

SUSIE TATE



UNWANTED

**unwanted** /An' wɒntɪd/ *adjective*

Not or no longer desired.

**Unwanted**

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Susie Tate

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*For all the Badgers - you guys rock x*

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# Chapter 1

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## *Big Dick Energy*

### **VERITY**

“Don’t screw this up, Max,” I said through gritted teeth and a practised smile. Winning this pitch would represent the pinnacle of everything we’d worked towards. It would secure the company’s showcase piece in a prime central London location. Every architecture firm in the country wanted to win the bid for the London School of Economics’ main campus. Huge plots for development in central London come up very rarely, and this commission would be the largest carbon-neutral building in the UK and we were *this* close to being picked as the architects to design it.

If I could just control Max a little longer, just get through this next meeting, we’d be golden. Our designs were by far the best to have been submitted. The panel had been overwhelmingly positive. This meeting was just a formality – everyone knew it. To be honest I didn’t even really know why it was necessary. All we’d been told was that one of the big guns financing the building wanted to vet the potential architects personally. Annoying really – what did some random billionaire know about good design?

Freya and Sundip, the junior architects who had worked with Max and me on this project, were already sporting small smiles of victory and relaxing back into the comfy chairs of the massive conference room we were waiting in. Max was tense, but then Max was a tense human.

This was part of the problem with having him at these meetings. He was a brilliant architect and one of my best friends, but he could make one hell of a bad impression on clients. Mostly because he had a tendency towards brutal honesty – by way of example, our last clients did not take kindly to their



ideas being dismissed as “pretentious bollocks”. Our business partnership worked because Max produced fabulous and innovative designs, while I was the charming level-headed negotiator who could massage clients’ egos. In all honesty, we tried to keep Max’s face time with the customer service end of the business to a minimum, but there’d been no way to avoid him coming to this particular meeting.

I rolled my head on my shoulders for a moment and focused on my breathing, just like Max’s sister Yaz had been showing me. Having always been dismissive of Yaz’s alternative therapy bullshit, I’d finally started listening to her after she’d recently used her breathing techniques to talk me down from a full-blown panic attack in the office. Since then, her techniques seemed to be really helping my anxiety. Only Yaz knew about the panic attacks – I’d sworn her to secrecy and hadn’t even confided in my brother, Heath. As far as Heath was concerned I’d left those panic attacks in the past, along with the rest of our early years. He’d only worry if he knew they’d come back, and I wanted him to concentrate on his own happiness, not on me. If he could just stop being such a prick to Yaz and accept he was in love with her that would be a start. Also, I’d never been very good at admitting vulnerability, and I did not want to be pitied or perceived as being weak – not if I could help it. Competent, together, gets-shit-done Verity: that was the image I projected into the world, and panic attacks weren’t compatible with that.

I focused on my surroundings, picking out specific things in turn – the leather chairs around the huge conference table, the bank of floor-to-ceiling windows behind me with the view across London stretching out below us. It was fair to say that this room exuded a lot of Big Dick Energy – it was designed to intimidate, to put whomever you were meeting with on the back foot. Well, that wasn’t going to work with me. It took a lot to intimidate Verity Markham. Beside me, Max had started tapping his pencil against the shiny tabletop. *Tap tap tap tap tap...* I put my hand over his to stop him. His nervous tension was driving me insane. Suddenly the doors opened and I started in my seat. All the air left my lungs in a rapid whoosh and my mouth fell open as the tall man who’d just pushed into the room came into view.

*Harry.*

His bone structure was much more defined now, a perfectly sculpted designer beard highlighting his chiselled jawline, which had been softer and less developed twenty years ago. His previous mop of dark curls had been

shorn off and combed back, with only a slight wave indicating the craziness of before. Gone was the gangly boy with uncoordinated limbs and clumsy movements. In his place was an unbelievably gorgeous man in an Armani suit that he filled with a built physique, moving with the absolute confidence of someone who owned everything and everyone in this conference room.

His eyes were the same though, that same warm, deep brown – there was the Harry I remembered, there in his eyes. But then he focused on me and... nothing. No flash of recognition, no widening in surprise to see me sitting six feet away from him after twenty years. Just... nothing. The excited smile that had formed on my face after the initial shock of seeing him started to fade. Those beautiful eyes dropped from mine down to where my hand was still lain over Max's and I did catch a flash of something in his expression, but then he looked away towards the other members of my team and the blank mask was back before I could read anything further into it. Max cleared his throat and shook my hand from his (no mean feat considering the death grip I'd started to exert), bringing me back to reality. With a jerk, I realised that everyone but me had stood up to greet Harry and his entourage. I was the only one in the room still sitting down with my mouth now open like a goldfish.

"You must be Mr York, I'm Max Hardcastle," Max rumbled in his deep Yorkshire accent, his hand extended across the conference table to shake Harry's. I shook my head to clear it and then sprang to my feet, accidentally sending my wheeled chair crashing back into the window behind me. Everyone's eyes flew to me, and I muttered a harassed apology, praying for the glass to stay intact.

"Please don't worry about the window," Harry cut me off as he shook Max's hand. "The glass is bullet-proof." He gave me a practised, urbane smile which didn't reach his eyes and which I instantly hated, then turned his attention back to Max. "Great to meet you too, finally, Mr Hardcastle – and please, call me Harry."

"Max," Max said, even managing his own smile which was a real turn-up charm-wise for him. "And the chair thrower is Verity Markham, my business partner." Didn't Max recognise Harry? Were we all just going to pretend we didn't know each other? That we hadn't gone to school together for four years? What was wrong with these people? I mean, Max I could maybe understand – Harry had been in the year above us and, really, I was the only one to have known him properly at school. But surely *Harry* remembered *me*.

How could he possibly have forgotten?

“Ms Markham, of course,” Harry’s too-smooth voice was grating on my nerves now together with that smug, unaffected smile. I stared down at his large hand which was now extended in my direction and blinked. Max elbowed me sharply and cleared his throat and I jerked into action, rubbing my now sweating palms down the side of my skirt before forcing my hand to meet Harry’s. So much for me being the charming, together one in this scenario.

“Hi, Harry,” I forced out, my voice seeming unnaturally high and strangled. “I–”

“So, please take a seat,” Harry cut me off. He actually talked *right over* me. Had I been sucked into an alternate universe where Harry York talks over me? “I’m so sorry but I have another meeting in…” he pushed up the sleeve of his jacket to check the time, and I got a glimpse of muscled forearm – his watch had that same Big Dick Energy as his conference room – “... another twenty-two minutes so we’ll have to keep this brief.”

Twenty-two minutes? My presentation alone was nearly an hour long. We’d worked for weeks on this. He looked over at me and raised his eyebrows expectantly. As my eyes locked with his it was like all the oxygen was sucked out of the room.

*You are everything, Harry.*

Those words from my teens flooded my mind. I could feel the same desperation and longing I’d felt back then, the rush of love and affection I hadn’t tried to hide when seventeen-year-old me had made that confession to Harry. The acute relief when I’d believed he felt the same. When I believed that he wanted me too. But he hadn’t wanted me, had he? It had all been an illusion. And here he was, proving that all over again.

*Harry, please. I don’t know what’s happened. I don’t understand why you’re not taking my calls.*

*You’re scaring me, Harry.*

*Please, just speak to me.*

My cheeks heated as in my mind I replayed those voicemails I’d left on his phone twenty years ago. I’d been so in love with Harry that I’d totally abandoned my pride and self-respect. And it had changed me. That humiliation had shaped me into a different person. Nowadays I *never* left my pride behind, and I never *ever* begged.

I blinked, cleared my throat and tried to focus on the task in hand.

Unfortunately, when I reached for my laptop my hand tipped over a glass of water, sending it flying across the table. Sundip, who'd spent the last week working on the model that now lay in the path of my destruction, quickly stood up and threw his jacket over the table, mopping up the water before it could reach the painstakingly designed miniature building.

"Jesus Christ," Max muttered to me. "What's up wi' ya?" His northern accent tended to deepen with stress. My gaze flicked up to Harry for a moment. The smug bastard was suppressing a smile. The only reason I could tell is that I *knew* that dimple on his now sculpted face. He was finding this all *very* entertaining. I cleared my throat and opened my laptop. Sundip finished mopping up the water, then gamely put his soaking jacket back on as if nothing had happened. I made a mental note to give him a raise.

The screen was already going, so I opened the first slide and tried to segue straight into presentation mode. This project was too important to bugger up just because someone from my past, someone who *I* thought was significant, couldn't remember me. Unfortunately, instead of my usual slick presenting style I was tripping over my words, skipping essential parts and having to go back. At one point I made eye contact with Harry and the disinterested expression on his face made me completely lose my train of thought. There was silence for nearly a full minute before I could recover it.

"So, it's not just the aesthetic appeal, but also the environmental impact of this building which puts it way above whatever—"

"Right, I think I've heard enough for now, Ms Markham," Harry spoke over me. Again! "Thank you for your time today. I'm sure we'll be getting in contact in due course. Now, if you'll excuse me."

"But you've not heard owt about the energy-saving potential," Max put in, disbelief threading through his words. "We've not even showed the 3D modelling."

"Whilst that sounds *fascinating*," Harry's tone did not make it seem like he found any of that in the least fascinating, nor did the fact he was checking his watch for the hundredth time since he entered his stupid Big Dick Energy conference room, "I'm afraid this is all I have time for." He let his sleeve fall back over his watch, pushed back from the table and stood up in one fluid motion, his team following his lead. There was a chin lift and another ultra-brief moment of eye contact with me, before he swept out of the room followed by his entourage. I hadn't even managed to get to my feet.

"Oh my God, V," Max snapped after the double doors had glided shut

after the departing team of suited business peeps. “What the hell was that?”

“I don’t–”

“This is the most important contract we’ve ever gone for and you’re throwing chairs, soaking our models and sounding like a fucking amateur!” Max was a perfectionist, and he had a quick temper. It didn’t usually phase me. I could normally shrug off his abrasive grumpiness and be the calm voice of reason. But I felt raw after that exchange with Harry.

“I didn’t think it was that bad,” Sundip put in, bless him. The man had to be soaked to the skin by now. Max gave him a dirty look and he shrank back into his chair.

“Didn’t you recognise him?” I said in a low voice, as I started packing up my laptop and gathering the plans we’d spread over the table.

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s Harry. Harry from school. The year above us. His dad was one of the maths teachers *and* your housemaster. Surely you recognise him?”

Max frowned at me. “Verity, I barely remember any of the bastards that were in *our* year except for you and Heath. I wasn’t popular like you lot, or half as social. I’m certainly not going to remember some random bloke in the year above. And I definitely blocked out anything to do wi’ maths.” Max shuddered. He’d never been a very keen mathematician.

“But he–” I stopped and frowned myself. Just because I’d spent so much time with Harry didn’t mean that Max should remember him. It was me who had discovered Harry’s hiding place in the library and me who had kept going back there day after day to seek him out. Harry may have been a massive part of *my* school experience, but it was no surprise that he hadn’t registered on Max’s radar. “Okay, well he *did* go to school with us and there’s no way he wouldn’t know who I was.”

Max snorted. “You may have considered yourself unforgettable, V, but I’m sure there might have been the odd bloke who managed to slip through that school without developing a fixation with you.”

Freya was ignoring Max and looking at me with her head tilted to the side. “You had a thing with him, didn’t you?” she asked, and I flashed her an annoyed look.

“Oh my God, V,” Max groaned. “Don’t tell me that some teenage bullshit is going to screw my chances of getting the biggest commission of my life?”

“It wasn’t a thing. It was...” I trailed off because, what exactly was it that I had had with Harry? It certainly seemed to have left much more of an

impression on my mind than it had on his. If he did remember me and had decided to ignore the fact we had history I shouldn't really let it surprise me. *He* was the one who had let *me* down after all. I'd had a lot of shit going on when I was at school, and for a while Harry had been my safe space. That meant a lot to me, but it was clear that it meant less than nothing to him. I looked down at my hands and saw that they were still shaking, and I tried again to concentrate on my breathing.

No, no, no. Verity Markham was not a shaky, unsure, delicate flower. Our designs were the best. We didn't deserve to be dismissed like that, and I certainly didn't deserve to have someone talk over me – *twice*. Either this *was* related to teenage bullshit and Harry was a serious grudge-holder (although why on earth he would be the one to have a grudge against me I had no idea – if anything it should be the other way around), or he was just your average billionaire dickhead not prepared to spend a few more minutes hearing out the ideas of the most environmentally friendly, innovative architecture firm in the country. Whichever it was, I decided in that moment that I wasn't going to put up with it. I stood up suddenly from the stupid shiny monogrammed black table and stalked to the door of the conference room.

“V, where are you going now?” Max asked.

“Wait here,” I snapped at all of them. “I'm going to show this idiot my own Big Dick Energy and sort out some teenage bullshit. It'll be in the bag by lunchtime.”

## Chapter 2

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## *You're the big man now?*

### **HARRY**

Christ. Why had I thought this was a good idea? Seeing Verity again was nothing like I imagined. Over the years I'd pictured so many different scenarios, and in all of them I'd ended up brushing her off, dismissing her. She'd see me, no longer a nerd, no longer so gangly that I didn't have full control over all four limbs, but as the man I was now. A dedicated, punishing gym routine had put bulk onto my previously skinny frame. I'd ditched the glasses for contacts years ago, and my hair was styled – crazy curls well and truly a thing of the past. I was successful now. Richer than all those snobby kids I went to school with. Richer than most people. No longer the charity case, the teacher's kid. It was supposed to have been really satisfying to confront her with the person I had become, rather than the pathetic boy she knew in school.

But instead of feeling smug and satisfied and all the goddamn feelings I'd waited years to bask in, I just felt... empty. Being in the same room as Verity had made me feel more alive than I think I'd felt for more than two decades. She hadn't changed as much as I thought she would after twenty years. Her cheekbones were more defined, her figure fuller than that of the slight teenager she was at school. But she still had that same energy about her, still outshone everyone else in the room. Even at sixteen Verity had been perfectly put together: gleaming brunette hair thick and straight down her back, subtle make-up, immaculately turned out. She'd made her school uniform look like it should be on the catwalk back then, and considering how hideous the uniform was that was quite a feat.

Despite being a year above her at school, I'd been in awe of her. She was



so charismatic, so beautiful, that it seemed like the whole student body revolved around her. Together with her twin brother Heath, Verity ruled that school and everyone in it. As a shy, introverted nerd of a teenager, she had quite frankly terrified me.

Boarding school is easy for some kids – Verity and her brother sailed into that place like they owned it and never looked anything but totally thrilled to be there. For me, school was *not* easy. I mostly enjoyed hiding. And my favourite place to do that was in the very back corner of the library, behind the science section (hidden from anyone who actually had a life) where there was an old, tattered leather sofa next to a massive radiator. Downingham was one of those posh, ancient schools, stuffed full of buildings dating back hundreds of years, and the library must have been the oldest of these by far. It smelt of musty books and polished wood. I loved it, but the heating wasn't great. It was also huge. Nobody really ever made it back to my favourite hiding place where the oldest books were kept, mostly forgotten and unindexed. And from the age of thirteen to fifteen I spent a lot of my time there, completely alone. Then, about halfway through the winter term of my third year at the school, I was ensconced in my corner when light, unfamiliar footsteps caused me to look up from my copy of *A Game of Thrones* and into a pair of bright blue eyes.

*“Well, this is frightfully cosy,” she said, plopping herself down on the other side of my sofa. I'd seen Verity around school for the past year. She was only fourteen but already so beautiful it almost hurt to look at her.*

*“What are you doing here?” I blurted out, my shock and general social incompetence making it sound like more of an accusation than a question.*

*“Same as you I expect,” she said, completely unfazed by my tone. She swivelled and put her feet up on the radiator. It meant she was part lying on the sofa and her glorious hair had nearly made it into my lap. I shrank closer to my side and attempted to keep my poor teenage brain from short-circuiting. “Ah, that's better,” she sighed as she wriggled further into the depths of the sofa. “This fucking school is always so cold.” I wasn't sure how she could possibly be cold – she was wearing her blazer, school overcoat, a scarf, even mittens. She shuddered. “I hate the cold. Good spot you've found here.”*

*I stiffened. This had been my sanctuary for the last two years – a place where I could read what I liked without people taking the piss. I wasn't letting anyone invade it, however beautiful they were.*

*“This is my sofa.” Yes, I was a smooth son of a bitch back then. It still didn’t seem to faze Verity though. She sat up and turned to face me, her mass of dark hair falling about her shoulders.*

*“Well, aren’t you a prickly little hedgehog” she said, her head tilted to the side and a small smile on her face. Calling me a little hedgehog was a bit rich seeing as I was already six-foot-one and she couldn’t have been much over five foot. I huffed and turned away from her, inching closer to my side of the sofa. “You don’t own this sofa, hedgehog, so suck it up – I’m staying.”*

The door to my office suddenly flew open, dragging me back to the present, and there she was looking murderous and beautiful. My secretary, Brian was on her tail trying to stop her, explaining that I wasn’t to be disturbed, but he didn’t know what an unstoppable force Verity could be.

“I’m sorry Mr York,” huffed out Brian. “I did tell Ms Markham that you weren’t to be disturbed but—”

“It’s fine, Brian,” I said casually. I’d perfected casual, urbane grace over the last decade. It was a hard-won skill, but it served me well in business. I’d have been happy to spend the rest of my life tucked away with my figures and spreadsheets, but once York Evans Finance had started managing serious money for large multinational companies, I’d had to start wearing suits and being an adult. If it hadn’t been for Toby, I would have never managed it. No company with any weight behind it would let a scruffy, monosyllabic nobody manage their money.

“Yes, thank you so much Brian, but I can take it from here,” Verity turned the full wattage of her smile at the unsuspecting Brian and his eyes went wide before he returned it with a small one of his own, seeming to totally forget that Verity had just barged through him to get to me.

“So,” Verity started as she stepped into my office as Brian backed away, closing the door behind him. “What fresh brand of bullshit are you trying to sell me now, hedgehog? Where are the *very important people* gathered here for the non-existent meeting you pretended to have scheduled? And on what planet do you not remember who I am?” Her hands were on her hips now, one stiletto-clad foot tapping in an impatient rhythm and her eyes were flashing. Christ, she was magnificent. My heart was beating so hard it felt like it was in my throat, but I managed to force myself to smile the way Toby had taught me – cool, unconcerned, with just a touch of arrogant smirk to it.

“I must apologise,” I said, my voice steady, tone indifferent, whilst inside I was vibrating with anxious energy at being this close to her. “Have we,

er...” I trailed off and then raised an eyebrow. “Most ungentlemanly of me but I don’t always remember all the women I’ve... well...” I let my silence speak for itself and felt a perverse rush of satisfaction as her face flooded with colour, real fury now leaking into her expression.

“You unbelievable bastard,” she hissed. “I can’t *believe* you don’t remember me. And no, I am not one of your forgettable fucks. Last time I saw you *I* was seventeen, and *you* weren’t a colossal dickhead.”

“Ah, Verity,” I said, tapping my chin as if I were searching my memory banks – as if I hadn’t been having intermittent dreams about seventeen-year-old Verity for over two decades. “So sorry. My school years are a little hazy. A lot’s changed since then.”

“Clearly,” Verity snapped, her tone suggesting that the changes – at least with regards to me – were not for the better. Well, as far as I was concerned the Harry of twenty years ago was a skinny, fantasy-fiction-obsessed loser who could bloody well stay in the past where he belonged. Today’s Harry didn’t get rejected by girls like Verity. Today’s Harry had supermodels and actresses clamouring to go out with him. There was no way *today’s* Harry was being humiliated, ever again. And okay, maybe today’s Harry still read fantasy fiction, but nobody needed to know that.

I managed a light laugh and that cool smile again. “Is that why you’ve clawed your way in here and slammed the door in my secretary’s face? Old times sake? Want to sing the school song and all that? Sorry to disappoint you but I’m afraid I hated every minute of that place, so I’m not really ever going to be in the mood to reminisce.”

The colour in her face faded at that comment, leaving her almost unnaturally pale. “You hated *every* minute?” There was actual hurt running through her tone which surprised me. Truth be told I hadn’t hated the time I’d spent with Verity. Not by a long shot. It had been the highlight of my senior school years – the only highlight. But I’d be damned if I was going to give her the satisfaction of knowing that. So I managed a casual shrug.

“School and I did not mix well. To be honest, I try not to think about it at all.”

“Huh.” Verity sounded deflated now – the heat had left her words and I found that I wanted it back. “Well, I loved school. It was a *lifesaver* for me and Heath.”

The fact that she had loved school came as no surprise to me. Who wouldn’t love being worshipped and adored by hundreds of other teenagers at

that age? But why would she use the term lifesaver? What an odd choice of words. I frowned.

“What do you mean—?”

“Listen, let’s forget our history then,” Verity cut me off, walking forwards to take the chair opposite me across the desk. “Whatever. Who cares?” That flash of hurt swept her expression again, and I had the most insane impulse to jump out of my chair and shout *I care!* at her at the top of my lungs. “Just as long as you’re not using it against my company to put us out of the running for this job.”

“I think we can be assured, seeing as I only have a hazy recollection of our school days at best, that it has no bearing on my selection of architecture firm for the project. I’m just not sure that your designs really gel with the vision that we want to—”

I was cut off by her hand slamming down on the wood of my desk. She was leaning forward now with that rage back in her expression. Perversely I *liked* the rage, better than her deflated stance from a minute ago.

“That’s bullshit! Our designs blow all those other amateurs out of the water, and you know it. You’re just being an asshole because of something that happened *twenty years ago* – when really it’s *me* that should be pissed off with *you!*”

Just as her voice rose to a near shout, the door to my office was pushed open and Toby chose that moment to stroll in. Christ, the last thing I needed was for him to be involved. I was struggling to keep my expression neutral after Verity’s last rant. Why on earth would she think that she had the right to be angry about our past? She wasn’t the one who was left completely humiliated back then.

Toby, always comfortable in any situation, moved into the room with his hands in his pockets. He looked between me and Verity, who was still leaning over with her hand flat on my desk from where it had slammed down, and he smiled.

“You must be Verity Markham,” he said, completely ignoring the tension in the air and Verity’s furious stance. At the mention of her name, Verity straightened and her eyebrows shot up. “Toby Evans, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Great to meet you, Mr Evans,” said Verity, as she shook his hand and gave him an insincere smile. “I’m so sorry, you have me at a disadvantage. How is it you know who I am?” She gave me a strong side-eye and I felt

colour creep up my face. It was years since I'd last blushed, damn it! I was fervently wishing I hadn't told Toby anything about Verity, but the bastard had a knack for extracting information, and he was my best friend. Shooting him a death glare before he could open his mouth, I cut in.

"Toby's just a lot better than me with names. It must have been from his research into the bids. *Isn't that right, Toby?*"

Toby looked between us again, still smiling and gave a non-committal shrug. "Something like that," he said vaguely, and my hand balled into a fist.

"Well, Mr Evans, I hope you're a bit more reasonable than Mr York," Verity said, flashing me another furious look before looking back at Toby and smiling. "*He* doesn't see potential in our bid."

"Call me Toby, please." God, the bastard was enjoying this. He shot me a quick look, and I pressed my lips together. No way was I offering Verity to go back to calling me Harry – the less familiarity the better as far as I was concerned. I couldn't believe she'd already called me 'hedgehog'. "And I'm quite sure Hazza didn't mean anything by it. I say, why don't we all go out and discuss it further? Tonight, at The Ivy?"

Verity gave Toby an assessing look. "No offence, Toby, but are you blowing smoke up my arse? Because your partner here seems to think we're a no-go."

"I assure you I wouldn't dream of blowing smoke anywhere near your arse, Ms Markham."

"Verity, please."

"Verity," he said giving her another winning smile and I had another insane urge to punch him in the face. "I really do think that with some more rational discussion, we'd be able to give your bid some real consideration."

"Toby, I hardly think that's necessary," I put in. "We don't want to waste Ms Markham's time after all."

Verity narrowed her eyes at me and opened her mouth to speak, but Toby got in before her. "That's fine, Hazza. If you're too busy, *I'll* take care of it."

I frowned. "What do you—"

"Eight o'clock work for you, Verity?" Toby managed to put a subtle emphasis on her name, making the blood rush to my ears.

"You're not taking her *anywhere!*" The words shot out before I could claw them back. Toby's grin grew even wider, and Verity looked at me like I was crazy.

"Right, well then," Toby said, not missing a beat. "That's fine, we'll *all*

go out. I presume your team will come along too, Verity? We can make a night of it. Just let Brian know the numbers on your way out.”

“I still don’t think that we need—”

“Fine by me,” Verity cut me off and shot me a filthy look. “Maybe you’ll give us more than half a second to explain our design.”

“That’s settled then,” Toby said, ignoring my choked protests in the background.

“Yes, it is, isn’t it?” Verity’s voice was smug now. She gave me a fake, fuck-you smile before turning to give Toby another genuine one. “Toby, it’s been a pleasure. Mr York, it’s been real. I’ll see you gentleman later. I can see myself out.” She then spun on her heel and stalked out the way she came, Toby only just making it in time to open the door for her.

“Well,” he said after it had closed behind her and we were back in the silence of my office. “*That* was interesting.”

“Fuck off, Toby,” I muttered, leaning forwards to rub my forehead as I let out a long breath I hadn’t realised I’d been holding.

“Turning her down make you feel good?” he asked, ignoring me as usual to plonk himself down in the chair opposite mine across my desk. “You’re the big man now?”

I shrugged. “It’s got nothing to do with me wanting to be the big man.”

“Hmm...”

# Chapter 3

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## *Ancient history*

### **HARRY**

“You are such a prick,” Toby muttered as we walked into The Ivy.

“I don’t know what you mean,” I replied nonchalantly.

“What was that?” Naomi asked, curving her arm through mine and leaning into my side. I felt a twinge of unease – maybe this hadn’t been the best idea. But the thought of going on my own tonight with no armour or ammunition was too humiliating. And going out like this was nothing new for me and Noo. It really helped her to be seen with me. Toby thought it was just for publicity, but there was a more pressing reason to do with her safety that meant she needed to appear attached. I forced a smile at her, but, given her startled expression, it was probably more a baring of my teeth.

“Nothing, just Toby being Toby,” I said, and Noo rolled her eyes in irritation.

Toby and Noo simply did not get on. Not anymore. There was simply too much history there.

“So, is this a business dinner?” she asked. “What’s the skinny?”

Toby snorted and I accidentally on purpose kicked the back of his heel.

“Business, sorry,” I said, “But it shouldn’t take long.”

She shrugged. “I don’t care. Makes no odds to me. Just so long as we’re papped, I don’t mind what we do.”

“I bet,” Toby muttered.

As if on cue there were a couple of flashes right in front of our faces. It was disconcerting, but part of the deal when taking Noo out. Before we made it into the restaurant there were a few more flashes and some shouts for Noo’s attention. She gave them what they wanted – paused for a moment and



smiled on my arm before we walked through the door, and I felt her relax against me.

But then I saw *her* and all thoughts of photographers, Noo's relief, Toby's annoyance flew out of my brain. She was just that gorgeous. She and Max were standing at the bar, he was pulling at his collar and looking just as uncomfortable in formal attire as he had earlier. Verity, however, looked completely at home in impossibly high heels and a deep navy knee-length dress, perfectly tailored to her subtle curves. Her hair was swept up at one side, her only jewellery the diamond-encrusted clip that held it there. The contained elegance of her outfit was in sharp contrast to Naomi's gold minidress, and despite Verity's lace dress hiding way more than it showed, my heart still felt lodged in my throat.

"Hi there, Toby," Verity said, her perfectly painted red lips parting into a smile as she looked at him. "Mr York." Her smile dropped when she transferred her blue gaze to me, and I felt an acute sense of loss. I remembered what it was like to have that smile directed at me – it had been like a drug for teenage Harry. I would have done anything for it. I swallowed as Max and Toby exchanged greetings and then cleared my throat.

"Ms Markham, Mr Hardcastle," I forced out, my voice slightly hoarse. There was a short silence and Noo gave my arm a light squeeze. Somehow, I'd totally forgotten she was there. "This is Naomi Light. Naomi, Max Hardcastle and Verity Markham."

If the sight of a pop star on my arm rattled Verity she was an incredibly good actress. Her smile stayed in place as she greeted Noo, adeptly speaking for both herself and Max, who was still looking sulky and pulling at his collar. Verity complimented Noo on her latest album, easily pulling her into a conversation about the music industry and Noo's upcoming tour. Her ease with people, any people, was something that had already been obvious even at fourteen – it was nuclear-powered now. The only crack I saw in her persona was when we all moved to the tables, and I dropped my hand to the small of Noo's back to guide her there. Verity's gaze fell briefly to my hand, and I could see a flash of something cross her expression before she reset it back to polite interest.

Once we were all sitting down, Verity, Toby and Noo kept the conversation going, whilst Max and I sat largely in broody silence. I guessed the big guy was about as socially incompetent as me. I'd become better at this stuff over the last few years, but all my carefully learned techniques seemed

to fly out the window when I was around Verity, which was intensely frustrating, as, if I was honest, this whole exercise was really about me proving to Verity how very far I'd come from the awkward boy she'd known and toyed with at school.

“So, Toby,” Verity said into a lull in the conversation after our orders had been taken and the drinks had arrived. “Have you had a chance to look over our designs? What are your thoughts?”

Toby opened his mouth to speak but I got in there first.

“Toby's not leading on the build or the negotiations with the LSE,” I snapped, frustration and bitterness making my tone sharp. “It's not up to him.” I sounded like a spoilt child now.

“Okay then, Mr York,” Verity held her pleasant tone and kept that smile on her face as she turned to me, but there was an edge of frustration to her voice and her smile didn't reach her eyes. “Have *you* had time to reconsider? Or indeed, actually bother to look at our designs properly?”

“Ooh,” Noo put in. “What is it you're designing for Harry?”

They'd already chatted about Max and Verity's firm, so Noo knew that they were architects. Verity turned to her and proceeded to explain the project and their vision in the kind of detail I hadn't allowed in the conference room earlier. The way she lit up as she described the campus building, using her hands to express herself and conjure a vision of the proposed design was captivating. The food that had arrived during her explanation remained largely untouched.

“Gosh, that sounds smashing,” Noo gushed, receiving the full force of Verity's smile.

“We think so, don't we Max?”

“It's a good'un,” Max put in – this three-word contribution seeming to be all that was required of him. Given that Max was one of the most talented eco-architects in the country, having him christen the project “a good'un” was a very high endorsement. Toby kicked me under the table.

“Hazza hasn't ruled anyone out yet, have you mate?” he said.

“How could you not go with their design, Harry?” Noo's eyebrows were raised in real surprise, such was the impact of Verity's little speech. I felt put on the spot. Everything was messed up. This wasn't what I was aiming for at all. When I'd contacted the LSE and offered the funding package, it was because I wanted to be the one to toy with Verity for a change. I hadn't considered that her company might actually have the best design, or that I

would look like a total prick if we didn't use them.

"They're not the only architecture firm in the country, Noo," I said. "And they're certainly not the biggest. It might be too much for a firm their size. No offence," I put in, nodding to Max and giving him an insincere smile.

"The panel we presented to three months ago were not of that opinion. If they hadn't been serious about us taking on the project, why did they let us bid for it?" Verity said through gritted teeth, her barely restrained anger coming through loud and clear. It gave me another perverse rush to have provoked some sort of reaction from her, so much so that I couldn't seem to stop the smug smile spreading across my face as I looked at her and gave a casual shrug.

"I came on after the panel had been formed and made its initial assessments. Things are different now. Anyway, it was your decision to carry on with the bid and draw up the designs. You can't tell me this will be the first time you haven't been successful? I'd imagine that it's the nature of the business."

"I assure you that we do win the majority of the bids we go in for, and we certainly don't waste time bidding on projects for which we aren't even going to be considered. Do you have any idea the amount of man hours that went into that design?"

"Doesn't feel that great when people waste your time, does it?" The words were out before I could stop them.

She narrowed her eyes at me. "No, it certainly doesn't. Are you implying that *I've* wasted *yours*?"

I broke eye contact with her and shrugged again – not casually this time but more like the grumpy heartbroken teenager I was twenty years ago. The rest of the table was looking between us with confused expressions at the underlying tension. I felt their pain. I wasn't quite sure what I was trying to achieve anymore.

"When exactly have I wasted your time, Mr York?" Verity's voice was sharp now. She put emphasis on Mr York, as if to make clear how ridiculous she felt it was to address me formally after all we had once shared. Suddenly the restaurant was feeling too hot, I pulled at my collar and cleared my throat.

"Right, well, we'd better get going," I said, pushing my chair back and standing abruptly. "Noo?" I held out my hand to her. She looked up in dismay from her still half-full plate to me, then back again. I ground my teeth as she shovelled the remaining steak into her mouth. Verity had stood up as

well and now had her hands on her hips.

“I want to know what exactly you’re implying?” she said. Noo used the opportunity to try to finish the rest of her chips. Everyone was still watching Verity and me like it was some sort of sport. Max was leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed, and Toby was sporting a small grin. I took a hold of Noo’s elbow and guided her to standing. She managed to spear a few more chips into her mouth as she straightened up. Why couldn’t she be one of those celebrities who only pick at their food for God’s sake? My own dinner had remained largely untouched.

“I’m not implying anything. Now, I’m sorry but we really must leave.” I was drawing Noo back from the table. She abandoned her attempts with her fork and instead grabbed a handful of chips, waving them at everyone the table and saying her goodbyes around a mouthful of food as I drew her back with me. Verity’s gaze was fixed on my hand on Noo’s arm. The fury in her expression gave me another perverse rush of satisfaction. As Noo shoved the rest of the chips into her mouth I put my arm around her waist, nodding a terse goodbye to everyone and watching Verity’s face flush with colour. I leaned into Noo and whispered in her ear. To anyone watching it probably looked like I was whispering sweet sexy nothings in preparation for taking her back to mine. In reality I was apologising and promising to buy her a kebab on the way home with extra garlic sauce – a fairly unsexy proposition, but one that I knew would get Noo moving a bit quicker.

“This isn’t over,” I heard Verity shout as I guided Noo to the exit. Once we had our coats, I hustled her out of the door and into my waiting car. I told Geoff to take us via a kebab shop, then collapsed back into the leather of the back seat, leaned my head against the head rest and closed my eyes. As I opened them, I flinched when I saw Noo watching me with a curious expression as she continued to eat her chips.

“Want to tell me what that was about?” she asked, her mouth still full of chips.

“Not really,” I muttered, breaking eye contact with her to look out of the window.

“You were a real prick to those people tonight,” she said.

I shrugged.

“I presume you’ve fucked that woman Verity?”

“What makes you say that?”

“Uh... other than the fact you could cut the tension between you with a

knife? There's no way you haven't either fucked her, or you really, really want to fuck her. And let's be honest – if you really wanted to fuck someone, you would have done.”

“It's complicated,” I said, looking out into the dark again. “I knew her a long time ago. It's ancient history.”

“Didn't seem like ancient history when she tried to burn a hole in my arm with her eyes when your hand was on it. *Or* when you acted like a massive tool the whole night. You can be a prickly pear, but I've never known you to be so openly rude. To be honest I wasn't sure you were capable of that level of expressed emotion.”

I rolled my eyes. “I express emotion, Noo.”

“Not often. You're a bit of a closed book. A sexy closed book, but a closed one. I think that's why we're such good mates – I express enough emotion for the both of us.”

I managed a low chuckle, but I knew it was unconvincing.

“You know it's good, right?”

“What's good?”

“*Feeling* stuff,” her tone had softened, and she was leaning forward into me, her now chip-free hand on my arm. “You can let yourself do it. Try trusting someone. Not everyone's—”

“Kebab shop on the left, Geoff,” I said after pushing the intercom button. Geoff moved out of the traffic.

Noo sighed. “Don't think you can distract me with food,” she said. “It won't work.”

I raised my eyebrows as we pulled over in front of the kebab shop and she smiled. “Okay maybe it'll work for a bit, but we *will* be discussing your emotional growth in the near future.”

I rolled my eyes as I opened the door. There was no way I was going to allow my *emotional growth* to be picked over. Especially not when I had a strong suspicion that I was stuck in the headspace of a crushed eighteen-year-old, instead of that of the confident, successful, thirty-nine-year-old man I should be now.

# Chapter 4

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## *You were always so bloody bossy*

### **VERITY**

The mistake I made was letting my anger fester. Max told me to let it go, that “we don’t want to work for that stupid sod anyway”, and I knew he was right. I told myself that it was the months of work being flushed down the toilet that had riled me up so much. That and the loss of an important job to our business. But deep down it was actually Harry’s refusal to acknowledge me and our history that had tipped me over the edge into real fury.

The crush I’d had on Harry at school had been extreme. It was the reason that I had refused to cede that safe corner of the library that he arguably did have dibs on all those years ago. Instead, I would head there whenever I had a free period or break, hoping Harry would be ensconced on that sofa and that I could plonk myself next to him.

To me he was fascinating. Most boys at that school fawned over me and would have happily flirted with me in a quiet corner of the library with very little encouragement. Harry would just frown and shift away from me to the edge of the sofa, as I sprawled out deliberately with my feet up on the radiator. I got very little conversation out of him in those first few weeks, and I used to rejoice in any tiny reaction. He’d stiffen in his seat if I lay down with my hair fanning out next to his leg. His jaw would clench if I put on my lip balm. He’d choked on his bottle of water once when I flipped fully upside-down on the sofa with my legs over the back, trying to encourage blood to my brain to help me with my maths. But it was only when I started pretending to sketch him that he broke the stalemate and actually spoke to me. It had taken half an hour of me sitting cross-legged on the sofa facing him, my sketchbook on my lap and my pencil flying over the paper, before he

finally said something.

*“What are you doing?” His voice was low with annoyance, and he was looking straight at me. Direct eye contact had been a rarity up till that point, and now I was noticing how very warm his brown eyes were. Even with his eyebrows lowered and his expression set in a default scowl, it didn’t take away from their beauty – not to me.*

*“Sketching.”*

*“Are you...” he trailed off and then cleared his throat before continuing. “Are you sketching me?”*

*“Yes.”*

*“For God’s sake, why?”*

*I shrugged. “Why not?”*

*“You can’t just go around drawing anyone you feel like. That’s... that’s... well, it’s totally illogical and, I bet, illegal.”*

*I smiled at him, and this seemed to ratchet up his annoyance a few notches. “Call the police if you like. It’ll be their top priority.”*

*He huffed. “I’m pretty sure you need my consent to sketch me, you know.”*

*“I’m pretty sure I don’t,” I sing-songed. I was really enjoying this now – Harry had never deigned to speak to me for this long in the past. Getting a reaction from him was the most fun I’d had in ages. “Ah yes, that’s it – that’s the frown I want to immortalise. Just hold it there for a – oomph!” Harry had lunged for my sketchpad, which I automatically lifted above my head. His body pressed mine into the back of the sofa as he reached across me, and his much longer arm plucked the book out of my outstretched hand. For a moment he froze. His face was inches from mine. I could see each of his thick eyelashes and his deep brown eyes up close. He sucked in a breath and his pupils dilated before that familiar frown was back and he scrambled away from me, my sketchbook in his hand.*

*“Shit... um,” he muttered. “I’m really sorry. I invaded your personal space and I well...”*

*“Hey, it’s cool. No problem,” I said, trying to control my breathing, and smoothing my hair over my shoulder as I cleared my throat. Harry’s face was totally horrified which I tried not to take too much offence at. He fiddled with the binding of my sketchbook before flipping it over. He glanced at the sketch and his eyebrows went up.*

*“You were messing with me.”*



*“No shit, Sherlock.”*

*“This is really good,” he muttered as he flipped from the first sketch which depicted the interior of the library, including its floor-to-ceiling oak shelving, the heavy desks littering the room – everything except the people, of course. I hated drawing people. Buildings and interiors were much more my bag. But pretending to draw Harry had been too easy. “Woah, you’ve drawn every school building in here!” he exclaimed, flipping through the pages. Like most public schools, ours was insanely old, with expansive grounds and ancient buildings boasting ornate architecture. “What’s this one?” he asked, squinting at the last sketch in the book. I bit my lip and shifted on the sofa in a rare sign of discomfort.*

*“Oh, it’s nothing. It–”*

*“It’s modern but really beautiful. Where is this? Not around here.”*

*I shrugged and felt my face flushing with pride. He’d called my building beautiful.*

*“It’s nowhere. I mean... it’s made up. I made it up.”*

*He gave a low whistle as he held it out to get a better look. “You’re really talented.” The surprise in his voice was kind of insulting but I decided to take the compliment anyway. “You don’t draw any humans, do you?”*

*“Humans suck,” I said casually but he looked up, straight into my eyes again. Twice in one day was kind of a record for Harry.*

*“You’re right, they do suck,” he said. “I just wouldn’t have thought you would... I mean, people love you.”*

*“Not all people love me,” I said, allowing a little bitterness into my tone. He cocked his head to the side and his brow furrowed. The last thing I wanted was new, chatty Harry digging into any of that shizzle, so I deflected. “Anyway, adoration gets boring. You know?”*

*Harry snorted, actually snorted, then gave me a lopsided grin. “I can’t say I do. That’s never been a problem for me, to be honest.”*

*“You surprise me,” I said, grinning back at me. “You seem like such a people person.”*

*He rolled his eyes.*

*“Listen, if you agree that humans suck why do you put up with me torturing you here on the reg?” I asked. “Why not find another human-free hiding spot.”*

*“I don’t find you as annoying as regular humans.”*

*As compliments went it wasn’t the most effusive, but at the time it felt like*

*a huge win.*

I gritted my teeth and forced myself to clear the image of teenage Harry and his weirdly crap but satisfying approval. Why I needed to be seeking that same approval in my late thirties was completely beyond me. It did strike me as ironic that Harry had been the first to encourage my architecture dream, and a couple of decades later was doing his best to crush it. Well, fuck him, his condescending attitude, and convenient memory loss. He was not getting away with bugging me about. Not when it interfered with the fate of the company I'd built with Max. It wasn't just my pride and business at stake here – the success of this bid affected all the employees we had working for us.

Since that disastrous dinner, Harry had done his best to make our lives difficult. We met with the panel again, this time with Harry present. He nit-picked pretty much every element of the design to the point that I wanted to scream. I was so angry that Max actually had to take control of the meeting, which was very much a last resort as far as anyone was concerned. Why Harry had to stick his nose into the bidding process so relentlessly was anyone's guess. He seemed to be a very busy guy. When he wasn't accumulating more wealth, he was busy escorting his famous girlfriend around town. And the most irritating thing about this whole situation was that even his unrelenting arseholedom did not seem to blunt the sharp edge of my jealousy. The whole situation was making me incandescent with rage.

So, when I knocked on the massive imposing door to Harry's stupid Chelsea town house, it might have been a little more aggressively than was strictly necessary. I stood back on the step waiting for him to answer with my arms crossed over my chest, totally ready for the confrontation I had planned – I knew what I was going to say and how I was going to say it. But when the door was pulled open and Harry filled my field of vision, my mouth dropped open and every vicious word I'd planned to throw at him flew out of my brain. For a moment I just stood there stupidly, searching for words.

“What are you wearing?” I finally blurted out in a breathless whisper. Yes, those were the words that came out of my mouth, instead of the well-rehearsed smackdown I had been chanting in my head for the last hour. My gaze was fixed on his broad chest, or – to be more exact – on the very defined musculature of his broad chest. I could tell *just* how defined it was because he was wearing a compression shirt which looked like it had been painted onto his body. Teenage Harry did not have muscles like this. Teenage Harry was

skinny, gangly and had hands and feet much too big for his body – like a massive puppy that hadn't grown into its paws quite yet. Teenage Harry was too busy hiding in the library to work out. *This* Harry didn't look like he missed a workout... ever. Yes, I'd noticed the other day that this Harry filled out a suit well, but I had not been able to see the extent of his six-pack or the guns he was sporting.

But even though his body may have changed, the frown that he levelled at me was all too familiar.

“Er... I was about to go to the gym and I–” His hand went to squeeze the back of his neck, doing fabulous things for his arm-chest-abdominal muscles in the process I might add. I recognised the gesture. This was Harry flustered. I'd officially flustered him – caught him off guard. Good. “What are you doing here interrogating me on my outfit on a Saturday morning? How did you even get this address?”

“Calm down, Princess Diana. I'm not stalking you. Your partner gave me your address. He encouraged me to come here. Said it was good for you to be surprised and out of your comfort zone.”

“Fucking Toby,” he muttered. “Interfering prick.”

“I think Toby wants the best design for the project and he's trying to help you to see reason.”

“He's trying to do *something*, that's for sure,” he said under his breath.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean that Toby doesn't give a shit about the architecture of that building. What he gives a shit about is winding me up, which he knows that by sending you round here he'll be doing in spades.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “What does Toby know about–?”

Harry huffed and took a step out onto the front porch, forcing me to take a step down and putting me at even more of a height disadvantage.

“There's nothing to know. What happened at school is ancient history. Toby's just seen us arguing and knows sending you here will effectively ruin my weekend.”

I uncrossed my arms and pointed at him accusingly. “So, you *do* admit to remembering me. I knew it!”

His jaw clenched and the muscles of his arm bunched more as he tightened the grip on the back of his neck.

“I may have dredged my memory banks over the last week and come up with some vague recollections.”

“You’re full of shit, hedgehog. You remember me just fine.” I was entirely over his bullshit and I wasn’t going to stand outside his house like a creep any longer. “And you’re going to make me a cup of tea, admit you’re a grudge-holding little bitch, and let me convince you to use my company for your project.”

“Wow,” he said deadpan. “That all sounds like such a super fun way to spend my Saturday, but I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

I narrowed my eyes at his stupid, overlarge chest and felt the anger simmer up. It wasn’t often I allowed myself to feel this much emotion. I was the level-headed one out of me and Max – the one who dealt with the difficult clients, who negotiated the tricky deals, who smoothed things over. It had been the same with Heath when we were children. There were plenty of reasons to lose our tempers back then, but I worked out early on that it never achieved anything. Heath would rage against what we were put through, whereas I preferred to work under the radar to sort what I could in the circumstances. Tamping down anger and expressed emotion had always been the best way for me – but all that control seemed to fly out of the window when it came to Harry.

Just then a huge, ugly, ginger cat with an almost comically squashed face emerged from the doorway. It rubbed itself on Harry’s legs before looking up at me and blinking. Instinctively I leaned down to stroke the cat then gently picked it up to cradle it against my chest. This was no mean feat – the thing was bloody massive and had clearly been overfed. I looked Harry squarely in the face.

“Either you let me in, or I’m taking your cat.” My arms were straining now under the weight of the huge ball of orange fur, but I was determined to style it out. It didn’t help that the cat had gone completely limp, acting like a dead weight as it relaxed into my hold as if my arms and chest were a comfortable place for a nap.

“You’re not going to take my cat, Verity.” His words sounded confident, and I knew he was going for unaffected, but I noticed that flash of concern across his face. He loved this ugly orange nightmare.

“Try me.”

After hesitating for another few seconds Harry finally sighed and moved out of the doorway, allowing me to stroll through it. As soon as I could I put the cat down. It gave me an annoyed look as if I’d disturbed a good sleep, twitched its tail and strolled off down the corridor.

“Great, now you’ve pissed her off. I’ll be paying for that for days,” he muttered darkly as he closed his front door and then led the way through to his kitchen.

“How exactly can your cat punish you?”

“You don’t want to know.”

As we moved into the kitchen space I paused: clean white surfaces everywhere, no clutter, shiny floors. Order and cleanliness were really important to me and Heath, but while Heath had leaned towards modern clean lines, I tended to like cosy comfort. This space did not say cosy or inviting in any way. Again, it was something that didn’t seem to gel with the Harry I knew from school.

“Right, what do you want?” He’d put the kitchen island between us and was standing in another defensive pose again. I deliberately took my time pulling out one of his kitchen stools (again white – blurgh!) and sat down.

“We’ve had a disagreement, hedgehog,” I said, scanning the kitchen for a kettle. “But we *are* British, and we’re not animals. Can you at least offer me a cup of tea?”

Harry huffed and turned to pull up a rolling cupboard door which was hiding the kettle as if its presence on his perfect kitchen surfaces would offend his eyeballs. The orange cat jumped up onto the kitchen island (how this was possible considering its massive bulk was unclear), padded its way to the sink and sat its fat arse down. Harry sighed, turned the tap on and waited whilst the orange monster took its time lapping at the running water. Only when it had sauntered off again did Harry fill the kettle.

“Your cat is strangely bossy, and you’re weirdly deferential.”

He shrugged. “Believe me you don’t want to piss Barbara off, and she doesn’t drink standing water.”

I pressed my lips together to avoid smiling. I would not smile at this arsehole, no matter how adorable it was that his cat was terrorising him in his own home. Or the fact she was named Barbara.

He made my tea and plonked it down in front of me. I took a sip and then looked at him – my eyebrows shooting up.

“So, you remember how I take my tea, but you don’t remember *me*. Am I right?”

His hand went back up to his neck again and he shifted on his feet.

“Thank you for the tea, Harry,” he muttered under his breath. “Sorry for invading your Saturday and pissing off your cat, Harry.”

Urgh! He used to do this all the time at school. He'd mutter what he *thought* I should have said under his breath. It had infuriated me then no less than it did now.

"I wouldn't have had to invade your precious home if you hadn't been a world-class arsehole in the first place."

"Verity, I turned down your company for an architecture project we're sponsoring. This does not make me an arsehole. This makes me a businessman who wants to see the best possible—"

"We *are* the best possible and you know it!"

"Wow, I can see you've *really* worked on that inflated opinion of yourself over the years."

"What do you mean by that?" Inflated opinion of myself? What was Harry talking about? I never acted like that with him at school. I'd even told him all my insecurities – more than I'd actually shared with my own brother. He knew that wasn't me.

"It means that you thought your shit didn't stink at school – that you deserved all the adoration and attention, and you haven't changed. One. Single. Bit."

I flinched slightly as if he'd slapped me and, for a moment, I was completely incapable of speech. I thought he *liked* me at school. I thought we had something special. Did he simply tolerate me back then? Had I misread him so utterly?

"You know that's not me, Harry," my voice came out a little hoarse and I cleared my throat before continuing. "You – you know more than anyone."

A flash of regret passed through his expression before it set back to his standard grumpy.

"I didn't *know* you at all at school. And anyway, the last thing I want to do is talk about the past. I've come a long way since my school days – I'm not the same person I was back then. Thank God."

"Well, that's for sure. I actually liked the person you were in school."

"Could have fooled me," Harry muttered as he looked away.

My eyebrows climbed my forehead. "What are you on about? You knew I had a massive crush on you, Harry. I made myself embarrassingly obvious."

His eyes shot to mine, wariness taking over his expression. "You can't seriously think I would believe that now. I'm not a stupid kid anymore."

I frowned. "Harry, I *told* you I liked you. I kissed you – I virtually *jumped* you that last week of term before you left school. Consent-wise it was a bit

murky to be honest, but seeing as I was half your size I think I get a free pass.”

“Verity, we both know what that was about. I don’t want to go over it again. And there’s no reason to lie now to get what you want.”

“What do you mean ‘we both know’? I don’t under—?”

“Listen, just tell me why you’re here then get out.”

I flinched again and then rubbed the middle of my chest distractedly. Harry’s dismissive, combative attitude towards me now was making my chest feel tight, almost as though I could feel a panic attack building. I paused for a moment and discreetly tapped the breathing app on my watch. The vibrations started on my wrist and I managed to time my breathing to them, blocking Harry out as I did it. When I looked back up at Harry his expression was now clouded with concern. It made him look so much like teenage Harry that I almost felt the urge to cry.

“Verity?” he asked, his tone now much softer than before. “Are you... I mean, are you okay?” He’d come around the kitchen island now to stand a few feet in front of me. I surreptitiously pulled the sleeve of my jumper down to hide my watch.

“I’m fine,” I snapped, straightening my spine and squaring my shoulders. “Just pausing to take in the full level of your arseholedom nowadays.”

His frown stayed in place, and he took a couple of steps towards me. The fact that my voice had shaken on those last words may have made them a little less than convincing. It pissed me off that he was even taller than he had been at school, and I had to tip my head right back to maintain eye contact even with the height advantage of the stool.

“Verity, I—”

“Are you going to reconsider our designs or not?”

He huffed out a breath and pushed his hand through his hair, making the thick dark strands a little messier so he looked more like the Harry I knew.

“This overconfidence was boring twenty years ago, and it’s still boring now. The best design is going to be the one that—”

I jumped off the stool. He took a surprised step back but that didn’t stop me from advancing on him. “You’ll be a bloody idiot if you go with another company, and you know it.” I was right in his personal space now, and he was starting to look a little panicked. “You know I’m right. You know the project will suffer without us.” I poked him in the chest once, staring up into his beautiful dark eyes and he caught my finger in his large, warm, dry hand.

His pupils dilated as he looked down at me and his expression went blank for a moment.

“You were always so bloody bossy,” he said before he closed the space between us and pressed his mouth against mine.



# Chapter 5

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## *You were kind up until you weren't*

### **HARRY**

She sucked in a shocked breath, so her lips were slightly parted when my mouth met hers. If I'd been in my right mind I would never have kissed her, but having Verity in my kitchen on a Saturday morning, her beautiful dark hair falling about her shoulders and those gorgeous blue eyes flashing with fury as she stalked towards me was the recipe for my current insanity. Her light floral scent, that familiar freckle next to the corner of her mouth, everything just combined to bring my desire for her to boiling point. Plus the fact that she was claiming that she really had had a massive crush on me. My rational brain knew that this was a complete fiction, but rationality seemed to have gone out the window.

And now that I was kissing her the acute relief of finally being able to touch her was almost staggering. It was as though holding myself back from her during our last few interactions had been an unacknowledged strain which had now lifted. Alarm bells were ringing in the back of my mind, but they didn't stop me from deepening the kiss, nor my arm from banding around her waist and pulling her into me, my hand delving into the unbelievable softness of her hair. Then the shrill sound of a phone ringing penetrated my Verity-scrambled brain, and I pulled back. She blinked up at me for a moment before glancing at the source of the obnoxious noise. Her phone was still sitting on the granite counter. The familiar face of her too-good-looking brother was lighting up the screen. Of course he was on a bloody boat in the photo – the picture of aristocratic glamour. Seeing her brother was like a cold bucket of water being thrown over me. This bloody family. If they couldn't buy or bribe their way out of trouble, they'd do pretty

much anything else to manipulate their way out of it, and I was not falling for it. Not again.

Verity leaned over to silence the call and then stared up at me. She looked dazed and vulnerable. If I didn't know better, I would have thought the kiss had affected her just as much as me. But the Markhams were not to be trusted. I wasn't getting sucked down that rabbit hole again.

"Wow, you're good. I'll give you that," I said, and I was proud of the casual tone I'd affected when my heart felt like it was beating outside of my chest.

"W-what?" Verity whispered, reaching out to the counter as if to steady herself. She really was putting all her acting effort in here. It took all my willpower not to reach out and steady her.

"You know – coming here on a Saturday morning, forcing your way in, snogging me. Tell me, Verity, how far would you have taken this? Would you have gone as far as a quick fuck to get what you want? To have your design be the one for this project?"

Verity just stared at me and her mouth dropped open. The colour that had flooded her face after that kiss receded, leaving her looking unnaturally pale. She took a sudden step back and her hip collided hard with one of the kitchen stools. Her small wince of pain had me holding myself back again. She's fine, I told myself. Don't fall for it. Barbara, who normally hates everyone, took the opportunity to rub up against Verity's shoulder. As if on automatic pilot, Verity's hand reached up to stroke Barbara's head, her eyes still trained on me. I crossed my arms over my chest and waited.

She cleared her throat and swallowed before she spoke. "You think I came here to sleep with you so that I could win a bid for my company?" she said. "That is your opinion of me?"

I rolled my eyes. "Please don't give me the indignant how-dare-you-question-my-honour routine. I don't like to play games, Verity."

"Games?" Her voice broke over the word and she cleared her throat again. "You think I'm playing games?"

I shrugged. "I'll admit to being curious. After all, I never got a proper snog out of you all those years ago. Just that bullshit closed-mouthed teenage crap you laid on me that last time in the library. May as well allow one now. Boring as it was."

"Boring?" her eyebrows shot up and her face regained some of its colour. The Barbara stroking was more vigorous now. "It didn't feel to me like you

were particularly bored, Harry.” Her gaze flicked down to my crotch then back up again and I felt my own face heat. It took all my effort to affect a casual tone after that to drawl out the next sentence.

“Not going to deny it was fun at the time. But not quite worth a multi-million-pound contract, darling.” Then I smirked. It was the sexy-I’m-a-bit-of-a-shit-but-hot smirk that Toby had taught me at uni. Total opposite of my real personality, but it had its uses. Verity’s gaze dropped to the smirk, and she frowned.

“What happened to you?” she whispered. It took all I had to maintain the smirk.

“I grew up, Verity. Maybe you should try it too.”

She let out a short, humourless laugh which made my chest actually hurt.

“I grew up *way* before we ever met, Harry,” she said, and it was my turn to frown in confusion, while Barbara took the opportunity to place her massive paws either side of Verity’s neck. Again Verity’s arms came up automatically to support Barbara’s bulk so that she was snuggled against her chest. Verity, now shaking with rage, barely seemed to notice. “I had to, or I wouldn’t have survived.” I had no idea what any of that meant. Verity had always led a charmed life as far as I was concerned. “So, Harry, you can shove your building and the bid for it right up your arse. Our design is no longer on the table.” I blinked. That was not what I had expected her to say. Not by a long shot. Even more shocking was the hurt in her expression. A kernel of doubt started to unfurl in my mind. When she spoke again her voice was so un-Verity-like that I felt my breath catch in my throat. “Y—you think I’m capable of that?” I uncrossed my arms and took a step towards her, but she held up her hand to ward me off. “You really have *that* low an opinion of me?” I swore I could see tears shimmer briefly in her eyes before she blinked to clear them, and I felt a twinge of alarm.

“Verity, I—”

“You actually think me capable of trying to sleep my way into a contract with your company?” her voice was rising now, and her colour was returning as real fury flashed in her still tear-filled eyes.

She really did look bloody furious at this suggestion. My mind also kept flashing back to that kiss. Could she really have been that good an actress? I opened my mouth to speak but she got in there before me.

“We wouldn’t touch your project with a barge pole even if you and the LSE doubled the fee. You can go with the other shitty, substandard designs

you've been plugged and knock yourself out."

I took another step towards her, but she took a corresponding one back, so I stopped and cleared my suddenly dry throat.

"Maybe we should talk," I said slowly. Nothing about this interaction was making sense. What reason would Verity have to come here and let me kiss her if not to secure the deal? I was starting to feel a little sick. She flashed me another furious look and moved to step around me, but I moved with her to block her way.

"I will never speak to you, ever again," she said through gritted teeth. "This is *twice* now that you've made me feel like shit on your shoe, Harry. It took me long enough to get over it the first time. I'll not have you knocking the wind out of my sails again. I've come too far since then to let you set me back." I blinked. She was voicing all of *my* thoughts when it came to *her*. Those were *my* worries. What on earth was she talking about? How did *I* possibly set *her* back? None of this made any sense. "Now, get out of my way."

"Er... you're still holding my cat."

Verity glanced down at a very comfortable-looking Barbara, who was now cradled in her arms like a baby and then shoved the mass of orange fur in my direction. I held Barbara up against my chest, turning quickly to put her down on the counter but the bloody cat wasn't having any of it. She dug her claws into my arms, refusing to let go. I sighed. It seemed that I was going to have to continue this interaction holding an obese cat, which only added to my sense of having lost control of the situation.

"Please, Verity," I said, my voice now hoarse. Something here was very, very wrong. It was me that should be angry with her. The hurt expression on her face should have been mine. "Let's just start from the beginning. I think there's something I'm missing about now and what happened twenty years ago."

"You've made it perfectly clear, Harry, that you don't give one single fuck about what happened twenty years ago. You even, for some sick twisted reason of your own, pretended not to even recognise me."

"But Verity I—"

Her low voice cut me off. It was just above a whisper and laced with pain. "The time we spent together at school was a *lifeline* to me. I valued it. I thought you did too. There were things I couldn't... Let's just say that back then I was riding out a storm, and you were my calm in that storm for a

while. Maybe you were just putting up with me, but you were kind... at least you were kind up until you weren't. So, in order to end this, I'll thank you for that. Thank you for bringing me peace and making me happy when I needed it. But I never want to see you again." She stepped to the other side again to try to pass me, but I mimicked her movement. I felt like something incredible was slipping through my fingers like sand. I wasn't sure what was happening, but I knew I had to keep her here. I knew if I let her leave now, I'd regret it.

"What storm?" I asked in confusion. "Please just wait and we can--"

"Get out of my way!" she shrieked. Tears had formed in her eyes again and her arms were straight down by her sides, her hands bunched into small fists and her knuckles white. She looked like she was going to shatter any moment.

"Okay, okay," I said, trying to keep my voice even and calm. Barbara for once seemed to read the room correctly and allowed me to put her down. I turned to Verity, my hands lifting up to show my palms in surrender. I glanced behind my shoulder towards the door and then back at Verity. "Did you drive?"

"Harry--"

"It's just I don't think you're in a fit state to drive at the moment."

"My state of mind is *none* of your business."

"Just let me drive you where you need to go."

"No fucking way. I didn't drive here, you prick. It's London. And I'm getting an Uber."

"I just--"

Clearly having had enough of my delaying tactics, she shoved past me. I could have stood my ground, but her eyes had this wild look and her tears had spilled over now. I had no choice but to move out of her way. Once she had a clear path to my front door she ran, actually ran away from me, slamming the door behind her.

"Shit," I muttered as I moved to the living room at the front so that I could look for her out of the window. She was standing looking down at her phone but then glanced back up at the window as if sensing I was there. On seeing me she shoved her phone back into her bag, spun on her heel and power-walked away down the street. I could see her arm going up to her face. It looked as though she was swiping away tears.

I watched her until she disappeared from view around the corner, and then considered my options. I couldn't very well follow her now – she

wouldn't take kindly to it, and it would be more than a little stalkery. But I had to know that she was okay. My mind flashed back to the conference room and I remembered how her hand had squeezed Max's. At the time I'd wanted to rip his arm off, my indifferent act totally thrown for a moment before I could get a hold of myself again. I should have known that, when it came to Verity, indifference and casual dismissal were not going to be possible. Not with the strength of my feelings towards her.

Well, she was obviously close to Max. I remembered him from school as well. Max, Verity and Heath had been thick as thieves. Pushing my jealousy to the back of my mind I sighed as I sat on the sofa and pulled out my phone, going to my emails and searching for the full contact details for their company. Then I swallowed my pride and rang Max's number.

"Max?"

"Who's this?" his gruff voice answered.

"It's Harry. Harry York."

"You pulled that stick out of your arse yet, mate?"

I could see why Verity took on most of the client-facing work. "I'm phoning about Verity." There was a pause.

"What about her?"

"She... she's just left my house and she's a little... emotional."

"What?" his voice had risen now, his tone edging from irritated to angry.

"We... look, she's upset, and I wanted to let you know. I'm not sure if you and her are together or—"

"*Together?* My *wife* would have something to say about that. Verity's like my sister. What made you think we're together? And why the fuck is Verity *emotional* when in the twenty-five years I've known her I've seen her cry once? If you've done owt to upset her, I'll be down to those fancy offices of yours to sort you out. Billionaire or no."

"Look, I don't want to go into details. But, please, I'm worried about her. She said she was getting an Uber. I live in Chelsea. I don't know if you lot are still in London, but I wanted to make sure that—"

"You leave her to me," Max growled. "Stay away from her. I *knew* there was something dodgy about you. V says you were an alright sort at school, but your money's turned you into a right conceited bugger. Not sure what you've been playing at with Verity but best you fuck off now. You get me? And you can take your building and shove that up your arse and all."

"Max, I—" I broke off when I realised that I was speaking to dead air.

He'd hung up on me. Not that I blamed him. At least he'd said he'd look after Verity. I collapsed back into one of my sofas and stared up at the ceiling rose. My mind was running through everything that had happened that morning, everything that Verity had said. I rubbed my chest absently, an ache had started there when I'd seen the tears in Verity's eyes. Then I winced as Barbara jumped up and sunk her claws into my groin.

*The time we spent together at school was a lifeline to me.*

*I was riding out a storm.*

*You were my calm in that storm for a while.*

*You were kind... at least you were kind up until you weren't.*

Something wasn't right. I was missing a piece from this puzzle. But one thing was for certain – I wasn't letting Verity get away that easily. Not this time.



# Chapter 6

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## *Have you actually read this yet?*

### **VERITY**

“Hey, V. You alive in there?”

The soft-spoken question cut through my thoughts, and I blinked to regain my focus. To my surprise, Mia was standing in front of my desk, her head tilted to the side as she watched me with a concerned frown puckering her forehead. Mia and Max had been looking at me like that a lot over the last few weeks, but I wasn't about to tell them what was really going on. The last thing I needed was for them to know about my godforsaken mother and her ongoing harassment. I could deal with it on my own, just like I dealt with everything else. If they knew they'd tell Heath, and he was going to be bloody well shielded from this shit now. And anyway, Max and Mia had enough going on with the pregnancy. Mia's stomach was almost comically huge now incubating Max's giant baby, the poor woman.

But, despite all they had going on, Max and Mia had been on high alert about me ever since *that Saturday* in London. Bloody Harry. I'd tried to brazen it out with them. Max was waiting for me at my cottage when I'd finally made it home back to Dorset. The poor guy could see that I'd been crying, and it was clear that he didn't quite know how to handle me. He told me Harry had contacted him, saying I was emotional and that he was worried about me. I hid my surprise that Harry would even care enough to contact him, but Max did not hide the fact that he'd found it somewhat alarming that someone would be describing me as emotional. It didn't help that I wouldn't elaborate on what had actually happened between me and Harry – only telling Max that Harry was a complete dick, but I was fine. I think I managed to convince him that Harry had been exaggerating his concerns to further piss

me off as part of his dickish behaviour.

“I don’t know, V,” he’d muttered. “The poor bugger sounded right worried.”

“Trust me, Max,” I replied in a monotone. “He does not give a fuck about me. He’s just trying to piss me off.”

After a further exhausting half hour, I’d managed to get rid of Max and drew on my ruthless self-control to tamp down my emotions. The next morning, I managed to start feeling strangely numb. However, this did nothing to alleviate Max’s concern. Luckily, I’d convinced him not to tell Heath about my run-in with Harry. The last thing I needed was for Heath to know that Harry York had been upsetting his sister again – he had been angry enough the first time. But Max *had* told his wife, Mia. I loved Mia. She’d certainly done wonders for Max’s mood since she’d come into his life, and she was fantastic at running the office IT systems. When she first joined the company, Mia had been anxious and deeply introverted, not a surprise given her past. But she’d come out of herself over the two years, and I was so pleased for her. However, her newfound confidence, together with her and Max’s worry for me, had resulted in regular gentle cross-examinations over the last two weeks. In fact, it seemed that Max and Mia were becoming more concerned as time went on.

“Oh, sorry, darling,” I said with a start. “Didn’t see you there.” Mia moved into my office and leaned against my desk.

“Do you want to come over tonight? I think Heath’s coming for dinner.”

“Sorry, can’t tonight. And don’t let my brother keep eating you out of house and home like a stray dog.”

Mia sighed. “You know I’m here if you need to talk?” she said softly and I looked up, forcing a small smile which was all I could really manage.

“Of course I do.”

Mia frowned as she studied me, her head tilted to the side. “See, I don’t think you do. I think you’re used to just getting on with things and looking after *other* people. I’m not sure you’re so good when it comes to looking after yourself.”

“Mia, I’m fine. Honestly. I keep telling you and Max – Harry blew everything out of proportion.”

“Max didn’t think you were fine at all when he saw you after you got back, and, well, even before this you’ve not been yourself for months.”

“I’m just tired.”

Mia shook her head. “That’s bullshit.” I blinked at the swear word. Mia was certainly not as prolific a swearer as me. In fact, it was very out of character. “You haven’t smiled a real smile since you got back from London. Tired, my arse.”

I rubbed my forehead and made an attempt at a smile again, but it clearly didn’t convince Mia.

“*You* were there for *me*, Verity. All of you were.” There was a long pause. I opened my mouth to speak but she got there first. “It’s okay to need people you know. You don’t have to deal with everything by yourself. If you’d let us talk to Heath maybe—”

“Do not say *anything* to my brother,” I snapped, and she flinched slightly. I immediately felt bad as I knew Mia still wasn’t great with reprimands of any sort due to her past, but I couldn’t risk Heath getting involved in any of this shit. Having a twin was great until you wanted to keep something to yourself and work through it without the guy you shared a womb with shoving his nose into things. Luckily Heath had been distracted lately. So had Yaz – and I was really hoping that that was not a coincidence considering how long she had been secretly in love with my brother, and how long my brother had been stubbornly resisting something that would make him happy. The trouble was that Heath and I didn’t trust happiness. Not really. Not with how we grew up.

“I promised I wouldn’t tell Heath and I meant it, V,” Mia’s voice was a little hurt. I rubbed my forehead for a moment trying to summon up the necessary apologetic words, but they wouldn’t come. That numbness had settled over me again. To be honest, Harry really should be the least of my problems, but somehow the way he treated me in London had brought everything to a head. Maybe my horror that he would think so little of me was more acute in view of how much he had meant to me at school. Back then it hadn’t felt like I had many safe spaces. Harry and the library had represented one of the only places where I could really be myself. Being with him had been liberating. There were so many expectations in the rest of the school environment – but not with Harry.

“I’m sorry, Mia,” I managed eventually. “I didn’t mean to snap. It’s just... complicated. I can’t—”

I was cut off by Max bursting into the office and slamming down a contract onto my desk.

“Well, we only went and won the bloody bid,” he said in his grumpiest

tone.

“Which one?”

“The York Evans project.”

I frowned up at him, my stomach tightening at the mention of Harry’s name.

“But we pulled our bid. You promised—”

“Of course, we pulled it,” Max said. “I’m not having owt to do with that twat and neither are you. But the bugger’s been trying to get through to me for days, and then this came in the post just now. Doesn’t seem to matter to the persistent bastard that we aren’t interested.”

Mia picked up the paperwork and started scanning through it, her eyes widening as she read.

“Well, he can shove his contract right up his arse, because I’m not working with that piece of—”

“Er... there might be a little problem with the whole shoving thing,” Mia put in, her eyes still on the contract.

“What’s up, love?” Max asked, moving to her side to look over her shoulder at it.

“Max, have you actually read this yet?”

“I don’t need to read it to know it doesn’t interest me. We’ve got plenty of other projects that aren’t financed by complete pillocks.”

I felt a rush of gratitude towards Max. Yes, there were plenty of other projects but in reality, none were as big as this one, and I knew for a fact that, before all this had happened with Harry, Max would have given his right arm for a chance like this.

“Thanks, Max,” I said with a small smile, which for once didn’t feel forced or faked.

Mia bit her lip and lowered the contract.

“You’re not going to like this, but I’m afraid you may have already committed.”

I frowned. “What are you talking about? We haven’t signed or agreed to anything.”

Mia shifted her feet and then tucked her hair behind her ear with her free hand – something she only did when nervous, which was less and less common for her these days.

“Are you sure you didn’t sign anything? Maybe something before the bid?”

I blinked. “Only the NDA, but that was just so we wouldn’t discuss the project outside of the meeting. It wasn’t tying us to anything else.”

“Did you read it?”

My mind flashed back to that day in the conference room, and I felt the blood drain out of my face. I’d been so nervous after seeing Harry again, and the NDA had seemed excessively long. Max had signed it after me without even really glancing at the content – confident that I would be my normal thorough self and have gone over it with a fine-tooth comb. “Bugger,” I muttered. “What did we commit to?”

“There’s a lot of fancy legal speak, but the upshot is that once the bid is made you’ve committed the company’s services to completing the project should you be the ones to win the job.”

“I don’t give a toss what that bit of paper says,” Max grumbled. “We’re doing nowt for that bastard.” His northern accent was thickening in his anger. Max wouldn’t want to work with someone who’d upset me, but he also did not like being told what to do. Finding himself not in control of a situation was a surefire way to piss him right off.

I shook my head. “We’re not breaking a contract, Max. That would flush the company’s reputation right down the toilet.”

Max threw up his hands in frustration. “Why does the bugger even want to work with us? He jerked us around endlessly before this. And now we’ve withdrawn our bid and basically told him to go fuck himself, he changes his mind again.”

Mia shot me a lightning-quick furtive look, before concentrating back on an angry Max. “He’s clearly got his... reasons,” she said carefully shooting me another look. “And of course, your bid was the best one – there’s no doubting that. Maybe he realised how superior your designs were and that he really needs you at the helm. Either way, the cover letter and the contract are pretty firm. I don’t think he’s going to back down.”

“Bloody hell,” Max said as he flopped down into one of my office chairs and blew out a frustrated breath. “Well one thing’s for sure – V, you are not to be involved. I’ll be the frontman for once. He can deal with my grumpy arse on the daily if he’s so desperate to work with us.”

My head was spinning as I sat back in my chair and looked up at the ceiling. Why would Harry push this? Surely, he should have been glad not to have to see me again. Was he being pressured by his partner to go for the better design? My fingertips started tingling and a familiar feeling of the

room closing in around me started up again. I needed to try and slow my breathing.

“Thanks, Max,” I managed to get out around my closed-over throat. I felt a soft hand on mine then and realised that Mia had come around the desk to stand next to my chair.

“Are you okay?” she said softly. The soft but firm pressure of her hand on mine worked to anchor me somewhat, and the room slowly expanded back from that oppressing closed-in feeling.

“Honestly, darling. I’m fine,” I tried to inject my voice with as much confidence as I could muster. I needed to woman up a bit here. Mia had come through real trauma, while I was letting my hurt feelings spiral me into a series of panic attacks and the edges of depression. I sat up and turned my hand to squeeze hers back, forcing what I hoped was a more convincing smile. From the concerned expression on her face, I didn’t quite pull it off.

My phone started ringing then and I felt a fresh wave of adrenaline flood my system when I saw Mr Crawley’s contact info flash up on the screen. I hadn’t spoken to the Markham family lawyer for a good few years now.

“Sorry, guys,” I muttered. “I’d better take this.”

“Okay, hun,” Mia said, giving my arm a squeeze and then moving out of the office, dragging Max behind her. I answered the call just as she shut the door.

“Mr Crawley?”

“Ms Markham,” he said in his stiff formal tone that I was well used to. “So sorry to disturb. I tried Lord Markham, but he wasn’t answering his phone.”

“I’m sorry, Mr Crawley, but if you’re looking for my father then I—”

“Your father? I... er—”

In all the time I’d known Mr Crawley I don’t think I’d ever heard the man lost for words.

“Yes, my father, Lord Markham,” I said into the ensuing silence. “The man I’ve not spoken to for over ten years. I’m afraid that I can’t—”

“I wasn’t talking about your father, Verity,” Mr Crawley interrupted. My eyebrows went up in surprise at this unprecedented use of my first name. “I was talking about the *current* Lord Markham, your brother, Heath.”

“But—”

“I’m afraid your father died last week. Please let me offer my sincere condolences. I’m phoning about the funeral arrangements and the will. I

didn't realise that you hadn't been informed."

"Who exactly would have told me?" I forced out through my now dry throat.

"I thought maybe your mother or—"

I let out a sharp laugh as one of my hands went up to rub my temple. I could feel a bitch of a migraine forming behind my eyes. "My mother wouldn't spit on me if I was on fire, Mr Crawley, as you are well aware. Her communication is limited to pissed-up torrents of verbal abuse and threats via voicemail, which I delete."

Mr Crawley cleared his throat, and I closed my eyes slowly. "Well, I'm sorry that you weren't informed sooner of your father's passing. Maybe I should speak to Lord Markham? It's just he isn't answering his phone."

My eyes shot open. "*Don't* ring my brother again," I snapped.

"Well, it's just that arrangements have to be made and—"

"I'll deal with the arrangements. Leave Heath to me."

"Right, well I'll be in contact with the specifics, funeral directors and such."

I blew out a long breath. "Right, yes fine. Thank you, Mr Crawley."

There was another long pause. For a minute I thought he might have been cut off.

"Mr Crawley?"

"I'm sorry," he said, a slight rasp to his voice and I frowned.

"Mr Crawley, that's kind but honestly I'm not that sad about losing a man that I haven't spoken to in over—"

"No," he said. "You mistake me, young lady. I'm not sorry about your father. I'm sorry for my inaction."

"Your inaction?"

"In my defence, I did try. I spoke to your grandparents countless times. I knew you and your brother should *not* live in that house. I knew that your parents weren't... capable. But I didn't try hard enough."

It was only when my head started to spin and my vision narrowed that I realised I was holding my breath. I sucked in a sharp burst of air and let it out slowly before I could speak.

"It wasn't your fault," I told him through my thick throat.

"I understand why you would think that, but you were children and I—"

"Those animals were a law unto themselves, Mr Crawley. There was nothing you could have done. Now, I'm so sorry but I've got to go."



I tapped the screen to hang up and lay the phone face down on my desk. Then I did something I'd never done, ever. I left work in the middle of the day. We had an important meeting that afternoon, but I still left. Max would have to deal with some client-facing work for once. I'd officially run out of fucks to give.

# Chapter 7

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## *Worst-case scenario*

*EIGHTEEN MONTHS LATER...*

**VERITY**

“You don’t have to be here,” Max grumbled as we pulled up at the site. “I’m not a total knob you know. I can be trusted to talk to other humans.”

I suppressed an eye roll and patted Max on the arm. “I know you can talk to the nice humans, Maxy, but it’s always better if you don’t have to.” I dreaded to think what would happen if I did actually leave Max to deal with all the contractors we were meeting today. These site visits to the LSE campus were vitally important. They were how we established all the relationships that the project would hinge on. I would have loved to leave it to Max, but there’d been too many times when clients and contractors had walked off the site muttering complaints about “grumpy northern bastards” for me to risk it. And I’d already allowed Max to do far too many of them unsupervised in my attempts to avoid Harry. Of course, I’d had to attend the many completely pointless meetings Harry seemed to insist on for various spurious reasons, which were all excruciating in their discomfort, but on-site contact had been minimal. “I doubt he’ll be there anyway,” I said lightly. “He’s more of a *remote supervision* type of chap than someone hands-on. I can’t exactly see him in a hard hat, can you?”

“Bastad better not be there,” Max muttered darkly as we pulled to a stop in front of the now cleared and level site – the size of it struck me again and I felt a surge of excitement. Yes, maybe I hadn’t wanted to take on the job, but

that didn't change how exciting it was in reality to have control over such a large area of central London real estate. The building we'd planned would be revolutionary. Yes, we'd been on *Dream Homes*. Yes, we had a good reputation. But to be one of the big hitters we needed a project on this scale – and we'd be able to create real beauty right here in the heart of the city. Beauty that we'd designed ourselves, beauty that was sustainable, that wouldn't hurt the environment. The entire building would be passive – completely carbon neutral. This was a big ask for something so huge, but we were confident we could do it if we had the right contractors – hence the need for me to make sure we kept them.

Site visits could be messy and dusty, they were not conducive to my normal tight-skirted outfits. So, I'd paired jeans with a fitted jumper and fabulous high-heel boots. I probably should be wearing flats, but wearing jeans was as far as I was ever willing to compromise when it came to site visits. Even when we'd been out to boggy marshes in the West Country I still wore at least three-inch heels, bunged heel-stoppers on the ends and just got on with it. I'd been wearing heels for so long that I think my body would probably topple over without them. I scowled at the hard hat I was handed (I'd never been a fan of hat hair, but at least I had opted for a low ponytail, so it wasn't a complete disaster). Max elbowed me and I put it on. The first couple of hours went well. All the contractors were people we'd worked with before, and they all bought into the entire vision even though I knew some of it was a real pain in the arse (engineers do not like curved walls – it winds them right up). There was only one incident when I'd had to rescue Dave, a particularly competent and practical builder, from Max who was arguing over an inch difference in the position of the foundation. Max's raised voice calling Dave a "stubborn cockney arsehole" caused me to abandon my productive talks with the engineer and hurry over to where they were arguing. Now, I was good in heels, but a near run on the rough terrain with clumps of concrete still littering the ground was too much, even for me. I tripped just as I reached them, and the ever-competent Dave caught me before I fell onto my face.

"Dave, my hero," I said smiling up at him as he hauled me to my feet. From memory, Dave was not averse to some light flirting, and as I was keen to smooth over Max's arsehole comment hamming it up seemed to be the best option. But just as I was steady myself with Dave's help and his mouth had tugged up into a reluctant smile, I was suddenly hauled back by a

strong arm which felt like an iron band around my waist into a hard body behind me. I turned, expecting to see Max staring down at me, but all my breath left me in sudden exhale as my eyes clashed with the warm brown of Harry's. His jaw was clenched tight as he searched my face. I pushed against his arm, but it didn't budge.

"You need trainers," Harry said in a tight voice, and I felt my eyebrows go up. An unwanted flush of desire at being this close to him burned through me. I could feel the warmth of his body and smell the clean scent of aftershave, and as heat rose to my cheeks I felt like that pathetic sixteen-year-old again. That was when my shock morphed into embarrassment and then anger, and I pushed against the steel band that was Harry's arm.

"Get off!" I snapped, giving the offending forearm a final hard shove. He broke eye contact with me to blink down at where he had me imprisoned, as if he hadn't really been fully conscious he'd been holding me to him, then let me go so abruptly that I almost stumbled again. His hand extended to steady my elbow, but I flinched away from him and he jerked back.

"Those boots are completely unsafe on a building site," the arrogant sod told me, as he crossed his arms over his chest and stared down at me with disapproval.

"Oh, and your ten-thousand-pound-suit-and-no-hard-hat combo is sooo much more appropriate."

"I'm sorry, but have I nearly fallen onto building debris? Any of which could slice open an artery or give me tetanus?"

"That is savage worst-case scenario thinking, even for you." I bit back. Harry had always been the ultimate pessimist, thinking through things to their worst possible outcome and contrasting violently with my unrelenting optimism. I actually used to find it endearing.

*"Well, I want a gap year," I said one day on the sofa, my feet resting on Harry's lap as he tried to concentrate on reading The Hobbit for what was probably the hundredth time. He tolerated this seating arrangement as long as I didn't fidget.*

*"Good luck."*

*"You're not going to have one?"*

*"A year poncing about trying to find myself? No chance."*

*I rolled my eyes. "I won't be trying to find myself, I'll be seeing the world. Maybe I'll teach English in a school in India—"*

*"Dysentery."*

*“Ride an elephant in Thailand.”*

*“They smell and they weigh over a tonne. If one of them loses their shit, you’ll be squashed flat.”*

*“Climb Kilimanjaro.”*

*“Altitude sickness. You do know you can get cerebral oedema if you go to high altitudes? That’s brain swelling that can cause permanent damage. No thanks.”*

*“Surf in South Africa.”*

*“Sharks.”*

*“See Mayan ruins in Mexico.”*

*“My God, are you mad?! If the heatstroke doesn’t get you, then the human trafficking or the drug cartels would.”*

*“Winter Palace in St Petersburg?”*

*“Frostbite, and the country’s run by a sadist. People go missing there all the time.”*

*“Harry, has anyone ever told you that you might not be the most positive person?”*

*That’s when I’d started laughing, and it was one of the first times I’d managed to coax a smile out of Harry. From then on it was one of our things. I’d suggest something and he’d come up with the worst-case scenario.*

This current exchange reminded me so clearly of the past that my chest felt tight. I had to remind myself that the Harry here and now was not sweet, worst-case-scenario Harry. He was full-grown, muscle-bound, obnoxious, arrogant, *mean* Harry, who had such a low opinion of me that he thought me capable of sleeping with him to secure a contract. Who kissed me and then told me to “grow up” before I’d even managed to claw my way back to rational thought.

“What are you doing here?” I snapped.

“Er... Verity, love,” Dave put in. “He is financing the build.”

I turned to Dave and narrowed my eyes at him, all attempts at flirting away Max’s rudeness now forgotten. “That doesn’t mean he should be swanning in and interrupting us when we’re trying to work.” Dave’s eyes went wide. Clearly this was not the way you spoke to the gov’nor if you wanted to remain in business.

“Verity,” Harry said, his intense gaze still fixed on me. “Can we have a word for a minute?”

I glanced at him and swept out my arm in a magnanimous gesture. “By all

means, *sir*. You are the boss after all, as Dave here has kindly pointed out.” Harry sighed and gripped the back of his neck in his trademark sign of discomfort. Good, feel uncomfortable, you insufferable prick.

“I was hoping for a quick, *private* word,” he said in a low voice and took a step towards me. Max had clearly had enough of Harry being anywhere near me by this point though, so before he could step into my personal space he was shoved back with Max’s large hand to his chest. Harry only went back onto one foot which was pretty impressive – Max was an absolute mountain of a man who didn’t always have a handle on his own strength. However, Harry was only an inch or so shorter than Max and the memory of his muscular chest was now burned into my brain, so I wasn’t totally surprised that he could stand his ground.

“Bloody hell, mate,” Dave put in, clearly convinced both Max and I had lost the plot. “What’re you playing at? There’s being a grumpy shite to me, and there’s pushing the bloody guv’nor around. You want us all out of the job?”

“I assure you, Mr Sedon,” Harry said smoothly, unruffled by the hard shove he’d just received, “nobody’s job is in any danger whatsoever. I merely need a private word with Ms Markham.”

“It’s fine, Max,” I said quietly, putting my hand on his arm to stop him doing anything else to Harry. The majority of the contractors on site were staring over at us now. We didn’t want to put them off on the first day – there were plenty of other stress-free jobs they could move to. It was important that they saw us as harmonious and competent. To that end I gave Harry a fake smile which only served to deepen his scowl. “By all means, Mr York. Lead the way.”

# Chapter 8

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## *Can we start over?*

### **VERITY**

Harry hesitated for a moment, before giving Max a quick nod of what looked bizarrely like respect then taking me gently by the elbow and leading me away. I allowed this until we made it round the corner of the site wall, then jerked my arm away when nobody could see.

“I said, don’t touch me,” I snapped, taking a step back from him and crossing my arms over my chest.

“I was only...” he started, flicking me a look and then shoving his hands into his pockets. “I didn’t want you to fall again. Those boots really are not fit for purpose.”

“Is that what you dragged me round here to tell me? That my boots are inappropriate? Because I do actually have a fair bit of shit to achieve here today. I do not need to be dragged off for private chats with bored billionaires.”

“Who says I’m bored?” he asked, kicking a stone in front of him on the pavement.

“If you’re not bored then why are you here making my life miserable?”

“*Nice to see you again, Harry,*” he muttered under his breath. “*I realise that you’re financing the build, Harry, and I can at least spare you five minutes.*”

Ugh – how had I ever thought this little habit was cute? “Harry, you’re interrupting my day. If all you’re going to do is mumble ineligible crap then just leave.”

“You know what, Dave is right – this is *my* site. I have a right to be here.”

“Sorry guv’nor,” I said in a poor imitation of Dave’s cockney accent.

“Shouldn’t have spoken out of turn to the boss. More than my job’s worth, I’m sure.”

He blew out a frustrated breath and squeezed his neck again. “Why are you making this so difficult?”

I stared at him and crossed my arms over my chest. “How about I make it easy? Stay away from me. Stay away from the site when I’m here. Talk to Max if you need to discuss the designs. Now, if we’re finished, I do actually have—”

“I’m sorry, okay?” he said. “I’ve been trying to apologise for over a year, Verity. I shouldn’t have kissed you. That was totally out of order.”

“Calling me a whore who was trying to secure a contract with my body was what was out of order, Harry.”

Harry winced at my words but after a brief pause he looked up at me again, his eyes flaring as he took a small step into my space.

His voice dropped lower as he tilted his head towards me. “So, *kissing you* wasn’t out of order then?” he asked, a small smile hitching up one side of his mouth. He was so close now that I could smell his aftershave and feel his breath on my cheek. Flashbacks of his lips on mine flew through my brain, just like they had all year. A rush of feeling swept through me as I focused on his strong, stubbled jaw. I could feel my face flood with heat. I swallowed and felt that pull between us stronger than ever, nearly swaying into him. This was not happening, I told myself and I took a small stumbling step back, the rush making me feel like I was going to actually swoon like a heroine in a historical romance book. I could hear my heart beating in my ears. It was like he had some sort of otherworldly power over my body. I’d never felt this level of attraction for anyone before. He’d taken my arm again when I stumbled and I shook his hand free, frowning up at him.

“No,” I snapped. “The kissing part was out of order as well.” Annoyingly, my voice was hoarse, giving too much away. I cleared my throat before carrying on. “And all this crap you’ve pulled over the last eighteen months has been out of order too, Harry.”

His smile dropped and he shifted uncomfortably in front of me, kicking another small stone with his Italian leather shoes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

My eyebrows went up. “Harry, I’ve attended more bullshit meetings this year and a half than I have in my entire career. You’ve objected to every single thing we’ve put forward.”

Last month Harry had insisted Max and I come up to London again on the pretence that he wasn't happy with the atrium, which was absolutely and undisputedly beautiful.

"I just thought a tree in the middle might be an idea," he'd said, the ridiculous shareholders nodding along with him like he was the oracle of architecture. I'd explained with what I considered to be extreme patience, whilst trying to control my left eyelid twitch, that no, we could not stick a bloody great oak tree in the middle of the goddamn building and that this wasn't the Eden Project, for Christ's sake.

"Woah, okay clearly you're not open to any new innovations," Harry had countered. "That's fine. I'll defer to your more traditional way of doing things."

That made the shareholders sit up and take notice. The last thing they wanted was stuffy and traditional, as well that prick knew.

"Ms Markham," put in one of the shareholders, "maybe we should--"

"This building is going to be at the absolute cutting edge of design. It's ground-breaking. But it will not have a bloody great tree in the middle of it because that is ridiculous!" I was nearly shouting by the end of that little speech and when Harry's small smirk made its appearance in response to my display of emotion I was tempted to throw my laptop at him.

Undermining me had become some sort of sport to Harry at this stage. He'd use any opportunity he could to rile me up. I looked up at him now, my eyebrows raised and my arms crossed over my chest. He was going to admit that he had been a deliberate pain in the arse for twisted reasons known only to himself.

"Okay, maybe I've been a *little* unreasonable," he admitted. "But... I--"

"Is it because I'm a woman? Is that why you've been questioning my every move?"

"What? No! Of course not, Verity." He looked totally shocked at that suggestion. "How could you think that of me?"

"There's a lot of things I wouldn't have thought the old Harry capable of, but this new, not-improved version is a different kettle of fish."

Harry sighed and ran his hands through his hair. "Look, I've tried to apologise for what I said but you don't take my calls."

I frowned at him. "So, your solution is to be a shit to me and make my life difficult in a variety of ways, threatening my business in the process."

"I wasn't threatening your business."

“Harry, questioning our designs incessantly, wasting our time with bullshit *is* actually a direct threat.”

He lifted one of his hands to the back of his neck and squeezed. “Can we start over?” he asked in a softer tone. “Let’s go back and pretend it’s the first time we’ve seen each other since school. I won’t behave like a grumpy git. You’ll smile at me like you did when I first walked into that conference room before I started on my grumpy git behaviour, and we can go from there. We’ll forget any of the in between stuff ever happened. Just a mistake we can put behind us.”

*Forget it ever happened.*

*A mistake we can put behind us.*

Pain, fresh and raw, shot through me and for a moment it was difficult to breathe. I knew it shouldn’t surprise me, but Harry expressing regret at kissing me was another blow to my self-esteem. And the worst thing was that despite how he’d behaved, what he’d said to me that day, what he clearly thought about me and my character and how he’s behaved since, I couldn’t help still wanting him.

Over these past eighteen months I had replayed over and over in my mind the feeling of his lips on mine, his body pressed against me. Whenever I closed my eyes, all I could see was Harry’s face flushed with desire for me – as though my subconscious was so desperate to be with him that it used any perceived downtime to conjure him up. It affected everything I did. And now, here he was telling me what a mistake it had been. Apologising for what he saw as a moment of weakness on his part.

“You don’t need to apologise,” I said, my throat was tight and my voice sounded hoarse. I looked away and swallowed, pushing all these inconvenient feelings back down where they belonged. The last thing I needed was to seem emotional on site. I couldn’t think of anything worse. I’d worked hard for the kind of authority I had in this male-dominated environment – developing over-emotional tendencies wasn’t going to engender much respect. “You’re entitled to your opinion, just like you were twenty years ago.”

Harry’s face darkened. “Twenty years ago you played me, and your family very nearly ruined mine. If anyone’s entitled to hold resentment over twenty years ago it’s me.”

“W–what do you mean?”

Harry gave me a blatant look of disbelief. “Don’t pretend you don’t know

what happened.”

I frowned at him. “Harry, all I know is that you finished school and cut off all contact with me.”

“My dad nearly lost his job because of your family. My family *did* lose their home.”

“He... he what?” I thought back to the last year of school. Yes, Mr York had given up his housemaster position but that was nothing to do with me or my family. Then a memory flashed through my mind of a visit from my parents during that summer term.

*“That nosy, do-gooding, holier-than-thou piece of shit,” my mother had snapped in the car on the way home. “Thinks he can tell me how to look after my own kids.” She ignored both me and Heath. Neither of them had said a word to us since the fake hugs they gave for Mr York’s benefit. “You don’t think he can... do anything. Can he?”*

*My father snorted. “No teacher is going to speak to me like that,” he muttered. “That fucking, jumped-up bottom-feeder has just signed his own resignation letter. He has no idea who he’s taken on, who we are.”*

“My parents,” I breathed. “This is about when he raised concerns about my parents.”

Mr York had been Heath’s housemaster. Towards the end of Harry’s last summer term Heath told me that Mr York, Harry’s dad, had been sniffing around our home circumstances. Our parents hadn’t been seen at the school for over a year, and after the previous summer holidays we’d come back to school... a bit worse for wear. Thin. Those had been a bad few weeks. Max’s parents, the Hardcastles had picked us up for the remaining holidays that year which had frustrated Mr York. My housemaster wasn’t particularly interested – happy just to accept my assurance that everything at home was fine. Mr York however was more persistent. He wasn’t willing to accept any of Heath’s explanations. He went as far as to report his concerns to the headmaster.

Heath and I had been taken to the headmaster’s office the week before the term ended and questioned about our homelife. But by that stage we were conditioned to give our standard answers. In any case, our granny had passed away and there was no other family who could take guardianship of us. Neither of us wanted to see what kind of guardian the state would conjure up for us. So, we lied. If I remember correctly, we even laughed off the suggestions of abuse. The headmaster was all too willing to accept our

explanations. The last thing that school needed was to go after prominent people like my parents. Mr York wouldn't have stood a chance against Lord and Lady Markham.

My ears were ringing now and everything had slipped a little out of focus. I concentrated on my breathing and fought my way out of the past and back to the present, Harry's angry voice filtered into my consciousness.

"You probably had a good laugh at my dad's expense," he said. "All a game to people like you, a man's livelihood. But to us it was a pretty big deal. My parents had to move out of the free housing the school provided when Dad lost his housemaster role, meaning they couldn't help support me at uni. I had to work like a dog to manage my first year living in London. Our lives were turned into a complete shitshow in the wake of the Markhams."

I took in a stuttering breath and let it out slowly. The world around me seemed to be falling away. Harry and his formidable anger was all I could see.

*People like you.*

It wasn't the first time I'd been lumped in with my parents and I was normally able to shrug it off. I'd long since stopped caring about people's opinions of something they knew nothing about. But with Harry I was struggling to be so robust. Unfortunately, despite everything, Harry's opinion mattered to me. Maybe it was because I fell in love with him before I even really knew what love was, and that had left some sort of mark on my soul. Even now with false accusations and animosity in the air I could feel this pull to him, this yearning. I swallowed and forced myself to meet his angry gaze.

"He tried," I said, my voice weaker than I would have liked, but to honest I was impressed I'd been able to get any words out at all. Harry's anger morphed into confusion.

"What do you mean?"

"Your dad," I said, my voice stronger now. "He tried. That's... that's more than can be said for the rest of them." I moved forward and laid my hand on Harry's forearm which was crossed over his chest. "You tell him I said sorry, but that what he did meant something. It meant something to us that someone tried."

Harry blinked and I pulled my hand away as he began to uncross his arms. I could feel the backs of my eyes start to sting and I knew that I needed to get out of there.

"Verity, I—" Confusion had now been replaced by concern, which was the

last thing I wanted. I shouldn't have said what I did about his dad. I couldn't stand Harry's pity. Better he thought I was a spoiled brat who got his dad fired. I could reach out to Mr York in my own way. I had the resources to track him down and it wasn't like I wasn't used to cleaning up my family's messes. Just look at the grief I had been getting from my mother over the last year. I took a couple of steps back, making sure not to stumble this time.

"You're right," I said, my voice stronger now. "It's best to just forget everything. Put it all behind us."

"Maybe that's not the—"

"I'm not going back there again," I blurted out to cut him off. "I won't. It's over. It stays in the past where it belongs." Harry glanced down at my hands which I realised were clenched so tightly into fists at my sides that my knuckles must have turned white. I made a huge effort and managed to let them uncoil and turned to leave.

"I *can't* forget about it," he said, his voice rising. I took a step back and his eyes flashed to my feet. He frowned before focusing back up to my face. "You're still all I can think about. It's putting me off my work, I can't sleep. It's *consuming* me." I blinked once and then turned away from his intense expression. Okay so maybe Harry was suffering nearly as much as me, but I doubted he had this soul-deep yearning that I seemed to be tortured with. Even now he looked furious that he wasn't able to suppress his attraction for me, that I was distracting him from his work. Heaven forbid he'd forget to make another billion this week.

"Is that why you're apologising? Want another crack at it do you?"

"No... yes... no. Look, I just want to *talk*, Verity. Some of the things you're saying don't make any sense to me. I'm sorry I made assumptions but based on past form I—"

"Past form?" my voice started to rise again. "*My* past form? Look *I'm* sorry that your dad lost his housemaster position, I really am. But twenty years ago, *you* were the one to cut me off, not the other way around."

Harry huffed in frustration. "Can you blame me? My family lost their house. My dad almost lost his job. And then your brother put me in the picture – told me the truth."

I reeled back in surprise. Heath had told Harry what was going on? "If Heath told you the truth, then I'm even more confused, Harry. If you knew everything, then why did you stop speaking to me?" Harry's eyebrows went up. When he spoke again his voice was hoarse.

“How can you say that? You’d lied to me. I couldn’t trust you again. I was devastated.” The man looked genuinely confused and I decided that I’d had enough of this nonsense. I’d had enough of people trying to rewrite history for me over the years. Enough of having painful memories minimised and dismissed. Harry was standing there saying he had known all about my family and yet he *still* walked away? For hiding it from him?

“Don’t you try to mess with my head, hedgehog,” I said, taking a step towards him and poking him once in the chest. He took a step forward himself into my hand which then flattened over his heart. For a moment I froze feeling his heat burn through my skin and his steady heartbeat against my palm. He opened his mouth to speak but instead looked down at my hand then back to my eyes and I took a sharp breath in at the intense brown around his dilated pupils. Everything else fell away. It was just me and him. My hand on his shirt tensed and I let out a slow breath. His head lowered. I stretched up onto my toes and before I knew it my mouth had brushed his in a soft kiss, our breath mingling between us. “Ha—” I started to whisper against him, but that was all I managed to get out before he closed his mouth over mine. One of his hands went into my hair and the other arm went around my back, pulling my body into his. A small voice in the back of my mind tried to communicate with my body but it was all too much. His smell, the warmth of his chest and arms now surrounding me, his mouth over mine all combined and I melted into him, letting out a small moan in the back of my throat of sheer relief at being this close to him again. My mouth had just opened under his and my hands had just slid up underneath his suit jacket to feel the muscles of his back, when I heard a small cough behind him. Harry froze and I jerked away in shock. It took me a few more moments to register what was happening as he turned around, keeping me pinned behind him to shield me from view.

“Verity?” I sighed at the sound of Max’s voice. The last thing I needed was his heavy-handed input. “Oi, you, get away from her!”

Harry stiffened and put a hand to keep me behind him as if shielding me from Max, which was ridiculous. Max was a big teddy bear. He might bluster about and look intimidating, but he was marshmallows and kitten fluff inside.

“Calm down, Hardcastle,” he said his tone back to his normal cold. “Verity and I just had something to discuss in private.”

“Calm down? You should have seen the state of her the last time you two had a *private discussion*. Anything you need to discuss you can do with me.”



Max moved then to sidestep Harry and get to me, but Harry was faster. He blocked Max and gave him a shove in the centre of his chest, catching him off guard, causing him to stumble back a step.

“I’m not letting you near her when you’re angry,” Harry unwisely said to an increasingly angry and martial-arts-trained Max.

“Max would never hurt me, Harry,” I said, darting around him and putting myself between the two of them before the situation could escalate any further.

“Unlike some buggers,” Max put in. Harry scowled at him.

“I just needed to talk to her for one minute. Is it too much to ask that you could mind your own bloody business long enough for us to have an actual conversation?”

“Not many ideas being exchanged from where I was standing, mate,” Max retorted, and I felt my face heat.

“Max!” I clipped. “That’s enough.” Harry’s gaze flew to my face, which was now hot with mortification, and his scowl deepened.

“I’m only saying he shouldn’t be taking liberties with you on-site when you—”

“Will you shut up! For Christ’s sake, can’t you see you’re embarrassing her?” Harry said. There was a beat of silence.

“Verity’s never been embarrassed a day in her life,” Max said with confidence.

“Well then you don’t know her very well.”

“I don’t know her? Listen to me, you cheeky sod. I’ve been mates with her for the last twenty-five years. Where have you been?”

“Verity, I just want to talk to you. I—”

“I’m sorry, Harry, but there’s nothing more to say.”

Max was right. Harry didn’t know me, not anymore. What just happened was a mistake. No more “private chats”. Clearly, I could not be trusted around him.

## **HARRY**

Verity had backed away from me and was now standing with Max. It was just like school again – me on my own, excluded. I’d worked hard to bury all of that insecurity, but it was surprising how quickly it came back when a pretty girl decided that I wasn’t good enough to speak to. In my rational mind

I may have known that there were reasons Verity had avoided me for over a year and was rejecting me now, but rationality had no place in the broken heart of a teenager – and that was where my mindset shot back to in that moment.

“Fine,” I said, stuffing my hands into my pockets to stop myself reaching for Verity again. Her lips were still swollen from our kiss, her thick hair had fallen out of its sleek style. There was even a small smudge of mascara on her cheek, which was completely at odds with her normal perfection, but knowing I had been the one to mess her up made her look even more attractive. I had to get a grip of myself. Verity wouldn’t even have a simple conversation with me for God’s sake. I had to let this obsession go. Easier said than done when all I could think about was the way she felt against me, the noises she made in the back of her throat – and now I was adding in the image of her face after we’d kissed today in all its slightly dishevelled, glorious imperfection. “Well, if you’re quite finished here then maybe you could get on with the job I’m paying you for.”

With that I stormed away from them through the site entrance. I felt eyes on me as I headed to my car which made me even more angry. I was being run off my own property by the architects to whom I was paying perfectly good money. As I pulled away from the kerb, I glanced at the dashboard and caught sight of the small Baby Yoda that Toby had stuck there as a joke. Anger shot through me again and I ripped the figure off and threw it out of the window, deeply regretting having ever told Toby about my secret love for everything *Star Wars* and let him convince me it was okay to have a geeky side. It wasn’t okay. It hadn’t been okay twenty years ago and it still wasn’t now. I squared my shoulders as I pulled out into the traffic. No more geeky Harry. From now on it was in-control-billionaire-finance-company-owner Harry. *That* Harry didn’t get rejected by pretty girls. *That* Harry wasn’t pathetically obsessed with a woman who very much did not return his affections in any real way.

# Chapter 9

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*Other humans aren't scary, they're just boring*

**HARRY**

“What?” I snapped at Toby who was currently leaning in my doorframe smiling at me.

“Well, good morning to you, my little ray of sunshine,” he said, strolling in and throwing himself down on my sofa. I felt my eye twitch. My brown leather, beaten up, squashy sofa had seen better days and didn't really go with the office décor in any way, but I was very protective of it. I didn't really even like anyone else sitting on it, which I knew was a little odd. Toby caught my gaze and rolled his eyes. “Wow, you are so weird about this sofa. Well, I'm hungover so you can just put up with me sitting on your precious for a few minutes. Lanie's with her mum this week so I let the Treepost clients convince me to go out with them last night. Huge mistake.”

Barbara immediately jumped off the documents that her massive butt had been obstructing for the last hour to make her way over to Toby. “Oh shit,” muttered Toby as she leapt onto his lap and proceeded to dig her claws into his thighs before turning in multiple circles and finally collapsing her great weight onto him, closing her eyes with a snort. “Agh!” he cried as she dug in her claws, likely piercing his skin through his trousers.

I sighed. “You know what you have to do.”

Toby rolled his eyes and frowned down at the cat then flinched when she clawed him again. “Christ, okay, Babs. No need to be so aggressive about it.” He started stroking her head and that chainsaw purr filled the room. “Your cat is a psychopath.”

“I know.”

“Why the hell do you bring her into the office?”

“She’s started doing dirty protests if I leave her alone at home now,” I told Toby, taking the opportunity to look through the Barbara-abused documents. “That bloody cat can go for days without shitting, but as soon as she sees me leaving in a suit she’s straight upstairs to my bed and... well you don’t want to know. I think she likes the office. And my usual cat-sitter called in sick. I can’t get anyone else in as Barbara’s fussy about which humans she’ll tolerate. And there aren’t many sitters who’ll tolerate her either.”

Toby winced and Barbara continued to rhythmically dig her claws into his legs until he speeded up his stroking. “Can’t think why.”

“How is my goddaughter?”

Toby frowned. “I dunno, mate. She won’t talk to me. Maybe it’s a teenage thing but...” his voice dropped a little lower and I could hear the concern in his tone, “she’s sort of gone into herself. I mean, Maggie can be a grade A bitch to me, but she’s a good mum and even she’s at a bit of a loss.”

“Lanie not speaking?” My eyebrows went up in surprise. “But she can talk the hindlegs off a donkey.”

Toby snorted. “Not now she doesn’t. You haven’t seen her in a while. She’s changed. I don’t know if it’s the divorce or school or what, but I do know that I’m not handling it very well. The kid won’t tell me anything and the more I push the more she shuts down.”

“Christ, I’m sorry, mate,” I said, feeling a bit bad for moaning about myself when Toby was so obviously worried about his daughter. There was a twinge of guilt as well. I’d been so distracted lately that I hadn’t been as engaged as I should have. “Can you bring her round next week? I’ll cook her tacos. She loves my tacos.”

“Sure, don’t expect much convo out of her though. Or even really to see her face. It’s all dark hoodies and thick eyeliner now.” Dark hoodies? Lanie’s favourite colour was pink.

“Okay, well just bring her round and we’ll see.”

“Thanks, man. Maybe you can talk to her. You’ve always been her favourite Godparent. Not that there’s much competition mind – my brother-in-law and his wife are still massive twats. Anyway listen, I came in here to ask you why you’re hiding?”

“Hiding?”

“Yes, hiding.” Toby raised his head off one of the arm rests to look at me. “It’s like we’ve slipped back fifteen years and you’ve gone totally asocial.

Don't make me dig you out of that hole again, mate. Once was enough."

"I'm just busy. These systems don't upgrade themselves."

"I heard what happened last week," he said quietly, and I pushed back from my computer screen, resigned to the fact I wouldn't be working for a while. "And I don't necessarily think that the correct response is continuing to send shitty emails asking our architects to change a perfectly good design."

"I emailed about a valid concern."

Toby raised his eyebrows at the obvious lie. It had not been a valid concern, and Verity's company had demonstrated this by plugging the change I'd suggested into their Building Information Modelling software, then sending me a graphic reimagining of the catastrophic stairway collapse that my suggestion would have caused. I was secretly quite impressed – they'd even managed to add in the human figures usually used in these graphics to give scale, but instead of showing them walking about, the new designs showed people trapped under building debris and crushed by the ceiling caving in. It was less a building design and more a scene from a horror movie.

Toby sighed. "Did she message you?"

I shifted in my chair and avoided eye contact with him. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Verity," Toby said. "You know, the girl you've been in love with since you were sixteen. The girl you made a scene with at the site last week. Did she message you? I assume that was who you were trying to provoke with your dickish suggestions."

"I wasn't trying to provoke anyone. I really did–"

"Come on, Hazza. It's just me here."

I closed my eyes for a moment and swallowed my pride. "No, she didn't."

"Have you tried just being honest with her?"

"Before we could get to the honesty part, I lost it and behaved like a complete shit. Now she won't give me the time of day. Anyway, she's not interested, Toby. She wasn't interested when we were teenagers, and she's still not interested now."

"The way she looks at you does not suggest disinterest to me, my friend."

"She looks at me like she hates me."

"Exactly."

I grabbed the back of my neck and squeezed for a moment. "I felt like I

was back there again when she told me to piss off at the building site,” I said in a quiet voice. “Back there as the geeky teacher’s son who doesn’t quite fit in amongst all the glamorous rich kids. Then I stormed off like a two-year-old.”

“That fucking school,” Toby muttered in a dark voice.

When Toby and I had met at the LSE I’d been at my most antisocial. We were in the same dorm, and at the time I was deeply shy and reclusive, basically only leaving my room for classes, to eat and to go to work the jobs I needed to stay afloat. Toby was my study partner and we had a similar dry, self-effacing sense of humour. So, after a whole six months of me dodging his invites, he stole my laptop and wouldn’t give it back unless I came to the pub with him. Gradually, Toby’s friends became my friends. I got a haircut and started going to the gym more, discovered girls actually liked me, started seeing some action, and realised that at the LSE pretty much everyone was a geek, and proud of it too. It had taken a while to accept the new normal though, and there had been bumps in the road. Like the time Toby and his friends had been planning a ski trip. I’d been there for all the discussions and nodded along, but it was only when Toby asked me if I had checked my passport was up to date that I realised that they actually wanted me to go with them.

*“What do you mean you didn’t think you’d need it, Hazza?” he’d asked in front of everyone whilst we were all ensconced in a small booth in the pub. “Don’t tell me that you’ve actually mastered teleportation now? I knew all those extra hours in the lab had to be for something.”*

*“No, I—” I glanced about at the curious faces around us and shrugged. “I just assumed it was just you lot. Like, a mates’ trip.”*

*“You lot?” Noo asked, her eyebrows in her hairline as she leaned further into Toby. “What does that mean? Aren’t we your mates too?”*

*“Um...”*

*“Well, that’s bloody charming,” Marco put in. “Last time I buy you a beer, you bastard.”*

*My face felt red hot as I looked down into my empty glass and muttered, “I’m sorry, I just haven’t really had mates before. I wasn’t sure if I was... well...” I trailed off and gripped the back of my neck, thoroughly embarrassed and upset that they might think I thought myself too good for them when the opposite was true.*

*Toby huffed out an exasperated breath and used his free hand that was*

*not around Noo's shoulders to push my head to the side whilst ruffling my hair. "Well, for your information, Hazza, you may be a salty bastard, but you're my best mate. So you'd better get your arse in gear and sort out your passport to come on holiday with us lot. Right?"*

*It took me a moment to answer and when I did my throat was tight. "Right, yeah sure I'll get on that." If I sounded a bit choked nobody commented on it, but Noo did give me a hug before we left for the student bar and Toby slapped me on the back a few times, before giving me an awkward one-armed hug of his own.*

"Downingham has got a lot to answer for," Toby said. "But it's in the past now. And anyway, you always said that this girl was the only good thing about school. She made it 'tolerable', remember? Before all that shit with your dad kicked off, and the stuff her brother said. Which, by the way, may well not be true – you still don't know all the facts."

Not for the first time I wished I hadn't always been so open with Toby. He'd been like a dog with a bone ever since Verity came back on the scene, and Noo wasn't much better. To her it all had the potential to be the romance of the century. I hadn't had the heart to tell her how I'd behaved since our dinner at The Ivy. I don't think romantic heroes insult their heroines after kissing them, dredge up old grudges from the past, and basically fuck everything up royally before they'd even managed to have an actual conversation.

"It doesn't matter now," I said in a dejected tone. "I've been way too much of a bastard for her to ever give me the time of day. The annoying thing is that she doesn't seem to be just angry about what happened last year. For some reason, she's painted me as the bad guy from when we were at school, which makes no sense whatsoever." I shook my head. "Either way she's made it clear that I need to stay away from her."

"Hmm," Toby said as he stared off into the middle distance.

"Don't even think about interfering, you prick," I said. "I'm serious Toby. This isn't uni where you can set me up with whichever bird you like, and it works. I..." Verity's pale face, her eyes swimming with tears, floated through my mind and I swallowed. "I don't want to upset her anymore. It's better we just leave it."

"Okay," he agreed, way too quickly for my liking. "I'll leave it if you agree to get off your arse and come out with me this weekend."

"Where to?"



“Surprise.”

I frowned.

“Look, you’ll die early if you carry on working all the time. How about this – either you agree to come out with me this weekend, or I get your mother on the phone and have a cosy little chat about how you’re not looking after yourself. You loved it the last time she visited the office, remember?” He was grinning at me unrepentantly now and I had no doubt he’d follow through with his threat. Mum loved Toby. She’d be on the next train down if he told her how hard I was working. The scale of my business and my capacity for hard work had always baffled my parents. As had my ambition to get out of that stifling boarding school town. Dad was happy as a maths teacher, and Mum had been happy to help him run the boarding house when he was housemaster. After Dad lost that post we’d had to move into a tiny, terraced house in the town. But despite the humiliation and the accusation of wrongdoing that he endured, he still loved that damn school. Part of the reason I never told my parents how miserable Downingham had made me was because he had loved it so much. But the crap time I had at that place, together with my parents infuriating lack of financial ambition, was what had pushed me on to build this company I had today.

They were proud of me, of course they were, but all they really wanted was for me to be happy. My grandad had died of a heart attack, and they were always issuing me with ominous warnings about my family history and how I should limit stress. Mum sent me an article just yesterday about a Japanese businessman who had dropped dead from overwork – if Toby rang her now she’d be down here in a shot and, worse, she’d be worried and upset.

“Fine, whatever,” I muttered. “But if it’s a big social thing then you know that’s not exactly something I’ll find relaxing.” There were basically four people I liked to hang out with, beyond that I wasn’t keen on humans in general.

Toby rolled his eyes. “Don’t worry, the crew will be there. We won’t let any of the other scary humans talk to you.”

“Other humans aren’t scary, they’re just boring.” Very few people I met ever said or did anything interesting. I hated small talk with the strength of a thousand suns.

“Just be ready at seven on Saturday night. And it’s black tie by the way.”

# Chapter 10

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## *We're not friends*

### **VERITY**

“Gah! These shoes are killing me.”

“Yaz,” I said in a warning tone. “Do not take off your shoes.”

“How do you walk around all day in these torture devices?”

“My feet, legs and spine have long since realigned to accommodate high heels,” I told her in a dry voice. “If I stop wearing them now my vertebra would likely disintegrate.”

“Medically accurate as always,” Heath put in. “Midge, you do what you need to do, love.”

Yaz turned to my brother and slipped her arm around his waist. He smiled down at her, threw his arm over her shoulders and pulled her into his side to kiss her temple. Shoes were now forgotten. I was happy that my brother and Yaz had finally sorted themselves out and admitted they were in love, but their PDA could get a bit nauseating.

“Yo! Dorset peeps!” Kira Lucas sprang up out of nowhere in her characteristic way. She grabbed Yaz from Heath and into a full-body hug, slapped Max on the back, fisted bumped Heath and, alarmingly when it was her turn to greet me, she grabbed my face in her hands saying, “God, look at you, you savagely gorgeous building-fiddler.”

“Hello, Kira,” I said with some mild exasperation, but secretley suppressing a smile. It was impossible not to be charmed by this woman. “I didn’t know you guys were going to be here.”

“Oh, you know Barcos,” Kira said. “Environmentally friendly design butters his muffin. This is exactly the type of architecture award evening he wants to attend. And anyway, he loves a good bash.”

My eyebrows went up at that blatant lie.

“Okay,” she admitted. “He’s not quite as social as me, but he *did* think he needed to come.”

This evening was an architecture prize-giving dinner with a difference. It was for innovative designs with the least environmental impact. We had been nominated for a housing project on the outskirts of London that we’d just completed last year. All the houses were beautifully designed but in an affordable way, and they were all passive – meaning each one could be heated with only a couple of humans and a dog. That’s where our project had the edge over other companies – we were catering to the average person, and reducing their bills whilst helping the environment. Most of the other projects that had been nominated for the same award weren’t reproducible, affordable housing – not by a long stretch.

“Good to see you don’t change,” I said through a smile, then eyed her feet – she was barefoot.

“See, shoe police!” Yaz said as she pointed at Kira’s feet. “The *prime minister’s wife* has taken off her shoes! There’s no reason I can’t.”

“Yaz, the prime minister’s wife is mental,” I said in a dry tone. “No offence, Kira.”

“None taken, building-fiddler. I take it as a compliment.”

“Yes, well,” I said through a smile. “The whole country knows she’s mental. Nobody will blink an eye if she takes off her shoes. We lesser mortals need to keep our footwear firmly in place.”

Yaz started banging on about foot health and yoga and how high heels were anti-feminist. She even called them ‘foot cages’, but her words faded into the background for me because I’d spotted *him*. I took a sharp breath in and then stopped breathing altogether. It was only Yaz’s hand on my arm that brought me back to myself.

“Breathe, Verity,” she said softly as she gave my arm a squeeze and I let out the breath I was holding and took another one in for some much-needed oxygen.

“V?” Heath’s concerned voice filtered through now and I managed to drag my gaze from Harry to my brother. “You okay, love?” I realised that everyone in our small circle had stopped talking. They were all silently focused on me. I forced a smile.

“Yes, fine. Sorry just zoned out there for a minute.”

“Did you see something?” Yaz whispered in my ear. “Some sort of

trigger?” The yoga and breathing techniques Yaz had taught me had improved the panic attacks but I still wasn’t fully in control of them.

“I’m fine,” I said firmly. “Honestly, I probably just need a drink.”

I lifted my champagne glass to my mouth, but unfortunately, this did not have the effect of reassuring everyone I was okay as my hand was shaking.

“That dick,” Max spat out and I closed my eyes in annoyance. Shit, he’d spotted him too. “He’s here.”

“Who’s here?” Heath asked.

“Harry bloody York, that’s who.”

“Harry York?” Heath said slowly. “I know that name. Wait... Harry from school? *Your* Harry from school, V?”

“*Your* Harry?” Max’s voice rose in disbelief. “What do you mean by that? She hates his guts. We both do. He’s been a relentless prick since we took that bloody job for the LSE.”

Heath frowned. “Verity does not hate Harry York’s guts. In fact—”

“Just shut up, both of you,” I hissed. “And *stop* saying his name.”

But it was too late.

“Er... hi.” It was much more along the lines of a greeting that teenage Harry would have given, and I felt a sudden absolute longing in my chest that almost felt like pain. “Harry York.”

“*Your* Harry York, apparently,” Toby said from next to Harry.

“Oh! We don’t have to wear shoes? Thank fuck for that.” Naomi had come up on Harry’s other side and kicked off both her shoes to where Yaz’s and Kira’s lay in the centre of our circle. “Crap,” she muttered. “I feel like a hobbit now. You boys all need to cut down on your greens.”

“You’re Kira Lucas,” Toby said in a stunned voice, suddenly clocking Kira in the circle.

“Ooh,” Kira said, a wide smile on her face. “I didn’t know you Dorset lot had fancy friends what wear Armani.”

“We’re not friends,” I snapped, and all eyes in the circle came to me. “We do business with them.”

“I wear Armani,” Heath put in, breaking the awkward silence.

“Er... you’re in pyjamas most of the time, mate,” Kira said, which was technically true as Heath was an emergency medical consultant.

“Your husband got us to pay more tax,” Harry blurted out and Kira tilted her head to the side. Her eyes flashed and she opened her mouth to speak but Harry got in there first. “Good for him. Better than that last tosspot.”

“I’m Toby by the way,” said Toby smoothly, extending his hand towards Kira. “This is Harry, and you probably recognise Naomi. Sorry, I’m still working on Harry’s manners. It’s been a couple of decades but at least now he does more than grunt.”

“You must have a bob or two if you were targeted by my husband’s tax policy,” Kira said, eyeing both Toby and Harry. “And I know *you* have a bob or two,” she said to Naomi, who after my ‘we’re not friends’ comment had slipped her arm through Harry’s and given a squeeze of silent support. She was still hanging off his side now. I felt like I was going to be sick.

“You’re friends with Urvi,” Naomi said, grinning at Kira and leaning more into Harry. “I know her through the biz. Great lady.” The ‘biz’ was the music industry. Naomi Light and Urvi Bailey were both the biggest selling artists in the UK. If anyone had told me back at school that Harry would end up going out with a pop star, I would have laughed in their face, but for this new Harry with the Big Dick Energy he liked to throw around, it seemed a perfect fit.

Kira’s face lit up. “Oh, you’re mates with Urvvels? She’s a diamond badger. Loved your last album by the way.”

“Harry, it’s good to see you again, mate,” Heath said.

Harry looked bemused as Heath took his hand to shake it, giving him a couple of slaps on the arm for good measure. I didn’t blame Harry. It was more than a little bizarre and, if I was honest, a bit hurtful. Heath knew how upset I’d been back then after Harry’s rejection. It destroyed me for a good while. I spent the first term of my last year at school holed up in my room listening to Justin Timberlake crying me a river. Where was his loyalty?

“I can’t tell you how brilliant it is that you and Verity have reconnected again,” Heath went on. “She binged on about you all the time at school. Harry thinks this, Harry says that – she thought the world of you.”

I felt a low buzzing in my ears as all the blood rushed to my head. This was mortifying.

Harry’s mouth dropped open to speak but he seemed to be utterly lost for words. He glanced at me, but our eyes only met for a second before I looked away, my face burning. I started to feel lightheaded but then felt Yaz’s hand on my back. The contact centred me, and I realised that I needed to let go of the breath I was holding.

“That’s strange,” Harry said in a tight voice. “That isn’t what you told me at the time, Heath.”

“Now, listen,” Heath started to say, “about that ... I– I need to explain. I–”

“It’s just as well we’re not the same people we were twenty years ago,” I said, cutting Heath and this uncomfortable exchange off. I did not want all that nonsense dragged up again. I’d ask Heath about it later. I managed to force my lips to turn up at the corners for a small smile. “Harry could barely remember me when he saw me again. Things move on, Heath. I doubt Harry wants to go over ancient history.” With that I downed my champagne, deposited it on a passing waiter’s tray and turned on my heel to sweep away from the group so I could breathe again. The whole place was full of people I knew – industry contacts, friends, colleagues, but I just couldn’t manage to rustle up my usual effortless charm. My throat felt too tight, and my head was pounding. After a few minutes I managed to escape the crowd and make for the ladies’ toilets.

# Chapter 11

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## *I've been really, really fucking stupid*

### **VERITY**

I'd only just left my cubicle and was staring at myself in the mirror when the door swung open and Naomi stepped inside.

"Hey," she called, grinning at me again, which seemed to be her default setting. "Yeesh, this bog is posh, but I guess I'd still better put my shoes back on. She balanced on one foot and then the other as she accomplished this manoeuvre with the grace of the performer that she was. I gave her a polite smile and made for the exit, but a now fully-shod Naomi stepped in front of me to block my way.

"Are you going to put Harry out of his misery or not?" she asked. Her hands went to her hips and her eyebrows lifted up in expectation. The grin had dropped now I noticed.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said, which was the truth. As far as I was concerned Harry was here with his girlfriend, who was an absolutely stunning international pop star. Not much misery evident there.

"Bloody hell, lady!" Naomi flung her hands up and then slapped them down at her sides in frustration. "Give him a break. He's so into you it's almost painful to watch."

I frowned. "I'm sorry, but are you seriously telling me that your *boyfriend* is into me?"

Naomi rolled her eyes. "He's not my boyfriend." I raised my eyebrows, and she puffed out a breath. "Okay, I can see how it looks. But honestly, we've been friends for decades, nothing more. It was always..." Naomi looked to the side briefly then cleared her throat. "It wasn't Harry I was with at uni. We've never gone there. It's been pretty clear from the beginning of

our friendship that he's not into me, not like that anyway. Not the way he's clearly into *you*."

"If he's not your boyfriend, why are you going out with him?"

"Oh, that! Yeah, I can see how that's confusing. Harry does it as a favour."

"A favour?"

Naomi shrugged. "I have a little... er... problem – too depressing to get into right now – but it's better if the public see me as being *with* someone. I thought you knew all that to be honest?"

"Okay," I said slowly. "So, Harry's your beard?"

Naomi laughed. "I guess that works. My relationship beard. But he's been a good friend to me too, and he's a really good bloke. I just want to try to help fix whatever got fucked up between you two. It's rare to see Harry actually *want* something with any intensity that's not to do with either the business or his foundation." The York Foundation funded youth projects in deprived areas all over the country, with a special focus on anti-bullying measures. At Harry's instigation, the LSE building we had designed would provide a dedicated space for one such project, aimed at supporting underprivileged teenagers. "He normally just defaults into dry humour and cynical world views – showing actual enthusiasm is almost unheard of."

"I don't think he wants me. Far from it."

"But–"

"And even if he did, I'm afraid there are a few too many burnt bridges to cross when it comes to Harry and me."

"But maybe if you–"

"No!" I burst out. All the stress of the evening and of the last few weeks crashed through me in that moment and I semi-shouted my words. "He broke my heart, alright? Twice! Harry could be the best bloke in the world with thousands of charity foundations, but that doesn't change the fact he's been a shit to *me*."

"I'm sure that–"

Right. I'd had enough of this. I skirted around Naomi and made it out of the door to bolt towards the bar, but after a few steps, I stopped abruptly as I saw Harry talking to Heath just a few feet away. Heath appeared to be quite animated whilst Harry was standing back staring at him with his arms crossed over his chest. Just as I'd turned to flee in the other direction, I felt someone's hand close over my lower arm. Naomi was surprisingly strong for her size,

and she managed to bring me to a halt.

“Give him a chance, Verity. You’re being unfair. He—”

I yanked my arm from her grip and turned to face her. If she had Harry up on a pedestal, then fine, but I wasn’t going to be accused of being unfair.

“Look, maybe he’s a good friend and he’s helping you with your ‘little problem’, whatever that means, but after he kissed me, your *good friend* accused me of coming on to him to get my hands on his building project.”

Naomi winced. “I’m sure he didn’t mean it like that. You’ve got to understand, he’s so *very* rich. He’s used to people, women especially, taking advantage of him. Maybe he thought—”

My laughter cut off whatever she was going to say next, and her mouth snapped shut. Because it wasn’t happy laughter, it was pain-filled and bitter even to my own ears. “Do you have any idea how rich *I* am, Naomi?”

“No,” she said carefully. “Listen maybe we should go somewhere more private for a sec.”

“See, I’ve got *old* money. Piles and piles of it. My family’s been filthy rich, living off the backs of the downtrodden in this country for centuries. Now my father’s dead, I’m beyond wealthy. Harry knows that. The last thing he’d think is that I’m after his money. No, he just thinks of me as a straight-up, old-fashioned *whore*.” My eyes were burning now, and Naomi’s face had gone very pale. She opened her mouth to speak, but before she could say anything a great wall of man blocked her from my view.

“I do *not* think you’re a whore,” he said, his voice shaking with anger as his hands came up to frame my face. I was too shocked to move. Before I could say anything, he’d spun us round, slung his arm over my shoulders and tucked me into his side then started propelling us through the crowd. Out of the corner of my eye I could see Toby leading Naomi in the opposite direction for some reason. I was too shocked to launch any sort of objection until we were in the lobby. When I saw we were headed to the exit I managed to get enough of my faculties in order to jerk away from him and grind to a halt. He turned to face me. When he took a step forward towards me, I took a corresponding one back. He put his hands up as if in surrender, his expression guarded. “Okay, Verity. Please just listen for a moment.” I started stalking in the opposite direction, but he skirted me easily to block my path.

“Get out of my way,” I said through gritted teeth, then moved to the side, but he stepped with me. “Harry—”

“If you value any of those hours we spent together even *half* as much as I

do then please, please hear me out.” His hands were still held up to me with his palms facing forward and his expression was tinged with desperation. I crossed my arms over my chest and narrowed my eyes at him. “Five minutes.”

He blew out a relieved breath and then went to take my hand, but I jerked it out of his reach.

“Okay, right yes,” he muttered, his hand going up to the back of his neck in his obvious discomfort.

“Get on with it then,” I snapped.

“I can’t speak to you here,” he said, just as a passing couple gave us curious looks from across the lobby. “Will you come back with me?”

“To your house?” my voice was rising with incredulity. As if I would go anywhere near that place again. He rubbed his hands down his face.

“Okay, right, here then. I...” he paused, put his hand back up on the back of his neck again and cleared his throat. “I don’t know where to start.”

“Five minutes, Harry.”

“You weren’t playing some sort of sick game with me at school.” It was said as a statement, not a question but I had no idea why he would feel the need to verbalise this. Why would I have been playing a game?

“Is this some kind of joke?” I snapped.

“You didn’t think I was a geeky, skinny, social-climbing teacher’s son.”

My head jerked and my mouth fell open. “Of course, I didn’t. Harry, for God’s sake I was in love with you.”

Harry’s eyes closed for a moment and his jaw clenched so hard I could see a muscle flickering under his stubble. “I’ve been really, *really* fucking stupid.” His tone was so desolate that I almost, *almost* felt sorry for him.

“Who the hell called you a geeky, skinny, social climbing, teacher’s son?” I asked, anger on his behalf leaking into my tone. I may have hated his guts now, but the idea of someone saying those things to sweet, grumpy, shy, teenage Harry made me bloody furious. Harry’s desolate expression was briefly broken by a small smile at my outrage. “Why didn’t you tell me at the time, you numpty? I could have sorted them right out.”

“Because, Verity, it was your *brother* who called me those things.”

I blinked then shook my head a few times in a jerky way. “Heath would never have said that. He— he would never behave like that.”

“Ask him yourself, baby,” he said, and that endearment swept through me from the inside out in a rush of warmth. When would my body cooperate

with my mind when it came to this man?

“I can’t believe he’d do that.”

“He says he had his reasons, but that at the time he thought he was doing the right thing.” Harry’s jaw clenched again, and his eyes lit with anger. “We’ll have to agree to disagree on that one. It was the week everything went down with my dad. You and Heath had both been called into the headmaster’s office. I’d wanted to speak to you to ask you why your family was doing this. Beg you to try and change your parents’ minds. But Heath caught me on my way out of the house and stopped me. He told me that neither of you gave a shit about my ‘nosy twat of a father’. That it was all a game to you both, that all I’d ever been to you was a game.”

“Heath wouldn’t say that,” I muttered. “He... he just wouldn’t say any of that. We...”

I trailed off and my gaze went unfocused for a moment as I thought back to that week. Heath had been desperate with worry.

*They’re talking about calling the bloody social workers in, V. We’ve got to be convincing. If anyone comes back to that house to check on us, we’re fucked.*

I remembered that wild look in his eyes, the desperation in his tone. Heath would do anything to protect me. Anything. I blinked up at Harry’s concerned expression and took in a shuddering breath.

“When you said before, back at the building site, that Heath told you everything, what did you mean?”

Harry frowned. “Well, what I just told you.”

“That I was playing games with you?”

“Yes.”

I felt a weird mixture of relief that Heath hadn’t told Harry what was really going on back then, pain that he’d lied, and an acute sense of loss.

“That’s why you wouldn’t take my phone calls?” I whispered. “You thought... you thought it had all been just a game? You thought I would have done that to you? That I was that type of person?”

A flash of pain went through Harry’s expression and one of his hands went up to the back of his neck. “I’m sorry, Verity. Heath told me he was lying. But I’m sorry I didn’t let you explain things to me yourself. When Dad lost his job as housemaster it just cemented everything Heath had said. I had so much resentment back then about entitled rich kids.” His voice then dropped to just above a whisper as he leaned into me, his gorgeous brown

eyes boring into mine. “I should have let you explain. I should have known you would never say that, would never think that.”

“I—I...” I trailed off and looked toward the direction of the crowd in the other room, trying to spot Heath. “I’m going to have to speak to my brother about this.”

“Verity, I know that I’ve been a complete dick since we met again, but my stupid pride was in the way. Part of me seems to be stuck as that awkward, rejected teenager still. All I could see was the pretty, popular girl playing games with the nobody I thought I was, just like everyone else did at that school.” He then carefully took both of my hands in his as if I would spook at any moment, and lowered his voice. “You never told me things were... difficult at home back then Verity.” I felt my heart surge up and lodge in my throat at his words.

“How long were you talking to my brother?” I asked in a low voice, snatching my hands away from his and taking a step back. Harry held up his hands again.

“Look, I know it’s a tricky subject and –”

“He’d no right to tell you any of that,” I snapped. The cold feeling of shame that I was unfortunately very familiar with washed over me in an automatic response. It didn’t seem to matter how much therapy I had, how many times I was reassured that what happened to us during our childhood wasn’t our fault – I could never get away from this feeling. The feeling of being unwanted, of not being lovable enough for my parents to bother looking after me. I knew the reality was that my parents were damaged themselves, that they were addicts, that they were selfish and that that wasn’t on me. But knowing and believing are two very separate things. And this man who now knew – I could see it in his eyes, he *knew* – this man had made me feel unwanted and vulnerable himself, not once but twice. He was the last person I wanted involved in my sordid family history. I was going to kill Heath for leaving me as exposed as this.

“I needed to know *something*, Verity. He didn’t tell me much, just that my dad was right to have been worried.”

“There’s no reason for you to know.”

“I want a chance to–”

My throat felt tight then and it was a struggle to get out the rest of my words, but I pushed through. “I left you so many messages, Harry. I *begged* you to speak to me.”

Harry shifted uncomfortably. “My parents were so angry. Everything was totally messed up and I was an insecure little bitch who was only too ready to believe the worst.”

“Even if all your insecure teenager bullshit had merit. That doesn’t change how you treated me last year. Or how you’ve treated me since that day in the boardroom when you threw your Big Dick Energy around to make some sort of bullshit point. Or all the times you’ve tried to undermine me since.”

“I know,” he said, his voice strained and hoarse. “All I can say is how sorry I am. I wish I could go back and change things. Not just the last year but the last twenty years. But I’m here now. Please just give me a chance to—”

“Harry, I’ve been unwanted since the day I was born,” I said, my voice as cold as the feeling that had washed over me. “By the people who were genetically predisposed to love and care for me. I’m not going to waste my time now with somebody else who makes me feel unwanted.”

“God, Verity,” he said, his face paling at my words. “I had no idea about any of that. I’m so sorry. I should have—”

“I don’t want to go into it. It’s over now. Listen, for the sake of the project let’s just... call a truce. Okay?”

Harry narrowed his eyes and moved a little closer. His face was still pale with shock but his mouth was set in a stubborn line – not a good sign with Harry. Bloody hell, he was so handsome it almost hurt to look at him. I felt my pulse rate pick up and that familiar pull towards him. “Does calling a truce involve you ever letting me kiss you again?”

“No, it does not,” I said, my hands going to my hips.

Harry rubbed his stubble for a moment lost in thought. “Does it involve you agreeing to have dinner with me?”

I huffed out an exasperated breath. His mouth was quirked at the corners now in a half smile. “Absolutely not.”

“Hmm.” He studied me for a moment. “Can I drive you home?”

“Harry, I live in Dorset. That’s over two hours drive.”

“So?”

“No, no you cannot drive me home, you lunatic. Anyway, I’m sure you have an early start tomorrow making more billions for billionaires – go do that.”

He stared at me for a moment and then whispered, “I can’t stop thinking about you.” It took all my self-control to stay where I was and not fall into

him. I felt my breathing speed up and a flush spread from my chest to my neck, but I managed to force myself to take a step back.

“Try,” I said before spinning on my heel and stalking away from him towards Heath and the others. As I was crossing the space my Harry-addled mind did register the pause in the music and the compère speaking to the crowd to announce the winners of the Sustainable Housing UK award. I heard Max’s name and mine being called out, and turned to the stage, forcing myself to put on a shaky smile.



# Chapter 12

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## *I was a patient man*

### **HARRY**

“Max, what’s going on?” Verity said as she pushed open his glass door.

Both Max and I stood up. She scowled at me in response to my low wave and half smile. She did not however attempt to throw a brick at me like she had on site a few weeks ago which I counted as progress (to be fair there wasn’t actually a brick to hand in Max’s office, but she could have gone for the stapler or something).

“Hi Verity,” I said, ignoring her fierce stance and obvious annoyance.

“Why is *he* here?”

Max looked between us in frustration. “The bugger said he wants to go through the new designs for the lobby. He does *own* the bloody thing, V. I can hardly tell him to shove off without showing him owt.”

Verity blew out a frustrated breath. She looked amazing today – the heels, the elegant low bun, the white silk shirt with wide-leg white trousers – every inch the client-facing, ice-queen side of the business. By contrast, Max’s jumper had a small hole in the sleeve.

“You’ve seen the designs. We sent them to you last week,” she said through her teeth. I shrugged.

“I prefer a more in-person approach.” She shot me a look that would have a lesser man pissing his pants, but I held my ground. This was my new tactic with Verity. Over the last month I’d been sending flowers, cards, messages. I’d had lunch delivered to their office twice – steak sandwich and prawn salad – both of which I knew were her favourites (or at least they were sixteen-year-old Verity’s favourites when we played the game of: *what room service would we order if we weren’t stuck in a freezing cold school with the*

*equivalent of prison food for every meal*) but none of this was cracking her determination to ignore me. The only emails or texts she responded to were those related to the business project. All the others went unanswered and ignored.

Okay, so maybe Verity hadn't agreed to give me another chance, but at least we were communicating about *something*, and she wasn't openly hostile (with the exception of the brick incident).

"Fine, well you can catch up with the delightful Max in person, Mr York. Some of us have actual work to be getting on with."

An hour later and armed with an oat milk latte (some more inside information I'd extracted from Heath, who was still feeling guilty enough to be on my team in the winning-Verity-over stakes) I knocked on Verity's office door and let myself in before she could tell me to bugger off.

"Harry, honestly," she said, standing up and coming round her desk to halt my progress further into her space. I held out the coffee to her and she snatched it out of my hand. Even at sixteen Verity had been a little caffeine fiend. "I'm sure you're frightfully busy. How have you got time to come to Dorset and annoy me? There are hundreds of women in London who'd be only too happy to accept coffees and flowers and food and..." she trailed off as she saw what I was holding in my other hand. "Where did you-?"

"I don't know if you remember this or not but..." I trailed off, feeling a little self-conscious now that I'd followed through on my crazy plan. She put her coffee down on the desk behind her and did a slow blink at the book I was holding.

"It can't be?" she whispered, and I held it out to her. Slowly and very carefully she took the book from me and inspected the front cover before opening it at the first page. It was a drawing of me. I was standing on a huge wall wearing a leather coat with furs over my shoulder and heavy boots on my feet. There was a dragon flying in the background.

I remembered the day Verity had drawn it. I'd been totally scandalised that she was graffitiing a book, and not just any book but my *favourite* book. But I forgot about all of that when she showed me this sketch. Jon Snow is one of the coolest characters in the history of literature in my opinion, and for Verity to draw me in his likeness, to have spent hours over it, was impossibly meaningful to a bullied, geeky schoolboy. There was no telly version of *A Game of Thrones* in those days, so Jon Snow existed only in the imagination of epic fantasy readers like me and Verity. She knew he was my favourite

character.

*“I thought you never drew people?” I’d said at the time when I managed to speak past my dry throat.*

*Verity shrugged. “Most people suck. I normally stick to buildings. But you’re not so bad, and I couldn’t draw The Wall without you looking superior on top of it.”*

*I felt my cheeks heat up as I studied the sketch again then I cleared my throat.*

*“Listen, if you don’t want it then—” Verity tried to take the book and I snatched it away, holding it up to my chest.*

*“No, I’ll keep it,” I said, my tone was a little fierce. Verity’s hands went up and her eyes widened for a moment.*

*“Ookaay,” she said slowly. I shifted on the sofa and moved to stow the book in my bag.*

*God, why was I such an awkward bastard? Couldn’t I try to say thank you like a normal person? I squared my shoulders and turned back to her. Her expression was a mixture of unsure and hopeful. There was a look in her eyes again today. It had been there for the last few weeks – determined and hyper-focused... on me, which I was finding so confusing.*

*“Harry, listen you’re leaving school soon,” she said, leaning towards me on the sofa. “I... Look, I’m sorry if you think the picture’s silly. It’s just that I—”*

*“If I could draw, I would only ever draw you.” The words just fell out of my mouth before I could claw them back. But that picture of me was not silly. I couldn’t let her think that, even for a moment. But that sounded a little stalkery – I’d probably scared the crap out of her. I felt heat hit my cheeks. “I mean, I—”*

*I did not get to finish that sentence. In fact, I wasn’t sure if I’d ever regain the power of speech again. Because Verity Markham was kissing me. Her mouth landed on mine mid-word, and now all I could feel were her soft lips, all I could smell was the floral shampoo she used. And I was frozen in place. She pulled back and looked at me. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes the brightest blue I’d ever seen them. At my hesitation the colour left her cheeks, leaving a stricken expression in its wake. Oh my God, I needed to grow a spine and pull myself together!*

*“Shit, sorry, Harry, I guess I read you wrong. But after that comment about you drawing me, I thought that—”*

*It was my turn to cut her off now. I closed the gap between us, my hands going up to her jaw then sliding into her hair and my mouth closing over hers. There was way more enthusiasm than technique, but that didn't matter to either of us. Footsteps behind the shelves caused us to break the connection but we stayed with our foreheads pressed against each other, our breath mingling between us along with the dense fog of teenage hormones.*

*"You are so, so beautiful," I found myself whispering. Her hand came up to my jaw and she stroked my face down to my neck and then into my hair at the back, letting out a low almost purr of contentment.*

*"You are everything, Harry," she said simply.*

In the intervening years, I'd gone over those words in my head and the way she'd said them thousands of times. Her tone had not suggested that she was having a laugh with me or taking the piss as Heath had said later. But I'd pushed the truth of who I knew Verity to be out of my mind in the weeks following our kiss. In the narrative I constructed after Heath said what he did, it was just another example of a spoiled little rich girl playing with the bullied loser who dared to have a crush on her, right before she destroyed my father's career. I could acknowledge now what a coward I was.

*You are everything, Harry.*

I'd let her down, but it wouldn't happen again. She just had to believe it.

"You kept it," she whispered, still staring down at the book. There was a long silence during which neither of us moved.

"Verity, I—" I was cut off as she moved in one fluid motion towards me, up onto her toes and her mouth closed over mine. Just like before, it was as though a circuit tripped in my brain. I didn't care that we were in her office with glass walls, that I was trying to win her trust slowly, that I wanted to really talk to her first before things got physical again — none of those thoughts or good intentions mattered because finally, finally she was in my arms again with her scent surrounding me and her soft body against mine. One of my hands went up to her jaw, the other slid up her back and the kiss went out of both of our control. I was so lost in the acute relief and overwhelming feeling of rightness that it took me a couple of minutes to register the sudden and absolute silence. I managed to break the kiss and Verity blinked up at me once, twice, then she froze as reality flooded in. We both turned our heads at the same time.

"For fuck's sake," Verity muttered in a horrified tone, as I struggled to suppress a laugh. The entire work floor had stopped what they were doing to

stare into Verity's glass office. There were people with mugs halfway up to their mouths, some frozen over work drawing boards with pencils in hand.

"Bloody hell," Verity whispered. "Why did I have to insist on an open environment? Nosy fuckers."

Max was standing in *his* glass office on the other side of the space with his hands on his hips and his mouth open in shock. When he caught my eye that shock morphed into anger and he sprang into action, storming out of his office and across the floor towards us.

This at least seemed to have the effect of unfreezing the employees as he shouted, "Show's over, you nosy bastards!" before wrenching open Verity's door. I could see out of the corner of my eye that Max's wife Mia had also sprung into action and was right behind him coming into the office.

"I warned you, York," Max blustered, pointing at me as he advanced. "I'll not have the likes of you upsetting V. She's only just come right after the last time you—"

"Max!" Mia said sharply, halting the large man's progress, and using both her hands to grab onto his pointing arm and lower it. "Stop throwing your weight around and let them sort it out."

Max puffed up his chest in indignation. "There's nowt for them to sort. He's upset Verity, he's not going to do it again. The end."

"Listen Max—" I started, but he cut me off, his pointing arm coming up again.

"She's like a sister to me, is Verity. I'll not have some fancy London knobhead come here and mess with her."

"Max," Mia said again, this time abandoning his arm to go around in front of him and placing both her hands on his chest. "I know you care about Verity, but her *actual* brother thinks Harry's a good guy. And even if he's *not* a good guy—" she broke off and turned her head to look at me, daggers shooting out of her eyes, and added, "—and, by the way, you'd better be," then she turned back to the still enraged Max to continue, "it's *Verity's* decision whom she wants to kiss, not yours or mine or even Heath's."

Max looked down at his wife. His expression went from furious to low-level grumpy and his breathing settled. "Bloody southern pretty boy," he muttered.

"The War of the Roses was over five hundred years ago, Max darling," Verity put in. "You can stand down." I forced myself to suppress the smile I could feel attempting to break free, and Max narrowed his eyes at me.

Verity's voice then softened. "And Mia's right. I can make my own decisions, even if they're unhealthy – but it does mean a lot to me that you care so much." The certainty with which she implied kissing me was an unhealthy choice grated on me, but I told myself that was fine. I had all the time in the world to change her mind.

"Come on, big guy," Mia said, pushing ineffectually against Max's broad chest to encourage him to back out of the office. "Let's leave these two alone to make decisions like the *adults* that they are, right? We'll go and get egg and chips and you can whinge about *fancy southern idiots what want shite over-priced taps and curved walls*. Then we can pick Sophie up from your mum."

Max allowed himself to be manoeuvred out of the office by his small wife as he pointed to his eyes then to me and back again.

"I am so glad that Verity had you looking out for her, Max," I said just as he was about to go through the door. "Not just now, but for the last twenty years. The twins are lucky to have had you. You're a good friend."

Max paused in the doorway and tilted his head to the side. He looked less grumpy now and more confused – as if he couldn't quite work out what to make of me. When they finally left, and Verity turned to me her expression was similar. I noticed she had the book clutched in her hand again. After staring at me for a long moment she cleared her throat and moved back around the other side of her desk. I felt an actual wrench at the physical distance now between us. A rogue lock of dark hair had fallen out of her bun during our kiss, and my fingers itched to free the rest of it. But I balled my hands into fists and made myself stay where I was. I didn't want to push her too far too soon.

"Right, so clearly there are some unresolved issues here," Verity said. I could tell that she was attempting to get back to a business-like demeanour, but the way her hand shook as she put the book onto her desk, and the throaty quality of her voice ruined that endeavour. "I don't know if I can—" she broke off and swallowed, avoiding eye contact with me and the wall of glass to my side.

All I wanted to do was to go over there and hold her, but I knew that wasn't what she needed. I had to gain her trust first. Anger over the wasted years I could have spent with her washed over me again. If I hadn't been so thin-skinned, so full of pride and so convinced that I was in the right back then I could have been holding Verity for two decades now. I wouldn't have

to force myself to stand back whilst she regained her composure. I could be kissing her any goddamn time I wanted if only I hadn't been such a self-involved arsehole. I squeezed the back of my neck, forcing myself to let go of the regret and focus on the reality that I was here with her *now*, that she had just kissed me, and that I finally had a chance to be happy – if I could just manage not to fuck this up.

“I’m sorry I cornered you here,” I said. “But Verity, please, please, if you could just give me a chance. I know I can’t gain your trust right away but maybe we could take a few steps back...” I paused then gave a rueful laugh. “You know, with all our history, it’s occurred to me I’ve never even taken you out on a date. Pretty shit form considering how much you mean to me – then and now. So, would you consider it? Here on your turf?”

Verity looked from the book on her desk to me and bit her lip, before giving me a slow nod. The rush of relief I felt almost made me feel dizzy and I smiled at her. Her eyes dropped to my mouth for a moment, and she seemed to lose focus, before giving her head a small shake, pressing her lips together and meeting my gaze.

“Pig and Whistle, eight o’clock,” she said.

“Er... The Pig and Whistle?” Anywhere called The Pig and Whistle was not likely to have the most romantic of atmospheres. Her eyebrows went up and she crossed her arms over her chest.

“That a problem, billionaire boy? Too posh for the local pub now?”

She was asking *me* if I was too posh? Verity who’d grown up in a veritable castle was calling me posh? “Of course not,” I snapped.

“As friends, Harry,” she added softly. I crossed my arms over my chest but didn’t contradict her. I’d get her there in the end. I was a patient man. And surely, The Pig and Whistle couldn’t be as bad as it sounded?



# Chapter 13

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## *Why didn't you ever say anything?*

### **HARRY**

The Pig and Whistle was way worse than it sounded. I really should have realised that, despite her aristocratic background, Verity would have little interest in castles and expensive restaurants. Even at school she'd had an extremely throw-away attitude to her wealth and status, as only those born to it can really affect properly.

*"I don't care about any of that bullshit, Harry," she'd said. "Money and titles don't make you a good human, you know."*

*"Says you in your castle, Lady V." Lady V was what most people called Verity at school, given her hereditary title which was common knowledge at the time.*

*"You don't know what you're talking about, hedgy," she said, but her smile had faded just like it did anytime I mentioned where she came from.*

I wish back then I'd pushed more about *why* she always shut down, but I was just a stupid teenager and all I wanted was to make her smile. So, I'd changed the subject to her housemaster's latest facial hair choice and coaxed her back to smiling, when I should have been coaxing her into opening up about something that was clearly painful. But that was then, and this was now, and I wasn't going to miss any opportunities again, even if I had to grab them in the shittiest pub I'd been to for a good long while.

I wasn't sure that even the dives we used to frequent at uni compared to this place. There was actual sawdust on the otherwise suspiciously sticky floor. The bar only offered a selection of local ales and had no facility to take any payment other than cash. When I questioned this policy, the owner (an extremely grumpy gentleman called Fergus who looked to be at least a

hundred years old) growled at me saying, “You’re not from round here are you, boy?” I hadn’t been called a boy for over a decade. “If you’ve no cash you can bugger off.” He’d emphasised his point by waving his stick in the air and narrowly avoiding my face. A laughing Verity had had to step in then. She offered him cash. Great. I was finally in a position where I might be wealthier than this woman and I couldn’t even buy her a sodding drink. Then, to my surprise, she kissed the grumpy Fergus on the cheek. He looked no less grumpy, but I did catch the corners of his mouth turning up, the sly old devil. Verity proceeded to tell him he’d have to forgive me as I was a “city boy” and not used to how things worked around here.

Fergus had grunted something about “Fancy city ways,” and shuffled off through the crowd. Which was another thing I did not understand about this place – it was absolutely packed. Every one of the dank tables and chairs were bursting with people, and the bar was a crush to get served.

“V! Over here!”

Verity and I turned to see Heath’s wife Yaz standing on her tiptoes and waving frantically at us. She was at a table with Max, Mia, Heath and a younger bloke I didn’t recognise. Verity waved back then set off in that direction with me trailing after her, carrying my beer and wincing at the sticky nature of the floor – I dreaded to think when this place had last been professionally cleaned. Max had rustled up two extra chairs around the cramped table, and after Verity had kissed and hugged everyone we both negotiated our way into them. I muttered a few “heys” and gave a few chin jerks but my reception was lukewarm at best, and, not being the most adept at social situations, I probably came across as a right surly sod.

“Hazza, good to see you, man,” was Heath’s surprisingly warm greeting. He even slapped me on the back as I sat down. The rest of the table were frowning at him in confusion. Clearly, he hadn’t got the *Harry’s a bastard* memo. Then again, Heath had quite a lot of making up to do where I was concerned. I managed to acknowledge him with another chin jerk, but it was beyond me to smile – I still held way too much resentment for that.

“This is Teddy, my stepson,” Max put in and I looked at the younger man sitting next to him. He was looking between me and Verity with his eyes slightly narrowed. “Teddy, this is Harry York. He’s the chap funding that bloody great monstrosity in the big smoke V and I are working on.”

“Oh, so you’re the guy,” Teddy said unsmilingly.

“Yes, I’m the guy,” I muttered, absorbing the waves of teenage

annoyance directed my way. Clearly, some of my recent less-than-stellar behaviour had filtered through to him, likely from Max, and it had been obvious from the hug Teddy had given her that he cared about Verity.

After the awkward bit of silence that followed my introduction, the conversation moved on. Unfortunately, I'd never been very good with this sort of thing. Structured interactions where the rules were clear, like business dinners or meetings, I was fine with. Unstructured social things like this, unless it was with the extremely small handful of people I was close to, I found stressful and impossible to navigate. Typically I came across as grumpy and stuck up. My last girlfriend told me I was a complete and total fun sponge (this only came out after I dumped her – apparently, she was willing to put up with a fun sponge just as long as he was a suitably rich fun sponge.) So, whilst Verity and her friends were bantering back and forth, with Mia and Heath making the effort to try to draw me into conversations, all I seemed to be capable of was short one-word answers and the occasional grunt. I could tell by their expressions and shared looks that it was starting to piss them off, but I didn't know what to do about it.

“So, Harry,” Yaz said gamely into the ensuing silence after my last one-word reply. “What is it that you do?”

I blinked. It was so rare that anyone actually asked me that. Either they already knew because they worked with me, or they'd read about me in various magazines, or, like my family, they just knew I did something boring in finance that made me a lot of money. Assuming she wanted a stock answer I said, “I work in finance.”

Yaz's head tilted to the side as she studied me – it was a little disconcerting to be honest. “Okay you work with money – I get that. But what do you actually *do*?”

I cleared my throat and shifted on my chair. “Well, I manage wealth in a globally diversified and sustainable way to maximise growth.”

“Er... what? Break it down for me, big guy.”

“So, I take other people's money and I invest it to make them more money. Then I take a percentage of the money I make for them.”

“So, you help mega-rich peeps get richer and that makes you *mega* rich.”

I cleared my throat and focused on my beer bottle, becoming very invested in peeling the label away. I could feel some heat creeping up into my cheeks, suddenly hyper-aware of the company I was in. Max and Verity built things – real tangible, beautiful buildings. Mia helped them do that. Heath

saved lives. Yaz, no doubt, did something equally worthy. And I just made rich people richer.

“That’s enough,” Verity snapped. I glanced at her. She was sitting up straight in her chair and glaring at Yaz across the table. “Harry’s *really* good with numbers. Like genius good. He’s talented at what he does.”

“It’s okay, Verity,” I muttered, a bit shocked at her passionate defence of me. To be honest, I thought she would agree with Yaz wholeheartedly. “It’s not like I build anything,” I nodded to her, Max and Mia. “Or save lives,” I nodded at Heath. “Or er...” I looked questioningly at Yaz, who was now studying Verity closely. Her attention snapped to me, and I noticed a small smile on her face.

“I run a well-being centre and teach water sports.”

“Right, well. It’s not like I’m doing any of that sort of tangible, life-improving stuff or anything. Investing rich people’s money isn’t exactly the worthiest of causes.”

“Bullshit, Harry York!” Verity was properly angry now, her eyes flashing fire as her head whipped round to face me and her dark hair flipped over her shoulder. “The investments you make are only in sustainable and ethical businesses. None of the money you accumulate is dirty or hurting the world. Your foundation helps loads of worthy causes, it’s one of the most efficient and effective charitable organisations in the country. You change young people’s lives. You are not just making rich people richer. Don’t be so utterly ridiculous.” I opened my mouth to respond but she’d already whipped her head in the other direction and had started in on Yaz. “And you, Yaz, I thought better of you. Since when have you been so judgemental? All of you are behaving like total pricks. Harry’s *shy*. He always has been. But he’s great once you get to know him, and that’s not going to happen by acting like the Spanish Inquisition, or by judging his life choices. Mia’s *shy* and you guys have *never* behaved like this with her.”

The heat was really creeping up into my cheeks now. Yaz’s eyebrows were practically in her hairline. Heath’s mouth was pressed together in a poorly suppressed smile.

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Yaz said with some genuine remorse. “I wouldn’t have pegged you as shy.”

“Well, he is,” Verity snapped and then shocked the shit out of me as she reached over and grabbed my hand. And I found that with her fingers around mine I didn’t mind so much that she’d announced to her friends I was shy. In

fact, nothing bothered me at all in that moment.

“Welcome to the madness, Harry,” Mia’s soft voice said from across the table. When I looked up from my hand interlinked with Verity’s she was smiling. “Coming into this group as an introvert can be... challenging. Max also thinks that announcing I’m shy and looking like he’s going to rip the throats out of anyone who’s even vaguely mean to me is acceptable behaviour. Just roll with it.”

“I did not look like I was going to rip anyone’s throat out,” Verity snapped.

“Er...V, babe, you totally did,” Yaz said through a big smile. “You can stand down though.”

“And, by the way, Harry,” put in Heath, “my job’s not all saving lives, mate. Yesterday I removed a tic tac from a child’s nose, treated a chest pain that turned out to be indigestion, investigated an ‘abdominal mass’ which turned out to be faeces – the patient was literally full of shit – and then after my shift ended, I spent over an hour finding a home for a cat so the owner would agree to be admitted.”

“Wow, you really know how to get a girl in the mood, Markham,” Yaz said dryly, and Heath laughed before kissing the side of her head and pulling her into his side.

“Not all of us can ponce about in bikinis and wetsuits all day.”

“That is not all I do, and you know it!”

“Stop, don’t ruin it for me,” Heath said with a dreamy expression and Max smacked the side of his head.

“Gross, don’t talk about my sister like that.”

I cleared my throat. “Well, whatever you were doing yesterday, you were helping people. I’m not going to pretend that my job does that. In my defence, as a kid who got into a posh school because my dad was a teacher, I really did stick out as the charity case with the shit clothes. Kids can be fairly cruel. It made me...” I trailed off and then sighed, “...it made me laser-focused on money. My parents were never really that bothered about money. I may have... overcorrected.”

“Cruel?” Verity’s voice was low and dangerous now. “Who was cruel to you?”

Heath shifted uncomfortably in his chair. We’d been in the same house at school with my dad as housemaster, so Heath witnessed a good amount of the bullying.

“Heath, what’s he talking about?”

“They were all major pricks in that year, V,” Heath muttered. “I tried to stay out of their way. Apart from the time I punched Giles Bartholemew-Smithe in the face when he lied about fingering you behind the art department.”

Verity made a gagging nose and I almost burst out laughing.

“To be honest, it wasn’t so bad until my last year,” I said.

“What happened in your last year?”

I sighed. “You happened, Verity. You kept coming to find me to give me books, you hugged me outside chapel when I got into the LSE. Lady V, the most beautiful, unobtainable girl in school was hugging *me*, the impoverished maths nerd. It didn’t go down well. Giles and Monty Timms beat the shit out of me and made me wear a girls’ house tie for a week. That meant endless detentions from teachers for being in the wrong tie, which I just had to take or risk getting the shit kicked out of me again.”

“Those utter bastards,” Verity said through gritted teeth. “Where are they now? I am going to end them both.”

That startled a laugh out of me. “You can stand down there as well,” I said. “I took over Monty’s family business ten years ago and sold it for parts.”

“Giles?”

“I’ve managed to scupper the financing of two of his start-ups but he’s still plugging away.”

“Hmm.”

I squeezed her hand. “Verity it was over twenty years ago. You knew I didn’t like that school. Let it go.”

“I thought you didn’t like it there because you were cleverer than everyone and they all bored you. If I’d have known that they were *mean* to you, I would have removed all their testicles with a spoon. Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“I was not going to tell the prettiest girl I’d ever seen, who was the only good thing about my time at school, that I couldn’t stand up for myself against a bunch of jumped-up public-school numpties.”

“B—but I irritated you,” she said, confusion colouring her tone. “You put up with me at school. Towards the end I thought I might have grown on you, but you never—”

“I was terrified, Verity,” I said softly, looking into her eyes, forgetting

about the rest of the table as my free hand slid up to her jaw. “You were the only chink of light I had in that place. I didn’t want to risk doing anything to make it go dark. That’s why I waited until the very last week to—to...”

“To kiss me,” she breathed, her mouth now an inch from mine. Just as I started to close that gap a loud throat cleared from across the table, and we sprang apart.

“Listen, I’m happy for you, man, but I don’t think I can watch you snog my sister in the middle of The Pig and Whistle,” Heath said dryly.

“Yes, there are children present,” said Yaz through a huge smile.

“Ugh, Auntie Yaz,” grumbled Teddy as he pushed away her attempts to cover his eyes. “I’m *nineteen*, you realise.”



# Chapter 14

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## *Where I was meant to be*

### **VERITY**

After the pub, Harry didn't go back to his hotel. I grabbed his hand as we were leaving and that seemed to say it all. On the taxi ride back to my house I was still feeling murderous about those bastards who'd made Harry's life miserable at school, and he could sense my anger.

"It was a long time ago, Verity," he muttered, giving my hand a squeeze. "It's best to let these things go. Kids can be cruel."

Well, that might be true, but those 'kids' were seventeen- to eighteen-year-old, over-privileged shits who should have known the difference between right and wrong. And anyway, it wasn't just them I was angry with.

"I can't *believe* I didn't notice what was going on," I said through my teeth. "You must have thought I was so self-absorbed. And if I'd known I was making it worse I..."

"It's not your fault." He cleared his throat and continued in a tight voice. "Listen, I don't want you feeling sorry for me, or—"

"I don't feel sorry for you. I feel like I want to rip some heads off, but I don't feel sorry for you." I paused for a moment then continued carefully. "Harry, is what happened why you... I mean why you're so different now? From back then I mean... you used to be more—"

"More of a skinny dweeb?"

"No! I—"

"It's okay, I seem to remember you admitting you had a crush on that skinny dweeb." He smiled a very smug smile, and I rolled my eyes. "Well, in a way the bullying did contribute, but there were other factors at play. See, there was this girl I liked, and I thought she'd been playing me—"

“Harry, for God’s sake I didn’t–”

“–and I think that had more effect on me than the bullies. That summer after... well, after everything happened, I started working out, getting stronger. By the time I got to uni I wasn’t a skinny dweeb anymore, but I still had a long way to go confidence-wise. That’s when I met Toby and Naomi. They sorted the rest out for me. Wouldn’t let me hide in my room. Showed me how to flirt with women. How to be confident.”

At that point we arrived at my house. As the taxi pulled away Harry looked up my drive with an astonished expression on his face.

“This was not what I was expecting,” he said in a bewildered voice, and I smiled. I lived in a small cottage a short drive inland from the beach. I was aware that it probably wasn’t the kind of house people would picture Verity Markham living in. Probably people imagined me in a house much more like Max’s or Heath’s – modern, large, clean lines. But I was all about small, cosy, homely – everything in my home needed to be about comfort. My childhood had given me enough of a taste of large, impersonal houses to last a lifetime. I could tell Harry was even more taken aback by the interior. I had a country kitchen with warm wood floors and an AGA that was on all year round. My living room had a huge log burner and was stuffed with colourful sofas and squashy armchairs in mustard, blues and pinks.

“Surprised?” I said smiling up at Harry as he stood on the threshold to my living room. He tilted his head to the side and surveyed it all in its squashy, comforting glory.

“No,” he said finally, turning away from the room to stare directly at me. “It suits you. At school you always wanted the cosiest corner and the warmest radiator. I can see you wanting this type of home.”

“People assume that because I have money and I’m an architect I’d want to live in some vast modern nightmare. I love Max’s house, but the industrial look does not float my boat. Not for my home. I like to be warm.”

“I think it’s beautiful,” he muttered, moving closer, his hand going up to slide up my jawline to tilt my face to his. “So beautiful,” he said again this time with his lips a hair’s breadth from mine. I sucked in a short breath before my mouth closed over his and the world fell away. That feeling of absolute rightness swept through me as my mouth opened under his, and my arms wrapped around his broad muscular back.

This was where I was meant to be, right here in Harry’s arms. How had I ever thought for a moment that I could exist any other way? We broke apart

for a moment, our foreheads still pressed together. Harry was breathing heavily, his pupils were huge. He pulled away slightly to scan my face.

“Is this okay? I don’t want to push you into anything that you–”

My fingers on his lips cut him off. I smiled up at him. “I’m not sixteen anymore, Harry. This is more than okay.”

“But do you trust me?” he whispered, and my smile fell slightly.

I looked up at him for a moment before closing the distance between our mouths again and pushing my hand up his shirt to feel the muscles of his back under warm skin. A small involuntary moan left my throat which seemed to trigger a slip in his control. His arms closed around me and pulled me into him, my softness against his hardness, fitting perfectly, melting together. The kiss became more urgent and a low rumbling sound, almost like a growl, vibrated from deep in his chest. He started walking me backwards towards my sofa without breaking the kiss, his hands moving under my shirt. He grasped the hem with both hands and pulled it over my head and onto the floor. Then he froze. I watched him swallow as he scanned me in my white lace bra. I felt a flush spread from my chest up to my cheeks under his gaze.

“Jesus Christ,” he said in a hoarse voice as he moved into my space again, his hands skimming my stomach up to my breasts. “You are so much more beautiful than I could ever have imagined.” He lowered his mouth to mine again, one of his hands now going to my hair whilst the other cupped my breast. “And when it comes to you,” he said in my ear after breaking the kiss to move his mouth along my jawline and neck, “I have a very good imagination – twenty years’ worth of it.” I tried not to hyperventilate or pass out with the swooping, dizzy feeling of intense desire and need which was making me more and more lightheaded. The backs of my legs came up against the sofa then and Harry lowered me down onto it in a swift movement that again took my breath away. Before I knew it, he’d worked on my jeans, pulled them free, and his fully clothed body was pushing mine into the sofa cushions. I broke the kiss to let out another small moan before my hands went to the hem of his shirt and started yanking it frantically in a much less smooth way than he had managed to remove all my clothes.

“Off,” I snapped, continuing to wrestle with his stubborn shirt. He let out a low laugh which I felt everywhere as his hard body was fully pressed against me.

“Patience never was your thing,” he said against my mouth but then did finally pull his shirt over his head and chuck it away. The compression shirt

I'd seen him in that day at his house hadn't done his body justice. The definition of his broad chest and his ridged stomach was so much better in the flesh. My breath hitched in my throat as I ran my hands over his glorious skin. He gave a light shiver under my touch and his jaw clenched tight before his hands came up to push the hair away from my face and kiss me again. He was rocking against me now and I could feel how hard he was through his jeans.

I let out another moan as I moved with him, fervent teenage fantasies and desperation giving a sharp quality to the very real adult lust. His hand moved to my chest and pulled the cup of my bra down then he was kissing down from my mouth to my neck then further, his stubble rubbing against my skin as his mouth made its way to my breasts, finally pulling one of my nipples into his mouth, eliciting a startled moan from me. His other hand had snaked round to release my bra in another smooth move which almost jerked me out of the moment – it was so un-Harry-like.

In fact, as I focused on him through the haze of lust I could just sense that his moves were a little too practised. Images of all the women he must have been with flashed through my mind – streams of models and actresses, and a flash of jealousy shot through me. I didn't want Harry's practised moves, I wanted uncontrolled, unsophisticated Harry. I wanted him to feel as overwhelmed as I did. But now his other hand was at the waistband of my knickers and as he went lower and then exactly where I needed him all other thoughts shot out of my mind, my back arched, and I sucked in a sharp breath. The pads of his large fingers pressed exactly on my centre, rubbing with just the right amount of pressure. I was spiralling up and up, my body stringing tight under Harry as I built towards the edge, but I knew I didn't want to go there alone. I didn't want to be the only one out of control. I needed it to be with Harry.

I sank my fingers into his thick hair and gave it a tug. He lifted his face from my neck and his eyes locked on mine. His pupils were dilated, his jaw clenched, the restraint in his expression almost pained as his practised movements continued to drive me further towards spiralling out of control.

“Not without you, Harry,” I said in a hoarse whisper through my tight throat. “Let go. Come with me.” That was when his movements became more desperate, less rehearsed. He ripped my knickers down my legs, then pulled away to undo his jeans. It took him a few extra seconds as his hands were actually shaking. He swore under his breath, but my heart soared at the loss

of control. Finally, I had the real Harry, the one I knew. Then he was on top of me again, all finesse and control out of the window. A deep growl shuddered through his chest as he filled me so deep and hard and in such a sudden movement that it knocked the breath out of me for a moment.

“Verity, shit,” he said as he looked down at me. “Baby, I’m sorry. Are you okay?”

I shifted under him, so much desire and desperation clawing through my veins that I felt like I was coming out of my skin. “I will be if you *move*,” I snapped. The muscles of his throat pulled tight as he pulled back and filled me again, harder this time. But as he settled into a rhythm I could sense the restraint creeping back in, the practised moves hitting all the right places coming into play and I was building towards the edge again. But I wanted the old Harry, the uncontrolled one. I leaned up to whisper in his ear.

“Let go with me,” I whispered through my sharp intakes of breath as he thrust into me. My hands dug into the muscles on his back, and I let out another moan. “Fuck me, Harry. Let go.” I bit his ear and that seemed to trigger a complete breakdown of smooth-move Harry. His now jerky, abrupt, powerful thrusts finally drove me over the edge as he followed me with a shout.

We were both breathing hard as he let his weight collapse onto me for a moment before lifting himself up on his elbows. He scanned my face, his expression concerned.

“Christ, Verity. You good? I was rough.” I smiled in answer and his expression flooded with relief. He moved to kiss my mouth then all the way across my cheek to my ear and gave it a light bite of his own, moving inside me again and causing me to let out another low moan. “We didn’t even make it to the bedroom.” Harry was smiling down at me now.

“I think a sofa is appropriate,” I said. “That’s where I always imagined this after all.”

His eyebrows went up. “You imagined *this*, did you?”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay I imagined a slightly more PG-13 version of this. But it always involved a sofa. And maybe you had a few more curls and a little less muscle – not that I’m complaining – but it was always you, Harry.”

He searched my face, an almost reverent expression on his, as though he almost couldn’t believe I was real or that I was here with him.

“Bedroom,” he whispered against my mouth, and I nodded in response, incapable of speech at that point. Then he shocked me again by pulling up

from the sofa with me in his arms and striding like that back into the corridor.

Now, stairs in these tiny cottages are narrow and steep. They are not meant for large men to carry adult women up them. In fact, cottages are not meant for large men full stop. After the banister had clipped my shoulder and Harry had hit his head twice on the low ceiling so that he had to deposit me on the stairs with him hovering over me, both naked, we descended into a fit of giggles.

My hands went up to frame his open, laughing face and I whispered. “I love making you laugh. I always loved it. You’re beautiful too, you know.”

His expression sobered and he searched my face for a moment before he went in for another kiss. This time more urgent. When we broke apart, he was breathing heavily again. “Let’s get off these fucking stairs,” his voice was rough now with an edge of growl to it that I felt all the way to my toes.



“HEY.”

I turned from the AGA to see a gorgeously ruffled Harry standing in my kitchen doorway. His normally perfectly styled dark hair was sticking up on one side and his jaw was covered in thick stubble. He had his jeans on but was barefoot and bare-chested. I felt my mouth water and looked back at the bacon I was frying so that he couldn’t see me openly drool.

“Hey, yourself,” I said, smiling at the bacon.

He sauntered in behind me and one of his muscled arms came around my waist, pulling me back into his bare chest, the other lifted the weight of my hair over my shoulder so he could kiss my neck. I shivered and I felt him smile against my skin.

“You left me in bed,” he said, his voice a sleepy growl.

“You were sleeping.”

In one swift movement he snatched the spatula I was using on the bacon away from me, putting it down on the wooden surface next to the AGA and then turned me in his arms so I was facing him.

“Harry!” I protested. “I was—”

He cut off whatever I was going to say with a kiss, and, like always I melted against him.

Memories of last night tore through my brain: uber-masculine Harry in

my feminine bedroom, his weight pressing me into my soft duvet; him holding me up in the shower with one arm underneath me as the other pushed against the tiles of the wall, then whispering against my wet skin after we were finished with round two, “I like your bed, but this shower is not big enough, darling.” I’d smiled and nodded, so drugged on him that I would have agreed to a full house remodel without blinking an eye. Then again back on the bed, but this time less frenzied with Harry staring at me as he stroked the damp hair back from my face almost reverently, like he was trying to memorise every expression I made, like I was the centre of his universe.

When he ended the kiss, I blinked up at him and that smug smile was back on his face again.

“That’s how I want to wake up when I sleep with you,” he said. “Got it?” He gave me a small squeeze to emphasize his point, and I narrowed my eyes at him.

“You’ve become very bossy, Harry York.”

He shrugged, completely unrepentant still smiling down at me. The smell of burning jerked me back to reality and I let out a muffled squeak and turned back to the pan.

“Look what you made me do,” I muttered in mock annoyance. Instead of moving away his arms encircled my waist again and he rested his chin on my shoulder before kissing my neck. I smiled involuntarily. “This is not the most efficient way for me to make breakfast, you know.” Harry was kissing up my jawline now and pulling me back into his body again. I closed my eyes and released the pan and spatula again as his hands moved under the shirt that I was wearing to slide over the smooth skin of my stomach, then up to my breasts, cupping them and lightly pinching my nipples. After a few moments, one of his hands smoothed down from my breast to the waistband of my pyjama shorts. My eyes rolled back in my head and I melted back into him, bacon and breakfast forgotten.

“I think this is very efficient,” he said against my neck as he kissed his way to my ear. “Multi-tasking.” All I could do was let out a small moan in response as my body tightened in his arms. When I finally went over the edge, if he hadn’t been behind me holding me up I would have sunk into a puddle of goo on the floor. Then he turned me to face him and grinned that huge smug grin down at me like he was king of the world. I rolled my eyes before going up on my tiptoes to kiss him. The kiss started softly, but with him bare chested and my hand roaming the muscles of his back and shoulders



it soon escalated and before I knew what was happening, he'd lifted me and sat me on my kitchen table. The rest of our clothes fell away and he drove into me again, the elderly wooden table shaking with the force of his thrusts. He cushioned my head from its hard surface but that was the only small bit of control he was showing. All those moves that were technically perfect but too stilted fell away. The world fell away. It was just me and Harry, connected and completely out of control and it was beautiful. As we both came down off that high, naked, with me still lying on my kitchen table, he pulled me to him and gave me a hug so tight that it almost winded me. After a few moments he pulled back and framed my face with his large hands, staring in my eyes.

"The bacon's probably ruined," I whispered.

"Fuck the bacon."

"This table's over one hundred years old. I don't think it's supposed to take that kind of battering."

"Fuck the table too."

"Uh. I think we already did that."

His grin came back again, taking over his whole face. Serious, grumpy, business Harry was a thing of the past, as was awkward, slightly less grumpy but sweet teenage Harry. This Harry was a completely new entity. He grinned, he chuckled, he kissed my neck whilst I cooked bacon, he held my head so it wouldn't bang on the wood whilst he was shagging me, he was lighter, he looked happy. I'd made him happy. My smile faltered on that thought and Harry, so in tune with me it seemed, cocked his head to the side in concern.

"Are you okay, V? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"Of course not, you numpty. Take more than a shag on a wooden table to put a dent in me."

He searched my face. "I'll make it to the bed next time. Even if it does mean permanent concussion from those stairs. Your house is made for hobbits."

He pulled away to let me hop off the table and for some reason his retreat felt like a wrench, like a clamp around my chest. Which was ridiculous – he was right there, putting on his jeans. As I grabbed his shirt off the floor and shrugged it on, I tried to shake off a growing feeling of unease. The feeling that I was starting to *need* him. Because life had taught me early, way, way too early, that it wasn't a good idea to need people.

# Chapter 15

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## *Because Verity Markham is always fine*

### **VERITY**

Harry leaned back in his chair and let out a short disbelieving huff. “Verity Markham out on a date with me,” he said, his voice almost awed. I smiled. “My seventeen-year-old self would die of shock.”

It’d been a couple of weeks since Harry had first come down to Dorset to stay with me, and the whole thing had been like a dream. I couldn’t remember ever feeling so happy. He’d stayed that weekend and we’d barely left my house at all, other than for a brief walk down to the harbour for supplies. It was as though once we unleashed all our latent desire for each other we couldn’t get enough. Harry had to go to London for the week but ended up staying Sunday night with me and had to get up at five in the morning to make it back for his first meeting on the Monday. So today, when I came up to London midweek to bid on another project, Harry was waiting for me at the station. He insisted we went out to a restaurant that evening rather than our standard rip-each-others-clothes-off-and-worry-about-food-later format, but now he was looking at me like he wished he’d gone for option two.

“I don’t know how seventeen-year-old you can be shocked when sixteen-year-old me had the most massive crush on you that you completely ignored!”

He grinned and shrugged. “I was an idiot at seventeen. But do go on about this massive crush. I presume your teenage fantasies involved us reading geeky fantasy books together, me helping you with algebra, and being the most awkward human on the planet.”

“You were cute. Like a hot nerd.”

“Nerds aren’t hot.”

“You were.”

“Hey! You guys!”

We’d both been so engrossed in each other that we jerked in surprise at Naomi’s greeting. She was standing by the side of our table with her hands clasped together, bouncing up and down on her toes.

“Hi, Noo,” Harry stood to greet her, and I stiffened as she flung herself at him into a full body hug. When she turned to me and caught sight of my face her hands went up and away from Harry at lightning speed.

“It’s okay,” she said through a grin. “I get it. He’s all yours. Message received. Harry and I don’t play that way, so you’ve nothing to worry about. Honest.”

I smiled at her theatrics before she pulled me to my feet and treated me to the same full body hug she had given Harry.

“So... this is a date, right? Harry’s stopped being a grumpy arsehole and got his act together? You’ve stopped torturing him?”

“Yes, Noo, this is a date.”

Naomi gave a muted squeal although it still managed to turn quite a few heads. (I wasn’t surprised to be honest – between Naomi’s fame and her excitable behaviour, we’d basically become the focal point of the restaurant.) Harry shifted uncomfortably – I knew of old that he never liked much attention. Naomi and he made such unlikely friends.

“How did you guys ever become mates?”

“Oh, right. I’d better sit down for this one. It’s a long story.” Naomi wasted no time pulling a chair up to the table and sitting her arse down on it, encouraging us to do the same.

Harry sighed as he took his seat. “It’s not that long of a story, Noo,” he told her, his tone amused but exasperated. “And isn’t that your date over there?” We all turned to look over at a man hovering between the bar and our table with a look of confusion on his handsome face. I vaguely recognised him.

“Who is that?”

“Oh, he’s just some guy from *Hollyoaks* that my agent set me up with. No biggie. Anyhoo, you were asking how we met? Well, we went to LSE together. I was with Toby back then until... well anyway we became friends through him. But maths is not my bag in case you haven’t guessed.”

“Noo, that’s not true, maths *is* your bag. In fact, you are a maths genius

and could have worked anywhere you wanted. You just—”

“I just think it’s boring, hence, not my bag.”

“Noo’s IQ is over 180,” Harry said. “She actually *does* enjoy discussing mathematical theory believe it or not. Probably more than she enjoys prancing about on stage.”

“But you became a musician instead?” I asked, my head tilted to the side with curiosity.

Naomi shrugged. “Maths and music are pretty similar when you get down to it. It’s all about counting. Writing a catchy song that will sell is the same as solving a tricky equation, but way more fun. I wrote songs for other people at first until I started performing my own stuff. But then a couple of years ago I contacted Harry for a favour, and because I missed his grumpy face. I get really tired of the shitty dudes my PR company sets me up with, so Harry pretended to be dating me for a while.”

“It wasn’t just that you were tired of the media attention, Noo,” Harry said quietly.

She blinked at him then gave her head a quick shake. Harry took a deep sigh. Naomi’s smile dropped and she leaned forward. “Did you say anything to Toby?”

Harry’s eyebrows went up. “No, why?”

Naomi looked away, her cheeks flushed. “Nothing... he... Well, he cornered me after that awards event the other night and asked me what ‘little problem’ I had that you were helping me with. As if it’s any of his business.”

I thought back to my conversation with Noo that night outside the ladies’ toilets. “He must have overheard you telling me that at the event. Remember? You said that was why Harry was helping you out.” I asked.

“See,” Harry said. “I haven’t even told Verity.”

Naomi crossed her arms over her chest. “Fine, but the man’s hanging about like a bad smell for some reason.” Naomi looked over at me and I resisted the urge to ask her what her ‘little problem’ was – she’d had some champagne the other night and it had obviously made her more likely to share. She sighed. “I have a stalker. He’s pretty persistent. It’s been a bit scary. Harry’s been taking me out over the last year to put him off.”

“Oh, Naomi,” I said in a soft voice, my hand automatically covering hers on the table. “I’m sorry, darling. That’s really horrid.”

She shrugged, trying for nonchalant but her other hand shook as she tucked her hair behind her ear. “It’s fine. Goes with the territory.” She let out

a bitter laugh. “At least that’s what I’m trying to convince Toby of at the moment. He always was a pushy fucker though.”

“So, it really was you and Toby at uni. You and Harry were *never* a thing?” I asked. I hadn’t quite believed Naomi when she told me that before.

“No!” they both said together. Harry looked truly horrified and Naomi started laughing.

“Yeah, it’s tragic,” Naomi said with a deep sigh and a totally put on sad expression. “He butters my muffin, but I don’t even come close to smoking his salami. Such is my lot in life.” Harry rolled his eyes again, but did it smiling.

“I have never ‘battered your muffin’, Noo,” he said. “You only ever had eyes for Toby.”

Naomi shot him an annoyed look and sprung up from her seat. “Anyway, I better get back to Mr Hollyoaks over there. And, by the way, Harry, I agree with Verity – you *are* one hot nerd.” She touched Harry with her finger and made a hissing noise, pulling it away as if it burnt her, winked at me, then flounced off back to her annoyed-looking date.

“She does *not* strike me as a mathematician,” I said through a grin.

Harry shrugged. “She’s actually way smarter than me or Toby. I think that’s really how she’s managed to be as successful as she has. It’s a bit scary really.”

“And she hasn’t met anyone?”

Harry shifted in his seat. “I think something’s off about Noo to be honest. She dropped out of the LSE so abruptly. It never really made sense. And before that she lost weight and kind of ... lost her spark, going from outgoing and confident with an almost dazzling quality about her to quiet and sombre.” My eyebrows went up and he smiled. “I know, kind of hard to imagine Noo without spark. We never got to the bottom of it. She cut us all out, not just Toby, but he took it the hardest. He was so angry that he went a little crazy – you know, getting hammered every night, sleeping around a lot. Eventually one of the girls he slept with got pregnant. They ended up getting married, and by the time Toby realised that Noo wasn’t dating anyone else and didn’t seem to be moving on it was too late. Then his wife cheated on him and they had a messy divorce finalised last year. His daughter’s fifteen now. She’s a sweet kid. He’s been a bit of a mess for a while and has sworn off relationships. Once he opens his eyes, he’ll see Noo’s still there waiting for him. It’s complicated. Toby’s still so salty about the whole thing.”

“Sounds it.”

“Is Naomi safe?”

Harry smiled at me. “Don’t worry. You see those two chaps over there?” I looked over to where Harry was gesturing. There were two men in dark clothes sat together. One had his attention firmly on Naomi and her Hollyoaks date. The other was scanning the room.

“Woah!” I said, impressed. “Bodyguards. That is very cool.”

“I suspect when Toby pulls his head out of his arse she’ll have another slightly less trained bodyguard in the mix too.”

I raised an eyebrow. “He likes her. Still?”

“He never stopped.”

Once I felt more reassured about the Naomi situation I didn’t even think twice about going back to Harry’s house, but I’d underestimated the strength of the bad memories of Harry’s accusations that it would evoke from the last time I was there. When I first walked into his kitchen I glanced around and stopped midstride. All those feelings of humiliation surfaced again and for a moment I couldn’t breathe.

“Verity?” Harry had asked, his voice laced with concern as he turned to me. When he saw my face, he covered the distance between us in two large strides and his arms closed around me. “Jesus, I’m so sorry, baby. I was such a piece of shit.” As his arms tightened around me and I was cocooned in all things Harry, my heart rate slowed and I managed to take a breath.

“It’s fine,” I said against his chest. “I’m fine.”

“Yes, because Verity Markham is always *fine*. Because she always holds it together.” He pulled away from me slightly so he could look down at my face. “I want you to know that you don’t have to be fine all the time with me. That you don’t have to relentlessly be the strong, capable one. Not with me. I really am sorry,” he whispered, framing my face with his large hands. “If I’d known...” he broke off and cleared his throat. “There’s no excuse. I was a total and complete prick.” He glanced around his kitchen. “Maybe I should sell the house.”

I knew from his tone that he was deadly serious.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I like your house. I’ll get over it.”

Barbara chose that moment to heft her big butt up onto the sofa, her bushy orange tail swishing back and forth in irritation.

“Anyway, I think your cat is pretty settled here.”

“She’d get over it.”

“Harry, you move staff in when you go away so that she doesn’t have to sleep alone. I think she’s fairly set in her ways.”

When he kept looking around the room and biting his lip, I took his face in my hands and pulled it to mine. “Look, seeing as sofas are kind of our thing, let’s christen this one.” And with that I kissed him. Christening the sofa was easier said than done with a belligerent cat in the room. I sustained a fair few scratch marks on my arm in the process. But it was worth it when we were later snuggled up with a still grumpy cat on said sofa watching *Game of Thrones*. Barbara had spread her huge bulk across both our laps. If I paused stroking her massive head, she speared her claws into my thigh. At one point she lumbered up to climb onto Harry’s chest until her paws were either side of his neck and meowed right in his face. This prompted Harry to leave our cosy huddle and trudge to the fridge to extract some smoked salmon for her. When I huffed in annoyance the cat gave me her best fuck-you look, and shoved her arse in my face before leaping down to eat her spoils.

Every day I could feel myself falling deeper and deeper for this I-might-be-a-baddass-CEO-but-I-let-my-cat-bully-me-on-the-reg man.

And I was terrified.



# Chapter 16

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## *The past doesn't always stay in the past*

### **VERITY**

All the rest of that week I stayed up in London. Sometimes we spent evenings reading, just like we used to in the school library. Harry had hooked me into epic fantasy books so thoroughly at school that it had stuck, and now we both still read the same authors. Our mutual obsession for an author called LP Mayweather and the extraordinary world he/she (nobody knew which – the author was fiercely private) had created was no surprise.

When we weren't cocooned up together in Harry's house we'd gone out with Toby, Naomi and some of Harry's other friends. It seemed that most of his close friends were from university. I was happy for him that he had gone from the relentless exclusion and bullying at school, to somewhere where he was instantly accepted. He'd found his people. It helped that hollow feeling of impotent rage I experienced every time I thought about those fuckers who'd picked on him. And Naomi was right. Toby really was hovering around her as if she was going to be attacked at any moment, despite the bodyguards tailing her at all times.

Eventually Naomi had had to take him aside in the pub, muttering to me that he was being "an over-the-top dickhead". I watched them surreptitiously from the booth we were all chatting in. Naomi marched him over to a corner and then started talking animatedly and gesturing towards her bodyguards. Toby said something to which she rolled her eyes and was about to walk away but he pulled her back so she was standing against the wall, put his arm up at the side of her head and leaned down to whisper in her ear, his other hand going to her waist. Whatever he said to her made her eyes go wide, a blush spread from her neck to her cheeks and her mouth drop open slightly.

His head dropped down further, and I couldn't see properly but I'm pretty sure his lips made contact with her neck. Naomi's eyes fell to half-mast and she swayed towards him for a moment.

I thought they were going to kiss but Toby straightened up, his hand swept her cheek as he smiled down at her dazed expression, then he took her hand and led her back to the table, a blush still staining her cheeks. When they sat back down in the booth, Toby let Naomi sit first then slid in next to her, his arm slung up along the booth at her back. I raised an eyebrow at her but she dropped her eyes from mine to study the drink in front of her in an uncharacteristic display of shyness.

So when I met Lanie for the first time the next evening when she and Toby came over to Harry's for tacos, I wasn't too surprised that Naomi showed up as well. It was almost uncomfortable at first as Lanie was so very shy and standoffish, sinking into the folds of her black hoodie and ignoring everyone most of the time. The normally relaxed Toby was on edge all evening. The only time I saw Lanie relax was when she was cuddled up to Barbara on the sofa.

"You okay, darling?" I asked softly after Naomi and I brought a cup of hot chocolate over to her. Toby and Harry were still in the kitchen.

"Fine," she muttered. This was her go-to response it seemed.

"You must be pretty special if Barbara likes you this much. She's picky."

Lanie snorted and rolled her eyes. "She's just a cat." Her tone was dismissive but the way she buried her face into Barbara's fur did not correspond with her indifferent tone. The hot chocolate remained untouched.

"Er... cats are life," Naomi said as she plonked herself next to Lanie who just shrugged. "Seriously? What better way to feel better than to cuddle a cat?"

Lanie stiffened. "I don't need to feel better."

"Well, you might not," said Naomi. "But when I was growing up, I needed my cats. I cuddled them every day after school. But then I was bullied horrendously in high school so I guess it was different for me." I noticed Lanie sliding Naomi a curious look at this. Lanie had been standoffish with Naomi throughout the evening up until then, which I think had something to do with the frequency her dad's hand fell to the small of Naomi's back and the way he looked at her. One of the few times Lanie spoke was to make a few pointed comments about how great her mum was.

Lanie bit her lip but then lost her battle with her curiosity.

“You weren’t bullied,” she blurted out.

Naomi’s eyebrows went up. “Wasn’t I?”

“People like *you* aren’t bullied.”

“People like me?”

Lanie huffed. “Don’t pretend you don’t know you’re... like ... pretty or whatever.” She flashed Naomi a quick glare before she buried further into the cat.

“I’ll admit that I’m fabulous,” Naomi said, and Lanie snorted. “But fabulous people get bullied too, you know.” Lanie’s scowl was replaced by confusion. “I was heavily into maths back then and the flute. I basically went between the music department and the maths department, not fitting into either. My friends from primary school all dropped me because I wasn’t into make-up and clothes. Lucky for me I have a stylist and a make-up artist now because I still don’t give a crap about that stuff. Kids are little shits at that age. Come to think of it, adults can be pretty shitty too. I get trolled all the time online now.”

“Did it get better?” Lanie said so quietly it was an effort to hear her. Naomi and I exchanged a look before Naomi moved forward so she could sink her hands into Barbara’s fur as well, moving closer to Lanie.

“After a while it got better at school. I found some real friends – not many, but they weren’t bitches like my old crew. Then at uni I found other nerds like your dad and your godfather, and after that I was golden... for a time.”

That drew the first small smile I’d seen from Lanie all evening. “I *knew* Dad was a nerd.”

“He hides it well nowadays, but under that suit is a closet maths geek who’s obsessed with *Star Wars* to an unhealthy degree,” Naomi said, and Lanie let out a small giggle.

“He’s still got all the toys from when he was little. They’re in a display cabinet in his office,” Lanie told us.

“The nerd runs strong in that one,” Naomi replied.

Lanie smiled again but her smile gradually fell and she bit her lip.

“I was bullied at school as well you know,” Harry said from the side of the sofa where he and Toby were now standing, having moved from the kitchen area.

“Really?” Lanie was truly shocked now. Harry shrugged.

“Kids can be dicks.”

Lanie looked down at her hands in her lap.

“Must be nice to have a stylist and make-up artist,” she said in that quiet voice again. Judging by her poorly applied, thick eyeliner I could see how that would appeal to a fifteen-year-old who was clearly being bullied at school.

Naomi paused for a moment. “You know, a couple of years after I met your dad something happened to me at uni.” I straightened in my seat at this and glanced at Toby who had gone completely still. “It brought back all those feelings I’d had at school. Made it so I didn’t want to even be around the people that cared about me. I was a bit of a hermit for a long time after that – didn’t wear any make-up, didn’t dress up like I used to, so definitely no make-up artists or stylists. I was sad but I recovered. Talking about it helped. I took too long to do that though, and by the time I plucked up the courage to go back to my old life I...” Naomi trailed off and I watched two flags of colour spread high above Toby’s cheekbones. Naomi cleared her throat. “All I’m saying is that it’s best to talk about this stuff sooner rather than later.”

“What happened to you?” Lanie whispered and I held my breath waiting for the reply. After finally admitting the truth to Toby and Harry, Naomi had then told me last week what had really happened to her at uni. She’d been sexually assaulted by a tutor. She didn’t tell Toby at the time as she knew he’d lose his shit and do something stupid to this guy. She thought she could deal with it on her own, but when she reported him, he denied everything. The faculty made her feel as worthless as she felt at school, and she left the LSE. After months of hermitting, as she describes it – holed up composing music back at her family home – she confessed everything to her parents about what had happened, and they started legal proceedings against the school. The tutor was removed from his position but, at Naomi’s request, it was all hushed up. She had wanted to tell Toby herself, but by that stage it was too late – he had a baby on the way and was engaged to be married.

“Someone hurt me. Someone I trusted. And I tried to deal with it all on my own, which was the wrong choice.”

“But you’re okay now?” Lanie’s face was pale as she stared at Naomi.

“Now, I’m great,” Naomi said. “Because now I open up to the people who love me, and I don’t listen to the haters.” There was a pause and Naomi smiled at Lanie before bumping shoulders with her as she continued. “Also, now I have access to Michel, my make-up artist. You know, he works with all the big names. I’m meeting him tomorrow. Maybe you could come along?”

Michel could do our make-up, then maybe my stylist could go shopping with us?”

Lanie’s eyes went wide. “You’re serious?” she breathed.

“Yeah, of course. I’m always looking for peeps to go shopping with. You’d have to leave your dad at home though, the fun sponge.” Lanie giggled again, staring at Naomi with a new light in her eyes.

“Maybe your mum could come too?”

“Mum?”

“Yeah, girls’ trip. I used to know your mum back in uni days, you know. She’s a cool chick.”

“Are you sure?” Lanie asked cautiously, clearly not quite believing this was a real offer.

“Of course, hun,” Naomi said softly, drawing a small smile from Lanie that really lit up her face.

“I can go can’t I, Dad?”

Toby cleared his throat and blinked a couple of times before forcing a smile.

“We can check with your mum.”

“Maggie will be on board, believe me,” said Naomi with the confidence of a woman who *may* well have already spoken to Maggie.

“Right, I...” Toby looked a little flummoxed but overall just massively relieved that his daughter was smiling. “That sounds wonderful, Lanie-Loo. And maybe when we get home we can have a chat about some stuff?”

Lanie looked back at her hands. “Maybe,” she muttered, and Toby let out a relieved breath.

On the way out I overheard Toby mutter to Naomi about how they were overdue a little chat as well and I smiled.



WHEN HARRY STAYED WITH ME THE NEXT WEEKEND, MAX AND MIA, THEIR daughter Sophie, and Yaz and Heath had all come over to mine for dinner. Luckily, they’d eased back from giving Harry the third degree, and he had managed to relax a bit more. He was still slightly tense around them, but I sensed it took Harry a long time to trust new people. Naturally shy and having been burned at an early age, he was an extremely wary person. The

only person he interacted with freely was Sophie. The two-year-old was truly scrummy, of course, but I didn't realise how much of a natural Harry was with kids. Sophie was climbing all over him in no time, drooling on his expensive shirt. Harry explained about his many nieces and nephews and of course all the time he'd spent with Toby's daughter, Lanie. I felt a pang of yearning listening about his large extended family.

Yaz had taken me to one side after the meal to ask how I was. She seemed cautiously happy for Harry and me, but I could tell she was worried. She'd kept her secret about my panic attacks for which I was glad. Heath had his own demons from our childhood – I didn't want to be adding any fuel to that fire. He'd protected me as a child, and I protected him now. That was just the way it was. I told Yaz I was fine and that the panic attacks weren't a problem (mostly true). She was appeased for the moment, but unhappy that I hadn't talked to Harry about any of it.

"I don't need him thinking I'm a basket case this early on," I told her through a smile, which Yaz didn't return.

"Don't call yourself that," she snapped. "You and Heath are remarkably stable considering everything you both went through. Listen, V, if things are getting serious with this guy, then he deserves to know."

"It's fine."

"It's always *fine* with you, V, until it's really not. Just consider it, love. Okay?"

I agreed to get her off my back, but there was no way I was telling Harry that sometimes I couldn't breathe. That I still had flashbacks and nightmares decades later. That there was a reason I never allowed the temperature of my house to drop below twenty degrees. That I felt uneasy when my fridge and freezer weren't fully stocked.

I'd been avoiding Yaz's calls since then and I knew that was because she had a point, which I wasn't ready to consider. I was going to let myself have this slice of happiness without anything else creeping in to ruin it. For now.

But, as I was about to find out, the past doesn't always stay in the past.

# Chapter 17

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## *I didn't need anybody*

### **VERITY**

“Max, why don't you let me take it from here?”

“I've got it under control, V,” Max said in his shouty voice, which suggested he was very far from having things under control. Max using his shouty voice around anyone we wanted to work with, but most especially our contractors, was not good. Given the set of his jaw and the wild gesturing I'd seen him make to the team before I rushed over to intervene, he did not have anything about this situation under control. I needed to manoeuvre him away from the men on whom we absolutely relied on not to walk off site and leave us in the shit.

“I'm sure you do, Max,” I said smoothly, smiling at him and then at the irate hard-hat-wearing man next to him, “but the surveyors have got some queries about staircase positioning, and I think that as you led on that element then maybe...”

“Fuck,” Max bit off. “I told them that those bloody stairs had to stay where they were. I'm getting sick of every bastard here not being able to follow basic design.” With that he stormed off in search of the surveyors. He would not find the surveyors as they were not on site today. What he would find was his wife who would be fully prepared to calm him down with a thermos of tea.

“So, Max can be a little... too *Max*.”

“A grumpy git you mean?” one of the contractors said.

“Well, yes, he's an unreasonable pain in the arse. I'd be the first to agree with you there. But, luckily for you, he's not the one you have to deal with. We try to keep Max's interactions with other humans to a minimum. Now,

what was the problem with the curved wall?”

I'd managed to eek small grins out of some of the contractors with my savage (but accurate) assessment of Max's character, and as we started to unpick the difficulties presented by the design they slowly softened to me. It took a while, but eventually we'd come up with a compromise (at least I'd managed to talk them into thinking it was a compromise – in reality it was me getting exactly what I wanted for the design). Yes, contractors will always want to work to designs that are essentially boxes with no curves at all. Yes, the design we'd come up with for this side of the building was annoying. But no, I would not be accepting any sort of halfway house when it came to the vision Max and I had for this project.

“You're a good negotiator.”

I spun around to see Harry leaning against his flash car with a grin on his face, looking edible in his suit and tie with his arms crossed over his broad chest.

“Well, I'll admit, I'm better than Max,” I replied, as he pushed away from the pavement and took his long strides towards me. When he reached me, he wasted no time, closing his arms around me to haul me towards him, and laying his mouth over mine with a brief, hard, claiming kiss. I blinked up at his smiling face, still in the circle of his arms and tried to muster the correct amount of annoyance through my Harry-induced haze.

“You can't kiss me in front of everyone on site,” I managed, taking a half-hearted swat at his shoulder which just made his grin wider.

“Hello, Harry,” he mumbled under his breath. “I missed you, Harry. You mean the world to me and I'm only too glad to kiss you on site seeing as I'm your girlfriend and that means you can kiss me whenever you like.”

I rolled my eyes, even though a warm feeling had spread out from my chest at the sound of Harry calling me his girlfriend. “You know you're a weirdo, right hedgehog? That muttering thing should have stayed way back in your teens where it belongs.”

Harry smiled down at me and nodded, unrepentant about that too. I sighed, suppressing a smile.

“You can't kiss me here. It undermines me. I have to deal with these men, and they need to respect me.”

He tilted his head to the side with a bemused expression. “Verity, I doubt very much you could lose any respect here. Whenever I've seen you interacting with anyone in the board room, or out here on site, you pretty

much own the situation. A kiss from me isn't going to make a damn bit of difference. You're a total boss. This is well known. Now it's well known that you're *my* boss."

That warmth spread with his assessment of me. "You're such a caveman. The whole site doesn't need to know I'm yours."

His eyebrows went up into his hairline. "Uh... yes, yes they do. Now, when can I take you home?" Movement beyond Harry caught my eye as I opened my mouth to reply. I froze when I saw my family's lawyer approaching us. Registering Mr Crawley's grim expression, a feeling of dread sank to the pit of my stomach, and I pulled away from Harry.

"Mr Crawley," I greeted him, taking a couple of steps away from Harry, who reluctantly let me go.

"Ms Markham," Mr Crawley returned in his croaky voice. He must have been pushing eighty. He'd been my father's solicitor for decades. I'd met him a handful of times over the years, and he'd always been polite, distant and straightlaced. He wasn't one of my parents' friends who had gone to their parties. Even before he'd basically admitted as much when he informed me of my father's death, I had a feeling my parents vaguely disgusted Mr Crawley to be honest. My mother used to call him a stuffy old bastard, but I got the impression the man could manage money and their affairs better than anyone else. My father trusted him. And while my father had been many things – most of them repellent – he was not a fool. "If you could spare me a moment of your time."

I tilted my head to the side and frowned at him. "You couldn't have emailed?"

Mr Crawley glanced at Harry, who was closing in on my side, then back to me before giving his head a quick shake. "Given my long association with your family, I thought it best that I came in person. It's about your m—"

"Stop!" I surprised myself and Mr Crawley by the volume of my voice, but it did have the desired effect. He snapped his mouth shut.

I knew that whatever he was here to tell me would not be good. An escalation like this had been coming for *months*. I was the one who was kept informed about family matters by Mr Crawley, not Heath. I was the one who kept the lines of communication open to prevent her from going directly to Heath after Mr Crawley informed me of her threats. Don't get me wrong, I didn't allow much contact – but I knew that if she didn't get to dig her claws in once in a while then we'd have a shit show on our hands. Ice trickled

through my veins, and I felt myself go numb as I took in Mr Crawley's sombre expression. If I could shut everything down this would be easier. I'd be able to take on most of the crap, protect Heath, sort out what needed sorting. I just had to stay numb. I flinched when Harry's warm hand closed around mine.

"Are you okay, love?" he asked, his voice careful like I was fragile. Well, I wasn't fragile. I was strong. I *had* to be strong. And I couldn't do it with Harry here. He had no real idea about my parents. When we were younger, we were so completely ashamed of the situation at home that Heath and I didn't tell anyone. Concerned nannies were fired, that was until we were deemed old enough to look after ourselves (around the age of five or so). Teachers were fobbed off, including Harry's father. The only adults outside our family to ever come close to knowing what went on at home were Max's parents, seeing as we spent quite a few holidays with the Hardcastles when our parents neglected to pick us up from the boarding school we all went to together. But even they didn't realise the full extent of it, not until our father died and they saw the house for themselves. Although I suspected they knew more than they let on. Mrs Hardcastle was always piling our plates with more food than we knew what to do with when we stayed with them, and at any mention of our parents her mouth would pull into a thin, disapproving line.

So there was no way I was going to be telling Harry anything more about my childhood. Over the last two weeks we'd talked a lot about *his* family – his dad still taught maths and his older brother John was also a teacher who was, according to Harry "a stubborn bastard who refuses to take financial help". Harry *had* managed to buy John a house, telling him it was a business write-off and to stop being such a stubborn git. John only gave in when Harry enlisted the help of John's wife, Steph, (having had a third child and still stuck in a two-bedroom house Steph was very ready to move) but she made Harry promise never to miss another Christmas for work or they'd give the house back. His parents, however, had refused to move from the tiny, terraced cottage. All their friends lived on their road, the local pub was walking distance – they didn't see what more they needed out of life.

I'd managed to extract a lot of information about Harry's family whilst revealing very little about my own, but then I had years of experience deflecting curious people. It really wasn't that hard to turn questions around. When people love their own families, they're only too happy to talk about them and don't always notice when their questions get invariably turned back

at them. Anyway, from what Harry implied, Heath had already given too much away about my family and what went down back then. I wasn't about to add to that.

"I'm fine," I said, pulling my hand from his and taking a step away. "Listen, Harry, I'm sorry but this is official *Markham* business, and I need to deal with it on my own."

Harry frowned, no doubt confused by my cold, business-like tone. "Okay, if you're sure you're alright."

I sighed in annoyance and hardened myself to his concerned expression. "I'm perfectly fine," my cut-glass accent sharpened as I morphed into Verity-the-aristocrat mode, deliberately trying to wind Harry up and push him away, "and I don't appreciate you hovering. The complexities of the Markham estate are actually *private*."

Hurt flashed across his features before he quickly masked it with a cool expression I was familiar with. Harry was shutting down on me, his barriers were going back up. Well, as far as I was concerned, that was for the best. Nobody needed to be with me when I was like this – unable to feel anything, numb, empty. I had to deal with what was to come on my own. I didn't need Harry there with me. I didn't need *anybody*. That deep, deep shame was always there bubbling under the surface. On some level I knew it was irrational, but I just couldn't cope with Harry knowing all the grim details of my family.

But then childhood trauma isn't rational, is it? Being unwanted as a child is not a reality that can be easily processed. The child will always assume that there is something wrong with them. That they're the one at fault. There must be a reason they're unwanted. And the last person I wanted to know that was Harry.

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# Chapter 18

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## *The whole bloody point*

### **HARRY**

“Why are we having this meeting again?” asked Toby, as he took his seat next to me in the boardroom. I shrugged, muttering something about assessing progress and choosing a direction. It was all bullshit. The truth was I’d had to call an actual business meeting so that I could talk to my own girlfriend and see her face to face.

Over the last two weeks she’d been avoiding me. It was like *my* Verity had been switched off and a new, colder version had been drafted into her place. After she’d left with Mr Crawley, whom I’d since researched and found to be the Markham family solicitor, she hadn’t shown up at my house later that day as we’d planned. When I rang her, she’d given me some excuse about “sorting family business” and said that she’d ring me when she was able to. But she didn’t ring. In fact, she didn’t text or ring for two days. All my calls went to voicemail, and none of my messages were answered. Silence. By this stage, I was beginning to get worried. I couldn’t get her blank expression out of my mind, or the way she’d snatched her hand from mine. Something was wrong. So, I’d phoned Max, but he was his usual uncommunicative self, and couldn’t shed any light on Verity’s silence. My phone call to Max did result in some contact from Verity though. She texted me.

*Harry, I’m fine.*

*I just have some business I have to sort over the next few weeks. I won’t be able to see you at all this month. I understand if that’s not convenient for you and if you want to move on.*

If I wanted to move on? What the fuck did that mean? I was in love with

this woman. After that text, and the unanswered calls that followed, I started to get angry. Those small doubts and insecurities started to creep back in again. Heath's words from twenty years ago started replaying themselves.

*She's going to be Lady Markham, mate. What the hell do you think she'd want with a townie teacher's son?*

*My sister could have anyone she wanted. Why would she waste her time with a nerd like you? You were just a game to her, you stupid sod.*

Yes, Heath had *told* me that he'd been full of shit. That he'd just been trying to protect his sister from having her heart broken by a bloke who was going off to university and being left to pine after him. That things actually *were* hard at home – there were some family difficulties that Heath didn't want to get into. He'd also told me that he made a mistake – that Verity didn't really get over me, and that he still didn't think she had. He'd seemed to be telling me the truth at the time. At least *part* of the truth. There was definitely information he was holding back. There had been more to it than just him protecting his sister from me. The Markhams hadn't been honest with me from the beginning, and they still weren't being honest with me now.

The double doors to the conference room opened and Max walked in, followed by Verity. Toby and I rose from our seats to greet them, but I froze when I saw Verity's face. She was in her standard ultra-chic business-slash-high-fashion outfit, her hair and make-up were perfect as always. But her cheeks were more hollow than before, her eyes when they came briefly to mine were blank – completely devoid of any expression. And I could just make out dark circles underneath them. She wasn't sleeping. Was she eating? My chest tightened in concern.

"Verity?" I called softly and the room fell silent.

As if it cost her a huge amount of effort, Verity's gaze came to mine, and I sucked in a short breath. For a moment, pain flashed through the blue of her eyes so starkly it was like a physical force in the room. What was going on? I forgot about everyone else there, and focused only on Verity.

"Baby, are you okay?"

The pain burned brighter for a moment, before she blanked it completely.

"I'm perfectly fine, if not exceptionally busy," she said in a voice so cold I was surprised the water on the table didn't freeze over. "And it would be more appropriate if you addressed me formally in meetings. Now, if you don't mind, we have a number of things to be getting on with. Being commanded up here for a meeting is significantly eating into our time. And I



might remind you both, yours is not the only project we're working on."

"Okay, Ms Markham," Toby said, his normally easy-going demeanour a thing of the past and his voice also laced with ice. "We're sorry for wasting your precious time. If you could find a few moments to discuss the progress and timeline with us, that would be appreciated. Then you can both *leave*." He was vibrating with fury, and I knew why. This bitch routine was pretty convincing. Toby was protective of me – he had been since university, and he knew how much Verity meant to me.

Max took over at that point. Going through plans we'd already been sent, and information we were already aware of – exposing this meeting for the sham it was. When they got up to leave, I shot around the conference table to catch up with Verity. I caught her arm to stop her as she power-walked behind Max out into the corridor. At my touch, she spun around on her heel, her eyes huge and her expression so vulnerable that for a second I thought she might cry. She looked down at my hand on her arm for a moment, then up into my eyes and her body swayed towards me before she caught herself. She blinked, yanked her arm free and retreated a couple of steps.

"Verity, please," I begged. "Talk to me. I know something's wrong. Just tell me. You can tell me anything – remember?"

Max had paused a few feet from us both, and he was looking between Verity and me with concern. "Verity, I think—" he started, but Verity whipped around to look at him, and whatever expression was on her face made him snap his mouth shut.

"I told you," she said, all that vulnerability gone from her expression again, "I'm busy. To be honest, Harry, I think it's best that we just call it a day. I don't really have time for this right now."

"Call it a day?" my voice was incredulous. "Verity, what the hell has happened to you? We're *not* just calling it a day."

"You might get your own way here," she snapped, "with your Big-Dick-Energy office and your minions. But I'm not one of them, Harry. So, you can stick your special eggs, your LP Mayweather and your hot nerd routine. I've had *enough*."

I reeled back as if she'd slapped me. I thought she liked Mayweather? And what was wrong with my eggs? *She* was the one who had said I was a hot nerd, for God's sake. Unfortunately, I let my anger boil through my concern. I let those old, deep-seated insecurities in, and I didn't register the pain that had made its way back into her eyes as I took a step back.

“Fine,” I snapped. “I guess it’s run its course then. I’ve shagged my teenage crush now, so that’s a win-win as far as I’m concerned. So, by all means, do jog on.”

The anger ringing in my ears meant I didn’t hear the swift intake of breath Verity took, didn’t see how she flinched. And I was already walking away, so I didn’t see how Max had to support her to the lift, or how she’d crumbled against him once inside it. All I registered was my hurt pride, my fury and my disappointment. I didn’t stop to think how incongruous everything Verity was saying and the way she was acting was with the person I had come to know in the last few weeks. Just like twenty years ago, I let myself stew in my own resentment, and once again, I missed the whole bloody point.

# Chapter 19

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## *Not really our sort of people*

### **HARRY**

“Hey, Mum!” I called out as I pushed through into the tiny corridor and was immediately assaulted by three small bodies. I managed to grab them all into one mass of squirming kid – shoved the smallest two under one arm, and the largest under the other to stride down the corridor in search of the rest of my family. Mum still insisted on cooking these Sunday lunches at their home, even though there just wasn’t room for us all there now. She said she didn’t trust my fancy oven and was too old to work out my brother’s induction hob. So, all eight of us crammed around the small kitchen table in their terraced house every month, whilst the kids steadily destroyed everything in their path.

“I found some of your rubbish out in the hallway,” I said to my brother. The wriggling under my arms intensified.

“I’m not wubbish! You’re a big fat poo!” squealed my six-year-old niece.

“Tilly!” her mother, and my sister-in-law, Steph admonished as she came over to me and kissed me on my cheek, before extracting her eldest from under my arm. “We don’t call people poos.”

“Mummy!” Tilly shouted. “Want Unca Hazza!”

“I thought you said I was a poo?” I asked her, flipping the other two upside-down in my arms to their delighted squeals.

“I takes it back,” she said, squirming away from Steph to get back to me. I walked over to Mum and gave her a kiss on the cheek with the kids still in tow before walking them over to the sofa and depositing them both down on the cushions. Predictably they both sprang up and leapt at my torso, crying, “Again! Again!” at the top of their lungs.

“Kids! Get off your uncle,” Steph snapped. “John, honestly. Can you please control your children?”

“Looks like they’re doing a grand job to me,” my brother John put in, giving his youngest a thumbs up when I winced after an accidental bollock kick. Tilly then sat up on her knees next to me on the sofa and put both her hands on either side of my face, directing it towards her and away from her brothers.

“Wha’cha bring me?” she demanded, her cute little face screwed up in determination, and one of her bunches half coming out from the struggle.

“You *do not* ask for presents!” Steph said. “And, if you do, you say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’.”

All three of them started shouting “please” and “thank you” at the top of their lungs, as they jumped up and down on me and the battered sofa. I let them work themselves up for a couple of minutes, but when it became clear that I was either going to be sterile for life with the number of hits my groin was taking, or my sister-in-law’s head was going to explode, I reached into my bag and pulled out three Lego sets: *Harry Potter* for Tilly, *Star Wars* for five-year-old Mikey and *Marvel* for three-year-old Jake. They all squealed as they snatched them out of my hands, and then all three sprinted from the room with their prizes.

“Harry, my entire house is covered with bloody Lego because of you,” Steph grumbled.

“Yeah, mate,” John said. “I found some in my arse crack after I had a bath the other day. I don’t want to be digging around in my butt cheeks for Lego.”

“John!” Mum snapped. “Don’t say arse.”

“Yeah, and don’t talk about your kinky sex lives in front of Mum and Dad. Gross, guys.”

Mum speared me with a look, and I shut my mouth. Dad chuckled and clapped me on the shoulder.

“You,” Mum said to me in her sternest tone, “can peel the carrots.”

“Ugh,” I grunted as I moved to the kitchen table and picked up the ancient, very shit peeler. “Mum, you know I could *pay* someone to peel carrots for you. In fact, I could have had this whole lunch catered.”

Mum sniffed. “I’m not having some stranger in my kitchen.”

“We could do it in my kitchen, or John’s.”

“They wouldn’t make your mum’s gravy right,” Dad said, and I shook

my head in exasperation.

“You could give them the bloody recipe, Mum. It can’t be rocket science.”

There was a long silence then, broken only by Mum’s sniff.

“Dial it down, Richy McRich,” John said, his casually affectionate tone from before now gone. I looked up from my carrot peeling to see him frowning down at me from his position at the stove with his hand on Mum’s shoulder.

“If you don’t like my cooking, just say so,” Mum said in an injured tone, and I felt a spike of irritation and guilt.

“Of course, I love your cooking, Mum,” I said, trying (and failing) to not sound annoyed. “I just want you to be able to relax.”

“Well, I won’t relax if I’m in a strange kitchen, and people I don’t know are botching my gravy.”

I fought really hard and managed to contain my eye roll. It was a huge source of frustration to me that my family wouldn’t let me spend my money on them.

“You could be sitting with your feet up and a gin and tonic in your hand, Mum, whilst other people do all the hard work. And *I* wouldn’t have to be peeling Tesco sodding carrots.”

The peeler and carrots were snatched out of my hands by an irate John. “I’ll peel the *sodding carrots* if you’re so above all that,” he said. “I guess we should all just be happy you’ve found time in your busy, important empire-building life to come here at all.”

“Your mother *likes* cooking, Harry,” said Dad. “And I’ve been eating her roast dinners for fifty years now. I think my body would probably reject anything alternative on a Sunday lunchtime.”

I sat back in my chair and let out a frustrated puff of air. How was I being made to feel guilty for offering to help?

“Look, I’m sorry,” I muttered. “Really, Mum, you know I love your cooking. I just wish that once in a while you’d let me spoil you.”

“I don’t want to be spoilt. I want to *see* you. Being with family makes me happy, Harry. Cooking together makes me happy.”

“Harry?” Steph said, as she took the seat next to mine and rested her hand on my forearm. “Are you okay? You seem a bit... wound up.”

I sighed. Steph always saw way too much. And she was right – I would normally avoid snapping at my family about them not taking my help or

bitching about peeling a few carrots. But I was so on edge after the fight with Verity that I wasn't sleeping. I had no appetite, and everything seemed to piss me off. I flicked a quick sideways glance at Steph's concerned face and clenched my jaw so hard I could hear it click.

"I'm sorry," I said down at my hands on the table. "I guess I'm not myself. I just..." I trailed off and fiddled with a piece of carrot peel for a moment. The truth was that, although I loved my family, I always felt a bit separate from them. They had such different priorities to me; they didn't see things in the same way. My brother was four years older. He'd been popular at school – outgoing, confident. He filled out at a much younger age than me and never had quite the same nerd tendencies. So he was never bullied and didn't really develop the hang-ups I had about money, despite going to school with the same sort of ultra-rich kids. John loved his job as a teacher, but he wasn't motivated by money the way I was, and – also unlike me – he didn't have anything to prove. He didn't understand why I kept working at the same pace when I could now comfortably retire. He didn't *get* me. But although my brother might not have been that ambitious financially, there were different types of ambition. He had Steph, he had the kids, he had a beautiful life. What did I have? A huge empty house in Chelsea that my family wouldn't even come to for Sunday lunch. No girlfriend. My chest felt tight for a moment, and I took a shuddering breath in. Steph noticed and squeezed my arm. I had to make a choice. I could stay closed off from my family and never actually share anything with them, or I could, for once, risk showing a little weakness.

"My girlfriend dumped me."

The atmosphere in the kitchen shifted, and when I looked up I saw John's peeler was suspended in mid-air as he stared at me in open-mouthed shock. Mum and Dad had spun around to look at me, and Steph's eyebrows were in her hairline.

"*She dumped you?*" Steph asked in sheer disbelief, which made me feel a little better if I was honest. But then my family were used to it being *me* ending things with women, not the other way around. Mum and Dad had been wanting me to settle down for a while. I just never seemed to find someone I was comfortable with. Someone I could sit on a sofa reading epic fantasy with. Someone I could trust. But now I had – and she'd gone. And I'd never felt the same way about another woman as I had for Verity. Having experienced the bone-deep need I had for her, everything else paled in

comparison.

“Who is this stupid girl who would dare to dump such a handsome, wonderful man?” asked Mum, her hands going to her hips and her back straightening.

Now here’s the tricky thing. My family were not going to be over the moon at the mention of Verity Markham, or any Markham for that matter.

“Well, I know this is a bit of a blast from the past,” I said carefully. “But, well, I was at school with her.” I cleared my throat and braced myself for their reaction. “You remember the Markham twins?” There was a clatter of wood on the tiles of the kitchen, and I looked at Mum to see she had dropped her spoon. The blood had drained out of her face and her hand had gone up to her throat.

“Verity and Heath Markham?” Dad asked. There was more curiosity in his tone than the shock and horror of Mum’s expression. “Yes, of course I remember them.”

“What’s up with you two?” asked John, looking between me and our parents. “Why does Mum look like she’s seen a ghost?”

“Don’t you remember, John? It was the Markhams who lost your father his job,” said Mum, her voice shaking with fury. “What on earth are you doing getting mixed up in that family again, Harry?”

“That’s enough, Jean,” Dad said in a firm tone, and my eyes widened in shock. Dad literally never used that tone with Mum or told her when something was enough. Mum very much wore the trousers and, judging by her furious expression and the colour that was seeping into her cheeks, she was not appreciating her husband’s sudden alpha-male routine.

“They *did* lose you that job, Martin,” she snapped. “Those kids made out you were crazy in that meeting. They’d led you right up the garden path. You wouldn’t have raised concerns without cause. But it was just a game to them. Rich, entitled, aristocratic brats.”

“It was twenty years ago, Jean,” Dad said in a softer tone. “And I still think there *was* cause for concern...” he trailed off as he looked out of the window, a small frown marring his forehead. “And they didn’t lose me my job. I just had to step down as housemaster.”

Mum made a scoffing sound. “They *laughed* in that meeting, Martin. They laughed at you when you shared your concerns. It was humiliating.”

“They were sixteen, Jean, and, looking back, I think... I think they were scared.”



“Scared?” Mum said, her eyebrows in her hairline. “Lady Markham told me all about how uncontrollable they were. Those children weren’t scared of anything.”

Dad shook his head. “There was more to that situation than met the eye. Those parents... I still maintain something was off.” Dad turned to me, ignoring Mum when she started to argue. “How is Verity, Harry?” I blinked. Dad had been devastated to lose that job, but from his tone he seemed to really care about Verity’s welfare.

“Er... well, she’s okay, I guess. Apart from dumping me which—”

“And her brother?”

I blinked. “Er... yeah, Heath’s good. He’s a doctor now.”

“Oh, *good*. That is good,” Dad said with real feeling. This was all a bit weird. “And Verity? She’s an architect, isn’t she?”

“How do you know that?”

“Your mum and I watch *Dream Homes*,” Dad said. “She and that Max Hardcastle – he was in my schoolhouse too – have been on that show a few times. She does all the talking for him though. Can see why – he’s a grumpy bugger. Hasn’t changed since school.”

“Yes, their company is doing the design for the LSE campus building. That’s how I met her again.”

“Well, it’s for the best, love,” Mum said briskly. “You don’t want to get mixed up with the Markhams.”

“I heard their father died a couple of years back,” Dad said.

“Died?” I asked, my chest feeling tight. “When exactly did he die, Dad?”

“Er... Hold on, I’ll check my emails.” Dad grabbed his phone. “Ah yes, here it is. There was a legacy in his will to the school. Wanted the library named after him or some-such nonsense. Always was a pompous arse. Right, well, this was almost exactly two years ago.”

Two years ago was when I’d met Verity again – and had proceeded to act like an arse.

“I– I didn’t know that he’d died,” I muttered, feeling my face heat.

Images of Verity’s closed expression, the dark circles under her eyes and her stiff movements at the last meeting we had, as if she was strung so tight that the least bit of stress could tip her over the edge. Was she still grieving and the anniversary of her father’s death had brought it all up again? Christ, I’d told her to “jog on” – bragged to her that I’d shagged my teenage crush. And I’d let her go. *Again*. I was an idiot. I’d already let her run away from

me to grieve for her father on her own two years ago, and I'd done the same just now. Since my talk with Heath I knew something wasn't right about her family, but I hadn't asked her the right questions.

In fact, looking back on our relationship, I realised that I hadn't asked her many questions at all. My own parents seemed to know more about Verity's family than I did. I'd banged on about my family to Verity for ages. She knew every last detail about them. But every single time her parents or her childhood came up in conversation she'd managed to steer attention away from it. It was clever, subtle and deft, but if I was really looking for it, if I'd bothered to be just that bit more curious about the woman I was in goddamn love with, I would have realised something was off. I would have pushed for more information. And maybe then she would have felt comfortable telling me what Markham family business was going on, instead of shutting me out.

"I'm sorry, Mum," I said, grabbing my coat off the back of the chair and swinging it on. "But I've got to go."

Mum gave me a long look before she nodded and walked across the kitchen to me to wrap me in a tight hug. When she pulled back, she studied my face for a moment.

"Be careful with that family, love," she said. "You don't know what you're dealing with there. Just remember they're different, okay? Not really our sort of people."

# Chapter 20

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## *I hope you mean that*

### **HARRY**

“Max, I’ve been stuck in traffic for three hours. Can we just cut the shit? Where’s Verity?”

“Why should I tell you where Verity is?” Max’s large arms crossed over his chest as he glared at me across the office. “Seems like you’ve done enough damage there.”

“I haven’t done anything,” I retorted. Max’s eyebrows went up. “Not this time, Max, I swear. She just stopped speaking to me after that lawyer visited her at the site. Mr Crawley? Ever since then she’s cut me out. No explanation. Then I found out about her dad dying, and I thought... well, I thought maybe there’s something else going on.”

Max’s glare morphed into a concerned expression as his arms uncrossed. “Ah shit,” he muttered as he scrubbed his hands down his face. “Christ, we’ve been barking up the wrong tree.”

“What do you mean by that? Please, Max, just talk to me.”

Max sighed as he dug into his back pocket to pull out his phone. “Look, I saw you and V get into it at that meeting, and I assumed that you’d been a prick again. I thought that was why she’s retreated over the last two weeks. We’ve been waiting to tackle her about it and sort her out. We didn’t even think that...” he shook his head. “I’ve been bloody stupid.”

I frowned in real confusion now. “Why are you worried now you know it’s not *me* causing the problem?”

“You don’t let these Markhams soldier on, mate,” Max snapped. “They’ve done enough of that their whole bloody lives. If it’s not you what’s pissed her off, then we’ve bigger problems.”

“What are you *talking* about,” I semi-shouted in frustration, but Max already had his phone to his ear.

“Yaz? You spoken to V since yesterday? Heath alright? No, I don’t think London Romeo was the problem. Yeah, fucking hell is right. See what you can find out from Heath.” Max hung up the phone and put it back in his pocket before grabbing his coat off the back of his chair and making a move towards the door.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?” I said, spinning round to block his exit.

“Get out of my way,” he growled through gritted teeth, his hands bunching into fists at his sides. Max might have an inch or so of height on me, but if he wanted a fight, I was willing to give him one. My days of being pushed around ended at school. I’d spent enough time in the gym now to take this guy on.

“Woah, woah, woah!” a female voice cut through the testosterone fug around us as Mia came into the office. “What’s going on here?” she snapped as she stepped between us. She was holding her daughter Sophie, whom she passed to Max in order to put her hands on her hips and glare at us. The toddler defused the tension in an instant. I smiled at her but my smile dropped when I turned back to Max.

“Max is going to explain what the fu...” I glanced at Sophie, “I mean, what the heck is going on with Verity,” I said in a carefully controlled voice.

Sophie squealed and Max struggled but failed to contain her as she launched herself at me. I caught her in my arms and settled her on my hip. Max’s eyebrows went up in surprise.

“Hey gorgeous,” I muttered, managing another smile for her as she patted my face and squeezed my cheeks together.

“What about her?” Mia asked sharply. “We could ask *you* the same thing.”

“He says it’s nowt to do with him,” Max grumbled from behind Mia, his anger deflating with the entrance of his wife and the fact his kid was now heavily investing in rearranging my face. “Verity just did the old Markham vanishing act.”

“Listen,” I interjected as Sophie, clearly finding the adult chat dull, gave my face one last pat and then fought her way to slide down my body, before toddling to the toy box Max kept in his office, “Verity exited my life abruptly two weeks ago, and I haven’t been able to contact her since. I only just found

out about her father's passing yesterday." I looked up at Max. "What do you mean by 'the Markham vanishing act'?"

"You didn't know about Verity's dad?" Mia's eyebrows were raised. I felt a rush of annoyance mixed with guilt again and threw up my hands in frustration.

"She avoids talking about her parents *at all*."

Mia's eyes narrowed, and her hands went to her hips. "Did it occur to you that there might be a reason for that? I thought you cared about her?"

"I *do* care about her," I snapped and then let out a long breath to get my anger under control. "Listen, I was so wrapped up in her that, yes, maybe I missed some things. Maybe I didn't push like I should have done. And I—" I looked to the side and felt my face heat. "She doesn't trust me. I know that, okay. And that's on me. That's about my pride and how much of a stupid bastard I was when we started this thing. But I know something's wrong. I know she wouldn't have just cut me off like that unless—"

"Unless she was hiding something," Mia cut in. "Listen, it's not our place to share the Markham family history, but we've learnt that when the shit hits the fan, Verity and Heath tend to withdraw. It happened when their father died, and it took a fair amount of effort for them to let us in. I think the fact that Heath was in love with Yaz was helpful, but she still had to work hard to sort him out."

"They must have really loved their father," I said and then watched in fascination as Mia and Max exchanged a confused look. Max opened his mouth to speak, but Mia gave a sharp shake of her head, silencing him. What was that about?

"We'd better talk to Heath," Mia said, and Max gave a short nod. She turned to me. "I think it's better that you go back to London. We'll sort Verity out, and then she can contact you herself."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "You wouldn't even know there was anything to sort out if I hadn't come to find her."

"Harry, there's no point being stubborn about this. It will have to be on her terms. The Markhams are... complicated."

"I don't care how complicated they are. I'm in love with a complicated bloody Markham, and I am *not* going to keep walking away from her."

Mia eyed me for a moment before stepping forward into my space. "I hope you mean that," she said softly, looking up at me to search my face.

# Chapter 21

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## *She deserves her own slice of happiness*

### **HARRY**

“What did she say when you rang?” Yaz asked from her position at Heath’s kitchen counter. She was holding a spaniel in her lap like a baby and stroking the dog’s tummy.

“I asked why she was avoiding us, and she said work was crazy. I thought you guys must have been busy with your *massive project*,” Heath said as he moved to the kettle and started to make tea. Max, Mia, Baby Sophie and I were at Heath and Yaz’s house. I’d insisted on coming along and it was Mia who’d championed my cause to Max.

“She’s hardly *been* at work for the last two weeks, Heath,” Max said, and Heath stopped what he was doing to look over at his friend.

“Where the fuck has she been then?”

“I tried to ring her just now and I got a foreign dial tone,” I said, and everyone’s attention came to me. “She’s not replying to texts.”

“What did you do now, Hazza?” Heath said, his voice rising with anger.

“Nothing! Listen, like I told Max, there was a lawyer, Mr Crawley. He came by the site. Verity spoke to him in private, and it was after that that she changed. She blew me off, then the next time I saw her was when—”

“When you called that bullshit meeting in your Big-Dick-Energy conference room,” Max said.

“Can we stop calling my conference room that! It’s actually a standard bloody size.”

“Don’t be ashamed of the BDE, mate,” Yaz said, giving me a wink. “Nothing wrong with trying to compensate in whatever way you can.”

I scowled at her. “I have no need to compensate for *anything*, thank you



very much.”

“What happened at this bullshit meeting?” Heath said, ignoring the BDE banter and focusing his furious gaze on me.

“I just wanted to see her. I was frustrated, okay? I may have been a bit of a prick again.”

“A *bit* of a prick?” Max said in disgust. “I had to practically scrape her off the floor of the lift after you finished with her.”

“Max, I didn’t know that. She told me that she’d had enough of me. She was really specific. I’m not a mind reader.” I sighed. “Listen, for all I know, she *has* actually had enough of me. I’m not the most charismatic bloke. I’m quite a homebody, really. I like staying in, reading epic fantasy and being bossed about by my cat. Maybe she was bored? But I just really wanted to make sure she was okay.”

Silence filled the kitchen for a long moment before Yaz broke it.

“Verity loves you, Harry,” Yaz said.

“Yaz!” Heath snapped.

“You said it yourself, Heath. Harry makes Verity happy. He’s always made her happy. Even when they were teenagers. Well, before he ghosted her that is.” I opened my mouth to speak but Yaz was on a roll. “She bloody well deserves that, and I won’t have anyone, even if it’s Verity herself, sabotaging it.” She slid both her arms around Heath at this point and gave him a squeeze. “You Markhams can be a stubborn bunch, you know? And you, of all people, have to agree that you don’t always know what’s good for you. God knows it took you long enough to realise *I* was the perfect woman.”

“Yaz, Verity’s not an idiot like me. She copes better with all this stuff. She’s dealt with our baggage rather than ignoring it,” Heath said with absolute confidence.

Yaz closed her eyes slowly and let out a long breath, before taking a small step back from Heath and grabbing both his hands in hers. “I’m sorry, but that’s simply not the case. Yes, Verity is very strong. Yes, she dealt with the logistics of the funeral, and she *seemed* to cope with everything else pretty well. But you’re lying to yourself if you think she’s put all of your *baggage* behind her.” Yaz then dropped one of Heath’s hands and turned to me. “Harry, I know it’s not my story to tell, but when I was working on *my* Markham, I had some help and a bit of backstory from my parents to go on. I know Heath’s mentioned that his childhood wasn’t ideal, but I think you need to be armed with a bit more knowledge.”

“Yaz, I don’t think–”

“He deserves to have some insight, Heath. We can give him that. And from what you’ve told me, you haven’t exactly been honest with Harry, even now.”

Heath shifted on his feet and then ran both his hands down his face. “I’m not comfortable... you know, talking about it all.”

“Will you try?” Yaz said softly. “For Verity?”

Heath let out a huff of air and then pulled on Yaz’s hand to bring her right into his side under his arm. “Fine. Okay, the thing is... God, how do I explain this? That stuff I told you back then at school, about how Verity was just using you...” Colour crept into Heath’s cheeks, and he looked away from me with an ashamed expression.

“Go on,” I said in a tight voice, the atmosphere in the room growing thick with tension.

“Well, I’ve already explained that I was talking shit. But, you see, it wasn’t to protect Verity from you leaving like I said, although that was a part of it. It was so that you would leave her alone permanently. So that you wouldn’t contact her again *at all*. I just couldn’t risk it. Not with your dad sniffing around my family, asking questions. I was protecting myself as well. I was protecting our situation.”

“Your situation?” I pressed, my eyebrows going up in confusion.

Heath let out a huff of air and cleared his throat before continuing. “Your dad... he was a perceptive man and a good housemaster.”

“I already know this, Heath,”

“Well, he was a bit *too* good. Nobody else ever really spotted anything wrong.”

I felt my whole body tense as I stared at Heath. “What was wrong?” I gritted out.

“Verity and I started at a boarding prep school at the age of seven. You know how most kids would be homesick if they were sent to school at that age?”

“Yes?” I asked slowly. My mind was whirring, and I could feel my stomach sink at what I thought might be coming.

“V and I... we just couldn’t understand that. School for us was paradise.” Heath took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Yaz’s arms slipped around his middle, and she gave him another squeeze which seemed to confer some sort of strength. “We didn’t know about pillowcases or duvet covers or clean

towels until we got to school.”

“W–what?” I whispered as my heart sank down to my feet.

Heath shrugged. “We didn’t have them at home. No sheets either. We *loved* the feel of sheets. Loved the smell of them. It was all amazing. And the food – three hot meals a day, snacks whenever we wanted. The other kids were always whingeing about the food, which really confused us. Although I think what Verity liked the most was the warmth. So many of my memories of home are of this bone-chilling coldness. If you’re cold for long enough, it’s like it’s buried way under your skin and into your bones. Verity always hated the cold.”

I thought back to the library and how much she loved that huge radiator. It hadn’t seemed strange to me back then – just another of Verity’s quirks, but her love for that radiator was off the scale. And I thought of all her hats, gloves, hand-warmers, bulky scarves, thick coats. Yes, Verity *hated* the cold and clearly did everything she could to avoid it.

“But... your parents were rich,” I said in disbelief. “You lived in that huge house. You’ve got inherited titles. I– I don’t understand.”

“To be honest, I still don’t either, and I lived it, mate,” Heath said. “Dad was only into hunting and shooting. The pack of hounds he had for the local hunt were fed better than his own children.” Heath laughed. “He once put a heater in the dogs’ outhouse when the temperature dropped below freezing, but didn’t think to give one to his kids who lived in the shed next door.”

“You lived in a shed?” My voice was moving from confused to angry, and my ears were ringing with the strength of it.

“Trust me, it was better than living in the house. Especially when Mum and Dad were home. They threw these parties, see. I knew even at six years old that it wasn’t safe for Verity to be in the house. Not with the people they had over. It wasn’t just the booze and the drugs, there were people having sex on available surfaces, spilling upstairs into the bedrooms. One night we were woken up by some massive bloke falling into our room at four in the morning and grabbing Verity out of her bed. I got a hockey stick and smashed him in the balls. We moved into the shed the next day.”

Heath continued to recount the horrific details of neglect and abuse in an almost conversational tone. Calmly saying things like, “We only got the occasional backhanders and I managed to take the brunt of those,” as if suffering that physical violence was nothing compared with the prevailing torrent of abuse in which they were neglected, starved, assaulted, and

generally treated worse than the fucking dogs.

The low ringing was still there in my ears as I stood in Heath's kitchen, having been told that the woman I was in love with had suffered persistent neglect and abuse throughout her entire childhood. Bile rose up to my throat, but I choked it down. I felt everyone's attention directed at me after Heath finished his gruesome recounting, and it was like the walls were closing in. I turned and stalked out of the kitchen to the front door, wrenched it open then didn't stop until I was stood next to my car. A huge wave of fury swept over me at the thought of Verity back then, and I let out a shout of frustration. The nearest available solid object was my car, and I slapped both hands down on the bonnet, hard enough for the sound to echo around the drive, and then leaned into it with my head bowed between my arms.

"Yup, that about sums up how I felt when I found out too," I heard Yaz's voice from behind me and I spun to face her.

"How *could* they?" My voice was low, and saturated with such absolute fury that it didn't sound like my own.

"Some people should not have children."

I shook my head. "Heath and Verity's parents are *not* people, they're *monsters*." I let out a long breath, my anger now slowly seeping away to be replaced with desperate sadness and a feeling of complete impotence at not being able to rewind time and put a bloody stop to what Heath and Verity went through. I collapsed against my car, sliding down the chassis to sit on the block paving of the driveway. Yaz walked over to me and sat right beside me. When I spoke again my voice was much softer. "How did they survive it and come out so... normal?"

"I've often wondered about that," Yaz said. "They had each other. In their very early years they had a nanny, until she was sacked for alerting social services. I think there were some lovely teachers at their prep school and then at Downingham – your dad included. Even if he did back off when the Markhams threatened him. And really, they're just remarkable people." She shifted so that she was facing me then and put a hand on my forearm. "Don't think that they're not damaged though. Heath had so many demons he very nearly drove me away in the beginning. Loving them isn't easy because I think, deep down, they don't really believe they *deserve* to be loved."

I let out a low, pained chuckle. "And here I was thinking that Verity was sick with grief over her father. Christ, was I barking up the wrong tree."

"I think there was some grief there, weirdly, but when he died it stirred up

all the old feelings as well. They had to go up to the house and sort through it, arrange the funeral, see all their parents' old cronies at the funeral. Their bloody mother put in an appearance."

"Please tell me the mother's not as bad as the father."

Yaz huffed. "Well, she was good at putting on a front apparently. Better than the dad – he really couldn't give a fuck. That's all gone to shit now though. She was a bit of a mess at the funeral. Listen, I think information pertaining to the Markham parents should be rationed for you at the moment. You don't want to keep bitch-slapping the shit out of your hundred-grand BDE car."

"God, how could I have not known any of this? I met Verity when she was fourteen. I always just assumed she was as over privileged as the rest of that lot. How could I never have realised something was wrong?"

"Harry, I've known the twins for over twenty years too, and it was only when their dad died that this all came out as far as I was concerned. And that was only because Heath got shitfaced at the pub and spilled the beans. *And* I had my parents to pump for information. Heath and Verity befriended Max at school and they used to spend holidays with us. I was just a child at the time and it was completely lost on me why they would always be cramming into our semi rather than staying in their posh stately home. The only reason that Mum and Dad took them home in the first place was because their folks didn't turn up to collect them at the end of their first summer term. Dad says that the Markhams didn't even seem to notice that their kids weren't coming home anymore. They certainly never acknowledged it.

"Don't be too hard on yourself for not seeing what was going on. Sometimes we only see what we want to see, and Verity is a hard nut to crack. Don't give up on her though." Yaz gave my arm a squeeze and I looked down at her face. "I've never seen Verity as happy as she is with you. She's always focused on sorting out everything and everyone – she helped Mia get back on her feet, she supported Heath through his problems and made sure I didn't give up on him. Verity has always pushed for Heath to get his happy ending, but she has never shown any sign of reaching for her own. It's like she's her own last priority. She holds up that business even while Max does his best to try and fuck it up. She deserves her own slice of happiness. She deserves *you*."

Before Yaz had finished her sentence I jumped up off the ground and started walking to the driver's side of my car. By the time I had the key in the

ignition Yaz was standing up herself and peering at me through the passenger window.

“What are you doing?” she asked as I lowered the glass.

“I’m going to need the address of that lawyer in London. You get Heath to text it to me.”

She blinked at me in surprise. But as I was pulling out of the driveway her face broke into a smile.

## Chapter 22

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## *Je suis desolé*

### **VERITY**

A trickle of sweat ran down my back and I started to feel a little sick with the heat. They'd kept me out here for nearly five hours now. The policeman guarding the exit to the drive wouldn't even let me go and get some water. And, to make matters worse, I had no sun cream on. The very little shade there had been on the driveway was now non-existent in the midday sun. They'd taken my phone and my passport, so even if I wanted to call somebody I couldn't.

Maybe I should have told Heath this time?

Then I took a deep breath and squared my shoulders. I was used to clearing up this type of mess. Heath was finally happy – he didn't need this shit leaking into his life. No, it was better that I was the one sweating on the driveway of a stupid bloody villa in France. Better for me to be the one guarded by police like a criminal. We should have sold the villa months ago, but clearing out our parents' massive property up north had been traumatic enough without adding this place into the mix.

“Verity?”

I spun round and my eyes went wide when I saw Harry standing at the gated entrance. For a moment my heart leapt with the relief and sheer joy of seeing him, but then the consequences of his being here crashed over me and I started to panic.

“Harry? Wh–what are you doing here? How did you–?”

Harry glanced at the police officer guarding the driveway and, without missing a beat, strode over to me and snatched me up in a tight hug. I was shocked into silence as I blinked up at him when he pulled back but kept me



in the circle of his arms.

“What’s happening?” I whispered, too exhausted and dehydrated to muster up the strength to resist leaning into him.

“I’m a dickhead and I’m sorry,” he told me, and I frowned in confusion.

“I– Wh–what are you talking about?”

“I’m sorry for what I said,” he told me, his expression soft as his eyes roamed over my face. “I was cross with you and frustrated, but you have to know I didn’t mean it.”

“Harry I–”

“In my defence you *had* dumped me, but I know you didn’t mean that either.”

“Harry, I *did* mean it,” I said weakly, but, damn it, I still didn’t seem to be able to make myself pull away from him.

“We’ll talk about it later,” he said, and his arms gave me a squeeze before he kissed my forehead then reached up to tuck some of my hair behind my ear. “Now, you look like you’re going to pass out any moment. How long since you slept?”

“I don’t know,” I muttered, “maybe twenty-four hours?”

He made a low noise of disapproval but before he could say anything there was a voice from the doorway.

“Ms Markham.” The police officer in charge, Detective Matisse, finally emerged from the house and strode over to us across the driveway. Harry let me go so I could face the detective but kept his arm around me. “And who are you?” Detective Matisse asked, frowning at Harry’s arm around my shoulders. “Guy!” he shouted across at the guard then continued in French. “Didn’t I tell you to secure the area? Does this look secure to you, shithead?”

“He charged in here a second ago,” poor Guy replied, also in French. “What did you want me to do? Shoot him?”

“*Oui*,” Detective Matisse clipped, before turning his attention back to me and Harry. The local police had made it abundantly clear that they did *not* like me for a number of very good reasons, and I was sure that Detective Matisse was not keen for me to have any allies on hand. I felt an unnerving mixture of huge gratitude at Harry being here and panic about all he was going to find out. At least he didn’t speak French.

“If you’re finished arguing over whether someone should have shot me or not,” Harry said in perfect French (I gritted my teeth in frustration – bloody private school), “Ms Markham is dead on her feet, dehydrated and about to

faint from heat stroke. She's not going to be standing out here much longer. And for your information, I'm Harry York, Ms Markham's boyfriend."

"Fine," Detective Matisse clipped, giving Harry a filthy look which he then transferred to me. By this stage I was well used to them. "Did you know what this house was being used for, Ms Markham?"

I sighed. I'd been over this with him and his colleagues, repeatedly. "I had no idea it was in use *at all*," I replied in French. "My father died two years ago, and we hadn't got around to sorting out the sale of this property. I haven't even *been* here in over ten years."

"We've had complaints about the noise for months from local residents. Loud music, all night parties, streams of drunk people wandering in and out of the property. And, worst of all, drugs have been distributed here. Here, in this neighbourhood! Last week a teenager wandered onto the road and was hit by a car. He was high as a kite from drugs *your mother* sold him."

"Is the boy okay?" asked Harry in a horrified voice.

"His leg is broken. He needed an operation to fix it. He won't be out of hospital for weeks. Do you know, Ms Markham, why I took a job here?"

"No."

"I wanted a nice job in a quiet neighbourhood. Never liked inner city work and the hassle that came with it."

"Right, but—"

"Has my life been nice and quiet for the last six months? No, it has not. It's been filled with entitled English idiots thinking they can treat this neighbourhood and my country like total shit and sell drugs to our young people in the process. And what happened when I came to ask them to stop dealing drugs and stop keeping their neighbours up all night? This woman starts swearing at me and calling me a 'cheese-eating-surrender-monkey' and saying 'Bugger off, Napoleon'. If I had had enough evidence I would have arrested her there and then."

I sighed. Felicity always did have a particular talent for pissing people off. "Yes, okay. I think I can say it's likely that was my mother, but, as I've been telling you, we are *estranged*. I didn't know what was going on out here. I had no idea she had access to the property. Neither did our family's solicitor who will confirm my version of events."

"The quantity of cocaine in that property is enough to charge someone with possession with the intent to distribute, Ms Markham. Therefore, as the owner of the property you need to—"

“How long has Ms Markham been detained here and under what authority?” Harry put in.

“What authority? I’m the chief of police.”

“That does not answer my question.”

“I’ve been here since eight, Harry,” I muttered in English and leaned more heavily into him.

“Five hours?” Harry snapped, then continued in French to Detective Matisse. “Can’t you see she’s down about to pass out with heatstroke?”

“This is very serious business,” Detective Matisse spluttered. “Her mother...”

“Yes, her *mother*, not her. None of this is down to her. You’re punishing the wrong person and leaving a fair-skinned English woman out in the sun with no hydration for hours. We’re going.”

“You can’t leave!” Detective Matisse said, but Harry was already turning us and propelling me towards the gate.

“Is she under arrest?” Harry said over his shoulder.

“No, but—”

“Then we’re leaving.” Matisse ran in front of us, trying to block our path. I could feel Harry tense up, and I decided to try to calm the situation, pulling Harry to a halt before he let fly at the detective and got an assault charge on top of everything else. I separated from Harry, whispering to him to let me have a moment to reason with Matisse. He reluctantly let me go. When I was a few feet away with the policeman I lowered my voice, hoping that Harry couldn’t hear all I was saying.

“Detective,” I said, my voice was hoarse with how dry my throat was, and I saw a flash of discomfort in his expression as he looked at me. “If I can find out where my mother is then I’ll give her to you happily. You have clearly had the unpleasant experience of meeting my mother a handful of times. If you can imagine for a moment growing up with such a disgusting excuse for a human as your caregiver, and the level of neglect that would entail, you’ll know that she does *not* have my loyalty. You can’t imagine how sorry I am that she’s polluted your town. My mother and her parties are not safe environments for young people, and I am excruciatingly aware of that fact having experienced many near misses in my own childhood. But my mother is not my responsibility. What happened here, whilst awful, is also *not* my responsibility.”

Detective Matisse blinked at me then looked at my temple where another

trickle of sweat was making its way down into my neck and the anger went out of his stance. “Right, okay I... you can go. For now. But—”

“When I find out where she is, you’ll be the first to know.”

At that he stepped aside, and Harry strode back to me then half carried me to his car. Everything seemed too far away, and my ears were buzzing. I felt like I was going to pass out. Now Harry was here, all the fight had gone out of me. He lifted me into his blessedly air-conditioned environment and then leaned over me to grab a bottle of water which he shoved into my hand. I started drinking immediately, my body’s need for hydration taking precedence over everything else. I heard a soft curse in French from the pavement and turned to see Matisse looking at me as I gulped the water.

“*Je suis désolé,*” he said, his tone much softer now. I lowered the water and nodded, but before I could reply Harry had slammed the door and my words were cut off. He pulled away from the pavement and away from the villa. As we whisked past beautiful mansions, I rested my forehead on the cool glass and revelled in the cold air blowing over my face. I was so exhausted, and that, coupled with a good dose of sunstroke, meant that my brain was slow to catch up to the situation.

“Hey,” I croaked, turning to Harry who was staring straight ahead as he drove. The feeling of massive relief that I had driving away from the house was slowly being replaced with panicked confusion. It made no sense for Harry to be here. “My car? All my bags?”

“Steve is bringing your car. He’s retrieved your passport and phone as well,” he said, his voice was tight with what seemed to be anger. Everyone was angry with me – the police, the neighbours, the officials and now Harry.

“Oh, right.” I paused for moment, my sluggish brain slowly processing. “Who’s Steve?”

“Steve works for me.”

“Oh, of course.” The fact that I was simply accepting that the unknown Steve was driving my rental car with all my things should have been alarming to me. I was the ultimate control freak after all. I’d had to be. Bad things happened if you couldn’t control your environment. But I was so tired. And anyway, look where my control freak tendencies had got me – humiliated in a foreign country. Life, it seemed, after all these years was finally grinding me down. I let my head fall back against the glass of the window again and, after a few moments, I drifted into a blissful sleep.

## Chapter 23

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## *Don't you deserve to be free?*

### **VERITY**

“Verity?”

I blinked as I swam up into consciousness. Instead of sitting in the car, I was lying on a soft bed. Cool white sheets were draped over me and my head was resting on a comfortable pillow. I always noticed bedding. Heath was the same. It was a new concept to us when we started school as kids, and we'd never got over the shock of how comfortable real beds with clean bedding could be.

“This is a nice pillow,” I muttered as Harry's concerned face came into focus. “I give it a seven. The thread count isn't quite as high as mine.”

“Oh Christ, you're delirious,” Harry said, his voice edged with more than a little panic. He didn't sound like himself at all. His large hand gave my shoulder a squeeze and a small shake as my eyelids started drifting shut again. I grumbled and tried to bury further into the comfy pillow, but his gentle shaking grew more insistent. “Verity, come on, wake up. You've got to eat and drink something. Please, love.”

It was the 'love' that did it. I managed to blink my eyes open again and refocus on his handsome face.

“What are you doing here?” I said, trying for my normal commanding tone, but my voice was as rough as sandpaper and the effect was completely ruined. I pushed up from the bed then swayed when the world started tilting and spinning.

“You need to eat,” said Harry in a firm voice, then shocked me by grabbing me under both arms and pulling me up into a sitting position. He banked a whole load of pillows behind me, tucked the sheet in around me and

then dumped a laden tray-table over my lap. It was all done in the space of about five seconds. Once my head stopped spinning, I looked from the tray to Harry and back again. My very favourite breakfast of pancakes, blueberries and Greek yoghurt was sitting there, along with a glass of grapefruit juice (also a favourite). For my whole life before that point I don't think anyone had ever brought me breakfast in bed. They'd certainly not bothered to find out my favourite foods. My chest felt tight, and I had to force out my next words.

"How did you...?"

"I phoned Heath."

"You phoned my *brother*?" No no no! I did not want Heath involved with this. "What did you tell him?" I could hear the worry in my tone now. This whole situation would crush Heath.

"Everything, Verity," Harry shot back at me, and my heart started hammering. Oh no, not now. I couldn't afford to have a panic attack now. "Which you should have done from the start. This is not just your problem to sort out on your own."

"Heath didn't need to worry about it. I was handling it."

"It didn't look like you were 'handling it' when you nearly passed out yesterday with sunstroke and heat exhaustion thanks to those arsehole policemen. Who, by the way, are going to regret the day they put on those uniforms when I'm through with them."

I sighed. "They're just angry, Harry. The whole community is angry about what Felicity's done. It's understandable."

The tray wobbled as Harry sat down on the bed next to me and grabbed my hand. "What *she*'s done. Not you, Verity," he said with fierce conviction. "You are not responsible, and what they did yesterday was unforgivable."

"What happened to that teenager is unforgivable," I whispered back, staring at the tray of food, my head pounding and my eyes losing focus.

"Yes, yes, it is," Harry said, both hands moving to either side of my jaw so he could tilt my head back to look at him. "But that's not *your* fault. You weren't even in the country. You said so yourself to the detective."

I felt a stinging in my nose and my eyes filled with tears. "I know what I said, but I should have shut the house down or sold it. I knew it was sitting empty. I didn't even make the effort to rent it out. Heath and I didn't need the money. We've never needed money. It didn't cross my mind that she could get access to it. Didn't think about her making it like... like..." I trailed off

and closed my eyes to shut Heath's concerned ones out. "I should have known this would happen. If I'd just—" My throat caught, and I had to stop or I would have let out a full-on sob.

As it was, two tears escaped down my cheeks, and I felt Harry's thumbs sweep them away before he dropped his hands from my face. I heard a clatter of cutlery as the tray was moved to the side, and then felt Harry get into the bed next to me. Next thing I knew, he was sitting up against the pillows I'd been on and pulling me right into his side with my face in his neck. I inhaled deeply, smelling his familiar aftershave cut with the clean, male, unique Harry scent, and it broke through my control. I started sobbing in earnest against him, my hands grabbing at fistfuls of his shirt as my tears soaked the material.

He held me against him and stroked my hair with one hand, rubbing up and down my arm with the other. I was crying for the teenager that got hurt, for all the guilty feelings I'd had building up since Mr Crawley told me what had happened. And a small part of me was crying for the children Heath and I had once been – the endless neglect we'd suffered that could have so easily led to a similar tragedy. It must have been a good ten minutes before I managed to get myself under control again. Harry was stroking my back now and murmuring reassuring things into my hair. My cheeks heated at the level of vulnerability I'd shown. I hated feeling so exposed.

"I'm sorry," I croaked, wiping the tears from my face in embarrassed swipes.

"What are you sorry for?"

I tried to pull away from him, but he kept me anchored to his side. "I've ruined your shirt." It was all I could come up with in the moment. I couldn't say how I was sorry that I'd broken down. That I was sorry he had to see me so weak.

"I don't give a fuck about my shirt." He finally let me pull back but just so that he could lift me up against the pillows, again like a child, and plonk the plate back down on my lap. He then pushed my damp hair back from my face and kissed my forehead, before moving away to sit on the end of the bed. "Eat."

I looked at the tray and my stomach lurched. I hadn't been able to eat anything since I found out what happened at the house. All I could see were the photos from the police report showing the destroyed house and the blood on the road. But Harry made an impatient noise, and I picked up the



grapefruit juice before he could go off on one again. Once I'd managed to drink some, I found I could eat just a bit of the pancake, and with the influx of sugars and carbohydrates, my brain started to revive from its sluggish state.

"Heath's on his way out here, isn't he?" I asked. Harry was standing by the bed now with his hands shoved into his pockets.

"Yes."

I let my head fall back against the pillows and closed my eyes.

"Verity, why didn't you talk to anyone about this? Okay, so maybe you didn't want to tell me, but Heath's your brother. And your friends care about both of you."

"I want Heath to live a beautiful life. He deserves that. He..." I turned away and swallowed the bile that had filled my mouth before looking back at Harry. "He protected me. When we were children, he was always protecting me. I wasn't as strong as him back then. But now it's *my* turn. Now he's going to be free."

Harry took my hand. When he spoke again, his voice was soft. "Don't you deserve to be free?"

I sighed. "You don't understand. After the shit he went through I—"

"The shit you *both* went through, Verity." I closed my mouth and looked away. "Why didn't you ever tell me anything at school? The things Heath told me... I thought you lived in a castle, your every need met by servants."

I shrugged. "That's what you wanted to believe. It fitted your view of me. It fitted everyone's view, and that served our purpose."

"What do you mean?"

"If the full extent of the conditions we were living in had come out, we would have been taken away from that home. We would have lost our place at Downingham, and we loved it there. Mum and Dad made sure that we knew what would happen if the truth ever came out. The only other family we had was my granny, who was too frail to take us in, and then she died when we were fifteen. And you've got to understand, Harry," I looked at him then, trying to get across how painful this was, "we were *ashamed*. Parents are supposed to love their children. When we were really little, we thought there must be something wrong with us – but as we got older, it was more that we were embarrassed of how we lived, how our parents lived."

"Heath told me about the shed," Harry said softly. "And why you had to move into it. That must have been terrifying."

I blinked at Harry. “Heath’s been chatty.” I made to pull my hand from his as the old embarrassment swept through me, but Harry’s grip only tightened.

“I needed to know, Verity,” he said. “I’m sorry I didn’t ask you the right questions before.”

I slumped back in the bed and turned away from him, staring out of the window of the bedroom and for the first time noticing the view of the sea. “You can see why we loved school so much. Heath was a right short arse before we started at our first boarding prep school before Downingham. He must have grown over a foot by the end of the first year. He told you what he did to protect me?”

I glanced back at Harry and he nodded.

“So you can see why Heath’s done enough? Why it’s my turn now?”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Harry said. “You don’t have to do it all on your own anymore. Neither of you do. Was my dad the first to ever question what was going on with you guys as children?”

I shrugged. “When we were babies, we had a nanny who was actually really nice. But they got rid of her when we were four or five after a visit from social services. They were pretty careful after that, so when we went to prep school at seven nothing was picked up. And it wasn’t like they were beating us. I mean Heath, and occasionally me, got the odd backhander from Mum if we got in her way, and Dad could be rough if he thought we’d touched any of his stuff or spoiled the dogs, but mostly it was just neglect. To be honest, I think they forgot we were there a lot of the time.” I laughed briefly and looked up at the ceiling. “You know what’s funny?”

“What?”

“The RSPCA came round to take Dad’s dogs away because they weren’t cared for properly, but nobody ever came for me and Heath.”

“Verity,” Harry’s voice cracked over my name. When I looked up at him, I was shocked that there was a sheen of tears over his eyes. He pulled me into a hug and wrapped his arms around me. “God, baby. I’m so sorry that happened to you.”

“It was a long time ago,” I whispered into his chest. “Honestly, Harry I—”

“I can’t believe I never knew any of this,” he said, his voice sounding pained. “I know you weren’t forthcoming, but if I had been just slightly less of a self-absorbed twat I could have maybe made sure I knew at least something about your home life. All I had were stupid assumptions and

prejudices.”

“Look, Harry it’s all the past. I’m fine now. I–”

“You’re not fine,” he snapped, pulling slightly back from me so that he could look down into my eyes and then rub his nose against mine. I took a deep breath in and the smell almost made me dizzy with how much I wanted him. “You’re out here all alone, cleaning up something that’s nothing to do with you but that you continually shoulder responsibility for. You’re carrying guilt for something that wasn’t in any way your fault, and you’re doing it all alone.”

“Harry, I’m used to–”

His voice dropped then, low with fury. “I don’t give a fuck what you’re used to. What you’re *used to* ends now.”

And then he kissed me and everything else melted away. All the horror of the last two days, the stress of the last few weeks was overridden as I lost myself in him.

Maybe it was weak. Maybe it was selfish. But in my life I hadn’t had that much opportunity to do the weak, selfish thing, and I’d certainly never felt as cared for as I did waking up in that hotel room and being force-fed my favourite breakfast.

So, I was going to forget myself and this shitty situation and pretend I was loved by a man like Harry.

Even though deep down I knew that kind of love wasn’t for the likes of me.

Not really.

# Chapter 24

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## *Your happiness doesn't matter?*

### **VERITY**

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Heath shouted, and I shrank back from him as Harry stepped forward to put a hand on the centre of his chest, which Heath swatted away.

It had been a long day. After breakfast, Harry and I had made our way down to the police station as promised. Detective Matisse was no longer in full arsehole mode and even managed a very awkward apology for how they'd treated me yesterday. I made it clear that I was happy to cooperate fully and gave over all the information I had available on my mother, which admittedly wasn't much. I even showed them the emails that she'd been sending me over the last six months. They were all characteristically poisonous, demanding money, calling me a slut and a thief – blackmailing me in return for her promise to stay away from Heath. The worst thing was having to admit that I did make payments to her. That money must have gone towards setting up a nice little drug cartel situation for her here. I felt like an idiot.

After going through the paperwork for the villa and proving that I hadn't actually been in France when the dealing took place, the police allowed us to go with a promise not to leave the country for the next week. When we got back to Harry's hotel suite, Heath and Yaz were waiting outside. Heath had waited until we'd made it to the living room area to unleash, but I had been able to tell from the set of his body and the fact I only received a hug from Yaz, that he was beyond furious.

“Heath, calm down,” Yaz said from behind him, reaching for his arm. He didn't shrug Yaz off, but he did not calm down either.

“I did what I thought was best at the time,” I said, trying to reach for the commanding tone that I usually had no problem employing, but the stress of the last few weeks and the sight of Heath looking both murderous and devastated seemed to have knocked all the fight out of me. “I didn’t want you to have to get involved. You’ve got a new life now.” I indicated to Yaz who was still holding onto his arm. “You’re happy. I didn’t want you to get dragged back down by *them* again.”

Heath threw both his hands up into the air in frustration which did succeed in shaking off Yaz – extremely uncharacteristic, seeing as those two were always all over each other. “Oh, so it’s alright for *you* to get dragged down into it, then? *Your* happiness doesn’t matter?”

I shook my head in exasperation. “No, it’s just that—”

“You think I’m too weak to handle it?” he said, his voice low with fury now. “Might I remind you that I was the one who—”

“*I know!*” I screamed and the room went deathly silent. I never lost control like that, and I certainly never screamed at anyone. “Don’t you think I know? I was there. I lived it too! But the difference was that back then you protected me. *You* stole the food for us. *You* took the backhanders from Mum and Dad. *You* held me in the middle of the night when I cried myself to sleep and told me it was going to be okay. Of course, I don’t think you’re weak. *I’m* the weak one. You know that. So now it’s *my* turn to look after *you*. My turn to shield you from their *endless shit*.”

“V, hun,” Yaz’s attention had shifted from Heath to me now. I’d backed up away from all of them until my hip hit the side of the dining table. The room was closing in on me and I could feel the panic building in my chest. These attacks had started when I was a child. Heath used to be able to talk me out of them, make me focus on other things. My housemaster at school once had to call him into the girls’ house (something normally strictly prohibited) when I lost control after hearing that Granny had died. It was another example of how he’d been stronger than me, how he’d looked after me. And now I couldn’t do the same for him. Now I was totally losing my shit.

After all my efforts to make sure Felicity didn’t bugger up Heath’s life, it had all come crashing down anyway. And a boy had been really hurt. A life had nearly been lost because I wasn’t ready to face up to my responsibilities. Everything started feeling very far away then like I was behind a thick pane of glass with Heath, Yaz and Harry on the other side. I could see their mouths moving, but I couldn’t make out the words. My heart felt like it was beating

outside of my chest. I moved around the table and continued walking backwards with my arm outstretched in front of me to ward anyone off from approaching.

I only stopped when my back hit the wall at the far side of the living room. My legs started feeling strange, like they weren't part of me, like I couldn't feel them properly. I slid down the wall and landed on my arse with my head between my knees. My vision had narrowed, and everything seemed blurry. Then, through the numbness, I felt a warm hand on the back of my neck – a forehead resting on mine. One of my hands was placed on someone's chest while a reciprocating hand went to my chest. Gradually Yaz's voice filtered in through the fog.

"That's it, V," she was saying, her tone gentle but firm. "You're here with me. You're safe. We're together. Nothing's going to hurt you." She repeated the same sentences over and over until I started to feel my breathing slow. It was then I noticed a low keening sound of distress. When I realised with horror that it was coming from me, I forced myself to stop. The room came back into focus gradually. I could feel the wet on my cheeks, which I frantically wiped away.

"Let's get you up and away from the wall now, baby," Harry's soft voice filtered through as well. Now that I was aware of my surroundings again, I realised that Yaz was kneeling in front of me with both my hands in hers, and Harry was squatting by my side, his hand resting on my neck. I nodded woodenly, allowing him to guide me to standing. Then he led me over to the sofa and we sat down together. I closed my eyes as Harry gathered me into his arms and just let go. Let go of my worry about Mum and her life-ruining tendencies. Let go of the fact that I couldn't control this situation. Maybe I didn't have to deal with everything on my own? Maybe it was better that I was finally honest?

"V, honey," I heard Heath's voice crack and opened my eyes to see him staring at me from across the coffee table, his face now pale. "I didn't realise that..." he broke off and cleared his throat then lowered his voice. "How long have you been having these... er... episodes again?"

"Again?" Harry's voice rose, but I talked over him.

"Let's call them what they are, Heath, shall we? Panic attacks. Plain, boring old panic attacks." I sighed. "And they've been back again for a couple of years, since Dad died."

"Dad dying triggered this? But you *hated* Dad."

“Dad getting sick and dying triggered Mum. She contacted us both back then. You know what she’s like. That’s why they started up again.”

“But we haven’t been in contact with Mum since the funeral.”

“She was left out of the will completely, Heath,” I said in a tired voice. “Did you think she’d just fade away into the background? Her lifestyle is bloody expensive, and she’s long since gone through the money she got in the divorce settlement. Yaz blocking her from our phones after the funeral was never going to stop her, Heath. I knew she’d contact Mr Crawley at some point, so I told him to go through me when that happened.” I paused and closed my again. “I’ve been paying her off for months.” I felt my throat constrict, and despite my best efforts, my next words came out strangled. “It’s my fault that she has the funds to do what she’s done. I’ve been inadvertently funding this whole shit show. I just wanted her to stay out of our lives. But it was stupid, and someone got hurt. Badly hurt. And I... and I... I don’t think I can do it anymore. Not on my own.”

“Oh V,” Heath said, his voice soft. “You never had to do it on your own. I can’t imagine why you wouldn’t tell me.”

I paused, and when I spoke again, my voice was just above a whisper. “One of us had to be happy, Heath. I knew it couldn’t be me anyway. I knew I’d never have a normal life. So, I was going to make damn sure that you did.”

“Why will you never have a normal, happy life?” asked Harry. When I didn’t reply his arms tightened around me for a moment, before his hand came up to lift my chin so he could look into my eyes. “Verity? Why can’t you be happy, love?”

“I’m not...” I broke off and closed my eyes slowly. How did I explain that everything I so desperately wanted was just so out of reach. “I’ve had therapy.”

“Okay,” Harry said slowly, waiting for me to go on.

“Lots of therapy, Harry. But I’m still... not right. There’s a reason none of my relationships have lasted. I don’t trust very easily. I self-sabotage all the time. I know this about myself now. I’m capable at work, I’m capable managing other people’s lives, but not so much with my own.” My voice dropped back down then to just above a whisper again. “I can’t get past it, okay? I can’t get past the fact that I was their daughter, and they didn’t love or want me. That unwanted feeling just won’t go away. The feeling that, if my own parents didn’t want me, then how can I expect anyone else to?”



Harry's arm was like an iron band around me now, and when I looked up at his face, I saw his jaw was set at a stubborn angle. "You're going to be fucking happy," he said in a low voice that came out with a hint of a growl that I could feel vibrating through his chest. He made making me happy sound like a threat. "You hear me, Verity Markham? You're going to be fucking happy for the rest of your fucking life, and that's the end of it. And you will *never* have contact with that woman again." His eyes sliced to Heath. "Neither will you, mate. This bullshit ends today. If I'd have known what was going on two decades ago, it would have ended a fuck of a lot sooner, but that's done. We're here now. And your fucking mother and all her crap, including this goddamn mess she's created for you to clean up is not going to exist for either of you anymore. Understand?"

I cleared my throat and started to say cautiously, "Harry, I'm not sure that--"

"You two," he pointed to Heath and Yaz. "Stay with her. Do not let anyone into the house. Do not answer the goddamn door. I'm going to talk to that fucking detective and then we're all going to go home."

Harry seemed absolutely furious, as demonstrated by his rampant overuse of the f-word. I wasn't sure that was the right approach with the French police.

"Er...Harry, I'm not sure that--"

"You *are* going to be happy," he said, cutting me off, and taking my face in both his hands as he turned me towards him. "Properly, deliriously happy. I'm going to bloody well make sure of it." He gave me a hard closed mouth kiss, pulled back to search my shocked face for a moment, then dropped his hands, stood from the sofa and strode out of the living room.

Heath, Yaz and I looked at each other after the front door slammed with wide eyes. Then for some reason, Yaz's mouth started quivering as she pressed her lips together in what looked like an effort to contain a smile.

"Okay," she said in a voice shaking with amusement. "Harry's clearly going to be *extremely* cross until you're deliriously happy."

"I'd better go after him," Heath muttered, but Yaz put her hand on his arm and shook her head.

"You know what? I think the Markham twins deserve to have a break from this stuff. Don't you?"

"Yaz, I can't just--"

"Nope, enough misery for Markham siblings. I'm pulling a Harry and

forbidding you both from being anything but insanely happy. Now, stay with your sister. I'll go after billionaire boy and make sure he doesn't get arrested whilst sorting out your happiness."

"Yaz, I—" I started, but she squatted down in front of me, took both my hands in hers and cut me off.

"I love your brother," she said in a soft voice. "And I love you. I understand you're used to fixing this and surviving that, but you don't have to do it anymore. I meant what I said after your father died. You guys have been through enough shit. It's time to let the people who care about you deal with some of it. I know it's difficult for either of you to accept help from anyone but each other, that you've been taught again and again that people will let you down, but that's all changed now." She gave my hands a firm squeeze before releasing them, gave Heath a quick but firm kiss and then swept out of the room after Harry.

# Chapter 25

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## *I've already let her down*

### **HARRY**

“How long have you known about her panic attacks?” I asked Yaz, breaking the silence in the police waiting room.

Our company law firm had found a lawyer who spoke fluent French. He'd already collated all the evidence showing that Verity hadn't been to France in over ten years, and that she had no knowledge of how the house was being used. Unfortunately, the one thing we couldn't give the police was the whereabouts of Lady Markham. It seemed she had disappeared into thin air. By all accounts, it wasn't the first time she'd pulled this kind of vanishing act. Mr Crawley told me that he'd been paying off creditors for her for years and had never been able to track her down. He'd been only too happy for my law firm to take all the evidence relating to the French property and deal with the authorities. When I explained to him that now *I* was dealing with Lady Markham's affairs and that it should be me, not Verity, *exclusively* answering queries about her, I'd expected some resistance – but instead, he breathed a sigh of relief over the phone and said, “Finally the child can get some peace.” To be honest, he sounded very tired and very old. After I told him how the police had detained Verity and how upset she was, he went silent for so long I thought he'd hung up on me.

Just as I was about to call his name though he'd said in a voice shaking with rage, “Son, you make sure that you and that fancy law firm of yours find that woman and you *bury her*. Understand me?”

“Yes.”

“Are you and Ms Markham involved?”

“Yes.”

“I’ve known Ms Markham for thirty years, and I can say, without a shadow of a doubt, she is the strongest human being of my acquaintance.”

“Right, sir, I—”

“Those children have been through enough, son.” His tone changed as he cut me off – it was rough, and the cut-glass English accent shook slightly. I closed my eyes and felt my chest tighten. “I wish I could have done more for them. That’s just something I have to live with. But I’ll not let anyone hurt them now.”

“I’m not going to hurt Verity, sir.”

“They need peace.”

“I can give her peace.”

“You better do that, or *I’ll bury you.*”

At that, I smiled for the first time that day. Mr Crawley looked to be pushing eighty on my last encounter with him, and his law firm consisted of just him and an equally ageing secretary I’d spoken to that morning. But he cared about Verity, and that I respected, so I managed to keep the amusement out of my voice when I answered with a sober, “Understood, sir.”

So now my lawyers were sorting everything whilst Yaz and I waited outside.

“Since just before her father died,” Yaz replied. “Verity always has her shit together. She would never have told me herself. I found her one day in the office. Luckily, I have a habit of barging into my brother’s business uninvited. I’d always assumed that her father’s illness and death were the trigger. I didn’t know that that bitch had still been harassing her. V made me promise not to tell Heath.” She shook her head. “I shouldn’t have listened to her, but I wanted to make sure she let me help her. She’s so private and self-sufficient. I taught her to meditate and some mindfulness techniques – all that ‘hippy nonsense’ she was always taking the piss out of.” Yaz smiled. “But, I think it’s helped. I just wish I’d told Heath.”

“You did what you thought was right at the time.” I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, bracing to ask my next question. “Yaz, two years ago when the bid was being decided, Verity and I...” I trailed off and looked down at my hands, avoiding eye contact as the memory of what had happened and how I’d hurt Verity flooded back. Knowing what I knew now, the memory of the look of hurt and rejection on her face was making it difficult for me to breathe. “I—I upset her and—”

“No shit,” Yaz snapped. “I know you upset her. Did you trigger the panic

attacks? Is that what you're asking? I'm not going to lie to you, Harry – it probably didn't help."

"Christ," I bit out, my hands going to my hair as I hung my head in between my knees and stared at the floor. "I'm an unforgivable bastard."

Yaz sighed. "She seems tough, but it's mostly all front. You've got to be careful with her."

"I can't believe I didn't see what was right in front of me. Not now, and not twenty years ago. I've been the most self-involved prick imaginable."

"Listen, Harry," Yaz said in a softer tone. "You and me, we're dealing with Markhams now. They didn't have the best start. Their childhood taught them that they can't rely on the people who should love them, and that they should get used to disappointment and rejection. We have to teach them differently. Loving them isn't always going to be easy but I tell you something, it's worth it."

"I know it is. Of course, I know."

"Don't let her down, Harry."

"I've already let her down."

"Well, don't do it again. And don't let her push you away either. I've known V for over half my life now, and you're the first man I've ever seen her give a shit about. It scares her to death. You have to be the brave one. Right?"

"Right."

"And she's dealt with enough bullshit, so don't let her have to deal with any more of it. Not from you, and not from her fucking mother."

I turned to Yaz with a determined expression. "Oh, don't worry about that. Markham bullshit is well and truly over for Verity and Heath. None of it's going to touch either of them ever again." I held Yaz's gaze for long enough to see the slow smile that spread across her face before I pushed up from the bench we were on and stalked to the detective's office to check on what progress was being made. I wanted this resolved today and to get Verity back in the UK designing beautiful buildings and busting balls in the architecture world – *not* dealing with a trail of destruction left by her fucking mother.

And she was going to be bloody well *happy*.



## VERITY

“Er... Harry?” I asked carefully as I studied his profile. The look of steely determination was still there, and his jaw has been clenched so tight all day I wouldn’t be surprised if he was headed towards a wicked tension headache.

“Yes,” he snapped, pulling our linked hands over onto his lap and giving mine a firm squeeze. Since returning from the police station, brandishing my passport and announcing that I was free to go and that we were booked onto a flight later that day, unless he was letting me pack or had me tucked under his arm, he had yet to relinquish my hand. He was a weird mixture of very affectionate and very, very angry. It was a little disconcerting but at the same time strangely comforting. I’d been so angry about the toxicity of my parents’ influence for such a long time that seeing someone else’s absolute fury in response to learning of it was kind of a relief. Harry was so incensed on my behalf I felt like I could actually let go of some of bitterness, as though a weight had been lifted. But if Harry went on like this, he’d give himself a stroke.

“Are you... are you okay?”

He turned to me then and searched my face, his jaw still clenched and his eyes still burning with suppressed rage. His hand gave mine a brief squeeze before releasing it so that both his hands could come up to frame my face. I barely had time to suck in a shocked breath before he kissed me in a swift, firm, possessive way that I felt all the way down to my toes. When he was done his forehead rested against mine for a moment before he pulled back slightly to look into my eyes, keeping my face still framed with his hands.

“No, love,” he said, and I sucked a breath in as my chest flooded with warmth at the endearment. “I’m not okay. Neither are you. But once I get you back to the UK, take you back to your home where you feel safe and back to doing what you want to do – which does not include flying to some godforsaken French town to sort something out that you have absolutely zero responsibility for, then I’ll be okay. And so will you. I’m going to make sure of it.”

That warm feeling in my chest spread and it made me panic a little. I wasn’t used to letting anyone else sort out my problems. I’d been so self-sufficient for so long it was difficult to let go of that control. Even though I did know that this time I’d been pushed too far. This time I had to let someone in. But for that person to be Harry was terrifying. My feelings for him were definitely out of my control. I was going to have to do something I

hadn't dared try even as a child. I was going to have to trust someone. Maybe it wasn't just Heath who deserved to find happiness. Maybe we could both be lucky? So, I pushed down the nagging doubts in the back of my mind and reached up to Harry's hands on my face, taking them in my own.

"Okay," I breathed.

"What?"

"I mean okay, you can take me home."

Harry's face flooded with relief and his angry expression softened.

"Harry I..." I trailed off as I looked down at our linked hands then back up at his face. "Thank you for coming for me."

He frowned. "I'll always come for you, Verity. Always."

I glanced quickly to the side to hide my slight flinch. Because he hadn't *always* come for me, had he? Shoving those nagging doubts back down as well I swallowed and looked back into his warm brown eyes again. I needed to let go of the past and trust this Harry to not let me go. Not this time.



# Chapter 26

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## *You weren't okay*

### **HARRY**

“We haven’t been able to track down Lady Markham yet, but they’re close I think,” I said in an attempt to reassure everyone that I could keep that bitch away from Heath and Verity. In truth, she was proving very hard to find. There had been a few leads, but she was country-hopping so much that it was a near-impossible task. Verity stiffened next to me, and I could feel the anxiety rolling off her.

I’d thought that she’d settled over the last two weeks. After we got back from France, I took her home to her cottage where I knew she felt the safest, and I worked from there for a week. Well, fifty percent of my time was spent working, the rest was focused more on sorting out the mess in France and making sure it didn’t touch the Markhams. I had to have Barbara brought down – this involved transporting her in her own chauffeur-driven car, with a cat-sitter in the back attending to her every need, including a huge quantity of smoked salmon. Since arriving in Dorset, Barbara had now very much claimed Verity’s cottage and the entire surrounding area. The neighbour’s dog looked terrified poor thing.

Verity went back to work. Every day when she came home to find that Barbara and I were still there, she’d blink as if surprised I’d stayed. I didn’t let her get too lost in her thoughts. The minute she walked through the door I would sweep her up into my arms and kiss her before she was able to even put down her bag. I could feel the tension drain out of her with the contact. It was as if she’d been bracing for me to leave, and the physical reality of my open affection allowed her to release that.

What I found a little concerning was that this reaction did not lessen as

the days went on. If anything, the relief that I hadn't buggered off yet became more acute. I decided that all I could do was just consistently be there – hug her, kiss her, cook for her (okay maybe it was mostly ordering food rather than actual preparation), make love to her, hold her on the sofa whilst we watched *Game of Thrones* or read LP Mayweather books with my cat digging her claws into both of us until she was stroked at the correct speed, and tell her I loved her. She hadn't said it back to me yet, but I could wait. I knew she felt it. There were moments when I would catch her looking at me like she was trying to work something out. Like there was a trick being played on her, like I couldn't be real or offering myself to her freely. Verity Markham's trust was going to be hard won.

Her brother and her friends, however, were a different story. They had gone from open hostility before France to glowing acceptance. Even the toddler loved me, but then I'd always been good with kids – ever the fun uncle in my family and with Toby's daughter. We'd gone to the pub with Max, Mia, Heath and Yaz one night in the week, and, whilst both Markhams were a little quiet, Yaz's humour lightened the atmosphere. Even the perpetually grumpy Max managed a couple of dry comments about "some reight poncy bastards what need their house bulldozing" – I was starting to see why Verity kept the man well away from clients if at all possible.

So now it was Sunday, and we were having lunch at Max's house, along with his and Yaz's parents. It was clear they had open affection for Verity and Heath and so, understandably, were initially wary of me. But once it became clear how invested I was in Verity, and the fact that I was a favourite of their granddaughter they softened towards me. I found their protective stance when it came to Verity and Heath confusing at first, but of course I didn't know the background. When the subject of Verity's mother came up, I began to fully appreciate just how much history there was between Verity, Heath and the Hardcastles.

"That woman should be shot," Fern Hardcastle snapped, after hearing about the situation in France.

"Shooting's too good for her," growled the previously benign-seeming Aubrey. "She should be left to starve to death. Let her know what going hungry feels like."

Shocked silence had followed that out-of-character rant. Aubrey's face was nearly purple with rage, the man looked about ready to burst.

"Aubrey," Verity had said quietly, laying her hand over his. "It's done

now.”

He huffed out a breath and his body relaxed slightly as he managed a small smile for Verity. “I know, love,” he said, his voice now much softer. “It just makes me so bloody furious when I think about what you two went through back then. For her to still be causing you problems now is unforgivable. She’s done enough. You shouldn’t have to be dealing with it. When I think back to that summer you two didn’t come home with us. I just...” he shuddered and his face paled. His voice was quieter when he spoke again. “I’ve never forgiven myself for letting you go back with them.”

“It’s fine, Aubrey. It was a long time ago and—”

“You were so thin,” Aubrey cut Verity off, his eyes blazing with fury again. “So very, *very* thin.” He cleared his throat and swallowed, a sheen of wet over his eyes for a moment before he blinked them away. My chest tightened and there was a low ringing in my ears.

“What year was this?” I asked, my voice harsher than I intended, causing everyone to flinch.

“It’s fine, Harry,” Verity said in a placating tone, but I wasn’t willing to let it go.

“What. Year?”

She sighed. “I think I was fifteen? So the start of Year 10?”

“Jesus Christ.” I pushed back my chair in a sudden movement and stood up. Everyone’s attention was on me now. “So, you sat with me *every week* in the library, and I never once asked you why you’d lost weight? I remember you didn’t look right that term. You didn’t smile as much, and you were so so skinny. But did I once ask you what the matter was? No of course I didn’t.” I slashed my hand through the air and started pacing the floor. “Of course, I just assumed you were on some sort of crazy posh girl fad diet. I was too self-obsessed to see past the end of my own nose, past *my* problems. Too angry with you for being beautiful and popular and everything I wasn’t.”

Verity was on her feet now and rounded me to stop my pacing, taking both of my hands in hers. “You sat with me in the library,” she said. “You let me rest my head on your shoulder. You read me *A Game of Thrones* and *The Lord of the Rings* books. You made me feel safe. You gave me peace. Please don’t blame yourself for not knowing. I wasn’t ready to tell anyone that. Even if you’d asked, I wouldn’t have been able to be open about it. The only reason the Hardcastles knew anything is because we needed their help, but we hid the worst from even them. Between the school and them we were

okay. Really, we were, Harry.”

I grunted in disagreement. “You weren’t okay that summer, were you?”

She looked over at Heath, who had also risen from his chair and was hovering in the background, ready to come over to us if his sister needed him. “No,” she said quietly. “No, we weren’t okay that summer.” I released her hands then mine went up to cup her face before I rested my forehead on hers and let out a deep breath. “But we’re okay now. It’s over now.”

“You’re damn bloody right it’s over now,” I said in a fierce tone. “I just wish that back then I—”

“You’ve got to let it go,” Verity whispered. “Honestly, they’re not worth your anger now. You were seventeen, Harry. Give yourself a break.”

“I wasn’t seventeen when I behaved like a total bastard this time around though was I?”

Verity moved her head back slightly so she could study my face. Her hands came up to my wrists and she gave both a light squeeze. “Harry, I think we’ve established that you’ve more than made up for some callous behaviour you demonstrated before you had all the facts. And let’s not forget, I didn’t exactly make it easy for you.”

I closed my eyes briefly before giving her a short nod, then I slid my hands from her face to catch hers in mine, tugging her back towards her family (it was clear to me now that her family included the Hardcastles). When we were all settled back at the table I turned to Fern and Aubrey.

“What you did for Verity...” I trailed off and glanced to the side, before giving my head a quick shake and turning back to them. “It might not be my place to say it, but thank you. Thank you for seeing what I didn’t and acting on it.”

Fern cleared her throat and shifted on her chair uncomfortably. “Well, anyone else would have done the same.” She was clearly going for a brisk tone, but her voice was just a little shaky and hoarse, and the unshed tears in her eyes told another story.

“Yes,” Aubrey said in a gruff tone, laying his hand over his wife’s in her lap. “They were great kids. Still are... most of the time.”

“He’s right though,” Verity said in a soft tone. “We really needed help then and actually nobody else *was* willing to step in. I can’t tell you how much it meant to us.” Verity reached across the table to lay her hand over Aubrey’s arm and give it a squeeze. Heath, who was next to Fern, put his arm around her shoulders and pulled her in for a side hug whilst kissing her

temple. Fern cleared her throat again, too British to allow any tears to escape.

“Right,” she said in her not-quite-brisk-enough-to-be-convincing tone, “that’s enough of *that*. I need to check on my Yorkshires.” Off she bustled then to the oven but not before she patted my shoulder on her way past, which I was guessing was about as affectionate as she got.

“Well, I think this family’s bloody brilliant too,” Mia said, her voice also shaky with emotion. “And I count you Markhams in with that as well. I wouldn’t have survived without you all and now I have Max and Sophie and... well... I’m pregnant again!”

“Oh my God!” Yaz cried, her chair flying back as she rounded the table to hug a now crying Mia. Everyone moved to Mia and Max then, the Yorkshires that Fern was supposed to be checking on long forgotten. Verity leaned into my side and let out a happy sigh, but her body tensed as a now also tearful Yaz pulled back from Mia and shouted, “Well, I’m only bloody well pregnant too! I told you that crystal I gave you last month was powerful.”

I felt Verity suck in a shocked breath, glanced down at her and saw her mouth drop open. “Oh my God,” she whispered, her gaze flew to Heath who was smiling at Yaz and shaking his head.

“Yaz, darling,” he said. “I thought we were going to wait to— oomph!” Heath was cut off by a Verity-shaped missile. She’d launched herself from my arms into his and nearly caused his chair to topple backwards with the force of her hug.

“Hey, V,” Heath muttered as his arms came around his sister. “You okay there?”

She pulled back to look at him, an almost fierce expression on her face. “I’m so fucking happy for you,” she said. “You deserve this. All of this.”

“I know, sis,” he said in a soft voice. “We both do. You know that, right?” He glanced at me as Verity tore out of his arms and then threw herself at Yaz who was taken back a step.

“Wow, V,” Yaz huffed out in a surprised tone. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you quite so huggy. Maybe I’m rubbing off on you.”

Verity released Yaz so she could stare at her with that same fierce expression she’d worn with her brother.

“Thank you,” she said. “I can’t tell you what it means to... just, thank you. I’ll be the best fucking auntie you’ve ever seen.”

“Fucking auntie,” Sophie repeated into the shocked silence, cutting

through the tension as everyone laughed.

“You might want to start with toning the language down, V,” Max said in a dry tone. “This one muttered ‘fuck’s sake’ under her breath when they told her at nursery the bubble machine was out of order, and that was after you’d spent the day babysitting her.” Verity smiled, gave Yaz another hug and then moved to Max and Sophie. Sophie reached out for her, and she plucked her off Max’s knee and held her on her hip.

“What’s he saying about you, gorgeous?” Verity muttered, her hand that wasn’t under Sophie’s legs moving to stroke her darks curls back from her forehead. “I don’t believe a word of it.”

“Daddy’s silly,” Sophie said, nodding solemnly and drawing a few more laughs.

“Yes, he is, darling,” Verity said briskly. “And anyway, the nursery should have a working bubble machine – what kind of operation are they running there?”

“Jeepers,” muttered Mia. “At least there’ll be a few more babies to dilute this one. She’s getting way too much attention from way too many grown-ups at the moment.”

Verity snorted. “Nonsense.” She moved away with Sophie then who’d settled into her neck and then went to her bag which she’d left on the countertop. “I nearly forgot, darling.” She muttered as she dug through her bag, after a moment producing a new Barbie.

“Hurrah!” Sophie shrieked, clutching the Barbie to her chest and pumping her little legs. “Thank ew Verry-li!” she shouted.

“Yes, totally not being spoilt,” Mia said, shaking her head.

“Listen I had to get it,” Verity explained. “She did *not* have Architect Barbie – it was actually criminal.” Sophie flung her arms around Verity’s neck then and Verity gave her a hug in return, her eyes closing as if it meant the world to her to be this close to Max and Mia’s child.

The lunch then bled into late afternoon and evening, morphing into a celebration. More food was produced by Mia and Fern. Champagne was drunk by everyone not incubating a human, and Verity looked happier than I think I’d ever seen her.

On the way back to her cottage that evening she held my hand so tightly it was as if she was worried I’d float away, and when we arrived she basically attacked me as soon as we made it in the door.

“Baby,” I muttered against her lips as she pulled my shirt out of my jeans.

“Are you okay?” She paused for a moment and looked up at me, her expression so heartbreakingly vulnerable that my breath caught in my throat.

“I just want to make the most of tonight,” she said before going back to kissing my neck and running her hands up my abs onto my chest. “Before you leave,” she said against my skin. With Verity pressed against me, and her hands on my skin, reasoned thought was rapidly becoming a thing of the past, but I did manage to speak.

“You know I’m coming back, right? It’s only for a week.” I had client meetings that I’d been putting off for way to long. After nagging me for years to work less, even Toby was getting a little twitchy about my now extended absence. I was the stats guy, the balance of probabilities guy for the investors after all. He had the chat, but I had the figures. There was only so long he could jog along without me. Plus, since everything had come out about Lanie’s bullying there had been meetings with the school and he’d needed to spend more time with her, not to mention the situation with Noo.

“Of, course I know that,” she muttered, now intent on getting my belt undone and I gave up trying to talk it out as my body took control of the situation. She clawed my shirt off and her hands went into my hair as I threw her blouse away, then with one hand around her back and one supporting her leg I picked her up to straddle me and strode to the stairs, taking them two at a time and narrowly avoiding slamming my head against the low ceiling. Once we were in bed and my body was pressing hers down into the soft sheets, her need seemed to escalate. She only calmed once her eyes rolled back into her head when I finally thrust inside. We’d made love plenty of times that week, but none had been as frenzied. Once we’d fallen off the edge together and our faces were a hair’s breadth apart, she searched mine for a long moment, her hand coming up to the side of my jaw as if memorising every detail then a tear slid from the corner of one of her eyes into her hairline.

“Hey,” I said, gently as I wiped the wet away from her temple. “Verity, baby. Come back to me.”

“I’m sorry,” she said in a choked voice. “It’s just—”

“I’m not so bad in bed that I make you cry now, am I? I’ve never had quite such a bad review before.”

That pulled a small smile from her and a brief eye roll, but it also had the desired effect of damming the tears. “Don’t fish for compliments, you arrogant sod,” she said, her voice back to her normal crisp tone. I smiled at



her for a moment before I moved to kiss her mouth, then both eyes and rub my nose against hers.

We slept tangled together that night with her head resting on my chest and her arm around my torso, even in sleep she held on tight. I blinked up at the dark ceiling, wishing I didn't have to go back to London the next day, wishing there was more I could do to reassure Verity, wishing I could take her past away so she never had to feel this level of insecurity. But most of all I wished that I'd been less of a blind arsehole. Maybe then she'd trust me, trust *us*. I pulled her further into my side and she burrowed against me in her sleep. The feel of her soft body against mine and her breath against my neck helped me let go of my regrets. I was there with her now and I wasn't going to let her go. At least that's what I thought.

## Chapter 27

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## *If you want us to leave then we'll all just go*

### **VERITY**

“Mum, listen it’s not a great time for–”

Harry sighed and looked up at the ceiling, his free hand going to the back of his neck. I was perched on one of his kitchen stools drinking a cup of tea in my silk pyjamas and Harry’s massive dressing gown, feeling more relaxed than I had in long while. The plus side of overseeing the site in London this week was staying with Harry. The only slight downside was Barbara attempting to smother me in my sleep on the reg. She was sitting directly in front of me now, her flat poofy face inches from mine with a grumpy expression as her tail twitched from side to side. Somebody did not like to share their daddy.

Despite Barbara’s terrifying ways, I was slowly, very very slowly, starting to relax into this new reality. A reality where I’d stay at Harry’s house when I was in London because he was, in fact, my boyfriend. A reality where said boyfriend had done exactly what he said he’d do in terms of my mother – that situation hadn’t touched me in the three weeks since we’d left France. Mr Crawley was now talking directly to Harry and his company’s law firm. Control freak that I was, I found it a little hard to let go of the stress, and definitely still found it hard not to feel like my mother was my responsibility to sort out. The only information Harry had really let me in on was that they still hadn’t located her for the authorities but that they were “close” and “it was only a matter of time”.

“No, Mum, you’re not coming over here,” Harry ground out. My gaze snapped back to him and my hand froze in mid-air before the tea could reach my mouth. All the relaxed energy of the morning was sucked out of the

room. Harry's eyes shot to me as my mug clattered down onto the granite worktop and tea split over the side. I jumped up from the stool and grabbed a cloth to start wiping it. Harry was still on the phone to his mum, still affectionally annoyed with her for wanting to invade his Sunday without warning. I was *not* ready to see Harry's mother. He sighed again and I could tell that he was losing this argument. I threw the cloth back into the sink and rounded the kitchen island, gathering my stuff as I went. "Fine, okay but only for a bit, alright?" he said. I caught his eye and he frowned at me and my handbag which I was stuffing with my belongings that were strewn across the granite. "Listen, Mum. I've got to go. Yes, yes okay, see you in a bit. Love you too." He took the phone away from his ear and tapped to disconnect, then tucked it in his back pocket whilst keeping his gaze focused on me. "What are you doing?"

I gave him a brief, harried smile. "I'll just get out of your hair if you've family coming over. You probably want to spend some time with them, and I'd just be in the way. It's probably too soon anyway so—"

"Verity," he snapped, his arms crossing over his chest as he frowned across at me. "If anything, it's twenty years too late. You're not going anywhere. Mum will only be doing this because she's got wind of me having someone here. It's about time she knew we're back together. She'll want to see you."

I very, very much doubted that was the case, but I kept my mouth shut and gave Harry another closed-lipped smile. "Honestly, I'll just nip out to the site and check some things. It'll save me a tonne of time tomorrow. I was meaning to go there anyway."

Harry's eyebrows went up and he glanced out of his floor-to-ceiling window which was streaked with rain then back at me. "You want to visit the site *now*?"

"It's just a shower I can—"

"I've just watched you blow dry your hair and apply make-up for over an hour. There's no way you're going out in this."

I straightened my spine and skewered him with a look that would have had my junior architects peeing their pants, but just seemed to glance off Harry. "I'm not that high maintenance thank you very much."

Harry smiled. "Yes, you are." He moved to me then. I took a couple of steps back, but I wasn't fast enough. He plucked my handbag out of my hands, putting it on one of the stools then his arms came around me and he

pulled me into him.

“Harry I’m–”

He cut me off with a brief but firm kiss on the lips then pulled back to search my face. “It’s just my mum, love. You don’t have to be nervous.”

I bit my lip and looked away.

“You’re not really nervous, are you?” he asked, then let out a surprised laugh. “I think this might be the first time I’ve seen you less than two hundred per cent confident. She’s a small, older woman. I’ve seen you bust the balls of at least five CEOs in one board meeting. I’ll explain about everything that happened back at school. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

“I know, but listen, Harry. I think you should talk to her first because–”

“Yoohoo!”

I started in surprise and my eyes widened at the voice from the hallway and the slamming of the front door. Harry rolled his eyes, but there was a smile on his mouth as he turned to the entrance to the kitchen. We were still standing in each other’s arms when Harry’s mum swept in then stopped dead on seeing us.

“So, Mum,” Harry said as I pulled back, only to have him sling his arm around my shoulder and pull me more firmly into his side, “when you said you were ‘in the area’ did you, in fact, mean you were outside my door?”

Mrs York, who’d been staring at me with a shocked expression on her face, blinked a couple of times and then focused on her son. “I thought you said that... I mean is this...?”

“Mum, you remember Verity Markham, don’t you?”

“But she dumped you,” Mrs York snapped, and I felt my chest tighten but powered through. I wasn’t sure which was the worst of my crimes – dumping her son, or the damage my family did to hers all those years ago. I smiled tentatively and moved forward to offer her my hand.

“It’s lovely to see you again, Mrs York,” I said. She stared at my hand for a moment before woodenly moving to take it. After one shake she snatched her hand away. Okay then, maybe I was not going to win her over. Harry was frowning at his mum when I glanced up at him. He stepped forward and gave her a hug, which she managed to unfreeze enough to return, then he moved back to me and pulled me into his side again.

“I’ll put some tea on,” Mrs York said into the uncomfortable silence and bustled off towards Harry’s kettle. I pulled away from Harry to move back to

my stool at the kitchen island. He moved with me, gave me a brief supportive kiss on the temple before he walked around the island to his mum, who was fiddling with the mugs with her back to us.

“Mum?” he asked, laying a hand on her back. “What’s with the—?” He was cut off by the front door slamming open again and loud voices in the corridor. “What the—?” he muttered as he walked away from his mum’s stiff back and towards the voices. Two men and a woman entered the kitchen with three small kids in tow. I recognised Mr York from school, he was a greying, older version of Harry. The other could only be his brother – same build and dark hair as Harry, just a little older. The woman was pretty, make-up free and wearing jeans, her light brown hair up in a messy ponytail.

“Unca Hazza!” shouted a little girl with lopsided bunches who charged into the kitchen and slammed into Harry’s legs. “I have sooooo much to tell you. I found two frogs in the garden, and you *know* how much I love frogs. Mummy says that I can’t take them into school cause...” She broke off as her attention caught me where I was standing off to the side and her eyes went wide. “Who are *you*?” she shouted, abandoning her uncle who was hit with the two small boys who’d followed her in but weren’t fast enough to get to Harry first. Harry winced as the larger of the two boys’ heads collided with his groin. The little girl was standing in front of me now. Her hands were on her hips and her head was tilted to the side. I smiled down at her.

“I’m Verity,” I said, crouching down to her level.

“What are you doing in Unca Hazza’s house?”

“Tilly,” the pretty brunette chided, as she moved over to where we were standing. “That’s not polite.”

“Jeez, I was just asking her a question,” Tilly grumbled, as I straightened to greet the brunette.

“And don’t say jeez.”

“Bloody hell,” Tilly muttered, and the brunette rolled her eyes. “This is why I keep having to have ‘chats’ with your teacher, Mrs Coast.” She gave me a small apologetic smile. “Hi there, Verity. I’m Steph, Harry’s sister-in-law. This is John, my husband.” I shook Steph’s hand and nodded to John who was eyeing me curiously. “You’ve met Tilly and these other two maniacs are Mikey and Jake.” The two boys also abandoned their uncle to come and stand in front of me.

“You’re pwetty,” said the taller of the two.

“Mikey!” snapped Steph. “Say hello first before you comment on

someone's appearance."

"We York men get right to the point," said John, smiling as he strode over to shake my hand. "And he's not wrong. Anyway, I said the very same thing to you the first time we met, Steph. And *you* didn't seem to mind that much." He slung his arm over his wife's shoulders and kissed the top of her head.

"No offence, John, but I'd really rather our kids develop slightly better manners than you."

"You'll struggle there I'm afraid, love," Mrs York said as she came over to give Steph a warm hug and kiss her on both cheeks, before being attacked by all her grandchildren for hugs and kisses. I took a small step back, feeling like an intruder in this close family dynamic. For some reason I felt an ache in my chest, which was ridiculous. I had the Hardcastles, I reminded myself. They'd made it clear that Heath and I were part of their family. It was difficult though since Heath had married Yaz, because now he was *officially* family. I still somehow felt a little bit of an outsider. "I've been trying to instil manners into mine for decades and it's yet to pay off."

Barbara strolled over then to wind her way around Tilly's legs, purring.

"Barbara!" shrieked Tilly, falling to her knees and stroking the cat with an intensity that I was surprised Barbara would tolerate. Then she actually threw herself over the cat and cuddled its massive body. I was quite sure Barbara would have ripped my face off had I attempted such a manoeuvre. "Did you miss me?" Tilly muttered into her fur.

"Tonnes," Harry put in. "You know you'll always be her favourite girl."

"Harry took on Barbara for us two years ago," Steph explained to me. "She was Tilly's cat, but after the boys were born... well, let's just say there were some attempted smothering incidents. It would have killed Tilly if we got rid of her completely so this was a compromise – the fact we also have two more cats and a dog at home also sweetens the pot. Barbara likes who she likes but she's a bit of an arsehole really."

I smiled at Steph. "Tell me about it. She's tried to smother me a time or two."

"At least she doesn't shit in the bed anymore," put in Harry. "Can't leave her alone though. I fork out a fortune for her cat-sitter. I have to keep the poor woman on retainer so that Barbara is her only client as the bloody cat won't tolerate anyone new. Total psycho."

I felt a lump form in my throat at the thought of Harry taking on a psycho

cat called Barbara who won't drink standing water and basically bullies him in his own home, all to keep his niece happy.

"As great as it is to see you lot," Harry cut in. "What are you doing here?"

"You're always telling us you want us to come down," said Mrs York.

"Yes, Mum. I did, but it would have been nice to have a heads up about it."

"Well, you've clearly been busy lately," she shot a pointed look at me and the ice in her gaze caused me to take another small step back. "Too busy for family. We thought we better check you were okay. Clearly, you're *more* than fine."

Mr York came up and slapped Harry on the back a couple of times. "Your mum was worried, son," he said. "You know how she gets. Lovely to see you again, Verity," he said, coming around his son to shake my hand. "Sorry about all the craziness." At least his tone was warmer than his wife's. I'd really liked Mr York at school. He'd been patient with me – maths was never my strong suit. And really, he was the only teacher to ever question my parents. At the time Heath and I had just been annoyed by it, but looking back I could see how brave he was to raise concerns, even if they were never going to go anywhere. I winced when I remembered how I'd laughingly dismissed those concerns in the headmaster's meeting. I'd put on quite the performance.

"If you want us to leave then we'll all just go," said Mrs York in a hurt tone.

"Don't be silly, Mum," said Harry in an affectionate but exasperated voice. "I can order us some food and–"

"No need darling. It's all in the car. John, Martin – off you go to get in the Tesco bags."

"I could have easily ordered us lunch, Mum," Harry said as Mrs York turned back to the kettle and the men hustled out to the front door to do her bidding.

"Wouldn't have been your Mum's gravy though, would it?" Mr York shouted from the corridor and Harry rolled his eyes.

"Sorry, Harry," Steph said, pulling a face behind Mrs York's back.

"It's fine," sighed Harry. "You know I love seeing you guys."

"Well, maybe I'd better head off," I put in. "Let you all catch up."

"If you think that's best, dear," Mrs York said as she handed Steph a cup



of tea.

“Mum,” Harry snapped under his breath before he turned to block my exit from the kitchen. “Verity, of course you should stay.”

“I was sorry to hear about your father,” Mrs York said stiffly.

“Thank you,” I said and gave her a nod in acknowledgment.

“I saw in the press that you’re redeveloping your family’s stately home. Making it into flats to rent are you? I bet that’ll make a pretty penny.” Her tone was heavy on the accusation.

“It’s going to be a children’s respite centre actually.”

Mrs York’s mouth snapped shut and she blinked. “Oh.”

“I didn’t know anything about that,” Harry said, frowning across at me. “Are you doing the redesign?”

“No.” I shook my head twice. “I couldn’t...” I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “We gave it to another firm.”

“Not a high profile enough job for you?” Mrs York said, still trying to have a dig at me.

I looked at her square on. “I would have torn the place down until it was just a hole in the ground.”

“Er... okay,” Steph said slowly.

“I think the kids need better than a hole in the ground, so I let someone else do it.” I felt my hand enclosed in Harry’s warm, large one and he gave it a reassuring squeeze. There was an awkward silence which was thankfully broken by John and Mr York as they crashed back into the kitchen laden with bags.

“What’s going on?” Mr York asked, glancing between his wife and me.

“I’d like to know the same thing, Dad. Mum’s being kind of weird.”

“Well,” huffed Mrs York. “That’s no way to speak to your mother after you’ve not seen her for months.”

“It’s been *one* month, Mum, and you know what I’m talking about.”

“Right, well, I’m starving,” John cut in whilst dumping what seemed like hundreds of bags on the kitchen island. Clearly the Yorks were planning on staying, and from the strong side-eye I was receiving from Mrs York I was not wanted. Well, at least that was something I already had lots of practice with.

# Chapter 28

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## *Your son makes me happy*

### **VERITY**

“I don’t *care*,” said Tilly, her little body rigid with anger. “I hate school and I’m never ever going back.” Barbara was sitting in Tilly’s lap, and they were both looking at Steph with matching angry expressions.

Steph sighed. “We’ll talk about this later, love.”

“What’s all this?” Mr York asked as he ruffled Tilly’s hair from across the table. “I thought you loved school.”

“I hate it. They have yucky gravy, and they *torture* kids.”

“By torture she means they make the kids sit down for the odd maths lesson.”

Tilly shot her dad a disgusted look. “You don’t understand. I’m never going back ever, ever!” She turned to me then and, much to my terror, addressed me directly. “Unca Hazza lady friend – did you hate school?”

“Tilly, her name’s Verity.”

Tilly gave Harry an impatient look then focused back on me. I opened my mouth to speak then shut it again. There weren’t that many children in my life other than my pseudo- niece, and I had very little experience of interacting with them. This one seemed to me to be a bit like an unexploded bomb, and I didn’t want to say the wrong thing. However, all eyes were on me at this point, so I had to say *something*. I went for honesty.

“Actually, I loved school,” I said, lowering my fork slowly to my plate.

Tilly huffed and shot me a disgusted look. Clearly she had been hoping for some kind of ally and I’d let her down. The trust we’d built up over the meal where she’d been surreptitiously slipping me her unwanted Brussel sprouts to dispose of was shattered.

“I bet your mummy and daddy didn’t make you go *every day*. And I bet you didn’t have to do stupid after school clubs as well.”

I cleared my throat and then met her frown with a small smile. “When I was just a bit older than you, I lived at school, Tilly.” Her eyes, beautiful brown just like her uncle’s, went wide at that statement and she sucked in a shocked breath.

“Nobody lives at school,” her voice was low and horrified, as if the very concept was too awful to fully voice. “There’s no beds.”

I chuckled but the rest of the table was silent – everyone was listening to this exchange. I shifted on my chair.

“There were at my school. And they were super, super comfortable. The sheets smelt of flowers and I *loved* the school gravy.” I didn’t add that gravy and homecooked roasts weren’t something I’d ever even had before going to school, and nor were sheets of any description, let alone ones that smelt of flowers.

Tilly looked adorably confused. “But didn’t you miss your mummy and daddy? Who tucked you in at night?”

Sometimes it was brought home to me how very unusual my childhood was. Looking at Tilly’s utter bafflement in that moment was one of those times. She couldn’t imagine being away from the safety of her parents.

“I, um... some mummies and daddies are a bit... different. Mine weren’t like yours. They didn’t make gravy or tuck me in, or really do much mummy and daddy stuff at all.”

“What? That’s terrible!” She was shouting now and her righteous anger on my behalf reminded me so much of her uncle that I smiled.

“Honestly once we were at school it was fine. I had a twin brother, so I was never alone. And the housemistress at school tucked me in. She was really, really nice. And the school gravy was *the best*.”

Tilly made a face. “School gravy’s disgusting.”

“I thought it was the best thing I’d ever tasted. Oh, and custard! I still love spotted dick with custard – it’s my absolute favourite pudding.”

Tilly wrinkled her nose at the spotted dick comment then something else seemed to occur to her. “Do you have someone to tuck you in now?” she asked, and I heard John coughing to suppress a laugh from across the table.

“Don’t worry, love,” said Harry. “*I’ve* got that all under control now.”

“But you don’t even make gravy!” Tilly said accurately, as if she was doubting Harry’s ability to provide the essentials I might need. And gravy

was clearly considered an essential.

“That’s okay because Granny makes the *best* gravy,” Harry said. “So, she can cover that side of things.”

I bit my lip and looked down at my plate. Harry was just not getting it that his mother was not going to warm to me.

It was only after lunch, when Harry, John and his dad were playing with the kids out in the garden, and I was alone with Mrs York for the first time that I realised just how much she disliked me.

“Don’t think I don’t see right through you,” she said as I straightened from stacking the plates in the dishwasher. “He might buy the poor little rich kid routine, but I’m not so easily taken in, young lady. Your mother told me about you twenty years ago. Leopards don’t change their spots.”

“My mother?” I breathed in shock as I paused on my way to to pick up the rest of the glasses. “When did you talk to my mother?”

“Martin just couldn’t keep his nose out of it,” Mrs York continued. “Said he had a duty of care to you both. Nearly lost his job over it.”

“Is this about him raising concerns about our parents?”

“I told him not to do it,” Mrs York continued. “Told him nobody would believe us. We looked like right idiots when you and your brother denied that anything was wrong. Then your mother told us what was really going on with you both.”

“What did she say?”

“That you and your brother were uncontrollable. That they had to lock away spirits when you were home. That you took drugs and that was why you were so thin after the summer. Your mother cried in the meeting we had after the one with you and Heath. To be honest, I felt sorry for her. They both admitted to spoiling you two, making you entitled and said that it had backfired on them.”

I took a slow step back and clutched the kitchen island for support. It took me a while before I was able to speak. “Right, I see.” I nodded. My head was spinning.

“I hope you’re not mixed up with that nonsense now,” she said. “He’s a good boy, my Harry. Doesn’t need to get involved with all that.”

I blinked. It took all my effort to focus back on her face. “If you’re asking about alcohol and substance use, I can tell you this: I have never and will never take drugs, nor have I ever drunk to excess. Not once.”

“A likely st–”

“My parents were alcoholics and drug addicts, Mrs York. I can see how you might have been taken in by my mother – she’s very charming when she wants to be – but I’m afraid she was lying. If Heath and I had wanted to drink spirits as children, I assure you that we could have picked up any of the dozens of bottles littering the floor and surfaces of our godforsaken home. We didn’t choose to because we could see how dysfunctional our parents were, and we have never had any desire to be anything like them. I’m sorry that Heath and I lied, but you have to understand we had to protect what little we had. We couldn’t risk concerns being raised. There was no family to take us in. We only had each other and the school that we loved. We were so nearly free of that home. And we’d been taught from a young age to hide all the problems. We felt out of control enough as it was, we didn’t need to add to that in any other way.”

She sniffed and eyed me with suspicion. “Your mother didn’t come across as an alcoholic.”

I shrugged. “Like I said, she was very convincing.”

“You broke my son’s heart back then as well. Do you realise that? He told me what that brother of yours said to him. To be honest it was a relief. I didn’t want him around you.”

“Heath was lying. He was scared because Mr York had raised concerns. He wanted me to cut off contact with Harry. I didn’t think any of those things about Harry. Quite the opposite. As far as I was concerned, *I* wasn’t good enough for *him*.”

She huffed. “Well, you’ve got that right at least.”

I sighed and looked down at the floor for a moment, taking a deep breath in and letting it out slowly. This woman had made up her mind about me over twenty years ago. There really wasn’t any point trying to change it now. Maybe over time she’d soften but this wasn’t new territory for me. I’d been unwanted by maternal figures before. At least now I had the agency to live my life on my terms.

“Your son makes me happy,” I said in a quiet voice. “There’s nothing I can say that will make a difference to your opinion of me, but for as long as Harry will stay with me, I’ll make him happy too.”

She frowned. “What do you mean ‘for as long as Harry will stay’? You don’t sound very sure of him.”

“It’s not that I don’t trust him. I just know that once he...” I trailed off and looked to the side. It was impossible to explain the underlying dread I

had that really, underneath it all, I was still not good enough for a decent man like Harry. Deep in my psyche I was still that unwanted child. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “All I mean is that I absolutely treasure every moment with your son and would never ever hurt him.”

Mrs York tipped her head to the side as if trying to figure out a puzzle as she stared at me, but as she opened her mouth to speak I’d already moved to leave. In the boardroom and when it came to negotiating business transactions I was tough as nails, but I knew I didn’t have the strength for this. I walked out to the garden and Harry jogged over to me, slinging his arm around my shoulders, pulling me into his side and kissing the top of my head. I let myself relax into him. I gave myself these moments – I deserved them after everything. When I looked up, Mrs York was staring at me and Harry from the kitchen. The frown was gone now, replaced by curious expression. I broke eye contact with her when a small hand tugged at my skirt.

“Up!” shouted the stout little man at my feet. I smiled at him before leaning down to pick him up (I had no doubt that if I didn’t he would be able to tug my skirt clean off – he seemed pretty strong). Once his chubby legs had settled around my hips and his face was level with mine, he put his hands on my cheeks and squeezed together before giggling and collapsing into me, his little arms circling my neck as he nuzzled in under my chin. I’d held Max and Mia’s daughter before, but other than that I’d rarely been hugged by a child. I thought of having my very own niece or nephew soon, and for some reason my throat felt tight and to my horror my eyes stung with tears which I quickly blinked away. After suppressing my emotions for years, my experience in France coupled with finding out I was going to be an auntie seemed to have opened the dam and I was now a total sap. Harry’s arm which was still around my shoulders tightened and I turned to look up at him.

“You okay?” he whispered.

“Of course,” I said, my voice hoarse through my tight throat. Harry frowned. I felt Jake settle more deeply into me and become heavier in my arms. His breathing evened out and I realised he was falling asleep.

“I can take him if...?”

“No,” I said quickly, hugging the child closer to me. “I mean, no it’s fine. Let him sleep. The little guy hasn’t stopped moving since he got here.”

Harry helped me and Jake to the padded garden swing, then went back to his niece and nephew who wanted Unca Hazza to play catch.

“Don’t mind Jean,” Steph said as she settled next to us on the swing.

“She’ll come around.”

I shrugged. “I don’t blame her.”

Steph cocked her head to the side. “I would ask you about what went down back then, but you look wrung out to be honest.”

I gave her a grateful smile.

“Listen, Harry told me you’ve had a rough time of it recently. I want you to know that I’m on your side, even if my stubborn mother-in-law takes a bit longer to get with the programme.”

“She’s got good reason to be wary.”

“I’m guessing there’s more than one side to that story,” Steph said, and I realised that she was more perceptive than I’d given her credit for. “I’m here when you’re ready to tell me yours. My kids are good judges of character.” She stroked her sleeping son’s back then smiled at me. “Just like their mother.” I managed a small smile back and thankfully kept the tears at bay.

Later, when the Yorks were leaving and Mrs York was fussing over her grandchildren, hugging her daughter-in-law and her sons whilst I received a formal, icy goodbye, I felt a swift bite of jealousy. The Yorks were a close knit family. Whatever Steph said, it was obvious that I wasn’t *ever* going to belong. It was only a matter of time before Harry worked that out for himself.



## Chapter 29

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## *You were a child*

### **VERITY**

“Yaz, darling, all I’m saying is that maybe you shouldn’t wear those shoes all night,” I said, shoving a pair of glamorous flats that I’d brought for her under her nose. We were at a gala dinner raising money for Harry’s foundation. The focus was on the new LSE building and the youth project it would house – a huge model of it was in the centre of the hall, while plans and images were projected onto the walls. It was a black-tie event and Yaz was in the outfit I’d bought for her a while ago. She looked absolutely stunning, but the heels had to go.

Yaz rolled her eyes. “You and your brother are a nightmare. You’re obsessed with bullying me about my footwear. You do know it’s weird to carry shoes around with you? And can I remind you that these shoe-slash-torture-devices were chosen *by you*. I’m not swapping to flats now that I’ve mastered them. You always tell me I have to wear heels at these things. And, by the way, *your* heels are about an inch taller than mine and half as thin!” She wasn’t wrong. I was wearing a long-sleeved, high necked but backless silver dress. My heels were at least four inches, and the stiletto was razor thin.

“No offence, but you’re still crap at walking in those things,” Heath put in, smiling down at his wife as he handed her an orange juice. “You would have fallen over twice if I hadn’t been holding you up on the way in here.” Yaz was much more of a flip-flop and trainer girl than a four-inch-heel wearer. Walking in heels was second nature to me but for her it was more challenging. And I wasn’t going to have her falling over and risk something terrible happening either to her, or to my niece or nephew. Yes, I’d bought

those heels for Yaz originally, but that was back when I wanted her to knock my brother's socks off and show the stubborn idiot that he needed to get off his butt and make an effort or she'd slip through his fingers. That was all ancient history now, way before she was carrying such precious cargo, and now she needed to wear sensible shoes and keep my niece or nephew safe in there.

"Well then," Yaz said, going up on tiptoes to give Heath a light kiss on the mouth. "It's just as well I have you there isn't it? Problem solved."

I shook my head in frustration. "Heath can't follow you everywhere. And it's probably not good for your feet when you're carrying another human around."

"V, your niece or nephew is only the size of a tennis ball at the moment." Her hand went down to her small bump and Heath's arm came around to settle his over the top, linking their fingers together. "I think I can manage in heels."

"But if you fall then—"

"I'm fine, V."

"It's just—"

"Wow, I thought you were bossy before, but this is next level. Fine, fine, I'll wear the damn shoes."

"Thanks, V," Heath said under his breath, reaching over to give my hand a squeeze and then kiss me on the side of my head.

"Okay then," I heard a deep voice say and looked over to see Harry's brother a few feet away, glaring at us. "And here I was thinking I'd misjudged you. Turns out I'm better listening to my first instincts and remembering that leopards don't change their spots."

"John, it's not—" I started to say, but Heath went into full brother-on-a-mission mode before I had a chance to explain.

"What the fuck is your problem, mate?" he snapped, making the situation worse by tightening his grip on my hand and pulling me slightly behind him. "How dare you speak to her like that."

"Whatever," John spat. "Good luck, pal." With that, he gave our linked hands one last furious look and stormed off.

I sighed.

"Who is that idiot?" Heath said, turning to me.

"Harry's brother."

Heath's eyebrows went up into his hairline. "His brother? Why is he

acting like such a prick?”

“The whole family aren’t that keen on me. Apart from Mr York, which is a bit of a surprise to be honest. You know, after—”

“That was twenty years ago! Didn’t they give you a chance to explain?”

“Explain what?” Harry said as he drew up next to me and handed me a glass of champagne before kissing me briefly on the lips.

“Explain why your family are treating V like shit over something that happened more than two decades ago.”

Harry stiffened and I rushed in to avert disaster. The last thing I needed was for him to get angry with his family over me. The situation was difficult enough as it was. “It’s fine, Harry. Heath’s just being a bit overprotective.”

“I’ll deal with it,” Harry said through his teeth. Before I could stop him, he gave me a quick one-armed hug and set off towards his family who were all near the bar. I watched as he said something to his brother. John shot an angry retort back. The background noise of the room meant I couldn’t make out what they were saying, but whatever it was it didn’t de-escalate the situation, which was made clear when Harry shoved his brother’s shoulder and John shoved him back. It took their dad stepping in to stop it from going further. I bit my lip. This was the last thing Harry needed tonight.

This event should be a celebration. Mrs York got involved then, and despite how stressful the situation was I had to bite back a smile when she clipped her sons, both of whom were a good foot taller than her, around the ear. My smile dropped however when she caught my eye across the room and scowled at me like this was all my fault for ruining Harry’s night. I looked away and took a large gulp of Shloer from my champagne flute, which I used to disguise the fact that I wasn’t drinking, and wished that I didn’t have to give a bloody speech in front of these people. It fell to me yet again to do most of the talking, Max being mostly non-verbal at these occasions. But that was how we operated – I upheld the reputation of the business and did the schmoozing, and Max was kept from offending too many people.

Toby approached our group with Naomi, Kira Lucas and, to my surprise, Lanie. Even more surprising was how close Lanie was sticking to Naomi as her wide eyes took in the event space. She had on a very pretty evening dress and lowish heels. I’d only ever seen her in a hoodie before so this was a massive change. Kira Lucas’s appearance was less of a surprise given her and her husband’s passion for the environment and sustainable environmentally friendly design. But having the prime minister and his wife here tonight was

a huge boost for the project.

“Lanie,” I said, smiling in greeting despite my stress. “You look wonderful.”

“Noo helped me,” Lanie said softly. Naomi pulled her in for a side hug.

“My stylist helped you,” Naomi said through a smile. “And once we got the hem-length past this fun sponge,” she nodded to Toby, who rolled his eyes but not with any real annoyance, “we were golden. This one’s got a killer set of pins on her.” A tray of canapés came past and Noo fully body-blocked the poor waiter so he had to stop at our group. “Ooh! Posh sausage rolls.” She grabbed two and handed one to Lanie. Lanie stared at it for a moment then glanced at Noo who was already shoving hers into her mouth. “Er... if you’re not going to eat that then—” Noo made a grab for Lanie’s sausage roll but Lanie jerked it away and shoved it into her own mouth. Noo pretended to be disappointed, but I could see the small smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

“Noo’s right, you gorgeous little fountain of youth,” Kira said to Lanie. “I’d kill for your legs.” She grabbed a sausage roll herself and shoved it into her mouth. “OMG! Sam, you have to try these!” Kira semi-shouted, grabbing another one then taking it over to what could only be her bodyguard on the outskirts of the group. She held it out to him, but he remained motionless with his arms crossed across his massive chest. “Your loss, big guy,” she chirped, shoving it into her own mouth to follow the last one.

“What are the Yorks getting into it about?” Toby asked, ignoring Kira’s antics.

I sighed. “The Yorks aren’t my biggest fans and Harry isn’t really accepting that.”

“What weirdos,” Kira said, putting her hands on her hips. “You’re the dog’s bollocks, V.”

I smiled. “Thanks, darling. Quite the compliment, I’m sure.”

“Want Barclay to lock them up in the Tower of London?”

“Er... Kiki, I don’t think that’s a thing,” Naomi said, making an eek face at me.

“Pretty sure that if Barclay gives the word one of these chaps will be happy to sort it. Right, Sam?” She shouted the last over her shoulder to a sausage-roll-refuser, who was now scanning the room. His gaze snapped to Kira, and he gave her a long-suffering look, before going back to his surveillance of the space. She shrugged. “He loves it.”

“Is that why he asked to be the far guard as we were coming in?” Naomi said, smirking into her drink. Kira narrowed her eyes.

“Sam loves being my close protection officer. He’s just being a stubborn old badger today. Right, Sam?”

He didn’t even spare Kira a look this time. In response, she spun on her heel and stepped right into his personal space. His arms were crossed over his massive chest, and he was still pretending that Kira wasn’t there. She held her fist out for a bump. When he didn’t uncross his arms she simply bumped one of the closed fists that he had resting against his chest, before making her own fist explode and mime showering over him, complete with sound effects. Throughout the whole performance, Sam’s mouth twitched once, but the rest of him remained statue-like. Kira sighed and made her way back to the group.

“He’s like, super serious about his job. You’ll have to take my word for it – I can have those bastards locked up in the Tower. Just give me the signal.”

“V?” Max drew up next to me. “It’s speech time.”

“Oh crap,” I said, glancing at my watch to see that it was already eight. “We should have started ten minutes ago.”

I smiled at everyone and gave our excuses, then dragged Max up towards the stage. Toby followed along behind, signalling for Harry to join us. I deliberately didn’t look over to where he was still standing with his family, not wanting to be on the receiving end of any more dirty looks. But on my way to the stage, something caught my eye. The familiar figure of Giles Bartholemew-Smithe was standing with a large group of men by the bar. He’d put on weight, lost some hair and, if the broken veins around his nose indicated anything, drunk a fair bit of alcohol since school. For some people, things only went downhill after their teenage years. I remembered Harry’s embarrassment when he’d admitted to having been bullied by this man, and the shyness and insecurities that it had clearly caused. My vision clouded with red.

“V, what the fuck are you doing?” Max asked as I changed direction to veer off towards Giles.

“Smithe!” I said as the crowd around him cleared for me and I was left facing the slimy piece of shit.

“Lady V!” he said with the same guffawing laugh he’d had in school. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

One of my eyebrows went up. “Afraid I can’t exactly say the same, although I expect at least one of your assets will have remained

disappointingly the same.” I glanced down at his groin then back up at his increasingly red face.

“Ha, you always were a joker. We had some right laughs at school, eh?”

“Hmm, by ‘right laughs’ do you mean flashing me your penis when I was only fifteen in the pool changing rooms and asking me if I ‘only liked nerd dick or did I want to chomp on this?’ Or when you lied to half the school about fingering me behind the bike sheds after the tenth time I’d turned you down? Any of that ring any bells?”

“I– I– I don’t know what you’re–”

“Get out,” I snapped.

“You–you can’t just–”

Giles was cut off by Sam, Kira’s surly security guard, taking him by the back of his jacket and propelling him towards the exit. It seemed that Kira might not have been totally full of shit. I sincerely hoped that Barclay did have the power to throw people into the Tower.

“Gentlemen,” I nodded to the group around me and turned on my heel to march up to the stage, nearly colliding with Harry on my way there. His hands went out to steady me and when I looked up at his face, he looked a mixture of angry and amused.

“If I’d have known Giles had done that to you, I would have made destroying him much more of a priority. As it is I’ve only sabotaged two of his start-ups. Fucking prick.”

He looked as if he wanted to go after him, but I put my hand on the centre of his chest to stop him. “He’s not worth it, Harry. And we’ve got a speech to give.”

Harry stopped frowning after Giles to focus on me. As his anger drained and amusement set in he let out a short laugh as he searched my face. “I love that you told the entire room that Giles Bartholemew-Smithe has a small dick.”

I shrugged. “All true. Can’t believe he had the balls to show up here to be honest.”

Harry’s hand came up to my face, tracing down the side of my cheek with his fingertips. “You’d slay dragons for me, wouldn’t you?” he said softly. “My own little Astrida.” I smiled up at him as I rolled my eyes, took his hand in mine and gave it a squeeze. Astrida was a kick-arse character from LP Mayweather’s book – she killed various monsters; dragons were actually the least of her worries.

“Smithe is hardly a dragon. More a toad-faced, tiny-dicked loser. Verbally slaying him isn’t really an accomplishment. Right, we best get going.” I tried to pull my hand from Harry’s, but he just grasped it tighter in his and we ended up walking up onto the stage like that, with Toby and Max in our wake. Once the four of us were up on the stage, Harry gave my hand one final squeeze before letting it go so that he and Toby could take their turns at the mic. The whole crowd fell silent as the two of them spoke about the building and how they hoped it would help the community, as well as be a centre of excellence for the LSE. Toby was charming and smooth as always, while Harry played the straight man to Toby’s banter. They had the crowd smiling and laughing – everyone was well oiled with champagne by now and it showed.

“And, of course, the genius behind all of this was Blue Sky Design. We have Verity Markham and Max Hardcastle here tonight to speak about the building and it’s cutting-edge, high-performance credentials. These two are transforming the landscape of architecture and how we live and work in buildings.”

“I’m sayin’ nowt,” grumbled Max as we made our way forward. Harry gave me an encouraging smile as he and Toby stepped down into the crowd.

“No change there then,” I said out of the side of my mouth whilst keeping a fixed smile on my face. “You’ll have to say *something* Max.”

“Fine.”

The applause died down as we reached the microphone. Max surprised me by grabbing the mic first, saying “Cheers,” then stepping back and nodding to me. I held back an eye roll. Clearly in Max’s mind that one terse word was more than enough. Fine. This was what I was best at anyway. Public speaking was my jam.

“Thank you, Max, for that moving speech,” I said into the mic and the large space echoed with laughter. “We feel so privileged to be part of this project. Max and I have always been passionate about sustainable design and helping to create a carbon neutral future. This building takes our industry a step closer to that. When Toby and Harry chose us for this project we were thrilled, and to know it will do so much good is a dream come true. I’ve so many people to thank that I need to get to that first. Dave and the construction crew – I know that we are massive pains in the arse.” Another ripple of laughter went through the crowd. It nearly, but not quite, drowned out an angry, high-pitched shout from somewhere near the back. A shiver



went down my spine at the familiarity of the voice, but I dismissed the worry as my mind playing tricks on me. It was the stress of the situation. Maybe I was more worried about this speech than I thought. “And I wouldn’t blame you if you don’t want to work with us again – although that would give me a very sad face.”

“You’re alright, love,” shouted Dave from the crowd. “All you design monkeys are pains in my arse. I’m used to it.” Some more laughter went through the crowd at that, and again I heard that familiar shout – this time verging on a scream. I gripped the microphone tighter, my laugh was shaky when I managed to force one out.

“Thanks, Dave,” I said, my voice shaky as well. “Good to know that we ‘design monkeys’ universally piss you off.” More laughter. My heartbeat was banging in my ears now as I strained to hear that voice again. I let out a relieved breath when there was nothing in the background. “This building will serve many purposes. It will be an educational space for the LSE, but the youth project championed by Mr York will also provide invaluable support to the local community. Without the real-world, practical construction experience that–” There was a commotion in the crowd. People were being pushed out of the way to allow someone through.

Then I saw her.

Thinner than I remembered. Make-up under her sunken eyes. Wearing a sequined designer dress and her trademark four-inch heels. Her eyes were bloodshot and wild. She looked deranged. I blinked and took a step back from the microphone, feeling the blood drain out of my face. This couldn’t be happening.

“You always were a stuck-up, holier-than-thou little bitch!” she screamed at me, and the crowd fell silent. Her words were a little slurred but clear enough for everyone to hear. “I should have got rid of you whilst I had the chance. This fancy fucking party.”

She was advancing on me now, tottering up the steps to the stage with a determined look on her face. My instinct was to run, but for some reason, my feet were frozen in place. I glanced into the crowd, and I could see both Harry and Heath fighting to get to me, but the people in their way were so shocked that they weren’t moving quickly enough. Then my fucking mother grabbed the microphone. I watched her sway in front of me and I thought I might throw up. The prime minister was in the crowd for God’s sake. Harry’s *family* were here. I swallowed the bile and braced for what was about to come

out of her mouth.

“This fancy building. You fucking your fancy billionaire.” Now with access to the mic, her voice was projected across the vast space. I closed my eyes as humiliation washed over me. There goes my reputation in the architecture world – everybody would think I shagged my way into this job now. “What about me, hey? What about your *mother*? I put up with you little shits for years. How dare you cut me off. I deserve–”

It was the word *deserve* that did it – that snapped me out of my frozen horror. This excuse for a human didn’t deserve anything.

“You deserve *nothing*,” I said, my voice was shaking with fury, but still clear enough to be picked up by the microphone. In that moment I forgot about the crowd. I forgot about my professional reputation. It was just me and this horror-show of a mother and all the insecurities she had instilled into me over my lifetime. “You didn’t deserve the millions that you’ve already drained out of the Markham family and spent. You haven’t deserved the payoffs I’ve given you since then. And you are *not* my mother. You’ve never been a mother to either Heath or me.” I could see Harry and Heath now at the side of the stage. Harry looked like he wanted to stride over to me, but Heath had a hand on his chest to hold him back. I made eye contact with my brother, and something passed between us. I needed to say this. Heath understood that. “A mother does not neglect her children. She doesn’t forget they exist so that she can party with her depraved friends. She doesn’t starve her kids or make them sleep in a fucking shed.”

“You *chose* to sleep in that shed!” she screamed.

“We weren’t safe in the house!” I shouted back. “That house wasn’t a place for children. It wasn’t even fit for the dogs. We were all better off in the goddamn shed.” I shook my head and turned to Heath again. “Call the police,” I said before turning back to Felicity. “Now get off my stage, you pathetic excuse for a human being.”

Her face twisted with a new level of rage, and I was too slow to spot the danger. She launched herself at me, drawing her hand back and then striking me across the cheek with the back of it. She may have been a skeletal shell, but she seemed to be filled with superhuman strength in that moment. I felt the sharp edge of one of her many Markham heirloom rings tear the skin under my eye, and the force of the blow brought me down to my knees. There was a commotion around me then. Bodies were flying onto the stage. I could hear a struggle going on. But I stayed on my knees, focused on the blood

dripping onto the wood of the stage from my face.

“The police are on their way!” I could hear Heath shouting. “Check on her. I’ll deal with this bitch. Harry!”

At Harry’s name, my head shot up. It took a moment to find him. He had my mother by the scruff of her designer dress, nearly taking her off her feet. She was struggling, and by the looks of it had managed to scratch his face. “You will pay for this,” Harry said to her as she thrashed about like a wild cat. The stage was then swamped with what seemed like dozens of dark-suited men. I recognised Sam among them and realised they must be the majority of Barclay and Kira’s close protection crew.

The adrenaline started to wear off then and I just felt completely drained, as if that interaction with my mother had sucked all the life force out of me. I took a deep breath and pushed up to my feet. The blood was still dripping from my face and now falling onto my dress, showing up in large red patches against the pale fabric, but I was beyond caring. I was beyond anything. All those years of hiding the horror of our childhood wasted. Rationally I knew that it wasn’t our fault that our parents didn’t love us. But the unwanted child that lived in my heart was still embarrassed. Still wondered what was wrong with her that she didn’t inspire the kind of love other people received freely from their parents. Still wondered why she wasn’t good enough. It was that part of me that needed to flee. I didn’t want to see the pity in everyone’s eyes. Didn’t want to look at their faces as they saw me in a new light, saw the broken child I would always be.

Uncaring about the blood now soaking the front of my dress, I moved quickly to get off the stage. There was so much chaos up there that nobody thought to stop me. As I went into the crowd it parted to let me through, everyone too shocked to stop me. So, before anyone could get in my way I was at the exit. I could see the police car pulling up and still I felt numb. As they came into the venue, I turned away to the cloakroom to hide my face and blood-stained dress. One thing was certain, I was not up to being questioned now. The stunned coat assistant handed me my stuff and I shrugged on my coat to hide my dress.

“Er... do you need-?” he passed me a tissue and I tried and failed to give him a weak smile in return.

“Thanks,” I muttered, accepting it, but still not having the energy to press it to my face and stem the blood flow. It was then that I felt a hand on my arm which made me flinch and step away from the contact. When I looked

up, I saw it was Mrs York. Her face was pale and there were tears swimming in her eyes.

“It’s okay, love,” she said, using that soft voice that I’d heard her use with her family, but never with me, and holding her hands up as if to reassure me she wouldn’t try to touch me again. “It’s me. I’m not going to hurt you.”

I blinked at her, hating the pity I could see in her expression. She might pity me now, but I was quite sure that she would still think I wasn’t the best choice for her son. Who would want an entirely fucked-up woman latching onto your golden child?

“I’m so sorry,” she said in an unsteady voice. “I can’t believe I thought...” A tear made its way down her cheek, and she let it fall. “That awful, awful woman.”

I cleared my throat but when I spoke my voice still came out hoarse. “She lied pretty successfully back then. You weren’t the only ones that believed her.”

“The Hardcastles didn’t believe her, did they?” Mrs York said sharply. “They weren’t taken in. I spoke to Max’s mother earlier. She told me what went on.” She shook her head. “And here I am thinking I’m a good Christian.”

“Honestly, it’s fine. You weren’t to—”

“You were a *child*,” she whispered, openly crying now. “You were both just children. We all let you down. It’s *not* fine. We should have pushed harder with the school. We should have reported it to social services.”

I felt my eyes sting and took a step back. I could feel the blood continuing to drip down my face. “I can’t—”

“Let me see to that cut, sweetheart,” Mrs York said in that soft voice again. “You’re bleeding all over your pretty dress.” She moved towards me, but I held up my hand to stop her.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered back. “I just can’t be here. I can’t—” I couldn’t get the rest of my words out. My throat felt like it was gripped in a vice. She moved towards me again, but I was too quick. I spun on my heel and darted out of the exit.

“Verity! Wait!” I heard shouted after me, but for once my luck was in. A black cab pulled up to let someone out just as I made it onto the pavement. I slipped inside, slammed the door behind me and rested my head back against the leather.

“You’ve been in the wars, love,” the cabbie’s concerned voice came

through the screen. “Which hospital do you want to go to?” Mindful of the ongoing streams of blood and that the cabbie probably didn’t want his interior blood stained I finally managed to press a tissue against the cut to stem the bleeding.

“I’m fine,” I said, reaching for my normal clipped, commanding tone but failing miserably. “Just drive. Please.”

# Chapter 30

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## *Back to the beginning*

### **HARRY**

“You shouldn’t have held me back,” I snapped at Heath. If I’d been able to register anything but my worry for Verity, I would have felt bad. The poor guy looked completely wrecked.

We were still on the stage with the remaining security team, the rest of whom had hauled that fucking woman away. The party guests were showing signs of slowly dispersing, but we couldn’t find Verity anywhere and I was beginning to feel a little frantic. Images of her on her knees with blood dripping from her face and onto the floor kept flashing through my mind, and of her horror-struck expression when she saw her mother emerge through the crowd.

“I’m sorry,” Heath muttered at the floor. He was sitting down on one of the chairs, bent over with his hands holding the back of his head. Yaz had made it up onto the stage and was standing behind him rubbing his back. He looked up at me then, his bloodshot eyes focusing on mine. “She had to say it, mate.” I shook my head, but he carried on. “She had to get it out. We had to let her say what she needed to say.” His head fell forward again, and his voice dropped, breaking over his words. “You don’t understand. She *needed* to say it. For both of us.”

I threw my hands up in the air in frustration. “That monster is not worth it. Don’t you see that? I’ve been working for weeks to track her down and make sure she’s kept away from both of you. She’s not worth a second of either of your time or mental energy.”

“Well said, darling,” Mum’s voice echoed across the space, and I turned towards her. She was striding up the steps to the stage with a determined look

on her face. “But I want to know why ‘your people’ didn’t keep her away tonight.”

“Mum, I’ll talk to you in a minute. I’ve got to find—”

“Because I’m not sure they’re up to the job. So, *I’ll* be having a word with them. That woman should never have made it into this event.” She was trembling with rage, no doubt unhappy at the disruption to my night – something I couldn’t give less of a fuck about. All I wanted to know was where Verity was.

“Mum, I haven’t got time to—”

“No,” she snapped, “You’re bloody well right you haven’t got time. You need to get out there and find that poor girl.” She pointed at me and then at the door. I opened my mouth to speak but she was on a roll. “How could you have let her leave? She’s hurt and– and...” Mum broke off and pressed her lips together. Now that she was closer, I could see that it looked as though she’d been crying. “She’s out there all on her own.” She looked at Heath and her expression softened. “But you know all about that don’t you, love. Being alone. Not having anyone looking out for you. Having people let you down. It’s been happening to both of you all your lives by everyone around you, including me.”

“Mrs York,” Heath started. “It was decades ago, and honestly you couldn’t have—”

“I’m sorry, but my husband and I very much *could* have and *should* have done something. We shouldn’t have believed those monsters. It might be too late for that now, but I’m not making the same mistake twice.” She turned back to me. “You send your people after her. She must have some sort of tracking thingy in her phone or something. Or you could contact the taxi company and ask—”

“Taxi? Mum, where did you see Verity?”

“Oh, I thought someone would have said. She left in a black cab. I tried to stop her, but you know my hip plays me up and I’m not as spritely as I used to be so—”

“Shit,” I snapped, scrubbing my hands down my face. I knew tracking her iPhone would be pointless as I could feel it in my pocket – Verity had given it to me earlier so she wouldn’t have to carry a clutch bag. It had made sense at the time, but I didn’t know then that she would go missing after a showdown with her deranged, coked-up mother.

“Everything okay?”



I turned to see Kira and Barclay Lucas walking up the steps to the stage, followed by the rest of my family. Kira's normally smiling face was clouded with concern.

"You can find people, right?" I asked Barclay who tilted his head to the side.

"Well, if someone doesn't *want* to be found then—"

"She's *bleeding!*" I semi-shouted. It probably wasn't advisable to shout at the leader of the country in a crowded room, but I *had* to find Verity. I tried to lower my voice when I spoke again. "She's hurt and she's all alone. Please, Mr Lucas."



### **VERITY**

I leaned my head against the window of the train and looked at the lights flashing past. There'd been some funny looks directed my way in the station, but thankfully I'd only got a few drops of blood on my coat and I managed to find a plaster in my handbag for the cut on my cheek. Still, I'd only had the hand towels in the station toilet to wipe my face and neck with, so there was still some dried blood on me which looked slightly alarming to the other commuters. But luckily, Brits in general like to keep to themselves and that is doubly true on trains. My arms could have been hanging off and it would probably only raise the occasional eyebrow.

So, I was left to myself which was what I wanted. The shock of seeing my mother, having her scream at me in front of everyone I knew not to mention all the press in attendance, had rendered me incapable of rational thought. The shouting, the slap, the humiliation – it all took me back there and I couldn't seem to find a way out. Nothing was really registering. It was like the world was just that bit too far away from me. Like I was removed from everything around me, from myself. Why was I even on this train now? What was I trying to do? I knew I should have stayed. I should have checked on Heath, should have made sure Felicity was arrested. It was *my* responsibility.

And Harry... my chest tightened, and I took in a sharp breath. How could I face Harry? My hands went down to my stomach, and I closed my eyes. It was after Yaz broke their news that I started to do the maths in my head.

Harry and I hadn't taken any precautions so I suppose it shouldn't come as much of a surprise, but somehow I just assumed that at thirty-nine my ovaries wouldn't have been quite so keen on making humans. Deep down I knew that I hadn't tried to prevent it because having a baby of my own was a dream that I wasn't prepared to let go of.

But how could I guarantee to this baby that I wouldn't be like her? Clearly maternal instincts weren't going to be inherent in my genetics. This wasn't something I could organise my way out of. It wasn't a board meeting I could boss, or a project I could deliver with record-breaking efficiency. This was a human child that would need to be loved. It would need to be wanted. I had no blueprint for this. My childhood wasn't full of the casual affection and security of other people's. I couldn't rely on Harry and his family to help me either. His mum might feel sorry for me, but I knew there was no way she'd be keen on me having Harry's baby – not when I was entirely fucked-up and broken by my past. Now Harry would feel trapped with me. He was a good man – I knew he'd stay with me for the baby, but I couldn't shake that unwanted feeling. I felt sick when I thought of him knowing everything, and now having seen how ugly it all was. There was an undercurrent of hunger in my nausea though, and I realised that it had been hours since I'd eaten, yet I couldn't face anything now.

"I'm letting you down already," I whispered as I rubbed my stomach.

"What was that, love?" a kindly looking older lady said from the seat across from me. The other commuters frowned at the un-British display of concern. The chap next to me shifted slightly away. Clearly the blood-stained lady talking to herself on a train was best avoided.

"Sorry, nothing. I'm nothing," I said, my voice hoarse. She frowned at my odd choice of words and opened her mouth to say something else, but I closed my eyes again, shutting her out. It wasn't exactly a conscious choice to say 'I'm nothing' it was just what seemed to come out. And now I'd said it I realised that it was how I felt underneath it all. But the baby wasn't nothing. I needed to snap out of this for the baby. So, I was going to make this journey back to where I started. Back to the beginning.

# Chapter 31

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## *Just like always*

### **HARRY**

“Do you need more money? Is that what this is? More resources?” I tore my hands through my hair as I paced my living room. It had been over twelve hours since Verity had gone missing. I’d come back to the house thinking that she might turn up here. Max and Mia went back to her cottage in Dorset in case she went there, but there was still no sign of her. The only lead Sam’s team had been able to get was that a lady with an actively bleeding cut had been taken to Paddington station at around nine o’clock last night from the venue. Then... nothing.

“Not sure this is one you can buy your way out of here, mate,” put in Toby, who was sitting next to Heath on one of the sofas. I scowled at him. “They’re doing all they can.”

“I’m sorry Mr York, but as soon as she hit that station, she was smoke. No leads that we’ve been able to find,” Sam said.

“I’m sure she’ll ring you soon, Harry,” my sister-in-law said from her position perched on the arm of my brother’s chair. Everyone looked exhausted. Heath, Toby and I had had no sleep at all, and the others were too worried to sleep for long. I felt bad for Yaz as she was pregnant, but she was just as worried as the rest of us. Even Barbara had only clawed Toby once and hadn’t even shoved her butt in any of the strangers faces yet.

“Right,” Mum said as she bustled into the room with Dad in tow. Both of them were carrying trays of tea and biscuits. “This is what we all need. Tea makes everything better.”

“Tea is not a cure-all, Mum,” I snapped. “I want to know where my girlfriend is.”

“I know you do, love,” said Mum, handing me a cup of tea and staring at me until I at least put it to my lips before she moved on. “But shouting at the people that are trying to help you isn’t useful. Drinking some tea and trying to think clearly is a much better plan. Don’t you agree, Martin?”

“Always, love,” Dad said dutifully as he handed around the rest of the teas.

“Now then,” Mum said as she bent down to Heath who was sitting next to a now asleep-with-Barbara Yaz on the loveseat. She lowered her voice so as not to wake Yaz or Barbara up. “Drink up for me, sweetheart.” Heath looked a little dazed, but he did manage to accept the tea. Mum did her staring thing again until he took a small sip. “Good lad,” she said, and I would have laughed if it wasn’t such a dire situation. I doubted that Heath Markham had been called a *lad* for at least a decade. “Can you think of anywhere that sister of yours could have got to?”

“Mum, we’ve been over this with Heath. He doesn’t—”

“Shush now, darling,” she said, holding her hand up to me. “Let the boy have a think. Drink some more tea, love. That’s it. Now, where do you think she’d go? Where would she feel safe?”

“I’m not surprised she took a train. She loves trains,” Heath said as he frowned into the distance. “Getting on the train to go to school. Leaving that bloody house and knowing we were free for another few months. Yeah, V loves trains.”

“School,” I whispered, staring at Heath. “You guys loved school. Didn’t you?”

Heath shifted in his chair. “Look, there’s nothing wrong with loving school, mate. We’ve apologised for...”

I slashed my hand through the air. “No, I mean Verity really, really loved that school. She felt safe there. Didn’t she?”

“I don’t understand what you—”

“I know where she is.”



## VERITY

*Tap tap tap tap.* My eyelids fluttered open at the repetitive sound, and as I swam up from sleep the first thing I noticed was the smell: old leather and

books – the most comforting combination in the world. Ten years ago I made a donation to the school for this library. My only caveat was that the old leather sofa would stay, tucked away where it had always been. Just knowing it was here was enough. I hadn't been sure if I'd still fit through the window (teenage Verity was a skinnier human), or whether the lock would still be loose, but these old institutions aren't big on change. I was able to work the lock open and crawl through the window last night. At the time I'd been so exhausted that I simply collapsed on the beaten-up leather and fell straight asleep.

The tapping had stopped now and I let my eyelids fall closed again, breathing in deeply and letting the breath out slowly like Yaz taught me. I wasn't ready to let the real world intrude, not yet. As I drifted off, I went into a half-dream half-daydream state, going over everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours. I felt a tear trickle across my temple and onto the soft leather, so I reached back further in my mind, looking for better memories – something to take me away from the pain of last night. Then I was back here again. Back in the safest place I knew with the comforting smell and the warmth of the sun pouring in through the window above. My mind conjured that skinny boy with a thick mop of curly hair scowling at me from across the sofa as I tucked my feet under his legs. Even through his scowl I could still see the slight curve of his lips as he suppressed a smile. The weird thing was that I could actually feel the warmth and weight of his legs on my bare feet.

“Verity?” It was his voice, but deeper. Not the voice of teenage Harry with the curly hair. I frowned and shifted on the leather, tucking my feet further under his legs. “Honey, wake up.”

“Read your book, Harry,” I muttered, reached my hand up to push the hair out of my face. A burning pain shot through my cheek when I grazed it with my fingers and I flinched, my eyes flying open.

“Shit, Verity,” not-teenage Harry's voice said, concern threaded through his tone. “Careful of your face, baby.” I felt his large hand settle on my calf and give it a squeeze and I turned to look across at him. The curly mop was gone although his thick dark hair looked more dishevelled than I'd ever seen it in recent times. The skinny frame was bulked out, his muscular chest still evident despite the dress shirt he had on from the night before – top two buttons undone now, revealing his corded throat. Sleeves pushed up to his elbows, showing his muscular forearms. His beautiful eyes had dark shadows

underneath them. He looked like he hadn't slept at all. I frowned, which unfortunately caused another lance of pain through my cheek and I winced again. Harry's eyes darkened and his jaw clenched, a flash of fury in his expression as his gaze flew to the badly applied plaster on my face.

"Are you okay?" I asked, my voice croaky from sleep and the fact I hadn't drunk anything in over twelve hours. Harry's grip on my leg tightened.

"Of course," he said, his voice warring between concern and irritation. "Of course, *you ask me* if I'm okay."

I pushed up onto my forearms then paused as my head started to swim. Suddenly the weight of Harry's legs on my feet was gone. Then he was there, squatting in front of me, one of his large hands on my shoulder to steady me and the other gently pushing the hair away from my eyes.

"Woah," he said. "Steady, take things slowly, okay?"

"How did you find me?" I whispered.

"You didn't think I'd know to look here? I'll always find you."

I felt my eyes sting. A single tear tracked down my cheek, stinging my cut as it went.

"Verity, baby," Harry said, still in that soft tone but edged with real worry. "Please let me take you out of here now. We need to get that cut seen to, okay?"

I shook my head. More tears falling now.

"Please, please, baby," his voice was tortured now. "It's killing me seeing you hurt like this. Please let me take you to get it sorted and then home."

"I can't face everyone," I whispered, and Harry closed his eyes slowly as a fierce expression swept over his features.

"You've nothing to be ashamed of," he said. "And you don't have to even think about that crazy bitch. She won't touch you or Heath ever again. I can guarantee it."

"My family's a little fucked up," I said with a small smile which unfortunately also stung my cut.

"Er... yeah, love. I had noticed."

"I might be a little fucked up too." My voice had dropped back to a whisper, and I held Harry's eyes, looking for a reaction.

"Verity, considering the animals that brought you up as children, I would say you and Heath are remarkably stable."

I carried on as if he hadn't spoken, my voice still not much above a

whisper. "I can't seem to shake the feeling that..." I looked down at my lap and Harry leaned into me, so our foreheads were touching.

"What feeling, love?" he whispered.

"The feeling that I'm unwanted. It seems to be ingrained in who I am now. No amount of therapy has been able to change it."

His hand tightened in mine, and he let out a long breath. When he spoke again his words were careful and deliberate, as if he was trying to get his point across in a way I would listen to.

"Verity Markham. I have never in my entire life wanted anyone or anything as much as I want you. I've loved you since I was fifteen years old. You might not believe you belong to anyone, but I already belong to you. I always have."

"I *want* to belong to you too." My voice had dropped to barely a whisper now, but Harry's hand tightening in mine showed that he had heard me. For the first time in the last few hours, I felt the feeling return to my body and I registered how cold I was in the draughty library. I shivered and that was enough to spur Harry into action.

"Right, well," he said as briskly as he could with his hoarse voice. When I looked into his eyes again, I realised that to my shock they had a suspicious sheen of moisture over them. "Now that we've established that we belong to each other, can we please get out of this freezing fucking library."

Without waiting for me to answer he simply scooped me up off the sofa into his arms, turned sharply on his heel and marched off towards the exit.

"There's nothing wrong with my legs, Harry," I squeaked.

"I'm not taking any chances."

"What do you mean? I think I'd know if I'd broken a leg, you wombat."

Harry's determined expression cracked for a moment as he grinned. "No, I mean take a chance that you'll do one again and run off." He readjusted me higher onto his chest and his arms tightened around me as he shouldered through the double doors. "You're the wombat who ran away like a full drama heroine in a romance book. You want romance book drama? Then I'm going to give it to you in full romance-hero-carries-the heroine style."

When we stepped out into the daylight there was a small crowd waiting for us outside.

"Oh no," Mia said, rushing up to us. "Are you okay, V? Did you hurt your leg as well when you fell?"

"Put me down," I said through my teeth to Harry, but he only tightened



his grip. I rolled my eyes and focused back on Mia. Max and Yaz were next to her now crowding around me and Harry. Heath was still hanging back with an uncertain expression on his face. “No, Mia,” I said in a frustrated voice. “My legs are fine. Harry here thinks I’m going to do another runner.”

“Sensible,” Max put in. He shrugged when I scowled at him. “What? We’ve been worried sick. I’m not traipsing across the UK looking for you again. What random place are you going to run off to next? The dingy halls of residence at uni? The school canteen?”

I huffed. “I’m not running off again. And the library was special to me.”

Max eyed the building with confusion. “Er... whatever you say. All I remember about it was Mrs Tenby sucking cough sweets and the history section smelling of socks. But each to their own.”

“V?” Heath’s voice sounded from a few feet away and I turned to him. He looked uncharacteristically unsure of himself, more how he was as a child than the man he’d become. “You...” He swallowed and Yaz moved back from us to stand next to him and hold his hand. “Are you okay?”

This time, when I wriggled to get down, Harry did set me back on my feet but stayed close to my side with his hand in mine as I walked over to Heath. “No,” I whispered when I was a foot away from him. “But I will be, Heathy. We both will.” Heath swallowed again before giving a short nod. Then in a sudden movement, he sprang forward and swept me up in a bone-crushing hug.

“We will, won’t we,” he whispered in my ear as I squeezed him back. “I think I can believe that now.”

“Heath,” Harry said softly. “Watch her face, mate.”

“Oh, right,” Heath said, setting me away from him slightly so he could look at the cut on my cheek. “Shit, V. That’s going to need stitches. If we head back, I’ll call Mark on the way. He’s plastics and he can...”

“I want you to stitch it for me,” I said, and he frowned.

“V, it’s on your face. It’d be better if plastics did the—”

I closed the distance between us in one step and placed my fingers lightly over his mouth to cut off his words. “I want *you* to fix me up. Just like when we were children. I want it to be you.”

“But it’s your face and—”

“I don’t care. Harry, do you care about a scar?”

“I care that you’re happy.”

I shrugged. “That settles it. Heath, you can get the supplies and stitch me

up.”

“V, I—”

“*We’ll* sort it,” I said in a fierce tone now. “We’ll sort the mess those monsters made. You and me. Just like we always have.”

He blinked then cleared his throat “Okay, V,” he said, his voice cracking on the words. “Just like always.”

# Epilogue

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## One we made for ourselves

### **VERITY**

“So, you’re sure about this, are you?” Heath asked. “We can still turn the car around.”

“What are you on about?”

“Well, this Harry fellow seems like a stand-up guy, but if you don’t want to go through with this then—”

I turned in my seat to face him, my eyebrows in my hairline. “I’m seven months pregnant with his baby, Heath!”

He shrugged. “So?”

“So, I’m madly in love with him, pregnant with his baby, am already living with him and have adopted his cat. I’m not exactly marrying him on a whim.”

“I just want you to be happy.”

“He makes me happy.”

He smiled at me across the backseat of the car and took my hand in his, resting them both between us on the white lace of my dress, which was taking up the whole of the adjacent seat. My bump was so huge that it translated to a vast amount of material dress-wise.

“It feels good, doesn’t it?” he asked.

“What?”

“Being happy.”

My throat tightened and I felt my eyes fill with tears. “Don’t you dare make me cry,” my voice was hoarse.

“We deserve it, V.”

I gave him a short nod and squeezed his hand back. “We’ve found our

family now,” I whispered. When we were little, we used to whisper late at night about how we would find our family, our *real* family. One that loved us and looked after us. One that cared if we were happy. Heath’s eyes filled with tears at that as he nodded too.

“One we made for ourselves,” he whispered back.



HARRY AND I SANK INTO THE SOFT LEATHER SIDE BY SIDE THEN TURNED TO each other with huge smiles on our faces. The silence of the library was beautiful after the hectic noise of the rest of the day. He kissed me softly, one hand in mine, the other resting on my stomach. I was huge. I practically had my own postcode. My midwife had looked me up and down last week and said, “Gosh you are retaining a lot of water, aren’t you dear? We’d better dip your urine today and check for pre-eclampsia.”

The fact that my likeness to a beached whale counted as a clinical sign was not encouraging when I had to wear a wedding dress in the imminent future. The urine dip was negative, but I remained puffy and huge. Harry didn’t care. He told me I was the most beautiful pregnant woman on the face of the earth, and punched Heath in the arm at the rehearsal when he called me “Big V” and asked me to “waddle up the aisle with him”.

“My shoes are killing me,” I whined, toeing the offending items off. Much to Harry’s annoyance I had refused to wear flats for the ceremony. He’d reluctantly agreed but made me promise to hold onto his arm at all times, other than when Heath was walking me down the aisle.

“I told you,” he grumbled, frowning at the white spike heels now lying on the floor. When he looked at my feet and ankles a slightly alarmed expression crossed his face. “Er... darling, maybe you should put your feet up on the sofa.” He shuffled us around so that he was sitting at the far end, and I was lying on my side with my feet up across the leather, snuggled into his side.

“My ankles are huge, aren’t they?” I said in despair. “They’re like a pair of tree trunks.”

He cleared his throat. “No, I didn’t mean *that*. Your ankles look perfect, love. But... er, maybe we should check your urine again.”

I punched him in the ribs, and he held both his hands up in surrender with a smile on his face. “Sorry! Sorry, I just think a bit of a check-up is a good

idea. You can't be too careful and..."

"I do *not* need any more check-ups, Harry!" Ever since Harry had heard the words *high-risk pregnancy* and *geriatric mother* (I was forty for God's sake!) he had gone a little overboard with my antenatal care. Even today he'd managed to wrangle an obstetric consultant to come along to the wedding, which was absolutely ridiculous. He'd claimed the chap was an "old university mate", which was a complete lie as confirmed by Toby and Naomi, neither of whom had ever laid eyes on him before.

Unfortunately, Harry had Heath's support in this particular battle, seeing as Yaz was also heavily pregnant and nearing her due date. The difference was that Yaz seemed to be sailing through pregnancy with very little outward change in appearance, as if someone had just stuffed a football up her surf t-shirt. Much to Heath's horror she'd continued most of her water sports teaching until a few weeks ago. He was almost as overprotective as Harry. If those two had their way, we would be transported back to the 1950s where the little women stayed safely at home whilst the menfolk went out into the big, bad world. Neither Yaz nor I had any intention of staying at home.

Harry had even stormed onto a building site last week after he found out that I was spending the day there to sort out the next stage of construction and decide how it would fit in with the plans Max and I had made. We'd won another big landmark building in London, and I couldn't trust Max to negotiate with the site manager – he wasn't to be trusted since the 'complete bellend' incident, which had left us without any construction team on site in our last project for over a month. "Don't irritate me, hedgehog. This is the most relaxed I've been all day."

Harry chuckled and pulled me closer into his side, his hand going to rest on my oversize stomach. "They can all be a bit much, can't they?" he said but I shook my head.

"No, no I'd never say that."

"Verity, my mother stood over you whilst you ate last night like some sort of prison guard. I thought she was going to punch the waiter in the face when he couldn't fully reassure you that all the cheese was made with pasteurised milk."

I smiled against Harry's chest. "She just wants to make sure I'm okay."

"She's a nightmare! And that nutcase sister-in-law of yours. As if anyone needs emergency reiki on the morning of their wedding."

I chuckled. "Oh, so you heard about that?"

“Well, I quite wanted to know why they couldn’t manage to get my bride to the church on time. I was sweating up at the altar for a good fifteen minutes.”

“Yaz just wanted to make sure I was centred before the ceremony.”

“And the Hardcastles putting their two pennies in as well. Between Fern, Aubrey, Max, Mia, Teddy and my family I didn’t think I’d ever get you to myself.”

I smiled. The truth was that being fussed over by our families was never going to annoy me as much as it annoyed Harry. He’d never known the alternative. They cared about me. Cared enough to shout at waiters over blue cheese, to rub my feet as a matter of urgency, to make sure I ate. To me it was all wonderful.

“Well, you’ve got me to yourself now.” I leaned back to look up at his face. His hand came up to my jaw and he tilted my mouth to meet his in a soft kiss.

“I love you,” he whispered against my mouth.

“I love you too,” I whispered back.

“I belonged to you before, but it feels good to make it official.”

My eyes started to sting but I swallowed past the threatening tears. “I do belong to you, don’t I?” I managed to get out in a hoarse whisper.

“We belong to each other.”

I smiled then as I lost my fight against tears Harry’s thumbs came up to swipe them from my cheeks.

“I’m sorry, baby. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“No, it’s fine. Happy tears. I’m so happy, Harry.” The old Verity would be horrified by the amount of blubbing I seemed to do on the regular now, but then again, the old Verity was emotionally shutdown and deeply unhappy.

“I never wanted anyone but you.”

“Me neither.”

He kissed me again then, pulling me closer until I was pressed along the length of him. When we broke apart, we were both breathing heavily. He rested his forehead against mine and smiled.

“Didn’t think I’d get another chance to kiss Verity Markham on this sofa again.”

“Verity York now.”

His smile was blinding, and his arms tightened around me.

“Let’s stay here for a while. I’m sure they can survive without us. I bet they won’t even notice that we—”

“Oi!”

We both started at Yaz’s shout as the double doors crashed open. “I know you two are hiding in your weird teenage love spot. We’ve come to drag you out of here for photos and cake.”

“Yaz, maybe they want a bit of privacy,” Mia’s voice joined Yaz’s. Then it was like a herd of elephants had invaded the library.

“They’ll have plenty of privacy next week, darling,” Fern Hardcastle said in her no-nonsense tone. “We get to have them for now.”

“Yes, quite right, Fern,” Jean York clipped. I could hear both the women’s M&S heels clicking across the library floor now, just around the corner from the bookshelf we were tucked behind.

“I told you!” Yaz shouted as she rounded the corner and pointed at us. She looked gorgeous in a maxi dress and gold flip-flops. My brother appeared next, slinging his arm over her and kissing the side of her head.

“Sorry, mate,” he said to Harry. “I held the horde back as long as humanly possible.”

“Unca Hazza!” Sophie scrambled down from Max and ran to the sofa as fast as her stubby legs could take her. Mia smiled after her daughter and rested her hands on her also very pregnant stomach.

“Why the bloody hell are we all in the library?” Harry’s brother said. Three more small bodies ran to the sofa and scrambled up Harry and me.

“Careful of Auntie Verity’s bump, guys,” Harry said, attempting to hold them back but I shook my head at him.

“They’re fine, Harry,” I said as his now four-year-old nephew pressed his ear against my stomach. I smiled down at him and stroked the back of his soft hair. “Hear anything yet?”

He looked up at me with a grumpy expression. “He’s a *really* boring baby.”

I laughed. “Maybe he’ll be more fun when he’s out and about.”

“Then I won’t be the youngest!” At his shout, the baby chose that moment to move. My stomach rippled as a leg pressed out to the side. I held Jake’s hand over the movement and his eyes went wide. “Maybe he’s not totally boring,” he whispered, and I leaned forward to kiss him on the side of his head. “You look really pretty, Auntie Verity.”

“Yeah,” said Mikey, who had inserted himself between me and Harry on



the sofa. “Even if you are all puffy.” I laughed and pulled him in for a hug, looking over the top of his head at my mother-in-law. She gave me a beaming smile which I returned. I was now firmly, even ferociously, a member of the York clan. Sunday lunches at Harry’s house (his parents had finally relented and allowed him to host), his brother’s and even my cottage when we were there were a regular fixture. A real turning point came when Jean agreed to teach me how to make her gravy – a dizzy height of acceptance that not even the beloved Steph had managed to achieve. I was no longer the outsider. I was part of the York family and was being gradually interwoven into the threads of their life. I don’t think any of them realised how precious a gift that was.

“Right, kids,” Yaz said. “Let the love birds get up. We’ve cake to eat. Come on, come on!”

“Yes,” Lanie said from behind everyone, and I looked over at the entrance to see she’d also arrived in the library along with Naomi and Toby who were holding hands as was their default setting nowadays. “There’s cake and a band. You olds are so boring!” It was safe to say that Lanie’s spark was well and truly restored. No more monosyllabic answers from her now. In fact, there were times I nearly missed hoodie-wearing-kept-her-many-opinions-to-herself Lanie, but not quite. Sassy, colour in her cheeks, take-the-piss-out-of-the-old-people Lanie was much more fun and less anxiety-provoking.

“Yes!” shouted Tilly, clambering off the sofa to stand next to Lanie and take her hand. “Boring olds!”

“Come on, love,” Heath said, lifting Sophie off the sofa and turning her upside down whilst she giggled. “Let’s not get between your auntie and cake in her delicate condition.”

“Talk about my condition again and you’ll see just how indelicate I’m capable of being,” Yaz said through her teeth at Heath, who smiled, gave her a brief kiss, which was my brother’s solution to most arguments with his wife.

“You’re a pacifist remember,” Heath said. “Peace and love and all that.”

“I can get back to peace and love when my feet aren’t killing me and I’ve had some bloody cake. Now, you two, get off your butts and let’s go!”

“Well, you lot have ruined it anyway,” Harry grumbled as he pushed up to his feet and then turned to me to pull me to mine. I was just about to toe on my stilettos when Harry bent down and snatched them up from the ground. He looked at me then threw one, then the other, deep into the stacks of

shelves.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I asked, my hands going to my hips. Harry ignored me, turning to Yaz who handed him a pair of flip-flops which he then thrust under my face. I looked from the flip-flops to Harry then to Yaz, the traitor (only this morning we’d both had a joint whinge about how bossy the guys were getting). “There is no universe in which I will ever wear *flip-flops*. You can both forget it.” Mia moved in front of Harry then and pulled a pair of delicate gold flats out of her handbag.

“See, we did bring you a choice,” she said with a smile.

“Ugh, fine,” I said, taking the shoes from Mia and giving her a reluctant smile. Harry took the shoes and bent down to help me put them on.

“Good girl,” said Jean in a brisk tone. “Right, now then let me sort you out, love.” She came over to me and opened her vast handbag. Before I knew it, powder and lipstick had been reapplied. Mascara smudges were wiped away. The make-up artist, who’d spent over an hour on me this morning, would no doubt be appalled by Harry’s mum’s botch job with Boots own-brand cosmetics, but to me the fact she cared enough to do it was everything. “Beautiful,” Jean whispered when she’d finished, her hand coming up to the side of my face and her eyes filling with tears which set me and my pregnancy-hormone-charged emotions off again. “No, no, no. None of that now, sweetheart. We can’t bowl back into the party like a pair of blubbering ninnies. That’ll never do. Come on then. Off we go. You three ladies need feeding.”

She bustled away, sweeping her grandchildren, her own kids, and even Toby, Naomi and Lanie in her wake. As I turned to leave Yaz took my hand then grabbed for Mia and dragged her over to us.

“Group hug, girls,” she said, throwing her arms around both of us. We all crowded into a tight hug, our bumps restricting somewhat how close we could get to each other. Mia’s baby kicked the side of my stomach and I smiled.

“They’re already fighting,” I said into our circle.

Yaz rolled her eyes. “Let’s hope they take after us.”

“They’re going to have the best childhood, aren’t they?” I said softly. “Together.”

“Of course, they will,” Yaz said with the assurance of someone who’d lived an idyllic childhood herself.

“We’ll make sure of it,” Mia said more softly, her keen gaze on me.

“Together.”

“Together,” Yaz and I repeated. Then all three of us broke into huge smiles.

“If you ladies are quite finished?” Max’s grumpy voice filtered into our love-in.

“What are they talking about?” Heath said, his tone clearly annoyed at being left out.

“Well, everyone seems to have more of a right to be hugging my wife than me,” huffed Harry, and I rolled my eyes as the three of us broke apart.

Mia smacked Max in his chest as he approached. “Way to ruin the moment, you numpty!”

Max’s eyebrows went up as he claimed his wife and pulled her into his side. “You lot are always having ‘moments’. There’s cake to be eaten, woman.”

I caught Heath’s eye as we filed out of the library.

“This is it right here,” he said, drawing curious glances from everyone.

I nodded and we both smiled.

He was right.

This was it.

Finally.

The family we made for ourselves.

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# Broken Heart Syndrome

## *Chapter One*

If you yearned for, and daydreamed about, someone enough, could you drive your subconscious mind insane? Could you lose your grip on reality and start hallucinating?

‘Frankie? Hello, can you hear me?’ Lou trilled as she waved her hand in front of my face. I was staring over her shoulder at the rapidly approaching figure, trying to determine whether he was, in fact, a figment of my fevered imagination. ‘Frankie?’ she called again, her voice now tinged with concern. ‘Jesus, you look like you’re going to pass out.’

She turned to follow the direction of my gaze, and we were now both looking up into the gorgeous (if somewhat bloodshot), sky-blue eyes of Thomas G. Longley. ‘Holy crap,’ she muttered under her breath, taking a small step back.

‘Hi, I’m Tom,’ my possible hallucination said. He was focusing on me, just as he had been throughout his determined walk towards us across the bar. My expression was likely akin to that of a crazed Belieber when confronted with a pair of Justin’s used underpants, and I was frozen in place.

Lou gave me a sharp kick in the shin with the pointed toe of her boot, snapping me out of my stupor. I realized that my mouth was hanging open, and snapped it shut. The pain in my leg suggested that this was reality, and he was the genuine article. Although happy that I wasn’t as crazy as a box of frogs, I had unfortunately lost the power of speech.

I was pathologically shy, especially around attractive men, and this was not just any man; this was Thomas G. Longley. My best friend, Lou, and I had been obsessing over Thomas G. Longley for the last two years. He was the star of most of my fantasies, and, bizarrely, my imagination didn’t just restrict itself to the steamy ones. I had even caught myself daydreaming about washing his sweaty rugby kit and sorting his socks into pairs, such was the extent of my infatuation.

Tom was four years above us at medical school. So whilst we were nearing the end of our second year, he was about to qualify that summer. Well over six foot tall, solidly built, with light brown, messy hair, and amazing blue eyes framed with incredible thick eyelashes, he was our idea of

perfection.

He always looked in need of a shave, and most of the time his clothes were downright scruffy, his wardrobe seeming to consist of only well-worn jeans (no bad thing with his arse), and equally well-worn rugby or tour tops. But his lack of care for his appearance made him even sexier in our eyes, highlighting his natural confidence and the fact he couldn't care less how people saw him. Lou and I thought he was the cat's pyjamas, along with the rest of the female population of our medical school (although I doubt they were quite sad enough to obsess over him to the extent that we did).

For some weird reason we always used his full name when referring to him, and not just 'Tom', by which he was widely known. We would have loved to know what the G of his middle name stood for. The only reason we even knew the first letter was because we checked the viva results for his year like the crazy stalkers we were. Not wanting to be outed as creepy nutcases, we never worked up the courage to find out more, as this would have involved asking his friends and risking exposure.

London medical schools are pretty insular when they're not part of larger universities, and there were only about a hundred and fifty students in each year at ours. This enabled our rampant observation of Thomas G. Longley; but even though he was the subject of our obsession, neither of us had ever had an actual conversation with him.

There was, however, the 'Library Incident', which took place towards the end of my fresher year. In a revision frenzy, I tripped on the way through the bookshelves to get to my friends. I ended up sprawled face down, right in front of a table of rugby players, one of whom was Thomas G. Longley.

My books had flown everywhere, and unfortunately so had other mortifying items from my bag: my Tampax Extra Super tampons, my trusty multicolour glitter pen, and worst of all, Lady Princess le Foof (the small, dog-eared, ancient My-Little-Pony that I used to bring me luck in exams, and religiously carried around whilst revising).

Thomas G. Longley leapt up, rounded his sniggering mates at the table, and crouched down to help me gather my stuff. I could feel the heat in my cheeks as I frantically grabbed for the most embarrassing items, but I was too late for Lady Princess le Foof, who had rolled out of my reach.

'You okay?' he asked, holding out Lady Princess le Foof in his tanned hand. I looked briefly up into his gorgeous face, which was lit with a wide smile, and felt my heart stop before I quickly looked away.

‘Fine, thanks,’ I muttered in barely more than a whisper, before snatching away Lady Princess le Foof and scrambling to my feet. I kept my eyes averted as I scurried away, while his mates continued to jeer in the background.

After dissecting the ‘Library Incident’ at length with Lou, we both concluded that I most likely came across as a rude, clumsy, mentally deficient – not the first impression I would have gone for, but there was little point dwelling on it (which unfortunately I did, an unhealthy amount).

Lou herself had undergone the ‘Bar Incident’. The price of going out and drinking in central London restricted all but the fabulously wealthy to the dingy student bar, so it was invariably heaving, and one night Lou had found herself pressed up against Thomas G. Longley whilst waiting the requisite five hundred years to order. As soon as Thomas G. Longley had drawn up he had been served instantly (such was his appeal to the female bar staff), but as further proof of his perfection he directed the barmaid to Lou, explaining that she had been waiting longer.

Lou had fared a bit better than me in her interaction with him. For a start she wasn’t sprawled on the floor, and she did manage to thank him warmly, using more than the two words I had limited myself to.

So as you can see, past experience had not prepared me for the approach of the unwitting subject of my unhealthy obsession. Hence my second ever conversation with Thomas G. Longley was veering towards me, once again threatening to demonstrate subnormal behaviour on my part.

Despite this, instead of actually answering him, my mind was making a frantic inventory of my appearance. It was caveman night at the bar, and Lou and I had embraced this theme with gusto, both of us donning the micro-mini, furry, leopard-print skirts we had found in the Topshop sale. Lou had backcombed my hair to go along with the whole cavewoman thing, and I was now regretting having allowed this. My hair was the one part of my appearance that I was normally happy with, being very dark, long, thick and shiny, when in its normal state.

Although I doubted that shoes or cosmetics were available in the Jurassic period, Lou had forced me into wearing four-inch stilettos and full-on makeup. All our mates were dressed up too, including the guys (most of whom were wearing extremely ill-advised loin cloths), and we had thought that our outfits were awesome and hilarious. But now that I was looking into the gorgeous eyes of a very obviously not-dressed-up Thomas G. Longley, I



thought with horror that we probably looked like a pair of demented cave-sluts.

Lou gave me another sharp kick in the shin, and I realized that I needed to pull it together and speak.

‘I – I’m Frankie,’ I managed to get out. Tom smiled and swayed slightly on the spot. He leaned in and I could smell the alcohol on his breath. We stood staring at each other for another few seconds before he lurched forward, closing the gap between our mouths. He tasted of gin and cigarettes but I didn’t care, this was Thomas G. Longley and he was finally, finally kissing me. The perfection of the moment started slipping away, however, when the catcalls of his mates penetrated my hormone-fuelled mind.

I could hear the standard ‘Way-hey!’, ‘Go on mate!’, ‘Give it some beans!’ and ‘Show her who’s boss, son!’ No doubt spurred on by his vile friends, I felt one of Tom’s hands pushing its way up into my skirt, unfortunately taking said skirt with it, and nearly exposing my knickers. His other hand was clamped round the back of my neck and his tongue was down my throat.

Panicked by imminent knicker exposure, and being the subject of practically the whole bar’s attention, I started frantically pushing at his shoulders. He lifted his head from mine and I could see him trying to focus on me with his bloodshot eyes. A frown creased his forehead and a look of confusion passed across his handsome face, which I noticed was now decidedly pale. He gagged, and I took a hasty step back just as we were approached by my friend Dylan.

Dylan was a member of the rugby team but also in my year and one of my best friends. He gave me an apologetic look and grabbed a now green-tinted Tom.

‘Come on, Longley,’ he said, leading him away in the direction of the loos. ‘Can’t have you blowing chunks over the ladies can we.’

I ducked my undoubtedly beet-red face and straightened my rucked-up skirt. The jeers from the rugby table continued, although now they were shouting ‘Denied Longley!’ and ‘Unlucky mate!’ Lou cast them all killing looks, straightened up to her full five foot ten (given her four inch heels), grabbed my hand and dragged me away.

We retreated over to a table of our friends, which was luckily about as far as you could get from the rugby boys. I was relieved that we hadn’t shared our stupid crush with the others over the last two years. It was mortifying

enough that I had allowed a bloke so obviously plastered to stick his tongue down my throat and his hand up my skirt, exposing me to the whole bar moments before he had to be dragged away to throw up. If everyone had known the perfect being I had built him up into before this happened, I would never have lived it down.

‘Buck up, Frankie,’ my friend Georgia said in my ear. ‘We all know that lot can be complete bell-ends, just ignore it.’ I gave her a weak smile and looked down into my pint of snakebite to avoid the concerned looks from the others.

Just as I was starting to feel a bit better, Dylan came up to our table.

‘You okay, Frank?’ he asked, crouching down next to me.

‘Fine, Dyl, no worries,’ I chirped in a voice that sounded falsely bright, even to me.

‘Drinking games got a bit out of hand, see,’ Dylan explained in his Welsh lilt. ‘Longley got too many wets in and they’ve all decided that tonight is “fuck a fresher night”.’

I looked at Dylan in horror, ‘But I’m not a fresher.’ Dylan shifted uncomfortably and ran his hand through his hair before he answered.

‘I guess he hadn’t noticed you before, Ladies.’ (‘Ladies’ was Dylan’s bizarre name for me; I had no idea why, and presumed it was a Welsh thing).

‘Oh right, of course,’ I replied in a small voice, feeling like an idiot. Of course Tom hadn’t noticed me before, despite the small size of our medical school, our frequent proximity, and even the ‘Library Incident’. I was an expert in blending into the background, being only five foot four, with dark hair and eyes (inherited from my Italian parents), and a conspicuous lack of curves. No wonder he hadn’t recognized me.

With a hot crushing pain in my chest and my nose stinging as tears threatened, I looked away from Dylan and continued my contemplation of my snakebite. I think Dylan had caught sight of the unshed tears before I looked down, and he bumped my stool with his hip.

‘Come on, Ladies, make some room for your favourite valleys’ boy.’

I smiled and stood, letting him slip onto my stool and pull me down into his lap. He was tall, with a bulky frame and hair almost as dark as mine. I knew lots of girls panted after him, but I thought of him more like a brother. Although he was always flirting, I never took it seriously. He’d even tried to snog me a couple of times, which was probably more a drunken mistake on his part, and we were firmly in the friend zone now.

He swept my hair back over my shoulder so he could talk softly into my ear. ‘Want my opinion, he’s more than a bit *twp* not to have noticed you before, Ladies. Forget him.’ I had been around Dylan enough to know that ‘*twp*’ meant ‘daft’. I didn’t think Tom was daft though, just drunk and thoughtless.

‘Yeah, Frankie,’ Lou said from my other side. ‘In fact I’m going to officially rechristen him Thomas “Gankface” Longley, Weasel Gankface for short.’ I sniggered into my drink and took a decent swig. Gank was Lou’s very favourite word of the moment (what can I say? We were students) and she used it at every available opportunity.

‘Perfect. Weasel Gankface it is.’

We didn’t see Weasel Gankface for the rest of the evening, and I put a brave face on my humiliation. But it proved impossible to completely avoid the rugby boys, a couple of whom stumbled up to us on the dance floor. After disengaging a second time from their wandering hands, I got another demonstration of why Thomas G. Longley’s new nickname was well earned.

‘Bloody hell,’ the drunken prop forward slurred, after I had slapped his hands away from my bum. ‘Longley’s right, you are frigid.’

‘Yeah,’ his friend put in. ‘Frigid Frankie!’ They both burst into gales of laughter at their joke, but were cut short when a furious Lou whipped her blonde head around, stormed up to them, grabbed them both by an ear and banged their heads together. They stood frozen in place and stared at her, shocked.

‘Jog on, you pathetic Gankensteins,’ she bit out, her beautiful face flushed with anger. ‘Mark, I know for a fact that you have a pin-dick, and Harry, I know that you came in your pants from just *snogging* Milly Jones. How on earth you think you can try it on with Frankie, who is so out of your league it’s not even funny, I don’t know.’ With that she grabbed my hand and stalked off the dance floor with me in tow having to jog to keep up with her long strides. Once we had made it out of the bar and into the car park she slowed to a stop, snatching me into a fierce hug.

‘Hey, Lou-Lou,’ I wheezed whilst being crushed to her ample chest. ‘I’m okay, it’s fine.’ She pulled back so that she could look down into my eyes, and framed my face with her hands.

‘You’re not bloody well okay,’ she informed me, her tone still fierce. ‘Don’t you dare let those tossers push you into your shell. We’ve only just managed to extract you from it and I won’t have them setting you back.’

I had been painfully shy and homesick when I arrived at medical school, and Fresher's Week had been a terrifying experience. Luckily Lou had been on the same floor as me in halls. She had noticed my rabbit-in-the-headlights expression on the first day after Mamma left, and took me under her wing.

Loud and outrageous, with a particular talent for creative swearing, she was the yin to my yang. Fortunately for me, Lou and I became part of an extremely close-knit group of friends in our first year. The bonds of friendships forged at medical school are strong, owing to the intense environment and pressure pushing you together. Generally the ethos was work hard, play harder, and my friends had made sure that I didn't let my shyness and fear of big social situations hold me back from having fun.

I gave Lou a reassuring squeeze and managed to fake a small smile. 'Really, Louey, no probs – okay? I'm tougher now than I used to be, remember?' I lied. Lou narrowed her eyes but I could see that she was going to let it pass. She heaved out a sigh and released me so that we could link arms to walk through the car park together.

'God,' she said in a dejected tone. 'Thomas G. Longley, what a sodding disappointment.' I could tell that the death of that particular dream had cut her deep too.

'Weasel Gankface from now on, Lou, don't forget.' Thankfully the heavy atmosphere was broken by our giggles as we made our way to the night bus.

Once we were on the bus, however, and meandering through the busy London streets, my mind replayed the events of the night. I had to turn away from Lou and look out of the window so she couldn't read my expression, but I couldn't help letting out a small sigh.

'Hey,' she said, grabbing my hand and squeezing, 'don't let him give you a raging case of Takotsubo cardiomyopathy. '

I rolled my eyes and grinned despite the churning in my stomach. 'Wow, Lou. That might just be the saddest joke I've ever heard. You do realize you're a huge nerd for cracking that one.'

'Well, you're just as much of a dweeb for getting it,' she retorted, looking relieved that I was smiling again. Takotsubo cardiomyopathy is otherwise known as Broken Heart Syndrome, and is the name for sudden heart failure after emotional trauma, when the stress hormones actually cause a weakening of the heart muscle. The trauma can be anything from grief, to a relationship break-up. And its existence proves that you can, in fact, die from a broken heart.

Well, I survived, and the one good thing to come out of that night was that it absolutely and thoroughly cured me of my crush. The few times that I saw Tom again (he had been demoted from the Reverend Thomas G. Longley), he studiously ignored me, and I began to wonder if he even remembered what happened. He qualified as a doctor a few months later, and that was that.

Unfortunately the name Frigid Frankie was bandied around campus and seemed to stick. Nobody actually said it to my face, but I could hear it muttered behind my back all the time. This meant that either guys were put off by what the name implied, or, worse, they considered me a challenge. Therefore, after a few regrettable incidents, my love life was pretty much put on hold for the rest of uni. This was not fun, seeing as I still had four years left.

So it was safe to say that Thomas G. Longley, a.k.a. Weasel Gankface, was not one of my favourite people. I sincerely hoped I never saw his stupid, gorgeous face ever again.

## *10 years later...*

‘Louey please, please, please get your lazy tush out of bed,’ I begged for the hundredth time.

‘Bugger off,’ she muttered into her pillow.

‘But you promised, remember? Please, Lou-Lou, it’s my first day. Come on.’ I made a grab for the duvet, and she was too late to stop me whipping it off. The impact of the furious glare she levelled at me was slightly diminished by her puffy eyes and bed-head.

‘Ugh, fine,’ she sighed, crawling to the edge of the bed to look at her alarm clock. ‘Bloody hell, Frankie, it’s only just gone seven.’ She flopped back down and squinted up at me, taking in the fact that I was fully dressed and ready to go, with my bag firmly on my shoulder.

‘You’re a maniac,’ she groaned, heaving herself up again. ‘How long have you been ready for?’

‘Um ... a while,’ I admitted.

Truth was, I hadn’t really slept at all last night and finally gave up around five, when I began choosing my outfit in a fit of OCD panic. I settled on very standard junior doctor uniform: black trousers, pink fitted shirt and black ballet pumps, with my hair in its usual ponytail. I was hoping to blend into the background (as was my wont).

I hated the first day somewhere new. It was bad enough moving to a different department in a hospital you were familiar with, but to be going to a completely new hospital and new specialty was especially hard. This was the last six months of my core training, and I couldn’t wait for it to be over. It would be nice to be concentrating instead on the only specialty in medicine I was actually good at, and staying in one place for a change; but first I had to endure the next six months working in cardiology, at a massive teaching hospital I had never set foot in before.

I’d just transferred to Cardiff from Bristol. Although I was relieved that the deanery had approved the transfer, and that I could move in with Lou, who was working at the same hospital, that didn’t make the prospect of my first day any less daunting.

‘Lou, the echo meeting starts at eight, and it was hammered into us at

induction yesterday that you were late on pain of death. You promised you'd show me the way there.' My voice was rising in panic, and Lou grabbed both my hands in hers.

'Deep breath,' she said. 'Pull it together, Rossetti. Repeat after me: I am an awesome medical genius and I won't be intimidated.'

'I am an awesome medical genius and I won't be intimidated,' I mumbled.

'That's the spirit, my humble friend. Right, we better get a wriggle on. Why didn't you wake me sooner?' I rolled my eyes in frustration at her convenient amnesia about the last half hour's duvet tussle. 'Be a doll and dig me out something to wear from the chaos? I'll just nip into the shower.' I began rooting through her wardrobe, the vast majority of her clothes lying in a heap at the bottom.

'Find me one of my slutty drug-rep-on-heat dresses and heels, would you,' she shouted from the bathroom. 'I want my sexy new consultant to get a load of my legs today.' How she walked around all day in four-inch Louboutins like they were slippers, I would never know.



As we walked down yet another corridor I glanced nervously around. I was trying to keep track of the route we'd taken, but it seemed impossible. This place was huge. I didn't know how on earth I was going to negotiate leading a ward round through this rabbit warren when the time came. Lou was taking her long strides, with me jogging in her wake. She cast a glance in my direction and cleared her throat in a nervous gesture, which was at odds with her usual confidence.

'Um, Frankie, there's something I might have forgotten to mention about cardiology,' she said.

'Spill it, Lou,' I replied. 'I'm in no mood for mysteries this morning.'

'Well, I—'

We came to a stop outside a set of double doors labelled 'Cardiology Conference Room'. I looked down at my watch and groaned: 8.05 a.m. Crap.

'Look, I don't have time for this now, Lou.' She could tell me her gossip later; I was late enough as it was. 'Thanks for driving me and showing me the way.' She was shifting nervously in front of me, blocking my way to the

door.

‘Oh, ballbags to it,’ she muttered, continuing to look nervous. ‘I’ll come in with you. I don’t have to start my ward round till nine anyway.’ With that she pushed through the double doors.

The conference room had a large table in the centre. At one end was a big screen with a projector trained on it. Around the table sat what could only have been the consultants, as they were all smartly dressed in suits. The vast majority of them were men, with only one woman among them. I guessed that the few men in shirts but not jackets must be the senior registrars.

All the juniors and the rest of the registrars were squashed in at the back; some had seats, but most were standing, or perched along the thin tables against the wall.

Lou breezed in like she owned the place and reached in between a couple of consultants, nonchalantly taking two cups and a couple of pastries. She then sauntered over to the coffee cart to fill both the cups. Meanwhile I scurried to hide in the back, perching precariously on the end of one of the tables. The consultant standing up at the front of the room next the projector cleared his throat.

‘Nice of you to join us, Dr Sands, but as far as I’m aware you are working in Elderly Care currently,’ he said. He was a stocky, grey-haired man in a crisp suit with an unmistakable air of authority. His tone was formal, but I could tell that he was fighting a smile.

‘Oh, you know me, Dr Williams,’ she smiled at him. ‘Can’t get enough of those echo pictures, thought I’d get a quick fix before my ward round.’

He raised his eyebrows, and then levelled his gaze at me. ‘For the benefit of those who were *not* here at the start of the meeting, I will repeat that all new trainees need to report to the office after we’re finished here so they can be allocated their consultants.’

My face was burning, and I could feel the room’s eyes turn in my direction whilst I ducked my head. Lou had squashed up next to me on the table. She handed me a coffee and a pastry, and squeezed my hand.

‘Medical genius, no intimidation, remember?’ she whispered in my ear, and I gave her a weak smile.

Once Dr Williams continued his lecture, everyone stopped paying attention to me, and I felt free to scan the room. I was just looking around the table of consultants, wondering who I would be allocated, when I felt the hairs at back of my neck stand up. I looked at the far end of the table opposite



me, and my breath caught in my throat.

A pair of gorgeous, and familiar, blue eyes were staring back at me. My mouth dropped open in horror. I heard Lou emit a small squeak and realized that I had her hand in a death grip.

‘I’m sorry, Frank,’ she whispered in my ear. ‘I just couldn’t tell you; you wouldn’t have slept for a week. He was appointed a few months ago.’

‘Jeepers,’ I muttered, tearing my gaze away from his and looking down at my shoes.

‘For Christ’s sake, Frankie, if ever there was a time to drop an f-bomb or two it’s now.’ My continued lack of profanity was a constant source of annoyance to Lou, but I thought that she more than made up for it. ‘Look, you probably won’t have to see that much of him anyway; it’s a big department.’

On the way to the secretaries after the meeting, I kept replaying Lou’s words in my head, praying that I could indeed avoid him. The other new trainees seemed to know their way around better than me, and most were already friends, making me feel even more like the new girl.

The cardiology secretaries all sat together in a huge office. Seeing as Dr Williams was the head of the department, his secretary was in charge of allocating us to consultants and our on-call rotas. She looked pretty frazzled and harassed as she gave each of us a huge binder with all the relevant information for our new role (no doubt the changeover was taking its toll on her). I wasted no time in riffling through to see who my consultant was. My eyes closed in resignation and a wave of nausea hit me.

Of course.

*Dr Longley.*

‘You alright?’ I opened my eyes and saw a petite girl with long red hair in front of me, looking at me with a concerned expression. ‘You look like you might hurl or something.’

I forced a smile. ‘I’m fine. I just hate first days.’

‘I know,’ she agreed, ‘and that meeting scared the bejeezuz out of me. If he’d picked on me to answer I’d have peed myself. I couldn’t even make out the bloody ventricles on those echoes.’

My smile was genuine now; here was a girl after my own heart. ‘They all just look like different variations of cats squirming around in a black bag to me,’ I replied, and she let out a high-pitched giggle before I saw her eyes widen, fixed on something over my shoulder.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up again, and when I turned I was confronted by an expanse of broad chest, clad in a light blue, wrinkled shirt. I looked up slowly, noting the hint of chest hair visible at his open shirt collar, tanned throat, lightly stubbled jaw, and finally those amazing blue eyes, which were staring down into mine. I stepped back quickly and he frowned at me.

‘Dr Rossetti?’ he asked, obviously having been directed my way by the secretaries.

Great. I wasn’t surprised, but it still hurt that he didn’t remember me at all from uni. Then again, the night he humiliated me and called me frigid, he didn’t know who I was either. He’d thought I was a fresher for goodness sake.

‘Frankie,’ I replied quietly, sticking out my hand for him to shake. I felt a blush creep up my cheeks as he enclosed my small hand in his big warm grasp, and quickly snatched mine away as soon as I could without being blatantly rude. He frowned again, and I realized that I might not have pulled off that manoeuvre without more than a hint of rudeness.

‘Okay, Frankie, looks like you’re with me,’ he said, offering me a tight smile. ‘I’m Dr Longley and my registrar is Dr Hadid, he’s waiting for you on CCU. I’m in the cath lab this morning so I’ll catch up with you both later.’

He sounded stiff and awkward and he looked like he couldn’t wait to get away from me, which seemed weird. I mean, I could still be shy, but I rarely made *that* bad of an impression. I also noticed that he didn’t suggest that I call him Tom, and I decided that was just fine: the more formal the better.

‘Great, have a good morning of, um ...’ Gah! I was such a freak. I couldn’t for the life of me remember what they did in the cath lab. ‘...stenting!’ I finally said with relief, ‘and stuff,’ I finished lamely.

‘Right,’ he replied, and I noticed that his face was a little softer and his rigid tone had slipped slightly as he continued: ‘and I hope, Frankie, that by the end of the six months echoes might look a bit less like cats in a bag.’ With that he nodded to the now salivating secretaries, and strode out of the office.

Bloody brilliant. Five minutes into working for him and I had already demonstrated my idiocy twice.

Oh well, moving on.

My new redheaded friend was staring after Tom, looking slightly dazed. I knew the feeling.

‘Jesus,’ she muttered as he left the office. ‘I would walk through hellfire to drink his bathwater, *and* to top it all off he actually mends broken hearts for a living.’

***Broken Heart Syndrome* is available on Amazon now.**

# Acknowledgments

I'll start by saying a massive thank you to my readers. I never dreamt that people would take the time to read the stories I have thought up in my freaky brain, and I am honoured beyond words. I am also eternally grateful to the reviewers that have taken a chance on me – your feedback has made all the difference to the books and is the reason I've been able to make writing not just a passion, but a career. Special mention for Susie's Book Badgers - you are wonderful humans, and your support means the world. My wonderful alpha readers – Small Suse, Aurelia, Carly, Jane, Ruth, Jess Katie and Andy – your feedback was essential and much appreciated.

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# About the Author

Susie Tate is a contemporary romance author and doctor living in beautiful Dorset with her lovely husband, equally lovely (most of the time) three boys and properly lovely dog.

Please use any of the links below to connect with Susie. She really appreciates any feedback on her writing and would love to hear from anyone who has taken the time to read her books.

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