot down notes.

“I’m thinking that we could bring together Sienna’s ability to create social media content, with your design talents, so we arrive at a visual style, for our slides in the first instance, and then for the service itself, assuming we’re successful.

Gerry said it when we had dinner, he’s had an influx of much younger staff in the last few years, and he’s not always sure he’s reaching them through traditional means.

We could help him with that through this project.

” Philippa steeped her fingers and rested them on her desk.

“Yes,” said Sienna, her enthusiasm clear in her voice.

Alex didn't look up, spending a moment scribbling on her pad, her brow furrowed.

“Alex?” said Philippa. “I mean, if you're up for this, it could make all the difference. We would of course pay you the going rate for your time and expertise.”

Alex was still intent on her activity. Finally she put her pen behind her ear. “Something like this?” She turned around her pad to display a sketch of a social media ident, the kind of thing that could be used on slides, reels and so much more.

“Yes,” said Philippa, beaming, “exactly like that.”

“I love it,” said Sienna, her smile seeming to grow ever bigger. “You're so talented. I'd love to be able to sketch like that.”

Alex shrugged. “It's just a rough idea, but I can work it up in design software. I'm figuring the deadline is, like, yesterday?”

Philippa gave a sheepish grin. “You read that correctly. But of course, it doesn't have to be the finished article. Just a prototype, if you like?”

“No problem,” said Alex, jotting down a few more notes in her pad. “By the end of the day tomorrow?”

“Perfect,” said Philippa. “Thank you. And Sienna, are you ok to work with Alex on this?”

“Definitely,” said Sienna. She was now taking notes of her own on her laptop.

“We're going to crush this,” said Philippa, immediately regretting her choice of

words.

What was it about having Alex in the room that made her act like a teenager.

Alex and Sienna's heads both snapped up from their notes, surprised at her turn of phrase, while Philippa took off her reading glasses to give them a clean.

"I'm going to dash, if that's ok, Philippa," said Sienna. "I've got a meeting now with Roderick for a new case."

"Yes, of course," said her boss, relieved that she was leaving. Although Alex didn't follow. She just stayed in her seat, an insufferable grin on her face.

"Don't say it," said Philippa, rolling her eyes.

"Say what?" asked Alex, stifling a grin. "How excited I am to crush it?"

"Ugh," said Philippa, bringing her hand to her forehead. "You really are incorrigible."

"Well, boss, I was actually going to say that I'm just relieved you showed any kind of weakness. You're very intimidating here in your natural habitat." Alex gestured around her, then nodded towards where Sienna had been sitting. "This one is very clearly smitten with you."

"Rubbish," said Philippa.

"I'm not even kidding," said Alex. "Did you not see the way she mooned at you throughout that conversation?"

"Oh shut up," said Philippa. "The only thing that might – and I do mean might – be at

play there, is a desire to follow in my professional footsteps.”

“Well, she definitely wants to do something with you, that’s for sure. Maybe even in this office,” said Alex with a smirk.

“Please, with the glass door?” said Philippa. “I can’t think of anything less practical.”

“Oh, so that’s the only thing stopping you,” said Alex, laughing openly now.

“Well, obviously not. There are plenty of things stopping me, not least that she’s so much younger than me, and that she’s my subordinate,” said Philippa, starting to feel slightly flustered at Alex’s line of thought.

“You’re hot when you’re in charge. You know that, right?” said Alex. “I mean, objectively. I guess I’m biased here, given the other night. But really, if all the girls in here aren’t swooning over you in their droves, I’d be highly surprised.”

Philippa blushed. “I’m not sure this is a helpful conversation to be having.” She felt hot and confused. She knew Alex liked her even if she didn’t want to be with her. But talking about it like this was making it harder to deal with.

“No,” said Alex, holding up her hands. “Sorry. Really. Unhelpful of me. But I do think you underestimate how cool you are. But yes, not my place, really.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Philippa and Dottie walked towards the community centre where Hardev's birthday party was being held. She wasn't sure why his mum had chosen a weekday evening for it, least of all a Monday night. But Dottie was excited. There were rumours that there was going to be a Taylor Swift mega mix.

The blossom on the trees in All Saints Square smelled of the promise of summer, and Philippa breathed in the scent. This wasn't so bad. She might be able to nab a few minutes outside and appreciate the warmth of the sun with another parent, if she could find someone she knew.

"Do you think I should have worn the blue top rather than this purple one?" asked Dottie as they opened the door to the hall.

"No," said Philippa, "you look fabulous just as you are. I'm sure everyone else will think so, too."

"Yeah," said Dottie. "I think you're right. Thanks, Mummy."

Philippa smiled as her daughter swept into the room, very clearly scanning to see where her little gang of friends were. She took the card and gift she'd got for Hardev and placed them on an already overflowing gift table.

There were a few children she didn't recognise, but she knew Hardev did lots of extra-curricular activities. Philippa was certain that was Mrs Khan's tactic to managing her somewhat overactive child. It wasn't a bad approach, she mused,

watching as Hardev was mobbed by various groups of kids.

A young girl of about eight with red hair approached the gift table.

Philippa smiled at her. She wasn't from Dottie's school.

She looked anxiously at the table, which was well and truly full.

"Do you need a hand?" asked Philippa. "Look, if I reorganise these things here, I think there is a tiny space for your gift. What a lucky boy Hardev is."

The girl nodded, biting her lip, before turning to call to her mum. "Mummy, can you help me with my shoelace? It's come undone again."

"I can do that if you like," said Philippa.

"No, it's ok," said a familiar voice. "I've got it."

Alex.

Mummy.

Alex was 'Mummy'?

"Um, hi," said Alex, looking at Philippa's stunned face. "This is Seren." She knelt before the girl to tie up her laces.

Philippa looked down at Alex and the child. "Hi, Seren, nice to meet you. So, Seren's your...?" she trailed off.

Alex looked up, having finished Seren's laces. The little girl ran off to find her

friends. “My daughter. Yes.”

Philippa was thrown. How could she have spent so much time with Alex and not have known she had a child? “But you never mentioned her.”

Alex stood up. “No.” She played with her hair, looking uncomfortable. “And I guess you want to know why.” Her eyes shifted left and right. She seemed more unsure of herself than Philippa had ever seen her before.

“Well, I mean, it’s your private business, I guess,” said Philippa, slowly piecing things together in her mind.

Seren . The name was familiar. It had been mentioned on Alex’s birthday.

“But if I’m totally honest, yes. I’ve told you all about Dottie and my divorce, and you even told me about your ex-wife a little.

It seems a bit odd not to mention such a major part of your life. ”

Alex frowned. “Yes, that’s fair.”

“And you give off this whole hedonistic ‘don’t tie me down’ vibe,” continued Philippa, “which seems quite at odds with that very sweet little girl. She has your eyes, by the way.”

Alex’s face lit up. “She does, doesn’t she? It’s weird, because technically we aren’t biologically related – my ex gave birth to her with donor sperm. But somehow, she looks like me, just with that beautiful red hair.”

“You don’t owe me any explanations,” said Philippa, who couldn’t help but be drawn by the warmth in Alex’s face when she spoke about her daughter. Briefly, she thought

about how her lips would feel on Alex's cheek.

"No, perhaps I don't owe any, but I'd quite like to give one," said Alex. "Look, they all seem pretty settled." She pointed to the clump of children dancing to Sabrina Carpenter, thanks to the DJ and his disco lights. "Let's get a bit of fresh air outside."

The square was beginning to turn pink as the sun sank below the church, enhancing the colour of the blossom.

"I love spring," said Alex. "It is a good reminder that there's always hope." She looked sad, and Philippa desperately wanted to take her hand. There it was again, that something that seemed to pull her away from people, from joy.

"Me too," said Philippa. "And you know, there is always hope. Although I have to say, you don't look like you're convinced."

"Well, today is a good day," said Alex, ruefully.

"The reason I don't talk about Seren is that I barely get to see her.

After my marriage broke down, my ex moved into a different house.

To start with, Seren shared her time between the two of us.

But bit by bit, month by month, Jess – my ex-wife – has eaten away at my time with her. "

Philippa frowned. This reminded her of some of the cases she supported her clients with.

Alex went on. "There's always an excuse for her not to come to me, always

something more important Seren needs to be doing.

She knows Hardev through karate, but I haven't even been able to take Seren to that.

Jess always does it. She says I'm too chaotic, that I have too many girlfriends, that I'm a bad influence. ”

Philippa could feel anger rising inside her.

“And have you ever been chaotic in a way that has harmed Seren?” Alex shook her head.

“And do you have an endless line of women parading through your house while Seren's there?

” Again, Alex shook her head. Philippa huffed.

“Then it's a load of crap. She's talking absolute nonsense. Trust me, I know about this stuff.”

“I know,” said Alex, dropping her head. “But it's all very well knowing that.

Actually making things change, or challenging Jess, is way harder than I ever thought it would be.

It's been so hard these last few months, even to see Seren for more than a few hours at a time.

” Alex looked up, tears filling her eyes.

Philippa reached out an arm and put it around her friend's shoulders.

“You don’t have children in order not to see them.

Even she asks me why I haven’t been around.

She thinks I’ve abandoned her, and I swear I haven’t. ” A tear tracked down her cheek.

They sat together, side by side in silence for a few minutes. Philippa’s brain had immediately gone into solutions mode, but she knew that, for the moment, Alex needed her just to be there, to hear her. “And today?” said Philippa, her voice low.

“Today, Jess texted saying I should take Seren to this party, so I dropped everything and did it. I’ll do anything to see her,” said Alex. “Anything.”

Philippa pressed her lips together. “This is incredibly unfair, not only to you, but also to your daughter. I’m so sorry, Alex. And I’m sorry you didn’t feel you could tell me about it before.”

“It’s not you,” said Alex. “It’s just that if I want to talk about Seren, I can’t avoid talking about the fact that I struggle to get to see her, and I really don’t want to. I like you, you’re really cool. And in another time and place things could have been different between us.”

Philippa felt the words like a punch to her stomach. Alex continued. “I just wanted to be me, without all that baggage, especially given how amazing a mum you are to Dottie.”

“Ha,” said Philippa with a chuckle, “you weren’t there at the weekend when my child informed me that I was a workaholic.”

“She’s got you bang to rights,” said Alex, bringing her own hand up to hold

Philippa's. "Anyway, I need to go back in. I want to make the most of being with Seren. I have to take her back as soon as the party ends."

"Hmm," said Philippa. "Do you?" They stood up, breaking contact, and walked towards the hall. "How about if we sneak off before the party's over and take Seren and Dottie for milkshake. You can text Jess and tell her a friend's parent invited you both out. I'll come back with you, if you like."

Chapter Twenty-Six

“Milkshake does seem to be the most valuable currency among kids of this age,” said Alex, who had opted for a caramel latte instead. The Vine was bustling and busy.

“Just be grateful it isn’t vapes,” said Dottie, who was sitting next to her.

Philippa and Alex dissolved into laughter. “You make a good point, m’lady,” said Alex. “We definitely prefer milkshake to vapes. Or indeed heroin.”

“What’s heroin?” asked Seren.

“A heroine,” said Dottie, enjoying every bit of being two years older than her new companion, “is a woman who is a hero to others. So I’m not sure why your mum thinks they’re less valuable than milkshake. For example, Harriet Tubman helped Black people escape slavery.”

“Indeed she did,” said Philippa, placing her hand gently on her daughter’s. This was all in danger of unravelling. “Seren, maybe you could tell us about your karate class? I hear that’s how you know Hardev.”

“Yes, well,” Seren began, her voice significantly quieter than Dottie’s, “I’m working towards my blue belt.”

“Ooh, that sounds good,” said Dottie. Seren smiled, gaining confidence and warming to her theme.

As the girls fell naturally into conversation, Philippa turned to Alex, who was opposite her at the table. “You look worried,” said Philippa.

“Honestly,” said Alex, “I am. For all the reasons I said before.” She looked over at her daughter to check she wasn’t paying any attention to the adult conversation. “I try not to change plans with Jess because I tend to reap a lot of stress and strain afterwards.”

“I get it,” said Philippa, “but tell me something. Does Jess ever change her plans on you?”

“Constantly,” said Alex, a wry smile on her face. “Ok, I see your point. Look, let’s not talk about her. It’s nice to see you. Thank you for pushing me out of my comfort zone.”

“It’s nice to see you, too,” said Philippa, her heart filling with empathy for what Alex was going through. Suddenly everything was making much more sense.

Alex smiled. “Yeah. I’ve been working on some designs for your bid. I’m hopeful that they’ll fit the bill. I’ll send them over to the lovely Sienna tomorrow.”

“Oh, the lovely Sienna?” said Philippa, feeling torn between teasing Alex and actual jealousy.

“Not my type,” said Alex, waving Philippa away, “but she’s definitely someone’s. I prefer a more mature woman.” She sat back in her chair.

Philippa folded her arms, unsure how to respond. “Hmm. Well, I look forward to seeing your work. And also, you do still owe me a viewing of your paintings.”

“I don’t show them to just anybody,” said Alex, “but I guess you’re not just anybody,

are you? Maybe after we've dropped off Seren?" She shifted awkwardly. "That's if you meant it when you said you'd come with me?"

Philippa unfolded her arms. "Of course I meant it. Although I can't come with you after we drop Seren.

Dottie really needs to go to bed soon. But I'd like to be able to help a little, if I can.

And can I just say, for what it's worth, you have done nothing wrong.

What is happening here," she gesticulated, well aware that small ears could still hear, "is all someone else's doing, and not yours.

You have rights." She took a breath. "Perhaps I can help you with that, if you'd let me? "

"Really?" said Alex, her eyes filling.

"Really," said Philippa, unable to resist putting her hand across the table to rest it on Alex's warm arm.

"Thank you. Graphic design pay doesn't tend to stretch to legal advice when you have to pay child maintenance and a mortgage, too." Alex had lowered her voice.

"I can imagine," said Philippa. "I feel very lucky, to be honest. Paul and I have been able to work through things between us and come to arrangements with money and all that sort of thing. I mean, I made sure we did it all with the appropriate court orders, because it's a means of protecting all of us – including Dottie. "

Philippa's daughter's head whipped round. "What about me?"

Philippa laughed. “I was saying we managed to work everything out with Daddy so we all get what we need. You get to spend lots of time with us both, right?”

“Oh, that,” said Dottie, glazing over, like this was the duller topic ever. “Yeah, it’s all fine.”

“Seren’s mums are separated as well, so she has a similar set up,” said Philippa.

“Do they?” asked Dottie, turning to Seren.

Seren paused and looked silently at Alex before answering. “Yeah. I don’t get to see Mum Alex as much as I used to. Mum Jess says she’s really busy.”

Philippa immediately turned to Alex, whose face had gone ashen.

Alex spoke quickly, “Seren, I am never too busy to be with you.” She manoeuvred herself so she could put an arm around her daughter’s shoulders.

“I think maybe I should have a conversation with Mum Jess and see if we can work something out so we can see each other a bit more.”

A tiny tear dropped down Seren’s face. “I’d like that,” she whispered.

Dottie put her hand into Seren’s and for a moment they all sat in silence together.

Philippa could feel anger building inside her.

It was very clear that Alex’s ex was saying one thing to her and another to their daughter, in order to engineer her chosen outcome.

It was unfair on Alex, but worse, unfair on Seren, who was only a child.

It was a familiar feeling to Philippa, who had met many parents in this situation through her work, but the feeling was sharper here, having a personal relationship with Alex, rather than a professional one.

She wanted to storm over to Seren's other mum's house and tell her exactly what she thought. But she knew that wouldn't be helpful.

They managed to steer the conversation onto more mundane matters, but Philippa could see that Alex was shocked by what Jess had said.

The atmosphere had changed. She desperately wanted to hold her friend, but it somehow didn't feel like the right thing to do amid the mess that was their fake romance, their real friendship and the feelings that Philippa increasingly harboured.

Seren and Dottie chatted companionably as the four of them walked towards Jess's house.

Philippa could see the set of Alex's face.

Every muscle appeared strained. She slipped her arm through Alex's.

"It will be ok," she murmured, not wanting the children to hear.

"I'm here for you." Alex didn't answer, but she did squeeze Philippa's arm.

The front door of the house opened even before they'd started up the path. "Hi, darling," came the singsong voice of the redheaded woman who answered the door.

"Hi, Mummy, this is my new friend Dottie. Can I show her my room?" said Seren, pulling Dottie through the door.

“Of course, sweetheart,” said Jess. Once the children were through the door, her demeanour changed. “You’re late back,” she said, dark eyes focused on Alex.

“I texted you to explain Seren had made a friend and we’d get a quick milkshake before we came over,” said Alex.

“Looks to me like you’ve made a friend,” said Jess with a sneer. “Or maybe she’s just another in the long line of women you have parading through your house.”

“Excuse me,” said Alex, whose face was white. “I don’t have women parading through my house, and even if I did, it wouldn’t be any of your business.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” said Jess, who was still standing on the doorstep, glaring at Alex and Philippa. “If it’s in a place my daughter spends time, then it is absolutely my business.”

“She’s so rarely at my house that she doesn’t meet anyone else there but me,” said Alex, her voice quiet and shaking slightly.

“So who on earth is this?” asked Jess, jerking her head towards Philippa. “Seren’s certainly met her.”

Philippa could hold onto her growing anger no longer. “I’m Alex’s solicitor, actually,” she said, slipping into professional mode with ease. She knew where she was there. “And I’d remind you that under the laws of England and Wales, your child has the right to see both her parents.”

Philippa could feel Alex’s gaze on her. She continued. “This isn’t a formal visit, but I would encourage you to heed the rights of my client before making any more remarks about her access to your child.”

Jess's eyes had gone wide. Her mouth opened, closed and then opened again. She faltered, then turned back into her house. "Seren, time for your friend to go home," she called. Dottie emerged quickly, taking Philippa's hand.

"See you on Saturday," said Alex.

"See you then," said Jess, and then closed the door before Philippa, Alex and Dottie had even turned away.

"Come to mine for a cuppa," said Philippa, putting her arm back through Alex's. "We can chat after Dottie's gone to bed."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Philippa had never seen Alex look as stressed as she did that evening. Once she'd checked Dottie was settled in bed, she emerged downstairs to see her friend sat on the sofa, her face strained, staring into space.

"Are you ok?" asked Philippa gently, not wanting to make Alex jump.

"Jess lied to Seren," said Alex. "She told her I'm too busy to see her."

Philippa pursed her lips. "She did. And it's wrong and deeply unfair to both you and Seren."

"What do I do now?" She turned and locked eyes with Philippa.

"Well, the first thing is we need to get you a proper routine to see her and spend quality time with her. From what you've said, this is a major issue," said Philippa.

"And you think we can do that?" asked Alex, allowing herself a small smile.

"Yes," said Philippa, "I do. But before we talk about how we do that, I really think you need a cup of tea and a biscuit or something." Philippa walked towards the kitchen. "I'm not trying to mother you," she called back into the living room, "but you look like you need some sustenance."

Philippa could hear Alex chuckling in the living room, and was relieved the tension had been broken slightly. "I can't believe you did that," said Alex as she walked into

the kitchen.

“What?” Philippa was filling the kettle.

“Pretended to be my solicitor!” said Alex, a little colour returning to her face.

Philippa shrugged. “Yeah, was I a bit much?”

“No, it was epic,” said Alex. “Did you see her face? That’s the first time I’ve seen her lost for words in the last two years.”

“I just hope it might make her think again in the future,” said Philippa, laying out mugs and teabags.

“The way you just ran off the legal stuff like that,” said Alex. “Properly impressive.”

Philippa shrugged again, but smiled. “That’s what I do. It’s my job.”

“Well, I appreciated it,” said Alex.

“Here, take this.” Philippa handed Alex a mug of steaming tea. “Toast? Dottie has strong-armed me into Nutella, so perhaps we should break that open?”

“Ooh yeah,” said Alex, “I could definitely do with that.”

Once back in the living room, they sat side by side on the sofa, toast on their laps and tea on the stylish coffee table in front of them.

“You look a little better now,” said Philippa.

“Thanks. It’s been a tough time, really. That’s why I don’t talk about Seren. It means

talking about Jess and the mess I made of my old life.” Alex took a generous mouthful of her toast.

“I can understand that,” said Philippa, endeavouring to be more ladylike with her toast consumption, but beginning to understand Dottie’s obsession with chocolate spread.

“I just thought if I did everything Jess asked, she’d understand I wasn’t trying to threaten her relationship with Seren. I thought she’d ease up and allow me more access.” Alex sighed. “It didn’t work.”

“No,” said Philippa, “I can see that. In fact, I’m thinking that one of the things we need to do is start to work out a way of setting some boundaries for your benefit, and of course for Seren’s. My professional opinion, for what it’s worth, is that you need to start pushing back.”

“Easier said than done,” said Alex, her face clouding.

“Yes, I know.”

Philippa really did know. The minutiae of co-parenting and family dynamics were complicated and laden with emotion.

While the law was there to help, situations were sensitive and difficult in many ways.

“I feel perhaps that Jess is trying to control this situation. Perhaps even trying to control you a little.” She chose her words carefully.

She didn’t want to push Alex into an uncomfortable position.

“You do?” said Alex. She put her face into her hands for a moment. Philippa stayed

quiet and put her arm around her friend's shoulders. "I guess I can see why you might think that."

Philippa breathed in the smell of Alex's shampoo.

She knew it was wrong to allow her mind to wander like this while Alex was suffering, but it was impossible not to respond to the woman beside her.

It was as though all the desires she had ignored for so many years of her life were rushing to the surface.

"I've been so weak," said Alex.

"No," said Philippa, squeezing Alex's shoulder with her hand.

"I really don't think you have. You've maintained a relationship with your daughter in spite of everything.

I've met people in your position who have simply given up.

It's clear your daughter adores you. You've done all you can to date, and now you need help.

And if you'll let me, I think I can help you. "

Alex lifted her head and allowed it to drop onto Philippa's shoulder. "Thank you," she breathed.

Philippa rested her own head on Alex's, and they sat like that without speaking for a few minutes.

“Mummy!” came a voice from behind them. Dottie appeared, bleary-eyed in her Taylor Swift onesie, and the two women sprang apart.

“What are you doing down here?” asked Philippa brusquely. “You’re supposed to be asleep.”

“I was,” said Dottie, squeezing onto the sofa between Alex and Philippa. “But I woke up and needed a drink and realised I forgot to take up my water bottle.”

Philippa sighed. “Well, up you get, Dot, your water bottle’s probably in the kitchen. Go and get it.”

Dottie looked questioningly at her mother, before trotting out of the room.

Philippa shook her head. “For goodness’ sake.”

“I can’t find it!” came a shout.

“Sorry, Alex,” said Philippa, getting up to help her daughter in the search. She found Dottie standing in the middle of the kitchen gazing into space. “There,” said Philippa, immediately seeing the bottle next to the sink.

“Oh yeah,” said Dottie. “I didn’t see it.”

“Clearly.” Philippa raised an eyebrow.

“Is Alex your girlfriend?” asked Dottie in a stage whisper.

“No. And even if she was, it would still be bedtime,” said Philippa, annoyed at herself for going red. Dottie stared at her for a moment, before vanishing back upstairs.

“Sorry,” said Philippa again when she returned to the living room. “She’s so nosey. I’m pretty sure she was trying to figure out what’s going on. She’s a terrible gossip.”

Alex laughed. “I think she’s awesome.”

“So do I, most of the time,” admitted Philippa. “But evenings are me time – grown-up time. As a single parent I guard that as a precious commodity.”

“I get it,” said Alex, “although I so rarely get to have Seren stay over. I’m a bit envious of your setup, to be honest.”

“Yes,” said Philippa. “Sorry, it’s probably insensitive of me to complain.” Alex waved a hand to dismiss it. “I can see now why you’ve been so hesitant to be in a relationship, but can I just say, you have every right to have your own life. Who you are seeing has nothing to do with your ex.”

Alex looked at Philippa, and a familiar sensation washed over the solicitor. One that told her there was more to be said here, but that neither of them were saying it.

“You’re right,” said Alex. “Of course you’re right. I think I was just desperate to prove to Jess that I’m a legitimate parent.”

“But that’s the thing,” said Philippa, unable to resist resting her hand on Alex’s. “You have nothing to prove to her. You are a legitimate parent. That’s it, no discussion.”

Alex looked for a moment as though she might cry, but then something seemed to change. She raised the hand that Philippa was holding to Philippa’s cheek. “God, you’re difficult to resist, Philippa Samfire.”

Philippa froze.

“I know what I said,” continued Alex, “about being in the wrong place for a relationship. And who knows, perhaps that’s still true, but I can’t stop thinking about you.”

Philippa felt an electric current travel from where Alex’s hand touched her to her stomach, which was somersaulting in a way that was utterly distracting. She couldn’t ignore the way she felt any longer.

“The feeling is entirely mutual,” said Philippa, her voice barely above a whisper. “But I don’t want to take advantage of you while you’re in a vulnerable state.”

“Oh please do shut up,” breathed Alex. “I might be having a challenging day, but I know exactly what I’m doing.” She closed the gap between them and kissed Philippa.

Philippa’s body came to life, all the sensations she’d been imagining washing over her at once. She kissed Alex back, longing for their contact to linger longer than the last one had.

Alex’s lips were soft, but demanded more, causing Philippa to part her own. She wanted as much of Alex as she was willing to offer. She felt Alex’s tongue touch her own and she groaned audibly.

Alex pulled away momentarily. “You ok?” she asked.

Philippa knew she probably appeared flushed, but she smiled. “More than ok.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Philippa leaned into Alex and kissed her, relaxing into it this time.

She could get used to kissing this woman, she decided.

Alex's arms were around her waist, and Philippa allowed her hand to travel up Alex's side to her face.

Her skin was warm and smooth. She knew she wanted more, but she didn't know how to ask for it.

The sense of wanting more was new to her.

She'd been on the other end of it with Paul, and with men she'd dated in her youth.

She'd always assumed that all women felt slightly uncomfortable about it.

She'd never even considered she might feel that way about someone herself.

But here she was, contemplating bringing her hand downwards to brush Alex's breast. And at the same time, being terrified to make any kind of move that might scare Alex away. She pulled back slightly.

"Ok?" asked Alex. "I know this isn't something you've done before, and I don't want you to feel pressured. If you want to stop, or you want me to go, please just say. It will be ok. I promise."

“I’m absolutely fine,” smiled Philippa. “And honestly, I’m not sure how I would cope if you left right now.”

Alex laughed. “Well, thank goodness for that. Now, for heaven’s sake, please touch me.” And she leaned towards Philippa to kiss her. This time more fiercely.

Philippa didn’t need telling twice, and brought her hand downwards, running her finger along Alex’s cotton shirt collar.

Her neck was inviting, and she broke the contact between their lips to dip her head and kiss under her collar.

Alex leaned her head back and sighed. “Am I doing it right?” asked Philippa, her voice muffled by the material.

“More than right,” said Alex. “You’re a natural.”

“I’m not sure about that,” said Philippa, beginning to unbutton Alex’s shirt without thinking. Once she had dealt with the top three buttons she slipped her hand onto Alex’s chest, grazing the lace at the top of her bra.

“Yes, Phil, that’s right,” said Alex, her voice low.

There was something immediately wonderful to Philippa about eliciting this kind of response from Alex.

This was a woman who always seemed so in control, who had been there and seen it all.

But here was Philippa, inexperienced and nervous, making Alex breathe more and more heavily.

Philippa's own breath had deepened, and she brought her face back to Alex's, to kiss her lips again as she moved her hand down further and stroked Alex's breast. It was Philippa's turn to sigh, and she could feel herself coming undone.

"How asleep is your daughter?" whispered Alex, her voice urgent.

"That is a very good question," said Philippa, mindful that the stairs came out directly into the living room where they were sat, snogging like teenagers. "Perhaps I should go and check."

"Good plan," said Alex.

"And if she is asleep, I propose you join me upstairs. My room's at the opposite end of the house to hers. Turn left at the top of the stairs – I'll text you if it's ok," said Philippa.

"I love Boss Philippa," said Alex, a glint in her eye. "All masterful."

Philippa blushed, but she was enjoying the other woman teasing her.

She tiptoed up the stairs. With every step she prayed that Dottie was fast asleep so she could close her door.

Her daughter always insisted on falling asleep with it open, as if afraid she might miss something interesting if she let it close.

She was nothing if not on brand, even at bedtime.

Trying to be as stealthy as possible, Philippa poked her head around the doorway.

Dottie was fast asleep, splayed out on her bed, an open book in one hand.

Philippa slowly put out her hand and took the door handle gently.

With infinite care, she pulled the door towards her, making as little sound as possible.

She had come this far, and to wake Dottie at this point would be a tragedy for her sex life.

She knew that for a fact. She allowed the door to close, then paused on the landing, taking a breath.

She'd done it. She silently punched the air, careful not to hit anything and make a sound.

Once in her bedroom, Philippa took out her phone and texted Alex. "All clear. The eagle has landed."

A few seconds later she heard footsteps on the landing. Alex appeared in the doorway, stifling a giggle. "The eagle has landed?" she whispered.

Philippa put a finger to her lips. "Shhh, close the door. Lock it."

Alex did as she was told, then turned to walk towards Philippa, who was sitting on the end of her bed.

With each step, Alex undid another of her buttons, shedding her shirt just as she reached Philippa.

"This reminds me of when I used to sneak to my girlfriend's house when I was in my teens," said Alex, leaning forward to unbutton Philippa's top.

"Her parents didn't approve, so she'd let me in through the back door after they went

to sleep, and I'd spend the night, only to have to escape before dawn. ”

“Wow,” said Philippa. “I didn’t do anything even vaguely that exciting or...” she gasped at Alex’s hand on her breast, the sensation from her nipple interrupting the connection between her brain and her voice.

Alex put her other hand onto Philippa’s shoulder and gently pushed her back. “Is this ok?” she asked. Philippa nodded, before grabbing the back of Alex’s neck and pulling her down onto her.

“It’s all ok,” said Philippa, not wanting to delay matters any further. “I want you.”

That was all Alex needed. “You are unbelievably hot,” she said, gazing at Philippa’s chest and midriff. “But I think that we’re both incredibly overdressed right now.”

Philippa smiled. “I agree entirely.”

Alex stood up again, while Philippa stayed where she was, leaning back on her elbows on the bed.

She watched as Alex slowly removed her shirt and bra.

Her hands went to her belt, and Philippa couldn’t bear to simply watch.

She stood to undo Alex’s buckle. She could see Alex’s neck and face flush as she unzipped her jeans.

Alex smiled and slipped Philippa’s shirt off her shoulders. It pooled on the floor, and Philippa wasted no time in undoing her bra and tossing it aside. Alex undid her trousers and Philippa stepped out of them. “I think you should get back on the bed,” said Alex.

“No,” said Philippa. “After you.”

Alex raised an eyebrow. “It’s like that, is it?”

Philippa gave a shy grin and nodded. So Alex shrugged and got onto the bed, naked apart from her knickers.

She lay on her back and looked up at Philippa, who climbed on and swiftly straddled Alex.

“You feel so good against my skin,” said Philippa, leaning down to feel her body against Alex’s and kiss her.

Philippa adjusted herself so she had one leg between Alex’s, and Alex groaned.

“You’ve done this before,” said Alex.

“Nope. I’m just following my instincts,” said Philippa, dropping her head to Alex’s chest to kiss her smooth skin.

“Well, may I say that you have superb instincts,” said Alex, breathlessly. “Oh yes, there,” she gasped as Philippa took her nipple into her mouth, licking it first gently, and then sucking it.

Alex pushed Philippa gently away and turned her over onto her back. She lowered herself onto Philippa and smiled. “My turn to be in charge,” she said. She kissed Philippa while allowing her hand to trail slowly down her stomach until it reached the top of her knickers. “And these need to go.”

Philippa didn’t have the wherewithal to answer in words, so she just nodded and raised her hips.

Alex pulled off the knickers and dragged a finger slowly down through Philippa, who thought she might actually die of happiness right there and then.

She couldn't recall a time when she had been this turned on with someone else in the room.

She brought her hands to Alex's waist, and pulled down her knickers, too.

"Good point," said Alex, making quick work of removing them and returning to her place.

Philippa felt an intense closeness to the other woman as they lay skin to skin, nothing to divide them.

She sighed, and for a second thought she might actually cry.

She held back, aware that this would spoil the moment, and before she had another thought, Alex's fingers had found where Philippa was wettest.

"Yes," said Philippa. "Yes, more."

Alex smiled and began to kiss Philippa's neck as she pushed first one and then two fingers into her.

Philippa stopped trying to make sense and instead gave in to the moment.

She could feel the care Alex was taking, as well as how turned on this was making Alex.

She wanted to touch her, too, but knew her dexterity would fail her at this moment.

“You are just gorgeous to touch,” said Alex, drawing her hand in and out in a steady rhythm, while Philippa’s breath accelerated. She adjusted her hand to move her thumb up and add a sensation that almost caused Philippa to come on the spot.

Philippa tried for a minute to delay the inevitable, but she couldn’t hold on any longer.

She grabbed Alex’s back with both her hands and squeezed as she felt the force of pleasure and passion overtake her.

If there had been no one else in the house, she knew she would have been noisier, but she managed to keep it down.

Once her orgasm had subsided, she held Alex close to her and breathed, wanting to hold onto the moment forever. Part of her wanted to hold onto Alex forever, too, but she knew that was probably just the biological chemicals. The alternative was too scary even to contemplate.

“I enjoyed that,” said Alex, her voice muffled by Philippa’s breasts.

“Oh my word,” said Philippa finally. “So did I.”

“I got that impression,” said Alex, popping up her head to look at Philippa’s face.

“There’s no need to look so smug,” said Philippa with a faux haughty look.

“Really? I mean, it’s been a while since I got a toaster oven,” said Alex.

“A what?” Philippa was confused.

“Google it,” said Alex with a wicked giggle. “But seriously though, you are a

beautiful and incredibly sexy woman. I can't even tell you how turned on I am right now. And that's not to put you under any pressure to do anything you don't want to, by the way."

"Oh, Alex, there are many things I want to do," said Philippa with a smirk. Then she flipped Alex onto her back and climbed on top of her. "Starting with this." Slowly, she began to kiss her way down Alex's body.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Philippa woke the moment her alarm went off.

She looked across at Alex, who was stirring, and her mind flashed back to a few hours earlier, going down on the other woman and making her almost squeal so much she would have woken Dottie, if there hadn't been two closed doors and half a house between them.

She smiled to herself. Definitely something to be smug about, she decided.

"Morning," said Alex, her voice crackling with sleep, her eyes still closed. Philippa enjoyed the fact that they were both still naked.

"Morning," said Philippa, moving across the bed to kiss Alex. She couldn't resist being close to her after the night they'd just shared. She knew she would be sleep deprived at work, but she really didn't care.

"This is the kind of alarm call a girl could get used to," said Alex between kisses.

Philippa smiled and kissed her again. Alex groaned in pleasure as Philippa gently dragged her fingers down Alex's front and brought them to rest exactly where Alex wanted her most. "Yes, I have decided," said Alex, her eyes still closed.

"I think this is the best way to wake up."

Philippa glided her fingers up and down, feeling how turned on Alex quickly got. She

was slick with want, and Philippa adjusted herself so she was fully on top of her. She kissed Alex passionately and soon Alex was gasping with pleasure.

“Well that was embarrassingly quick,” said Alex. “But my excuse is that I’m still turned on from last night. Or was it this morning?”

“Mummy, why is your door locked?” Dottie’s voice came from just outside the door. Both women froze. “Your door’s never locked. Except when you’re wrapping Christmas presents. And it’s the twenty-eighth of May, so you’re definitely not doing that.”

“Sorry, darling. I did it by accident,” called out Philippa, who had never felt less erotic in her life. She looked across at Alex and hissed at her. “Get in the wardrobe!”

“What?” said Alex.

“You heard me,” said Philippa. “Coming, darling,” she called before reverting to a whisper. “Look, I’m out to her, but I’m not ready to introduce her to anyone. Can you just hide, this once? I promise I’m not trying to put you back in the closet.”

“I mean, you kind of are,” said Alex, gathering various items of clothing from the floor as she made her way to the wardrobe. There was a hint of a smile on her face. “But given I’ve had about four orgasms in the last twelve hours, I’m going to let you off.” She vanished behind a white wooden door.

Philippa had thrown on a thick furry dressing gown and made her way to the door. She took a breath before unlocking it. “Morning, Dottie. How are you?”

“I’m fine, thanks. You?” said Dottie, her upturned face a picture of innocence. “Why is your hair sticking up like that?”

“Oh, um, I was doing yoga first thing,” said Philippa, putting her hand up to her head, where she was very clearly sporting what another adult would have recognised as sex hair.

“Whose phone is that?” asked Dottie, whose eagle eyes had picked out Alex’s mobile by the side of the bed.

“Oh, a friend’s,” said Philippa, flustered. “Why don’t you go downstairs and get the cereal out? I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Sure thing, Mummy,” said Dottie. “Have you remembered it’s Romans day?”

“Of course,” said Philippa, a cold fist of dread squeezing her heart. Dottie trotted away and Philippa closed the door.

A muffled voice emerged from the wardrobe. “So, have you remembered it’s Romans day?”

“It’s ok, you can come out now,” said Philippa. “And no, obviously, I’d completely forgotten. I don’t even remember being told in the first place, so it’s less forgetting and more never knowing. What the hell am I going to conjure up in the next hour?”

“Leave that to me,” said Alex, managing to make climbing out of the wardrobe look quite graceful. She’d somehow got herself dressed while Philippa was talking to Dottie. “Sorry about the phone,” she said.

Philippa waved away her apology, aware that the whole situation was somewhat teenaged. “No, it’s fine.”

The door flew open again. “Mummy, the rice crispies have run out!” exclaimed Dottie. “Oh, hello Alex. Why are you here? Did you have a sleepover?”

“Morning, Dottie, loving the shoes,” said Alex, without missing a beat. “They set your school uniform off nicely.”

“Thank you,” said Dottie.

Philippa collected herself. “Yes, Alex, my friend, had a sleepover last night. And she’s going to help us create a Roman costume for you.”

“She is?” said Dottie, entirely unphased by Alex’s presence.

“I am,” said Alex. “I have a plan.”

“You forgot, didn’t you, Mummy?” said Dottie.

“I think that technically I didn’t forget, it was more that I wasn’t told,” said Philippa, side-eyeing her daughter.

“I’m sure I told you and I think there was a letter in my bag or something,” Dottie insisted. “But anyway, what about the rice crispies?”

“Go downstairs and make do with cornflakes, I’ll be down imminently,” said Philippa, using the voice she rolled out if she didn’t want to be asked any further questions, either by her daughter or by colleagues. She was confident the letter was scrunched up at the bottom of Dottie’s schoolbag still.

“You are terrifying when you put your strict voice on,” said Alex with a grin.

“That’s the general idea,” said Philippa. “It’s the only way, sometimes! Now, I’m going to leap into the shower and emerge serene and ready for the day.”

“Any chance I can join you?” asked Alex with a wink.

“No chance, unless you want to give me yet more difficult explanations to provide for my daughter,” said Philippa with a laugh. “But I must confess to liking the idea.”

“Then we can book that in for a future date,” said Alex, who was busy organising her hair in the mirror on Philippa’s bedroom wall.

“A future date?” asked Philippa, her heart leaping. She hadn’t wanted to ask Alex what might be next, but she desperately hoped this might become something more than just one night of amazing sex.

“If that’s what you want,” said Alex. “I mean, I know it’s what I want.” She turned her head to look at Philippa.

“I do,” said Philippa, smiling back at the woman who had somehow managed to ingratiate herself into several parts of Philippa’s life.

“Then go and have your solo shower, safe in the knowledge that this is not a one-time thing,” said Alex, moving towards Philippa and kissing her. “In the meantime, I’m going to organise this child’s costume.”

“You’re my hero,” said Philippa.

“No,” said Alex, looking serious for a moment, “actually you’re mine.”

Philippa smiled and made her way towards the shower. The steaming water felt refreshing against her skin. She closed her eyes and allowed it to rinse away all the activities of the night before and that morning, safe in the knowledge that she would never forget them.

By the time Philippa got to the kitchen she was greeted by Dottie and Alex, who appeared to be eating pancakes. “Pancakes?”

“Yep,” said Alex. “The cereal situation was serious.”

“Very serious,” confirmed Dottie.

“So I made pancakes while Dottie got me a few things for her costume,” Alex was dishing up piles of fluffy American-style pancakes for each of them, Philippa silently acknowledging that they would go down a treat given all the recent energy she had expended.

“Very industrious of you both,” said Philippa, taking a sip from the coffee cup Alex proffered.

“Thank you. Now, I have a question for you – can I cut a hole in this bed sheet?” asked Alex.

“It looks like an old one of Dottie’s, so go ahead,” said Philippa, sitting down to tuck into her pancakes, which had been served with Nutella and chopped banana. She really was going to have to get on board with chocolate spread.

Philippa scrolled through her phone, preparing herself for the work day ahead, while all around her was a hive of activity – a mixture of pancake eating and costume designing.

She took a moment to absorb just how natural Alex was with Dottie, and was struck by the injustice of the distance Jess had put between Alex and Seren.

It felt so unfair and unnecessary. She reaffirmed her personal resolve to improve the situation in whatever way she could.

“Ta-dah!” said Alex, presenting Dottie, who was wearing a simple tunic Alex had styled from the old sheet. Her school tie had been repurposed into a belt round her

middle, and an old red pashmina Philippa hadn't worn in years was around Dottie's shoulders in place of a cloak.

"Amazing," said Philippa. "And if you get the jelly shoes we bought you for the beach last summer, they can be your Roman sandals."

"Yesssss!" said Dottie, running up the stairs to her bedroom.

"Thank you," said Philippa. "Really, thank you. You are so creative. I'd never have been able to work out how to make something as good as that."

"You're entirely welcome. Dottie's a fabulous person. I am sure, given the chance, Seren would love to get to know her properly," said Alex. Her face clouded for a moment.

"I can see you're a brilliant mum," said Philippa, her voice soft. "And we will sort it so you can see Seren more. I know we can do that."

"Thank you," said Alex with a small smile.

Chapter Thirty

The sun shone through the blossom on the branches, and through the windows into Philippa's office.

She could have used the blinds, but today she felt like letting the sun in, even though it got in her eyes at certain angles.

She smiled out into the world. So this was what it was supposed to be like.

She wanted to open a window and shout at everyone who could hear that she finally understood what all the fuss was about.

It had only taken her forty-six years. But she had arrived. And she had grand plans to stay.

In the back of her mind, she knew that she and Alex hadn't talked about what the future looked like.

There was a lot to talk about. Their lives were increasingly intertwined.

This was evident when she opened her inbox to find an email with designs in from Fletcher Design Co.

She had to consider the best approach for Alex's ex-wife as well.

And what about their children? How would any relationship – if they were in one –

play out for them?

In truth though, today Philippa really didn't care about any of that. That was a problem for Future Philippa. Present Philippa was too busy enjoying spicy flashbacks from the night before.

There was a knock at her door. She looked up to see Sienna beaming at her through the glass. "Morning, Philippa," she said once she'd been ushered in. "You look like you've had good news."

Philippa smiled in a way that she hoped denoted professionalism. "Mmm. Some good news. Do come in, how are you?"

Sienna practically bounced as she sat in one of the chairs opposite Philippa's desk. "Have you seen Alex's designs? They are amazing. So good. I think they'll really add value to our bid."

"Really," said Philippa. "They've come in, have they?" She pretended her heart hadn't skipped a beat when she'd seen the email a few moments earlier. "I'll have a look. Hang on."

She opened the attachments on the email and was confronted by a set of beautiful designs that had absolutely captured what Philippa and Sienna had described.

She could see why Sienna was so excited by them.

While the bid was all about the content of what her company could offer, providing a visual identity that wrapped around that offer could make all the difference.

"I see what you mean," murmured Philippa, looking at the designs, before peering over her reading glasses at Sienna, who was clutching her hands together.

“I just wanted to say,” said Sienna, her voice shaking slightly, “thank you. Thank you for the opportunities you have given me.”

“Of course,” said Philippa, taking off her specs.

“I mean, you’ve championed me right from the start, especially in these last few weeks.

” Sienna bit her lip. “And to have such a fantastic female, and not to forget, queer role model is just incredible.” She smiled, her cheeks reddening.

“Sorry, I’m gushing. But I couldn’t not tell you given how far this work has come. ”

Philippa wasn’t sure what to say. This wasn’t what she had expected from her subordinate, and it didn’t help that she was a bit sleep deprived.

“Well, Sienna, thank you. I appreciate you taking the time to say so.” She closed down the files on her screen.

“But I haven’t given you any more support than anyone else in your position deserves.

” Philippa wasn’t sure if that was a moment of disappointment on Sienna’s face she saw, fleetingly.

“I’m glad you feel I’m a role model, but please don’t forget to forge your own path.

As you’re already doing. You are a credit to the firm, you really are. ”

“Thank you,” beamed Sienna. “I’ll make the final touches to the presentation, and I’ll see you later when we run through it.”

“Great, thank you,” said Philippa.

Sienna looked down and checked her iPad before looking up again. “You have a client waiting. Shall I let him in?”

“Sure,” said Philippa, ready to face whatever the rest of the day had to offer.

Philippa knew full well she was on autopilot for her appointments, her years of experience allowed her to whip through them, offering sensible advice and strategic proposals.

Chrissie was waiting for Philippa when she left work. “Come on,” said Chrissie, “let’s go for a walk. It’s a beautiful evening.”

“Let’s,” said Philippa, delighted to see her friend.

“You said you had news. I feel like this might be juicy news, based on our last conversation?” Chrissie nudged her friend’s arm with her elbow.

“At the risk of sounding like a teenager, yes, it is juicy. In fact, it feels very juicy right now,” said Philippa, well aware she was channelling her inner seventeen-year-old.

“Oh, hang on,” said Chrissie, pausing to appraise the bags under Philippa’s eyes. “You totally did the deed with Alex, didn’t you?”

Philippa pressed her lips together before nodding eagerly. “Yes, I did.”

“Oh my God! This is huge news,” said Chrissie, reaching for her phone.

“Well put that away, you can text Nisha about it later!” admonished Philippa. “But

yes, it does feel quite huge. You never told me.”

Chrissie gave Philippa a wry smile while she put her phone back in her pocket. “I never told you what?”

“That being with a woman is possibly the best thing you can ever do.” Philippa giggled.

“Ha ha, well, it’s hardly a well-kept secret.” Chrissie grinned. “Although I must say, I am enjoying seeing the giggly version of you. I’ve never met giggly Philippa before!”

“It’s funny,” said Philippa. “That reminds me of something Dottie said to me a few days ago, about how work is so important to me. I wonder whether I might have leaned into my professional persona a bit too much.”

“Is that a bad thing?” asked Chrissie.

“I don’t know that it’s bad, as such, but I wonder whether there’s another side to me that I’ve neglected,” mused Philippa. “I know I was later in life coming out, but it’s more than that. Perhaps I’ve been so busy being driven, I haven’t taken the time to just be me. To have fun.”

“That’s interesting,” said Chrissie. “I remember last year when I was going through a lot of stuff and I was determined to hold on tight to what I thought was the way to live a good life. I mean, I needed to make a change. That was good, but I was being too prescriptive, I think.”

“Oh yes,” said Philippa. “You said you set yourself a rule of not being able to fall in love, right?”

“Ha,” said Chrissie. “I did. And with good reason. But I guess I learned that

sometimes to make a change, you have to let go.”

“I, for one, am delighted that you got together with Nisha,” said Philippa. “I can see how happy you make each other. As your friend, I feel really happy for you.”

“And I feel happy for you,” said Chrissie, briefly bringing her hand to Philippa’s back. “I think it’s great you’ve met Alex. You’re so brave. Putting yourself out there at our age is tough. And this is all new to you.”

“I guess,” said Philippa. “But what else was I going to do? I couldn’t just stagnate. And anyway, part of the reason I’ve become so wedded to my job, is that I didn’t feel entirely wedded to my husband, as it were.”

Chrissie giggled. “I love your turn of phrase. Is that something they teach you in law school? Seriously, though, that makes sense.”

“The thing is, I’m not sure where Alex is when it comes to being in a relationship. She has a lot going on,” said Philippa.

“You said that before,” said Chrissie.

“It’s more than I thought. She has a child she didn’t tell me about.”

“A child?” said Chrissie. “And she hid that from you?” She stopped walking.

Philippa stopped and turned slightly to look at Chrissie. “Yes, yes she did, but she’s explained why.” Chrissie frowned slightly. “Though I must admit, that was my initial reaction as well.”

The friends started to walk again, and Philippa updated Chrissie on what had happened and why.

Chapter Thirty-One

Roderick was lurking by Philippa's office door. She sighed and ushered him in, questioning, not for the first time, the wisdom of glass doors on offices. She couldn't pretend she hadn't seen him.

"Morning, Philippa, how are you?" He plonked himself into a seat opposite Philippa's desk.

"I'm fine, thanks. What can I do for you?" she asked.

"I just thought I'd check in and see how you're getting on with that bid for the finance firm. The presentation is this afternoon, right?" He was trying to communicate a casual air but was clearly very aware of when the meeting was taking place.

"Yes, that's right. I think we're in a good place," said Philippa, looking down at her notes.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Roderick seemed keen to be involved.

Philippa gave him a wry smile. "Well, if you're free at half past two, you could come and be in the room and help answer any questions Gerry and his team have."

"Sure, I'll check my calendar," he said, making a show of taking his phone out. "Yes, I think I can squeeze that in."

“Very good of you,” said Philippa. “You, me and Sienna. No doubt we’ll make a formidable team. I’ll send you over the slides.”

“Awesome,” said Roderick, unable to keep the triumphant smile from his face.

Philippa’s phone beeped. Alex: “Can I see you tonight? x”

Philippa looked up at Roderick. “Ok, well, we’ll gather here at twenty past and then head over to Gerry’s office. See you shortly.”

Roderick nodded and stood up. “Right you are. See you then.”

Once he’d left the office Philippa smiled, relieved to hear from Alex.

They’d shared a couple of texts since the night they’d spent together, but no plans had been made to meet up.

She desperately wanted to see Alex again, but didn’t want to overwhelm her.

She picked up her phone and responded straight away.

“I’d love to,” she wrote. “I’ve got the presentation later today, but I’ll drop you a line when we’re done. You could meet me in town? x”

“Deal. Good luck! You’re going to smash it x” responded Alex. Philippa hoped she was right.

Sienna knocked on the door, signalling that a client was ready for Philippa.

It was a complicated divorce case, with a complex financial settlement involving all kinds of assets.

Philippa needed to stop thinking about the woman who had kissed her on Monday night and start thinking about court orders.

She waved at Sienna to let the client in.

Sienna returned a few moments later with the client and passed Philippa a file of papers. This was a two-person job. Philippa opened the file, impressed with the quality of the work Sienna had done so far.

The day passed quickly, and before long Philippa, Sienna and Roderick were strolling along Colmore Row towards Gerry's impressive building.

The receptionist there was ready for them and showed them straight up to a top floor office with panoramic views of Birmingham.

Gerry was there, along with four of his colleagues.

"Welcome, Philippa," he said, shaking her hand. "I hope you've been offered a drink."

"We have," said Philippa. "Let me introduce my team to you."

Chapter Thirty-Two

“That was incredible,” said Sienna, sitting at a high table in the upmarket bar she, Philippa and Roderick had directly adjourned to following the meeting.

“It was,” said Philippa. “You did an excellent job. Well done.”

“I can’t believe he just said then and there we had the contract,” said Sienna. “I didn’t think that would happen.” Her eyes were wide.

“It’s certainly unusual,” agreed Philippa.

Roderick returned from the bar with a bottle of Champagne and three glasses. “If we can’t celebrate with bubbles today, when can we?” he said, grinning as he sat down. “Well done to you both. That was outstanding work.”

Philippa raised her eyebrows. She hadn’t expected him to be so magnanimous. “Well thank you, for being here and helping to answer questions.”

“You’re welcome. Anything I can do to get it over the line,” he said, pouring each of them a generous glass of fizz. “And Sienna, you’ve done a great little job on this.”

Philippa sighed inwardly. “There’s no little about it. Sienna did a great job.”

“Thanks,” she said, her face glowing as she looked across at Philippa, barely acknowledging Roderick.

“And I have to say, Philippa,” said Roderick, clearly keen to stay in the conversation, “the design work you had done was a stroke of genius. It really brought everything to life. I loved it.”

“Thanks,” said Philippa. “Sienna worked hard on that, too. But yes, I agree. It seemed to impress the panel.”

Philippa texted Alex to meet her outside the bar in half an hour.

In a bid to reclaim her life from work, she’d decided she would only stay for one drink with her colleagues.

She was excited to see the woman who had turned her into what Chrissie termed ‘giggly Philippa’.

She wondered if that was a version of her that Dottie had ever seen. Perhaps she should.

The three colleagues replayed the key moments from the presentation, including the moment that Gerry had proffered his hand across the boardroom table to shake Philippa’s. “It was like a scene from *The Apprentice*,” said Sienna, her cheeks pink from the bubbles.

“That was brilliant,” said Roderick. “But hey, I need to make a move. The wife will never forgive me if I’m late home.

” He rolled his eyes. Sienna laughed awkwardly, but Philippa’s face remained stoney.

She made a mental note to ensure that Roderick had done his EDI training, particularly when it came to gender equality and sexism.

“God, you’re fearless,” said Sienna after Roderick had left the room. She drained her glass and poured herself another. “You just faced him down right there.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Philippa drily. Technically, Roderick was a partner in the firm, albeit a junior one, and she didn’t want to criticise him in front of an employee. She did allow herself the glimmer of a smile though.

“You are, though,” said Sienna. “Wow, this has totally gone to my head.” She took another generous sip.

“Well, we deserve to celebrate,” said Philippa. “After all, we’ve just taken our company into a new chapter. You deserve a bit of fun.”

“Maybe you do, too,” said Sienna, looking intently at her boss.

Philippa laughed. “I think we all do.”

“But I mean it,” said Sienna. “You work so hard, and you seem on top of everything. I feel like you deserve to relax a bit.” Sienna’s voice was low, and Philippa had the sense that she was trying to say more than just those words.

Philippa smiled. “Well, perhaps.”

Sienna adjusted herself on the stool she was on to face Philippa and leaned slightly forwards. “I think you don’t get how amazing you are,” she said.

“Sorry?” said Philippa, aware that Sienna’s hand was apparently resting on her knee.

“You can’t see it,” said Sienna, into Philippa’s confused face, “but I can.”

“I…” but Philippa was cut off by the younger woman leaning in and touching her lips

to Philippa's.

"I see the pitch went well," said a voice beside them. Philippa and Sienna flew apart. It was Alex. "I'm a little early." Her mouth was a straight line.

"Hi," said Philippa, "yes, you are. Sorry."

"We were just celebrating," said Sienna.

"I can see that," said Alex, raising her eyebrows. "I'll leave you guys to it." She turned and walked out of the bar.

Philippa was momentarily thrown. She stood to follow, but Alex turned and held out her hand. "No," she said, "don't follow me." The bar door slammed, and so did Philippa's heart.

Philippa sat back down and looked towards Sienna. "This is not happening, Sienna."

"I'm sorry," said the younger woman, biting her lip. "I got carried away."

"You did," said Philippa. "And there are many, many reasons why it's not happening. Not least because of the power dynamic here. That, and Alex over there is special to me."

"Oh," said Sienna, her already red face rapidly getting even redder. "Oh god, I'm such an idiot. I'll resign immediately. I'm so sorry."

Philippa held up her hands. "Shhh. That won't be necessary." She sighed. "Go home, sober up, and we'll speak no more of this."

Sienna nodded meekly. She gathered her jacket and her bag and crept out of the bar,

following in Alex's footsteps.

Philippa lifted her glass to her lips. Suddenly, Champagne seemed like the wrong thing to be drinking. She drained her glass and poured herself the remnants of the bottle. She couldn't face going home right now, not after she'd messed everything up with Alex.

Philippa pulled out her phone, hoping against hope that there was a message from Alex there. There was, but it had been sent twenty minutes earlier. "Hey gorgeous, can't wait to see you and I bet you'll be celebrating. I'll be a bit early x"

Philippa rested her chin on her hands. She'd just had the best sex of her life, with a woman who meant more to her than one hot night, and she'd wrecked it thanks to a misjudged conversation with a member of staff.

Alex had warned her that Sienna had a thing for her, but Philippa couldn't see it.

The whole idea that women might want her was new to her, and she wasn't ready.

What made it even more frustrating was that while objectively she could see that Sienna was an attractive woman, Philippa didn't fancy her at all. It was all such a mess.

She looked at her phone again. Alex might have told her not to follow her, but she couldn't resist sending a text. But what could she say? As she was staring at it, her phone lit up again. "How did the bid go, bab? x" It was Charlie.

"Brilliantly, but now I've ruined my life and I need your help. Gin and tonic do you? x" texted back Philippa.

"??? send me the address xx" came back from Charlie.

Philippa smiled. She was lucky to have him as a friend. If anyone understood, it would be Charlie. And he knew Alex, so maybe he could help her understand what best to do next.

She ordered gin and tonics for them both. Champagne was rapidly losing its appeal.

Chapter Thirty-Three

“ O k, ok. Slow down. So, one – you slept with Alex and had the best sex of your life?” said Charlie between sips of his drink.

“Correct,” said Philippa, frowning.

“And you followed that up by making the deal of your life?”

“Check,” she said.

“And then your hot paralegal laid a smacker on your lips just as Alex was about to come and meet you for more erotic fun?”

“Well, I wouldn’t describe Sienna as that, given I don’t want to be with her, and I don’t have the hots for her. But, essentially, yes,” said Philippa, tapping her fingers on the table while Charlie caught up.

“Firstly, how good was the sex?” asked Charlie with a wink.

“Ugh, Charlie,” said Philippa, “must you?”

“I must,” he said. “How can I give you advice if I don’t know the whole filthy picture?”

“You’re terrible,” said Philippa, with a reluctant smile, “but yes. It was epic. All these years, I never knew it was supposed to be like that. It felt almost life changing.

Honestly, if I ever had any doubt I was gay, it was completely erased by that night.”

“Well, that sounds amazing,” said Charlie. “Honestly, bab, I’m really pleased for you.”

“Yes, but now it’s all ruined,” said Philippa, raising her voice.

“Well, not necessarily,” said Charlie. “Fletch is pretty laid back. I’m sure if you explain what happened she’ll understand.”

“Do you think?” said Philippa. “She seemed pretty pissed off.”

“I can understand that. I would be, in her place, but I know her. She’s quick to forgive, really she is,” said Charlie. “But tell me, what changed? I thought this was all strictly fake? You’d agreed and everything.”

“Yeah, we had agreed. And like you said, she has a lot going on. In fact, that’s what I discovered completely by accident. I took Dottie to a party and bumped into Alex and Seren,” Philippa explained.

“Ah,” said Charlie, “that’ll do it. I’m not sorry.

I did tell her not to keep it from you. I know she struggles talking about Seren with everything going on with her ex, but when I realised you were actually becoming friends, I hoped she’d talk to you.

At the very least, I reckon you could give her some good professional advice.”

“Yeah,” said Philippa. “And I have offered. We had a bit of a run-in with Jess, actually, so I took her back to mine to give her a cuppa.”

“Is ‘give her a cuppa’ a new euphemism?” Charlie made air quotes with his fingers.

“Ha bloody ha,” said Philippa, laughing in spite of herself. “We did have tea, actually, but then, well, things happened.”

“Oh yes,” said Charlie. “I do enjoy it when ‘things happen’.” Philippa rolled her eyes. “Look, text her, explain. Then it’s up to her what she does. I can’t tell you how she’ll respond, but it’s not fair on either of you if she’s making decisions without having all the info.”

“You’re right, of course.” Philippa finished her drink. “If I draft something, will you check it?”

“Only if you buy me an espresso martini,” said Charlie.

“Order two and I’ll pick up the bill. One of those would go down a treat right now,” said Philippa, passing him her credit card.

She drafted the text three or four times.

After ten minutes, she thought she had it.

“I’m so sorry,” it said. “You were right about Sienna. She does have a thing for me, as evidenced by her kissing me unexpectedly just as you walked in. It sounds lame, but it really isn’t what it looked like.

I’ve told her it’s absolutely not on and she’s apologised.

I get that you’re angry and you’ve every right to be.

But I want you to know that you are special, and if you’d like to be with me, I’d like

to be with you. xxx”

“Come on then,” said Charlie. “Let’s have a look.” He took her phone and scanned the message. “Oh my,” he said. “That nearly brought a tiny tear to my eye.”

“Oh do shut up, Charles,” said Philippa. “This is serious.”

“I’m being serious,” he protested. “Genuinely, it’s very touching. I’d totally forgive you, after a few days of giving you the silent treatment. Obvs.”

“Obvs,” echoed Philippa glumly.

“So,” said Charlie. “Are we sending?”

“We’re sending,” said Philippa. She pressed her phone screen, and the message disappeared with a swoosh. She immediately felt butterflies in her stomach.

She didn’t much feel like her cocktail now, but she took a sip of the alcohol-infused espresso, and it gave her a little lift. “Do you think it’s too late for me, Charles?”

“Too late?” said Charlie. “Too late for what?”

“Love. I never went through that adolescent phase of crushes and kisses and mistakes. I never had those carefree relationships with women. And now here I am, only just working out who I am, and it’s complicated.

” She took another sip of her drink. “Dating as a single mum brings a whole new dimension to it. Even if things did work out with Alex, how do I navigate telling Dottie? I feel like there’s so much pressure to get everything right.

And so far, I seem to have got it all wrong. ”

“Bab,” said Charlie, quietly. “Can I let you in on a little secret?” Philippa looked at him expectantly.

“It’s always complicated. Because people are complicated.

I came out when I was sixteen years old, and it was complex for all sorts of reasons.

Whoever you are, finding a person that is your person is hard.

We all have stuff going on, whether that’s children or personal insecurities. ”

“Is that why you resisted being in a relationship for so long?” asked Philippa, glad to focus on someone else.

“I guess so,” said Charlie. “After Ralph, I couldn’t face taking that kind of risk with my heart all over again.

He hurt me so much. So I stuck to one-night stands or short flings.

” He smiled. “Don’t get me wrong, I really enjoyed it.

There’s nothing wrong with that, but after a while, I began to feel like I was missing something.

I think it crept up on me. I hadn’t even realised. ”

“What happened?” asked Philippa.

“It was my friend Kiera, actually. She started again, after having her heart well and truly stomped on. She met someone – Seymour.”

“Jack’s sister?” said Philippa, beginning to piece things together.

“Yes, well that, too. Seeing her happy and settled and taking a risk for a second time made me see that perhaps even I could do the same. And then of course Jack popped up. I didn’t realise he was queer to start with, so it felt like an inconvenient crush.” He smiled at the memory.

“Are there ever convenient crushes?” asked Philippa.

“Ask your Sienna,” replied Charlie with a snigger.

“But one evening I was supposed to go to the cinema with Kiera, but Seymour was poorly. Jack said he fancied seeing the film, so we went together. And the rest, as they often say, is history. He’s brought out parts of me I never expected to see again.”

“That’s lovely,” said Philippa.

“It hasn’t been without its difficulties. I’ve got to be honest, I nearly had a panic attack when he started routinely leaving his toothbrush and shower gel at my place.” He played with the rim of his glass.

“Why?” asked Philippa, furrowing her brow.

“I accused him of trying to move in by stealth,” replied Charlie with a wry smile.

“God, you didn’t?” said Philippa, rolling her eyes.

“I did. I also suggested he’d taken tips from his lesbian sister and was trying to U-haul.

Perhaps not my finest hour. But he just said he wanted to be with me and didn't see the point of taking his toothbrush back and forth between his place and mine.

And in that one simple sentence, he had highlighted my issues with commitment. ” Charlie pressed his lips together.

“Do you still have issues with commitment?”

“Yes. Old habits die hard,” Charlie admitted, “but I’m working on them.”

“Sounds like Jack is very patient,” said Philippa, one eyebrow raised.

“Oh shush. I am a treat,” said Charlie.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Philippa had a headache. It was to be expected, really, given how much she and Charlie had ended up drinking. She pressed her palms to her forehead, remembering the night before.

She rose from her bed, grateful she didn't have an effervescent child to prepare for school. She was studiously avoiding her phone, dreading what might be waiting for her. Alex hadn't replied last night, and in fairness, Philippa really didn't blame her.

Just as that thought passed through her mind, her phone rang. Her stomach turned over and she grabbed it. But it was Paul. Or more specifically, Dottie, video calling her mum, as she did from time to time before school when she was with her dad.

"Hi, Mummy," said Dottie.

Philippa ruffled her hair and tried to ignore how grey and hungover she looked. "Morning, lovely girl. How are you?"

"I'm good. Are you ok? You look like you're poorly or something," said Dottie, bringing her face closer to Paul's phone to examine Philippa's face more thoroughly.

"Oh, I'm fine," said Philippa, throwing on her sunniest smile. "I didn't sleep too well, so I'm a bit tired. That's all."

"Did Alex have another sleepover?" asked Dottie.

Philippa gave a tight smile. “No, not last night.” She knew Paul would be listening, and while she didn’t owe him any explanations, this wasn’t the conversation she needed this morning. “So, are you all ready for school?”

“Yes. I just wanted to ask you about something important,” said Dottie, who seemed to be roaming the house at speed. The movement was making Philippa feel nauseous.

“Ok, ask away,” said Philippa.

“If you had to be any sea creature, which would it be?” she asked. “Daddy said he’d be a crab, so he’d still have pincers to hold his golf clubs.”

“Of course he would,” said Philippa. “And what would you be?” she asked, desperately trying to think about all things nautical.

“I’d be a seahorse, of course,” said Dottie.

“Yes,” said Philippa, “of course. I think I’d probably be a sea anemone. Do you remember when we saw them in the rock pools in Paignton, when we visited last summer?”

“Oh yes,” said Dottie grinning. “They’re all red and smooth when they’re above the water, but when the tide comes in, their little fingers come out to grab tiny creatures to eat.”

“That’s right,” said Philippa.

She came off the call feeling a bit more human, but knew she needed coffee.

She looked at her diary. She didn’t have any meetings until later, which meant there was time for coffee and carbs.

She had a quick shower and headed out. She'd been meaning to go to Jack and Seymour's cafe, the Jam Pot, for a while.

The walk down the high street did Philippa good. Things felt less overwhelming, and the paracetamol she'd taken was beginning to kick in. She arrived at the cafe to find Seymour behind the counter.

"Morning," said Philippa, smiling at the woman with blonde hair tied back in a messy bun behind the counter.

"Morning," said the woman. "You're Charlie's friend, aren't you? I'm Seymour. Charlie's dating my brother."

"Yes," said Philippa, and she introduced herself.

"Lovely to meet you properly, Philippa. Charlie talks about you a lot," said Seymour. "What can I get you?"

"Well, I'm going to confess that due to Charlie's intervention last night, I need all the coffee and all the toast," said Philippa putting her bag down by a table.

"I hear that," said Seymour. "What's your favourite flavour of jam?"

"Actually, I wondered if you had marmalade?" asked Philippa.

"Of course," said Seymour. "We don't judge here." They both laughed, and Philippa reflected that Charlie seemed to have really nice friends.

Seymour didn't take long with Philippa's order. The marmalade was good and bitter, just the way Philippa liked it. That, along with the wedges of toast and the double espresso, made Philippa feel like a new woman.

She opened her laptop and logged into her work email account.

She needed to start planning for the new contract with Gerry.

Roderick had already begun to besiege her, with four emails sent that morning expounding his ideas for the best way to start that planning.

Reluctantly, she had to admit that some of his ideas were good, but she couldn't help but get the sense that he was trying to mansplain her job to her at times.

There was nothing from Sienna, which was a relief.

Philippa's hangover was just one reason not to go into the office this morning.

Sienna was the other. She dreaded being on the receiving end of some kind of long-winded apology for what had happened.

Sienna had already said sorry, and Philippa really didn't want any embarrassing postmortems.

After an hour of working through various case notes, Philippa's phone pinged.

This time, it was Alex.

Philippa took a deep breath and swiped her finger across the screen.

A heart had appeared underneath the message Philippa had sent the previous day.

There was another message being typed, if the three bouncing dots were to be believed.

Then the dots disappeared. They reappeared again.

And then stopped. This happened over and over for about five minutes, with Philippa's stress levels growing steadily higher and higher.

Eventually, she locked her phone and put it away in her bag.

"A watched pot never boils," said Seymour as she collected Philippa's empty plate. "I couldn't help but see you frowning over your phone."

Philippa smiled. "Caught in the act. When did dating become so difficult?"

Seymour laughed. "My fiancée could tell you some stories about that, especially online dating."

"Oh, is that how you met?" asked Philippa, her interest piqued.

"No," said Seymour, a knowing look on her face. "I was her shoulder to cry on after all her disastrous Tinder dates. Eventually she worked out what she was missing."

"Genius," said Philippa. "Well, I'm working on the basis that if I ignore my phone for a bit, it's more likely to bleep at me. But for now, I need to head into town."

"Good luck," said Seymour with an easy smile. "I'm sure it will work out if it's meant to."

"I hope you're right," said Philippa, waving goodbye.

For a change she took the bus into town, leaving her car behind.

The number 50 was an efficient if bumpy way down the A435 into the city centre,

and it gave her some time to take stock.

The route took her through Kings Heath, then the cooler Moseley and onto scruffy, arty Digbeth, complete with miles of street art and graffiti on abandoned buildings.

Birmingham was a city of colours, and Philippa loved being part of it.

It was eleven am, but in spite of the time and the strict rules on city buses, there was the distinct waft of a joint being smoked at the back of the vehicle.

Philippa wondered if this might help her chill out a little bit about what Alex might say next.

She was relieved by the heart that Alex had sent, but concerned about the amount of time it was taking her to properly respond.

It seemed unusual for her. Philippa fought the urge to text and ask if she was ok.

She knew she needed to give the woman some space.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Sienna was already in a meeting with Roderick when Philippa arrived at the office, much to her relief. She knew she couldn't put off coming face to face with the younger woman forever, but she was happy to delay it for now.

She had a lot to go through, and various cases to catch up on. It was a good day to get her head down and make a dent in her 'to do' list. For once, she didn't have any clients to see, so she was able to concentrate without interruption.

It was mid-afternoon when Sienna knocked on her office door. Philippa sighed. It was time to get this over with. She gave what she hoped was a professional smile and ushered the paralegal in.

"Good afternoon, Sienna. How are you?" asked Philippa.

Sienna shuffled into the room and closed the door behind her.

"I'm fine," she started. "Well, not really fine. But I'm ok.

"She shifted from foot to foot. "What I mean to say is how sorry I am about last night. I can see it was completely my fault and a misjudgement. I don't want it to affect my position here, or my career. "

Philippa put up her hands to stop Sienna talking. "Hey, hey, stop, it's ok. Thanks for your apology, but as I said last night, it's best we just draw a line. We're all human, and we all make mistakes."

“Thanks,” said Sienna, looking genuinely relieved. “And I hope you were able to make it up with Alex.”

“Yes, well, that’s not something you need to worry about,” said Philippa, well aware that the bouncing dots had stopped and as yet, there had been no further communication from Alex. “Now tell me about the Abbott case, please. You said you’d prepared a summary for me?”

“Oh, yes,” said Sienna, raising her iPad to talk through the details of the case. She looked relieved to be discussing business at last, and so was Philippa.

After about fifteen minutes, Philippa thanked Sienna and told her to go home once she’d finished her next meeting.

Once she’d finished her own work, Philippa folded her laptop and opened the cupboard in her office.

Her sports bag was still in there. She hadn’t been for a run in a few weeks and today felt like a good day to blow away some cobwebs.

Once again, she cursed the preponderance of glass in her office structure, and she went to use the toilet and shower facilities down the corridor.

Once changed, she felt good. The hardest thing about going for a run was always getting her sports bra on.

Once that was done, she knew nothing could stop her and this was by far the easiest way to stop thinking about Alex.

Before long, Philippa was running along the canals by Brindley Place, admiring the variety of boats and bars and restaurants in that area.

She flew past the unimaginatively titled National Indoor Arena, where she'd seen Elton John perform a few years before, and headed into a more residential area.

She turned on a history podcast and escaped into a story about a failed political assassination.

Her legs ached to start with, and her lungs protested, but within a kilometre or two, she found a rhythm and her breath, her legs, her arms, her whole body, started to work smoothly.

This was the moment she ran for. When everything was working in harmony and she forgot she was running, or how far she'd gone.

She was just in the moment. She breathed in.

Then out. In. Out. Her feet pummelled the towpath, and the world disappeared.

She ran a regular route, which meant she didn't need to concentrate on which way to go. After an hour she found herself approaching her office building once again. She could see a familiar figure leaning against the wall outside.

Was that Alex?

She slowed, then stopped.

"Hi," said Philippa, "you ok?"

Alex looked like she'd been crying. She was drawn and pale. "Er, not really."

"God, I'm so sorry about last night," said Philippa. "I never meant to hurt you."

“No,” said Alex, “it really isn’t you.”

“Come on, let’s go inside,” said Philippa, swiping them both into the building. “Everyone will have gone home. We can sit in my office and talk.” She sensed that something was seriously wrong, and she was concerned it might have something to do with Seren.

“Here,” said Philippa, sitting Alex down in one of the easy chairs in her office, and taking the one beside it. She poured them both a glass of water.

“Thanks,” said Alex.

“What’s happened?” asked Philippa.

“I’ve come to say goodbye,” said Alex.

“What?” Philippa frowned.

“I’m going to France.” Alex looked down at her lap. “I’m sorry, because I really thought we could be something, but this is something I just have to do.”

“Ok,” said Philippa, “slow down. Why are you going to France? It sounds like more than a holiday.”

“It is, but I have to go.” Alex clasped her hands together. “Jess is moving to France with Seren. I can’t let my daughter go without me.”

“When is she going?” Philippa’s brain was already scrolling through the legal ramifications.

“Next week,” said Alex.

“And has she enrolled Seren in a school there?” Philippa leaned over to her desk to grab a pad and a pen. She jotted down a couple of notes.

“Not yet,” said Alex.

“Good,” said Philippa.

Alex looked up. “Why does that matter?”

“Well, she can’t actually change Seren’s school without consulting you. The law is a greyer area in terms of moving her more generally, but aside from that, have you given written permission for Jess to take Seren out of the country?” asked Philippa.

“No,” said Alex.

“Right, we need to act quickly then,” said Philippa, getting up and moving to her desk.

She put on her reading glasses and turned on her laptop.

“She can’t actually take Seren out of the country without your written consent in the first instance.

And even then, she can’t change her schooling without your consultation.

Obviously, we need to work fast, though, given how quickly she seems to be making her plans. ”

“So we can stop this?” asked Alex, a glimmer of hope in her eyes for the first time that evening.

“I think we can,” said Philippa. “And I’m going to do everything in my power to prevent it from happening.”

“But can you act as my solicitor, given, well, you know,” said Alex, a half-smile appearing on her face.

“Not formally. But I can provide you with the advice you need. We will work something out, I promise,” said Philippa, looking over at the woman who had come to mean so much more to her than she had ever expected.

“Thank you,” said Alex. “You really are my hero, you know.”

“I do my best,” conceded Philippa, with a smile of her own.

“Can I just say how hot you look, all sweaty and post-exercise?” said Alex.

Philippa rolled her eyes. “Let’s focus on the matter in hand.”

“Yeah, but don’t tell me you haven’t thought about bending me over your desk,” said Alex with a smirk.

Philippa ignored her but went very red. Alex appeared to have a hotline into her brain again. She shook her head slightly and started writing an email. Her fingers moved quickly and efficiently. Alex stayed quiet for ten minutes while she finished it off and pressed send.

“Right,” said Philippa. “I should be able to get something for you tomorrow once everyone is back in the office. In the meantime, don’t respond to any messages from Jess. And for goodness’ sake, don’t go to France.”

“Oui,” said Alex. “Message received.” She saluted Philippa. “I genuinely don’t know

what I would have done without you. Jess told me that because she's the primary carer, she can go wherever she wants with Seren. I couldn't see any way of making it work without going with her."

"I could tell by the look on your face. Even your freckles went pale. Honestly, I'm relieved you have a bit more colour now," said Philippa. "And, for the record, you know I'm not interested in Sienna, right?"

"Yeah," said Alex. "I'm not going to lie, I did have a bit of a moment when I saw her kissing you."

"You stormed off," said Philippa. "Not without good cause, I might add."

"Yes, I did that, but as soon as I read your message, I knew you were telling the truth." Alex rubbed the back of her neck. "You don't seem the kind of woman to hide behind a lie. So after I'd cooled down, I started to reply to you. Then Jess called and this whole nightmare began."

"I see," said Philippa. "That makes sense."

Philippa took off her specs and placed them on the desk. She walked around to the other side and perched on the edge of it to face Alex, who stood and walked towards her.

Alex smiled and put her arms around Philippa. The pair embraced, and Philippa breathed in the scent of Alex's hair.

Alex moved her head back so she could kiss Philippa. "I know I'm a bit of a mess," she said, "but I'm your mess."

"You're no more mess than I would be in your position," Philippa told her. She

kissed Alex back. “Come on. I need to get a shower. You coming with me?”

Alex’s eyebrows shot up. “I sure am. Is Dottie with Paul?”

Philippa grinned and nodded.

Chapter Thirty-Six

“What are you waiting for?” asked Philippa with a grin, as she peeled off her running gear and dropped it on her bedroom floor.

“Understood,” said Alex with a laugh. Moving quickly, she shrugged off her clothes and followed Philippa into the shower.

Philippa kicked a rubber duck out of the shower tray onto the tiles. “My apologies,” she looked at Alex, “not the vibe I’m going for.”

“I’m here for any vibe if it means I’m here with you,” said Alex. “And besides, I think that duck has voyeuristic tendencies.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” said Philippa stepping into the steaming water and pulling Alex by the hand to join her.

Philippa reached for the shower gel and soaped up her hands.

She ran them over her own body and then over Alex’s, enjoying the feeling of the suds on their skin.

Alex pulled her in for a kiss, but Philippa had her own plans.

She placed her hands either side of Alex’s hips and pushed her to the tiled wall of the shower.

“Oh, I see,” said Alex between kisses, “it’s like that, is it?”

“It is,” said Philippa, peppering her neck with kisses before kissing her breasts and running her hands down her stomach.

Alex sighed. “I still think you’ve done this before.”

Philippa giggled and brought her hand down to stroke Alex in a way that made the other woman stop talking. Philippa kissed Alex on the mouth hard, swallowing Alex’s groan. She held the woman up against the wall, moving her hand up and down, getting almost as much pleasure from it as Alex was.

Alex reached around to squeeze Philippa’s bum with one hand, while curling her other arm around Philippa’s back for stability. She gasped and pushed her head back, taking advantage of the empty house to make all the noise she needed as she reached orgasm.

“You’re going to need to give me a minute before I’m any use to you,” said Alex, a few seconds later, her eyes still closed, the water running down her face.

“I can live with that,” said Philippa, “for a short while, at least.”

“Slave driver,” said Alex, opening her eyes and smiling. “Although I must confess, you look very sexy all covered in soap suds and water.” She brought her hands up to smooth back Philippa’s hair, which had fallen over her eyes.

Philippa threw her head back, exposing her neck, which Alex happily kissed. Philippa could feel the hot water pounding on her back as Alex explored her with her mouth.

“Ok, Samfire, your turn.” Alex took Philippa’s hips and turned to push her against the tiles.

Philippa gasped. “They’re cold!”

“And yet you didn’t hear me complaining,” said Alex, licking her lips before slowly making her way down the solicitor’s front.

Philippa sighed. “I could get used to this, you know,” she said quietly.

“Me too,” agreed Alex, pausing as she reached Philippa’s midriff. Slowly, she teased Philippa, kissing her at the base of her stomach and the top of her legs.

Philippa could feel the blood rushing in her ears, the water pounding around her, and her heart racing. Alex hadn’t even brought her tongue to her centre yet, but the anticipation was the sweetest suffering she could remember.

Kneeling before Philippa, Alex looked up. “May I?”

Philippa nodded. “Yes,” she whispered, “I may die if you don’t.”

“Well just call me a hero,” said Alex, before moving her mouth into place, and setting off sensations Philippa couldn’t recall experiencing before. There was something exposing and vulnerable and incredibly sexy about having Alex in this position, using her mouth to pleasure her.

“You’re...” Philippa tailed off, before giving in to the moment and closing her eyes. Within minutes she was arching her back and groaning, while Alex held her.

The lovers eventually made it out of the shower and into the bedroom, where Philippa furnished them both with towels.

“So,” said Philippa, “is it true, what they say about you? Are you just amassing notches on your bedpost?”

Alex gave a rueful smile. “No,” she said, rubbing her hair with a towel. She stopped to look at Philippa. “Don’t get me wrong, I’ve had my fair share of fun. And I’ve definitely been generous with my time since I split up with Jess.”

“Generous,” said Philippa, raising an eyebrow as she dried her back.

“You know what I mean.” Alex started putting on her clothes. “But I’ve never pretended to anyone I wanted a relationship, I’ve never lied about who I am or what I want.”

“Hmm,” said Philippa, Alex’s words catching her off guard. “Whereas I have.” She sat on the bed, wearing just her underwear.

“Hey,” said Alex, “what did I say?” She moved to sit by Philippa.

“Sorry, it’s not you. I mean, you’re right. You’ve never lied. But I have. I lied to myself all those years, and to Paul. And to everyone I know.” Philippa pulled a t-shirt over her head.

Alex put an arm around Philippa’s shoulders. “But that’s different. It wasn’t a malicious lie, or a selfish one. It was a complicated one, laced with denial and confusion.” She dropped a kiss on Philippa’s cheek.

“Perhaps,” said Philippa. “But for at least the last five years I’ve known I needed to address who I really am.”

“And now you have,” said Alex. “And the thing I love about you is that there isn’t a hint of bitterness to you, you don’t seem to resent the years you spent with Paul. You’re just here in the moment, wanting to enjoy life.”

Philippa smiled, feeling a little better for the reassurance.

But there was something else nagging at the back of her mind.

“And here I am, in the moment, wanting to enjoy my life. Enjoying you.” She got up and picked up a pair of jeans to pull on.

“But I’m going to be completely honest. I want this to be more than just sex.

I want to be more than just someone you have fun with for a little while.

” Philippa zipped up her trousers and fastened the button.

She looked down at Alex. “I know this isn’t cool, and I’m very much not playing hard to get, but I really do want to have a real relationship with you, Alex.

And being even more honest, I feel things.

I don’t think I can do any more of this with you if I don’t think that you might feel those things, too. ”

“Feel things?” echoed Alex, thoughtfully. She pulled on her socks.

“Yes,” said Philippa, who was organising her hair in the mirror, trying to distract herself from how invested she was in Alex’s response to her monologue.

“And aside from all of that, my help around getting you access to Seren has absolutely nothing to do with what I’ve just said.

Whatever happens now, whatever we do, whether we have a relationship or not, you have my help, support and friendship. ”

“And that,” said Alex, “is precisely why I am beginning to ‘feel things’, as you put it,

as well.”

“You are?” asked Philippa, daring to look at Alex.

“Yes. And I’m completely terrified by the prospect. The last time I had a serious relationship I ended up in the place I am now – at the whim of someone I no longer respect, fighting desperately just to get access to my own daughter.” Alex frowned.

“I can completely understand that.” Philippa moved to where Alex was sitting on the bed and knelt in front of her. She took Alex’s hands. “I don’t need you to commit to me here and now. I just want to know that it’s a possibility.”

“It’s definitely a possibility,” said Alex, smiling down at Philippa. “But don’t you want to have some fun? Play the field? Meet all the girls?”

“Have you seen the field?” asked Philippa. “Because I’m not sure I want it. I don’t have any need to be with anyone other than the person I’m...” she stopped herself. “The person in front of me right now. I’m forty-six years old. I don’t have time to mess around practising. I want the real thing.”

“That is so very you, Phil,” said Alex with a laugh.

She pulled Philippa up so they could stand opposite one another.

“Ok, here’s the deal. I, Alex Fletcher, feel things for you, Philippa Samfire.

I promise that you are not a notch on my bedpost, or merely someone to have fun with.

Although that doesn’t preclude us from having fun. ”

Philippa smiled and tucked a lock of Alex's damp hair behind her ear.

Alex continued. "I don't know where this will lead, but I know I want to find out, and I want to do that with you. I'm a horrible scaredy cat, so I can't promise not to have a few wobbles along the way. But I can promise to tell you if I do."

"Deal," said Philippa, holding out her hand to shake Alex's.

"A lawyer to the last, I see," said Alex.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Philippa knocked on Roderick's door and entered his office. She needed a favour, and for once, he was the person who could help.

"Morning, Philippa," he said, a wary smile on his face. "How are you this morning?"

"Fine, thanks," she said. "Did you pick up the emails I sent you last night?"

"Mm, yes," he said. "Why don't you take a seat?"

Philippa sat on one of the easy chairs by a small coffee table, and Roderick sat in the other. "Ordinarily I would handle a client of this nature myself," she said.

"Yes," said Roderick. "I was wondering about that."

"I have something of a conflict of interest when it comes to this case." Philippa shuffled in her seat. "Alex Fletcher is my, um, well, she's my girlfriend."

Was she? Philippa wasn't really sure, but for the purposes of getting this done, she needed a way of explaining to Roderick what was happening.

"Ah yes, your partner, I remember meeting her at that networking event a few weeks ago." He smiled.

Philippa had forgotten about that, and how the whole fake relationship had begun.

And now it was reality. The word ‘partner’ felt weighty, though.

And somehow, the tone Roderick used made her feel a little uncomfortable.

She wasn’t sure it was a word Alex would be keen to use, especially given her previous relationship experience, but she knew now wasn’t the time to obsess over that.

“Yes.” Philippa gave a close-lipped smile. “As you’ll see, her ex-wife is trying to take her child out of the country to live. You don’t need me to tell you the legal problems there, but we do need to act quickly.”

“I can see that,” said Roderick, referring to his notes. “She’s looking to go next week. Sounds a bit chaotic, but it must be incredibly upsetting for your partner.”

“Mmm,” said Philippa, frowning.

“I’ll get a letter drafted for you by lunchtime today and we can send it electronically and by post this afternoon. That way we can ensure it arrives before any further plans are made.” Roderick scribbled a note on his yellow pad.

“I’m hoping we don’t need to resort to a Preventative Steps Order,” said Philippa, knowing just how stressful and costly that might be for Alex.

“Agreed,” said Roderick, “but we have that in our back pocket should we need it.”

“Indeed.” Philippa smoothed down her trousers.

“Because based on what you’ve told me, it’s Alex’s name on the birth certificate along with her ex-partner’s, so she has full parental responsibility. She has rights – and, indeed, so does her daughter,” said Roderick.

“She does,” said Philippa, relieved to have his support. Perhaps he wasn’t so bad after all.

“I am sure we can work this out,” he said.

“We can talk about the best way to arrange payment after it’s all done, if that’s ok,” said Philippa.

“No,” he said, holding up his hand. “This one’s on me.

I think I owe you one. It’s been a steep learning curve working here, and I appreciate some of the pointers you’ve given me.

” He sighed. “This is a very different firm to my last one, but I think for the better. You were right about Sienna. She is a really talented person and has so much to offer us.”

Philippa smiled in surprise. “Well, thank you. That’s very generous of you. I’m aware I can be a bit spiky at times.”

“I think we all can,” said Roderick.

Philippa left his office a few minutes later, revisiting her own prejudices about the man who had annoyed her so much since his arrival. She texted Alex to let her know the wheels were turning, and she received a heart in response.

The rest of the day was filled with the usual round of paperwork and appointments.

Philippa thought about what it might be like to go on a proper, real date with Alex and, beyond that, perhaps even go somewhere nice for a day trip, with their daughters.

She shook herself from her reverie when her laptop pinged to remind her that she had a meeting with Gerry to discuss the details of the new contract.

The stroll down Colmore Row to Gerry's office took in Pigeon Park and the cathedral. Philippa had been able to leave her jacket behind, and the warmth of the sun felt good on her skin.

"Good morning, Philippa, how are you doing?" asked Gerry, who had come down to the main reception area to meet her. "I'm fed up with my office, let's go and grab coffee somewhere else."

"Sounds ideal. I love a Turkish coffee at that Syrian cafe, so maybe there?" Philippa turned her head in the direction of the establishment she meant.

"Perfect," said Gerry. "How's Alex?"

"Ah, she's good, thanks," said Philippa, with a smile.

"Glad to hear it. And glad to see you so happy with someone." Gerry plunged his hands into his pockets. "Of course I'm sorry things didn't work out with Paul. He's a good guy."

"He is," agreed Philippa.

"But I can see that this works much better for you. And may I say, since the divorce, Paul's golf is now frighteningly good, so he has you to thank for that."

Philippa laughed. "My work here is done."

They took a seat in the cafe and Philippa ordered her customary Turkish Coffee complete with ornate cup, saucer and Turkish Delight.

“You’re a braver person than me,” said Gerry, looking uneasy at the thick, strong coffee. “I’ll stick to my usual latte. Anyway, well done again on winning the contract. Your team were so professional and dynamic, and the product you put forward was excellent.”

“Well, thank you, Gerry. I really appreciate that, and I know the team will as well.” Philippa poured herself some coffee from the small pot on the silver tray. “Of course, the hard work starts here, to get all the right plans and people in place to ensure we deliver what we promised.”

“Well, I have no doubt you’re more than equal to the task,” said Gerry.

Philippa smiled as they began to work through the details of the programme. “I’m really keen that no one feels that legal support with issues – especially family issues – is out of reach to them,” said Philippa, thinking about Alex’s situation.

“Agreed,” said Gerry.

“So I suggest we come in and do some work with your team on what we can offer and how it all works.” Philippa scribbled notes down on her pad.

“That sounds like an excellent plan,” said Gerry.

Philippa’s phone began to ring. “So sorry,” she said. “I thought it was on silent.” She picked it up and saw Alex’s name flash up, as well as eight messages from Alex asking her to call. “I’m sorry, Gerry, I need to take this.”

“Please do, I’ll have a look at some of the figures we discussed,” he said, putting on some reading glasses.

Philippa took her phone call outside into the sunshine. “Alex? What’s happened?”

“She’s gone,” said Alex.

“What?” said Philippa, her heart rate rising.

“Seren,” Alex was breathing heavily, as though she had been running. “I went to pick her up from school, but she wasn’t there. The teacher said Jess had been in to pick her up just after lunch to catch a flight.”

“Have you tried calling her?” asked Philippa.

“Yes, but she’s switched off her phone or something. I’ve texted, too, but nothing.” Desperation came through loud and clear in Alex’s voice.

“What the hell is she doing?” said Philippa. “Ok, don’t panic, or at least, try not to. Let me make a couple of calls, but see if you can get yourself to the airport. I’ll meet you there.”

“I’ve just run back to my place to get my car. I’m leaving now. Please tell me this isn’t happening,” begged Alex.

“Look, it’s ok, we can sort this out,” said Philippa, desperately hoping that she could. “I’m leaving town now and I’ll go straight to the airport. See you there.”

She hung up and dashed back into the cafe to give Gerry her apologies. Some things were more important than work, however big the deal.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

“Look, I know this is a weird one, but I need a favour. Tell Roderick he has to get to the airport,” she said. “Yes, Birmingham Airport. And then I need you to check when the next flights to France are leaving.”

“Sure, Philippa,” said Sienna.

Philippa could already hear her typing on her computer. “And once you’ve done that, I need you to get to an address for me.” She paused. “It’s a bit of an extraordinary ask, but I need you to go and check whether the house has been cleared out or not.”

“I know I don’t need to know the details to help, but would you be able to tell me what this is about?” asked Sienna. “I might be more use if I know why I’m doing this.”

Philippa hesitated. “It’s for Alex.”

“Alex, your?—”

“Yes, my Alex,” said Philippa, dispensing with a title for their relationship altogether.

“Her ex-wife is taking her daughter out of the country against her wishes, and we need to stop her before she gets on the flight if at all possible.” Philippa could hear fevered typing.

“Roderick is acting as her solicitor. And I’m acting as, well, as someone who cares

about her.” Philippa overtook a line of lorries.

“I get that,” said Sienna. “All understood. So you need me to check to see if the house has been packed up or not? Makes sense.”

“Yep – this might just be a holiday dressed up as something more, but it might be the real deal. I think we need to know for sure,” said Philippa.

“She lives in one of those Victorian terraces in Kings Heath, so you’ll be able to see through the big front window and hopefully it’ll be clear from that.”

“Got it,” said Sienna, “the next flight for France is due to take off in about forty-five minutes, so you need to get a wiggle on.”

“Yep. Believe me, I am not resting on my laurels here,” said Philippa, putting her foot down again, thankful for her electric MG’s acceleration. “Get Roderick to call me when he’s on his way.”

“Sure thing,” said Sienna. “I’m hanging up now. Good luck.”

Philippa was making good progress when she hit a traffic jam. There had been a minor collision ahead and everything had come to a standstill. “Fuck!” she exclaimed, just as her phone began to ring.

It was Roderick. “Hey boss, Sienna’s given me the update, I’m on my way.”

“Avoid the M42, I’m in a traffic jam and I have no idea how long I’ll be stuck,” said Philippa, so frustrated she wanted to cry.

“Noted. I’ll go round through Solihull,” said Roderick. She could hear him shutting a car door and putting on his seatbelt. “Do we need to contact the police?”

“I hope not. If at all possible, I’d like to manage this informally. You know as well as I do that you don’t have to stay married, but if you have kids, you’re divorced forever, and you always have to manage that dynamic. I don’t want to make this any worse than it already is.”

“Yeah,” said Roderick, “never a truer word. And Alex is on her way there?”

“She is. Sienna has her number, so call her when you arrive. Looking at the state of this traffic, you’re going to be there before I am,” said Philippa.

“Got it. I’ll call you when I get there,” said Roderick.

“Thanks.” Philippa immediately redialled. “Alex, you ok?”

“Yeah, although I just heard a traffic update saying to avoid the M42 because of an accident. I’m relieved I’d already got onto the A roads instead,” said Alex.

“I wish I’d heard that update,” Philippa told her. “I’m in stationary traffic, I’m afraid.”

“Oh no!” said Alex, her voice catching. “So what should I do when I get there? What do I say?” Her breaths came fast.

“Don’t worry. Roderick’s on his way. I’ve briefed him and he knows what to do.” Philippa thought for a moment before continuing. “And I’ve sent Sienna to Jess’s house to take a look through the window and see if it looks like it’s been emptied.”

“Sienna? Ok.” Alex hesitated. “Good idea. I really should have thought to check there myself, but I just knew I needed to get to the airport before the flight left.”

Philippa chose not to share the timing of the next flight.

It wouldn't help Alex to know that there was less than an hour now until the potential departure of her daughter.

There was no need to stress her out any more, and the last thing Philippa wanted was for her to stop concentrating on the road.

Philippa turned off her car. It was clear she wasn't going anywhere any time soon.

She felt powerless and angry. She'd advised clients so many times about how best to manage access to their children, but she'd never experienced it from such close quarters.

She had no idea how Alex was still functioning.

She couldn't imagine how she would cope if Paul tried to take Dottie from her.

Not for the first time, she took a moment to appreciate how supportive he'd been throughout what must have been a difficult time for him.

She looked at her watch. Just twenty-five minutes until the flight left.

The odds of Alex and Roderick getting there before Jess and Seren went through security were growing slimmer with every minute.

A bead of sweat dropped down her brow as she began to strategise.

It was the only way she could cope. She reached across to the passenger seat and retrieved the bag in which her laptop was stashed.

She moved the driving seat back and opened it up, then began to make a list of options for what Alex would be able to do if Jess had succeeded in taking Seren out

of the country.

She knew that ultimately, when it came to family situations such as these, there was never a black and white answer.

Families were complicated. And she knew that, if push came to shove, Alex would leave the country to be with her daughter.

Of course she would. The selfish part of Philippa dreaded that option.

How on earth could they, as two single parents, maintain a relationship between France and Birmingham?

It would be more than difficult. Deep down, Philippa knew she would support whatever Alex chose to do.

But for now, she hoped against hope there was a way to resolve this.

Eventually Philippa's phone rang again. "I'm here with Roderick," said Alex, her voice urgent. "This place is huge."

"It is," said Philippa, "but I think Sienna's given the check-in counter number to Roderick. Go there first."

"Ok," said Alex. "I'll call you in a bit."

Philippa's pulse was racing now, even as she sat in her stationary car. She tried to imagine Alex and Roderick finding Seren and Jess as they queued up with their suitcases.

At that moment, a police car appeared, having driven the wrong way down the hard

shoulder. An officer got out and began to speak to people in their cars. Philippa wound down her window to hear.

“So sorry, ladies and gents,” said the officer, a portly chap with a moustache. “This section’s going to be closed for a good hour or so. We’re going to turn you around to go back the way you came and leave at the next junction.”

Philippa groaned. Was nothing going to go her way?

This was not the way things ended in those Hollywood romantic comedies with a race to the airport.

By the time she got off the motorway and found a new route, the flight would be long gone.

Still, she had to do something. She switched on her car, ready to move the moment the cars behind her turned around. She called Roderick. “Anything?”

“No,” said Roderick. “I’m sorry, Philippa, but I think we’re too late. I’m here with Alex. The counter was already closed, and the gate’s closed now, too. The flight is about to board.”

“Oh no,” said Philippa, her head in her hands. Even though she knew it was irrational, she felt as if she had failed in some way.

“It looks like she got our letter and freaked out,” said Roderick. “She’s trying to get away before any action is taken.”

Philippa sighed. “Yes, you’re probably right. Is Alex ok?”

“Not really,” said Roderick. “We’re heading back. Should we meet you at the

office?”

“Yes, I’ll be there around the same time as you by the look of things.” Philippa ended the call and send Alex a text, trying to reassure her that they would make sure she didn’t lose Seren for good.

At last, Philippa was able to turn her car around and drive back down the motorway towards the previous junction. She could hardly bear to imagine what she would face back at the office.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Philippa finally left the motorway and began to head towards Birmingham city centre. Sienna's name lit up on the dashboard.

"Sienna, what can you see?" said Philippa, dreading the response.

"I can see a woman with red hair and a child, filling suitcases in the living room. They look like they're going somewhere," said Sienna.

"What?" said Philippa. "They're still there?"

"Looks like it. What do you want me to do?" asked Sienna.

Philippa took an abrupt left turn, to head directly to Kings Heath. "Call Roderick. I'll call Alex. We'll meet you at the house."

"What if they try and leave?" said Sienna.

"Well, you can't stop them technically, but perhaps you could try and stall them somehow? Use your creativity." Philippa wanted to be of more help than this, but it was the best she could do.

She hung up and dialled Alex. "Alex, she's still at the house, but it looks like they're leaving for the airport soon."

"So it's not too late," said Alex, her voice thick with tears.

“Not yet,” said Philippa, “but we need to get there quickly. Sienna’s there, but there’s a limit to how much she can do.”

Alex’s voice was grim. “Ok, I’ll go straight to the house.”

Philippa leaned forward, willing her car to go faster. She had to stop this somehow. Ten minutes later she pulled up outside Jess’s house, where she could see a red-faced Jess remonstrating with Sienna.

“So sorry,” Sienna was saying to Jess. “I thought it was the taxi I’d booked and then didn’t need, so I told the driver to go. I had no idea it was yours.”

“We need to catch a flight urgently,” said Jess. “That taxi was taking us to the airport!”

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry. Look, let me pay for your taxi, I’ll get an Uber for you on my account now,” said Sienna, her performance befitting RADA. She pulled out her phone and looked for the Uber app.

Philippa could see Alex and Roderick walking up the street from the opposite end. Before long, they had all reached the bottom of Jess’s front path. Philippa could see Seren in the living room through the window.

“Jess,” said Alex, “what are you doing? The school said you were taking Seren to France.”

“Yes, I told you I was taking Seren there,” she said, looking around. “Who are all these people?”

“Good afternoon,” said Roderick offering his hand. “My name is Roderick Kent, and I am here to inform you that you do not have legal permission to take your child out

of the country without written consent from my client, Ms Fletcher.”

Philippa made eye contact with Alex, who looked shaky and pale. Philippa nodded, to reassure her things would be ok.

“That’s total nonsense,” said Jess, although her voice gave way to doubt. “I’m the primary carer, therefore I can do what I think is best for my child.”

Philippa walked over to Alex and stood beside her. She wanted to take her hand, but at the same time she didn’t want to make the situation any more complicated than it already was.

“Actually,” said Roderick, “my client has full parental rights and can legitimately stop you from doing this. Now, if you want to have a conversation about where your child is educated and how my client can have more access to her, I can help facilitate that.” He looked hard at Jess, whose eyes had gone wide.

“But I would suggest you get yourself a solicitor pretty swiftly.”

Jess turned to Alex. “What the hell have you done?” she asked, raising her voice.

“Don’t shout at me,” said Alex. “Seren is watching all of this. I don’t want there to be a scene.”

“A scene? You’re the one who’s turned up mob-handed with all your solicitors on my doorstep,” said Jess. “And you were in on it too, weren’t you?” She looked towards Sienna, who was still pretending to book a cab. Sienna shrugged, but decided to put her phone down now the game was up.

“I’m protecting myself, and I’m protecting Seren,” said Alex evenly.

Philippa was impressed with how articulate and together Alex was managing to be.

“I’m happy to talk to you about what the future looks like, but you need to know that what you’ve been doing just isn’t right.

I need to be able to spend time with our child. Because that’s what she is. Ours.”

At that moment, Seren ran outside to greet Alex. “Mummy Alex, I missed you!” she said. Alex put her arms around her daughter and looked pleadingly at Jess.

“I cannot believe how manipulative you’re being,” whispered Jess.

“I think that’s enough,” said Alex, her voice low and calm.

“I agree,” said Roderick. “I would urge you to reread your letter. I will be in touch in the next few days with an appointment for mediation, where we can iron all of this out.”

“Well it’s pointless trying to get to the airport now, we’ve missed our flight anyway,” said Jess, holding her hands up.

“Can we go for milkshake?” asked Seren, looking up at Alex.

Alex looked across at Philippa, who gave another almost imperceptible nod. “Yes, darling,” said Alex. “Mummy Jess needs to unpack some things now that plans have changed a bit.”

Jess rolled her eyes and stomped back into the house. The door closed firmly, and Alex stood, hand in hand with her daughter, tears streaming down her face.

“Mummy, what’s wrong?” asked Seren, concern etched in her face.

“It’s ok, Seren, I’m just pleased to see you. It’s been a stressful day.” Alex wiped her eyes. “Let’s go and get that milkshake.”

The Vine was as busy as usual, and today, Philippa, Alex and Seren were joined by Roderick and Sienna. “I think we’ve all earned these,” said Philippa, looking around at their drinks. They’d all opted for milkshakes apart from Philippa, who had stuck to her favoured double espresso.

“You certainly have,” said Alex, looking around at Roderick and Sienna. “Thank you both for all you did. I really don’t think I can possibly tell you how grateful I am.”

“Not at all,” said Roderick, waving it off.

“It really was the least I could do,” said Sienna, with a sheepish smile.

Alex winked at her. “You’re probably right there.” She grinned.

Philippa smiled. A happy ending for Seren and Alex. Or at least, that was now more likely. They’d still need to go through the process with Jess, but she had been prevented from making disastrous and chaotic decisions that would have been hugely damaging for both Seren and Alex.

Alex looked around the table and abruptly stood up. “I’ll be back in a sec,” she said, before escaping out onto the High Street just outside the cafe bar. Philippa excused herself to follow.

“Are you ok?” she asked Alex, who was pacing up and down.

“Yes and no,” replied Alex with a smile. Her eyes were shining with more tears. “I’m beginning to think you’ve seen me cry more than pretty much anyone in the short time you’ve known me.”

“I have that effect on you, it would seem,” said Philippa, holding out her arms. Alex walked into them and let Philippa hold her.

“You have many effects on me,” said Alex. “I’m sorry, I was just a bit overwhelmed by everything. I thought I’d lost Seren. Really. It felt like I might never see my daughter again.” She sobbed into Philippa’s shoulder.

“I know,” said Philippa. “And I’d have felt the same way. But it’s ok. It’s all going to be ok.”

“I think that’s why I’m crying,” said Alex, pulling away and brushing her face with her hands. “Well, that’s part of it.”

“Say more,” said Philippa, desperate to do anything to make this woman happy, and aware that she was increasingly falling for her.

“I was thinking about that conversation we had yesterday, about my fear of committing and not wanting a relationship.”

Philippa’s heart flip-flopped. Was this it? Was she about to be dumped? She swallowed.

She had to do the right thing, for Alex and Seren. There was no point making it harder for all of them.

“I get it,” she said. “You’ll be wanting to focus on Seren, not on me. I totally understand if you want to walk away.” She fought the tears collecting in her own eyes and contemplated returning to her empty house after the last few days. It made her feel sadder than she wanted to admit.

“No,” said Alex. “That’s not it. What I wanted to say is that yes, I’m afraid, and I

haven't done this for a while. But the truth is, Phil, I really am falling in love with you."

"You are?" said Philippa, her eyebrows hitting her hairline.

"Yes. I think I knew that from the moment you swooped in to save me from that oaf at the networking event," said Alex. "Remember what I said about meeting you at that dinner with Gerry?"

Philippa nodded, not trusting herself to say anything for now.

"Well," said Alex, "the reason it was so believable is that it was true. I wanted you from the moment I saw you."

"And I you," admitted Philippa. "And I fell in love with you ages ago." Her heart soared as she looked into Alex's glittering eyes and pulled her in for a passionate kiss.

Chapter Forty

FOUR WEEKS LATER

“So, is this where I ask you to paint me like one of your French girls?” asked Philippa, a wicked grin on her face.

“Well, I could certainly do that, should you wish,” said Alex, “but I’m not sure it would work particularly well with my usual style of painting.”

They were in Alex’s spare room, where two easels sat under dust sheets and the walls were lined with paintings leaning with their faces against the wall.

“I can’t believe I’ve finally managed to persuade you to let me in here,” said Philippa. “I so want to see your work.”

“Well, don’t get your hopes up too high,” said Alex. “It’s been a while since I painted. Life has been quite busy in the last couple of years, and if I’m honest, I lost my mojo a bit.”

Philippa was wearing an oversized t-shirt of Alex’s and little else. She took Alex’s hand. “I think we can safely say, based on what we just did, that I’m pretty sure your mojo is back.”

“Why, thank you,” said Alex, affecting a curtsy, which looked even more silly in the boy shorts and vest she was wearing.

“Come on, no more excuses. Let’s see,” said Philippa.

“You know I love it when you’re bossy,” said Alex.

“Hmm.” Philippa pursed her lips.

“Here you go,” said Alex. She gave the nearest sheet a tug and revealed a glorious interpretation of mountains and a lake with a moody stormy sky in oils.

“Wow,” exclaimed Philippa. “This is incredible.”

Alex blushed. “You don’t have to say that.”

“No, I know I don’t. Really though, it’s amazing. I love the depth and the darkness in it.” Very softly, Philippa placed her fingers on the painting to feel the undulation of the angry clouds in the sky.

“Depth and darkness,” said Alex, “that’s me.”

“Well, maybe sometimes,” said Philippa. “You’re certainly deeper than you gave yourself credit for when we first met. So where is this?”

“It’s a place in Cumbria I visited with Jess when Seren was a baby. I remember thinking I’d love to take her there again, when she’s old enough to appreciate it.”

“And did you?” asked Philippa.

“No,” said Alex, putting an arm around Philippa, who was officially now her girlfriend. “Family life became a bit harder, and then there was the divorce. I haven’t really painted since then either.”

“Do you think you might start again?” asked Philippa, turning to face Alex.

“Yes,” said Alex. “For the first time in a long time, I do.” Alex framed Philippa’s face with her hands. “Now that we’ve managed to agree a proper plan for me to spend time with Seren, I feel like I can really be creative again.”

“I’m glad,” said Philippa, leaning forward to kiss Alex. “And maybe we should take the girls to Cumbria sometime? I think they’d both like it.”

Alex’s eyes lit up. “Yes!” she said. “Yes, I’d love to. We could camp.”

“Woah,” said Philippa, “Samfires do not camp.”

Alex pulled Philippa into her. “I love you, Samfire. And I’m sure I can convert you to camping.”

Philippa looked into Alex’s eyes. She loved how much lighter Alex seemed since she’d begun to see her daughter regularly.

And it was wonderful to spend time with her, without the constant question about whether they were really having a relationship or not.

“I love you too, Fletcher,” said Philippa, “but I think sleeping under canvas might be a step too far.”

“Thank you,” said Alex, looking serious for a moment. “Thank you for helping me keep my daughter here.”

“Thank you for taking a chance on me,” said Philippa.

I hope you enjoyed Faking It (and falling in love)

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:07 am

“You said you knew how to do all this,” said Philippa indignantly.

“I do,” said Alex, her voice muffled by the tent canvas she was engulfed in.