



The Retreat

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Category: Romance

Description: She needed a fake girlfriend.

The universe sent her the one woman she swore she'd never forgive.

Talia Knox is a fiercely ambitious corporate lawyer with one goal: making partner at her prestigious law firm.

Her boss places great importance on family—and Talia's carefully crafted lie about her long-term girlfriend, 'Alex', has kept her professional image impeccable.

But when the firm announces a corporate retreat, with obligatory attendance for significant others, Talia's lie is suddenly at risk of being exposed.

The worst is yet to come, after a chance mix-up leads Talia's boss to mistake Imogen Lake—unemployed art curator, walking disaster, and the last person Talia wants to see—for her elusive partner.

Given that Talia has despised Imogen ever since she found her in bed with her then-girlfriend, it's less than ideal.

Desperate to protect her career, Talia proposes a deal: Imogen will pretend to be her devoted girlfriend for one weekend at the luxury countryside retreat, in exchange for a much-needed payday.

Broke and out of options, Imogen agrees.

But between couples yoga, blindfolded hikes, and a classic one-bed situation, the line between performance and real emotion begins to blur.

Old wounds resurface.

Sparks fly.

And soon, Talia faces the biggest decision of her life: hold on to everything she's built or risk it all for the last woman she ever expected to want.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

Talia Knox stared at the elevator doors and tried not to fidget.

But twelve floors was a long time for a type A personality to do absolutely nothing.

Long enough, certainly, to make a poor decision.

She unlocked her phone and opened the dating app she hadn't touched in months.

The interface had been revamped, with brighter colours now, cheerier fonts.

It congratulated her for coming back like she was a Jack Russell returning to its owner, rather than a forty-year-old woman wondering if she was too young to give up on her vagina and her heart, in that order.

She ignored the chipper 'Welcome back, Talia!' banner and started to swipe.

Woman with a ukulele. Left.

Woman with a mullet. God, were those back again? Left.

Woman with a Hello Kitty tattoo. Left.

Her thumb moved on autopilot, barely registering the faces. They all looked like effort. Even the thought of exchanging messages made her want to take a long nap.

The elevator slowed and dinged open.

‘Morning!’ chirped Rebecca from HR, far too brightly for 8:54 a.m. As ever, she was dressed in primary colours. It gave her the air of a very organised toddler.

Talia locked her phone and slid it into her blazer pocket, straightening up. She offered only a nod in response.

Rebecca’s smile faltered.

She’d wanted more but wasn’t getting it.

Just crisp posture and a blank face.

No trace of awkward swiping or existential horniness.

Because the staff of Monroe Legal only saw what Talia wanted them to see.

A perfect, muted suit with the right price tag.

Minimalist jewellery. Glossy espresso-coloured hair twisted into an immaculate low bun. Outwardly, the picture of cool competence.

Inwardly?

She was on the edge. She ran on a relentless loop of deadlines, client calls, and unspoken expectations. She was averaging about three hours of sleep a night. She googled ‘how many coffees before you’re officially a lunatic’ more than once this week.

But her torment would end soon. Her recent performance review had gone exceptionally well. Billables up, clients happy. All roads pointed to promotion. A non-equity partner slot was opening up in September.

It had to be hers. It had to be hers. Because if it wasn't, well... Talia didn't like to go there. She had to get it, and that was the end of it.

The elevator landed. Rebecca scuttled out first. Talia followed at a slower pace, taking a deep breath to steady herself, giving her insides a chance to catch up with her composed exterior.

She settled into her seat just as the conference room buzzed with polite nods and feigned enthusiasm.

Celeste Monroe—co-founder's daughter and board partner at thirty-nine—was charm in a couture blouse. Warm, brilliant, a bit terrifying.

'Right,' Celeste said, clapping her hands once. 'Everybody grab breakfast, and I'll waffle while you eat.'

Talia zoned out while Celeste launched into a smooth recap of quarterly triumphs. She was careful to keep her expression extremely interested. Because she'd done the maths.

There were five equity partners. But Celeste had her father's proxy vote as he'd retired but refused to relinquish his stake. And Celeste was married to another equity partner, Mitchell. Everyone knew he voted however Celeste did. Then there was Rhona, who might well vote Talia's way. And Jonas, technically still a partner, though barely visible, Talia couldn't say either way about him.

But the reality was that Celeste effectively held three out of five votes. She wasn't just a Monroe. She was Monroe. And Talia couldn't move up without her say so.

Across the table, Daniel Parsons was dismantling a pain au chocolat. Flakes were going everywhere, but he didn't care. The man had no napkin and no shame. Just the

smug aura of someone who'd always assumed the world would hand him what he wanted.

Talia hoped he was wrong. Because he was her biggest competition. Behind her in numbers, but with the added benefit of a wife, two kids, and a Labrador called Socks. The full LinkedIn family package. And that made him lethal. Even though he was nowhere near as good as Talia.

That was the thing no one would dare say aloud at Monroe. But Talia had heard the euphemisms for those trying to climb the ladder.

Not quite the right fit. Not settling. A little outside the culture.

She knew what it meant. They wanted the kind of life that looked stable enough to inspire confidence over expensive wine and awkward small talk at client dinners. A spouse who laughed at the right jokes, weekend plans that sounded enviable, jokes about DIY disasters, or the kids' latest pricey hobby. Just enough relatability to make you seem grounded but polished enough to reassure the client you'd never miss a filing deadline.

They wanted dependability. Aspirational. A life that said, trust me with your millions, I have a golden retriever and a tax-efficient marital status.

Talia had learned that the hard way. You could only show up to so many client dinners solo before Celeste started tilting her head and asking, 'So, seeing anyone these days?' in a tone that made it clear that it wasn't small talk. It was a performance review.

She knew she wasn't getting partner if she didn't have a partner. And that seemed very unlikely, given her hours and general cynicism toward relationships.

That's why, a year ago, Talia invented Alex.

Alex was a very serious girlfriend. Beautiful, principled, elusive. A doctor. Outdoorsy. No one had ever met her, but who would question a woman buried in NHS shifts?

And once Talia was promoted? She could quietly kill off Alex with a vague mention of a mutual, respectful split. People broke up all the time. Especially when one of them was 'busy saving lives' and the other was finally where she wanted to be.

Celeste stood. 'Before we wrap, something exciting to share.'

Talia blinked back into the room.

New slide. White cursive. Pine trees.

Building Together: Strengthening Bonds Outside the Boardroom!

'We're bringing back the company retreat!' Celeste beamed. 'We've booked a long weekend in Montshire, a gorgeous lodge. Trails, campfires, team building. Very restorative.'

Everyone clapped, so Talia did too. But she wasn't remotely into this type of bullshit. She'd have to do it, of course. You didn't say no to Celeste.

'We'll send a packing list, but for now, mark your calendars. Two months from today. And, this year, we're inviting spouses and partners!'

That landed like a thunderclap.

'We've always said Monroe is built on family values,' Celeste went on. 'That

includes the families we choose. Whether you're married, dating, or just beginning something special—bring them. We want to meet the people behind your brilliance.'

Talia didn't hear anything after that. Just that one word, repeating. 'Partners.' She was officially panicking.

'Does this mean we'll finally meet Alex?' Daniel said, far too pleased with himself.

Talia gave him a thin, perfectly tilted smile that said, die in a bin.

'If she exists,' someone muttered, and everyone laughed.

Talia had moved beyond panic to a full freak-out. 'Umm, well, you know doctors' schedules. We'll have to see,' she said evenly. Not like a woman who was about to be unveiled as a liar.

Celeste tilted her head. 'Well, she's got two months' notice.' She smiled that bright, threatening smile. 'We'd love to meet her, Talia.'

Talia didn't trust herself to speak again, so she merely gave a light shrug.

The meeting adjourned. Chairs scraped, and people spilled into corridors, chatting about fire pits and whether their hiking boots still fit.

Talia sat still. Her mouth was dry. This wasn't just a weekend of awkwardness. It was the implosion of an expertly constructed lie. The end of Alex. The start of questions about her judgement, her image, her stability.

She had sixty days to figure out a reason why Alex couldn't attend—one wouldn't sound like an obvious and pathetic lie.

Or... to find herself an Alex.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

Imogen Lake was standing on a wobbly chair, arm deep inside a cupboard she hadn't opened since the start of the pandemic, when the entire contents of the top shelf rained down on her. Most of it was light enough, but a tin of chickpeas joined the fun and hit her on the shoulder.

'FUCK!'

She lost her footing and sat heavily on the floor. From this position on her arse, she could see dirt and grime she would have preferred not to know about.

She stood and put the stuff back in, hoping that amongst the debris would be tea bags. But no. Just tins that were several years overdate. She hoped it wouldn't come to eating them, but she couldn't swear to it.

Her phone buzzed again from the kitchen table. Imogen stood, padded over, and picked it up with a sigh. She unlocked it and swiped into her Instagram.

Of course, it was Flora. Imogen only had post notifications on for her. She didn't even follow Flora with her main account anymore, but the finsta let her keep an eye on things without the sting of being seen.

Flora's latest girlfriend was the star of the snap. She was tall, blonde, and effortlessly hot in that vaguely French way. Looking at her made Imogen feel downright schlubby. She and Flora were squeezed into an intimate two-shot outside a café. Flora looked happy and in love.

She scrolled past the post quickly, biting her lip. She should unfollow. She really

should.

She exhaled sharply and shoved the phone back onto the counter.

‘Get a grip, Imogen,’ she muttered to herself. ‘She just didn’t love you.’

Not exactly a comforting thought. So, she turned her mind another way. A pretty picture meant nothing. No one posted pictures of the bad times, did they? That girlfriend would probably end up like her, right? Dumped.

Her phone buzzed again, but this time it was an email.

Subject: How to Earn Passive Income from Home (Yes, Really!)

Imogen snorted.

‘Ah yes, this will be legit.’ She opened it anyway, knowing full well it was probably just another one of those scammy pyramid schemes.

But if there was even a chance it might lead to a reliable source of income, she might as well check.

She skimmed through the email, which was filled with promises of financial freedom and unlimited earning potential.

The more she read, the more she had to laugh at herself.

If get-rich-quick schemes worked, it was only for those who sold them to you.

Imogen might not be doing great right now, but she knew that much.

No MLMs for her.

Imogen stood up and wandered toward the living room, glancing at her side of the room where her laptop was open to yet another tab of survey sites and cashback apps.

The screen displayed her latest find—an app that paid pennies to scan supermarket receipts.

She tapped it, uploaded a photo of an old Tesco slip, and watched her balance inch up by 20p.

She checked her earnings for the week: ?4.10.

She closed the laptop with a sigh.

Her life had become a patchwork of side hustles.

Re-selling old clothes on Vinted, mystery shopping for chain cafés, delivering leaflets in the rain.

None of it ever added up to enough.

One gig might cover groceries, another her phone bill, but then the council tax letter would arrive and she'd be back to square one.

She was tired, but honestly, she didn't know what it would feel like not to be scraping by.

She'd looked into food delivery, obviously, but she couldn't drive, and the idea of riding a bike in traffic made her feel faintly ill.

She was convinced she'd get knocked over in the first ten minutes.

So instead, there were the dog-walking gigs.

The odd spot of cleaning.

And of course, there was Lou's Café, the one semi-regular gig she'd managed to keep going for the last six months.

It was a small, local place run by a woman named Louise who always insisted on paying her 'under the table' because the café was technically still trying to break even.

But Imogen was barely keeping her head above water financially.

She was always just this close to being completely broke, yet somehow always making enough to scrape by.

But she wondered how long she could ride the line before going under.

The phone beeped.

Oh, look.

Flora's new one was standing in front of the Eiffel Tower, pretending to hold it in her fingers. What a marvellous play on perspective and proof positive of a sense of humour. This girl really was the full package.

Imogen pushed that thought aside, choosing instead to focus on what she could control, like her next cuppa.

She couldn't really have run out of tea bags, could she? That would simply be too desperate.

She decided to try again, but she'd learned her lesson, and this time, she fetched a stool to stand on.

She opened the kitchen cupboard, hoping, praying for a box of tea bags that she might have forgotten.

But it was just more chickpeas. Why were there always more chickpeas? She needed tea!

She kept routing, hope draining by the second.

And then, just behind a tin of kidney beans, there it was.

A small box of generic brand tea bags. Imogen felt more joy than if she'd discovered the Library of Alexandria wedged behind out-of-date tins. Maybe things were going to be OK. The tea bags were a sign. The universe would provide!

After the kettle had boiled, Imogen poured the hot water into a chipped mug.

She stared at the steam rising from the tea bag and let out a slow breath.

She glanced at the clock.

It was nearly noon, which meant Lou might be texting soon, asking if she could cover the afternoon shift.

The answer would be yes. It was always yes. Shit pay was better than no pay.

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts.

‘Imogen?’ A voice floated in from the hallway.

Imogen rolled her eyes and walked to the door. Through the peephole, she could see Mr Dawson, the landlord, holding up an envelope.

‘Imogen? Are you in? I just need a quick chat.’

I don’t, Imogen thought, panicked. She knew what that chat would involve, and she wasn’t doing that today.

A few more knocks and he gave up, shoving a letter under her door. Imogen checked the contents to find out what she already knew. The rent was overdue by three days.

Her heart sank a little lower as she threw the letter on the counter. She had some of it. If Lou texted, she’d have almost all of it. If she could find a few bits to sell in the flat, she might be alright, for this month at least. Next month was another matter altogether.

Imogen took a long sip of tea. Everything always looked better after a cup of tea, she decided. But what came with the tea was not hope, but a craving for a biscuit. And of course, she was out.

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A month had passed since Celeste's retreat announcement, and Talia was no closer to solving her problem. Every idea was flawed.

She couldn't ask a friend to play along, that would be too humiliating. The idea of admitting she had a pretend girlfriend could never be public knowledge.

She could tell everyone that the relationship had ended, but that was no good because she'd still be in the same bind as before.

A social failure at a firm that prized romantic success. Plus, she remembered that joke from the meeting. 'If she exists.' Saying she broke up with Alex was too close to admitting she'd made her up.

She could tell the truth? What a hilarious idea.

There had to be a way around this. Talia pulled up her phone again. She quickly googled hire a fake girlfriend and scrolled through the results.

All of the ads were for 'escorts' who specialised in pretending to be your girlfriend for an event. Talia's stomach churned. She wasn't even comfortable googling this. No matter how much she needed a solution, she was certain this idea would backfire. She'd seen too many bank records during settlement meetings to be ignorant to the fact that things like this could bite you in the arse long after you'd forgotten you'd even done it.

She sighed and leaned back in her chair. Her thoughts shifted to the root of her problem, the reason she was so damn single. To the start of all her problems.

Flora.

Because Talia wasn't single just because she was too busy—though that was true enough. She simply couldn't get over why she was avoiding relationships in the first place. The reason was tied up with her most serious relationship, which was also her worst betrayal.

The wound wasn't just about Flora. It wasn't just about the fact that Flora had been the one person Talia had allowed herself to care about. It was that she had been the first person to teach her how deeply a heart could break when it was cracked open.

Talia couldn't seem to come back from that knowledge. So here she was, about to look like a real arse at the very moment she needed to look like the opposite of an arse. She needed to be more like... a shoulder. Something neutral and quietly competent.

What could she do? She couldn't pull a pretend Alex from thin air.

She was stuck with the best of bad options. Pretend she'd broken up with Alex and take the hit. The thought didn't sit well. But what choice did she have?

It wasn't perfect. It wasn't clean. But it was an answer. She could act heartbroken, maybe even rush off to the toilets a few times as though overcome with emotion.

Yes, maybe people would have some cynical thoughts on the 'breakup.' But who would ask her to prove Alex's existence? No one would dig deeper into it, not at a company retreat. They'd probably think she was a little tragic. A little sad. And her ambitions would take a hit. But maybe she was good enough by herself. Maybe if she worked even harder, she could make up the deficit.

Maybe.

Talia stood up and paced her office, the weight of the decision settling on her chest. It wasn't ideal. But it was the only option she had. A breakup story would have to be enough.

She grabbed her phone again to send the email to Celeste. She'd craft a story. She'd say the right words. It would be OK.

I'm sorry I can't bring Alex to the retreat, she typed, pausing before she added the next line. We recently broke up. Our schedules were simply too tough to make it work.

It was plausible. The words were soft enough, sad enough, to sound real. She could hear the sympathy in Celeste's voice already, feel the polite understanding that would follow. It was a believable story. She could sell it.

So why couldn't she press send?

Because she knew this would cost her the promotion. It just would. She'd never get there at Monroe. She'd have to leave, start somewhere else, resetting the clock and everything she'd done to get to the big chair. Professionally, not having a girlfriend at this moment in time could set her back as much as a decade.

Her thumb hovered over the send button. She should just do it anyway. There was nothing else to be done. All she was doing was delaying the inevitable. An answer was not going to fall out of the sky.

But she couldn't bring herself to hit send. Not yet.

Talia closed the email, the draft sitting in her inbox, incomplete, unresolved. She needed more time. But more time to do what?

A reminder beeped at her, and she realised she had a meeting in half an hour. This problem would have to wait.

Talia's day was going from bad to stupid.

En route to her meeting, her heel had gotten stuck in a grate so thoroughly that she had to let the grate have it. She had to hop into a nearby budget shoe shop and grab the closest thing to classy she could find. So she'd arrived at her meeting late and poorly shod.

As she left the meeting, which had not gone great, she cursed her own feet. How could she be confident in Chimmy Joe's? Talia was not a fan of mistakes. Particularly her own.

She decided not to head back to the office immediately. She spotted a little café tucked away on a quiet corner. No one from work would be there because, frankly, it was a little too grubby.

She pushed open the door and stepped inside. The place was even more of a dive from the inside. But that was exactly what she needed right now. It was just her and the comfort of this tiny, empty shithole.

She chose a table in the corner and glanced around, wondering if anyone would serve her. After a few moments, she spotted a waitress, an hourglass-shaped blonde in an apron, moving quickly behind the counter, facing away. Talia kept looking, hoping to catch her eye. But she wouldn't turn around.

Talia sighed impatiently. She was the sole customer. Talia would have thought they'd been all over her.

Moments later, the door to the kitchen opened, and an older woman came out, spotted Talia, and said something into the waitress's ear. The waitress turned slowly, with regret, and Talia found out the reason for the bad service.

It was Imogen.

She slowly approached Talia, looking down. As well she might. Finally, she reached her, her hands fidgeting with the apron strings nervously. Talia's heart pounded, and she could feel the heat of anger rising in her chest.

'What can I get you?' Imogen nearly whispered, her doe eyes skittish.

'What?' Talia scoffed.

Imogen flinched, but only for a second. 'What can I get you?' she replied, the flatness of her voice making Talia's blood boil.

Talia's eyes narrowed. 'So this is where you've landed up, is it? Guess the gallery didn't work out.'

Imogen's gaze flickered with something. Shame? Annoyance? Talia couldn't tell.

'No, it didn't. What can I get you?' she repeated once more.

'I'd have thought you'd have a job for life given what you did for the boss,' Talia said.

Imogen took a slow inhale before speaking again. 'It closed. OK?'

Talia felt her heart flood with warmth. 'The gallery went bust? Oh, poor Flora. Hate to hear her dreams didn't work out.'

‘Actually, she was offered curator of The Vespar in Paris,’ Imogen told her, as though it was a win. ‘She packed up the place by choice.’

But it didn’t take Talia long to put two and two together. ‘Oh, I see. Did she leave you behind for greener pastures? How sad.’

Imogen didn’t flinch, didn’t look away. She just set her jaw and met Talia’s gaze head-on. ‘I wasn’t your girlfriend, Talia. If you’re still angry, take it up with her.’

‘Take it up with her?’ Talia spat, feeling the frustration building to a boiling point. ‘But you were so integral to the whole thing, and you’re right in front of me. So I think I’ll take it up with you if it’s all the same.’

Imogen’s face twisted, and for a second, Talia thought she saw something like guilt cross her expression. But then it was gone, replaced by something colder.

‘It wasn’t my fault,’ she snapped.

‘No? Flora screwed herself in our bed, did she?’

‘I’m not to blame,’ Imogen shot back, her voice barely above a growl.

‘Oh no, you were such an innocent in it all,’ Talia spat, her breathing shallow as rage pulsed through her.

She couldn’t believe how angry she still was, even after all this time. Five years had gone by. She should have let all this go by now.

But looking at Imogen, nothing had been let go.

Without thinking, Talia stood up suddenly, her chair scraping loudly against the floor.

She was too close now, their faces inches apart.

‘You really think you’re not responsible?’ Talia hissed, her voice shaking with a combination of fury and desperation.

Imogen’s face hardened, her eyes cold. ‘You want closure?’ she said quietly, her words sharp. ‘Then here it is: Flora made her choice.’

Talia’s body trembled with rage, and without thinking, she grabbed the table nearest and flipped it with a crack.

Imogen’s eyes went wide in surprise. But no one was more surprised than Talia. Public rage was not her style at all, nor was destruction of property. Was this what it was like to go insane?

She wasn’t planning to go any further into the madness. She had to stop. This was too far.

She reached forward and tried to right the table. But as she pulled, the table next to it teetered, its balance disturbed by the motion. It fell, crashing into the one beside it, which then knocked into another. One after another, the tables toppled with a cacophony of splintering wood and shuffling chairs.

Talia stood frozen for a moment, watching the carnage she had unintentionally set in motion. A domino run of lunacy.

As the last table finally crashed to the ground, Talia looked around, her mind still struggling to catch up with what she’d just done.

But then she looked at Imogen’s face—at those bloody doe eyes that had batted at Flora and ruined Talia’s life—and made the decision not to give a damn.

‘Great. Look what you’ve made me do,’ Talia said.

Before Imogen could respond, Talia stormed out of the café, the door swinging shut behind her with a bang.

She didn’t look back. She didn’t want Imogen to know that she was freaking out. Not just from the destruction, but coming face-to-face with someone who played a part in leading her to the very predicament she was now in at work. If not for her, things might have been so very different.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

Imogen was looking around her at the devastation Talia had left behind. She couldn't believe a small lawyer had managed to wreck the place like this. It looked like The Hulk had popped in for a coffee, only to be told they were out of hazelnut syrup.

Of all the people to walk into this out-of-the-way café, it had to be Talia, didn't it? Imogen had never had an enemy in her life before, but she couldn't deny she had one now.

That pissed her off. Talia had no right to take the high ground. To make this Imogen's fault. No one was blameless in the situation. Least of all Talia.

But before she could go much further down the path of who was truly to blame for Talia finding Imogen in bed with her girlfriend on that rainy Tuesday, Imogen was promptly given bigger fish to fry.

'Imogen!' Lou called, furious. 'What the hell is going on?' she demanded, arms crossed furiously.

Amid the chaos, Imogen couldn't come up with anything but the truth. 'Umm, well, that was my ex's ex, and we kind of have a bad history... I guess she has rage issues?'

'The place is wrecked because of your personal life? OK. You're done.'

The words hit her like a punch. She was fired? She hadn't done anything.

'Are you serious?' she asked, voice trembling.

‘You’re supposed to save me money, not cost me! Get your things and leave. Now.’

Imogen’s vision blurred with a surge of anger, and she opened her mouth to protest, but the words wouldn’t come. What was the point?

She grabbed her apron and yanked it off, her hands shaking. She slammed it onto the counter. Then, without another word, she turned on her heel and stormed out of the café.

The weight of everything crashing down on her was suffocating. There was no way to catch up now. Rent? Bills? That was a joke at this point. She’d been living on borrowed time for too long, and now the inevitable had arrived. She was out of options.

But one thing was clear. There was no way in hell she was going to let Talia off the hook. She needed a talking to, putting it mildly.

Imogen had no idea what she expected to get out of a confrontation, but she wasn’t going to let her walk away scot-free. No way. Talia was a wealthy lawyer, and she’d just taken what little Imogen had. How was that fair? Did the punishment truly fit the crime? And as for the crime, she wasn’t even the criminal. She was only an accessory after the fact.

It didn’t take long for Imogen to track Talia down. A quick Google search and she had the address of Talia’s company—some fancy building in the financial district.

Imogen found a bus that took her practically to the doorstep, which was some luck at last. It was a hot day, and the bus was sweltering and packed, which only exacerbated her rage. By the time Imogen reached the tall glass building, she was ready to tear the fucking thing down with her bare hands.

She stormed inside, her heels clicking on the cool air-conditioned tile floor with every step. It was all too polished, too pristine, too fake. She hated everything about it. Everything about her.

She approached the receptionist, her voice tight. 'I'm looking for Talia Knox.'

The receptionist smiled, her fingers hovering over the keyboard. 'Talia Knox? Let me check... She's in a meeting right now, but if you wait a moment...'

'I'll wait,' Imogen cut her off. 'Tell her my name is Imogen, and I'll be here until she comes down,' she declared, not hiding her anger.

The receptionist looked nervous and uncomfortable, but Imogen didn't care. She had no patience for pleasantries now. She was going to... What exactly? There wasn't a plan, as such. But yelling would figure heavily. Maybe she might even break something in the lobby, cause a scene—like for like.

She perched on a seat and looked around her. There was a tall plant pot in the corner. Looked a bit heavy, though. Maybe if she leaned against it and pushed...

'What the hell,' said a cold voice.

Imogen looked up, startled. She hadn't expected Talia quite so quickly. She thought she'd have more time to plot. But cometh the moment...

Imogen stood, getting a better look at Talia now that she could meet her eye properly. She looked as sharp and pristine as ever, her fancy suit hugging her petite frame perfectly, her grey eyes cold and controlled, her shiny dark hair in that anally retentive bun. The woman was pulled tighter than a Victorian corset.

'Imogen,' she said, her voice flat. 'What the hell are you doing here?'

Imogen didn't answer immediately. Instead, she took a step forward, the anger still bubbling beneath the surface. 'You just got me fired.'

Talia's lips pressed into a thin line. 'This isn't the place,' she said. Imogen noticed she was trying to be quiet. Embarrassed, was she?

A laugh escaped Imogen's lips, sharp and bitter. 'You don't get to do that. You just went apeshit at my place of work, and I was blamed.'

Talia's expression faltered, just for a moment, before she crossed her arms and stepped back. 'I'm not doing this with you now.'

Imogen was lightheaded with rage. 'You don't get to control this,' she hissed. 'Not after what you've done. That was my job. And now I'm flat broke. Because of you.'

Talia looked down for a second, a flash of what might be guilt flitting through those cool eyes. But she quickly masked it with indifference. 'Imogen, you know what...'

Imogen squared her shoulders, ready to tear into her again, but before she could open her mouth, Talia glanced over her shoulder. 'Oh Christ,' she muttered miserably.

Imogen followed her gaze to see someone glide out of the elevator, a very tall, elegant woman. Imogen smiled. She didn't know who this woman was, but she could tell from Talia's reaction that she was important to Talia in some fashion.

This was way better than the plant pot.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

The moment Talia spotted Imogen standing in the lobby, everything in her body went tight. Imogen looked wild-eyed, flushed, and furious. And she was here. At her work.

Imogen had been fired because of the sort-of accident in the café that morning, and she was clearly here to make that Talia's problem. Talia hated Imogen and didn't exactly regret that. But she also didn't exactly not. But she didn't have a chance to decide how she felt before the shit truly flew into the fan.

Talia glanced over her shoulder and caught sight of her boss, Celeste, stepping out of the lift. She was heading in their direction, fast.

One little 'Oh Christ' escaped from her mouth. She turned to Imogen. 'We are not doing this in the lobby of my office.'

'Why not? Embarrassed someone might hear what an unhinged maniac you are?' Imogen shot back.

Talia winced. 'You've made your point. But you've also just said you've got no money. So how about this?' She pulled her phone from her pocket, heart hammering, and opened her banking app. Her thumb hovered for a second. 'I'll give you a grand. Right now. Just walk out of here.'

Imogen blinked at her. The fury was still there, but Talia could tell that number was tempting her. One thousand pounds. Not an insignificant amount but a small price to pay to escape this scene.

But before Talia could get confirmation that the deal was acceptable, the clock ran

out.

‘Talial!’ Celeste’s voice rang out.

Talia turned and pasted on a smile just as her boss reached them. ‘There you are,’ Celeste said brightly. Her eyes slid to Imogen, curious. ‘And this must be Alex.’

Talia froze. What?

Celeste turned to Imogen, beaming. ‘We’ve heard so much about you. It’s lovely to finally meet you.’ She grabbed hold of Imogen’s hand and started shaking it. Talia waited for her to say something, but she didn’t say a word. She just let her hand be shaken. She looked confused, putting it lightly.

Talia wanted to correct her. She opened her mouth to do so, but then she thought, Yes, OK, you can say this isn’t Alex, but then what? How would you explain or introduce this person to your boss?

So she, like Imogen, ended up saying nothing.

Celeste was not one to let a silence occur. ‘You know, we wondered if you really existed,’ she chuckled.

Oh god.

‘But here you are. Did you get a day off at last?’

Imogen pursed her lips, the start of a word coming out, possibly a string of words of the type that could ruin a rep in seconds. Talia had to do something quickly.

‘We were just heading out,’ Talia said firmly, already guiding Imogen by the elbow.

Imogen glanced at her with narrowed eyes, clearly confused, but for once, she didn't protest.

Talia got them through the glass doors and out onto the pavement, her heart still pounding. She let go of Imogen's arm and turned to her.

Imogen crossed her arms. 'What the hell was that?'

'That,' Talia said, opening her phone again and pulling up the transfer, 'was none of your business.'

She held out the screen. 'One thousand pounds. Right now. You walk away.'

Imogen stared at it, then at her. 'Why does she think my name is—'

'Not your problem. Put your bank details in.'

They stood there for a long second. The sound of traffic, the low thrum of the city, the absurdity of the entire thing pressing in around them.

Imogen gave her a long, unreadable look. Then, finally, she said, 'Fine.' She took Talia's phone, tapped in her details, and handed it back.

Talia hit the button.

It only took a second for the confirmation to appear. Payment sent.

Imogen's phone buzzed a moment later. She checked it, then looked up again. 'You're unbelievable, you know that?'

'Just take my money and fuck off,' Talia said flatly.

Imogen gave her a final, livid look, then turned and did just that.

Talia stood there, alone on the pavement, watching her go, heart still pounding with something that wasn't quite relief. She'd bought herself a solution to a problem. For now. But what the hell was she going to do when 'Alex' came up again? Because she'd never actually said that Imogen wasn't Alex, had she? So now, Alex had a face, and that was... good?

Or maybe not. Because that face was Imogen's face.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

Imogen stood at the bus stop with her hands in her pockets, shoulders hunched. Two minutes to wait for her ride home.

She took out her phone again and opened her banking app. It was still there; it wasn't an illusion. One thousand pounds. Enough to cover the rent for this month. After the way she'd barely scraped by last month, it was good to know she wouldn't sweat the next rent day.

Still, given what she'd lost, it wasn't much. Because now she had no job, no backup plan. What would happen after that?

The bus picked her up, and she sat on the top deck, staring as the streets blurred by. Shops, buses, faceless people.

She looked at her phone once more. And the number had already shrunk. A debit for her phone contract had been taken. Not a lot, but a reminder of the clock already running out. Not that she needed it.

At home, she sat on her springy sofa and contemplated what had happened. Doubts were beginning to creep in. Should she have let herself be bought off like that? What about the principle of the thing?

Who was she kidding? Principles were for people who could afford them. That didn't include her. Particularly not today. She hadn't really had any choice but to accept that money, had she? Just a shame her dignity had gone so cheap.

Part of her wondered if she should just send the money back. Another part of her knew the first part was full of shit. She couldn't do that.

All she could do now was feel lucky that Talia's boss or whoever she was had shown up. Otherwise, she might not even have what she had. That was what had compelled Talia to offer a cash settlement for her little tantrum. Imogen quite liked the memory of watching Talia sweat like that. Because every other memory of Talia felt complicated and shameful.

Five Years Ago

Imogen handed Flora a cup. 'Milk, half a sugar,' she said.

Flora smiled. 'I really should drop that last half sugar.'

Imogen shrugged. 'It won't kill you.'

Flora chuckled. 'A perfect cup of tea and affirmation of my choices? You really are the perfect employee.'

Imogen tried not to blush and failed as she scuttled off back to work.

She'd been at Flora's modern art gallery (Arcadia, situated in the heart of the art district) for two months, and she still felt the awe of proximity. Flora McKay was a name in the art world—not quite famous, but known. She had that effortless confidence that Imogen found a little terrifying, and she knew her shit as well as everyone who was anyone in their world.

But she was kind. Surprisingly kind. She remembered the artist Imogen had once mentioned liking in an offhand way. She complimented her instincts for composition when hanging an exhibition. She made her feel seen. That was not something Imogen

was used to feeling, especially not in a space like this.

It was Imogen's first paid art job. She was finally putting her passion to use, not to mention her art history degree. She still couldn't quite believe it. Her life was finally starting at twenty-seven because Flora McKay had taken a chance on her. Her gratitude to Flora was boundless, as was her admiration for the gallery owner. She wanted so much to be liked by Flora, to please her.

So when it happened, the argument, it cracked something open.

Imogen hadn't meant to eavesdrop. She'd been carrying a framed piece to the back stairwell when she heard voices.

'I just think it's convenient,' Flora was saying. Her voice was low but tight, like she was trying not to shout. 'Every time things get difficult, you vanish into work.'

'I'm not vanishing,' Talia said. 'I have deadlines. That's not the same thing.'

'You're never home.'

'That's not true.'

There was a pause. Imogen stood frozen with the frame pressed against her chest.

'I didn't mind it, at first,' Flora went on. 'I thought it was temporary, that once this case was over, you'd—' She cut herself off. Then, quieter: 'You'd make time for what matters.'

Talia sighed. 'Flora—'

'No. I'm not trying to fight. I just... I miss you. And I don't know what I'm meant to

do with that.'

'You think I don't miss you too?' Talia's voice was weary. Not sharp, not angry, just tired. 'I'm trying to build something here. Something for both of us.'

Flora didn't answer right away. When she did, it was more clipped. 'It doesn't feel like it's for both of us. It feels like you're working hard to be anywhere else.'

There was another silence.

'I don't know how to keep doing this,' Flora said. 'I don't want to feel like I'm the only one working at us.'

'That's not fair,' Talia said.

Imogen heard movement, then footsteps. She realised they were headed in her direction too late to do anything about it.

Talia came out into the stairwell. She glanced at Imogen and offered an embarrassed smile. 'Sorry,' she said.

Imogen noticed that her ears were pink. 'It's fine,' Imogen said quickly.

Imogen stayed frozen, unsure how to handle this, but also still holding the piece, which wasn't small.

Eventually, Talia walked past her, leaving out the back door.

Imogen collected herself and carried the piece into the gallery, trying to look nonchalant.

Flora gave her an awkward smile. 'I'm sorry you had to hear that,' she said softly.

Well, so much for nonchalance. Imogen swallowed. 'No, no, no... I should have been louder. I should have coughed...'

'You're at work. You shouldn't need to worry about walking into a domestic,' Flora interrupted gently. Her shoulders slumped. 'We've just been... struggling. For a while.' She sighed, eyes flicking to the door like she half-expected Talia to return. 'She's just so... hard sometimes. Maybe I'm the problem.'

Imogen didn't know what to say. 'I doubt it,' she said finally.

That earned her a faint smile. 'You don't have to say that. I don't even know why I'm telling you this. You're just a bit too easy to talk to, I guess.'

Imogen smiled shyly, looking down.

'Hey, I know it's almost time to close, but I wondered if I could ask you a favour?' Flora began. 'There's this piece I've just acquired, and I'm thinking of selling it, but it's still at my place. I could do with a hand moving it. It's a bit awkward on my own...'

She said it casually, like a favour between colleagues, but her eyes didn't quite match the tone.

And Imogen said yes. Of course she said yes.

Flora's flat was as immaculate as you'd expect. Cream walls, pale oak floors, soft, abstract artwork hung at perfect heights. The sculpture—a spindly, three-legged thing

made of wrought iron and glass—sat in the hallway, partially covered by muslin. But they didn't go near it right away.

Flora poured two glasses of white wine. Imogen could tell from the bottle that it wasn't the kind she usually drank, which was always from the on-sale section of Tesco and came with a screw top. This wine was fancy, like Flora.

She offered one to Imogen, who took it with a soft thanks. She watched Flora sit on a sofa, curled into the corner, toes tucked under her. She patted the spot next to her. Imogen joined her nervously.

'Sorry again,' Flora said, swirling the wine. 'I should've kept my voice down. I hate that you saw me like that. I don't lose it often.'

'You didn't lose it,' Imogen said. 'You just stood your ground.'

Flora gave a little laugh. 'That's generous of you.'

She was quiet for a beat, staring into her glass. Then, without looking up, she said, 'I know she's cheating on me.'

Imogen blinked. She hadn't expected the bluntness.

'She says she's working late but... And I keep telling myself it's nothing. I don't know if she's actually done anything yet. But I've seen the apps on her phone, the women with emoji names saved in her contacts.'

'That's shit,' Imogen said softly. She'd never sworn in front of her boss before, but if there was ever a moment.

Flora looked at her, really looked at her, and for a moment, Imogen felt like she was

being studied. She felt herself sit up straighter.

‘She makes me feel small,’ Flora said quietly. ‘Like I’m just this... insecure woman who should be grateful to have someone so driven and smart.’

Imogen was too shocked to respond.

‘I guess I am grateful,’ Flora went on. ‘That’s why I haven’t left yet. What if it’s a mistake? What if she hasn’t...’

Imogen reached out without thinking and touched her hand. Just a light brush. She didn’t expect Flora to take it.

But she did. And then leaned in. Imogen had never necessarily thought of Flora like that. She wasn’t really her type. Her features were big and cat-like: wide-set eyes, heavy cheekbones, and a full mouth. Imogen usually went for petite, delicate types, sharp little elfin faces.

But Flora’s hand was warm in Imogen’s, and Imogen didn’t want to let go.

The kiss was uncertain at first. Like both of them knew they were hovering near a line and trying to convince themselves it wasn’t really there. But then Flora took it somewhere bigger, her fingers sliding into Imogen’s hair. It was so easy to get lost in it.

Before she knew it, they were in bed, naked.

Imogen told herself that it wasn’t wrong if Talia had already betrayed Flora. That this wasn’t betrayal but comfort.

Then the door opened.

‘What the fuck is this?’ Talia asked.

They sprang apart, and Imogen grabbed a sheet to cover herself before she finally looked up. The expression on Talia’s face was unbearable. She was ripped in half.

Her keys were still in her hand. Her eyes flicked between them, taking in every inch of what she needed to know. ‘I sacked off work so we could spend the evening together,’ she said to Flora.

Flora opened her mouth to say something, anything, but there was nothing that would make this look like anything other than what it was.

Talia turned and walked out.

Imogen looked at Flora. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

Flora was pulling her clothes back on hastily. ‘What are you sorry about?’

Imogen didn’t exactly know. Because Flora had started this. All the same, it didn’t feel good to be a part of what had just happened.

Imogen scrambled into her clothes and ran out of the apartment into the hall. She looked around her, expecting Talia to reappear, maybe slap her. But she was gone.

Imogen kept moving. She was a ways down the street when Flora caught up with her. Imogen hadn’t realised she was chasing her. She’d assumed Flora would be glad to be rid of her, given what had just happened.

‘Imogen, don’t run off.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Imogen said.

‘Stop saying that. You’ve done nothing wrong.’

Imogen couldn’t even respond to that.

‘This was bad, I know,’ Flora said. ‘And I’m sorry I pulled you into the middle of all this. But...’

Imogen was on tenterhooks. ‘But what?’

‘But maybe this was always going to happen,’ Flora said, reaching out a hand to push Imogen’s hair out of her face.

‘Was it?’ Imogen asked, shocked.

‘There’s just something here. Don’t you feel it?’

Imogen nodded. Of course she did. This was Flora McKay. What was she going to do, not fall in love with her?

‘I’m sorry it happened this way. But I’m not sorry it happened. It was wrong with Talia, and I knew that. I think I was falling out of love with her, and I just couldn’t admit it to myself. But you’ve made me see. I can remember now what it’s like to feel deeply.’

Imogen was stunned. She’d assumed this was the end. But was something real starting here? She wished it could have been a better start. But if Talia was cheating anyway, then this wasn’t so wrong. Was it?

Now

Thirty-two-year-old Imogen stared at the message she’d just received from the

landlord. Thank you for the payment. The rent was paid early this month. And Talia Knox had paid it.

She couldn't stop thinking about what had happened in the lobby. The way she'd transferred the money like it was nothing, like it was the easiest thing in the world to throw cash at a problem and make it vanish.

And then there was that name. Alex.

She'd stayed quiet, expecting Talia to correct her boss. But she hadn't. And Imogen had just stood there, too confused to argue, until she let herself be herded outside like a stray cat that had walked into the wrong flap.

Well, whoever Alex was, it wasn't her problem. She was done with Talia. Done with all of it.

Let Talia have her secrets. Imogen didn't have the time to ponder them. She had to get a new job.

Imogen opened her laptop and clicked on the local classifieds. Café shifts, bar jobs, cleaning gigs. Anything. She'd take whatever she could get. Pride was a luxury she'd never really been able to afford, and definitely not now.

Until recently, she'd still been applying for real jobs, art jobs she knew in her heart she was never going to get. She didn't even have the space to dream anymore. That fantasy was dead. She was in survival mode now.

She typed fast. Short cover letter, attached her CV, hit send. Over and over and over. Something had to come good.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

Talia sat at her desk for a full ten minutes after the meeting reminder pinged. Celeste - 10:30. Weekly check-in.

Normally, she didn't mind these one-to-ones. It never hurt to get face time with the boss. But this morning, she was nervous. Scared even.

She pulled her blazer off the back of the chair and slipped it on, heading for the lift, rehearsing the lines she'd been perfecting for days: 'Oh, Alex and I broke up. Yeah, it was mutual. We just wanted different things.' A small shrug, a little sigh. Confident and mature.

She felt a little better about it now. Because Celeste had met 'Alex', as far as she knew. So if anyone made any funny little jokes, Celeste could shut them down. Alex was not the Loch Ness Monster. She had been verifiably sighted. Celeste had shaken her hand. So the payoff had inadvertently bought plausible deniability in addition to some guilt assuagement.

Did Talia feel good about getting Imogen fired? Not as much as she would have hoped. She hated her, but the thought of taking someone's livelihood away, even the despised Imogen, didn't sit right.

But done was done. She couldn't un-wreck that café.

Talia caught her reflection in the lift doors. She looked calm enough. But her nerves were loud. Her heart was banging like a drum.

When she reached the office, Celeste was already waving her in.

‘Morning, darling!’ she said, all gloss and energy. ‘You’re looking sharp.’

Talia smiled as she entered Celeste’s massive office and sat on the edge of the visitor chair, bracing herself.

‘So,’ Celeste said, leaning forward, ‘I’ve been meaning to say. Alex. What a treat. You didn’t tell me she was that gorgeous.’

Talia’s mouth parted slightly. ‘Oh, well...’

‘No need to be modest. She’s stunning. And a doctor? What a package.’

Talia kept her mouth fixed in a smile. She could barely feel her face. It was enraging to hear compliments heaped on Imogen. Seeing as her gorgeousness had brought about such pain. If only Flora could have hired someone a bit more homely to help her sell pretentious art...

‘Thanks,’ she said. ‘That’s kind of you.’

The moment had arisen. She had to say it now. The words formed in her head, ready to push out of her mouth. ‘Funny you should mention Alex...’

But before she could speak, Celeste clapped her hands together. ‘Right, onto business. I’m sure you’ve been waiting to hear about the partner position?’

Talia smiled. ‘Well, yes, I have been wondering.’

‘It’s looking good for you.’

Talia stared at her. ‘Seriously?’

Celeste nodded. 'Of course. You've earned it. But you know how these things work. It's about fit. Presence. Chemistry. People want to know the full version of who they're backing. And the retreat next week is the place for that.'

Talia's skin prickled. She tried to swallow, but her throat had dried up.

'Oh,' she said. 'Right.'

'You know, some of them still talk about Henry's wife at the retreat ten years ago. She charmed everyone over breakfast waffles, and Henry got fast-tracked. I can see that happening for you two.'

Talia swallowed. 'Oh?'

'I mean, what matters is your work,' Celeste added quickly. 'The retreat will only be the cherry on your cake.'

Talia smiled. 'Of course,' she said, not believing that remotely.

Talia left Celeste's office in a daze.

She'd tried to end the lie. Tried to close the door. But it just wouldn't quite come out of her mouth. Especially after Celeste as good as said, 'Your girlfriend will get you this promotion.'

As she waited for the lift, she started to think something very, very silly.

The silly thought followed her into the lift, down a few floors, and back to her office. And then it sat with her through the rest of the morning, through lunch, and through

the afternoon. Then it followed her out to her car and home for the day. It was still there when she went to bed that night.

A silly, silly idea indeed.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

Imogen had applied for everything. Cafes. Retail stores. Even the vape kiosk at the shopping centre. Every application was met with ‘overqualified’ or ‘underqualified.’ Sometimes, no words at all—just silence.

She was starting to take it personally. Starting to wonder if there was something about her that people could sense the moment they looked at her CV. Something invisible and off-putting, something wrong.

Rent day was a few weeks off. And it was hanging over her like a shadow. The thousand pounds Talia had transferred had stretched as far as it could go, but that was gone now. Yet another rent day was on its way.

Imogen lay on her bed in the middle of the afternoon, staring blankly at the ceiling. The hum of traffic from the street below barely registered. She could feel the panic beginning to rise.

Her eyes roamed across the small room, the mismatched furniture, the half-finished laundry piled in the corner. There was nothing left. Nothing more she could sell. No one she could call. She had nowhere else to go.

Her parents, living in their retirement community, had no space to offer. Even if they did, they wouldn’t. They were nice enough, but there was a limit to their generosity.

They’d always said she needed to get a real job, that art curation was a dream she needed to wake up from. She hadn’t listened. They would be thrilled to find out they’d been right, but not enough to extend a helping hand. All she ever got from them was lectures that utilised the phrase, ‘Pull yourself up by your bootstraps,’

repeatedly.

So who else? There were her friends. Her good friends, the ones who still checked in, who sent texts now and then. But they had families now, homes full of spouses, kids, pets, commitments. They were settled. They wouldn't want Imogen's failure on their couches.

She'd never been here before. Not this close to the edge. It was, well, there was only one word for it. Terrifying.

And then came the knock.

She froze. For a moment, she didn't breathe. Could it be her landlord? Rent day was not here, but maybe he'd had enough of her general fecklessness and was booting her out.

Another knock. This time, firmer.

Imogen dragged herself off the bed and padded to the front door. She felt like she was walking to her doom. Even if it wasn't the landlord, it would be some other bad news.

When she pulled it open, it was bad beyond all imagining.

Talia. At her door.

'Wait, what?' Imogen said, more to herself than Talia.

Talia's hands were stuffed into the pockets of her black trench coat. 'Hi,' she said quietly.

'You can't have the money back. It's gone,' Imogen told her quickly.

Talia exhaled sharply. 'No, no. I'm not here for that.' Her eyes flickered from Imogen's face to the ground, then back again. 'I need a favour,' she said.

Imogen let out a sharp laugh, harsh and bitter. 'A favour?'

But Talia wasn't laughing. 'Just let me explain,' she said quickly. 'Please.'

Imogen wondered if she should simply slam the door. But there was something in Talia's eyes that made Imogen hesitate. The rage that had boiled up in her the last time they spoke wasn't there anymore. Instead, there was something more vulnerable. Scared, even.

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

Talia shifted uneasily in Imogen's poky living room. It had been easy enough to find—Imogen was listed. Getting up the guts to come here had taken a bit longer. But she knew this wasn't something to shoot a DM about. She needed to be eyeball to eyeball for this pitch.

Imogen hadn't said anything yet. She was seated on an old couch that should have been thrown out years ago, waiting—probably out of sheer curiosity. For Talia to come here, Imogen would know it had to be good. And Talia was not going to disappoint her.

'Imogen, look... Before I go on, let's just get the obvious out in the open. I realise the depth of our shared animosity.

You cost me a girlfriend, and I cost you a job. There's no love lost between us.'

Imogen's hackles visibly shot up. 'I don't think I quite see it like—'

Talia put her hand up. 'I'm not here to litigate our history. I'm not here to talk it through. I'm not here to make amends. We can park all that. I'm here to offer you, well, an opportunity. Of sorts.'

Imogen tilted her head in sour, amused amazement. 'Oh?'

Ok, it was time to say it. Get it out there.

'This is going to sound ridiculous, and I... I can't even believe I'm asking you this, but—' She cut herself off. Was she really doing this?

Yes. Yes, she was. Or it was bye-bye partnership.

Imogen watched her, arms crossed. Talia knew she didn't have the luxury of time to make this perfect. There was no ideal explanation, no neat way to dress it up. She had to get this out fast.

'It's about my boss,' Talia said, her words coming out in a rush now. 'I told her I had a girlfriend. I mean, I told her I have a girlfriend. And...' She winced, eyes flicking to the floor, unable to meet Imogen's gaze while she said it. 'Her name's Alex Gray.'

Imogen's brow creased. 'Okaaaay...'

'I made her up,' Talia continued, her voice faltering. She couldn't believe she was having to confess this pathetic thing to Imogen, of all people. 'I made up a serious girlfriend because my company is very big on family values, stability, all that crap. You can't go up without it. I'm completely happy to be single, but it was holding me back, so I did what I had to. But now... well, my boss wants to meet her. She expects Alex to be at this retreat next week. She's made it clear that it'll lock in my promotion. Without her, I could kiss it goodbye. I could kiss any chance of moving forward with this company goodbye.'

She stopped, feeling her heart hammering in her chest. This was it. There was no way back now.

Imogen hadn't said anything. She just sat there, her face unreadable. Talia shifted her feet and plodded on.

'You may recall from when you paid that little visit to my office that my boss called you Alex. And I missed the opportunity to correct her. So now, you are Alex as far as she's concerned.'

Imogen's lips began to turn up at the corners. She knew where this was going, and she was finding it delicious. Talia's nails dug into her palms at the realisation that Imogen was enjoying the power she had over her already. But Talia was in for a penny.

'I need you to be Alex,' Talia blurted out. The words tasted like dogshit in her mouth. 'I know it's insane, but it's just for the weekend. Just be there. Pretend to be my... my, my...' Say the word. '...girlfriend just for the retreat. I'll pay you ten thousand pounds to do it.'

The silence between them stretched out longer than Talia could bear. Imogen's lips parted like she was about to say something, but then she stopped herself. Talia pushed on.

'I know it's going to be awful being around each other,' Talia said, the words coming out harsher than she meant them to. 'But this is business, Imogen. You'll never have to see me again after this. I'll make sure of it. You'll get the money, and I'll get the promotion, and we can both walk away with what we need.'

Still nothing.

'Just pretend to be Alex. That's all I'm asking. Ten thousand pounds for one weekend. You don't have to do anything else. You certainly don't have to like it. I won't ask for anything more.'

Imogen's expression shifted slightly, but she still didn't say anything. She was staring at Talia with a mixture of confusion, disbelief, and satisfaction.

'Wow,' Imogen finally said. 'You really must be up shit creek to come to me.'

'My boss thinks you're her already,' Talia sighed. 'So I can't get anyone else, even if

that were a possibility. It has to be you. And Alex has to be there. I can't get out of that. Not without setting my career back years.'

Imogen sat still, her gaze unreadable. The silence felt eternal.

'Just think about it,' Talia added, her voice softening. 'Ten grand for forty-eight hours.'

Imogen didn't say anything.

Talia wasn't sure what would happen next, but she knew this was the moment. If Imogen agreed, everything could change. And if she didn't... well, Talia couldn't move forward. And work was all she had.

She could only hope that Imogen was as desperate as Talia suspected she was.

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Imogen couldn't help but feel amused as she watched Talia fidgeting, clearly hating every nanosecond of this. This entire situation was absurd. Talia, of all people, was now in a position where she needed Imogen's help.

After everything, after that mess with Flora, and then the crazy confrontation a few weeks ago that led to that one confusing moment, Imogen was the only person she could ask. It was a truly twisted butterfly that had flapped its wings to get them here.

Imogen had to smile. After all, Talia had put herself in this ridiculous situation, and part of Imogen wanted to revel in that. Oh, how the mighty had fallen on her slender, tailored arse. The way she'd carried herself, that sharp confidence, that air of control... it was gone now. She was desperate.

But ten grand desperate?

Imogen shifted in her seat, her arms folded across her chest. She didn't want to get involved in Talia's mess, but the money... The money was hard to ignore. She could picture how it would look in her account. A one and five zeroes. A beautiful arrangement of numbers. She could cover bills for months, really give her time to get back on her feet. Time to make a decent plan. Time to figure out her next move.

But what she had to do for it? Pretending to be someone else? Someone who didn't even exist? That was a different thing altogether. Plus, a weekend with Talia?

But the figure of the ten thousand just hung there, taunting her. It was a way out of the mess she was in.

‘grand,’ Imogen repeated, almost to herself. ‘That’s a decent offer.’ She paused. ‘But pretending to be someone else... That’s pretty fucking weird, don’t you think?’

Talia shifted, her eyes darting away. ‘Yes, I do, as it happens. But it’s just one weekend.’

Imogen kept mulling. grand, weird thing. grand, weird thing. grand, weird thing...

‘I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t absolutely need to,’ Talia said, her expression pleading.

Imogen didn’t know Talia’s rigid face could achieve such an expression. It was quite a sight.

Imogen stood up and walked over to the small, dirty window for a look outside at the empty street, trying to think neutrally about this.

Part of her wanted to say, ‘Fuck off’. But the other part was staring at the terrifying reality of being kicked out of her place with nowhere to go.

But the idea of being someone else felt a little like something out of a cheap TV drama. What if she slipped up? What if this whole thing turned into a disaster?

But then again... grand.

‘You’re serious about this, aren’t you?’ Imogen asked, turning back to face Talia.

Talia nodded, her lips pressing into a tight line.

‘And after this weekend... you’ll be done with me?’ Imogen asked. ‘I won’t need to pop up for any more corporate bullshit?’

‘No,’ Talia said quickly. ‘I won’t need anything else from you after that. Once the promotion is official in a few weeks, I’ll say it ended.’

Imogen sighed, long and deep. ‘Alright. I’ll think about it.’

Talia looked relieved that she was even getting that much.

‘I appreciate it,’ Talia said softly.

‘OK. Well, nothing more to say for the moment, is there?’ Imogen said pointedly, with a look at the door.

Talia gave her a nod and walked quickly out of her flat.

But as the door clicked shut behind her, Imogen couldn’t help but wonder: Could she really say no? With everything that was riding on this? Could she afford not to take the money?

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

Talia couldn't stop pacing around her flat. The retreat was only a few days away, and she still hadn't heard from Imogen. Every minute felt like an eternity, each passing second heavier than the last. What if she said no? What if she said yes? What if this was a disaster before it even began?

She had the promotion within her reach if she played her cards right. And Imogen was the only person who could make this work. If she said no... What if she actually had to go to the retreat alone?

Well, she'd be screwed. Simple as that. Partner would go to that dildo Daniel Parsons. Just as he expected it to.

Christ, that galled her. A man like Daniel? There was no way it had been hard for him. The road to success had been paved by wealthy parents before he took his first breath.

Nobody had caved shit for Talia. She'd clawed her way up from nothing. Two jobs at a time, nights spent revising on the bus while drunk teenagers screamed around her. No safety nets. Every step forward had been paid for with exhaustion and compromise. While Daniel strolled through open doors, she'd had to pick every lock.

Talia pulled her phone out of her pocket and stared at the screen. No new messages.

Then the phone buzzed in her hand.

Talia's heart skipped a beat. She tapped the message open with trembling fingers, her eyes scanning the words quickly.

I'll do it, but I want five up front.

The relief that flooded her was almost dizzying. Ten thousand wasn't chump change, but it was still a small price to pay in the grand scheme of things. The promotion was going to make her a fortune. She had to spend money to make money.

Talia smiled to herself, exhaling a shaky breath. Imogen was in.

She typed her response quickly.

Deal. Can we meet soon? We need to work out exactly how we do this.

She hit send and then stared at her phone, awaiting Imogen's response. Talia could practically see the end result in her mind. The retreat and then the promotion, everything she'd been working for. So close...

Her nerves jumped back up again. Because now, she actually had to do this mad thing she'd planned. And that scared her almost as much as the alternative.

It wasn't that she didn't think Imogen could do it. Or maybe it was? No, it was the plan that made her uneasy. The more she thought about it, the stranger it felt. Imogen, standing next to her, calling herself Alex? Had she lost her mind?

Maybe. But she had no other choice. This was it. No other way.

Talia shook her head, trying to clear away the doubts. Imogen was willing to do it. That was all that mattered. She had to hope that they could pull it off.

Later, her doorbell rang, and she jumped up. Her every movement was like a spider

on a griddle lately. She needed to calm down. Be Talia Knox. Now more than ever.

She opened the door to Imogen stood in the doorway, looking downright shifty. She could barely meet Talia's eyes. Not that Talia was jazzed for prolonged eye contact with Imogen, but it wasn't a great start to a pretend relationship.

'You're sure about this?' Talia asked, not quite able to mask the vulnerability in her voice.

Imogen gave her a long look, then nodded. 'If you've got the money, I'm sure.'

Talia stepped aside to let her in, her mind already racing through all the details. They had a lot to figure out.

As Imogen stepped past her into the flat, Talia forced a smile and tried to shake off her feelings about Imogen. This wasn't about them. This wasn't about anything other than the end goal.

'Alright,' Talia said, closing the door behind her. 'Let's figure this out, Alex.'

Imogen sighed. 'That's me.'

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

Imogen was sitting in Talia's flat. It wasn't the same one she used to share with Flora, thank god. They didn't need any more reminders of their history. The familiar tension was hanging between them like a heavy fog.

The flat was nice, of course. Clean lines, soft light, and furniture that looked expensive without being flashy. The sort of place estate agents described as tastefully minimalist. It was undeniably beautiful, but it felt curated rather than lived in. Like a showroom pretending to be a home. Exactly what Imogen would expect from a cold fish like Talia.

'Alright,' Talia said, her voice clipped, but the faint edge of anxiety was still there as she carried two coffees in and handed one to Imogen. 'Here's the plan.'

Imogen put her drink on a coffee table. Then picked it up again. Then put it down.

'What are you doing?' Talia asked.

'I'm sorry, I don't know what to do with myself,' Imogen told her honestly. 'This situation is...'

'Awkward? Agreed,' Talia said with a sigh. 'But it needs to get un-awkward fast, or this won't work. And I need to know it will.'

Imogen was trying so hard to be civil, but Talia wasn't making it easy. 'Gimme a minute. I'm not some psychopath who can just be someone else at the click of your fingers.'

‘I don’t expect you to be able to do that,’ Talia said calmly. ‘I’m just saying...’

Imogen sighed and said tightly. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say that.’

‘You did. But it’s fine. Get it out now while you can,’ Talia told her flatly.

‘There’s nothing to get out,’ Imogen lied.

Talia raised an eyebrow at that but didn’t address it. ‘So, I guess we’d better talk about Alex.’

Imogen managed to force a thin smile on her lips. ‘Sure. Let’s.’

‘There are not that many facts to know about her. First off, she’s a doctor...’

Imogen’s mouth fell open. ‘Whoa. What?’

Talia paused. ‘What’s the problem?’

‘I can’t fake being a doctor.’

‘Imogen, you don’t have to remove a gallbladder. You just have to say you’re a doctor if anyone asks.’

‘And what if someone asks for medical advice?’ Imogen demanded.

‘Why would they do that?’ Talia asked.

‘When you’re in social situations, and people find out you’re a lawyer, what happens?’

Imogen saw the lightbulb go on. ‘Oh. Right. Free advice.’

‘If anyone gets so much as a nettle rash...’

Talia waved a hand. ‘I’ll... intervene.’

That didn’t reassure Imogen remotely. ‘How?’

Talia sat back on the couch and thought. ‘I’ll google the symptoms and whisper to you what it says.’

Imogen stared at her. ‘That’s your plan?’

‘Yes,’ Talia said confidently. ‘Unless you’d prefer to fake your own accident to be carried away from the first one?’

‘Don’t tempt me,’ Imogen muttered.

Talia gave her a reassuring look. ‘Just look serious and say things like “It could be viral” or “You should really get that checked out at a hospital.”’

Imogen slumped back against the cushions. ‘Will that work?’

‘Would you buy it?’ Talia asked.

Imogen shrugged. ‘Maybe. But what if it’s more serious?’

‘Look, the odds are, any problems will be minor. So, unless someone loses a limb, it’s going to be fine,’ Talia said. ‘And even then, we’ll just say it’s not your area.’

Imogen was silent for a moment, mulling over the plan. Yeah, it probably would be

OK. But she had to wonder why Talia had to go to this trouble of building a fake doctor girlfriend. She'd said something about career setbacks, but was that the real reason? Or was Talia simply a bit unhinged?

She couldn't think of a single way to ask without chapping Talia's arse, so she bit her tongue. The last thing she needed was another fight.

'The doctor stuff isn't that important. What is important is that I need you to be personable,' Talia continued. 'Alex is confident, outgoing, and—' She paused. 'The kind of person who can hold her own in front of my colleagues.'

'Hold my own with who, exactly? Cutthroat corporate lawyers?' Imogen asked. The words came out before she realised what she'd said.

Talia's expression grew immediately cold. 'Oh, I'm sorry, I realise you're used to the gentle, moral world of art curation. Where everyone is kind and honest and there's no bullshit whatsoever.'

Imogen decided not to rise to that.

But Talia wasn't done. 'Oh, no, what am I saying? You don't work in that world anymore, do you? Would you be more comfortable if I only worked with wait staff? Because you're the salt of the earth now, right? No more fancy art world for you.'

Imogen stood up. 'This isn't going to work.'

Talia groaned. 'Sorry, OK? Sorry.'

Imogen stayed standing. 'No, it's not OK. You think because you're paying me, you can talk to me like dirt?'

Talia blinked. 'No, I don't think that,' she said with much more sincerity. Even a little shame.

Were it not for that, Imogen would have walked out. But she paused, and Talia jumped into the gap.

'Look, this is weird. We both know that. But no. I don't have the right to talk to you poorly in this situation. No amount of money buys that.'

Imogen felt Talia was being sincere. She wondered if the possibility of clearing some air might exist. If only to make this situation a touch easier. 'We could... talk. About the situation. The former situation, I mean. That might make it...'

'No,' Talia said quickly. 'That's not going to help anything. The only way to get through that is to put up a mental block on... that topic.'

'Mental block?' Imogen repeated. Not really a great plan.

Talia nodded. 'Yes. I'll just... push it down. I promise.'

The promise was good. It gave Imogen a way not to leave. Because she couldn't afford to blow this either.

Imogen sat down again. 'Do what you have to. But I expect you to treat me with a baseline respect. And not just when I'm being Alex,' Imogen said. She sat down again, gathering herself. 'So. Alex...'

Talia gave a small shrug, moving past the tricky moment quickly. 'She's an A and E doctor. She likes to hike. She's tough, but not cold. Likeable. She's...' She hesitated as if she were searching for the right words. 'Someone who fits in but doesn't get swallowed up by the crowd.'

Imogen laughed, but it was dry, humourless. ‘Great note. Very specific.’

‘That’s all I have for you.’

Imogen rolled her eyes. It wasn’t the details of the fake girlfriend she was supposed to embody that irritated her so much; it was the way Talia kept talking about Alex as if she were some kind of perfect person.

‘What’s wrong with Alex?’ Imogen asked.

Talia snorted. ‘What?’

‘You’re asking me to be the perfect woman. That’s a tall order. So just give me one thing I can be normal about.’

Talia shrugged. ‘I don’t know...’

‘There has to be something.’

‘I really don’t...’ Talia paused. ‘OK, why don’t you give her your own flaws?’

Imogen paused. Was that a jab?

‘I’m serious. If it’s hard to be someone else, don’t be. Not completely. You’re not a robot, I get that. Do what I’ve asked, and the rest is up to you.’

Imogen didn’t respond right away. She was stuck on the idea of her own flaws. As though they could be cherry-picked and slipped into someone else’s life like accessories. But maybe that wasn’t the thing to focus on. Maybe the only thing to take away from this was that she could be herself, essentially. If she’d become a doctor and liked hiking and was good at talking to people. And her parents had

named her Alex.

Piss of piss.

‘Fine. So, do you want to rehearse or something?’ Imogen asked flatly.

Talia shot her a look. ‘I think we’ll be OK. I just need you to know what the broad strokes are. How to behave generally. Let’s not make it weird.’

Imogen let out a dry laugh, but it was sharp. ‘Don’t make it weird? I think we’re a bit beyond weird. Weird is in the rearview mirror.’

Talia paused, her lips pressing into a tight line. It was clear she wasn’t happy with the sarcasm, but she didn’t push it. ‘I’m trusting you with this.’

Imogen raised an eyebrow. ‘Are you?’

Talia’s eyes flickered, but she said nothing.

Imogen didn’t want to drag it out. So she just pushed off from the couch, muttering, ‘I’ll figure it out. But you need to understand this can’t be perfect. I’m not an actress, Talia.’

Talia didn’t answer for a long moment. ‘I think that’s all we need to talk about for now.’

She walked Imogen to the door. ‘Pick you up Saturday at 7.30.’

Imogen’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Hold on, you forgot something.’

‘What?’ Talia asked, irritated.

‘People are going to ask how we met, right? So, how did we meet?’ Imogen asked.

Talia groaned. ‘Leave it with me. I’ll come up with something and text you.’

Imogen nodded, and the door was shut in her face without further pleasantries. She headed down the hall.

It was OK. It would be OK. They had a plan now, or at least they were pretending to. But Imogen couldn’t shake the feeling that, no matter how well she played the part, something would go wrong.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

The morning air was crisp as Talia pulled up outside Imogen's flat, her car's engine ticking over in the quiet street. She looked up at the shabby building and felt a knot twist in her stomach as she sipped her second coffee of the morning. She'd barely slept. Again.

But that was fine. Expected, even. She was used to the acid stomach and the 3 a.m. wake-ups. That was the cost of ambition, and Talia had always been willing to pay it. Career progression didn't pair with a functioning nervous system. That was what antacids and industrial-strength concealer were for.

Talia just hoped she was as prepared as she could be for this weekend. But what more could she do? Imogen knew the brief and seemed willing to follow it. And Talia had done what she'd vowed and pushed down any lingering thoughts of the past, any remnant of the mess with Flora. It was locked away and would remain so until she dropped Imogen off on Monday morning. Then she could go to the nearest uninhabited area and scream till her voice box gave out.

She let out a long, anxious breath, rubbing her forehead. She glanced in the rearview mirror, looking herself in the eyes to check for signs of madness. If it was there, Talia couldn't see it—which was as good as it would get.

This was an imperfect plan, she knew that. But there was no turning back now. If she wanted the promotion, if she wanted her life to travel at the speed it should, she needed to pull this off.

And for that, she needed the woman who had once ruined her life.

She got out of the car and smoothed down her Gore-Tex jacket. The black-on-black Rab logo barely showed on the chest. Underneath, a merino-blend top hugged her frame, and her slim technical trousers looked more like designer wear than hiking gear. Her waterproof boots bore a discreet Vibram logo on the sole. Every item was quietly expensive, exactly Talia's style. She always went for that 'if you know, you know' approach to expensive clothing.

As she headed into the building, Talia realised she hadn't given Imogen a clothing brief. She panicked about that all the way up the stairs to Imogen's flat.

Imogen answered the door almost immediately, her arms crossed over her chest. She was wearing an adequate corporate retreat outfit, thank god. Fitted jeans, clean trainers, and a soft-looking jumper in a cheerful shade of yellow. Casual and vaguely outdoorsy. Not pricey, but that was good. Alex could be modest. That worked for her character.

'You're bang on time,' Imogen said, her voice flat.

Talia nodded, offering a thin, polite smile. 'Of course I am. You ready to go?'

'Yeah,' Imogen muttered, grabbing a bag. 'Let's get this over with.'

Talia didn't comment on her tone. She knew better than to push her.

The drive out to the country was quiet.

Imogen sat in the passenger seat, her gaze fixed out of the window. Talia focused on the road ahead, trying to ignore the awkwardness between them, but it was impossible. You could have cut the air with a plastic spork.

This was not good. They needed to warm up before they reached the retreat.

Talia tried to start small talk. 'The weather looks nice today,' she said, glancing at Imogen for a response.

Imogen didn't even look at her. 'Yeah,' she muttered, her eyes still fixed outside.

Talia pressed her lips together, her hands gripping the steering wheel a little tighter. She wasn't good at this personal shit. Not at fixing things, not at navigating the awkward silences, and certainly not when it came to Imogen.

But she was good at negotiation. Maybe if she treated it like any other deal with a client she didn't like?

'Look,' Talia said finally, her voice sounding more strained than she intended. 'I know this isn't... ideal. I know you're doing me a favour. And I just want to say... thank you. I really appreciate it.'

Imogen didn't respond. Her fingers drummed lightly on the seat next to her, the only movement in the car as they sped along the country roads.

Talia cursed under her breath, realising how bad this was. She had hoped, somewhere in the back of her mind, that the drive would give them time to relax into the situation, ease into the act of pretending to be something they weren't. But the silence between them was growing heavier, the gap widening the further they got from the city.

The rolling hills of the countryside passed in a blur as Talia tried to focus on the road, her thoughts tumbling over one another. What had she expected? That it would just be easy? That they would be able to pretend everything was fine, that they could both slip into these roles without any of the old baggage coming up?

She took a few subtle deep breaths, trying to force herself to calm down. This is about your career, she repeated in her head, an almost soothing mantra. This wasn't about old wounds. She had a job to do, and Imogen was just... a means to that end.

But even as she thought it, she knew the lie in it. She knew that it wasn't just about the promotion, not really. It was about proving herself. About proving that she could get everything she wanted. And, if she was honest with herself, it was about proving that she could control her own life, even if that meant sitting next to someone she'd like to smack around the face.

The silence stretched on.

What was she supposed to do? How was she going to make this easier?

As they neared the turn for the retreat, Talia's stomach was a mess of nerves. It felt like the friction between them was actually growing, and it was becoming clearer by the second that this was not going to be as simple as she had hoped.

She took a deep breath and tried again, her voice softer this time. 'We'll be there soon.'

Imogen didn't say anything, just a nod.

Talia gripped the wheel tighter and tried to focus on the road ahead, knowing that there was no going back now.

The retreat was upon them. What would Imogen do when they got there? Would she snap into Alex mode? Or was this a portent of things to come?

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The gravel crunched under the tyres as they pulled into the sweeping drive of the lodge. It was picturesque as fuck; Imogen had to give it that. Honey-coloured stone, neat hedges, a view that stretched out over green hills, everything a rich company could want out of their silly little retreat.

Talia parked in the car park near the entrance, and for a moment, they just sat. 'We should go in,' Talia said gloomily.

'Hold on,' Imogen said.

'What?'

Imogen gave her a look. 'I'm not getting out of this car until...'

'Ah.' Talia took out her phone and tapped around. 'OK, it's sent.'

Imogen checked her phone. There it was, five grand, easy as you please.

And that would be the end of any ease for the next few days.

The inside of the lodge was old-money countryside chic. There was already a fire lit in the main reception despite the good weather, and the woman at the desk had the kind of accent that said she'd grown up playing croquet and eating scones the size of fists.

‘Are you from the Monroe contingent?’

Talia nodded and approached the desk. Imogen kept back. She wasn’t ready to do this yet. She hadn’t said much on the way over, kept her mouth shut. She didn’t trust herself to sound civil, not yet. Not until she had to be.

She checked her watch. They were early by design. Talia had insisted on that. So the place was empty but for the receptionist.

‘Alex, I’ve got the keys,’ Talia said. ‘Shall we settle in before everyone gets here?’

Imogen turned and gave her a wobbly smile that would have convinced exactly no one that she was Talia’s beau. It was giving hostage situation.

Their room was up a narrow staircase, tucked at the end of a long corridor. The key turned with a soft click, and then they were inside.

Imogen stared. One bed. It was enormous, but still. One bed.

‘Absolutely not,’ she said, throwing her bag down in the corner. ‘You can have the floor.’

Talia opened her mouth to argue but must’ve seen the look on Imogen’s face because she nodded, quick and sheepish. ‘Yeah. Sure. Of course.’

Imogen turned away and busied herself with unpacking the essentials: pyjamas, toothbrush, phone charger. Her hands moved automatically, but her thoughts were thick with resentment.

Everything about Talia grated. The way she took charge. The way she’d tried to play nice in the car. And of course, the way she’d once let Imogen become the scapegoat

for everything Flora had done.

But that incident was not supposed to exist in this place. She should stick to disliking Talia for things happening today.

Actually, she wasn't supposed to resent her at all. There was five grand in her account that had bought a loving and medically informed girlfriend. The other five relied on her carrying that off. Which included a distinct lack of loathing.

She had to at least try to shift the tone. For the sake of the money. For the sake of her own sanity.

She turned to Talia, who was hovering awkwardly near the window.

'Alright,' Imogen sighed. 'We need to not despise each other for the next forty-eight hours, minimum.'

Talia blinked. 'I don't—'

Imogen waved away the fake denial she could see coming. 'Let's do something. A warm-up exercise. Like, I don't know, a fake couple trust game.'

Talia tilted her head. Suspicious but curious. 'What kind of game?'

Imogen thought for a moment. Then shrugged. 'Quick-fire questions. No lying. The first thing that comes to your mind. Helps us get to know each other. Build... rapport.'

Talia hesitated. Then nodded. 'Alright. You go first.'

Imogen settled onto the bed and gestured for Talia to sit next to her. Which she did,

putting a full foot between them and pulling a decorative cushion off the bed and onto her lap as if she needed a further barrier.

Imogen gave her lap a light slap. 'Right then. Off we go. Favourite book as a kid?'

'Northern Lights,' Talia said.

Imogen liked that one too, but decided not to mention that.

'Yours?' Talia asked.

'The Secret Garden,' Imogen said.

Talia's eyebrow went up. 'Oh.'

'What?'

'It's a good book, that's all.'

Imogen had to laugh. 'You thought I'd be more of a Sweet Valley High kind of girl?' Imogen asked her.

Talia put her hands up in defence. 'I never said that.'

Imogen looked at her.

'I wasn't exactly thinking Sweet Valley High,' Talia said weakly.

'But something vapid?'

Talia put her hands down. 'Fine, you got me.'

Imogen decided not to linger on that point. It was contrary to the spirit of the game to find even more things not to like about each other.

‘Worst date you ever had?’

Talia’s face dropped. ‘Really?’

Imogen nodded.

Talia looked like she was thinking about refusing to answer, but then her shoulders dropped. ‘I once met this woman who brought her ex’s dog on the date and kept crying into its fur.’

Imogen’s mouth went up slightly in one corner, a dimple popping. ‘I was once stood up by someone who said they’d gone into early labour. She wasn’t even pregnant.’

An amused snort escaped Talia, but she was quick to bat it down.

‘Most irrational fear?’ Imogen asked, folding her arms.

Talia hesitated, then said, ‘Pigeons. I know it sounds ridiculous.’

Imogen blinked, surprised. ‘Pigeons?’

‘Yeah,’ Talia admitted, curling her lip slightly. ‘They’re loud, unpredictable, and bloody relentless. One time, a pigeon followed me for about half a mile after I gave it a bit of croissant.’

Imogen cocked her head. ‘It probably wasn’t the same one.’

‘Its markings were very distinct. I still see it outside my office window sometimes.’

Imogen felt herself smiling and stopped. 'I'm scared of spiders. Completely.'

Talia's eyes widened. 'Spiders? That's a bit obvious, isn't it?'

'It doesn't have the originality of a stalker pigeon, I'll give you that,' Imogen said. She thought she might have pushed it a bit with that.

But Talia only gave a dry snort. 'So... What's up with spiders? Aside from the obvious.'

Imogen frowned, thoughtful. 'Did you know they don't get stuck in their own webs?'

Talia frowned. 'They don't?'

'Some of them coat their legs in this oily stuff, like a wax, so they can walk on the threads without triggering the vibrations.'

Talia pulled a face. 'That's grim.'

'And they're bloody precise,' Imogen added, warming to her topic. 'Like, some species actually count their steps when they go out hunting, so they can find their way back to their web.'

Talia stared at her. 'That is truly disquieting.'

Imogen shrugged and smiled. 'Told you. Spiders aren't just scary. They're wrong.'

Talia gave a short laugh, looking away. 'OK, next question.'

Imogen thought. 'Would you rather fight one horse-sized duck or a hundred duck-sized horses?'

She sort of thought Talia would demand a more serious question, but she considered it carefully. 'A hundred duck-sized horses sound like a swarm of nightmares.'

Imogen nodded. 'Exactly.'

'So, horse-sized duck it is. At least it's just one thing to focus on.'

Imogen smiled. 'Looks like we agree on something after all.'

Talia glanced at her sideways, a little reluctant. 'Seems like it.'

They both fell quiet for a moment, the game bridging the distance more than either expected.

'Next question,' Imogen said lightly. 'Do you snore?'

Talia smiled faintly. 'Not that I know of. You?'

'Only when drunk,' Imogen told her.

'Then don't get drunk.'

'I'm glad you said something. I was planning to be smashed the whole time,' Imogen said dryly.

'Actually, I would recommend some drinking this weekend.'

'You would?'

'Me personally? I'm gonna need a drink or two this weekend,' Talia admitted. 'I'm sure it wouldn't hurt you to relax a bit, either.'

‘Me? I’m totally relaxed. I’m downright fucking zen,’ Imogen said.

That surprised a laugh out of Talia that she was quick to cut short.

It wasn’t perfect. It wasn’t healed. But maybe it was a start.

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Talia hadn't expected to enjoy the game. She'd gone along with it because it was easier than arguing.

But now there was a kind of... looseness between them. Not trust, exactly. Just a sense that neither of them was about to launch a passive-aggressive grenade. She had to call that progress.

'Alright,' Talia said, shaking her arms out as if the movement would dispel the last of the weird warmth she felt. 'That's enough emotional excavation for one day.'

Imogen gave her the smallest smile. Then her expression shifted. She cocked her head, frowning slightly. 'Did you hear that?'

Talia froze. Voices. Doors slamming. The clatter of wheeled suitcases on flagstones.

Oh, god.

She whipped her phone out of her pocket and checked the time. 'Shit. The welcome lunch starts in fifteen minutes. People are arriving.'

'You told me we had time to settle in!' Imogen wailed.

Talia was already straightening up in the full-length mirror. 'We did. We used it.'

From outside came a booming, 'This place is SWEET!' that could only belong to Marcus Talbot, junior associate and the office Labrador.

‘OK, alright, OK,’ Imogen said, standing from the bed. ‘Do I look OK?’ she asked with slight self-consciousness.

Talia turned from the mirror and gave her a once-over.

The clothes were cosy and cute, and her sandy blonde hair was in some sort of deliberately messy braid thing that was casual yet presentable. She was an appealing human to look at, Talia conceded. The sharp cut of her cheekbones, the way her full mouth tilted slightly at one corner like she was always halfway to laughing at you. The wide amber-hazel eyes were soft and open. Her skin was absurd. It had that maddening glow of dewy health.

And there was something about the energy she gave off... Charming. Warm. Slightly chaotic, yes, but there was charisma there.

Talia didn’t trust Imogen as far as she could throw her, but in that moment, she could appreciate her. If she’d had the choice of someone to hang off her arm, Talia was forced to admit to herself that she couldn’t have done much better.

‘You’ll do,’ Talia said, turning back to her reflection.

Talia stood up and brushed her hands down the sides of her trousers, though there was nothing on them. ‘Look. You don’t have to be perfect,’ she said. ‘You just have to seem... plausible.’

‘That sounds like a lawyer word,’ Imogen observed.

Talia sighed. ‘I guess it is. But it’s not a bad way to approach it. Be charming and be plausible. Does that sound like something you can manage?’

‘For ten grand? I’ll plause my arse off.’ The words were light, but Imogen’s eyes

weren't.

Talia caught a flash of real fear before Imogen masked it with another shaky smile.

'It'll be OK,' Talia said quietly. She didn't know that, of course. But she just needed Imogen to calm down a bit. She looked like Talia felt.

Imogen nodded once, sharp and jerky.

Talia opened the door, and they stepped out into the corridor together. Somewhere downstairs, smooth, inoffensive jazz played, and the low hum of conversation floated up.

'Should I hold your hand?' Imogen whispered as they walked.

Talia glanced at her. 'Oh, umm...' She nearly said, 'No, that's not necessary.' But then she realised how stupid that was. Of course she should hold Imogen's hand. She had to. 'OK.'

Imogen slipped her hand into Talia's, and Talia felt her grip go rigid and told it to chill, relaxing into the hold. As she did, she found that Imogen's hand was soft and warm, and Talia wasn't nearly as uncomfortable with holding the appendage of her enemy as she would've thought.

At the top of the stairs, the noise below sharpened. Cutlery on plates, low laughter, and the clink of glass rose up to meet them. Talia felt Imogen's fingers tighten.

Below them, the lodge's main hall was rowdy. Long tables lined the far wall, stacked with platters and drinks. A couple dozen people milled about, some holding a plate already.

Imogen shifted beside her, nervous energy rolling off her in waves.

‘I feel like I’m about to walk on stage naked,’ she muttered.

Talia didn’t say anything to that, but she let her thumb brush lightly over Imogen’s knuckles, just once, not even thinking about it until it was already done. Imogen’s hand responded, tightening her grip on Talia’s. Just for a second.

Talia glanced sideways at her—at the faint flush high on her cheeks, the way her chest rose and fell a little too fast—and felt an unexpected jolt of protectiveness.

Side by side, they started down the stairs, the chatter and clinking glasses swelling around them. Heads were already turning. Eyes tracking them as they descended.

Talia lifted her chin and pasted on a smile she prayed looked natural.

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Imogen clung to Talia's hand like it was the only solid thing in the room.

The moment their feet touched the ground floor, she felt the weight of a dozen curious stares settle on them.

She knew how she must look. A little stiff, a little too careful. Not very Alex.

Talia leaned into her, just a little. A subtle nudge against her side. 'Just breathe,' Talia murmured under her breath.

Easy for her to say.

Imogen followed Talia's lead, angling their path toward the fireplace, where a small cluster of people had already noticed them. Their expressions were open, smiling, expectant. One statuesque woman was practically buzzing with excitement.

Oh god. That's her boss!

Imogen summoned a smile. It felt foreign on her face, too wide, too much. She tucked herself half a step closer to Talia as they closed the distance.

Celeste got there first, cutting across the last few feet with a speed that suggested she'd been waiting for this.

'Talia!' she cried, throwing her arms wide.

Talia let go of Imogen's hand to be pulled into a quick, crushing hug while a

handsome grey-haired man hovered at her elbow.

Celeste turned her attention to Imogen, her gaze sharp and assessing. Not unfriendly, but definitely the kind of look that was sizing her up in real-time.

‘And Alex!’ she said brightly.

Alex. Right. That’s me.

‘I’m Celeste. This is my husband, Mitchell.’

The grey-haired man gave a sheepish wave. Imogen waved back.

‘Lovely to see you again,’ Celeste said.

Imogen reached out automatically, her heart hammering against her ribs. Celeste’s handshake was firm, enthusiastic enough to jolt up Imogen’s arm.

‘Hi,’ she said, wincing internally at how small her voice sounded. She cleared her throat. ‘It’s lovely to meet you. Again.’

Talia bumped her shoulder lightly with her own, a gesture she somehow understood to mean good job, and some of the cold terror loosened. She knew it was probably bullshit. Talia just wanted her to relax into this. Still, the gesture was appreciated.

Celeste beamed. ‘Honestly, it’s about time she brought you along to one of these things.’

Imogen pasted on a smile and tilted her head the way she imagined a relaxed, confident girlfriend would.

‘She’s always trying,’ Imogen said. ‘But a doctor’s hours...’

Imogen risked a sidelong glance and caught the faintest quirk of a smile on Talia’s mouth.

‘Come, come,’ Celeste said. ‘Everyone’s dying to meet you.’

As they moved deeper into the crowd, the introductions started flying fast and loose.

‘That’s Daniel Parsons,’ Talia murmured under her breath as they approached a broad-shouldered man in a navy gilet. ‘He’s a senior associate, like me.’

Daniel spotted them and beamed. ‘Talia, mate! And finally, the elusive Alex!’ His handshake was vigorous, the kind that made Imogen’s wrist ache. ‘Was starting to think you’d made her up.’

‘I live to disappoint,’ Talia said coolly.

‘You’re a tough nut to crack, eh?’ Daniel said to Imogen, elbowing her lightly. ‘But she got you to us in the end.’

‘That’s Lara,’ Talia went on, just in time for a woman with a razor-sharp bob to glide over. ‘His wife. She’s also a lawyer at another firm.’ And then she leaned in to whisper. ‘She hates him, but she’s pretty good at pretending she doesn’t.’

Lara landed among them and extended a hand. ‘Alex, what a pleasure to meet you. I love your braid.’

Imogen smiled and mumbled something polite.

Then a booming laugh erupted beside them. ‘Talia!’ cried a man already wearing his

name badge like a medal. 'You beat me here! I bloody knew you would, early bird!'

'Marcus Talbot,' Talia whispered quickly. 'Loud, but harmless.'

'And the elusive Alex!' Marcus said, seizing Imogen's hand with both of his. 'Welcome aboard!'

A woman who looked to be a wife/girlfriend stood behind him with the distant air of someone hoping a fire might break out so she could escape. Imogen was right there with her.

Before Imogen could say anything to Marcus, a woman with big teeth was zipping toward them.

'Rebecca Knowles,' Talia whispered. 'HR. Runs everything. Don't make eye contact unless you want to help stack chairs.'

'Hi-hi-hi!' Rebecca chirped. 'Talia, hello! And the infamous Alex! You'll need the schedule. I've laminated it, obviously!' She beamed, pressing a copy into Talia's hand, then spun off, presumably to greet someone else with a terrifying level of enthusiasm.

Talia nodded across the room to two older women. The pair were already arguing good-naturedly about who would break their ankle first.

'Claire and June. Legal secretaries. They've been at Monroe since god knows. They know where the bodies are buried. Unfireable.'

'Jesus,' Imogen whispered. 'Is there anyone here who isn't terrifying?'

'Peter Chen doesn't give me any trouble,' she said, nodding at a guy ignoring

everyone and staring at his phone. 'He's IT support and gives zero shits. Shocked they got him to come, actually.'

'Who do we have here?' said a husky voice coming in from the left. Imogen turned to see a woman with killer perfume and perfect eyebrows approaching.

'Jade Robinson,' Talia spoke quietly and quickly as the woman got closer. 'Another junior. Flirts with everyone. New partner at every event. Not sure she's gotten the memo about the culture at Monroe, but I'm not going to be the one to tell her...' Talia's volume jumped to normal level as the woman reached them. 'Jade, hello,'

'You didn't tell me your girlfriend was this cute,' Jade said, eyes fixed on Imogen.

Imogen wasn't sure if she was supposed to like the compliment or not, so she looked to Talia to see how to handle it.

Talia ignored it. 'You bring... anyone?'

'Ray was going to come, but then he pissed me off, so I've given him his walking papers.' She turned to Imogen. 'So, if you get bored, Alex, I'm in room six.'

Imogen stared, stunned.

'She's joking,' Talia muttered. 'I think.'

Jade winked and disappeared into the crowd, leaving Imogen blinking after her.

'What the hell have you brought me into?' she hissed.

Talia gave her a wry look. 'The lion's den. Smile like you mean it.'

She shook hands as names and titles piled on, laughed when she was supposed to, and nodded along to half-heard anecdotes. All while trying to eat quinoa.

Through it all, Talia stayed close. An elbow brushing hers. A look, here and there, when Imogen stumbled over a question or hesitated too long. She didn't know if it was, You're doing OK or Do better. But she hoped it was the former. Because, so far, she felt she had made an acceptable Alex Gray.

As she sipped a coffee among a mixed group of people that included Celeste, the talk drifted towards business—lots of talk of IP and proprietary rights—and Imogen felt safe to glaze over for a while.

But then Celeste's voice cut through the chatter: 'So, Imogen! How did you two meet?'

She felt Talia stiffen, just slightly, at her side. Everyone was looking at her. Waiting.

Imogen's mind went blank.

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‘How did you two meet?’

The question was from Celeste. Of course.

Talia kept her expression relaxed. This was worked out, nothing to worry about, Imogen had her script.

But then she felt Imogen pause. One second, two seconds.

Shit. Imogen couldn’t remember the story. Talia could feel it. She thought about speaking for her. Just leaning in and starting the story. But something stopped her.

Give her a second. It’ll come to her.

Talia gave the smallest nod, a movement so subtle it could’ve passed for nothing. But Imogen caught it. She straightened almost imperceptibly, and when she spoke, her voice was steadier than Talia expected. Her brain had come back online.

‘Well...’ Imogen said, eyes flicking quickly to the group, then back to Celeste. ‘I work at Northwick General.’

Talia resisted the urge to exhale.

‘Talia was in an accident. Nothing serious. A car clipped her and knocked her off the road. I was working in A&E that night,’ Imogen went on. Her voice had a touch of stiffness to it, like she was feeling her way across a tightrope. But it was holding.

‘She came in, mostly rattled. A bit bruised. I did the initial exam before she was sent on for scans.’

There was a pause, a flick of the eyes toward Talia, gauging. Talia stayed quiet, face neutral.

‘And she was... chatty,’ Imogen went on, a small smile tugging at the corner of her mouth now. She was settling into it. ‘Despite everything. She kept joking that I didn’t look old enough to be a doctor.’

‘Chatty?’ Celeste repeated with a glance at Talia.

Talia smiled. ‘I can be when I need to be.’

‘Oh, I see,’ Celeste said with a light laugh. ‘Working the charm, were you?’

‘I don’t often meet women like Alex. Had to put the work in,’ Talia said with as close to a lascivious smile as she could muster. She turned to Imogen. It was time for a term of endearment. ‘Go ahead, babe. Finish the story.’ OK, that had come out normally. No dry heaving at all.

Imogen smiled. ‘She started asking what time my shift ended. Very casually, of course. Just out of politeness.’

Light laughter. People were enjoying it.

‘But then, before I could segue into a date request, wouldn’t you know it? I was whisked off for a scan,’ Talia picked up.

More laughter from the group.

‘If she’d asked me there and then, I would have said no,’ Imogen said.

Talia tensed.

‘I don’t pick up people at work,’ Imogen said with a laugh. ‘That’s how you lose your medical license.’

Everybody laughed again. Talia relaxed.

‘She was professional to a fault,’ Talia said, meeting Imogen’s eyes briefly. ‘But I could tell she wasn’t totally immune to my charm.’

‘Charm is a strong word,’ Imogen muttered under her breath.

Talia smiled wider. ‘Anyway, I waited until the next day to find her again.’

Celeste looked delighted. Daniel leaned in. ‘Wait, you went back?’

‘Nothing too stalkerish,’ Talia said. ‘I just left a note at the hospital reception. And she texted me later that week.’

Imogen gave a small shrug, like it was no big deal. ‘I thought she was, well, interesting, and one drink couldn’t hurt. One drink turned into dinner. Dinner turned into... I’m sure you can imagine.’

‘The rest is history,’ Talia finished, her tone pitched just right.

Celeste was grinning. ‘Eyes meeting over a stethoscope... Very cute.’

There were nods, approving looks, a little ripple of warmth around them. The story had landed. Imogen was breathing a little easier. Talia could feel it in the line of her

shoulders. She hadn't flinched, hadn't tripped. She'd nailed it.

'Me and Lara met at a spit roast,' Daniel said. There was a small silence, during which Lara shot him a look like she was going to kill him. 'Sorry, I mean a hog roast,' Daniel said quickly, laughing. 'Jesus, baby, can you imagine?'

Lara looked like, no, she really couldn't. Celeste looked away from it all.

Talia leaned in while Daniel droned on about their meeting, her voice low enough for only Imogen to hear. 'Nice.'

Imogen didn't look at her but nodded, a small glint of something in her eyes now. Nerves, yes, but maybe pride, too.

Talia turned back to the conversation, that same steady smile in place. This was only the first test. But it hadn't been a disaster.

And Imogen, it turned out, was a better liar than she gave herself credit for.

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The reception had begun to take on the feel of a typical office gathering: laughter, clinking glasses, polite grins worn thin around the edges. Imogen stood near one of the long tables, feeling tired. She needed a breather. This shit was wearing.

Talia approached with two glasses in hand: her smile smooth, distant. ‘Thought you might need this,’ she said, handing one over.

Imogen took it. Their fingers brushed briefly. Though it wasn’t the first time they’d touched hands today, it made Imogen’s arse clench every time.

But she wasn’t supposed to be clenched. She was supposed to be comfortable going skin-to-skin with Talia Knox, so she smiled quickly. ‘You know me so well,’ Imogen said, in case of rogue ears.

They stood together, angled just slightly away from the rest of the party. It would look right, Imogen thought. From a distance.

‘So,’ Talia said after a sip, ‘how’s the whole... charming-the-firm thing going?’

‘You tell me,’ Imogen replied.

Talia threw her one quick, real look. ‘I’m not unhappy,’ she said.

Imogen thought that was pretty close to a compliment coming from Talia. She was about to respond when her eyes caught the label on a nearby bottle set beside a plate of sugared almonds. She stilled.

The wine was a deep gold; the bottle stamped with a silver-inked heron. She knew that label. Too well.

A small, accidental sigh fell from her lips.

Talia picked up the reaction and followed her gaze. Her expression didn't change, not right away. But the silence between them shifted, tautening.

'Christ,' Talia said, low-voiced. 'They had to have that one.'

Imogen turned away from it. 'She used to swear it went with everything,' she said carefully, her voice neutral.

Talia swallowed. 'It really didn't.'

A short pause. Nothing in Talia's posture or face said sadness, but Imogen felt it in her all the same. Talia swirled her glass and said, half to the floor, 'Bold choice for a party.'

'I bet no one drinks it,' Imogen replied.

Their words were bland. Safe. But the weight behind them was not. The wine sat between them like a ghost neither of them could look at directly.

They didn't speak again for a while. Just stood there as the rest of the party moved on around them. Eventually, Talia tilted her head, a gentle warning in her voice.

'Probably best not to dwell on the bad wine choices of the organiser.'

Imogen knew she was probably right. They shouldn't dwell on... anything.

Yet, something in her compelled her to say more. But what? What could be said about the woman they had in common that wouldn't make what they were doing that much harder?

Nothing at all. But the topic was like a scab you shouldn't pick, not yet healed, but oh so inviting.

'Look, Talia...'

Talia looked at her in alarm. Imogen paused, looking for the right words. 'I just—'

And then Rebecca yelled, 'Right! Come on, everyone! It's time for the obstacle course!'

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The obstacle course loomed ahead like a playground designed by Hannibal Lecter: ropes suspended between trees, hay bales, tyres dug halfway into the ground, and what appeared to be a climbing wall made from repurposed pallets.

Talia adjusted the chin strap on her helmet grimly.

‘Alright, everyone, find your partner!’ Rebecca called out.

There was a shuffle of motion as Monroe employees broke off into pairs, dictated by Rebecca. Talia turned just in time to see Rhona heading her way, one of the partners. She looked visibly unhappy about everything that was happening.

‘Guess we’re paired?’ Rhona said.

Talia smiled despite herself. ‘I’ll try not to get us kicked off for unsportsmanlike behaviour.’

‘Pity. I had high hopes.’

Talia laughed and looked over to see Imogen standing to watch with her fellow WAG Lara. Her face said happy, but her body said, ‘Get me the fuck out of this.’

‘How’s she getting on?’ Rhona asked.

Talia shrugged. ‘I think Celeste likes her.’

‘But does she like Celeste?’ Rhona asked.

Talia was stumped by that.

‘My husband didn’t,’ Rhona said.

‘Well...’ Talia began, aware she was in tricky territory.

If she agreed, she was disloyal to Celeste. If she didn’t, she was disagreeing with Rhona. Either way, not great.

‘It’s OK, this isn’t an interview. Not with me, anyway,’ Rhona said. ‘I’m already voting for you.’

Talia smiled sincerely. ‘Oh! Thank you, Rhona.’ She’d hoped this was the case, but it changed nothing in terms of the numbers. Celeste was the one with the real pull.

‘In return, I need you to get me over this fucking thing without breaking my hip,’ she said, nodding at the course in front of them.

‘You’re nowhere near old enough for that sort of talk,’ Talia told her.

‘I knew there was a reason I liked you,’ Rhona said.

They set off together toward the start line, side by side in companionable silence.

‘Think it’ll be tragic or just mildly humiliating?’ Rhona asked as they surveyed the first obstacle, a rope net they’d need to climb and descend on the other side.

‘What? We’re going to win, Rhona,’ Talia said with a flash of her eyes. ‘That’s the idea, right? Find out who wants it the most?’

‘God, don’t ask me. I tried to stop this weekend from happening.’

Talia resisted the urge to tell her she was sorry she hadn't succeeded.

Rebecca explained the rules to the teams. Teams would start at staggered intervals, as it was a timed exercise. Teams that crossed the finish line together would have the same time. Those finishing separately would have their times added together for their total.

'If you need to leave me for dead, I shan't mind,' Rhona said.

Talia laughed like that was ridiculous. But she absolutely would if she had to.

Then Rebecca yelled, 'Bang!' into a megaphone.

Everyone looked at her.

Rebecca lowered the megaphone. 'I don't have a starter pistol,' she explained.

'Yelling "Go" is also acceptable,' Talia told her.

Rebecca's shoulders dropped. 'Fine.' She picked up her megaphone. 'Go!'

To Talia's surprise, she didn't have to leave Rhona behind. She and Rhona kept talking to each other, calling out steps, steadying each other with a hand to the shoulder or wrist, both naturally in sync. Rhona had a dry running commentary going that made Talia laugh hard enough to nearly miss her footing on the balance beam.

'We should quit our jobs and become stuntwomen,' Rhona said, breathless, after they slid down a small incline and landed together in the dirt.

'So much for dodgy hips. You're a beast at this,' Talia told her.

By the time they reached the end of the course, Talia was panting and flushed in a way that felt good. She wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her glove and exchanged a victorious high five with Rhona.

Talia and Rhona sat on the log, recovering.

Next up were Marcus and Daniel, crashing through the final hay bales for no particular reason. Marcus's polo shirt was clinging to him in patches. Daniel, still somehow wearing his gilet, looked annoyingly fresh.

'Absolutely smashed it, mate!' Daniel crowed, patting Marcus on the back hard enough to dislocate something. 'Knew we'd be top contenders. What did I tell you, Marcus? All about the follow-through. Like a clean line-out.'

'You did say that,' Marcus agreed, beaming like they'd just invented teamwork.

More times filtered across, with a much less chipper energy. Claire and June appeared with the quiet menace of seasoned professionals. Claire's hair was windswept, but her dignity was intact. June had a smear of dirt across her cheek and looked delighted about it.

Peter Chen passed them at a quiet trot, alone, the straps of his helmet hanging loose. He tapped Rebecca's clipboard as he went by. 'Finished,' he said simply, then sat down on the grass, pulled out a phone, and put his headphones back on.

'Wait... Who was his partner?' Talia asked.

'Jade,' Rhona said, pointing.

Jade came last, deliberately, emerging from the final stretch with her arms wide like a victorious gladiator. 'I'm here to entertain, not compete!' she announced.

Rebecca tapped her stopwatch and noted her time.

Talia stood and walked over, 'Um, so...'

'Give me a minute,' Rebecca said irritably and then quickly slapped on a smile. 'But I love the energy.' Talia huffed and went back to Rhona.

After an excruciating wait that was probably only about three minutes, Rebecca picked up her megaphone. 'Now, in first place... Daniel and Marcus!'

Daniel grabbed Marcus's face and screamed, 'YEEEESSSS!' right into it.

Talia tried not to glare.

'And in second place, Talia and Rhona,'

Rhona smiled. 'I'm happy with that.'

Talia smiled back. But she was not in accord. To be beaten by fucking Daniel... this wasn't good.

Then things got worse.

'And now that you've all warmed up with your work buddies...' Rebecca called out cheerily. 'It's time for round two! But this time, we're doing the course again with your partners! Just for fun!'

Talia froze.

There were groans, laughter, and the rustle of people glancing around for their romantic plus-ones.

‘And here’s me, a widow. Guess I’m sitting this one out with a coffee,’ Rhona muttered with a grin, walking off.

Talia saw Imogen walking over to her with the look of a woman stepping up to the gallows.

‘We need to nail this,’ Talia told her right away.

‘Why? Is there a cash prize?’ Imogen replied wryly.

‘Alex...’

‘Sure, yeah, got it. Umm, I can do this. I can definitely do this,’ she said. But Talia knew the tone of a woman psyching herself up. It didn’t fill her with confidence.

Talia needed to win this. She didn’t buy the fun thing at all. This would be watched. And if she could make second place with a widow in her sixties, it might look bad if she couldn’t beat Daniel with her younger, outdoorsy ‘girlfriend.’

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It was the kind of course Imogen had found hilarious from the outside. Contrived obstacles, muddy camaraderie, some poor sod dislocating their shoulder on a rope swing. Now she was in it, soaked and scraped and irritable.

They were halfway through. She was doing her best, but her best was crap, she knew.

She considered herself relatively graceful, for the most part. But the course took her straight back to the smell of wet tarmac and the memory of Mrs Keane, her sadistic PE teacher, a woman built like the Trunchbull and twice as furious. She'd always gunned for Imogen, screaming things like, 'LAKE! I've seen more athleticism from a soggy biscuit!' Every time that voice rang out, Imogen could feel her muscles turn to pudding.

It was that same useless panic now, flooding her chest, making her hands fumble even as her brain yelled, You can do this.

She adjusted her grip on the rope net, trying to climb with some semblance of rhythm. She was strong enough, but strength wasn't helping her now. Her hands were fast but clumsy. Her feet landed slightly off each time. She was all force and no finesse, and the net swung wildly under her as a result.

Talia had already reached the top and was crouching, waiting. She didn't say anything, which somehow made it worse. Imogen scrambled over beside her, breath uneven but not winded. Just annoyed. At herself. At this ridiculous course. At the awareness that Talia was watching her, finding her wanting.

They dropped down the other side and ran toward the trench tyres. Talia hit each one

cleanly. Imogen, in contrast, caught her shoe on the second tyre and nearly toppled. She managed to stay upright, barely.

They kept going. She didn't speak. Talia didn't look back.

The wall came into view at the end of the clearing. Eight feet tall, rope dangling, no ladder.

Talia didn't even slow down. She hit the rope and climbed with the kind of steel that was built out of ambition.

Imogen followed, face hot. Halfway up, her hand slipped. She caught herself, but the jolt rattled her shoulder. Her boot couldn't find a solid hold. The rope twisted. Her body swung clumsily into the wood with a thud.

She heard the sound of someone landing on the other side. Talia had cleared it.

Imogen gritted her teeth and went for the rope again, trying to steady it. Her hands wouldn't cooperate. She could hear Keane barking at her to 'Stop flailing.'

Then she heard it: the scrape of boots on the platform above.

Imogen looked up. Talia's arm extended down toward her, braced and unwavering.

'No, go!' Imogen told her firmly.

'Don't be a bloody idiot,' Talia said.

Imogen reached up and let herself be pulled, awkward and graceless, to the top. It took an age.

They dropped down together on the other side, landing hard. Imogen staggered. Talia steadied her without thinking and then released her just as quickly.

They crossed the finish line together.

Rebecca clicked the stopwatch and made a non-committal noise. Imogen wiped her hands on her trousers, avoiding Talia's eyes.

The rest of the teams crossed the line, and it looked a little different now that people were paired with their loved ones. Most people struggled with partners who weren't athletic or didn't take it seriously. But not Daniel. He was barely able to keep up with Lara, who went across the course like an over-caffeinated Marine.

Once the race was run, Rebecca gave them the skinny. 'And in first place...' Rebecca began and told them what they all knew already.

Daniel grabbed his wife in a tight hug. 'Thank you, baby,' he said emotionally.

'If you hadn't tripped on that tyre, we could have shaved off another second,' she told him.

The rest of the team positions were announced. Talia and Alex were second to last. Amid the high fives and commiserations, Talia wasn't looking at Imogen.

Imogen opened her mouth, ready to apologise, but then Celeste approached.

'You could've left her,' Celeste said to Talia. 'No one would've blamed you.'

Talia barely shrugged. 'I don't know why I didn't.'

Celeste nodded. 'Because you're a real couple.'

Imogen blinked. 'But we lost.'

Celeste gave her a look that could chip stone. 'Did you really think this was about winning?'

Talia gave a faint huff of breath beside her, not quite a laugh. Celeste touched her on the shoulder and walked off.

'Thanks for being such a clumsy buffoon,' Talia said quietly and without malice. It was even warm.

'I do what I can,' Imogen replied, relieved.

But her agility had not quite returned to her. And as she turned to get a drink from the water table, her boot caught on a patch of churned-up mud. She tipped forward, instinctively reaching out, and grabbed hold of Talia's forearm to steady herself. Talia stepped in at the same time, catching her waist.

Imogen's hand had ended up against the inside of Talia's arm, palm splayed over bare skin where her sleeve had ridden up. Talia's fingers were pressing firmly into her lower back, just above her hip.

It was a lot more than a handhold.

Imogen righted herself quickly, and they both let go at once, stepping back and averting their eyes. Talia's jaw shifted like she was about to say something, but didn't.

'Well,' Imogen said. Her voice came out lower than she meant it to. She cleared her throat. 'Graceful as ever.'

Talia smiled politely. But Imogen couldn't help but notice that her ears had gone a bit pink.

'I need a drink,' Talia said and walked briskly over to the water table.

Imogen followed her, thinking, What the hell was that?

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The course was behind them, and everyone was scattered in post-assault course clumps, making their way back to the lodge.

Talia stopped to brush dirt from her knees when she noticed the faint tremble in her hands. Barely there. Nothing anyone else would spot. Certainly not Imogen. Unless she was looking closely. And why would she be?

The important thing was that the course had turned out better than Talia had expected. Better than she probably deserved. She'd been swearing under her breath the whole way back to help Imogen, already annoyed at herself for risking the loss. But she'd gone anyway. Not to prove anything, not to be noble. Just because she'd thought Imogen might be hurt. And she'd felt... what? Concern?

She wouldn't have credited herself with that, not when it came to Imogen. But maybe it wasn't for her. Maybe it was for 'Alex.' Maybe Talia was just committing harder than she'd realised.

This meant Talia's instinct to grab Imogen before she could fall was logical and not weird at all. She was just leaning in. And the heat in her ears? That didn't mean anything.

Still, Celeste's words stuck. 'Real couple.' It was the real win of the day. Celeste's approval. This was working. They were really doing it. Talia felt something like gratitude to Imogen.

Then she remembered the wine. Flora's wine. Flora. Flora and Imogen in that bed...

Talia muttered something about going to change and didn't wait for Imogen's reply, just turned and walked, trying to remember how her legs were supposed to move naturally.

She got back to the lodge before Imogen and sat on the edge of the bed and bent forward, elbows on knees, forehead in hands.

There was a knock on the cabin door, two quick taps.

'It's me,' came the voice.

Talia considered not answering. Just for a minute. Letting her stew out there. And then she stood and opened the door.

Imogen stepped in, already unzipping her coat. 'You OK?'

'You slowed me down on that course,' she said finally.

Imogen paused. 'I thought you were happy—'

'You didn't know it would work out in my favour.'

'I didn't ask you to come back for me like an action hero, did I?' Imogen snapped.

They were silent for a moment.

Imogen took her coat off, finally. 'Look, I'm doing my best. I really am.'

Talia looked over. Imogen had a smudge of dirt on her cheekbone and grass in her hair.

‘You should clean up,’ Talia said, turning away. ‘There’s a nature walk before dinner. Try not to fall over again.’

‘I’ll do my best,’ Imogen said, her tone clipped.

Talia wanted to believe she would. But trusting Imogen did not come naturally. How could it? She was glad she’d had a reminder of just who Imogen was.

She picked up her laminated schedule to check the details for the walk this afternoon. And she saw it had another word in front of the word ‘walk’ that she hadn’t spotted before. What the hell was a ‘trust walk?’

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

Imogen was tying a blindfold around Talia's head. Talia stood ramrod straight, arms folded, her body a clenched fist.

Behind her, Daniel was making lascivious jokes to Lara as she tied his blindfold. She responded by tightening until he yelped. Celeste was adjusting her husband Mitchell's walking boots and jokily telling him he'd better keep up while Jade was already loudly speculating about bears to her partner, June. Someone laughed nervously.

Rebecca loitered with a stopwatch and clipboard, springing about with excitement. 'We've tried to pair our nature lovers with our more city-bound people. So some people are with colleagues, some people are with partners.'

Imogen was about to ask why she and Talia were paired off if that was the case when she remembered that 'Alex' was supposed to be a hiker—a fun detail she'd nearly forgotten and the reason she was now about to lead a blindfolded Talia into the woods.

Imogen thought this was a very silly idea, but was in no position to say so. She was supposed to love nature shit. She was supposed to be jazzed for this. She wasn't supposed to whine that she was pretty sure she was going to die on a one-hour walk.

'You're first off. Two-minute intervals after that,' Rebecca said to Imogen.

She heard Rhona asking whether two minutes would be enough of a gap or if they'd end up all bunched together.

‘Trust the system!’ Rebecca said a bit too loudly. ‘Now, Alex, take your partner and follow the ribbons! Three, two, one, go!’

Talia immediately started marching with startling confidence for someone who couldn’t see. ‘Are you with me, Alex?’ she said over her shoulder.

Imogen didn’t get a chance to reply. Talia was off, heading into the woods. Imogen actually had to jog to keep up with her.

‘Wait—’

‘Trust me, I clocked the direction when we were briefed,’ Talia said. ‘The path turns slightly left at the start. I’ve got the bearing in my head.’

Imogen blinked. ‘You do realise you’re the one who can’t see?’

‘Just keep up,’ Talia told her.

Imogen, who’d always tended to defer to the confident, said nothing and let herself be steered.

Minutes later, the path narrowed quickly. Then started to slope. Imogen was too busy dodging brambles to realise they’d gone wrong until there was no more path. Imogen looked behind her. She couldn’t see where it had been.

‘Talia... I don’t think this is right.’

‘I’ve been counting steps,’ Talia said briskly. ‘Rebecca mentioned it was three hundred feet in a straight line and then—’

Imogen stopped. ‘You weren’t walking in a straight line.’

‘I was. I am.’

A bramble caught Imogen’s ankle. She swore and pulled it free. ‘We’re lost, Talia. OK? If you don’t accept it, we’ll get even more lost.’

Talia paused. ‘You’re sure?’

‘Yes,’ Imogen said sharply. ‘You can either take off the blindfold, or you can trust me to get us back.’

Imogen could see Talia’s forehead creasing, even behind the blindfold. ‘But if I take off the blindfold... What if I’m spotted breaking the rules? We’ll be disqualified,’ Talia said.

Imogen shrugged. Then she realised Talia couldn’t see the gesture. ‘I just shrugged, FYI.’

‘I can’t let you lead. You don’t know the way either,’ she said.

‘I might not be a real hiker,’ Imogen admitted, ‘but I’ve got eyes. And right now, that gives me the edge. So pick. Are you breaking the rules or are you letting me lead?’

There was a long pause. Then Talia exhaled. ‘Fine. Lead.’

It was not an easy surrender.

‘I need to hold on to you,’ Imogen told her.

‘I can just follow the sound of your footsteps,’ Talia said instantly.

Imogen rolled her eyes and turned around, scanning for anything that looked

remotely familiar. Broken twigs, disturbed soil, the way the light angled through the trees. Was she about to make this even worse?

She sighed and started walking.

They passed a fallen tree. A glint of red on a branch caught the light. A ribbon.

‘There. We’re back on track.’

Talia hesitated. ‘You’re sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘Yeah, but...’

Imogen took Talia’s hand and placed it directly on the ribbon. ‘OK?’

Talia nodded, feeling the ribbon. ‘Hey, umm...Maybe you should take my arm. So I can follow you quickly.’

Imogen took her arm lightly without further discussion.

They walked in silence for a long while, the path growing clearer with every step. And then the trees began to thin, and the light shifted, becoming brighter, more open. Up ahead, a wooden sign had been strapped to a tree with twine. The paint was cheerful and slightly smudged.

‘Take off the blindfold and enjoy the view.’ There was a little bucket of badges that read, ‘I completed the Monroe Trust Walk!’ in Comic Sans font.

Imogen stopped walking. ‘You can look now.’

Talia reached up and pulled the blindfold off. She blinked against the light and looked ahead.

The trees gave way to a rise in the land and a shallow ridge overlooking a long, open valley. Grasslands stretched below, dotted with wildflowers and wind-bent trees.

‘Oh,’ Talia said quietly.

It wasn’t dramatic. No cliffs. No crashing waves. But it was... still. Quiet and golden in the late light. The kind of view you didn’t expect to find until you were already standing in it.

Imogen glanced at Talia, meaning to remark that if it had been up to her, they’d have been dead in a ditch instead of seeing this.

But the words never made it out of her mouth because the light caught Talia’s face, and her freshly revealed grey eyes were soft in this moment. There was a clearness in her expression that she hadn’t seen before. Something unguarded and striking.

It threw her.

Imogen looked away quickly, unsettled. There was a prickly feeling rising in her chest. She decided to ignore it. It was probably just nettle rash.

After a beat, Talia said, ‘No one else is here. We’re very late, aren’t we?’

‘Probably.’

Talia huffed a sigh through her nose and grudgingly said, ‘That’s my fault. Sorry.’ It sounded like it hurt her to say it.

Imogen smiled, not quite looking at her. 'No problem.'

They turned slowly, ready to retrace their steps. The path was starting to darken. Talia went to the bucket and grabbed two badges, handing one to Imogen. She pinned her own to her chest, and Imogen followed suit.

'I'm supposed to put the blindfold back on, right?' Talia said. 'So you can lead us back?'

'I don't think there's anyone to see if you don't,' Imogen told her. 'Pretty sure everyone else is long gone.'

Talia mulled it over. 'No, it's fine. You got us here. I trust that you'll get us back.' She started to tie the blindfold back on.

Imogen watched her in mild astonishment at the choice to let herself be led back. But she said nothing. And then Talia took her by the arm and off they went, Imogen leading the way.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

The forest was louder when you couldn't see.

Leaves whispered overhead, branches crackled underfoot, and birds communicated with each other about the possibility of some slap and tickle. And beneath it all, the steady sound of their own footsteps. Talia's slightly heavier, more deliberate, and Imogen's quick and skittish.

The blindfold itched against Talia's cheekbones. She resisted the urge to rip the bugger off. She hated feeling so vulnerable. Worse, she hated giving up control of her direction.

'You can either take off the blindfold, or you can trust me to get us back,' Imogen had declared, a laughable idea. Put herself in Imogen's hands?

But Talia hadn't had a choice. If Celeste spotted her with her blindfold off, it wouldn't be good. She had to let the woman who could see take the lead. Because trying to lead without the use of her eyes was, even for Talia, ridiculous. She was really putting the 'freak' in 'control freak' today.

Now, Imogen's hand was on her arm, guiding her gently but firmly back to the group. Talia had expected to feel tense the whole way through. She expected to hate the powerlessness, the vulnerability. But instead, something strange was happening.

Her senses were firing in directions she didn't expect. She was aware of everything: the brush of a fern against her calf, the drop in temperature as they moved into deeper shade, the sound of Imogen's breath when she paused to orient them again.

But slowly, all that dropped away. Her focus narrowed.

To Imogen's hand. To the shape of it wrapped around her forearm. Light but steady. To the way she warned her, low-voiced, about a rock coming up or a slope to the left. The faint trace of something sweet and citrus on her skin, maybe soap or shampoo. A tiny breath of heat each time she leaned in.

Talia felt herself tuning in. More than she wanted to. More than she liked.

She let out a breath through her nose, trying to clear it all away. 'You still sure this is the right way?'

'I'm sure,' Imogen said quietly, confidently.

Talia's foot caught on something, and Imogen's grip tightened, just for a second. It made Talia's stomach flip inexplicably.

What the hell was this? This awareness of the softness of Imogen's voice, the steadiness in her hand, the little hesitations when she had to make a choice. And how did it feel OK walking like this? Blind. Dependent.

No. Not dependent. Trusting.

'You can take it off now,' Imogen told her, and Talia quickly pulled off the blindfold just as Imogen's hand dropped from her arm.

Talia was very nearly sorry to have her vision back because the first thing she saw was the assembled group—colleagues and their partners—all looking various shades of unimpressed.

‘There she is!’ yelled Marcus, as though every eyeball wasn’t already on them.

Talia opened her mouth to explain, but the words caught in her throat. What could she say? Sorry we’re late, I freaked out because I can’t relinquish control for five bloody minutes. Who’s hungry?

Probably best to stay quiet.

‘Well,’ Celeste said with a tight smile, breaking the silence, ‘glad to see you’ve found your way back.’

Talia flushed, the heat rushing to her face. She could feel Imogen standing beside her, still. She was probably just as embarrassed as Talia was.

Rhona folded her arms. ‘You’re lucky we didn’t have to send a search party.’

Before Talia could open her mouth, Imogen cleared her throat.

‘Yeah. That one’s on me, actually,’ she said, throwing on a rueful smile. ‘Thought I was being clever, trying to take a shortcut. Turns out I was a little cockier than I should’ve been. We ended up going in a very scenic circle. Poor Tally didn’t even know she was being led astray.’

A few people chuckled. Even Rhona’s frown seemed to soften a little.

Talia stared at her, wide-eyed, for a moment. And then added, ‘Not the first time I’ve been led astray by a hot blonde,’ she managed to quip.

Jade appreciated that one and laughed very loudly. ‘Same.’

Celeste gave Imogen a thin-lipped smile. ‘I suppose that’s what you get for trying to

cheat, Alex.’ She looked at Talia. ‘You’ve got yourself a naughty one.’

Talia lowered her eyes, unsure of what to say.

‘There’s not long till dinner. Let’s go back and get ready now, shall we?’ Rebecca said.

There was a collective noise of agreement, and everyone began to move in the direction of the lodge.

‘I’ll follow your lead this time, shall I?’ Imogen said, and there were some chuckles.

‘Ha, yeah,’ Talia said. And then mouthed silently, ‘Thank you.’

Imogen shrugged like it was no big deal. But Talia realised that Imogen was really helping her. All day, all the way, she was going above and beyond. Even after Talia had been rude to her in the room.

Talia didn’t know what to make of that. Or anything else that had happened that day.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

As they walked back to the room, it was quiet. Heavily so.

Of course, that was often the case with Talia. But there was a different quality to this tension.

Imogen thought about trying a joke to break it up. She could make a crack about Rhona looking like she was about to set up a search party with a flare gun and a clipboard. Or about Celeste's voice, how it always managed to make warmth sound like judgment.

But Talia's shoulders were high and tight, and the shape of her silence wasn't one Imogen wanted to press against.

Inside the room, it was no different. Talia took her coat off slowly, like she was trying to keep herself busy. And when she'd done that, she began to fold it very carefully, straightening out every crease.

Imogen sat down on the edge of her bed. She was still picking twigs from her jumper, trying not to think too hard about how strange things had gotten when Talia took that blindfold off.

'I'm sorry if I overstepped, telling everyone it was my fault. You didn't ask me to do that,' she said quietly, eyes fixed on a stray leaf she rolled between her thumb and forefinger.

Talia's voice was soft. 'You didn't overstep.'

Imogen looked up. Talia was watching her, arms still crossed like she was holding something in. There was colour high in her cheeks. She didn't look angry. Just... what?

'But—' Talia pushed away from the door and took a step forward stiffly. 'You didn't have to do that. Coming in last place was on me. I would have taken my lumps.'

'I know.'

Talia sat beside her. Not close enough to brush arms. But closer than expected.

'You've helped me out today.'

'That's what I'm supposed to do, isn't it?' Imogen replied quietly.

'Yes, but...' Talia began and then seemed to lose her train of thought. Or maybe she just didn't know what she wanted to say. Or maybe she did, but couldn't bring herself to say it. Maybe she just didn't know how to say something nice to Imogen.

The moment went quiet again. Imogen could feel Talia's weight on the mattress, the way it shifted under them both. She wanted to reach out. Just place a hand over Talia's and leave it there. The impulse was disturbing and obviously not one to act on, so she didn't.

Instead, she said, 'I didn't want you to feel embarrassed in front of your colleagues for one little mistake.'

That made Talia turn her head. Her expression was unreadable.

Imogen's mouth felt dry. She didn't know what she was doing, just that her heart had been beating too fast since the moment Talia had put the blindfold on in the forest

and said, with absolute reluctance, 'I trust that you'll get us back.'

And then suddenly, Talia reached up and touched her face. 'You've got a thing,' she said, brushing something from her cheek.

Imogen's breath caught. It was the touch. Talia's thumb was soft against her cheekbone. Slow. Precise.

It was gone as soon as it came, but Imogen felt it everywhere.

Talia's eyes went wide as she pulled her hand back like she'd been electrified. 'Oh. Sorry.'

Imogen shook her head. 'No. It's fine.'

She hoped she sounded normal. She didn't feel normal. Her skin felt too tight. Her breath wasn't coming evenly. Her eyes felt big.

Talia's hand dropped to the mattress beside hers. Close enough that the sides of their little fingers almost kissed.

And neither of them moved.

Imogen felt a want, almost a need. The desire to reach across and just touch. To take Talia's hand. To ask something with her body that she didn't dare to say aloud.

But Talia was rigid beside her. There was no moment happening. How could there be? Imogen was just losing her marbles.

The quiet between them stretched, and Imogen didn't dare look directly at her.

And then Talia said, too fast, ‘Let’s get ready for dinner.’

She was on her feet, walking toward the bathroom before Imogen could answer. Her hand missed the light switch the first time, then she found it, and blinked against the glare.

‘Talia—’ Imogen started.

Talia shut the door a bit too hard. Not a slam, exactly. But the effect was the same.

Imogen stared at the door for a long moment and then looked down at her hand. Still resting on the bed, fingers curled inward. Alone.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

Dinner was loud. The clink of cutlery, bursts of laughter, and the scrape of chairs on old wood floors were grating on Talia's nerves.

Talia sat stiffly at the long table, pretending to focus on her food. There was a sauce-covered something on her plate. Possibly aubergine. Maybe a wet sock. She pushed it around, trying to look occupied. Trying not to look up. Not to look across the table at the woman sitting in front of her.

Imogen was talking to Jade, anyway. Talia could take a quiet moment to collect herself. And she would collect herself. Everything was fine. They'd had a weird afternoon, that was all. A bit of blindfolded navigation, a smudge on a cheek, a blame taken, those things didn't add up to much.

And the way Talia had felt Imogen's hand on her arm, guiding her, steadying her... That had affected her only because she'd been tired. Disoriented. Vulnerable. Vulnerability did strange things to a person's mind.

Talia stabbed a cherry tomato a bit too hard. It burst like a blister. She heard Jade laugh. Talia's eyes lifted instinctively.

Jade was seated on Imogen's other side, turned toward her with her chin in one hand, all loose hair and sparkly eyes. She said something that made Imogen smile.

It was probably nothing. Jade flirted with everyone. She was one of those people. Touchy. Breezy. In desperate need of that kind of attention constantly and permanently.

But Imogen was laughing back.

Talia looked away and cut a piece of aubergine. She chewed it, tasting nothing. She picked up her wineglass, then set it down again without drinking. Her eyes flicked back up against her will to see Jade touch Imogen's wrist.

Suddenly, the stupid charade she and Imogen were playing together flashed into her mind. She was meant to be the girlfriend.

She leaned forward slightly, kept her voice light and jokey.

'Careful, Jade. That's my girlfriend you're pawing at.'

A few people at the table snorted.

Jade laughed too, completely unfazed. 'Relax, Talia. I was just admiring her bracelet.'

Talia smiled back. She was playing her part. See? All fun and games.

Then she looked at Imogen. She wasn't smiling. She was looking at Talia with this odd sort of stillness. Like she hadn't appreciated the joke.

Talia's smile faltered.

She looked back at her plate, heart beginning to thump harder now. She picked up her wine and drank it too fast.

'You all right?' Rhona asked quietly from beside her.

'Fine,' Talia said. It came out a bit strangled.

She made herself look up again. Just in time to see Imogen lean into Jade's space and say something close to her ear. Jade tipped her head back and laughed.

And the act dropped. Talia found herself wanting to punch Jade in the face.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

Imogen wasn't really listening to Jade.

The room was too warm. The wine had gone to her cheeks. And across the table, in the corner of her eye, Talia was sitting there like a thundercloud in brand-name casual wear.

Imogen gave Jade a little laugh because she was trying. Trying to be social. Trying to be liked. She was here, after all, as someone's guest. As someone's girlfriend, allegedly. She needed to pull her weight.

Jade was twirling a ring around her finger and telling a possibly tall story about a recent date where she didn't realise the guy was a sheikh until he discreetly handed the waiter a stack of cash to clear the entire restaurant.

Imogen smiled when she was meant to, nodded when she was meant to.

Then Jade's hand brushed her wrist, and Imogen didn't pull away. She simply ignored it. Jade flirted like she breathed. It was best to give her no reaction at all.

But across the table, Talia had gone still.

Imogen could feel it even without looking. The way you can feel a cat watching you through the banister. She took a sip of water and glanced down at her plate. Her fork hovered while she searched for another nod or chuckle to offer Jade something that would sound natural.

She didn't notice Talia leaning forward until her voice cut through the chatter.

‘Careful, Jade. That’s my girlfriend you’re pawing at.’

Jade let out a cackle, clinked her glass against Imogen’s, and said something about admiring a bracelet. Imogen wasn’t even wearing a bracelet.

But that didn’t bother Imogen. The joke? That bothered her.

Imogen glanced across the table. Talia wasn’t laughing now. She was frowning faintly, her mouth pressed into a line, her gaze fixed on her still-full plate.

She thought Imogen was flirting back. She was probably worried about how it looked to everyone else to have her ‘girlfriend’ practically cheating in front of her.

Imogen felt herself flush. Not with guilt, exactly, but with confusion. Shame, even. Because she wasn’t doing anything. She wasn’t interested in Jade. She was making conversation. Being a decent guest.

And now what? Now she was meant to play this part too? A girlfriend crossing the line in front of Talia’s whole firm?

It was too much.

Someone stood, clinking their glass with a spoon. ‘All right. Shall we head to the fire?’ called Rebecca, phrased like a suggestion, but it was clearly a command.

People stood up, gathering their bits and pieces.

Talia was still seated, talking to Rhona. She hadn’t looked at her since the joke.

Imogen didn’t wait to be acknowledged. She stepped out into the chilly night. A bonfire crackled and danced, welcoming the group into its orange-lit circle.

The bonfire was meant to be a bonding thing, according to the schedule. Laughter and roasted marshmallows, and someone with a guitar if they were unlucky. Ready, set... connect!

Imogen wrapped her arms around herself and took the seat farthest from the flames. This day was lasting forever, and her performance was wearing thin. She wished she were a psychopath. All of this would be fine if she didn't have normal human feelings.

Behind her, the door swung open, and the others spilled out, bringing the noise with them. Imogen didn't turn. She stared into the fire. Though she didn't look up, she could feel Talia's eyes on her. But she couldn't look at her. Whatever this was between them, it was starting to feel less like an act and more like a test she hadn't agreed to take.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

The bonfire crackled in front of them, its orange glow lighting up the group's faces. Laughter and light chatter flowed freely.

Talia felt anything but light.

She looked across the fire at Imogen, sitting there with her arms crossed and her eyes trained on the flames, her posture tight.

She supposed she should be sitting next to her. That would look normal, right? But she couldn't do it. She was angry, yes. But she was also confused. She blamed Imogen for that. She was just the kind of person who made things too easy and comfortable.

Talia didn't want to be easy and comfortable. She wanted to sit quietly with her resentment while she slapped on a smile and bullshitted her way through the weekend. But it was much more complicated than that. She couldn't sort through it. Did she hate Imogen or did she...

'Hey,' said Celeste, plunking down next to her. 'Is Alex OK?'

'Er... I think so.'

'Jade's just a flirt. Nothing Alex could do about it.'

'I know,' Talia said quickly. Jesus, a heart-to-heart with Celeste about 'Alex?' The bingo card from hell was filling up.

‘I don’t think you need to worry. Alex only has eyes for you.’

Good grief. ‘No, yes, no, I know,’ Talia said.

‘Go and sit with her. Work it out. Don’t let it fester. She loves you.’

‘I’m not...’ Talia chuckled. ‘It was just a joke.’

‘Hmm.’

‘It was.’

‘It seemed like jealousy might be an issue for you,’ Celeste said softly.

Talia flung her a sharp look. She had faked jealousy only because she thought she was supposed to. And now she was in a therapy sesh with her boss.

‘I don’t have jealousy issues.’

‘She’s flirted with Mitchell before.’

Talia blinked. ‘Alex?’

Celeste tutted. ‘No, Jade. Do you remember that night after we signed Halvord Global? She was all over him. I didn’t care, of course, my relationship is much too strong. Very solid.’

Talia realised her mouth was hanging. ‘Oh. Good.’

‘I can’t fire her. I don’t have cause. But I’m definitely sending her to a seminar,’ Celeste said, her quietly furious eyes sliding to Jade, now laughing with Marcus.

His girlfriend was giving zero shits, however. Because that was how it looked when you were strong with someone. What a misstep Talia had made.

‘In the meantime, go and apologise. Save yourself the argument. Put the blame where it should be,’ Celeste urged.

Talia opened her mouth to argue. But Celeste wasn’t kidding. She expected Talia to act, and she expected it now.

She stood, feeling all of twelve years old. The awkward kid told to go apologise with the adult hovering to make sure it stuck.

She moved around the circle slowly, her heartbeat strangely loud in her ears. Her mouth was dry, her thoughts already darting ahead. How would this look? Could she sell it?

Imogen didn’t look up until Talia was nearly there. Then her gaze lifted.

‘Hi,’ Talia said awkwardly.

‘Hello,’ Imogen said, just as awkwardly.

Talia stood for a moment. Then, quietly, she sat down beside Imogen, close enough that their shoulders almost brushed. Her voice was low, barely audible beneath the noise of the fire and laughter.

‘Celeste wants me to apologise for behaving jealously,’ she murmured, eyes on the flames.

Imogen nodded. ‘Got it.’

Talia knew this was the moment, and it had to read from a distance. She leaned in and made as much eye contact with Imogen as she could bear. 'I'm sorry,' she said, her mouth making the shape of the words in an exaggerated mime of contrition. She had to play to the cheap seats.

'That's OK,' Imogen said back with a quick, nervous smile.

Imogen sighed and looked into the crackling fire, hoping it was over. But then she felt it. Celeste's gaze was still on her. Expecting more.

Talia exhaled through her nose. Fine.

She turned slightly toward Imogen, not all the way, but enough to let her see her face. Then she gave her a small, deliberate look: eyebrows raised, lips pressed together, a subtle nod. A signal. She wants more.

Imogen's eyes searched hers for a long beat, and something in her expression said, Do what you have to.

And so, feeling like she might combust from the inside out, Talia moved.

She reached out, not for Imogen's hand, but for her arm. She gently curled her fingers around Imogen's sleeve, just above the elbow. A soft, almost hesitant grip. Just enough to show warmth, connection.

Imogen looked down at Talia's hand on her arm. Then back up at her. She didn't stiffen as Talia might have expected. Instead, she leaned in ever so slightly. Her shoulder brushed Talia's. And then her head casually tipped sideways until it came to rest against Talia's head.

The contact sent a ripple through Talia's whole body. Her skin seemed to tighten. Her

pulse jumped. But she didn't stiffen either. She just sat there, shoulder to shoulder, her temple resting lightly against Imogen's.

The fire cracked and hissed. Someone made a joke about Marcus's obsession with triathlons. The group laughed. But it all felt far away, unimportant. This little pocket of stillness wrapped itself around the two of them. Talia didn't want to break it.

But they were playacting, weren't they? Keeping up the ruse, performing closeness to satisfy the expectations of everyone watching.

But Imogen stayed close. And after a few seconds, Talia realised there was no one to perform for. Celeste had finally looked away, satisfied with Talia, and now fully engrossed in a conversation across the fire.

Talia could have pulled back then. She could have let the moment end. But she didn't.

She kept her hand where it was. She let her head stay tilted gently toward Imogen's.

After all, Imogen wouldn't know. She would only know this was for the performance.

She couldn't know Talia didn't want it to end.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

Imogen was pressed up against Talia, shoulder to shoulder, thigh to thigh. Their arms were touching fully, all the way down, and their heads leaned together like it was the most natural thing in the world. No one commented. Why would they? They were girlfriends at a retreat, sitting close by the fire.

Talia didn't say anything. Just that little exhale of breath when she'd leaned in, the smallest shift in weight as she pressed a fraction closer. Imogen had let herself lean too. Not much. Just enough to feel it. Just enough to let it feel... nice. The kind of nice that had no place in something fake.

Imogen stared into the flames, trying not to think too hard about it. But she could feel it. The rightness of it.

Then someone yawned. Someone else stretched and said, 'Alright, I think that's us.'

The moment fractured.

Talia moved first, pulling back slightly as she shifted to stand. The loss of contact was immediate and sharp. Cold air rushed in where warmth had been. Imogen jumped up to follow Talia and everyone else back inside.

Back in the room, everything felt too quiet.

Imogen's mind was still by the fire as she brushed her teeth. Still pressed up against Talia. Still caught in the feeling of it. Of her.

Should I say something now? she wondered. Does she feel it too? Or am I losing my entire mind?

A whole day of this back and forth, pull and push... Imogen didn't know what to think. Did Talia hate her or want her? Or feel nothing for her at all?

Imogen rinsed her mouth, dried her face on the towel by the sink, and got into her PJs. She walked out into the bedroom, Talia slipping past into the bathroom without looking at her.

Imogen glanced down at Talia's sleeping setup. She wondered if they didn't have to talk about it. Maybe it would be easier than Imogen imagined. 'Hey, you don't need to sleep on the floor,' she could say. And then...

Imogen pulled back the duvet and climbed under it, knowing she'd never be so bold. But she couldn't let go of the thought or the memory of the way Talia's head had rested against hers. It hadn't felt performative. It had felt like Talia was where she was.

She lay back against the pillows and stared at the ceiling, her hands fidgeting with the edge of the duvet.

Talia came in from the bathroom in immaculate silk pyjamas and settled herself on the floor.

'Goodnight,' Imogen said.

There was a silence. Imogen wondered if Talia was just going to go to sleep without any kind of normal response to the word, 'Goodnight,' which was generally just a repeated, 'Goodnight.'

But then she cleared her throat.

‘I just... I wanted to make sure we’re on the same page,’ Talia said, her words measured. ‘About earlier.’

Imogen felt her heart rate pick up.

‘About the physical stuff?’ Imogen asked, her voice a little sharper than she intended.

Talia took a deep breath that Imogen was sure was unconscious. ‘Yeah. I just... I need to know that you’re OK with it. I mean, if we have to...’

Imogen’s stomach twisted. There it was. ‘We don’t have to,’ she said, trying to let Talia know that tonight had been a choice for her.

But Talia looked up at her from the floor, brows knitting together in confusion. ‘It’s what people will expect. And for ten grand...’

Imogen’s jaw clenched. Ten grand. The words felt like an ice-cold splash in her face.

‘Oh, I see,’ she said, her voice low and tight. She leaned up on her elbows to make sure Talia got a good look at her clenched jaw as she said, ‘You want your money’s worth.’

Talia blinked, and her lips parted. ‘That’s not—’

Imogen shook her head. ‘It wasn’t in the terms of the agreement, though, right?’ she said, her words cutting through the tension. ‘We never said anything about touching.’

Talia blinked. ‘No, I know. I’m sorry if it’s weird.’

‘It wasn’t weird.’ The words slipped out before she could stop them. Imogen paused, surprised by her own honesty. ‘But we didn’t discuss it.’

Talia sat up and faced her, nodding. ‘I didn’t mean to make you feel like you had to do something you weren’t OK with.’

Imogen swallowed, her anger still simmering beneath the surface. ‘I’m OK. I mean, I was. Before.’

They both stewed in the awkward silence that followed, neither knowing exactly how to proceed. Imogen’s mind was still spinning, but there was something else beneath the frustration.

Deep disappointment.

This was exactly what she’d been told it was. And she didn’t have much cause to question it. Talia was simply a good actor.

All Imogen was getting from this weekend was money. And that was fine. What more could she expect?

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Talia was lying on the floor of the small room in her uncomfortable makeshift bed.

Her mind wouldn't stop. Every moment replayed itself in loops: the glances, the gestures, the performance. Was she really pulling this off? The question circled endlessly, but it danced with a second question. An even more troublesome one. What the hell was happening between her and Imogen? And then a third brain teaser. Was Talia fighting it hard enough?

The answer to that last one was, maybe a little too hard. One moment in particular was front and centre.

'It's what people will expect. And for ten grand...'

Talia flinched at the memory, her face heating in the dimness. God. She hated how that had come out. It had sounded cold. Like she'd reduced Imogen to a number, to a service paid for and owed.

Talia didn't see it that way. But it had come out because it was easier than saying something honest. So she'd gone for the easy line. A jab about money.

Talia didn't want to be that person. The one who weaponised money, who turned vulnerability into debt and obligation. That wasn't who she was. Or at least, it wasn't who she wanted to be.

She glanced up at the bed. Imogen's figure was curled beneath the covers, still and quiet, her breathing low and even. She was out. It should have irritated Talia how easily she was sleeping. A day ago, it would have. But now...

That was half the problem. The hatred she'd always felt for Imogen, comfortable and familiar, was slipping. And she didn't like that. Not one bit. She didn't know what was replacing it, not really, but it was something softer, something frightening.

Talia shifted onto her back, the light from the window casting faint shadows across the ceiling. This is ridiculous, she thought. I need to get my head straight. But the truth was, nothing felt straight. It all felt like it was bending under the weight of something she didn't have a name for.

She listened to Imogen's breathing. It soothed her, despite everything. That quiet, steady rhythm.

What a mess. She'd wanted control, and now she couldn't even trust her own feelings.

She shuffled again, wondering how many hours of sleep she'd get tonight. Her insomnia didn't need much to keep her mind racing, replaying every mistake of her day. It certainly had plenty of material to work with tonight.

She braced for it. The endless circling, the restless toss and turn of thoughts refusing to quiet down. But instead, she found herself listening to Imogen's breathing again. Soft. Steady. Grounding.

And somehow, without quite meaning to, she focused on that. Just that.

She didn't notice the moment her thoughts stopped spinning. She didn't notice when the tension in her shoulders loosened. She only noticed, much later, if it could even be called noticing at all, that she'd fallen asleep to the sound of Imogen's breath.

Talia was standing at the edge of a road. It was busy. Trucks and cars zipped by, honking their horns.

Across the road was a playpark. Talia knew that was where she wanted to get to. She was an adult; she knew that. But still, she needed to be there.

Talia took a step onto the road.

No one slowed down. Horns blasted. A blur of red and chrome shot past close enough to ruffle her clothes. But she kept walking. It was like wading into a current.

Halfway across, everything changed. The sound dropped out. She was floating, carried across to the park.

She walked through the gate, and Imogen was ahead of her, sitting on a swing that hung from nothing.

‘You found me,’ Imogen said, smiling with delight.

‘I wasn’t looking,’ Talia said. But she sat down on the swing next to her anyway.

‘Is Flora here?’ Talia asked.

‘I haven’t seen her,’ Imogen replied, swinging lazily.

Talia looked around her at the park. And there, on the roundabout, was Flora, as she’d looked the last time Talia had seen her in that street, sex dishevelled. She was spinning around on the roundabout without a care.

‘She’s here,’ Talia said.

‘Let’s not play with her,’ Imogen said.

‘OK,’ Talia said with a nod.

Now the roundabout was empty.

‘Will you push me?’ Imogen asked.

Talia hopped off her swing and walked around to Imogen. Suddenly, her body felt heavy. But before she could push her, Imogen had a change of heart.

‘You can get on with me if you like,’ Imogen said. ‘You can swing better like that.’

‘How?’

‘It’s a two-seater,’ Imogen said confidently.

Talia realised then that it was. And she climbed on. They pushed with their feet, swinging away together.

The metal chains creaked gently. The swing slowed.

Imogen leaned her head on Talia’s shoulder.

In the real world, Talia, now in the bed, pressed her forehead to the back of Imogen’s neck. Her breath moved softly against Imogen’s skin.

Neither of them woke.

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Imogen woke feeling cosy. Man, this blanket was good. What was it stuffed with? Goose down? It was positively toasty. And heavy. And... Wait, was that a breath on the back of her neck?

Her eyes blinked open slowly, suspiciously. She was facing the wall. That was normal. She always slept facing away from the door. But the arm draped across her waist? Not hers. And definitely not normal.

Her first thought was, Oh no, a bear. Her second thought was, Did Jade get into the room somehow?

Somehow, the most obvious explanation was the last to occur to her.

Imogen turned her head, careful not to jostle the mattress too much, and peered over her shoulder.

There she was. Talia. In Imogen's bed. Asleep. Curled in close, practically nuzzled into Imogen's shoulder. She was out cold, her expression soft and serene.

Imogen lay there, utterly still, for a solid ten seconds. Which felt like an eternity when you were trying not to acknowledge the thigh slotted casually between your own. The worst thing was that her body was reacting like it was happy about the situation.

Very happy.

She had to do something and quick. 'Talia,' she whispered.

Nothing.

‘Talía,’ she hissed.

Talía made an ‘Mmm’ noise and nuzzled closer.

Imogen wriggled backwards, managing to extract a single inch of space before Talía’s hand slid down her side and rested just above her hip, pulling her closer.

‘Talía!’ Imogen snapped.

Talía blinked awake.

At first, there was just confusion and sleepy blinking.

Then her gaze slid from Imogen’s face to their tangled legs, to the bedsheets, back to Imogen. Her entire body went rigid.

‘What the hell!’

She practically launched herself off the mattress, thudding backwards into the nightstand. A lamp wobbled dangerously.

‘Why am I in your bed?!’ she demanded as if Imogen had done it.

Imogen was incensed. ‘You tell me! I woke up with you clamped around me!’

‘I didn’t, I don’t...!’ Talía stammered. She looked genuinely scandalised. ‘I must’ve sleepwalked. I do that sometimes. When I’m... when things are... you know, stressful. I didn’t mean to!’

‘OK,’ Imogen said, accepting it as the truth. Nothing else made sense.

Talia made a sound of pure, wordless mortification and buried her face in her hands. Her ears were red. It was kind of adorable.

Imogen hated that she thought that.

‘This,’ Talia said finally, voice muffled by her palms, ‘is not OK.’

‘Mmm,’ Imogen agreed, too aware of how warm her face felt. ‘Ten out of ten on the fake-girlfriend immersion, though.’

Talia looked up, startled. Then narrowed her eyes. ‘This isn’t funny.’

‘It’s a little funny,’ Imogen said, attempting to believe it. ‘I mean, we can’t not laugh about it.’

Talia looked, if anything, even more horrified.

‘Relax,’ Imogen said, trying for casual. ‘It was an accident.’

‘Relaxing is the problem!’

Imogen’s smile faltered slightly.

Because the thing was, it wasn’t funny. Because there had been a moment there where Imogen had nearly decided not to move. To just enjoy it. Just be with Talia.

Talia backed toward the bathroom door, face flaming. ‘I’m going to brush my shower. I mean, shower my teeth. Oh, for fuck’s sake, you know what I mean.’

Imogen nodded, trying not to smile at how flustered Talia was.

‘I’m sorry. This won’t happen again,’ Talia vowed.

‘No, of course. Obviously.’

Talia yanked open the door and slammed it behind her.

Imogen sat in the silence that followed. She let her head fall back against the headboard, eyes on the ceiling. Just one more day.

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Talia shut the bathroom door behind her and turned the lock with trembling fingers. She leaned against the sink, breathing hard.

What the hell had just happened?

She turned the tap on and bent to splash water on her face like that would help. Like this was a normal morning and not one where she'd just sleep-invaded her fake girlfriend's bed.

'OK,' she muttered to herself. 'Let's talk this through. You were asleep. You didn't mean to. You're not a predator. You're just a lunatic.'

That helped. She clutched the edges of the sink and breathed. 'Calm down,' she commanded her heart.

She hadn't sleepwalked in years. Not since she was twenty-one and living in a student house. She'd started waking up in weird places: the kitchen, the fire escape, and on one particularly memorable occasion, at the foot of her flatmate's bed holding a jar of peanut butter.

But she'd outgrown that. Or willed it to stop. Either way, it had been done. Until now.

Apparently, the perfect trigger was a weekend of corporate surveillance and a fake romance.

But why couldn't she have woken up in the bath or even out in the woods? Oh, to

have come to sitting in sheep shit. How preferable that would have been to literally gravitating to Imogen in her sleep.

Maybe her subconscious was just deeply committed to the plan.

She groaned and let her forehead fall forward against the mirror with a solid thunk.

The worst part was the moment after she'd woken, but before she realised what she was doing. The feel of Imogen's body, warm under the covers. The scent of her. She'd smelled so fucking good. Talia had liked holding her.

She stomped in a circle on the cold tile. Reflexive, furious pacing. Like she could outrun the memory of how soft and startled and suspiciously pretty Imogen looked in the early light. How her voice sounded when it was husky with sleep. Talia had never heard her speak like that before.

But these were physical things. This was not a feelings thing.

A stupid, messy slip-up from a brain that didn't know how to be normal under pressure.

'OK. New rules,' she muttered. 'No physical contact. No lingering eye contact. No talking after 10 p.m. And if possible, no sleeping. Strap feet together with a belt if necessary.'

With that determined, she felt better. Slightly. She decided that if she was in the bathroom, she'd better do bathroom things.

She peed, brushed her teeth, and showered. Then she moisturised, did her makeup, and brushed her hair. After she'd checked a shoulder mole she was tracking, she had run out of things to do.

She couldn't hide in here all morning. Eventually, she'd have to face the woman she'd non-consensually cuddled.

This was fine. She was fine. If anyone could spin this, it was her. She'd once closed a deal so messy it took three NDAs, a forty-page appendix, and a paralegal who cried in the loos halfway through.

She squared her shoulders. Tried to pull herself together. But her reflection still looked haunted.

She wasn't spiralling. She was just a little off balance. And maybe she hadn't realised until now how close she was to tipping over the edge. Of what, she wasn't prepared to name.

But it had Imogen's face.

She unlocked the door and stepped back out into the room. Imogen was up now, standing there holding her toiletry bag. 'Why don't I see you down at breakfast?' she said, unzipping the bag and looking into it.

'Sure,' Talia said gladly.

Imogen passed her and went into the bathroom. Talia dressed quickly and got the hell out of the crime scene.

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Imogen brushed her teeth, washed her face, and ran a brush through her hair with grim, soldier-like efficiency. It helped. Rituals always helped. Especially after a morning that had begun with someone else's body wrapped around hers in a way that had made her body say, 'Hey. Remember sex? It's pretty good, isn't it? Maybe you should, er, ya know, have some?'

But it wasn't just the way her vagina had reacted that was the problem.

She'd been into it. She'd liked waking up with Talia's warm arms around her and the barest hint of soft snoring in her ear. She couldn't understand what the hell was happening. She and Talia were enemies of old. How the actual hell had they gotten here?

She dressed quickly, as if putting on clothes could also put emotional distance between her and the memory of Talia sleep-clinging to her like a koala.

By the time she reached the breakfast buffet, the dining room was buzzing with too-early corporate cheer. She scanned the room and spotted Talia already seated at the long table. She was sandwiched between Daniel and Rebecca.

Talia caught her eye and smiled tightly.

Imogen sat down opposite her with an equally brisk bearing of the teeth. Civil. Normal.

They were so normal.

‘Sleep well?’ Rebecca asked.

‘Very well,’ Imogen said, arranging her napkin like it was a weapon. ‘You?’

‘Good, except I woke up with a little friend. Spider got into my bed.’

Talia made a startled ‘pffft’ into her coffee, narrowly avoiding a full-on spit take. Imogen turned, eyebrows raised, and they shared a split-second look.

Do not, Imogen told herself, smile like you’re in on some joke only the two of you know.

She decided to keep her mouth shut and listen from then on.

The breakfast conversation from there was as dry as unbuttered toast. Something about a botched clause in a fund prospectus that had apparently ‘triggered a review’ and a junior who’d been ‘quietly moved sideways’ after a conference call went nuclear. Someone made a joke about a trainee not understanding the difference between equity and debt, which earned a round of smug laughter.

Imogen smiled, nodded, and consciously didn’t roll her eyes at any boring bullshit. She was warm and wifely, exactly as advertised.

But things kept cropping up, little reminders of the cuddle incident.

They bumped knees under the table. Brushed fingers reaching for the butter. All tiny, normal things, made weird by how not-normal Imogen felt. Her nerves were vibrating like a struck tuning fork.

Stop it, she told herself. This is fake. You are fake.

Rebecca stood and cleared her throat in a way that Imogen was starting to dread.

‘If you’re finished with breakfast, we’ll be heading out to the conservatory for our next activity!’ Rebecca beamed. ‘This morning, you’ll be stretching yourselves in our Partners Yoga session! If you brought your life partner, you’ll be with them. For everyone else, find someone to pair off with. Get ready for some serious bonding!’

Imogen’s stomach dropped. The words partner and yoga in close proximity could only mean one thing: enforced intimacy, public flexibility, and way too many opportunities to fall face-first into someone’s crotch.

‘We’ll be working on communication, balance, and mutual trust,’ Rebecca continued cheerily. ‘So be ready to support each other physically and maybe learn something new about yourselves in the process!’

Talia made a tiny choking sound. Imogen watched her spit out croissant crumbs.

‘I’m OK,’ Talia said.

‘Sure,’ Imogen said.

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Talia followed Imogen through the glass doors of the conservatory. Soft, ambient music played, the kind of thing Talia hated to her bones. A long row of mats was laid out in neat little pairs. A woman with a clipboard approached, all floaty linen and forced serenity. Her hair was scraped into a messy bun so artfully chaotic it must have taken twenty minutes and two mirrors.

‘Ah, our final couple!’ she said, beaming. ‘Talia and Alex, yes? Find your mats.’

The woman (Lorna, according to her laminated name badge) ushered them to their mat. There were rolled towels, a tiny bottle of something called “heart-opening mist”, and an instruction card about aligning their auric fields.

They passed everyone else who had rushed in here eagerly while Talia and Imogen had dawdled to a frankly preposterous degree.

Imogen sat down cross-legged. ‘Big Gwyneth Paltrow on Temu energy,’ she muttered.

Talia stopped herself from laughing. ‘Welcome to corporate wellness,’ she said.

‘Everyone find a spot,’ Loran chirped as she clapped her hands together.

‘This is fine,’ Talia whispered under her breath, willing her heart rate to calm. She was OK. She could do this. She could definitely do this without making it weird.

She sat down on her mat, alive to the tension between her and Imogen. They had both been trying not to touch all morning, but it kept happening. All through breakfast and

yet again, when they'd bumped into each other walking in here, hip to hip. It was getting silly. And now this? Was the universe angry with her about something? Did it want her to suffer?

'Now, let's start with something simple,' Lorna said.

How about a lobotomy?

Imogen glanced over at her, eyes narrowing slightly. Talia knew they both were mentally calculating the odds of making it through the next hour without enforced nestling.

Lorna clapped again. 'Let's begin with a simple stretch. A forward bend. One of you will support your partner's back as they lean forward and then switch!'

Talia's fingers twitched, and her mind reeled for an escape. Could she fake an embolism? A sudden, dramatic clutch of the chest, a fainting spell... Anything to get out of this?

But, instead, she glanced at Imogen, trying to convey the words, 'I didn't choose this' with her eyes alone.

'Is there something in your eye?' Imogen asked.

Talia tutted. 'No, I'm just... forget it.'

She turned her attention back to Lorna, who had found herself an enthusiastic volunteer in Jade and was demonstrating how to support a partner's back with an alarming amount of physical intimacy for such a professional environment.

'Go ahead, partners! Let's do this together! Trust each other!' she cried, bent double

with Jade's pelvis basically welded to her arse.

Oh, good. Trust. That was exactly what Talia needed to be doing with Imogen right now.

Imogen cleared her throat and asked quietly, 'You're... OK with this?' Her voice sounded strangely calm, considering the depth of their shared discomfort.

Talia met her gaze, narrowing her eyes. 'Do I have a choice?'

Imogen shrugged. 'You tell me.'

Talia looked over her shoulder. Celeste was already in the position being demonstrated, doubled over while Mitchell held her hips and tried not to make eye contact with anyone. Man, she was limber. This was not her first rodeo. If Talia couldn't match her skill, she had to have a go at reaching the enthusiasm.

'Fine,' Talia said, whispering sharply. 'Fine. We'll do it. But no extra touching.'

'Agreed,' Imogen replied with a dimple pop that caused Talia's pulse to race. A wonderful start to things.

Imogen leaned forward first, bending at the waist, while Talia was very careful not to look at her perky bottom with anything but casual attention. Talia's hands hovered just behind her lower back.

Just do it.

She rested them on Imogen's spine, feeling the soft give beneath her fingertips. The contact was so fleeting, so simple. Yet it sent something hot and electric shooting up her arm.

Imogen exhaled deeply, and Talia bit her lip, fighting the urge to pull her hand away.

‘Switch!’ Lorna chirped.

Talia’s hand was already off Imogen’s back before she even registered it.

Imogen straightened and turned, offering Talia a stiff smile. ‘Your turn.’

Talia bent forward, just focusing on not falling over. She didn’t let herself wonder at all if her bum was in as good shape as she hoped. Nor did she fret that Imogen would find it displeasing in any fashion. Those things couldn’t have been further from her mind.

She felt Imogen’s hands slide onto her hips, strong and steady, the faintest breath of a sigh escaping from Imogen’s lips as her fingers made contact.

The whole thing felt like a slow burn of too much proximity. Too much something. Talia tried not to lean into it. Tried to ignore the pulse of heat spreading through her chest, her stomach.

Imogen helped her back up with a casual pull, and Talia turned as she stood, eyes catching for a split second. That same magnetic, unwelcome pull. It made Talia feel like her brain had just short-circuited.

How much more of this was she expected to tolerate? Had anyone ever died of sexual tension?

If not, she might be the first.

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Imogen had no idea what she'd been expecting from a work retreat, but it sure as hell wasn't this. Getting themselves into poses straight out of the Kama Sutra had not been mentioned when Talia had pitched this.

She took a deep breath and braced herself for the next round of poses. Lorna, who had way too much get-up-and-go for someone in stretchy pants, clapped her hands again. 'Next up, we'll try the Double Tree Pose!'

Imogen's stomach plummeted as she shot a glance at Talia.

'Double Tree Pose?' she repeated, her voice cracking slightly.

'I've never seen a tree do that,' Talia said, watching Lorna and Jade (who was clearly performing for an audience) press flush against each other, hip to hip, palm to palm, their free hands sliding over each other's waists in a way that looked less like yoga and more like foreplay with core strength.

'You're a natural, Jade!' Lorna said.

'It's been said before,' Jade smirked.

Lorna eased out of the pose, and Jade let her go reluctantly. 'OK, OK! You'll stretch and hold each other's hands for balance. This is a trust-building pose, so really commit, everyone! No wimping out!'

Imogen would have loved to wimp out. She came from a long line of women who backed out of things. It was practically her legacy. But Imogen was up to her tits in

this one. No escape.

‘Ready?’ Lorna asked, though it wasn’t a question.

Imogen and Talia exchanged a look. There was no escape. They both got into position.

Talia bent slightly, arms lifted, legs braced. She looked calm. Capable. Gorgeous in a way that made Imogen’s eyes feel like they were glowing.

‘Hold on to my hands,’ Talia said quietly, her voice low and steady.

Imogen stepped in, placing her palms in Talia’s. Talia leaned back just enough to balance them, her core tightening with effort. Imogen followed instinctively, trying not to focus on the line of Talia’s neck or the way their hands fit together a little too well.

‘You alright?’ Talia asked, barely above a whisper.

Imogen couldn’t answer. Her brain was a mess. The heat between them was ridiculous.

She nodded mutely, even as Talia’s fingers slid slightly down her arm in a move that made Imogen’s knees want to give up and call it a day.

They were meant to be building trust, but all Imogen could feel was how perilously close they were to tipping over—in every sense. With Talia’s back arched and her chest leaning forward, Imogen’s grip tightened slightly, too aware of the warmth in Talia’s hands. Her thumb brushed against Talia’s wrist.

She couldn’t keep doing this. It wasn’t just weird. It was confusing. It was tempting

in a way that felt completely beyond her control.

For a split second, Imogen tried to back out of it, the self-preserving part of her mind screaming that if they kept this up, she was going to make a noise that would give the game away.

But then Talia's other hand reached out to steady Imogen, sliding down her arm, and everything inside her froze.

'You good?' Talia's voice came again, her voice just above a whisper. She wasn't making eye contact. That was a small mercy.

Imogen opened her mouth to answer, but nothing came out. Her thoughts scattered, and she couldn't quite grasp the words.

They held the position a beat too long. And then another.

Imogen's brain was yelling at her to move, to break free of the touch that was becoming too real. But her body? Her body was responding to Talia's, moving with her in a synchrony that made no sense.

Talia's grip on her hands tightened just slightly, and Imogen's thoughts scattered even more.

'OK, let's break!' Lorna said.

They released. Imogen didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed.

Then Lorna announced, 'Now, onto Partner Boat Pose! Sit facing each other, soles together, hold hands, and balance your legs off the floor!'

Imogen and Talia swapped a glance but obediently sat down, soles touching. They held hands again, legs trembling as they lifted into the pose.

‘Now, let’s see some serious eye contact,’ Lorna ordered.

But of course. They were in the seventh circle of hell already. Why not add eye contact?

Imogen looked into Talia’s grey, usually unreadable eyes and whatever mask Talia normally wore... slipped. For a split second, Imogen saw it all. Confusion, frustration, desire, and vulnerability all played out in Talia’s nervous look.

For a moment, it was like they were both caught in the same impossible web, neither willing to say it, but both knowing it was there.

Imogen’s heart raced. She wanted this. No, she didn’t just want this—she needed it, and it terrified her. It was too many things.

But seeing that mirrored in Talia’s eyes? It made it too real. Too possible.

And then somebody, somewhere behind them, let loose a long, unmistakable fart.

There was a beat of silence.

‘Happens all the time in yoga,’ Lorna said brightly as if someone hadn’t just ruptured the space-time continuum.

Talia snorted.

Imogen clapped a hand over her mouth, eyes wide with horror and the barely restrained threat of hysterical laughter. The spell was broken. The moment was gone.

Thank god. Or whoever had beans for breakfast.

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The room was quiet as Rebecca went over the ground rules for the second workshop of the day.

Talia sat at the front, doing her best to appear engaged.

But her mind was not in the room.

It was in that bloody conservatory.

The yoga session that morning had been the very last thing she needed.

Pressing herself up against Imogen like that had almost broken her.

But the demanded eye contact had been even worse.

Her cheeks flushed now just thinking about it.

How much had Imogen seen in her eyes?

She pushed the thought away and sat up straighter.

This wasn't yoga.

This was a corporate-style workshop, the kind of environment where she excelled, where she could be the Talia she wanted to be.

Not the horny idiot who climbed into people's beds and sweated having to look

someone in the eye.

But her best self, her strongest self.

Conflict resolution wasn't just familiar to her; it was where she lived.

She remembered a particularly thorny case from the previous year when two rival tech companies (both longstanding clients) had gone head-to-head in a dispute over IP ownership after a collapsed joint venture.

Each side claimed rights to the same proprietary algorithm, and the threat of injunctions was growing louder by the hour.

Talia had been brought in as lead counsel for one of them.

She'd dissected the original partnership agreement clause by clause, identified the single ambiguous sentence everything hinged on, and used it to negotiate a settlement that kept the case out of court.

Her counterpart had grudgingly admitted it was 'elegantly handled,' and Celeste had called her strategy 'impressively surgical.'

But this wasn't a clean boardroom mediation.

This was roleplay in a room full of strangers in a venue that smelled faintly of floor wax and herbal tea.

And worst of all, Imogen was here.

Somewhere behind her. Watching.

She shook that thought off. She could handle this.

‘Alright, folks,’ Rebecca said, looking pleased as punch. ‘I’d like you participate in a role-play exercise. The scenario is this: you and your colleague have a work-related conflict that needs resolving. There’s been some sort of disagreement, and you’re trying to navigate through it. The challenge is to argue with clarity and respect. No shouting, no insults. Just a disagreement that’s handled professionally. Got it?’

She checked her clipboard. ‘We’ll start with... Talia and Daniel.’

Talia felt Lady Luck’s intervention. Or maybe Celeste’s. It was unlikely to be pure coincidence that she was going head-to-head with her professional rival. But if this was a job interview? Fine. Good, even. She’d wipe the floor with that posh boy.

Daniel sauntered over with his usual self-satisfaction, dragging a chair as if he’d just been asked to deliver a TED Talk.

‘This’ll be fun,’ he said, dropping into the seat. ‘Try not to cry when I win.’

Talia picked up her chair and placed it quietly opposite him, giving him a flat look. ‘Daniel. This is conflict resolution. Nobody wins.’

He grinned. ‘We’ll see.’

They took their places near the centre of the room, and Rebecca gave them a moment to prepare. Talia took a breath and fixed her gaze on Daniel, letting her professional instincts surface. It didn’t matter whatever else was going on inside her; this part—she could do.

‘OK,’ Rebecca began. ‘Talia, you’re the one who feels wronged. Daniel, you missed a deadline. Five minutes. Begin.’

She didn't rush. She let the pause stretch a little and then said evenly, 'You told me I'd have the paperwork by end of day Friday. I didn't get them until Monday afternoon. That delay pushed everything else back and made me look like I was the one holding things up. I need to know if I can count on your timelines.'

Daniel leaned back in his chair, one leg crossed leisurely over the other. 'Ah yes, the Friday fantasy. I remember it well,' he said, amused.

She blinked. 'Would you like another go at that response?'

His smile faltered. 'Look, I admit I was late,' he said. 'But a lot was happening on my end that you don't know.'

'You could've flagged it,' Talia said calmly.

'I assumed you'd manage.'

Talia narrowed her eyes. 'So, you assumed I'd just clean up your mess quietly?'

'No,' Daniel said, the grin faltering. 'I assumed you were capable. I guess I overestimated.'

A flicker of tension rippled through the room. Someone sucked in a sharp breath. Daniel noticed and tried to walk it back.

'OK, poor choice of words. I didn't mean it like that. Look, it all worked out in the end, right?' he said, struggling to be Mr Chill now.

'It did work out, after some extra time on my part that I could ill afford,' Talia replied, arms folded now. Her voice had sharpened. Her posture had stiffened. 'Maybe I'm not shouting about my deadlines, but that doesn't mean they don't

matter.'

Daniel gave a small laugh, nervous now. 'Alright, alright. Point made. I'll loop you in the next time I can't make the deadline. How's that?'

Talia sighed and glanced across the room, and that's when it happened: she caught Imogen's eye.

Imogen's gaze was steady and even, but it hit Talia like a jolt. Talia's mind wobbled. She turned back to Daniel and spoke without thinking.

'That's not an apology, first off,' she said, her voice quieter now, tight. 'Second, when someone says they'll be there and then they're not—when they say something they don't mean—it's a big deal. It feels like you're the idiot for believing them. And you tell yourself not to be so naive next time, but the damage's already done.'

Daniel blinked, unsettled. 'Talia—'

'It's not just the delay,' she continued, her throat closing. 'It's the erosion. It's what it does to trust. I can't build anything with someone who keeps chipping away at that, Flora.'

A beat passed. Talia caught up to her own words. Jesus fucking Christ, had she just called Daniel Flora?!

'What?' Daniel asked, confused.

'Daniel,' she said quickly, but it was too late. But she kept going anyway. 'I was trying to say Daniel, but then a, er, fly flew into my throat,' Talia blurted, stepping back.

Daniel's eyes widened. 'Jesus! Is it still in there?'

'Maybe. I think I just need to cough it up.' She nodded briskly. 'Thanks, Daniel. That was... enlightening.' She stood.

'Somebody get her some water,' Daniel said, recoiling slightly. 'She's eaten an insect.'

Talia moved from her chair quickly, back into the general population—but nowhere near Imogen—trying to move with purpose, to mask the clumsiness of her exit.

Rebecca said quickly, 'Let's move on to the next pair.' Talia barely heard her as she grabbed a seat in the back. She was hoping no one would remember she used to have a girlfriend called Flora. If they didn't, they might buy the fly thing. Daniel certainly had.

But there was one woman who most certainly would know that name and what it meant. Talia could only hope she wouldn't make a big deal of it.

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The blanket was aggressively cheerful. Yellow gingham, practically glowing in the sunlight, surrounded by HR-approved wicker baskets and eco-friendly cutlery that had already started wilting in the heat. People lounged in pairs and clumps, sipping elderflower cordial and pretending they weren't all being slowly roasted.

Imogen sat cross-legged beside Talia, pretending to enjoy her quinoa salad. Across the grass, someone laughed like a donkey, and someone else suggested a group selfie. It was all painfully wholesome.

And none of it existed to Imogen, because all could still hear Talia's voice in the workshop. 'It's what it does to trust. I can't build anything with someone who keeps chipping away at that, Flora.'

Flora. The one who had told Imogen that Talia had cheated first. That the relationship was over in every way that counted. That sleeping with Imogen wasn't betrayal, just bad timing.

Imogen gripped her fork tighter. It bent at the neck.

'Can we talk?' she said without looking at Talia.

Talia didn't even pause in buttering her roll. 'We're talking.'

'I mean properly. Alone.'

Talia's jaw flexed. 'Now's not a great time.'

‘I don’t care.’

‘There’s free time later—’

‘I said I don’t care.’ Imogen turned to her, heart thudding. ‘You said Flora’s name.’

Talia blinked. Her face didn’t change, but the temperature between them did.

‘Don’t,’ she said, her eyes flitting around, looking for big ears.

‘I want to understand—’

‘There’s nothing to understand.’

‘Then why do I feel like I’m going to be sick?’ Imogen said, her voice rising slightly. She didn’t care. A few people glanced over and quickly looked away.

Talia got to her feet angrily. ‘Fine. Ten minutes.’

Imogen followed her down the slope, past Daniel trying to feed Lara a strawberry, her pushing his hand away. But Imogen kept her eyes on Talia’s shoulders. They were stiff and high.

They found a spot behind a cluster of trees, out of sight of the picnic. Imogen folded her arms and didn’t waste time.

‘I’m sorry. OK? I’m sorry you found us like that. That must have been terrible.’

Talia didn’t answer.

‘I’m incredibly sorry. And ashamed. And remorseful.’

Still nothing.

‘Talía.’

A pause. Then finally, Talía spat out, ‘How long?’

Imogen was relieved to be asked. ‘That was the first time.’

Talía laughed without humour.

‘It was, I promise you. I’ve got no reason to lie to you, have I?’

‘Well, I guess I was only a fool quite briefly then,’ Talía said with a sad sigh.

Imogen decided it was time to put it all out there. Yes, she’d done wrong. But she wasn’t alone. ‘I know it was horrible finding us like that, and I swear, I don’t ever do things like that... This isn’t an excuse for getting in the middle of your relationship, but she told me you were cheating, so I guess I thought...’

Talía’s face was surprise itself. ‘What?’

‘Well, she said she’d found out you were talking to people on dating apps. And I know I should have waited until it was over with you and her. I should have said no...’

‘Talking to people on dating apps?’ Talía repeated.

Imogen stared. ‘Maybe you don’t think it’s exactly cheating, but she was destroyed by it. She cried in my arms.’

Talía let out a sharp, humourless laugh and turned away, arms crossed. ‘She said I

was cheating?’

‘She said probably that you were... Look, I heard that argument between the two of you. I don’t know if you remember, but...’

Talia’s eyes were locked onto Imogen, wide with fury. ‘That’s not what happened.’

Imogen paused. ‘What did happen, then?’

Talia looked like she might walk off again. But then she sighed and shrugged. ‘OK, Imogen. If you want to know...’

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Five Years Ago

Talia had woken first, as usual. It was six in the morning. She'd been asleep only four hours, but it was time to get back at it.

Flora lay half buried in the duvet, one arm flung across the pillow where Talia had been. She looked peaceful. Unbothered.

Talia padded softly to the kitchen, made coffee, and came back to get dressed.

She was passing Flora's nightstand to get to the wardrobe. Flora's phone lit up. Talia wasn't snooping. It was just poor timing. Or good timing, depending on how you looked at it.

Talia read the message without meaning to.

So when are we going to take this thing into the real world? I'm tired of just talking.

Talia froze. The phone went dark again.

There was a moment where she waited to feel angry. But what she felt was the unmistakable beginnings of dread.

She picked up the phone and tapped it, lighting it up again. There it was, no mistake. I'm tired of just talking. There was no name, no contact picture. Just a number she didn't recognise.

Flora stirred behind her and Talia dropped the phone like it burned.

She left for work quickly.

She didn't make it to the office. Well, she did, but not through the doors. She walked right past the building.

She found herself walking the familiar cracked pavement that led to Flora's gallery. Her hands were cold. She wasn't sure how long she'd walked.

She pushed through the front door. Flora stood at the far end of the room, signing for a package.

Talia waited.

When Flora finally turned and saw her, her expression flickered. She knew something was up right away.

'Talia. What are you—'

'Can we talk?'

Flora glanced at the driver. 'Are we done?'

The driver nodded and got to stepping. Even he could smell the trouble coming.

Flora slapped on a too-bright smile as she turned back to Flora. 'Is everything—'

Talia didn't waste time. 'Who texted you this morning?'

Flora's smile faltered. 'What?'

'I saw the message: "So, when are we going to take this thing into the real world? I'm tired of just talking."' It wasn't hard to quote it. Those words had been spinning around her head all morning.

Flora's face shifted. 'You went through my phone?'

'I didn't. It lit up. I saw it.'

'So you assumed I was cheating on you?' Flora said, offended.

Talia folded her arms. 'Should I not?'

Flora actually laughed. 'Christ, Talia. Do you know how paranoid that sounds? It's a work thing.'

'A work thing,' Talia repeated, incredulous.

'That message was from an artist who's been trying to get me to come out to see his work for weeks. I couldn't find the time. He's being very pushy.'

Talia shook her head, no. 'Don't treat me like an idiot. You've been distant for weeks. You barely touch me anymore. You're always out—'

'Out?' Flora's voice rose. 'How would you know? You're the one who's never home. You're the one buried in work every night of the week.'

'I'm doing it for us—'

'No, you're doing it for you. Because it's easier than having to be vulnerable for five

minutes. God forbid you let someone actually see you.'

Talia reeled. Her jaw clenched. She was a lawyer, and she understood the tactics being deployed. 'You're deflecting.'

'I just think it's convenient,' Flora went on. 'Every time things get difficult, you vanish into work.'

'I'm not vanishing,' Talia said. 'I have deadlines. That's not the same thing.'

'You're never home.'

'That's not true.'

'I didn't mind it, at first,' Flora went on. 'The late nights, the weekends. I told myself it was temporary, that once this case was over, you'd... make time for what matters.'

Talia sighed. 'Flora—'

'No. I'm not trying to fight. I just...' She softened ever so slightly. 'I miss you. And I don't know what I'm meant to do with that.'

'You think I don't miss you too? I'm trying to build something here. Something for both of us.' She didn't understand the direction this conversation had taken. Talia wasn't the wrong one, was she? It was Flora who was wrong.

But, somehow, it was getting hard to remember exactly who was at fault.

'It doesn't feel like it's for both of us. It feels like you're working so hard to be anywhere else.'

Talia was stumped. Was she the problem, after all?

‘I don’t know how to keep doing this,’ Flora said. ‘I don’t want to feel like I’m the only one working at us.’

‘That’s not fair,’ Talia said. She heard a noise and turned to it. Someone was listening.

She saw the woman who’d later play quite the feature in her nightmares. But right then, all she saw was Flora’s young intern. Talia felt bad for embarrassing her.

‘Sorry,’ she said quickly and slunk out the back way like the graceless wreck she was.

Back at her desk, Talia tried to work. She couldn’t.

She answered three emails and reread one line of a contract fifteen times before giving up. Her mind kept looping back to Flora’s face. The way she’d looked more offended than guilty. Could Talia really have misread it?

She looked at her phone. No messages. Nothing from Flora.

At 5:15, she shut her laptop. For once, she wasn’t going to let the evening get swallowed. She was going home. She was going to talk to Flora like a grown-up. She was going to fix it. She loved Flora. She couldn’t throw that away over a misunderstanding.

Talia froze in the doorway of her bedroom.

She hadn't expected anything when she heard a noise from the bedroom, not really. She thought Flora might be watching TV.

She'd approached the room, thinking maybe they'd talk about what had happened that morning. Maybe apologise. Maybe touch each other like they used to.

Instead, she saw Flora's bare shoulders, her body sat up in an unmistakable position. She was astride someone.

'What the fuck is this?' Talia asked. It was rhetorical. She could see what it was.

They sprang apart like kids caught stealing from the cookie jar. Imogen grabbed at a sheet, and only then did she look at Talia. Her expression was pure horror.

Talia didn't move. Her keys were still in her hand, clenched tight enough to press sharp little half-moons into her palm. Her eyes scanned the scene. The two glasses on the table, the crumpled clothes half-hidden under the edge of the bed, Flora's mouth still parted like she might say something.

'I sacked off work,' Talia said, her voice still unnervingly level. 'So we could spend the evening together.'

Flora opened her mouth, but nothing came. Not even a lie. There was nothing she could say that wouldn't make it worse. Nothing that would make this look like anything other than what it was.

Talia took one long look. Just long enough to make sure she'd remember it.

And then she turned and walked out.

She didn't know where she was going. She just needed to be not here. Her legs were shaking. Her chest was tight.

She heard footsteps behind her.

'Talial'

She didn't stop.

'Wait, please!'

Flora grabbed her arm, breathless. Talia turned, her jaw clenched.

'You're overreacting,' Flora said, eyes wide with panic.

Talia blinked at her. 'Say that again. I dare you.'

'I didn't mean for it to happen. She came by to help me move the Danby. We had a drink, and...' Flora exhaled, shaky. 'It wasn't planned. I was upset after our fight. I wasn't thinking straight.'

'Do you think this is making anything better? I just caught you and your intern—'

'She doesn't mean anything,' Flora said quickly. 'You have to believe me. Imogen was a distraction, that's all. Because I was heartbroken about us. I just—'

'Felt like proving my point?' Talia asked.

'I was angry. I felt... abandoned. And she was just there. It was stupid and ugly, and it didn't mean anything, not the way you do. You have to know that.'

Talia's throat was tight. 'If I mean so much to you, how the hell did you let this happen?'

Flora looked wrecked. 'Because I thought I'd already lost you.'

'So you made sure.'

Silence.

Talia's voice dropped. 'You told me I was paranoid. I thought I actually was.'

'This was the first time I ever...'

Talia put a hand up, silencing her. 'You could've ended it with me. If you were so unhappy...'

'I don't want to end it with you,' Flora said softly. 'I just made a mistake.'

'Yeah,' Talia said. 'And it's the kind we can't come back from.'

Flora reached for her hand. 'Please don't do this. I love you. It was one weak moment. It didn't mean anything—'

'I know,' Talia said. 'That's the worst part.'

She turned and walked away. This time, Flora didn't follow.

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‘But she said that you...’ Imogen began and then stopped. ‘Oh.’

Talia shook her head. ‘She told you that so you’d sleep with her.’ She sighed, as though letting something go. ‘So you’d think you weren’t doing anything wrong. Because she didn’t think you’d have done it otherwise.’

Imogen’s shoulders slumped. ‘So I did just cheat with Flora with no excuse. You were the victim. Not me. All this time...’

Talia shook her head. ‘If there was you, there were others. At a bare minimum, she was already setting up an affair before you anyway.’

Imogen wasn’t so ready to be let off the hook. ‘I made a choice.’

‘Yes, of course you did. But, as I know, she’s very convincing. And from the sounds of it, far more calculating than I ever gave her credit for.’

Imogen felt like she’d been punched.

‘How long did things continue after I found you?’ Talia asked.

‘A year,’ Imogen told her, embarrassed.

‘She still had you convinced I was the bad guy?’

‘Yes.’ She paused, even more ashamed. ‘That day, she chased me down. She acted like I’d rescued her from you... But it was only because she knew she couldn’t get

you back.'

Talia laughed. 'Wow.' She sighed. 'Then what?'

'Things went on for a while. And I thought we were in love. But then she got that offer from The Vespar. I assumed at first I'd be going with her.' Imogen had to laugh at how fucking stupid she'd been. 'But she said she needed to go there alone. She wasn't sure who she was anymore, that she'd jumped into things with me too fast.' Imogen groaned. 'She just couldn't wait to bang a load of Parisian women. Hell, she was probably already at it locally, right?'

Talia shrugged. 'I don't know that.'

'You do. We both do.'

'The only thing I ever really learned about her was that she'd never let go of one thing until there was something else to go to. And she wasn't exactly passive about finding the next thing.'

Another shitty truth occurred to Imogen. 'She told me The Vespar headhunted her. I bet that wasn't true either. I bet she went after that with everything she had.'

'She liked to act like things just happened to her,' Talia agreed. 'Like she was just a tumbleweed caught in the wind, surprised that everyone wanted her. Like the gallery...'

Imogen blinked. 'What about the gallery?'

'You know how it was funded, right?' Talia asked.

'She got funding through the Arts Council...' Imogen stopped. 'Didn't she?'

‘Yes, I remember hearing that story. She spun it like the Arts Council came knocking because of some brilliant exhibition she’d curated. Like they’d seen her genius and couldn’t wait to throw money at her. She loved that story. Made her sound like the underdog who got her due.’

Imogen stared at the grass. ‘But it wasn’t true.’

‘I believed it too,’ Talia assured her. ‘But the gallery was funded by her parents. She made this whole thing about how they were emotionally withholding, how they didn’t understand art, how she had to fight for every scrap of validation. But when it came time to open the gallery, they wrote a cheque. A big one.’

Imogen frowned. ‘I thought she hated them.’

‘She did. But she didn’t hate their money.’ Talia hesitated, then added, ‘They made it in arms manufacturing, you know that?’

Imogen was gobsmacked. ‘What?’

‘Yeah. She used to dodge it in conversation, but she admitted it to me eventually. She was so ashamed. But she still took the money.’

Imogen stared at her. ‘How do you know all this?’

Talia looked down at her hands. ‘I only found out because I was helping her with some paperwork. She was hopeless with admin, and I found a scanned letter from their accountant, breaking down the trust transfer. The whole setup was designed to look like a third-party grant, but the money came straight from them. Half a million quid. Disguised as an “arts development endowment”.’

‘Did you say anything?’

‘Of course. And she wept with shame.’

Imogen nodded, recognising the move. ‘Of course she did.’

‘She begged me not to tell anyone,’ Talia explained. ‘And I didn’t. Well, until now.’

Imogen was quiet for a long moment. ‘God, she was exhausting.’

Talia let out a soft, bitter chuckle. ‘And magnetic. Unfortunately.’

Silence stretched between them. A bird chirped obliviously in the hedge nearby.

Imogen stepped closer. ‘I wouldn’t have touched her if I’d known. If I’d even suspected what the real situation was. Who she was.’ Imogen couldn’t ever really know if that was true; she’d never be given the chance to find out. But she believed it. She felt in her bones that she was better than that. She hoped Talia could believe that, too. She hoped that more than she expected it.

Talia was quiet for a long time. Then, softly said: ‘I know. Now.’

Imogen nodded once, throat tight. She’d run out of words.

They stood there, letting it hang. Not forgiveness. Not resolution. But maybe the beginning of something less terrible than the misunderstanding they’d been living in.

Talia finally exhaled. ‘OK.’

Imogen looked up. ‘OK?’

‘OK as in... we’ll talk more. Later. When it’s not a thousand degrees and everyone I work with isn’t five feet away pretending to be zen.’

They turned to walk back.

As they walked, Imogen realised something. Flora hadn't left her because she wasn't enough. She'd left her because she was simply a person with a short attention span and no loyalty.

She'd felt like she wasn't enough to hold on to Flora. And now she was glad she couldn't. It would have been no kind of life. Sooner or later, she'd have walked into a room and found exactly what Talia had.

Imogen was free. Not of the love. It hadn't been about that for a long time. It was the curse of inadequacy she was free of.

'You OK?' Talia asked.

Imogen looked at her, surprised. 'Me?'

'You look sad.'

'Actually, I'm relieved. What about you?'

Talia shrugged. 'I think I feel the same.'

'But you knew what she was. You've known it a long time.'

'I did and I didn't...' Talia stopped and looked away. 'But...'

'Tell me,' Imogen said.

Talia looked at her. 'I guess it's nice not to hate you anymore.'

Imogen was shocked. ‘You forgive me?’

Talia shrugged. ‘I think so.’

Imogen didn’t reach for her hand. That would have been crazy. They’d only just exorcised the ghost of Flora.

But Imogen thought about it. She thought about it a lot.

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Talia sat back down on the gingham blanket and tried to act like her entire emotional foundation hadn't just been kicked in.

The sun was too bright. Across the lawn, someone had started an impromptu frisbee game that involved too much laughter and not nearly enough spatial awareness. Talia tracked the flight of the disc absently, her jaw clenched, smile fixed in place in case anyone glanced her way.

It had all seemed so clean. So simple.

Imogen was the villain. The interloper. The one who knew and did it anyway. Not the only villain in the story but a perfect target for Talia's rage. Because otherwise? Otherwise, she'd have to admit she'd been tricked by Flora. And Talia didn't want that. She didn't want to think she'd been a fool. It was easier to believe Flora had just been weak, easily tempted.

But the truth was undeniable now. And that was what had stopped her from trying again all these years, wasn't it? That was the fear she had been trying not to look in the eye. How could she be sucked in by someone so fucking cold? How could she love a person like that so deeply? Was she broken?

Imogen sat beside her again, quiet now. Heavy with the same sadness Talia felt. She poked at a half-melted wedge of brie and then sighed.

Talia took a sip of her drink and tried to swallow the lump in her throat with it.

It had been self-deception, this hatred of Imogen. A story Talia told herself to make

things easier. But she couldn't cling to it anymore. Not after the look on Imogen's face when she said, 'I wouldn't have touched her if I'd known.'

Because Talia believed her.

Not because her instincts were reliable—they clearly weren't—but because everything Imogen had said matched what Talia knew herself. There hadn't been a single claim that didn't line up with her own experience. The lawyer in her had worked hard to find a hole, but there was none. Imogen was telling the truth. She had been duped too.

And if that was true, was it possible Imogen was who she appeared to be?

But who was that, exactly? What had Talia seen? What adjective could she honestly apply?

Could it be—Jesus Christ—was it possible Imogen was... a decent person?

What a terrible thought.

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By 3:07 p.m., Imogen had grass stains on her arse and the distinct sense that this retreat was a psychological experiment designed to test the outer limits of her patience.

She was halfway across a large lawn, knees bent, biting down on the handle of a plastic spoon. Balanced on said spoon was a large, raw egg.

‘Faster!’ Talia shouted, calling to her from the spot at which the egg was meant to be transferred to relay partners. ‘Come on, we’re going to lose to Jade and Peter. Do you want that on your conscience?’

Imogen tried to reply, but her mouth was full of spoon. She just grunted and tried not to laugh, which made her jaw wobble, which made the egg wobble, which made Talia shriek, ‘Easy!’

Imogen reached Talia as Peter was attempting to transfer his spoon to Jade with a look of existential horror in his eyes. Jade, a bit overexcited to be winning, fumbled and dropped the egg with a splat.

‘FUCK!’ she cried, enraged.

‘Disqualified,’ Talia declared as she took the egg from Imogen quickly.

But a demented-looking Daniel was coming up quickly, transferring to Lara. Lara took the egg and began to wobble off with it.

‘Go!’ he cried after her.

‘Mmm mm gonng,’ Lara managed angrily.

Imogen watched Talia veering left. ‘Talia! You’re drifting!’

Talia tried to correct, but not before knocking over a trestle table full of coconut water. The egg remained miraculously intact, and Talia carefully stomped her way across the finish line, passing Lara in the final moments.

‘Yes!’ Imogen cried, running forward to join Talia for a victory high five.

‘They cheated!’ cried Daniel as Lara took second place.

‘How?’ Talia demanded.

‘That egg has to be glued!’

Imogen leaned over and removed the egg from the spoon Talia was holding. Several people crossed the finish line, but no one paid them much attention. Not with Daniel’s tantrum to watch.

‘No way. She fell, and it stayed on,’ Daniel insisted.

‘I’m just graceful!’ Talia snapped. ‘I was able to correct.’

‘It doesn’t make sense!’ Daniel said with a little foot stamp.

Celeste came over the finish line, holding a broken egg, yolk down her forearm. ‘Everything OK?’ she asked Daniel.

Lara appeared next to him and placed a hand on his shoulder, gripping it. He suppressed a wince.

‘Sorry, his school was a bit overly competitive, and this sort of thing could get a bit heated,’ Lara explained.

‘They had egg and spoon races at Rugby?’ Talia asked.

‘I went to Harrow!’ Daniel said, incensed.

‘Is that a big deal?’ Imogen asked.

‘Harrow is the top school in the country,’ Daniel told her.

Talia side-eyed Daniel. ‘Well, I went to Bleakridge Comprehensive School, if we’re bragging. It had a Latin motto, but no one knew what it was because the sign got nicked in ninety-eight.’

Imogen snorted into her hand. Celeste was grinning too.

‘Well, Harrow Boy, I’m afraid that today, you’ll have to be content with second place,’ Celeste told him.

Daniel clamped his jaw shut. He was fucking furious. Talia was euphoric.

Talia was lying flat on the grass. Her chest heaved as she caught her breath, and there was a crooked, slightly smug smile on her lips. Imogen sat next to her, subtly watching her.

‘Good job,’ she said with a smile.

Talia turned her head to look at her. ‘Same to you. You’re actually good at this.’

Imogen squinted at her. 'What, transporting eggs via mouth?'

'No. I mean...' Talia faltered, then shrugged. 'You're... fun.'

'Oh. Thanks,' Imogen said, not quite meeting Talia's eye.

Following that was a quiet that lasted a second too long. Imogen's nerves couldn't deal with it. 'So, no fancy school for you?' Imogen asked quickly.

Talia sat up. 'God, no. My dad is a bus driver, and my mum is a nurse, so private school wasn't a conversation that was ever had in my house.'

'Really?' Imogen said, further surprised.

'What?'

'You just seem... I thought you seemed comfortable with wealth.'

Talia looked at her. 'Nope. I'm just your classic poor overachiever.'

'Yeah, me too. I mean, not the overachiever bit. Obviously. But I nailed the poor bit.'

Talia gave a shy little laugh. 'You know, before I saw where you lived, I assumed you came from money,' she admitted.

Imogen laughed. 'Oh, thanks a lot.'

'Sorry, it's not... It's a nice place. I mean, you made it nice.'

'Not really.' She paused. 'Why would you think that I came from money?'

‘The art world... lots of pretence, lots of money.’

Imogen nodded. ‘True. Not me, though. That job at the gallery was the only paid work in the art world I ever had.’

‘I didn’t realise that,’ Talia said.

‘Yeah. Took forever to get it. Volunteered wherever I could to get the experience, but the best places wanted people who could commit forty hours unpaid, which I never could. I felt so lucky when...’ Imogen stopped there. She didn’t want to say the accursed name again. ‘When she took a chance on me.’

‘And you couldn’t find anything after the place closed?’

‘Lots of almosts. Always pipped at the post by someone who had more experience, better contacts... So, eventually, I gave up,’ Imogen said with a sad shrug.

Talia frowned. ‘That’s rubbish. I’m sorry.’

‘Just the way the world works.’

‘But Flora could have helped you before she bugged off to Paris. She had contacts,’ Talia pointed out.

‘I didn’t want to ask.’

‘You shouldn’t have needed to,’ Talia said sternly.

Imogen shrugged. Though a lot of things were out in the open now, that didn’t mean she was ready to take sympathy from Talia. ‘The chips fell where they fell. I survived.’

Talia blinked. 'And then I got you fired from paid work.'

Imogen laughed. 'Yes, you did.'

Talia paused. 'I'm...'

'Don't say you're sorry. I don't deserve that.'

Talia was taken aback. Another heavy silence hung in the air. 'Right,' Talia said abruptly, sitting up and brushing bits of grass from her shirt. 'Next up: three-legged race.'

'Seriously?' Imogen said, staring at the zip tie in Talia's hand. They had a little distance from everyone else, and Imogen needed to vent.

'We've got this,' Talia said, smiling tightly. She crouched and began tying their ankles together.

Imogen watched the deft movement of her fingers. 'Why would they make corporate lawyers do this? What is to be gained?'

Talia tightened the zip tie with a couple of clicks. 'Please don't ask for logic and good sense this weekend. It has clearly been left in the city,' she sighed. Then added as an afterthought, 'Plus, I think the timing of this retreat isn't random. I'm pretty sure it's one long job interview. Daniel and I are being tested.'

'That's mad,' Imogen said with mild horror.

Talia shrugged. 'Maybe. But it is what it is.'

‘Wait...’ Imogen began reflectively. ‘If this is all a big competition between you and Daniel, then why is it so focused on spouses and partners? You don’t find that weird?’ Imogen asked, eyebrow up.

Talia checked the zip tie’s tightness and found it satisfactory. ‘The place was built by a family, the Monroes. Celeste is one of them. They’re obsessed with us being functional humans with social lives. ‘

‘I thought lawyers were supposed to work all hours and sacrifice their private lives?’ Imogen mused.

‘Yes, they want that as well,’ Talia said cheerfully.

‘How does that work?’

‘It doesn’t,’ Talia told her. ‘Why do you think you’re here?’

They stood, wobbly and close. Too close. Talia’s shoulder bumped Imogen’s. Her breath was warm against Imogen’s cheek.

‘Left leg first,’ Talia murmured.

‘I always lead with my right,’ Imogen said.

‘Relationships are about compromise,’ Talia said dryly.

Imogen gave her a rueful smile.

‘Ready?’ Rebecca yelled, and they moved awkwardly to the start line with all the other teams. ‘Set. Go!’

They made it maybe six hops before disaster struck. Talia caught her foot on the grass, lurched, and Imogen instinctively grabbed for her. Which meant, of course, that they both went down. Hard.

Imogen landed half on top of her, chest to chest, nose to cheek. For one suspended second, no one moved.

Talia muttered, 'Sorry.'

And Imogen, to her immense surprise, found herself replying, 'Anytime.'

Talia laughed nervously.

They disentangled themselves and climbed to their feet awkwardly. Everyone was ahead of them. 'I don't think we can win,' Imogen told Talia.

'I'm past caring,' Talia said. 'Come on, let's just finish.'

And they hopped across the finish line, laughing.

'What's next?' Imogen asked.

Talia checked her laminated schedule. 'Tug of war,' she said with a sigh.

'For god's sake,' Imogen said. But she didn't mind. She was having fun.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

There were many things Talia had prepared herself for this weekend. Small talk, poor sleep, the weight of pretending to be in a happy relationship. Tug of war had not been on the list. Especially not one refereed by Rebecca, who treated every children's game as if the players very lives depended on which team of corporate lawyers could drag the other through a patch of cow shit.

'Rebecca's really going for it, isn't she?' Imogen murmured beside her.

She was standing close. Not too close. Just near enough that Talia could feel the warmth of her body through the light fabric of her T-shirt.

Imogen ran warm, Talia realised. It was one of those ridiculous details Talia had noticed about her. Like how she smiled when she was nervous and that her eyes flickered with a kind of quiet mischief when no one else was looking. Those small things made her impossible to ignore.

'She's got a clipboard and a dream,' Talia muttered, eyes still on the rope. 'That's a dangerous combination.'

Imogen smiled. Talia smiled back. And then stopped herself. She was gonna have to stop grinning at this woman. It was getting silly.

They weren't supposed to be on opposite teams, but Rebecca had announced they needed to "mix it up" and "model adaptive collaboration" — whatever that meant — so now Talia was leading Team Resilience and 'Alex' was on Team Innovation. It was all a bit Alan Sugar for Talia's liking.

‘You ready to lose?’ Imogen asked.

‘Not remotely,’ Talia told her.

She tried to keep it light, teasing. But it was getting harder to control the way her voice changed when she spoke to Imogen.

She looked away before she could linger on that thought. Across the lawn, Marcus Talbot was hyping up his teammates with what appeared to be a pre-game chant. Daniel Parsons—inexplicably shirtless under his gilet—was shadow-boxing. Jade was trying to get Peter Chen to bet on who would fall over first. But he wasn’t looking up from his phone.

Talia retied her shoelaces till they pinched. She could do this. She’d survived a twelve-hour negotiation with a South African mining company on four hours of sleep. She could survive some rope-based theatre.

And then she looked up and saw Imogen. Pulling her hair back. Tying it off. Laughing at something Rhona had said. The laugh reached her eyes.

‘You’re staring,’ Jade said suddenly from behind her.

‘Jesus,’ Talia said, clutching her heart.

‘Eyes on the prize, Knox.’

‘She’s my girlfriend. I’m supposed to stare,’ Talia said quickly.

‘I suppose I can’t blame you. That is quite the arse.’

Talia was sick of Jade’s shit, and this time she wasn’t making a joke out of it. ‘Could

you knock that off? It's inappropriate.'

'I'm just kidding.'

'Find other things to joke about,' Talia warned her. 'Because those kinds of jokes are not OK for work. You'll get yourself in trouble. At the very least, it will hold you back.'

Jade blinked. 'Don't be so uptight.'

'I'm trying to help you,' Talia told her honestly. 'You're pissing people off.'

'I'm pissing you off, you mean,' Jade said. 'Worried I'll steal your girlfriend?'

'No,' Talia said. 'She wouldn't touch you with a barge pole.'

Jade laughed a bit too loudly. 'Oh, really? You want to put money on that?'

'Stop it, Jade. I'm not playing.' And then something came out that was kind of weird. 'She's mine.'

Ugh, what?

Jade sputtered a laugh. 'Man, I bet you were that kid who wouldn't share her toys.'

'People aren't toys,' Talia told her. 'And we're not children.'

'I'm not the one getting red in the face at a few jokes.'

Talia turned away to find Jade was right. There was heat in her face. She would have loved to tell herself that she was simply playing her part with gusto, but what was the

use anymore? That comforting lie just wasn't cutting the mustard. Not anymore.

That became even more clear moments later.

'Positions!' Rebecca shouted.

Talia planted her feet, wrapping the rough rope around her wrist, eyes locked on the line. Across from her, Imogen dug in, muscles taut.

The whistle blew.

Rebecca was bellowing encouragement like she was coaching the Olympics. June was shouting contradictory instructions. Claire dug her heels in like she was trying to anchor herself to the Earth's core.

Talia gritted her teeth and pulled, boots slipping in the wet grass, arms on fire. The rope wrenched against her wrist, and someone behind her screamed, 'Dig, Talia! Dig like you mean it!'

Across from her, Imogen was pulling for all she was worth. Her face was flushed, strands of blonde hair escaping in wild tangles, grinning like she was having the time of her life.

'Is that all you've got, Talia?' Imogen called, dimples popping.

Talia tightened her grip and tried to focus. But her mind wasn't on the rope. It was on the curve of Imogen's smile, the way her amber-hazel eyes sparkled with mischief and confidence. For the briefest second, the world narrowed to just the two of them, and everything else faded away. She felt herself being pulled forward.

Talia pulled back with everything she had, but it was too late. The rope slipped

through her fingers. Team Resilience lost.

Talia dropped the rope and stepped back, catching her breath. This was officially ludicrous. Now she couldn't even hang onto a rope without getting distracted by Imogen Lake and her stupidly perfect face?

'You alright?' Imogen asked, walking over.

Talia nodded. She was brushing grass off her trousers, her eyes still fixed on the ground. 'Pride slightly bruised. Legs intact.'

'Jesus,' said Daniel, strolling past with a bottle of something fizzy. 'I cannot believe you two have been together a year.'

Talia blinked, panicked. 'Why not?'

He shrugged. 'Because you two still have that thing.'

'Thing?'

'Yeah, that thing when you're seconds from ripping each other's clothes off.'

There was a beat of silence. Daniel, ever oblivious, sighed. 'Man, I miss that. I'm lucky if the wife even lets me touch the remote these days.' He walked off.

Talia felt Imogen shift beside her. Neither of them said anything. And that made it that much worse.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

Imogen sat on the edge of the bed, the worn wooden floor creaking softly beneath her weight. The room was quiet except for the distant tweeting of the birds.

The final dinner of the retreat was only an hour away, and here they were, Talia and Imogen, alone. Forced into a space that was somehow both safe and unbearably charged.

Across the room, Talia moved deliberately, checking her outfit in the mirror. She'd changed into a soft cashmere sweater and perfectly fitted dark jeans. It all looked so effortless, so completely put together. But Imogen was beginning to see what lay beneath that polished surface. And she wanted to see more.

I could kiss her, Imogen thought, her pulse quickening at the sudden surge of desire. But as quickly as it bloomed, doubt crept in. Would Talia want that? After everything that had happened between them, could they even begin to untangle what was real from what had been forced, faked, or manipulated?

The day had been a strange mix of laughter and tension, of stolen glances and awkward silences. And then there was Flora. The revelation about her had shaken them both. How she'd played them, the layers of deceit that had come to light. Both of them, caught in the same web.

Could they get past that? Could they move beyond the complicated history Flora had spun around them?

And what about the fresh guilt Imogen felt? She'd been lied to, but it didn't excuse her completely. She'd still been a part of the hurt inflicted on Talia. Could there truly

be forgiveness? Talia had said the words, yes, but could she really let go of those feelings so quickly?

Imogen shifted, her fingers twisting the hem of her sweater nervously. Even if Talia could forgive, could Imogen let go of all that? Could she forgive herself enough to try?

There was simply so much history and too many questions. Imogen didn't know what the hell to do with it all.

Talia's eyes met hers in the mirror, and for a heartbeat, Imogen thought she was going to address the tension. But then Talia looked away.

Imogen knew it would have to be on her, this decision, the next move. The past was such a tangle. But Imogen wanted to be brave.

Maybe tonight, she thought, we'll find out if this can be more than just pretending. Maybe right now.

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Talia looked over her shoulder in the mirror and caught Imogen's eyes on her. It wasn't just a casual look. Talia pulled her gaze away, frightened.

She didn't know what Imogen felt. Couldn't tell if the pull between them was mutual or if she was just reading too much into things. Maybe Imogen didn't want this at all. Why would she? Imogen had been hurt in the same way, by the same woman. Her life hadn't recovered either.

But that didn't mean she wanted to start again. Not with Talia. Not after all of this.

What if this was just another mistake?

But then there was the spark.

Too many moments to be a coincidence.

Of course, Imogen might be doing what she'd been paid to do. But what had she said before? 'I'm not an actress.' Could she be that good at pretending?

Talia took a breath, her eyes flicking to Imogen again, sat on the bed, arms wrapped around her knees.

She looked calm, but Talia could see the tension in her jaw and shoulders.

Was Imogen waiting for something? Was she feeling the same thing?

Talia cleared her throat, unsure of what to say.

Everything was still so delicate, so uncertain.

Was she ready to risk herself again? Maybe not.

But then again, how could she walk away from this? She hadn't felt anything like this in forever. It was impossible to ignore.

Talia ran her fingers through her hair, trying to quiet the swirl of thoughts. Yes, no, maybe...

Imogen looked up, their eyes meeting again for a brief moment. 'Talia...' She got off the bed and took a step closer, then paused. 'There's something I want to...'

Fear gripped Talia. Was she about to say...

'You hungry?' Talia asked quickly.

Imogen's mouth was a soundless circle for a moment. 'Umm... Yeah. I suppose.'

'Better get down there, then.'

Imogen nodded. 'Sure, OK.'

They walked out of the room together. 'This is it, last dinner.'

'Right.'

'You know what that means?'

Imogen nodded. 'Showtime.'

As they walked, Talia could feel her regret settling. She wanted to kick herself. She couldn't say for sure what Imogen had been about to say, but shutting her mouth would have been a good way to find out.

Why was she such a coward?

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Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

The clatter of forks against plates and the gentle hum of chatter filled the softly lit room, but to Imogen, it all blended into a kind of background fuzz she couldn't quite focus on.

The low murmur of conversation, the clinking of glasses, it was all on mute.

Her head was back in the bedroom, on the words she hadn't gotten out.

She had to shake herself back to reality.

The moment alone with Talia was over.

Imogen had tried, but Talia hadn't heard. So no one had confessed anything or thrown anyone on the bed and ravished them.

Imogen was back on duty.

She was Alex.

Supportive girlfriend and the perfect prop to help nudge her over the finish line for that promotion.

She glanced sideways at Talia, who was mid-sentence with Celeste. Law firm politics might as well have been a foreign language to her, but she could read the room well enough: this dinner was mission-critical.

'You crushed the Barret case,' Celeste said, folding her hands. 'That's exactly the

kind of brainpower we need stepping up to partner.'

Talia nodded modestly, her face calm but her eyes holding a flicker of Have I won yet?

Imogen took a careful sip of her wine, willing herself not to spill it down her front. She wanted to be perfect tonight. She wanted to get Talia where she wanted to go. Not that Talia seemed to need much help at the moment. Celeste was all but saying the job was hers.

But then Celeste caught Imogen's eye and gave a sharp, appreciative smile. 'Alex, it's great you're here. Support like this means everything. Helps Talia keep her feet on the ground.'

Imogen blinked, surprised. She knew she had to say the right thing. The perfect thing. 'I'm happy to be that for her,' she said.

'I know this weekend has been a bit much, but we're glad we got to know you,' Celeste said warmly.

'I'm thrilled I could come,' Imogen replied with what she hoped was enough enthusiasm.

'I know you're a busy woman; hope we haven't dragged you away from anything crucial?'

'I had the time, don't worry,' Imogen assured her.

That was true enough. Doctor Alex would always be on call, but Imogen had very little going on right now.

‘Must be difficult to manage the relationship with your hours?’ Celeste asked.

Imogen knew it wasn’t a casual question, despite how it was carelessly tossed. She glanced at Talia. She was smiling pleasantly, but Imogen could read her mind. Please nail this.

Imogen nodded. ‘We both work a lot. But we make it work. We find the time for each other,’ she said, remembering the talk she’d had with Talia that afternoon about the Monroe firm culture. ‘Life’s about balance, right? That’s what Talia always tells me.’

‘Absolutely,’ Celeste agreed with a nod.

Talia shot Imogen a grateful glance. Perfect.

Celeste turned away, and the table relaxed as the conversation drifted to summer holiday plans. But Imogen stayed alert, her brain ticking: Keep it light. Keep it supportive. Don’t mention the mess she and Talia were both silently avoiding.

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The second course was a delicate risotto with wild mushrooms and a drizzle of truffle oil. Talia couldn't taste it. She was too busy trying to keep her cool, keep her eyes off Imogen, and pretend she wasn't slowly coming undone from the inside out.

Then Imogen reached for her hand casually. It was the kind of move that screamed 'loving couple', but Talia's brain was already asking the real question: was this for them, or was it for everyone else?

Because they kept finding these moments—these excuses to touch. To lean in too close. To play the part too well. And now, with Imogen's hand resting in hers, thumb gently pressing into the soft web between her fingers, Talia wasn't sure what the performance was covering up or what it was revealing.

Talia reached for her water glass and knocked her elbow into Imogen's. The elbow collided with the wine, which tipped. A perfect arc of red spilt across the white tablecloth.

'Oh no!' Imogen cried, half-rising from her chair in mock horror. 'We're such a clumsy couple!'

The words rang out bright and cheerful, and the table erupted with laughter. Talia felt her whole face flush.

'You two are adorable,' said Marcus, shaking his head like a proud uncle.

Talia wanted to melt through the floor. Instead, she looked at Imogen, who was the picture of composure. She really was playing her part perfectly tonight. The question

was, to what extent was it an act?

‘We’ve been practising the synchronised clumsiness for months,’ Talia said dryly.

More laughter. Celeste looked amused. She knew right then she wasn’t just surviving the dinner, she was doing well. Not just her, but Imogen too. The way she had hit that note about balance...

Talia was almost there. The partnership didn’t feel like a dream someone else was having anymore. It was hers, just within reach, if she could hold her nerve. If she could just focus on what she was here to do.

‘You two have such great energy,’ Marcus noted.

Talia smiled, still clasping Imogen’s hand. But as the conversation moved on, she knew it was no good. She couldn’t ignore, even for a meal, what was happening with her fake girlfriend.

She wished she hadn’t been such a chicken in their room. She could have let Imogen speak. She might have just been asking when she’d be transferring the agreed balance.

But maybe not.

She’d never know now. Because she was such a fucking wimp. And now the onus was on her. If she didn’t act, she’d never know what they might be. She’d never touch her the way she burned to.

As she watched Imogen mopping up the wine, tucking her blonde hair behind her ear, moving in only the way she did, Talia knew it wasn’t a question anymore. She had to do something.

But how the hell was she ever going to find the bravery to let Imogen know that she wanted her?

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The main course arrived: roasted duck breast with a glaze so shiny you could check your teeth in it.

The conversation at the table swirled around them, people laughing, sharing stories of their own awkward or hilarious couple moments. It was fun and light-hearted, everyone bonding over shared experiences.

But for Imogen, the further the conversation went, the more uncomfortable it became. Every word was bringing the problem closer to the surface. She felt as though she might explode.

But the evening couldn't last forever. Theoretically.

And tomorrow, Talia could drop her off and never see her again. They would have no cause to cross paths.

Because the moment had passed.

She'd tried. She had tried to open a door, just a crack. But Talia hadn't walked through. Maybe she hadn't even noticed the door existed. Or maybe she had and chose not to. Imogen didn't know which was worse.

Rhona came over from the other end of the table. 'It's very dull where I'm sat, so I'm seeking refuge.'

Talia budged up enough to create a Rhona-sized gap. 'Please. Sit.'

Rhona sat. 'I hope the conversation at this part of the table is a bit more scintillating. Daniel keeps trying to talk to me about work.'

'I bet he is,' Celeste said, glancing at Talia. She didn't exactly wink at her, but she might as well have. Talia gave her a knowing look back.

Imogen was happy this was going so well for her. She deserved to win over Daniel. Imogen wasn't sure of much, but she knew that was true. You didn't have to spend ten minutes with him to know he was a bell-end. Talia was worth a hundred of him.

'Oh, um, we were talking about relationships,' Celeste said, a touch nervously. 'But we're done now.'

Rhona smiled dryly. 'Oh, don't mind the widow. I can handle a bit of young romance.'

There was a nervous laugh at the table.

'So, you two have been together how long now?' she asked Talia and Imogen.

'It's been... what, a year?' Talia said, the smile on her face stiff.

'Alex, tell her the story of how you met,' Marcus practically exploded. 'You'll die, Rhona.'

Oh god, not again. Why couldn't Imogen keep this bloody story in her head? It was like water through a sieve.

Talia cleared her throat nervously. 'Um, Alex, could I tell it this time?'

Imogen smiled, relieved. 'You tell it better, anyway.'

‘Thanks,’ Talia said, lifting her glass and taking a rather big swallow.

Imogen thought that was odd, the nerves in that action. She’d wanted to tell the story. Why was she scared?

Talia began. As she told it, Imogen remembered quickly how it went. The accident, the trip to A&E. Joking about how Imogen had been unimpressed with her charm. The group laughed right on cue.

Imogen watched her performance, trying not to feel sad. Trying not to imagine how it might have been if any of this were real.

But then something shifted. It wasn’t dramatic, just a softening in Talia’s voice. A slowing down.

‘She said I was lucky,’ Talia said, her tone gentler now. ‘That I could’ve hit the kerb wrong, fractured something worse. I barely heard her. I was too busy trying to find a segue to ask her out.’

Still smooth, still charming, but something in the delivery made Imogen blink. She looked at her properly now and realised Talia wasn’t playing to the room anymore. Her eyes were on Imogen. Not for long. But just long enough.

‘She didn’t flirt back, of course,’ Talia went on. ‘Too professional for that. But I left a note the next day. I thought... what the hell? If she doesn’t reply, I’ll take the hit. But she did.’

Talia’s voice dipped lower. Like this bit wasn’t for the room.

‘That drink turned into dinner. And then...’ She paused. ‘I don’t know. I don’t want to get soppy about it, but she made me feel—’ A brief laugh escaped her, but there was

no mask in it this time. She reached over with a shaky breath that only Imogen could hear and softly took her hand. ‘She made me feel things I didn’t think I remembered how to. I don’t know how I got lucky enough to meet her, but I’m glad I did.’

OK, that part was new.

Talia looked at Imogen for a moment, and then her eyes slid away nervously to Imogen’s hand. ‘It was worth a bad thing happening to me. To get here. With her.’ She paused. ‘With you.’

Imogen couldn’t breathe.

It wasn’t a story anymore. This was something else. A confession dressed up as a joke, and then slowly, carefully, not a joke at all.

Talia caught her eyes again and didn’t look away this time.

For the first time all night, Imogen forgot to keep her expression in check. She stared back at Talia, and suddenly the room was empty except for her.

Because Talia meant it. Imogen knew it. She just knew it.

Talia’s colleagues smiled warmly at them. No one aware of the emotional maelstrom swirling beneath the surface.

‘That’s so sweet,’ Celeste said, holding up her wineglass. ‘It’s obvious you two are meant to be.’

Imogen turned to Talia and smiled with all the sincerity she was allowed in this strange, shapeshifting moment. ‘I wasn’t sure if it made sense at first. But we just clicked,’ she said quietly. ‘Like I’ve never clicked with anyone.’

She leaned in before she could second-guess herself and kissed her. A soft brush of lips, almost chaste. But Talia didn't hesitate. She met her halfway, closing that sliver of distance with something sure and open and warm.

It lasted no more than a second. But it was enough. Enough to short-circuit Imogen's thoughts, to make her pulse spike.

It was electric. And so fucking real.

'Aww,' Marcus said, a little too loudly.

Imogen barely heard him. She was looking into Talia's eyes. And Talia was looking right back.

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Talia saw the look before Imogen even pushed back her chair. It wasn't obvious. Barely a crease of the brow, a flick of her eyes in Talia's direction. But it landed. It said: Follow me.

She waited three seconds. Maybe four. Then murmured something vague to the table and slipped out behind her.

The lighting in the restaurant bathroom was too bright, the kind that revealed more than it softened. Imogen was waiting in front of the sinks, leaning against them as Talia pushed the door open. The sight of her at that moment robbed Talia of her breath.

'You followed me,' Imogen said.

For a second, Talia thought she'd gotten it wrong. 'I thought you wanted me to,' she said.

'I did,' Imogen said, not entirely readable.

Talia let the door close gently behind her. The latch clicked louder than she expected. For a long moment, they just stood there in an extremely loud silence.

'I don't know what that was out there,' Imogen said finally, her eyes not quite meeting Talia's.

Talia took a slow step forward. She didn't want to rush this. Didn't want to fuck it up.

‘I hoped that you would,’ she said.

Imogen let out a laugh, short and brittle. ‘Look, you’re a lawyer. And a good one, by all accounts. I’m sure you can spin a convincing yarn if you want to.’

‘I’m not lying right now,’ Talia said, her voice steady. ‘And I wasn’t lying when I kissed you back.’

Imogen finally turned and looked at her directly. ‘Then why did you wait until there were witnesses? You had a chance before... did you not know what I was going to say in the room?’

‘No. Maybe.’ Talia sighed. ‘Yes, I did.’

‘Then why not just shut your mouth and let me say it?’ Imogen asked.

Talia opened her mouth. Closed it. She could feel her pulse thudding in her throat. ‘Because when you talk for a living,’ she said, ‘that’s not always your first instinct.’

Imogen arched an eyebrow but didn’t move.

Talia took a breath. ‘OK, fine. I was scared.’

‘Of what?’ Imogen asked.

‘Me,’ Talia admitted. ‘I don’t know if... look. I’m... not easy. I disappear into work. I get irritable when I’m tired, and I snap when I’m scared. The more anxious I feel, the more confident I act.’

Imogen’s expression didn’t change, but something in her shoulders softened.

Talia went on. 'I hate being vulnerable. I hate feeling weak. I hate admitting I'm wrong.'

Her voice cracked a little on that last line. She didn't look away.

'Do you think I don't know all this?' Imogen said finally, not unkind.

Talia gave a short, breathless laugh. 'You've spent two days with me.'

'Yet, I've still got the lay of you.' Imogen tilted her head, watching her carefully. 'You know none of that scares me, right?'

'It should,' Talia said, though her voice had softened too.

'Not when I measure it against other things,' Imogen told her.

'Like how you came back for me at that assault course, even when you thought it would cost you. How you decided to let me lead you on the trust walk back—

though you didn't have to by then, and it probably scared the shit out of you to let someone else take charge. How you're sweeter than you want anyone to know.

How you make me laugh. How your touch makes me feel. How your beautiful grey eyes make me feel.'

Talia felt faint. But she needed to stay conscious at this moment. Even if that was all she could manage. And it really was. Imogen was sweeping her off her feet. Almost literally.

Imogen reached out and touched Talia's wrist, light as a breath. 'And since we're speed running a relationship, here's what you'd find out about me eventually.

I'm not good at making decisions. I let other people steer. I tell myself I'm just being easy-going, but really... it's because I don't trust my instincts. I second-guess myself constantly.'

Talia didn't interrupt. She could feel how hard this was for her.

'I let people push me around, sometimes without realising. And then I get angry at myself afterwards. I can be passive until I explode.' She gave a tight smile. 'So that's fun for everyone.' Then Imogen added, almost as an afterthought, 'And I'm way too good at pretending I'm OK when I'm not. Scary good.' Imogen let out a long, slow breath. 'Woof, that's a lot, isn't it?'

Talia stepped closer. Not touching. Just close enough. 'I've seen some of that. But here's what I'm weighing it against. I meant what I said at the table,' Talia added, more quietly now. 'About you making me remember how to feel... things.'

Imogen's eyes smiled a little. 'What things?'

Talia sighed. 'Hope. Wanting. Pleasure. All the stuff I tried to train myself out of.'

Imogen tilted her head. 'You tried to train it out?'

'I did. And I was pretty bloody successful.' Talia looked down for a moment, then back up. 'But you've gone and ruined all that work.'

Talia took a deep breath and jumped off the cliff.

'I love how you connect with people. Even when you're not trying. Like it's just something you do. You walk into a room and somehow everything feels better, just because you're in it.'

Imogen opened her mouth, maybe to deflect, but Talia pressed on.

‘I love how fun you are. I love your voice. I love your dimples. I love that you’re brave enough to admit when you’re scared. And your bottom. I really, really love your bottom.’

That made Imogen laugh, a startled, helpless sound that broke the tension.

Talia smiled faintly but kept going. ‘Your touch is... electric. Like every time you graze my skin, I forget whatever I was about to say. Or do. Or be.’ She drew a breath. ‘And you’ve been kinder to me than I probably deserve. You’ve seen me at my worst, and you haven’t looked away. That... means something. More than I know how to explain.’

Imogen’s face was very still, but her eyes shone. ‘You’re explaining it just fine.’

They looked at each other for the longest beat, and Talia felt that familiar fear. Had she said too much? No. Because Imogen had made it clear she couldn’t be scared off. Talia wanted to believe that. And she decided she would.

‘So what happens now?’ Imogen asked, and her voice trembled slightly like she hated needing the answer.

Talia stepped in and gently took Imogen’s hand. The contact sent a thrill through her chest. She felt Imogen’s fingers curl around hers.

‘I don’t know,’ Talia admitted. ‘But I’m sick of Alex. I want Imogen.’

Imogen’s lips curled into a devilish smile. ‘Well, Imogen is taking you into that stall right there.’ And she began to push Talia in that direction. And for once, Talia was happy to let herself be pushed. It was time to let go of control.

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Imogen's hands caught the edge of Talia's collar, gripping it like an anchor as she pulled her into the narrow stall behind her. The door clattered shut. The lock slid home with a satisfying finality.

Talia looked at her, a little stunned. But not displeased. Lord, no. Not displeased at all.

Imogen didn't wait. She surged forward, kissing her with a heat that surprised them both. Talia groaned against her mouth and kissed her back hard, her hands immediately finding Imogen's waist.

The metal walls around them were cold, but Imogen felt feverish, urgent. This wasn't cautious. It was messy and aching and exactly what she wanted.

Imogen threaded her fingers into Talia's hair, guiding her, holding her. Talia kissed her like she'd been starving, like this had been held back too long, and Imogen let her—let the feeling drown her for a second. Maybe more than a second.

Talia's thigh slotted between hers, and Imogen gasped, her breath catching at the contact. She bit down a sound, her hands tightening around the back of Talia's head.

She was the one who started this. That thrilled and terrified her at the same time.

Talia drew back just enough to speak. 'You sure?'

Imogen nodded, breathing hard. 'Yes.'

‘You don’t have to decide anything right now,’ Talia said, brushing her knuckles across Imogen’s cheek.

‘I think it’s time we shut up,’ Imogen told her, coming back in to kiss her again.

It was like learning someone by touch alone. A thousand small yeses. Talia’s hand skimmed the side of her torso, fingers brushing under the fabric of her top. Imogen arched into it. Her whole body felt light, awake.

For a moment, the world was the size of this stall. Nothing outside existed.

Then, stupidly, inconveniently, Imogen’s brain twitched to life.

‘Shit,’ she murmured, breaking the kiss slightly. ‘We’ve been gone ages. What if—’

But Talia kissed her again before she could finish. A long, deep kiss that made the room spin again.

‘I don’t care,’ Talia whispered into her mouth. ‘Let them notice.’

Imogen half-laughed into the kiss, breathless, drunk on Talia. She hooked her hands in Talia’s belt loops. ‘Be honest.’

‘OK, I care a bit,’ Talia admitted. ‘Just not enough to stop.’

Talia’s hand slid to the waistband of her trousers. Imogen’s hips tilted without meaning to.

Then came the unmistakable squeak of the bathroom door opening.

They froze.

A voice, far too loud for the moment, cracked like a whip. 'Hey! Talia? Are you in here? They're just about to start the awards thing. You're gonna miss it!' cried Marcus.

Imogen's eyes flew wide. Talia pulled back a fraction, lips damp, pupils blown, and gave her a slow blink of disbelief. They were both panting.

'We'll be right there,' Imogen called out, her voice far too high.

'Ohhh,' Marcus said awkwardly. 'You're in there too, Alex? I see. OK. Bye.'

The footsteps retreated. The door squeaked again.

Silence.

Talia dropped her forehead to Imogen's shoulder. 'I'm going to kill him.'

Imogen laughed quietly, breath shaking. She reached up and brushed Talia's hair back with fingers that were still trembling slightly.

'I want to finish this later,' Talia murmured in her ear.

'You will,' Imogen said. 'We will.'

They kissed again, brief and charged. There was a promise in it. And then they fixed their clothes and stepped back into the world like nothing had happened.

Even though everything had.

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Talia's body was on fire, every inch of her humming with the aftershocks of what had happened in the bathroom.

She could still feel the heat of Imogen's lips against her skin, the intensity of the kiss lingering on her lips.

It was like she'd stuck her fingers in an electrical outlet in the best way possible.

But now, she had to sit through a corporate awards show.

Torture.

There should have been a Geneva convention about stopping someone in the middle of kissing someone when it was that hot.

Though Talia suspected no one in human history had ever had a kiss so steamy.

She looked around her, feeling pity for the people who had never been dragged into a stall by Imogen and kissed beyond the limits of sanity.

The poor bastards.

They hadn't lived.

The voice of the presenter (Rebecca, of course) and the clinking of glasses around her were nothing but a dull buzz, each second dragging on like an eternity.

‘And next up,’ she trilled, ‘the coveted Most Dramatic Reaction to a Lost Pair of Spectacles award goes to June!’

Laughter rippled through the crowd. June got up and accepted a miniature gold trophy glued to a plastic base with a thin smile. ‘I didn’t bring spares,’ she told the room. They laughed. She didn’t.

‘And now for Most Relentlessly Positive Energy Before 8 am!’

Marcus was up on his feet before Rebecca even said his name. He knew his brand.

The room was alive with easy joy and good humour. But for Talia, every moment dragged.

Imogen was sitting next to her, her back straight, eyes trained ahead.

She was beautiful in a way that made Talia ache.

An extremely good ache that Talia wanted to feel forever.

She couldn’t believe how good her life was at this very moment.

She and Imogen were starting something, and she was about to get the job of her dreams. Everything was in front of her.

Talia thought this might be the greatest moment of her life.

The award for Best Newcomer was announced, and Alex’s name rang out like a bell. Imogen stood and moved her world-class bum to the stage, her eyes shy and happy at the same time. And Talia thought, I’m going to fall in love with her, and there’s not a thing I could do to stop it, even if I wanted to.

Imogen stood at the microphone, her eyes scanning the crowd, and for just a second, she looked uncertain. Talia smiled up at her.

Imogen caught the gesture and cleared her throat, smiling softly at the crowd. 'I don't have much to say,' she began, her voice soft, steady. 'I'm just really grateful I got to come and meet the people Talia spends her work life with. And I appreciate just how much I've been welcomed by you all.'

She paused, eyes scanning the room before landing on Talia once more. Her voice didn't change, but something in the shape of her mouth did. 'This weekend has been more than I could have expected. I came here thinking I'd be an outsider. But I've been very well looked after.'

There was polite laughter. No one else caught the slight emphasis she put on 'looked after.' But Talia did. And the look Imogen gave her as she said it sent a wave of fresh lust through her. As if she needed to be more turned on.

Still, it was almost over, right? And then she and Imogen could go back to the room and...

'Are you OK?' asked Celeste. 'You look a bit flushed.'

'No, I'm fine. I'm just wearing too many clothes,' Talia told her. And there was no lie in that.

Talia was vibrating with anticipation as Imogen stepped back towards her. At that moment, all was so very right in Talia Knox's world. And it could only get better.

Then it all went wrong.

A loud crash rang out from nearby. Someone collapsed to the floor with a heavy thud,

sending the room into immediate chaos. The sound of chairs scraping against the floor, people shouting, panic.

The awards ceremony was forgotten as everyone rushed to the fallen person, some calling for help, others scrambling for water. Talia saw at last that it was Rhona, out cold on the floor.

‘Is there a doctor? We need a doctor!’ someone yelled. The room was in disarray, and all Talia could do was watch.

Then, amidst the confusion, someone else shouted, ‘Alex is a doctor! She can help!’

Talia’s stomach dropped.

The room turned to Imogen, and Talia’s head felt light. Imogen’s lips parted, but nothing came out. Imogen was drowning in this mess. The one Talia created.

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Imogen didn't move. She couldn't move. Because she knew there was nothing she could do. Nothing real. The name people shouted wasn't even hers. 'Alex! Alex, help her—'

Imogen's feet were rooted to the floor, panic rising. Rhona was unconscious. This was bad. People were looking to her for help. There was no messing around now. She knew what she had to do.

Imogen spoke quickly. 'I'm not a doctor.'

Marcus rushed to her, grabbing her by the elbow. 'Alex, can you just...'

They hadn't heard. Imogen said it again. 'I'M NOT A DOCTOR.'

The room went quiet in an instant. She felt them staring. She heard someone murmur, 'What?' and then someone louder, 'But she said—'

'I'm sorry. I can't help,' Imogen added. Her mouth felt like sandpaper.

A beat of silence. Everyone turned to look at Talia. She didn't flinch. Her arms were folded, her expression unreadable.

Before the tension could twist tighter, a staff member in kitchen whites burst in from the side corridor, already crouching by Rhona's side.

'First aid trained,' she said quickly.

She checked the pulse, tilted Rhona's head, and lifted her legs. Within seconds, colour began to return to Rhona's face.

'She fainted,' the woman said firmly. 'She needs to be properly checked. There's a hospital fifteen minutes away. I can take her.'

Rhona was coming round, groggy but upright, with someone supporting her. People had stopped shouting. The crisis had passed.

The woman in whites stood and helped Rhona up, and people jumped in to aid her, walking Rhona out of the exit in a cluster.

The doors swung shut, and pretty much immediately, everyone turned to Imogen. Everyone.

'Why would you pretend to be a doctor?' Jade asked, the first to speak directly to her.

Imogen could feel the weight of every gaze on her, but the only one she cared about was Talia's.

She looked at Talia, who was locked tight in panic.

Imogen took a breath. It felt like inhaling glass. 'I'm sorry, Talia,' Imogen said quietly, clearly. 'I lied to you. Because you're a lawyer and I wanted to be something that impressed you.'

There was a ripple of disbelief around her. People turned to look at Talia now, eyebrows raised.

Talia's mouth parted, just slightly. But she didn't speak. She looked as though she couldn't.

Imogen thought that was all the better. It gave her time to absorb all the blame. She turned back to the crowd. 'It was stupid. I panicked. And then it was easier not to say anything. So yeah, this is on me. I'm very sorry.'

No one responded right away. But then, someone did, and it wasn't to rage at the fake doctor. It was to poke a hole in the story.

'But you met at work,' Celeste said, stepping forward.

Oh shit.

'No, I, I, err, made that story up because it was romantic,' Imogen stammered. 'Talía didn't want me to look bad, so she went along with it. But...'

'Stop,' said a voice. Imogen turned. It was Talía. 'Just stop, Imogen.'

‘Just stop, Imogen.’

Talia’s voice sliced through the panic like a scalpel. Everyone turned. Imogen froze, her mouth half-open.

Talia turned to the room, shoulders squared. ‘I knew she wasn’t a doctor,’ she said.

The silence that followed was somehow louder than the chaos that came after.

‘You what, mate?’ Daniel Parsons barked. ‘You’re telling me this whole thing was some kind of weird blag?’

‘I wouldn’t use the word blag, exactly,’ Talia said.

‘I knew she was too perfect,’ muttered Jade, arms folded. She looked at Imogen and tutted with deep disappointment. ‘No doctor is that hot unless they’re on TV.’

Rebecca took the next pop. ‘Talia, I cannot believe you compromised the integrity of this retreat. Do you know how many logistics went into this? The forms? The allergies?’

Talia wasn’t addressing that one.

Celeste gave her a hard look. ‘I don’t understand.’

Talia was ready to make it clear. Time to vomit up the truth. ‘I made Alex up a while ago. Then when you demanded to meet her, I asked Imogen here to play her for the

weekend.'

Imogen's voice broke in, trying again.

'But it was my idea,' she said quickly. 'She's just—'

Talia turned. Not harsh, but clear. 'Don't,' she said. Quiet enough that only Imogen could hear. 'You tried but... let me deal with my own mess.'

Imogen looked at her, stricken. 'You're going to lose everything.'

'Only my job,' Talia said softly. Then she turned back to the room.

Celeste's silence stretched for roughly an eternity. It was almost a relief when she said, 'Everyone out. Except them.'

The room obeyed reluctantly.

After the door had shut behind Jade's muttered 'fuck me sideways,' the air became even heavier.

'Imogen, you should go too,' Talia said reluctantly.

Imogen looked at her, pained. She turned to Celeste. 'You need to understand, she doesn't—'

Celeste held a hand up, and Imogen broke off immediately. 'She can speak for herself.'

Talia nodded. 'I can. Go to the room. I'll see you there.'

Imogen sighed, shrugged, and let go. She walked out.

Celeste's eyebrows rose slowly. 'You faked a girlfriend? Why?'

'Because the culture of Monroe is all about being well-rounded.' Talia's mouth twisted, self-disgust creeping in. 'So I gave you what they wanted. A girlfriend. A stable, impressive partner. Someone warm, likeable, and always busy. The idea was that no one would ever actually need to meet her. And once I'd made partner, I'd tell you it ended.'

Celeste just watched her. She didn't look shocked. Only tired.

'So who the hell was that?' she said, thumbing at the exit Imogen had walked out of.

'That's a longer story than you can imagine. But the short version is that her name is Imogen, and you mistook her for Alex in the lobby. And we ran with it.'

Celeste exhaled, sharp and final. 'We were going to give you partner. You realise that?'

Talia nodded. 'You've still got Daniel.'

Celeste groaned. She gestured to the door. 'This is done. You can go.'

Talia didn't argue. She turned and walked to the door, hand on the handle. But before she left, she looked back. 'I'll put in my resignation when we get back.' And she walked out.

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Imogen sat on the edge of the bed, staring at the door intently. Her hands were clenched in her lap. She felt sick.

They'd been so close to getting away with it. Talia had been so close...

The door finally opened, and Talia stepped inside slowly. She didn't speak right away, just closed the door and leaned against it, tired.

'I'm sorry,' Imogen said, standing. 'If I'd just gone and chucked some water in Rhona's face, none of this would have happened.'

Talia laughed despite herself. 'I don't think doctors do that.'

Imogen sat back down. 'You're right. I guess I would have fucked it up either way.'

'I didn't mean it like that. This isn't your fault at all. I made Alex up so I could pretend I was a real person.'

'You're a very real person,' Imogen said instantly.

'Why did I pick "doctor"?' Talia asked herself, sadly amused. 'I could've gone with graphic designer or pilot or anything. Butcher, baker, candlestick maker...'

She blew out a breath and walked over to the bed, sitting beside Imogen.

'I'm actually sort of relieved it's over,' Talia said at last. 'The lie, I mean. It was exhausting.'

Imogen swallowed. 'Good.'

'Good?'

'Lying doesn't come naturally to you. I don't hate that.'

'I'm a lawyer,' Talia reminded her.

Imogen laughed and stopped herself quickly.

She was careful not to let their knees touch.

It wasn't the time for touching.

Talia's life had just imploded.

She had to wonder if it had taken what was between them with it.

After all, Talia's job was everything to her. Could she forget that Imogen had been instrumental in a moment that had ruined her life for the second time?

Talia was quiet, but Imogen could feel her thinking. Imogen could only await her verdict.

'You didn't ruin my life,' Talia said like she'd read her mind. 'It wasn't much of a life if it was built on a lie.'

Imogen turned to her, surprised.

Talia's eyes were fixed ahead, but softer now, like something in her had dropped its armour. 'I've been... contained. For so long. I thought if I could keep everything

tight enough, clean enough, professional enough... I'd be safe.'

'And then I happened.'

'You happened,' Talia said, a faint smile tugging at her mouth. 'Like an earthquake. Or a very sexy hurricane.'

Imogen looked away, flushed. 'I was just trying to help.'

'You were. You did.' Talia paused. 'I know it wasn't just the money, either. You had my back. I liked it. I really did.'

Imogen finally looked at her, and Talia turned her head to meet her gaze. There was so much in it. Fear, panic, sadness. But something else too.

Talia reached over slowly and covered one of Imogen's hands with hers. Her palm was warm.

It wasn't a kiss. Not yet. But Imogen turned her hand to thread her fingers through Talia's, and they sat in silence. Comfortable and exciting silence.

'I couldn't wait to get up here with you,' Talia said.

'Me neither. Before Rhona collapsed.'

'So, the moment's ruined?' Talia asked nervously.

'Isn't it?' Imogen asked, surprised.

Talia shook her head. 'I don't think it is.'

Talia's grey eyes didn't move from hers. Her look asked something of Imogen. It didn't demand—it invited. And Imogen, heart pounding, was ready to RSVP yes with absolutely no regrets. Her whole body was trembling.

Talia reached out and touched Imogen's face, fingertips gliding along her jaw. Her eyes didn't waver. And then she leaned in.

The kiss landed soft, slow, like they had all the time in the world. But it intensified quickly. Imogen's hand found the small of Talia's back, pulling her in, needing her close.

Talia's other hand tangled in Imogen's hair, guiding the kiss with a gentle insistence. Imogen melted into it. She let herself be led, then pushed back with her own hunger.

Imogen's fingers slid to Talia's waist, finding the shape of her through her clothes. She traced the curve of her hip, felt Talia's breath catch. That sound went straight through her.

The kiss broke briefly so Imogen could look at her. Talia's eyes were full of want. Imogen's pulse thrummed in her ears as her hands slipped beneath the hem of Talia's sweater, fingertips brushing skin that was softer than the cashmere. She moved slowly. She wanted to savour this.

Talia mirrored her, her hands slipping under her top, brushing her skin, and Imogen sucked in a breath. She was burning under every touch. Her body already arched toward it, needing more.

Talia took her hands back for a moment to do away with her own sweater completely; the sight of her was achingly sexy. Narrow shoulders, the soft line of her stomach rising with each breath, pale skin stretched over fine collarbones. She looked fragile. But Imogen knew she was anything but.

She felt Talia's hand at the zipper of her jeans, and Imogen was more than happy to lend a helping hand to rid of them quickly. And after that, their clothes came off in quick, breathless stages, until there was nothing left between them but heat.

There was no distance now. Just touch. Skin and warmth. They moved together, tangled in the sheets, in perfect rhythm with each other.

'You have no idea how much I want this,' Talia murmured into her neck.

Imogen's heart felt like it might break. 'Show me.'

Talia did.

The air in the room was thick with afterglow. Imogen lay on her side, watching Talia's chest rise and fall in the soft lamplight, sex exhausted and happy. The silence between them wasn't awkward anymore. The thing that had been waiting in their silences had come at last. They could breathe.

Imogen wanted to say something clever. But Talia looked over, all sleepy eyes and sexy-mussed hair, and Imogen's mouth went dry.

Talia beat her to it. 'Well. That happened.'

Imogen laughed. 'Yeah. That definitely happened.'

They fell quiet again. Imogen stretched out her hand, brushing a knuckle down Talia's bare arm.

'I wish things hadn't gone wrong for you,' she said. 'I'm happy that we... But I just

wish—’

‘I’ll say it again if you need me too. This was all on me.’ Talia paused and added philosophically, ‘But if I hadn’t told that lie, we wouldn’t be here. So I can’t even regret it that much.’

Imogen cocked her head and smiled a little cynically. ‘That’s a great line, Talia. But seriously...’

Talia turned fully onto her side, her knee brushing Imogen’s under the covers. ‘Imogen. I was halfway gone for you before you even touched me. I’m happy. Are you happy?’

Imogen exhaled slowly. ‘I think you know I am. But... it’s weird, though. Right? I mean, not weird, but...’

Talia gave her a slow smile, a little crooked. ‘I know. God, if Flora could see us now...’

Imogen’s grin was lazy now. ‘Forget her.’

‘I already have,’ Talia assured her.

Their fingers found each other beneath the sheets, the touch feather-light, like they were still feeling out the edges of whatever this was.

‘So what happens now?’ Talia asked.

And Imogen didn’t know. Not for sure. But she knew what she wanted to happen.

‘When we get home,’ she said softly. ‘I don’t want this to stop.’

Talia nodded once, serious. Then she slid closer until their foreheads touched.
‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah,’ she whispered. ‘I want to do this. With you. If you want it.’

Talia smiled. ‘I want it.’

She leaned in again, and Imogen’s tiredness suddenly vanished.

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Talia woke to the flat grey of early morning seeping through the hotel curtains. For a second, she couldn't remember where she was or why she felt so fucking good. Until she turned her head and saw Imogen asleep beside her. And then last night came rushing back. The absolute best sex of Talia's entire life. It wasn't even close.

Imogen lay on her side, her blonde hair good and sex-tousled, her full lips parted slightly. Her face was relaxed in sleep. She was farcically beautiful in repose. But Talia would have expected nothing less.

She lay still for as long as she could justify, trying to burn the image of Imogen into her memory. She wanted to live in this moment.

Then she saw the clock. 'Oh fuck.'

Imogen stirred and opened her eyes. 'No, I can't put in a catheter!' she cried.

Talia laughed. 'You're having a nightmare. But it's over.'

Imogen's eyes brightened as she came back to the world. 'Oh my god. Patrick Dempsey was screaming at me to help a clown give birth to a balloon animal,' she said, pressing a hand to her forehead.

Talia chuckled, propping herself up on one elbow to look at her. 'Well, Patrick Dempsey can deal with that by himself. Your medical career is over.'

'Thank god,' Imogen muttered, eyes still half-closed. 'I think my subconscious is trying to report me to the General Medical Council.'

Talia smiled, the affection blooming before she could stop it. She reached out and gently tucked a strand of hair behind Imogen's ear. 'You're safe now. No more catheters.'

Imogen smiled.

'One last little crisis, though. It's ten to nine and we're supposed to check out at nine,' Talia told her reluctantly.

Imogen's smile dropped. 'Christ.' She jumped out of bed and started packing. She turned to Talia. 'What are you still doing lying there? Come on!' she cried.

Talia chuckled and got out of bed. 'I like this bossy side of you. It's hot.'

'Stop flirting, start packing,' Imogen commanded, trying not to grin and failing.

They dressed and packed without further conversation. Talia tried not to think of what waited for her beyond the room. She didn't want to go out there. Didn't want to see Jade's smirk or the look of disgust on Marcus's face. And she certainly didn't want to see victory on Daniel's mug.

She glanced at Imogen once more before zipping her case. Imogen met her gaze steadily. And she felt a little better, a little braver.

It was on the dot of nine when they finally left the room, dragging their cases along the corridor carpet. Maybe everyone had already gone?

But as they walked down the staircase, Talia knew she'd been crazy to think she could have been so lucky. There was a bit more humiliation waiting for her.

Celeste. Jade. Marcus. Daniel. Rebecca. All gathered in the lobby with coats on and

luggage in hand. The last of the Monroe party.

Everyone looked up at once.

Talia stopped walking. Imogen, just behind her, faltered. For a second, no one spoke. The silence was so heavy it made Talia's ears ring.

Celeste's mouth flattened. Jade raised one perfectly shaped eyebrow. Marcus glanced down at the floor. Rebecca smiled nervously, then looked away.

Imogen was the one who moved first, stepping up beside her. She didn't say a word, but her presence steadied Talia.

'Keep walking,' Talia murmured.

Imogen gave a tiny nod, eyes flicking warily across the group as they walked down the stairs, which were now roughly ten miles long.

But before they could reach the door, the sound of tyres on gravel made everyone turn. A cab had just pulled up outside. They watched through the window as the driver got out, opened the back door, and out stepped Rhona.

The driver pushed open the double doors to allow her through, and she said, 'Thank you, Steve. Could someone pay him, please? I don't have my purse.'

Rebecca trotted over. Steve had a card machine ready, and she tapped it. 'I'll need a receipt,' she warned him.

'Are you OK?' Celeste asked as the driver left.

Rhona looked paler than usual, her hospital bracelet just visible under the cuff of her

jumper. 'I'm fine. I was just dehydrated, as it turned out. Not that those quacks would let me go. I slept terribly in that hospital.'

Celeste let out a sigh of relief. But Rhona didn't notice. She was too busy picking up the weird vibe in the lobby.

'Well, what did I miss?' she asked, blinking at the frozen tableau before her.

Nobody answered right away. Then Jade, always willing to take centre stage, stepped forward, arms crossed, and delivered the story in short, sharp bursts, getting right down to brass tacks. Talia was a fraud who'd made up a girlfriend and had gotten some random to play the part of the hot doctor.

'And she doesn't even know basic first aid!' Jade exclaimed as a dramatic denouement. As the least shocking part of the story, Talia felt it fell a bit flat.

Rhona absorbed it all in silence, her gaze moving between them. When Jade finished, she looked at Talia, then at Imogen. Her mouth twisted, not in disgust but in weary resignation.

'Right. Well. I've got to say... I'm not surprised.'

Celeste bristled. 'Excuse me?'

'Am I supposed to be?' Rhona asked.

Jade, Rebecca, and Celeste said, 'YES!' all at once.

'Come on, Celeste.' Rhona turned to her, voice low and steady. 'You're just like your father. You want the company to look perfect. You want us to look perfect. You'd burn the whole house down before you let anyone see a crack in the walls.'

Celeste flushed. 'That's not true.'

Rhona didn't blink. 'It is. That's why people lie. Why they hide things. You make it impossible to be anything other than spotless.' She gestured toward Talia. 'I don't blame her. We've all played the game. Eighty-hour weeks. No sick days. Smiling at clients while your relationship crumbles, or your sister's in hospital, or your life's coming apart at the seams. No wonder she cracked.'

Celeste's eyes had gone glassy, but she said nothing. No one responded at all.

Marcus cleared his throat. 'You'll need help packing,' he said to Rhona. She nodded, and they went up the stairs.

Jade muttered something about needing to be somewhere.

One by one, they left.

Celeste was the last one left, besides Talia and Imogen.

She lingered a moment longer than the rest, opened her mouth, then seemed to think better of it.

She turned and followed the others out, heels clicking like punctuation marks on the polished floor.

It was over.

Imogen and Talia stood side by side in the empty lobby, the hum of the lift behind them, the scent of cold coffee in the air.

'Well,' Imogen said after a long silence, her voice dry. 'That could've gone worse.'

Talia let out a short laugh. 'Could it?'

Imogen turned to her and took her hand. Her fingers were warm and firm. 'Yeah,' she said. 'It really could've. Rhona had your back. Even though I almost killed her.'

Talia smiled at Imogen. 'Don't be a drama queen. She was just overly thirsty.'

But it had been nice to have Rhona understand. It wouldn't change anything. Rhona was a partner, but she didn't call the shots. Talia's career was still bugged. But still.

'So... My place or yours?' Imogen asked.

Talia grinned.

They walked out together and got into Talia's car.

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Imogen settled herself into the passenger seat, and a thought popped into her head as her seatbelt clicked home. ‘Oh!’ she exclaimed. The thought couldn’t wait. This had to be done now.

Imogen pulled her phone out and fingers danced across the screen. After a moment, she slipped the phone back into her pocket, the corners of her mouth curling into a small, satisfied smile.

‘What was that about?’ Talia asked, shifting in the driver’s seat as she started the engine, easing the car out of the hotel’s gravel driveway and down to the turnoff.

‘Just returning your five grand,’ Imogen replied casually.

Talia put a foot on the brakes, making them both jolt forward. ‘No.’

Imogen laughed softly. ‘You think I could take your money? Now?’

Talia frowned, anxiety flickering in her gaze. ‘Yes. I cost you your job.’

Imogen’s eyes flickered downward briefly before meeting Talia’s again. ‘You did,’ she admitted softly. ‘But it’s fine.’

The words felt fragile in her mouth because she wasn’t sure how fine it was going to be. But holding on to that money felt like a weight neither of them needed. If they were going to make this work, it couldn’t start like that.

‘But how are you going to... What are you going to...’ Talia’s voice wavered,

searching for answers in the uncertainty.

Imogen waved a dismissive hand, smiling faintly. She didn't have the first clue. But she wasn't worrying about that today. 'I'll work it out. But it can't be with your money. You might need it anyway.' Realising what she'd implied, she clapped a hand over her mouth. 'Oh, I didn't mean to—'

Talia burst out laughing. 'Refer to my imminent firing?'

Imogen smiled. 'Well...'

Talia gave her a long look and shrugged. 'OK, we can talk about the money later.'

'We most certainly cannot,' Imogen told her firmly.

Talia pursed her lips but didn't argue. She got the car going again, and they journeyed on.

Hours slipped by in a warm quiet—a very different kind of quiet than they'd driven up in. It was filled with peace and satisfaction. Imogen reached over a few times to brush a stray strand of hair from Talia's face, her touch lingering just a moment longer than necessary. Talia smiled every time.

When they finally pulled up outside Imogen's flat around lunchtime, Imogen got out and Talia followed. 'You sure you're not sick of me yet?' she asked. 'I wouldn't take it personally if you wanted some time to yourself.'

Imogen just laughed and grabbed her hand, pulling her into the building. There was a lot that was uncertain. But it wasn't what was going to happen right that minute.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 6:45 am

As Talia stepped into Imogen's flat, she took it all in: the little stack of post spilling over the coffee table, Imogen's shoes kicked off half-heartedly near a rusty radiator, and a half-dead plant clinging to life on the windowsill.

It was kind of a mess. But it was Imogen's life, and Talia wanted to be here very badly. It was the centre of the world.

Imogen shuffled in, dropping another handful of envelopes onto the pile without even glancing at them. 'More bills, no doubt,' she said lightly.

Talia frowned. 'I wish you hadn't given me that money back.'

'I told you, I don't want it,' Imogen said flatly.

And Talia could see it was not a tone to argue with. She didn't want to ruin this moment. Though she was a little worried for Imogen. She wished there was some way she could help her. But it couldn't be with money. Talia understood Imogen's reasoning on that. They were starting something, and Imogen didn't want to taint it. That gave Talia hope that Imogen wanted this—wanted them—just as much as Talia did. Which was so fucking much.

There was so much they needed to learn about each other, so much time to pour into this to make it solid and true. But Talia was all in. She could feel Imogen's commitment too. It meant the world. Talia was ready to love someone. She was ready to love Imogen.

Her phone buzzed. She pulled it out of her pocket. One glance at the screen and her

good mood had a bite taken out of it. Her brow furrowed. The world she'd just stepped out of was already reaching for her, trying to pull her back.

'It's Celeste,' she said, her voice edged with hesitation.

Imogen pulled a face. 'You gonna take it?'

Talia didn't answer right away. The thought of hearing Celeste's voice again made her stomach drop. She'd been happy a minute ago. She didn't want to spoil that.

'I don't know.'

Imogen shrugged, calm. 'Go on. I'm here. It'll be OK.'

Talia managed a shaky smile and answered, pressing speaker before she could change her mind. She wanted Imogen in this.

'Talia?' Celeste's voice crackled through, taut and brittle. 'I'm sorry to call like this, but we've been on a conference call since leaving the lodge. The partners, Rebecca, everyone. We've been trying to figure out what happens next.'

Talia's hand tightened around the phone. 'I see.'

'We think... we've decided to leave things as they are.'

She frowned, bewildered. 'What do you mean?'

'We're not going to take any action concerning your position.'

'Are you trying to tell me I'm not fired?' Talia asked.

The confusion in her voice didn't even begin to cover the whiplash she felt. Celeste wasn't exactly being direct.

'We are not releasing you from your contract. That's correct,' Celeste replied.

Talia blinked. 'Oh. OK.'

'We're going to send you some paperwork in the next few days, if you could sign it?' Rebecca's voice jumped in suddenly.

Talia raised an eyebrow. 'Oh, Rebecca, I didn't realise this was a conference call.'

'Yep. Hi. So, it's crucial you get that paperwork back to—'

'What paperwork?' Talia cut in. 'If I'm not fired, what do you need me to sign?'

Rebecca gave a short laugh. 'Oh, you know. It's just a thing to say you won't sue us because Rhona said all that stuff about Monroe employees being overworked and pressured into maintaining a perfect image, that's all—'

'Rebecca,' Celeste snapped.

Talia rolled her eyes. 'Oh, I see. That's why I'm not fired. You're worried about a constructive dismissal claim. Well, I wouldn't bother. I'm not suing you.'

A pause. Then Celeste asked cautiously, 'No?'

Talia gave a small laugh, surprising even herself. 'You honestly think I want what happened at the retreat on public record?'

Imogen clapped her hand over the phone. 'What are you doing? They're going to let

it go.'

Talia shrugged. 'I'm not playing this game. If they want to sack me, let them.'

Imogen looked like she wasn't sure if Talia had completely lost it, but she moved her hand.

Talia shot her a wink, then looked back down at the phone. 'Look, Celeste, I'm not interested in staying. Fire me. Or I'll quit. Whatever works best for you.'

There was a beat of silence, and then Celeste spoke again, her voice gentler now. 'I understand why you might feel that way. But... before you make any final decisions—'

'There's nothing else to say,' Talia interrupted, her words hard and precise. 'What I did was crazy. But I thought I had to. That's not great, is it?'

Celeste exhaled slowly. 'I've been thinking about that. Maybe the company needs to change. Maybe the culture has been... wrong.'

Talia looked at Imogen. Imogen looked back at her. What the fuck was happening?

'Would you consider staying? At least for now?' Celeste asked. 'We want to try to do better. To make things right.' A pause. Then she added, 'Also, your billables are insane.'

Talia swallowed. 'I don't know. Everyone thinks I'm barking mad now, so I just think I'll be too uncomfortable.'

'I'll talk to everyone,' Celeste said quickly. 'Don't worry about that. Just give me time to figure out how to speak to everyone about this.'

‘I could do a seminar!’ Rebecca chimed in far too brightly.

‘No,’ Talia and Celeste said together.

Rebecca went silent.

Celeste cleared her throat. ‘So, would you stay? We could even leave the conversation open about that partnership. I mean, not right away. We’d need to let the dust settle...’

Talia hesitated. Her heart thudded with a strange clarity. ‘I don’t want it.’

The silence on the other end was almost comical. ‘You’re turning it down?’

‘I need to take a breath, Celeste. My work-life balance is in the toilet as it is. Partnership, now? I’ll have a heart attack before I’m fifty. But I’ll stay. For a bit. To see if it’s salvageable there.’

Celeste’s relief was audible. ‘Good. Good. Thank you, Talia.’

Talia nodded, even though Celeste couldn’t see her. ‘OK. Well, thanks for calling.’

‘Of course, and if there’s—’

Talia hung up. She looked at Imogen, who was already smiling.

‘You’re mad. She was still considering promoting you.’

Talia smirked.

‘But you said no? I thought... I thought—’

‘I’ve got time. What’s the rush?’ Talia said.

She barely recognised this relaxed version of herself. But she didn’t mind that. She didn’t mind it at all.

‘But it’s everything you want,’ Imogen said.

Talia raised an eyebrow. ‘Not quite.’

Imogen frowned. ‘What?’

Talia stepped closer, sliding her hands around Imogen’s waist, her voice dipping low. ‘If I had everything I want, you wouldn’t still be dressed.’

Talia bent to scoop Imogen up in one smooth motion, laughter bubbling between them. Imogen’s arms wrapped around her neck, legs around her waist, breath catching with surprise and delight.

As Talia started to carry her toward the bedroom, her foot caught the edge of the coffee table. The pile of post teetered dangerously and then spilled across the floor.

‘Oops,’ Talia muttered, setting Imogen down with a soft thud. She crouched to help gather the scattered letters.

Imogen knelt beside her, eyes landing on a heavier envelope stamped with a university logo. ‘Wait... what’s that?’

Talia picked it up, turning it over in her hands. ‘Looks official.’

Imogen reached for it, eyes wide. ‘I think it’s from this community programme I applied to an absolute age ago.’

Talia was bursting with curiosity. 'Open it!' she demanded, excited.

Imogen nodded, biting her lip as she scanned the page. Then her eyes widened.

'They want to interview me for the community engagement coordinator role,' she said, a laugh bubbling out. 'I thought it was dead in the water.'

Talia pulled Imogen to her feet and hugged her. 'This is amazing,' Talia breathed into her ear, incredibly excited for Imogen.

'It's only an interview,' Imogen said quickly. 'They'll have loads of people with way more experience than me.'

Talia smiled warmly. 'You don't know that.'

Imogen looked doubtful. 'I've never done this kind of work. I won't get it.'

'They want to interview you. Do you think they're doing that for the lols?' Talia asked her.

Imogen chewed her lip nervously. 'Even so, I'm awful at interviews. I ramble and blush. Then I start talking myself out of the job.'

Talia laughed softly. 'I'll help you prep. I'm embarrassingly good at selling myself.'

'Really?' Imogen's voice was small but hopeful.

'Absolutely. You're not giving up before you start. Not while I'm around.'

Imogen looked down at the letter, the doubt softening in her eyes. 'It's just an interview,' she said again, but this time it sounded a little more like hope. 'And it's

not curating. And the pay is shocking.'

'But it's curating adjacent, right? So when you get this, and you will, it will be the start of your rise,' Talia told her.

Imogen laughed, cheeks flushed. 'You make it sound easy.'

'Easy?' Talia grinned. 'With me coaching you, it'll be a breeze. Besides, who wouldn't want to hire someone so gorgeous?'

Imogen rolled her eyes, smiling wider. 'I don't think that's on the requirement list.'

Talia smiled, feeling passion rise once again. Her fingers grazed Imogen's arm, tracing slow, deliberate circles. 'Maybe not.' She leaned in, breath warm against Imogen's ear. 'But if they want someone who's hands-on and knows how to get things done, you're their girl.' She smirked, lips brushing Imogen's ear.

Before Imogen could protest, Talia's lips claimed hers, playful and demanding all at once. The letter slipped forgotten on the floor. There was now only one thing on both of their minds and it sure as hell wasn't interviewing technique.

Three Years Later

The gallery's floors gleamed, and the walls still smelled faintly of fresh paint. Evening light spilled through the tall sash windows, casting everything in gold.

Laughter and the soft clink of glasses rose above the low hum of strings from a discreet speaker behind the front desk. On the front window was the freshly stencilled name of the place: Imogen Lake Contemporary. She was still startled every time she saw it.

People clustered in small groups, admiring the work. The exhibition was bold, political, and unapologetically working class. Three pieces had sold in the first hour. A local arts journalist had requested an interview for next week. Her inbox was full of words like visionary and potential.

But all Imogen could see was the woman moving through the crowd towards her: Talia, magnetic as ever in a navy-blue suit that looked like it had been made with her in mind. Her smile was wicked and warm, and her grey eyes were fixed on Imogen like there was no one else in the room.

They still didn't make sense on paper: the corporate lawyer and the chaotic curator. But in real life, it worked. Imogen loved Talia Knox to a breathtaking degree.

'You pulled it off,' Talia said, handing her a glass of fizz.

'We pulled it off,' Imogen replied, brushing her knuckles against Talia's. 'Without your contact book, none of this would've happened.'

Talia shrugged like it was nothing. 'I just introduced you to a few people.'

'You introduced me to three major donors. They gave more in two weeks than I managed to raise in six months. Weird to be a nepotism girlfriend.'

Talia tutted. 'You got yourself here. I gave you some phone numbers. You turned them into something real. You could sell a snowstorm to the sun when you put your mind to it.'

Imogen smiled and took a sip of her drink, shifting slightly to watch the room. She was trying to be here, fully present. It had taken a long time to get to this moment. She wanted to enjoy every second of it.

Talia had been right. Getting the community engagement coordinator role had been the start of a slow and steady rise from an underemployed dreamer to here, now. Her own place.

She wasn't sure she'd have gotten that job without Talia's relentless cheerleading and razor-sharp tips. Talia had argued her into self-belief. She was annoyingly good at that.

From there, it had been long hours planning events, building partnerships, pouring herself into making the programme work. It tested her limits over and over. But with every meeting she led, every event that drew a crowd, she felt herself growing into the person she wanted to become.

And eventually, the dream she'd been afraid to name out loud stopped feeling impossible. Her own gallery. A place for the overlooked. The working class. The connectionless. The ones with no safety net and no name-drop CV. People like her. Grit, fire, and talent over polish and privilege.

She spent evenings writing proposals, chasing funding, and scouring listings for

spaces she might afford. The job had given her confidence. The gallery gave her purpose. It began as a sketch, then a folder, then a name on a lease.

It was small, and she was scared. The fear hadn't left. But it wasn't paralysing anymore. It pushed her forward.

And through it all, there was Talia. Steady, unshakable, and somehow always ready with exactly the right thing to say. Her love wasn't flashy or grand, but it was the kind that anchored you. The kind that made you brave.

'How do you feel?' Talia asked.

Imogen turned to her and smiled. 'I'm trying not to pee myself,' she said quietly.

Talia smiled back at her. 'Go ahead. We'll just rope it off and call it an installation.'

Imogen laughed. 'That's quite a rude assessment of modern art, but I'm going to let it slide.'

Talia grinned at her. 'I'm really bloody proud of you.'

Imogen smiled, the tight knot in her chest easing for the first time all evening. 'I'm proud of me too. But I remember how close I came to going nowhere.'

'But instead, you built this,' Talia said, tucking a lock of hair behind Imogen's ear, her touch light.

Imogen took a breath. 'I couldn't have done it alone.'

Talia's grin tilted. 'No, but you didn't need to. That's the whole point.'

Imogen noted Daniel looking at a painting nearby, his signature gilet doing little to

soften his swagger as he chatted loudly with the surprisingly large Monroe contingent who had turned up to support Imogen.

‘Yeah, this piece really captures the raw, unfiltered essence of, you know, the human condition,’ he waffled.

Talia rolled her eyes. ‘Christ, he’s not even saying anything.’

‘Does he ever?’ Imogen asked.

‘I’m so glad he didn’t end up becoming my boss,’ Talia breathed. ‘I’d have murdered him in the first quarter.’

‘Immy,’ Jade said, breezing past, ‘this place is cool.’

‘Thanks. But don’t call me Immy,’ Imogen told her.

‘Would you prefer me to call you Alex?’ Jade asked.

Imogen groaned.

‘Relax. I’m just joshing,’ Jade said with a flash of teeth.

‘I’d quite like to live that down at some point, if that’s possible,’ Imogen told her.

‘I’m sure you would. Hey, I’m feeling a bit faint. Is there a doctor in the house?’ Jade asked.

‘Jade...’

‘OK, that’s my last one. For tonight at least,’ Jade promised.

Imogen nodded. 'Thanks. Enjoy the art.'

'Baby, I am art,' she said, swaggering off.

Imogen had to laugh at her audacity.

'She never quits, does she?' Talia said, irritated.

Imogen kissed Talia on the cheek. 'She ought to. She'd have more luck flirting with the fire extinguisher.'

'Glad to hear it,' said a voice. Celeste Monroe appeared beside her, sleek, poised, and silently appraising. 'Well done on this place, Imogen,' Celeste said. 'There are some truly interesting pieces in here. I might even buy tonight.'

Imogen couldn't help but feel lifted by that.

Talia slipped her hand into Imogen's, squeezing gently. 'See? The place is great.'

Celeste leaned in, a teasing smile playing on her lips. 'You know, I still can't quite believe I'm seeing this.'

Imogen looked around. 'Yes, some of this work is...'

Celeste waved her hand between Talia and Imogen. 'No. This. When Talia brought you to those work drinks as her girlfriend, I don't think I've ever been so confused. I thought it was an ill-advised prank.'

Imogen laughed, recalling the awkwardness. 'Yeah, I was pretty much waiting to get slapped by, well, anyone.'

'God, imagine. Rebecca would have had a heart attack,' Talia said with an amused

sigh.

Celeste chuckled. 'It didn't take long to realise it was no act. Well, now.'

Imogen laughed, then looked around for Mr Celeste. 'Your hubby not coming tonight?' she asked.

Celeste's smile twitched. 'No, he's at a conference.' She blinked and shook her head. 'For god's sake, he's not at a conference. I don't know why I said that. We're just taking some time away from each other at the moment.'

'Celeste!' Talia cried, putting a hand on her boss's arm. 'I'm sorry.'

'Well, you know. Marriage. It has ups and downs,' Celeste said, mouth turned down.

Talia nodded. 'Of course.'

'We're going to try couples' counselling, so I'm hopeful.'

'That's great,' Talia told her sincerely.

Celeste nodded. 'Wow, living honestly like this is quite horrid, isn't it?'

Imogen and Talia laughed. 'On occasion,' Talia agreed.

Celeste touched Talia's elbow with light affection. 'Thanks for forcing it on me.'

Talia laughed awkwardly. 'I'd love to say it was my master plan, but life happens in the chaos, more often than not.'

She glanced toward a striking abstract piece on the far wall. 'Excuse me. I need to inspect that one.' She turned back. 'If I don't see you after this, I'll catch up with you

Monday morning.'

Talia raised an eyebrow. 'I'm not coming to that ten o'clock if you're just going to hassle me.'

'Hassling you to be a non-equity partner will only take up ten minutes of it. Less if you say yes,' Celeste teased her warmly.

'I'm good where I am,' Talia told her.

Celeste sighed. 'We'll see.' With that, she moved off gracefully, leaving Imogen and Talia standing close, the buzz of the gallery fading into a private, quiet moment between them.

'What shall we do after this?' Imogen asked.

'I want to go to bed,' Talia said.

'Long day?'

'That's not what I meant,' Talia said with a half-smile.

'My god, you're insatiable,' Imogen laughed.

'Of course I am. My girlfriend is a hot gallery owner,' Talia laughed.

'Is that sexier than a doctor?' Imogen asked.

Talia laughed, her eyes sparkling. 'Well, a doctor might save lives, but a hot gallery owner? She makes the world look a whole lot better.'

Imogen grinned, squeezing Talia's hand. 'Smooth talker.'

‘Only when it counts,’ Talia said, pulling her closer.

The intimate moment between them was suddenly pierced by a familiar, theatrical voice from the door that cut through like a poorly tuned violin.

‘Well, well, if it isn’t Imogen Lake, Queen of the Arts!’ said Flora, swaggering in wearing a white Chanel suit that looked like it cost more than the building.

Imogen gaped. ‘You’re kidding me,’ she muttered under her breath.

Flora swaggered over. ‘Darling.’

She did the double-kiss thing to Imogen’s frozen cheeks. Imogen rolled her eyes. Of all the people to show up. How the hell had Flora even known about tonight?

‘Did you get lost on the way to The Vespar?’ Talia asked.

Flora had somehow not noticed Talia’s presence until that moment, and she turned, confused. ‘Talia?! What on earth—’ The confident grin faltered, replaced by a flicker of shock, maybe even horror. She blinked, struggling to process. ‘Since when are you... and when are you two... like this?’

Imogen gave a small, calm smile as she bumped arms gently with Talia. ‘Three years next week, if you must know.’

Flora’s forced smile twitched, her eyes briefly clouding with something she quickly hid. ‘Well, that’s... unexpected.’

‘How did you find out about this place?’ Imogen asked, not too interested in Flora’s take on her relationship.

Flora shook off her weirdness quickly, at least externally. ‘Oh, you know... word gets

around.'

'Whose word?' Imogen pressed.

'Um, well, I saw it on Instagram,' Flora admitted.

Imogen was confused. 'Do you follow me?'

Flora gave a light laugh. 'I'm not sure. Perhaps someone shared it?'

Imogen knew that Flora had definitely been following her with a Finsta. It took everything Imogen had not to laugh at that. But Flora wouldn't have gotten the joke.

'How's Paris?' Imogen asked out of politeness.

'Very boring. I had to leave. You know how it is. Sometimes you just need a shake-up.'

'Hell of a commute to The Vespar,' Imogen noted.

'Ah, well, I'm working for them in a more freelance capacity now. I prefer to be able to pick and choose my projects.'

'Sounds like you're working for them in a fired way,' Talia said.

'I wouldn't put it like that,' Flora said. She cleared her throat. 'So, how's this place doing?'

'I don't know yet. We just opened,' Imogen told her.

'Oh, ha ha, of course. And you're, err, staffed up?'

Talia, mid-sip of champagne, spluttered, sending a mouthful of bubbles straight over Flora's pristine white suit.

Flora froze for a beat, then blinked down at the spreading stain as if hoping it might magically disappear. 'Well.'

'I'm so sorry,' Talia said nearly sincerely.

'Can I get you a napkin?' Imogen asked, barely suppressing laughter at Flora's perfectly earned misfortune.

Flora pulled out her pocket square and dabbed at the stain. 'I'm good, thanks ever so.'

Imogen cleared her throat. 'You know, if you're available, there's a mountain of work to be done. We could use someone to hand out leaflets.'

Flora's eyes narrowed, her smile tightening into something brittle. 'I'm not available. Just making conversation.'

Imogen's gaze stayed steady, her amusement barely concealed. She knew Flora well enough not to expect otherwise. 'The offer stands. Open-ended.'

Flora smoothed her jacket, clearly offended but forcing a laugh to cover it. 'I must dash, lots of things to get to. But I'm glad I could see the place. It's... cute.'

'So glad you could make it,' Imogen said, voice tight as wire.

'And you two,' Flora said, turning back with a mocking tilt of her head, 'best of luck. It's quite sweet to see my sloppy seconds finding each other.'

Talia reached out, her hand landing discreetly on Imogen's bum with a small, sly squeeze. 'We'll always remember you as our respective first pancake.'

Flora forced a smile. 'Sure. Later.' She turned sharply, heading for the door.

'Say hi to your parents for me,' Talia called after her, voice dripping with sweet venom.

Flora paused in stride for the briefest moment and then kept walking.

As the door clicked shut behind her, Talia turned to Imogen, and they both burst out laughing.

'Did I just dream that?' Imogen asked.

'Dreams are never that good,' Talia told her, releasing her bottom to grab a fresh flute from a passing tray and handing it to Imogen. 'I'm betting you need this.'

'Only to toast that idiot leaving,' Imogen told her. She looked around. 'Are there enough people here? I feel like it's thinning out.'

Talia looked around. 'I think it's actually fuller.'

Imogen looked again. 'Are you sure?'

Talia nodded. 'Honey, breathe. It's a good night.'

'Would you put your hand back on my bum? It's very soothing,' Imogen asked.

Talia nodded and placed it back on Imogen's left cheek. 'I live to serve.'

Imogen took a more relaxed sigh. 'Keep that there, if you could.'

'To the limits of decency. And a bit beyond,' Talia promised her with a smile.

Imogen watched as another sale sticker went up on a painting. It soothed her nerves a little. In fact, she was starting to suspect she might be someone who'd built something that could last. Maybe more than one thing.

She squeezed Talia's hand. 'It sucks that Celeste and Mitchell are struggling,' she noted.

'Yep,' Talia said sadly.

'Marriage is hard, I guess.'

'Yep,' Talia repeated.

'You want to give it a go?' Imogen asked.

Talia's mouth twitched. 'Huwha...' she spluttered.

Imogen gave a half-shrug, trying to mask her nerves with nonchalance. 'Seemed to work out OK last time we tried something crazy together.'

Talia turned to look at her, properly this time. 'You're serious?'

'I mean, I don't have a ring or a speech or anything.' Imogen paused. 'But I just think my life is so much better with you in it. And I'd quite like to keep it that way.'

Talia was quiet for a beat, eyes scanning Imogen's face for a lack of seriousness. But Imogen was deeply sincere. She wanted to marry Talia Knox. She wanted her forever.

'That was a pretty good speech, actually,' Talia told her.

'Good enough to say yes?' Imogen checked fearfully.

‘Definitely good enough. Let’s get hitched,’ Talia said with a smile, her ears turning that lovely shade of pink.

Imogen smiled back at her soon-to-be wife. ‘Alright, then.’

They turned back toward the paintings, hands still clasped, as another red sticker went up.

Thanks for reading! If you enjoyed the book and you have a moment, the author would very much appreciate it if you'd leave a review on [lokepub](#).