

FRIENDS WITHOUT BENEFITS



EVELYN FENN



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Friends without Benefits

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CONTENT WARNING:

This book contains depictions of aphobia and dubious consent.

Friends without Benefits

Evelyn Fenn

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To the Secret Triangle.

Chapter One

I BAGGED A table. U get the drinks LOL!!!!

Clare keyed a quick *ok*, pressed Send, and dropped her phone into her bag. No matter how much she liked Louisa and how much she usually enjoyed their Tuesday evening get-togethers, Clare wasn't looking forward to tonight. Only three days before, Clare had broken up with her long-term, long-distance boyfriend, and Louisa was sure to want details.

Clare took a fortifying breath and jogged up the steps that led to the pub's front door.

The Quill and Scholar, a favourite hangout of postgraduates and lecturers, buzzed with the after-work crowd. Although the pub appeared older than the university, it had opened less than thirty years before when it had capitalised on a fashion for bottled lagers. Since then, the Quill had moved with the times, catering for fashions for real ales and craft beers and, most recently, craft gins.

When she had been a student, Clare had eschewed the Quill's designer labels in favour of happy hours, Boddington's, and flavoured schnapps served in test tubes by the chain pubs a couple of hundred yards down the road. Although Clare had never developed a taste for bottled beer and she hated gin, she liked the Quill's ambience and décor. Plus, nobody could go wrong with the house Chardonnay. Besides, these days, the kinds of places marketed to undergraduates made her feel old.

Clare loosened her scarf, shoved her hat and wrist warmers into her jacket's pockets, and fought her way through the

crowd towards the bar. The room was full of people, many of whom she knew by sight and some by name.

Mikey, an astrophysics postgraduate who moonlighted as a barman, greeted Clare, and said, “The usual?”

“Please.”

He sighed theatrically. “One of these days I’ll get you to branch out. Some of our botanicals are amazing.”

Clare nodded and, not meaning it, said, “One day. Not today.”

While she waited for her drinks, she waved at Sam, an occasional drinking buddy, who was in the throes of writing up her doctoral thesis.

Clare exchanged notes for drinks and change, and then, holding her glasses aloft, she set out to find Louisa.

Clare and Louisa had nothing in common beyond a host of shared memories from their undergraduate days and a friendship that had endured across the years. Clare’s dad had once described Louisa as having more neck than a giraffe. On another occasion, he’d said, “That lass has got more front than the esplanade at Blackpool!” Given that Louisa had, when eight and a half months pregnant, worn a white dress as she headed down the aisle for her second marriage, seeking a blessing in the church of a god she didn’t believe in, Clare supposed Dad might have had a point.

Clare had taken an excessively long time to realise that Dad had a crush on her best friend. Mum thought it was hilarious. She had tried to explain it more than once, but Clare still didn’t get it.

Even though he'd only met her a dozen times over the years, Dad often asked after Louisa. Clare would say that she was fine, and Mum would laugh, kiss the top of Dad's balding head, and say, "You can dream so long as you don't trade me in for a younger model or buy a motorcycle!" Then Dad would colour slightly and answer that he was only being polite and that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with the mother of his children.

Clare slalomed her way through the crowd and up the wide, wooden staircase that led to the first floor, where the rooms of the converted Victorian villa were smaller, quieter, and cosier. Her favourite, a former bedroom with a large bay window that offered good views along the busy street and thus afforded great opportunities for people watching, was at the front of the building.

Today, Louisa hadn't been able to bag seats at the window and, instead, had parked herself at a table pressed against a wall, where she was now frantically working the screen of her smartphone.

In her business suit and heavy bling, her overcoat and accessories neatly arranged on a neighbouring chair, Louisa stuck out like a gemstone among pebbles. She had allowed her knee-length skirt to ride up slightly, thus emphasising her long, slender legs, and revealing kneecaps along with a hint of thigh. Thanks to genetics, a lot of self-discipline, soft lighting, and hair dye, Louisa passed for a good decade younger than her forty-and-a-few years. Louisa also dyed her eyebrows and eyelashes; Clare hadn't known people did such things until they'd shared a flat in their second year at uni.

Even this late in the day, Louisa's makeup appeared flawless. She wore matching vermillion lipstick and nail polish, the latter almost certainly the result of a mani-pedi, and her eye shadow and eyeliner looked as though they had been applied by a draughtsman.

Clare slid Louisa's usual in front of her. Louisa glanced up and gave her the barest of acknowledgements as she continued working her phone.

The immaculate nail polish glittered with reflected light as she finished typing and sent a message. "There. Done. I'm all yours."

"Everything okay?"

"Oh, yes." Louisa brushed Clare's concern away. "Just a teensy crisis at work. All sorted now."

Knowing Louisa and the general nature of her job, Clare was certain that, whatever the crisis had been, there would have been nothing teensy about it. Only major crises got escalated as far as Louisa, who had always been able to make light of the most catastrophic emergencies. Clare envied her insouciant self-confidence.

There was a pattern to their evenings together. Glass one would carry them through an exchange of war stories and a sympathetic hearing of each other's colleague-related character assassinations. Sometime during drink two, having got all their work angst out of their systems, they would move onto subjects of greater mutual interest. Glass three was when they got to the difficult topics, the ones that laid souls bare. Today was going to be at least a three-glass evening. They

wouldn't get to—let alone through—the interrogation otherwise.

Sure enough, when there was barely an eighth of an inch of liquid at the bottom of Clare's second glass, and Clare's perception was blurring around the edges, Louisa asked, "How were the in-laws?"

"The...what?"

"You know. Gavin's parents. The people you went to visit at the weekend? The parents of your SO?"

SO. Significant other.

"My insignificant other, you mean," said Clare, doing her best to copy Louisa's style of banter. "We split up."

"Oh."

There was something in the way Louisa said, "Oh," that made Clare bristle. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well. You and Gavin. You've always struck me as a couple more in word than deed." Clare tried to hide her shock at Louisa's astute observation by gulping the dregs of her drink. "Did you even do it with Gavin? Ever?"

Clare's silence spoke volumes.

"What was wrong with him?"

"With...him?" Clare asked. "You tell me. You set us up."

"I don't know him that well. So, tell me. What's wrong with him?"

"Nothing, as far as I know. We went out a few times. We didn't click." She stood up. "I'll get the next round." If they

were going to have this conversation, she was going to need that third glass, and maybe another after that.

Clare beat a retreat downstairs. As she waited to be served, she leaned on the counter, feeling unnerved. Was Louisa as perceptive when it came to her colleagues as she was with Clare? If so, that would go a long way towards explaining Louisa's rapid rise through the hierarchy of local government.

Louisa hadn't been marked for greatness as an undergraduate. She had seldom turned up to her nine-o'clock lectures, instead relying on Clare to take notes for them both. Clare had occasionally wondered how one-sided their friendship was, and whether Louisa was a user. However, they had stayed in touch after graduation, and a true user wouldn't have done that.

Most of their crowd had had jobs while they were at uni. The majority had worked in bars or restaurants, preferring to work evenings and weekends to avoid conflicts with their lecture schedules.

Louisa had been different. She had made the most of her assets, which included her legs. She had met husband number one while lounging precariously on the bonnet of a high-end sports car, modelling at a motor show.

Luca had turned out to be forty-seventh in line to the throne of a minor European principality, thus qualifying him as a Z-list celebrity. That meant, as Louisa put it, she had been a Z-minus-one celebrity. From the middle of their second year on, he had lured Louisa away from college every weekend. As, in Luca's world, weekends lasted from Thursday night until

Monday evening, Louisa had become even more dependent on Clare's notes than she had been before.

Louisa had invited Clare to the wedding. Clare hadn't gone because she hadn't been able to afford the airfare to Antigua. She had made a point of reading about it in *Hello*, though.

Louisa and Luca had divorced nine months later. Louisa had done well out of the divorce, which, by some miracle, had not been covered in any of the gossip columns. She had been unexpectedly sensible about the windfall, which she had eventually invested in the care and education of the children she'd had with her second husband, Nick.

Nick had run off with one of their nannies who, in an ironic twist of fate, also had insanely long legs and looked like a younger, softer version of Clare's glamorous friend.

Louisa's lacklustre academic performance had reflected a lack of focus and application rather than a lack of ability. Between divorce number one and marriage number two, Louisa had, thanks in part to a short skirt and a middle-aged leech, landed herself a management traineeship in one of the local councils. Her subsequent rise through the ranks had been meteoric.

Louisa always had one or two men snapping at her heels. She enjoyed being looked at and asked out, and she enjoyed dates and sex. Clare knew this because Louisa liked to share the details, never stopping to consider whether Clare wanted to hear them.

Clare carried the replenished glasses upstairs with exaggerated care. She misjudged the distance to the table as she set them down and sloshed wine onto her right hand.

Unthinkingly, she lifted her hand to her mouth and sucked. Louisa gave her a look that fell somewhere between amusement and disapproval. If Clare had been one of Louisa's children, Louisa would no doubt have told her off.

“Are you happy?” asked Louisa.

Wow. That wasn't what Clare had been expecting. “What sort of question is that? Of course I'm happy!”

“Honestly? You don't seem it.”

There was Louisa's straightforward perspicacity again.

Clare reached out and began to pick at a beer mat. “I'm not unhappy. Therefore, I must be happy, right?”

Louisa took a quick sip from her glass. “I'm not sure that's how it works.”

“All right, oh wise and great one, how does it work?”

To Clare's surprise, Louisa had a ready answer, suggesting that she'd given the question some thought. “The absence of unhappy doesn't necessarily make you happy. Happiness isn't a binary state. I prefer to think of it as more of a spectrum. As something fluid.”

Clare stared owlshly at her, too hazy to want to deal with pub philosophy.

“I worry about you,” said Louisa, trying a different tack. “You used to do things for fun. Remember fun?”

“I do things for fun! I'm here, aren't I?”

“Yes. But when was the last time you did anything else for fun? With anyone fun?”

“I go to the theatre,” protested Clare.

“With people from your work.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the people from my work.” But a voice in her head questioned whether that was entirely true. They were people she did things with, so she didn’t have to do them alone, but she didn’t hang out with them beyond talking shop in bars or coffee shops. She never invited any of them home.

“How many people know you knit?”

“A few.”

Louisa tried again. “How many people know you wrote short stories in college?”

“I don’t do that anymore.”

“That’s not my point.”

“Then what is?”

“Those things. They’re a part of you. They make you who you are, but all you ever seem to be these days is Clare the Academic, and that’s all your colleagues, even the ones you do things with, see, but it’s not you! You need someone to share yourself with. You need someone to be with.”

Clare peered at Louisa and said mulishly, “How long have you been wanting to say all this for?”

“A while. But after Gavin...”

“You’re beginning to sound like my mother. ‘I want you to be happy. I want you to meet someone. I want to see you settled.’ Oh, God. You’re not going to try to set me up again, are you?”

Louisa hadn't only set Clare up with Gavin. Before that, she had introduced Clare to Chris, and before that there had been Ian. And that was not to mention a whole raft of other men Clare hadn't gone out with. She'd agreed to go out with Gavin more to shut Louisa up than in the hope that something might come of the relationship.

Smug couples often wanted to spread their joy onto career singletons, and Louisa was always more inclined to play cupid when she was in a relationship of her own. Louisa had been going out with Gwyn when she had set Clare up with Gavin. Louisa and Gwyn had burned hot and bright but had fizzled out fast. As far as Clare knew, Louisa had not been with anybody since.

"No," said Louisa. "But you're right about one thing. I do want you to be happy."

Chapter Two

CLARE LIVED ON the second floor of a four-storey block of flats that was managed by an inefficient but officious management company. When they had been built, the flats had been marketed at young professionals. However, a glut of similar properties across the city, along with the development's location on the edge of the student village, had made the block popular with buy-to-let landlords, and a large proportion of the flats were now rented out to undergraduates.

She let herself in through the building's front door, which faced the main road. An array of letterboxes was located on the opposite wall, next to the back door, which, in turn, opened onto a large courtyard given over to parking. As Clare went to check her mailbox, she sighed as she espied the usual pile of junk mail her fellow residents were inclined to leave on the floor.

Clare tried not to be judgemental. She had nothing against students: she had been one once. But she suspected they, who were least invested in the building, were mostly to blame. She wished someone else would take a turn at gathering up and dumping the junk mail and flyers into the communal recycling. Tonight, even Clare couldn't be bothered to tackle them; the alcohol was beginning to wear off, leaving her with a feeling of fatigue that threatened to turn into a hangover.

She trudged up the stairs to the front door of her flat. She let herself in, disarmed the alarm, and went into her kitchen where she poured herself a large glass of water and forced herself to drink. The kitchen, like all the rooms in the flats,

was pokey. The flats appeared well-proportioned when empty, but as soon as anyone tried to live in them, the meanness of their dimensions became all too obvious. They had no built-in storage, and there was negligible space for personal possessions. Unfortunately, Clare had a lot of personal possessions, mostly books, but also the assorted paraphernalia that went with a minor knitting obsession.

Clare carried the glass through to the living room and plonked herself on the sofa. She rested her head against its cushions and let the world spin around her for a while. When, eventually, she drained the glass, she left it on the coffee table and went to bed.

*

GIVEN HOW FUZZY she'd felt when she'd gone to sleep, Clare was pleasantly surprised by how alert and awake she was the following morning; she even went so far as to leap out of bed to get a head start on the day. She washed, dressed, grabbed a hasty breakfast, which she gobbled standing up, then headed out to catch a bus into town. She stood on the lower deck and spent the journey staring idly out of the window as she compiled a to-do list in her head.

The bus got caught in rush-hour traffic, which made Clare wish she'd delayed leaving home for another half hour. Unless Clare was giving an early lecture, she tended to wait until just before nine o'clock to leave for work. That way, she avoided the worst of the traffic and was almost guaranteed to get a seat. Since she seldom left campus before seven in the evening, and usually took work home with her, she refused to pay any heed

to the more mischievous of her colleagues who teased her about her aversion to mornings.

*

BECAUSE CLARE LIVED in such a small flat, she didn't have space for a home study, so, unlike many of her colleagues, she made good and frequent use of the office provided by the university. She had done her best to personalise the space with books on the shelves, a couple of pictures on the walls, and some potted plants she hadn't managed to kill.

The only drawback to using the office as much as she did was that it made her easy to track down, and students had no qualms about seeking her out when other staff were nowhere to be found.

Like now, for instance.

Someone was hovering beside her office door. So much for having spare time before the first of a long string of supervisees turned up.

"I'm sorry to bother you," the student said. Clare had to give her credit for politeness but was less convinced about her sincerity. She came across as more impatient than apologetic.

Clare recognised her from one of her classes the previous semester. What was her name again?

"I saw you coming into the building, so I waited for you."

Between coming into the building and reaching her office, Clare had stopped barely long enough to say good morning to a couple of people. Had she detoured to make coffee, would

Elspeth— Yes! That was her name! Would Elspeth have given up and gone away?

“I’m here now,” said Clare as she unlocked her door. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m applying for teacher training next year. I was hoping to get a reference?”

By rights, Elspeth should have asked her tutor for the reference, but Clare had taught her, and that—apparently—was good enough. Plus, her tutor, Hugo Atkinson, was notorious for working from home. A reference wasn’t too much to ask for, was it?

But it wasn’t one reference. Thanks to the elusiveness of her colleagues, it was a whole bunch of them, and a host of other problems besides.

Clare had raised the issue at a staff meeting once. She hadn’t got far because her esteemed colleagues refused to acknowledge that they were the cause of any difficulty.

*

THE FIRST OF Clare’s supervisees arrived as Elspeth was leaving, and he was followed by others. Clare had barely twenty minutes to grab lunch and a large coffee before the afternoon’s staff meeting.

Professor Buonamici and Angela Preston-Wick were already in the boardroom when Clare arrived.

Buonamici was a dapper man. He had olive skin, brown eyes that twinkled even when he was serious, an impressively full head of white, curly hair, and a chevron moustache. Around campus, he was famous for his folding bicycle, which

he rode year-round, whatever the weather. Standing next to him made Angela, who had added the Wick to her surname upon her marriage the previous summer, look even taller than usual.

Buonamici paused their quiet conversation long enough to acknowledge Clare before returning to a discussion about arrangements for his upcoming trip to the US. Clare listened idly to the details of the conference venue, the keynote speakers, his wife's excitement at going along for the ride, and the quality of shops and restaurants in Boston. More people trickled in, and Clare lost the thread of the conversation somewhere around the cost of flights and luggage allowances.

Ben Duncan sat next to Clare and launched into an anecdote about how he had caught one of the second-year students, who had logged on to the teaching computer at the front of the computer cluster, looking at porn. Ben had wanted to check that the projector was working; when he'd switched it on, a remarkable amount of bare flesh, tits, and bottoms displayed in glorious Technicolor for the whole room to see. Clare laughed obligingly at his story, and Ben accepted her response as his due.

Ben was tall and lean, and shaved his head. Clare wasn't sure whether that was a hipster fashion statement or a practical response to a receding hairline. He was given to wearing T-shirts with jackets and denim jeans. In the 1990s, when denim trousers on a lecturer were a symbol of rebellion against establishment norms, he might have passed as cool. Now, two decades on, he looked scruffy.

Observant and entertaining, Ben was popular with the students. Clare also enjoyed his company, but she knew better than to confide in him as he was a notorious gossip.

Hugo Atkinson, who had come in especially for the meeting, and Colin Adams arrived together.

Atkinson was tall, had high cheekbones, and greying hair. There was something of the aristocrat about him, the result of either the way he carried himself or the way he spoke.

Colin Adams was a baby-faced man who would still look about twenty when he was bald and in his nineties. He had blond hair, blue eyes, and pink cheeks. He hung around with Atkinson on the rare occasions that Atkinson deigned to visit the department. Atkinson tolerated him more because he liked to have allies and followers than because he liked Adams specifically. Clare doubted that Atkinson was capable of liking anyone other than himself.

There was nothing scintillating on the agenda, but there was plenty that would enable three or more hours of pontificating. Clare suppressed a sigh.

The final stragglers arrived, with Professor Silcox arriving last, looking as harried as usual.

Clare seldom had much to say during these meetings; unlike some of her colleagues, she tended to speak only when she had something constructive to say.

Atkinson liked his own voice, and he was under the impression that other people did too. Thus, he was inclined to opine whenever opportunity arose. This had unfortunate consequences: he often stated the obvious, or repeated things

already raised by someone else, and anything worthwhile he might have had to say tended to get lost in the overall windbagery. The last was a shame because Clare suspected that somewhere deep—Mariana Trench deep—down, Atkinson had some good ideas. Atkinson’s reputation as a boorish bore was cemented by his preferred mode of delivery: loud and monotonic.

Buonamici called the meeting to order and rattled his way through the apologies. However, he did not have the same success with the minutes of the last meeting. Less than a quarter of the way through, Adams half raised his right hand, palm open and fingers extended towards the ceiling, to get Buonamici’s attention. “If I could interject, Chair...”

Uh-oh.

Clare felt similar resignation from everyone else in the room. Adams was a stickler for detail. That, allied with an encyclopaedic knowledge of university policies and procedures and his penchant for using half a dozen words where one would do, was enough to plunge even the most patient person into a pit of despair. Meetings tended to be a lot shorter and less fractious on the rare occasions when he sent his apologies.

“If you must,” said Buonamici, “but keep it brief.”

Adams cleared his throat, which told Clare that this was not going to be brief. She caught Angela Preston-Wick, who was sitting opposite her, rolling her eyes. Clare ducked her head to hide a smile.

“If I might refer you to the paper I circulated at the meeting of the 25th March, 2015, wherein I discussed the

likelihood of a reduction in the availability and amount of grant available to—”

Clare willed her brain to untangle the key message from its woolly padding and was grateful when Buonamici did it for her. “Yes, yes. Your previous paper said that there was a risk of a reduction in funding, and the latest figures show that you were right. That was perspicacious of you. How good of you to point that out.”

Wow. That was pithier than usual! There was something different about Buonamici today. He was normally more... tactful, suave, and measured in his comments, preferring to keep his irony—or was it sarcasm?—to himself. What had changed?

Adams looked thwarted. However, as the meeting was just beginning, Clare was sure he would find opportunities to say more later.

“Matters arising? None? Good. Agenda item one: research strategy...”

The meeting dragged. Clare listened with half an ear, doodled, mentally plotted out a journal article she wanted to write, and agreed or disagreed as required.

“Now, the final item on the agenda: staffing changes. First, I’m sure you will all be delighted to hear that Angela is expecting her first child.”

A desultory smattering of congratulations greeted the announcement.

“Angela expects to go off on maternity leave sometime in May or June.”

“Typical,” coughed Atkinson into his hand.

“What was that?” asked Buonamici.

“I was...considering the...adjustments...we’ll have to make if Angela is absent during the exam period. To have our examinations officer off at that time of year will be most inconvenient—”

“We’ll discuss cover arrangements at a future meeting,” said Buonamici. “But I will be happy to minute your interest in the role.”

Atkinson continued to talk as though Buonamici hadn’t spoken. Only his expression—he looked as though he’d found something smelly on the bottom of his highly polished shoe—gave away the fact that he hadn’t liked what he’d heard. “—and no doubt we’ll have to pick up the slack next year to cover Angela’s teaching load, and we’ll have to take on extra pastoral and administration duties—”

“Which will be no more onerous than when someone takes sabbatical,” said Buonamici.

“Sabbatical! That’s another thing! No doubt, as soon as Angela returns to work, she’ll be applying for sabbatical leave to help get her research profile back on track! At least Clare, here, has had the decency to avoid having kids!”

There was so much wrong with Atkinson’s comment that Clare didn’t know where to begin. Angela had no such problem. She leapt to her feet, her cloud of frizzy brown hair bouncing. She braced her hands on the edge of the table, locked her elbows, and leaned forward. Dark eyes narrowed,

she said, “How dare you! What you are saying is highly inappropriate!”

“I’m only saying what everyone else is thinking!” Atkinson lounged in his chair, his arms crossed over his chest.

Ben shook his head. “Oh, no. Not what I was thinking!”

“Me neither,” said Clare, finally—if ineffectually—finding her voice.

The conversation disintegrated into a heated argument.

“Enough!” shouted Buonamici. When Atkinson opened his mouth to say something else, Buonamici forestalled him, banging his palm on the table. “I said, enough!” He glared, and when he was sure everyone had backed down into silence, he continued. “I have one final item of staffing news, and I have saved the best for last. I will be retiring at the end of the academic year—”

Atkinson sat straighter, like a hungry dog that had caught a whiff of dinner.

“Old professors never retire,” quipped Ben. “They become emeritus.”

There was a titter of polite laughter.

“—after which I intend to spend more time with my family’s vineyards.”

Ah, yes. The famous vineyards. Buonamici gave wine to his staff and doctoral students at Christmas. To Clare’s untrained palate, it tasted rough and acidic.

“The advertisements for my replacement as chair and head of department will go out in two or three weeks.”

“I’m sure I’m not alone in my...disappointment...upon hearing your announcement,” said Atkinson silkily. “You have, over the years, contributed greatly to—”

“Yes, yes. My departure will be a terrible loss for the department, blah, blah, et cetera, et cetera.”

“Exactly,” said Atkinson, unable to resist.

The meeting concluded. People stretched kinks out of their backs as they stood. They gathered their long-dead coffee mugs and other assorted possessions, and broke into small groups, their conversations all about Buonamici’s retirement.

Ben held the door open for Clare as they left the room together. He grinned at her and said, “Now let the games begin!”

Chapter Three

“HAVE YOU NOTICED anything odd about Hugo lately?” Clare asked almost a fortnight later, when she and Ben found themselves leaving the department at the same time and falling into step as they headed towards Oxford Road. She glanced at her watch; she had a good quarter of an hour before she was due to meet Louisa. “He’s behaving very out of character.”

“*Au contraire*. I think he’s behaving very much in character. You just need to know how to read the signs.”

Clare realised she had to be missing something and said as much.

“You’ll figure it out,” said Ben blithely. “You’re coming to the seminar on Thursday, aren’t you?”

Clare wondered at the change of topic but nodded. “Of course. I’m looking forward to hearing what Kyle Jones has to say.” Kyle Jones was a young, promising researcher from one of the colleges of London University, and Clare had been anticipating his talk ever since she had learned he was on this year’s programme.

“You haven’t heard?”

“Heard what?”

“He cancelled. Family emergency.”

“Oh. What a shame!” Clare suspected that she should be more sympathetic about whatever crisis was keeping him away, but her own disappointment was too immediate. Tamping down her reaction, she said, “Who’s going to speak instead?”

Ben shrugged, but there was something knowing about the way he smiled that made Clare ask, “Are you being coy?”

He placed his hand on his chest in a flamboyant, slightly camp, gesture and smirked. “Would I?” After a beat, he said, “You should come. I doubt you’ll be disappointed. And you’ll come to the bar afterwards?”

“Probably.”

“Good.” He turned left, towards the city centre.

Why was he laughing? What wasn’t he telling her?

She turned right, heading for the Quill, and her Tuesday rendezvous with Louisa and Chardonnay.

*

AM UPSTAIRS AT window table. First round’s yours.

Clare sent the text, put her phone down, and turned to watch the comings and goings below.

Her phone dinged a minute or so later.

On my way.

Five minutes after that, Louisa strode along the pavement and turned onto the pub’s front path. Clare had once asked Louisa how she managed to move so fast and so easily in high heels, and Louisa’s explanation had been laconic: “Practice.” When pressed further, she’d expanded her explanation to “Lots of practice.”

Clare lost sight of Louisa before she reached the front door, her view blocked by a lot of ivy and the roof of the porch. Soon afterwards, laptop bag and capacious handbag over her right shoulder, and drinks in hand, Louisa joined her

at the table. How did she manage to juggle everything so easily and elegantly?

“Good day?” Louisa asked.

“Not bad. People are behaving oddly at work, though. Hugo Atkinson has been seeing students. Something’s up, and it’s incredibly mysterious.”

“What kind of up?”

“If I knew, it wouldn’t be mysterious, would it?”

“Fair point,” acknowledged Louisa. “What do you think is going on?”

“Honestly? I have no idea. Ben reckons I’ll work it out eventually, but he isn’t giving away any clues. How about you? How was your day?”

“Senior management signed off on the four Es.”

“Four Es?” Was Clare supposed to know what they were? Oh, yes. Louisa had mentioned them before, but that had been months ago.

“You remember. Our organisational values: *engage, ensure, equal, and excel.*”

“Eh? What does that even mean?”

“Maybe you need to read our value statement to get the full impact.”

“Value statement? What’s one of those?”

“Hold on a mo.” Louisa rooted around in her laptop bag. She pulled out a hardbound notebook, flicked through the pages, and said, “Here you go. ‘We *engage* with our

communities to *ensure equal* treatment and access to services for all, and we *excel* in everything we do’.”

“You know that’s total bullshit, don’t you?” said Clare, unable to stop herself.

“Expensive bullshit,” agreed Louisa. “You wouldn’t believe how much the consultants charged for that.”

“Probably not and, given that I pay council tax, I suspect it’s better I don’t find out.”

“You’re probably right.” Louisa took a quick swig from her wine glass and stood again. “Back in a sec. Going to pop to the ladies.” She sashayed between the tables as she headed out onto the landing.

Clare shook her head, frowned, and rummaged through her bag for a pen. She pursed her lips, picked up a beer mat, and began to write.

When Louisa reappeared, Clare frisbeed the beer mat in her direction and said, “There you go.”

Louisa reached out, fumbled the catch, but managed to hold on to the mat on her second attempt.

Clare waited while Louisa read what she’d written. “We are *passionate* and *proud* of the work we do. We aim to operate in a *principled*, *persuasive*, and *participative* manner. We seek to make ours a *prestigious* organisation.”

Louisa stared straight into Clare’s eyes. “You came up with that—”

“While you were in the loo, yeah.”

Louisa looked as though her legs were going to give out. She sat, placed her head in her hands and shook it. “Fuck.” She grabbed her glass and gulped half of her remaining wine. “It took the consultants six months and thirty thousand pounds to come up with the four Es. And you did a better job in five minutes.”

Clare’s mouth dropped. “How much! I’m in the wrong job!”

Louisa upended her glass and glugged. “God, we’re crap, aren’t we?”

“If I were you, I’d hope that the newspapers don’t get hold of what you’ve told me. Thirty thousand. You wasted someone’s salary for a year on consultants.”

“Not me, personally,” protested Louisa weakly.

“Nobody in local government ever seems to do anything personally. But you’re part of the senior management, so surely you had some part to play in the collective decision?”

One day, not many months into her management traineeship, Louisa had realised the people she worked for were no more intelligent than she. They were simply much better at blagging, had been lucky, had benefitted from nepotism, or a combination of all three. On that day, she’d resolved to become one of the favoured few. She’d honed her people skills—which had never been lacking to begin with—and she’d begun to climb the greasy pole. Louisa owed her success as much to barefaced arrogance as to ability. Then again, arrogance was a kind of ability, too, although not one Clare attached much value to. Clare opined, now Louisa was

nearly at the top of her career, she needed to take responsibility along with the rest of the bigwigs.

“We consulted,” said Louisa.

“Who with?”

“Our employees. They were invited to comment.”

“Did they?”

“A few did.”

“How many’s a few? And what did they say?”

“Eight,” admitted Louisa, which, out of a workforce of thousands, wasn’t impressive. “They weren’t complimentary.”

“But you’ve adopted your four Es, anyway.”

“Yes. We needed something—”

“Why?”

“—and nobody came up with anything better.” Louisa paused. “What do you mean, why?”

“Why did you need four anythings at all? I mean, what’s the point?”

Louisa tilted her head slightly. “It’s what businesses do: mission; vision; values...blah, blah, blah. Even the university has them.”

“It does?”

“I’m sure it does.” But as Louisa wasn’t able to back up her assertion, Clare wasn’t convinced.

They drank in morose silence for a minute; then Louisa said, “Can I keep this?” She held up the beer mat.

“Of course. Though I can’t imagine what you’d want it for.”

Louisa shrugged elegantly. “You never know. It might come in handy sometime.”

“Oh, sure. When you find yourself short of a coaster.”

Louisa tucked the mat inside her notebook. She glanced across at Clare as she put them in her bag and said, “It’s your round.”

*

THEY SPENT MUCH of glass number two talking about the latest exploits of Louisa’s two children. Nick was going to take them skiing at half term. Patrick wanted to give up the cello, which was a pity because he was pretty good, or would be if he ever bothered to practice. Joanne was going through an everything-is-terrible-and-I-don’t-want-to-talk-about-it phase. “She bought black lipstick last week too. I’m sure she’ll get over it eventually. I mean, I did.”

“You had black lipstick?” asked Clare. “I don’t remember that.”

“It was before I knew you. I was still in school. I also dyed my hair pink.”

“I wanted to do that, but I never had the nerve.”

“My mother went ballistic.”

Clare chuckled. “I can only imagine what mine would have done, but I suspect ballistic would be putting it mildly.”

“Anyway, that’s enough about my lot. I want to talk about you.”

“Well, that’s going to be a short conversation; I don’t have anything new to tell you.”

“Maybe not. But I’ve got some questions I want to ask.”

“Questions?”

“Yes. But first,” said Louisa, getting to her feet, “I’m going to get the next round in.”

Clare waited while Louisa disappeared downstairs. What on earth did Louisa want to talk about? As a glass three conversation, it couldn’t be good.

*

“I’VE BEEN THINKING,” said Louisa as she made inroads into her fresh glass. “About you and Gavin.”

Trying for a lightness she didn’t feel, Clare said, “I thought I’d got off lightly last time.”

“Meaning?”

“Your previous attempt at an interrogation wasn’t very—” Clare floundered around for a suitable word and, when she failed to find one, she made up her own. “—interrogationy.”

Louisa raised her immaculate eyebrows, but she didn’t challenge Clare’s use of the word; probably she couldn’t come up with a better one, either.

“The thing is, even when you’re dating, you don’t actually date.”

Clare stared. The conversation had barely begun, and she already wanted it to be over. How could she get away without causing a scene? Maybe she should resign herself to causing a scene anyway.

Louisa put her hand on Clare's forearm. "Calm down. I'm not saying any of this to upset you."

"I'm not upset," said Clare through gritted teeth.

Louisa ignored the lie. "What did you want, growing up?"

"What?" said Clare, puzzled by the abrupt change in the conversation's direction.

"You heard. When you were younger, what did you think your adult life should be like?"

Clare played along. "I don't know. What everyone wants, I suppose. House. Family. Security. Money. Fame. Fortune. Success."

"Married, double income, two kids?"

"Yeah."

"And have you found it?"

"Of course not. You know that. Lifelong singleton, me." Clare wagged her unadorned ring finger.

"Why?"

"I never found The One, I suppose."

"The One?"

"You know. *The One*. That person you click with. The instant attraction."

"Your soulmate?"

"Maybe, although I don't believe in soulmates."

"Why not? Because soulmates are ridiculous but The One isn't?"

Clare's insides squirmed uncomfortably as Louisa exposed the gaping flaw in her logic.

"If you truly wanted that, why have you never put any effort into looking for it?"

Clare's forehead creased into a frown. "I believed it would happen when the time was right. There have been more immediate things to deal with. You know, doctorate, job, career."

"Other people manage to juggle all that with a relationship."

"I'm not other people."

"No. You're not." Tentatively, she said, "You told me that you and Gavin didn't click."

"So?"

"What I want to know is, why would you put up with not clicking for so long? Why hang on to something that empty?"

"I don't know. Inertia, perhaps? Biding time until someone better comes along?"

"Were you? Biding your time, I mean. I never got the impression that you were looking for anyone else."

"I wasn't."

"What about Gavin?" An idea struck Louisa and she leaned forward expectantly. "Maybe he was unfaithful! Was he?"

Clare shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't ask."

"But you dumped him."

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Like you said, there was nothing between us. No chemistry. And when he tried to take my hand—”

“Yes?” said Louisa eagerly.

“Nothing,” muttered Clare, her face flaming at the memory of what she had done. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why not?”

“It’s—” Clare broke off, stopping herself from saying, “embarrassing.” It was the latest in a long line of embarrassments, of relationship failures. Yet another proof that she was incredibly bad at something other people found easy.

She was surprised and relieved when Louisa didn’t press her for an answer. Instead, Louisa reached into her handbag and extracted a neatly folded wodge of newspaper.

“I found this last Sunday.” Louisa unfolded what turned out to be a lifestyle supplement, turned to page five, and pointed to an article. “Read it.”

Clare looked askance at the apparent shift in topic.

“Go on. Read it.” Louisa thrust the paper towards Clare.

Clare shrugged, took the paper, and stared at the headline, which read, “I’m Not Attracted to Anyone.” This was followed by a subtitle: “An asexual speaks out.”

Asexual. Clare had heard the word before, and there was something about it that had resonated. But she had shied away

from it, sure it didn't apply to her. She'd meet someone, someday. That's what normal people did. Wasn't it?

She glanced at Louisa, who was watching her intently.

"Oh, what the hell?" muttered Clare under her breath. She lowered her eyes and began to read.

"Remind you of anyone?" asked Louisa when Clare was still only two-thirds of the way through.

"No," said Clare, through clenched teeth.

"Are you sure? Because I read the article and I thought of you."

"Why on earth would you do that?"

"Oh, small things. Like our previous conversation. Like the conversation we're having now. About how you never have a serious relationship. How you never seem to want to sleep with your partners. How you—"

"Enough!" snapped Clare, overcome by, and bristling with, a blend of anger, outrage, and humiliation. How dare Louisa! "That's...enough!"

Louisa backed off. "If you say so."

They sat in awkward silence, masking their unease by emptying their glasses.

Louisa resorted to small talk. Clare tried to play along, but their usual, easy camaraderie was lost, and Clare found an excuse to leave soon afterwards.

*

CLARE WAS STILL bristling when she got home. She dumped her bags, and then thumped and bumped her way around the kitchen as she made an inadvisable late-night coffee.

She carried her mug through to the living room, collapsed onto the sofa, and laid her head on its cushion. She muttered at the ceiling, “Well, that was a spectacularly crap evening.”

How dared Louisa question her like that! About her sexual orientation!

She switched on the television and stared unseeingly at the screen as she tried and failed to get everything Louisa had suggested out of her head. The questions, her discomfort, and Louisa’s insinuations and downright accusations spun around and around and refused to leave.

She couldn’t cast aside the seeds of the idea Louisa had planted, so she drained her mug and parked it on the coffee table. She picked up her iPad and pecked aggressively at the screen to open Safari.

She stared at the browser.

She took a deep breath and stared some more.

She didn’t want to do this.

Or did she?

She did. She had to know.

She began to type a word into the address bar.

Asexual.

Chapter Four

THE MORE CLARE read, the more her palms sweated and heart thumped, and the more she thought, *It's describing me.*

She got up, paced around the room, sat down again, and returned to her reading. This time, once she began, she didn't stop.

There were other people like her out there. If one per cent of the population was asexual, that meant... She did some rapid arithmetic. Population of the world: seven billion. More? But seven billion made the maths simple. One per cent of seven billion was seventy million people. Population of the UK: seventy million. Give or take. So that would mean, seven hundred thousand asexuals in the UK alone.

There would be twenty-five thousand asexuals in Greater Manchester, five thousand in the City of Manchester. Was that right? Clare checked. Yes, and that was a lot of people. Okay, so some of those people were children, but even so.

Thousands of asexuals, all feeling—or not feeling—the way she did. She wasn't broken, or wrong, or any of the things that in unguarded moments crossed her mind. She must have walked past people like herself on the street, and she hadn't known. Had never imagined.

She wanted to shout her new understanding from the rooftops. Instead, she stayed up, scouring the internet for nuggets of information until the silly wee hours turned into something not so wee, and she dragged herself off to bed.

*

WITH DAYLIGHT CAME a sense of caution and, thanks to her lack of sleep, a foot-dragging, brain-draining fatigue.

Clare made it to the lecture theatre with barely a second to spare before nine o'clock. She struggled to concentrate, so the class she delivered was far below her usual standard. Her brain was mush. Every time her mind wandered the teensiest bit, it screamed internally, "I'm asexual!" and she worried she might forget herself and scream the words out loud.

Concentrate, she thought. Concentrate on the Poor Allotments Management Act (1873).

After two hours of standing in the windowless lecture theatre, going through the motions of imparting knowledge to thirty-nine undergraduates, Clare scarcely remembered a word she had said. She disconnected her laptop from the projector and set off to her office, which was in a different building, a brisk five-minute walk away.

She winced as she stepped outdoors, the low-slung sun a painfully bright contrast to the lecture theatre's artificial lighting. She paused, blinked the glare away, and stifled a yawn.

There was warmth in the winter sun, so she closed her eyes and took a few moments to enjoy the feel of its rays on her face. Some tension that she hadn't been aware of left her shoulders.

"Clare!"

Clare looked around.

"I was hoping I might catch you." Sam voiced the statement like a tentative question.

“What’s up?”

“Do you have time for coffee and a chat?”

The mention of coffee leapt out at Clare. “Music to my ears,” she said. “I was heading to the department, anyway.”

“No,” said Sam. “I meant somewhere away from the department.”

Curiosity piqued, Clare said, “Oh?”

“I want...need...someone to talk to.”

“Okay. Beans Are Us?”

“Fine,” said Sam, relieved.

Although the coffee shop was bustling at eleven fifteen, Clare and Sam managed to find a table tucked away in a dimly lit corner that offered a modicum of peace and privacy.

“I’m sorry to talk to you about this. I probably should talk to Ben, but...”

Clare filled in the gaps. Ben was a great supervisor, academically speaking, but he wasn’t always the best at the personal support aspect of the job. Plus, there was always his lack of discretion to consider.

Sam got to the point. “I heard that Angela is pregnant.”

“That’s right.”

“I was wondering... This sounds opportunistic...but do you know whether there’s any chance of a temporary job?”

Clare felt odd, having a normal conversation when everything about her was in a state of flux. She was amazed that Sam hadn’t picked up on the thoughts that she was sure

she was broadcasting: asexual; asexual; asexual. Clare said, “Maternity cover, you mean?”

“Yes.”

Clare sighed. “I honestly don’t know, but I wouldn’t get my hopes up, if I were you. There may be some teaching hours, but more likely her second- and third-year courses won’t be offered next year. And her administration and supervision will get divvied up among the rest of us.”

“Oh, well,” sighed Sam. “I guess I’ll have to keep on looking.”

“You’re hoping to submit your thesis soon, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I’ve only got a couple more chapters to finish and the introduction and conclusion to write, and then the final edits. I should get it in by April, at the latest.”

“And you’re worrying about what you’re going to do after that?”

“Yes. I don’t want to move away, but, unless something comes up soon, I may have to. Ricky—”

“Your boyfriend, right?”

Sam nodded. “Ricky doesn’t get it. My writing up—the hours and the stress—is putting a strain on our relationship. Any talk of having to move for my career makes things worse.”

“I’m sorry,” said Clare sincerely. “I wish I could be more help.”

*

AVEN—THE ASEXUAL Visibility and Education Network—hosted a large online forum which was frequented by a lot of intense people. Intense *young* people seeking a level of self-awareness that Clare, at the same age, hadn't thought to look for. She envied them.

There were discussions about labels. There were so many labels! They were so confusing! There was an academic paper in there somewhere, begging to be written: "Labels: self-indulgence or an aid to self-validation?" Then again, possibly someone had already written it.

Attached to the label discussions were mentions of "special snowflakes", which sent Clare running to check the Urban Dictionary. She revisited the Urban Dictionary to find out what "Netflix and chill" meant. In turn, that led to her raising her eyebrows and muttering a perplexed "Really?" under her breath. Apparently, anything and everything had a double meaning in the hands of "sexuals", even the most innocuous phrases.

She found herself remembering her school days and all the jokes and innuendoes that had flown over her head. Her classmates and brother had teased her mercilessly as a result. Her parents had teased her, too, but they had been nicer about it.

She found an entire forum devoted to "Older Asexuals", which included a discussion thread called, "For 20-somethings getting off the ground". Since when had twenty-somethings been old?

When she posted for the first time, she found herself the recipient of large quantities of virtual cake, and she

experienced a heady sense of belonging. When she wrote about her relief at finding other people like her, she was inundated with yet more pictures of cake.

There were some things, though, that she still wasn't ready to discuss, not even with people known only by usernames and avatars. The fact that she was a forty-something virgin was one of them. Over time, her shame had become ingrained, and she couldn't shake her belief that people wouldn't understand, or wouldn't believe her, or would outright ask how that was even possible. Losing one's virginity was an adolescent rite of passage. How had she not?

She'd tried. She'd wanted to, at least on an intellectual level, and she'd come close, once, or twice.

That she never had had been one more thing marking her out as broken and setting her apart from the rest of humanity. Until now.

Now, here was a community of people who shared similar life experiences.

She had long believed that she hadn't met the right person. Her inability to find a special someone to fill the partner-shaped hole in her being had depressed her. She'd never considered that not only did such a person not exist but neither did the hole.

There was no hole.

She was whole.

Whole.

Not wired for a boyfriend or girlfriend. Sex wasn't in her DNA. The right person for her might turn out to be no person

at all.

That didn't make her broken or a failure, only different. Different in a way that had led her to a community of people who were the same.

*

BY THE TIME Thursday came around, Clare had mostly come to terms with her disappointment at Kyle Jones's cancellation. At least he had a worthwhile excuse: his partner had gone into labour earlier than expected. According to the grapevine, the baby, a boy, had been delivered safely and was doing splendidly for someone who was in an incubator and being fed oxygen through a tube.

Closer to home, the week's seminar would have been cancelled had someone not stepped into the breach. Clare had not expected that someone to be Hugo Atkinson.

Clare might have skipped the seminar except for the unspoken expectation that everyone attend if possible. By contrast, the open invitation to go to the staff bar afterwards was genuinely optional; the evenings usually turned out to be convivial, even if there was a lot of shoptalk.

A particularly arduous teaching load—which she had been struggling to balance with journal deadlines, marking, supervising, and administration even before she'd spent several nights reading about asexuality—a blacked out and airless room, and Atkinson's style of delivery took their toll on Clare.

She listened to the beginning of Atkinson's presentation, executed with his trademark blend of pomposity and drone,

but lost track somewhere in the middle. She didn't think she nodded off, not so anyone else would notice, but she put so much of her energy into keeping her eyes open that she failed to take in what he said. At times, her eyeballs rolled upwards as she struggled to keep her eyelids from closing. She only awoke properly when a desultory round of applause and the scraping of chairs heralded the end of the session.

*

“GOD!” SAID BRENDAN, a first-year postgraduate student, who had previously been an undergraduate in the department. “His seminars are every bit of a snooze fest as his lectures were!” Brendan was nursing his first pint, but he spoke with the injudicious freedom that most people saved until after drinks three or four. Brendan was an extrovert who, bright as he was, had never learned to filter his thoughts and words.

The post-seminar drinkers had pushed a couple of the staff bar's small, square tables together, and had huddled around them in a tight group. Clare was sitting on a round stool, which was only marginally less comfortable than the hard banquette being shared by several of their number.

“I was surprised that Atkinson volunteered to fill in today,” admitted Clare. “I can't remember the last time he talked to us.”

“I heard that he prefers to give talks elsewhere, at conferences, or at other institutions,” said Sara, another postgraduate. She was also in her first year. Having done her undergraduate studies elsewhere, she was still learning her way around the department's personalities. “Something about it being more prestigious?”

“You know why he did it, of course,” said Ben invitingly. Clare flashbacked to their unsatisfactory conversation two days before.

“No. Tell us.” Sam’s words were echoed by the other postgrads. Clare didn’t add her own voice to the mix, preferring to wait silently for the answer.

Ben leaned into the group as if imparting a huge secret and said, “He’s got his eye on Professor Buonamici’s job.”

“Ooooh!” said Clare, drawing out the syllable into a long and heartfelt realisation.

“Atkinson as head of department?” said Sam. “I can’t see it, myself.”

Neither could Clare. Or maybe she didn’t want to see it. However, that explained all Atkinson’s strange behaviours as well as why, over the last couple of weeks, Colin Adams had been even chummier with him than usual. Adams had been indulging in some pre-emptive schmoozing.

It also explained Ben’s behaviour. For some reason, he found things like petty departmental politics to be endlessly entertaining, and he followed the posturing and jockeying for position with the same level of interest avid fans reserved for their favourite sports.

Clare hated sports.

“We used to play Atkinson bingo to keep ourselves awake in his classes,” said Brendan.

“What’s Atkinson bingo?” asked Sam.

Clare wasn't sure that it was entirely proper for her to hear this, but she was curious. There were a lot of things about Atkinson that she found curious, principal among them, why the university—and the academic community, more widely—put up with him.

“We'd each have a scoresheet, and we'd tick off each Atkinson cliché. Everyone would put money into a pot, and whoever had the most complete bingo card at the end of the two hours would win enough to buy a coffee.”

“That's terrible!” said Clare, hoping students didn't do the same thing in her lectures.

“Not really. It gave us something to focus on, and it forced us to concentrate on what he was saying. Atkinson bingo was a great learning aid if you think about it.”

“If you say so.”

“What was on the list?” asked Sam. The rest of the table leaned forward eagerly.

“Um... Let me see. There were things he'd say, like, ‘As I first postulated...’ and ‘In my highly influential book...’ and ‘When I was on Channel Four’—”

“That's a good one,” interjected Ben amidst the more general volley of laughter.

“Then there were the things he'd do: wearing that brown tie, wearing a cravat, pointing and shouting at a student...”

The laughter snowballed with each additional item. Clare shouldn't laugh. It was highly unprofessional, but, oh, it was funny! Plus, it distracted her from the niggling voice in her head that refused to stop screaming, “Asexual! Ace! Asexual.”

Now the novelty had worn off, the voice had become annoying.

Brendan's list continued, "Coming into the lecture theatre, carrying a half-eaten Danish pastry because the no food and drink signs don't apply to him. Leaving an empty coffee cup behind at the end of the lecture. Making an offensive comment about the LGBT community, ethnic minorities, religion, or women, with a bonus point if followed by 'Oops, I'm not allowed to say such things these days, am I?'"

Brendan ran out of things to list, and Ben offered to get the next round in. As she went to the bar to help Ben carry things, Clare wondered if she'd ever be able to talk to Atkinson again without running through the checklist in her head.

By the time Ben was halfway through his second pint, he had become even more garrulous than usual. "Atkinson has been passed over for promotion a few times. He's been a reader for a while, but that coveted chair continues to elude him. Rumour has it, when Professor Buonamici was appointed instead of him, Atkinson was so furious he went on a rampage. Depending on who tells the story, he went on a bender and vomited or pissed on one of the university's flowerbeds, or on the wheels of the dean's car. Or something. I've never managed to get the full details or find out if any of it is true at all. But I like to think it is."

So, Clare realised with guilty pleasure, did she.

Chapter Five

SATURDAY MORNINGS ARE the best! Clare carried her first mug of the day through to the living room. She sat on the sofa, curled her feet next to her bottom, and tucked the hem of her dressing gown around them. She cradled the mug with both hands and took an appreciative sip.

She took her time on Saturday mornings, savouring the feeling of the weekend stretching ahead of her. This Saturday, given the week she'd had, she moved more sluggishly than usual. There were plenty of things she ought to tackle—laundry; shopping; the backlog of housework—and more things that she would have liked to do, but none of them needed to be done yet.

She liked Sunday mornings, too, but, by then, all the ought-to-dos began to press in, either demanding definite action or instilling guilt because they would get left for yet another week.

Clare glanced around. When had she last dusted? Not recently, judging from the layer of grey on the television stand and on the bookshelves. It was even longer since she had got the furniture polish out. She shrugged and refused to worry about it. Instead, she took another drink and allowed herself to enjoy being lazy.

She was two-thirds of the way through her coffee when her mobile phone rang. She untangled her limbs, reached over to root around in her shoulder bag, picked up the phone, and hesitated when she saw the caller ID.

Louisa.

For a petty moment, Clare was tempted to let the call go to voicemail. However, that would just postpone the inevitable; they'd been friends for nearly forever and they would make peace eventually. That was one of the immutable laws of the universe, so they might as well do it sooner rather than later.

Clare swiped the screen to accept the call, put the phone to her ear, and said coolly, "Hey, Louisa."

Without preamble, Louisa said, "About last Tuesday. I think I may have gone too far."

Clare didn't reply, but she didn't hang up. Instead, she waited to see what Louisa would say next.

"I didn't mean to upset you. I'm sorry."

Clare took a deep breath, then said quietly, "It's okay."

"It is?"

"Yeah. I think you may have been right."

"Really?"

Why was Louisa surprised? She had been the one to recognise the possibility in the first place. "Yes. I've done some research—"

"Of course you have," said Louisa drily. "Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"—and I think I might be...you know...ace. Asexual." Why was she so tentative? A few days ago, her impulse had been to out herself to the world. She had accepted her new identity, in the privacy of her own head, at least. But there was something about saying the words to someone else that made her doubt herself and worry about the reaction she might get.

Which was stupid.

Wasn't it?

Louisa was her oldest, closest friend in the whole world, and if anyone would support her in this, it would be Louisa, right? Plus, Louisa wouldn't be shocked by, or disapproving of, something she had suggested, would she?

“Go on,” invited Louisa. “What did you find out?”

Clare gathered her courage together and said, “I found a book. And some articles. There's even a whole online community. And I've been reading accounts other people have written about their experiences. Now I know there are thousands of people like me out there, and I'm not alone. It's a lot to take in. What you did on Tuesday brought things to a head. Made me face some things I should have faced a long time ago. I suppose I should be thanking you, but I hope you'll understand that I'm not ready to do that yet.”

“So, I did upset you.”

“Yes. You did,” said Clare. “I was pretty hurt and angry when I got home.”

“I'm sorry.”

“I know.”

*

OVER THE NEXT few weeks, Clare followed her normal routines. She went into work where she tried—and failed—not to get sucked into university squabbles and politics, and where Atkinson continued to be a visible presence around the department. Now she knew why, Clare stopped feeling

disconcerted by this and settled for being vaguely amused instead. She met with Louisa on Tuesdays, went to seminars and the bar on Thursdays, and continued to neglect her housework at the weekends.

While life went on much as before, Clare had changed. In her limited free time, she scoured the university's bibliographic databases for academic books and articles on asexuality. There wasn't much to find, and neither the library nor the university bookshop carried the few titles she managed to identify. To satisfy her voracious appetite for information, she had to overcome her usual academic snobbery and read more accessible material, ordered from sources online.

Now that the immediate euphoria that had accompanied what she'd come to think of as an epiphany had settled into a quieter acceptance, Clare felt better about herself, and more confident, than she had in years. How insidiously damaging had her previous mind set, assumptions, and expectations been?

Casual conversations took on a different colour. She found herself questioning things she had never questioned before. For example, why did people's go-to conversational gambits on being introduced for the first time include "Are you married?" or "Do you have children?" Those questions had always stung her, but now she found herself interrogating the cultural biases involved in asking them in the first place.

Again and again, she was tempted to confess all. But, if she did speak out, what would the people she had known for years make of it? Would it be easier to come out to strangers than old acquaintances, friends, and family?

In the end, instead of telling everyone, she told no one.

*

THERE WAS A forum on AVEN that she found herself returning to time and again. She hadn't posted anything in it, but she kept visiting and wondering.

Meet-ups.

How tempting was the idea to meet asexuals in the real world! Even more tempting, a group met once a month in Manchester.

What would a meeting be like? As full of politics and questions as parts of the online site? Made up of earnest people half her age, or younger?

She sent a private message to the group's coordinator.

CuriousCat93, whose onscreen details identified him as being a homoromantic male, responded barely an hour later. He told her she would be welcome and nobody in the group would care how old she was so long as she didn't care either. While most of the group were younger, there was at least one person of a similar age to Clare who came along fairly regularly.

Thus reassured, Clare resolved to give the next Mancunian meet-up a try.

*

THE VENUE FOR the meet-up was in an area of the city that Clare seldom visited. These days, its houses and apartments were marketed at "pioneers wishing to claim a stake in one of the last urban frontiers". On the up the area might have been,

but it wasn't all the way there yet, and even after several waves of regeneration activity, whispers of the area's reputation for deprivation and crime still lingered.

Feeling a thrill of danger, Clare caught a bus into the city's inner suburbs and, after consulting the map app on her phone, walked the last two hundred yards to The Spinners' Arms.

A solitary survivor from the Edwardian period, The Spinners' Arms stood out like a filled tooth among shiny new implants. Once, the pub would have been part of a streetscape of terraces. Now, it stood detached from but sandwiched between a pair of modern apartment blocks.

Clare stood on the pavement for a few moments, tempted to chicken out and head home. Instead, she told herself not to be a coward, straightened her shoulders, and walked into the pub.

She glanced around, and must have looked lost, because the barman said, "If you're looking for the aces, they're in the snug."

"Thanks," she said, forcing an appreciative smile. How did he know? Then again, Clare was noticeably younger than any of his other customers, and female to boot, so undoubtedly appeared as out of place in this bar as Louisa did in the Quill.

She walked across the slightly sticky floor and pushed open the door to the snug. She might have been a good thirty years younger than the men in the public bar, but the people gathered in the snug made her feel old. And conventional.

The snug was only slightly less austere than the public bar, and the only thing snug about it was its size. No fire burned

welcomingly in the grate. The ceiling was yellow with age and nicotine, which meant it hadn't been painted since before the smoking ban had come into effect. A couple of empty ashtrays sat on the mantelpiece, perhaps testament to the landlord's impotent hope that UKIP would be elected some glorious day in the future and repeal the anti-smoking legislation. In places, the varnish on the wooden counter had been rubbed away and a long succession of bar huggers had worn its wood smooth. Its brass foot rail was dull and dented, and the wooden floor was pitted and scratched. If the snug's stools and benches had a couple of millimetres extra cushioning over their counterparts in the other room, it wasn't obvious.

“Ah! Are you HistoryRules?”

“Yes.” The username Clare had chosen sounded better in her head than out loud. She wished she'd had the imagination to come up with something pithier or funnier.

“Hi! I'm CuriousCat93, more usually known as Tristan.”

Tristan was cheerful, good-looking, and blond, and Clare guessed that the 93 in his username referred to the year of his birth.

“Let me introduce you around.” Tristan gestured. “Matt.” Clare got a fleeting impression of a slightly taller, brown-haired man before Tristan moved on to, “Ollie. Preferred pronouns are they and their.” Again, Clare only had time for the briefest of first impressions. Tanned skin, intense eyes, spikey hair, and a come-fight-me expression.

“This is Jack.” Jack was thin with unkempt mousy hair and the remnants of pubescent acne. “Zoe.” Zoe had long black hair rinsed through with orange, perfect brown skin, and

extravagant makeup, which included glitter on her cheeks. “Molly. She’s not a regular, but she tries to come along whenever she’s in the city.”

Molly waved vaguely in Clare’s direction. Her hair was even more colourful than Zoe’s, and her huge earrings and clothes screamed 1980s. Her makeup distracted attention away from, rather than hid, the age lines around her eyes and mouth.

Tristan finished by pointing to “Janice.”

“Hello,” said Janice. Janice had short, dark hair flecked with grey, a kind face, and tired eyes.

“Everyone,” said Tristan, “this is HistoryRules, from AVEN, also known as...?”

“Clare.”

“Get yourself a drink and come and join us. I recommend the Knobber’s End.”

“The what?”

“Knobber’s End. It’s one of the real ales. This place is famous for ’em.”

“Knobber’s End,” muttered Clare to herself. “Right.” Apparently, today was going to be a day of firsts.

She retraced her way to the public bar, where her request for a pint of Knobber’s was met with nods of approval from the regulars.

The barman placed the drink lovingly on the counter. White foam formed on the ale’s surface and dribbled down the glass’s sides as the liquid turned from cloudy to clear. Clare picked up the glass and took a tentative sip. “It’s good.”

“Don’t act so surprised,” grumped the barman good-naturedly. “I’m guessing Tris recommended it?”

“Yes.” Clare nodded.

“He knows his ale, that boy. And yet he wants to waste his life working for some swanky management consultancy.”

Clare chuckled politely, said, “Thanks,” and returned to the snug.

Molly and Janice were deep in conversation about something while the others were setting up for a game. A wave of nervous loneliness washed over Clare, and she wished she were out with Louisa instead.

Tristan pointed to a seat and said, “We’re going to play Skull.” From that, Clare inferred that she was expected to join in.

A quick summary of the rules later, the game got underway. Clare couldn’t remember the last time she’d had a chance to play anything like this, which was a shame, since it proved to be a lot of fun.

After a few rounds of Skull, Tristan, Matt, and Jack moved to play a card game, while Clare, Zoe, and Ollie refilled their glasses and talked. Matt invited Janice and Molly to join them, but they refused to be distracted from their discussion of seed potatoes, plugs, and catalogues.

Clare found herself sitting on the periphery of a conversation dominated by Zoe, who spoke loudly and waved her hands around to emphasise her words. Were her mannerisms driven by overenthusiasm, nerves, a natural

flamboyance, or something else? Maybe she had had one beer too many and was an exuberant drunk.

Clare listened politely as Zoe explained for Clare's benefit that she was an actor. "I've got an audition for a film. It could be a big break for me. The part is fabulous, and it would get me known. Voiceover work pays the bills, but I didn't become an actor to be an anonymous voice. I want to be a celebrity, you know? I want to do more than repertory and the occasional commercial. I don't want my biggest role to be the face of online bingo for the rest of my life. Have you seen my bingo ad?"

Clare had not.

*

AS THE AFTERNOON progressed, Clare learned that her earlier speculation about the landlord hadn't been wide of the mark. The landlord turned out to be old-school Labour, not a UKIP supporter, and his fervour for trade unionism was only matched by his passion for real ale and a good pipe. And, yes, he would have welcomed a repeal of the laws on smoking.

She also found out that the real ale was one of the reasons why the meet-ups were held at The Spinners' Arms. That and the fact that Tristan's grandfather owned, and his uncle ran, the pub, and the aces were allowed to take over the snug for as long as they needed. Neither uncle nor grandfather claimed to understand what they called, "All this politically correct pride rubbish," but they loved Tristan, and that was reason enough to let him use the space for free.

By four o'clock, the games were over, and the group merged into one.

Jack, words slurring and gestures uncoordinated, confided in them his trials and tribulations. “I thought that there was something wrong with me! I mean, I thought I must be ugly. I’m not ugly, am I?”

“No, no. You look...attractive. Objectively speaking,” said Ollie.

“Objectively speaking?”

“Your face is symmetrical and evenly proportioned. Your nose is straight. But I’m hardly a good judge of what other people find appealing, am I?” There was general laughter in the room. “Maybe Matt and Tris can give you a more informed opinion.”

“Oh, yes,” said Matt. “You’re attractive. But not as attractive as ol’ Tris, here!”

Matt and Tris... Oh! They were a couple! Even knowing that Tristan was homoromantic, Clare hadn’t picked up on that.

“I don’t attract people,” continued Jack, “and I’m not attracted by other people. So, I must be ace, right?”

“Possibly,” said Tristan, not terribly interested.

“But sometimes I don’t know what to think. I could be a late developer, right?”

“Possibly,” said Tristan again.

“I can’t talk to my parents. They wouldn’t get it. They’re ancient.”

Clare raised her eyebrows. How old was Jack? Nineteen? Twenty? Surely his parents weren’t that old.

Jack picked up on her scepticism. He elaborated, “They were old when they had me—in their forties. They’re in their sixties, now.”

“That doesn’t make them old,” said Molly defensively. “Some sixty-year-olds are pretty with it.”

Clare thought of her own parents and agreed. Jack spoke from the perspective of youth.

“It’s not just their age,” argued Jack. “It’s their attitudes, like they were born old. They’re not like you.”

“How old do you think I am?” asked Molly. “I’m not sixty, yet!” She winked and laughed, which made Clare suspect Molly wasn’t far off getting a free bus pass.

“Their attitudes are right out of the 1970s, all casual racism and homophobia. I love them, don’t get me wrong, but sometimes they’re embarrassing. They voted for Brexit!”

“It’s not only racists who want Brexit,” Tristan objected, making Clare wonder how he had voted.

“I know, but... You should have seen how they reacted when I said I would have voted to remain if I could.”

Clare did a bit of mental arithmetic and calculated Jack’s age, based on the knowledge that he’d been too young to vote in 2016. Gosh, he was young!

“So, you see, I can’t tell them about this. They wouldn’t understand.”

Well, neither had Clare, until recently.

*

WHEN MOLLY MADE a move to leave, saying that she needed to rush for a train, Clare took the opportunity to escape with her. They talked as they rode on the bus to the city centre. Rather, Molly talked, and Clare listened.

Molly was the twice-divorced mother of two. She had loved her husbands, but ultimately neither marriage had survived because of the partners' differences in sexual appetite.

“Looking back,” said Molly, “I never should have married either of them, but I thought I'd get over all my hang-ups, you know? Or my husbands would be happy to do without. Of course I didn't, and they weren't. The stupid thing is, I got married not once, but twice. You'd think I'd have learned after number one, but, oh, no! At least I've got my beautiful children to show for it all. If I'd known what I know now, I wouldn't have them, so maybe it was worth it. When I learned about asexuality, well... I've never been happier, and I've met some fabulous new people. I get to travel all over the country to meet-ups. I marched in my first Pride last year which was incredible.”

Molly said, “So, tell me about yourself. Oh, here we are.”

Clare got off the bus with a profound sense of relief. She'd been overwhelmed by Molly's candid torrent of confidences, and Clare had had no desire to match them.

She took her time getting to the stand in Piccadilly Gardens from which she would catch her final bus home, detouring to buy a large and strong takeout Americano from one of the many coffee shops that peppered the city centre.

To her surprise and almost horror, she found herself queuing next to Janice. For a moment, Clare considered pretending that she hadn't seen her. However, politeness won out, and she found herself saying, "Excuse me? You were at the meet-up. Janice, right?"

"Yes. That was your first time?" Her intonation turned the statement into a question, as if there were doubt.

"We didn't get a chance to talk properly earlier, so, pleased to meet you."

"Likewise," said Janice. "So? What did you think?"

"Honestly?"

Janice nodded.

"Everyone was friendly. But I guess I was hoping for a life-affirming, empowering experience. Instead..." Clare shrugged.

"Instead?"

"It was an afternoon in the pub with a bunch of strangers."

"You're feeling a bit...flat?"

Clare nodded.

Janice smiled sympathetically. "My first couple of times were like that too."

"How long have you been going to the meet-ups?"

"A couple of years, on and off. I can't always get away. Plus, I sometimes find the meet-ups awkward because I used to know one of the other members in a professional capacity, and I can't forget... It's embarrassing, and I doubt either of us

want to be reminded of what happened. But I can't make myself stay away."

The bus pulled up at the stand. They waited for its passengers to pile off, then got on themselves, Janice first.

Janice headed down the aisle of the lower deck and sat on a double seat, next to a window.

"May I sit here?" Clare gestured to the space next to her.

"Of course," said Janice, possibly surprised that Clare had not assumed that her company would be welcome.

They made getting-to-know-you small talk as the bus headed south, and Clare learned that Janice had given up teaching to be better able to care for her elderly father. Janice didn't say much but left Clare with the impression that he was physically and mentally draining. Janice counted herself lucky to hold down a part-time job in a florist's.

Clare pointed out the history department as they went past the university and answered almost truthfully when Janice asked whether she enjoyed her work.

They talked a bit about favourite foods as they passed the curry houses on Wilmslow Road. Then the conversation flagged.

The bus let passengers on and off at a couple of stops before Janice picked the conversation up again. "How far are you going?"

"Not much further. Fallowfield." To clarify, Clare added, "Just past Sainsbury's. You?"

"Didsbury."

“Nice.” Clare tried not to sound too impressed.

“I suppose so. The area’s great, even if the house is cold, draughty, and needs everything done to it.”

Clare stood, readying herself to get off the bus, and said goodbye.

“Maybe I’ll see you again?” said Janice uncertainly.

Clare nodded noncommittally. “Maybe.”

Chapter Six

“YOU CAME BACK!” said Janice happily. “I wasn’t sure you would.”

“I saw the meet-up on AVEN, and I thought I’d give it another go.” Clare’s lips lifted into a small, shy smile. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Likewise.”

They had arrived punctually, which turned out to be earlier than any of the others, and they made slightly inane chitchat while they waited for the rest of the group to arrive.

Zoe arrived next.

“Hi, Zoe,” said Clare. Mindful of the previous meet-up conversation, she asked, “How did the audition go?”

“I got cast as a zombie,” said Zoe morosely.

“You got cast? That’s great! Isn’t it?”

“I was auditioning for the lead!”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh. I got cast as lead zombie instead. From intrepid zombie killer to zombie in the space of one audition.”

“How? Why?” asked Janice, which was nice of her. Clare had assumed that Zoe hadn’t been good enough, or that she hadn’t been right for the part, and had been ready to let the conversation drop.

“The casting director told me I’m not destined to be a superhero, but I’ll make a fantastic member of the undead, and

he'll give me a great non-death scene. Apparently, he spotted my friend, Max, and me mucking around while we were waiting for our auditions, and he thought my performance was 'compelling'."

"What were you doing?" Maybe Clare wasn't ready to leave the topic alone, after all.

"Zombie impressions in the canteen."

Clare couldn't help herself. She laughed.

Janice also found Zoe's story amusing. "Look on the bright side," she said cheerfully. "You've been discovered!"

"Maybe. But I've also been typecast as a zombie. I'll forever be known as the zombie girl." At least now she sounded more doubtful than glum.

Ollie's arrival diverted attention away from Zoe's story. "Matt and Tristan will be in, in a mo. They're having a quick chat with Pete."

"Pete?" asked Clare.

"Tristan's uncle. The barman."

"Ah." Clare hadn't caught the name before.

As if on a perfect cue, Tristan and Matt chose that moment to come in. Jack arrived a few minutes after, holding on to a pint of Knobber's. He nodded a hello to everyone, then sat down quietly.

Matt stood and cleared his throat to get everyone's attention. "Now that everyone's here, there's something Tristan and I would like to float past you." The various members of the group murmured curiously. Once Matt was

sure that they were listening, he said, “We’ve been thinking, it’s great to meet here, play games, and chat, but maybe we should do some other things as well. You know, ring the changes a bit? What do you think?”

The suggestion was met with cautious approval. “What do you have in mind?” asked Ollie.

“I don’t know yet. Maybe we could go to the cinema, or concerts, or something?”

“Museums? Art galleries?” suggested Janice hopefully.

“Perhaps,” said Tristan, but he wasn’t thrilled.

Matt pointed his thumb in Tristan’s direction. “He’ll do anything interactive. He loves to go places where there are lots of buttons to press. He’s not a fan of the look-don’t-touch kind of museum, though.”

Jack and Ollie agreed with Tristan.

“Clubbing?” suggested Zoe.

That idea was met with even less enthusiasm than museums. Ollie and Zoe didn’t like the same music. Janice liked to hear people talk when she went out. Clare didn’t like to dance, and, on the off chance that they did go dancing, Jack fretted about whether everyone would be able to get past the bouncers; what would happen if some of their number got left outside?

Janice suggested the symphony, but, again, taste in music was an issue. Clare’s suggestion of the theatre was met with “It depends on the play.”

After a generous quarter of an hour of unproductive discussion, and with gloom beginning to set in, Matt said desperately, “How about everyone goes away and thinks about it, and we kick ideas around again next month?”

Matt’s proposal met with more enthusiasm than any of the suggestions, and the discussion was parked, at least for now.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a blur of board games, jokes, chat, and Knobber’s. A wave of disappointment washed over Clare as they ran out of time. She liked Settlers of Catan and would have relished another chance to beat Matt at his own game.

*

AS THEY WERE packing up to leave, Janice tentatively asked Clare, “Are you in a rush to get home?”

“Not particularly, no. Why?”

“I was wondering, do you fancy going to get something to eat? Dad’s in respite care this week. You know, to give me a break?”

Clare nodded an acknowledgement.

“So, what do you think? You want to go somewhere?”

“Sure. Why not? Do you have anywhere in mind?”

The question stumped Janice. Apparently, she had made the invitation on impulse. They discussed options as they headed for the bus.

Neither of them was clued into the local restaurant scene, but neither of them was in the mood to eat in one of the chains. Clare said doubtfully, “I recently heard good things about a

place called Morreli's. The restaurant's been there forever. It looks nothing from the outside, but rumour has it the new chef is excellent."

A colleague had once told Clare a story about Morreli's. An Italian customer had protested at the restaurant's misspelling of a common Italian surname. He'd tried the food, met the owner, and had said, "Don't ever change that name! Your food and your spelling deserve each other!" Kind people described Morreli's spag bog as legendary, while others less charitably described it as notorious, and Morreli's ice cream had nothing in common with gelato.

Now, though, if the rumours were true, Morreli's was on the cusp of change. Conversation in the staff bar indicated that the new chef had both talent and ambition and might drag the restaurant into the twenty-first century.

"Morreli's?" asked Janice in surprise. "In Withington?"

"You know it?"

"I can't believe it's still there. Wow... Dad used to take me when I was still at school." She shook her head in amazement. "I haven't thought about that place in years." The smile on her face suggested her memories were fond ones.

Thus, they got off the bus together a couple of stops beyond Clare's building. They turned onto, and walked along, Mauldeth Road.

If the cluster of shops on Mauldeth Road had ever been prosperous, it had been a long time ago. Now, some of the premises were empty, others had found new uses as chiropody

clinics or tanning salons, and the few shops that remained were barely ticking over.

They found Morreli's tucked between a chiropractor and a charity shop, and as soon as they went through the front door, Clare realised that, if there were plans to drag Morreli's into the twenty-first century, nothing visible had happened yet. Clare's heart sank as she took in the worn burgundy carpet, curtains, napkins, dark brown wooden furniture, and fittings. How terrible had her suggestion been that they come here? However, with a huge, delighted grin, Janice said, "Oh, my God! This place hasn't changed a bit!" so maybe things would turn out all right, after all.

"Good evening, ladies. A table for two?" The nametag on the waiter's shirt identified him as Lazlo. To Clare's untrained ear, his slight accent sounded Eastern European.

They nodded.

As the table by the window was already taken by an elderly couple, the only other customers so early in the evening, Lazlo picked a couple of menus up from a small counter-cum-bar, and showed them to another, set further back in the restaurant, pressed against a wall.

He waited until they had taken their seats before he gave them a menu each and asked, "Can I get you anything to drink, while you choose?"

"I'll have a sparkling mineral water," said Janice.

Mindful of the amount of Knobber's she had drunk that afternoon, Clare said, "Same here, thank you."

Lazlo wandered off, leaving them to peruse the menus and their surroundings.

A couple of decades of candle wax had dribbled and accreted down the sides of the Mateus Rosé bottles that were being used as candle holders. The wax had coalesced with dust and grime to turn to shades of dirty grey. The battered placemats depicted black-and-white images of nineteenth-century life in Manchester. Judging from the ones on their table, the pictures focused more on horse-drawn omnibuses, trams, and municipal buildings than factories, slums, and waifs. From a social history standpoint, Clare found waifs more interesting, but maybe their images wouldn't have provided a suitable ambience for a meal out.

“The décor isn't the only thing that's a throwback to the 1970s. Have you seen the menu?” Janice asked.

Clare looked. The starters included melon, prawn cocktail, and chicken liver pâté. Black Forest gâteau and banana splits lingered on the dessert menu. The menus, themselves, were ancient, prices updated by the use of sticky labels and typewriter correction fluid.

Lazlo returned with their drinks. The mineral water arrived in undersized and overpriced bottles, but at least their glasses contained a couple of ice cubes and slices of lemon. Janice, in tune with Clare's uncharitable thoughts, asked, “May we have a jug of tap water too?”

Lazlo nodded, made a note on his pad, and asked, “Have you decided what you would like to eat?”

Responding to Clare's dubious frown, he said, “I'll give you a few more minutes. Personally, I recommend the

specials.” Lazlo gestured to a blackboard that was hanging next to the counter, and he winked as though he was letting them into a secret. “Chef pours his heart into those.”

Lazlo went to check on the couple at the window table, where the woman was trying to cajole the man into making a decision. “Chicken, darling? You like chicken, don’t you?” To Lazlo, she said apologetically, “He’ll have the chicken in a basket, and I’ll have the scampi.”

“Thank you.” Lazlo withdrew, presumably to pass the order on to the kitchen staff.

“As appealing as scampi and chips, chicken in a basket, and vegetable lasagne undoubtedly are,” said Janice, tapping her menu, “I think I like the idea of the goat cheese gnocchi in tomato sauce. Or... Why do all the specials have to sound so good?” She ended on a moan.

Lazlo returned with the jug of water and took their order. In the end, both Clare and Janice had chosen items off the board, Janice opting for the Cumberland sausage casserole with gravy, while Clare had gone for foil-baked salmon. Both came with sweet potato mash and seasonal vegetables.

Lazlo brought out the main courses for the window table and laid them out in front of the couple. “Be careful. The plates are hot.”

The man looked down, poked his plate with a forefinger, and asked querulously, “Why is my chicken in a basket not in its basket?”

“Because,” said the waiter with the patience of a saint, “the baskets were old, worn, and stained, so Chef has decided to

serve the chicken on plates from now on.”

“It’s not the same.” Was his bottom lip trembling?

“Of course it is,” said the woman, trying to jolly him along. “Look how beautifully served the food is! I’m sure it will be delicious!”

“It’s not the same. I miss my basket. I want my basket.” His voice began to rise in a distressed wail, and Clare forced herself to look away.

As their meal progressed, Clare began to suspect that there was policy and there was practice at Morreli’s, and practice undermined policy as often as possible. The owner liked things done as cheaply as he could get away with and to mark up everything as much as possible. By contrast, the chef and the waiter aspired to do things well. Thus, the tap water was served cheerfully and generously, with lashings of ice and lemon, whereas the mineral water had been dealt with in the most parsimonious manner possible. Similarly, when Lazlo brought out their meals, the items on the regular menu and the specials might as well have been sliced loaf and artisan bread in terms of presentation and quality.

As Clare and Janice ate, they shared more details about their lives.

“Mum left us years ago,” said Janice. “I was eight. My parents got divorced when divorce was still a bit scandalous. Mother lives with husband number three on the Costa del Sol. Dad retired years ago. He used to fill his time with gardening and petty local politics, but he struggles with anything much these days.”

Clare summoned up a mental image of a stooped man in a Harris Tweed sports coat and corduroy trousers. She wondered whether she was anywhere close to the mark.

“We’ve never talked about it properly, but I think Dad might also be somewhere on the ace spectrum,” Janice continued. “Mum isn’t. She’s embarrassing. And Felipe—husband *numero tres*—is a randy old goat.”

Clare laughed. Janice didn’t seem to mind.

“There you have it. Mum’s not around, and hasn’t been in decades, and Dad is old and needs help. I stayed home. Never really got on with my own life. You know?”

Clare wasn’t sure she did. She’d often worried she was stuck, wanting and failing to find The One and settle down, and until recently never questioning why she hadn’t been able to. But she had left home, taking out a mortgage of her own. Was that the same or different? She didn’t know. She settled on grunting a noncommittal “H’m.”

“The house is lovely, of course. But it needs everything done to it. We’re capital rich and cash poor, and Dad would never think of taking out a second mortgage.” Janice sighed. “Dad can’t manage the stairs these days, so he’s trapped on the ground floor, and what’s the point of having all that room when we only use a fraction of it? Sometimes I dream of moving somewhere smaller, cheaper, and warmer, but it would kill Dad to leave. He’s in familiar surroundings and, with the dementia, that’s a good thing.”

Clare talked a bit about her own family. Her mother and father still lived close by, but her brother lived in a north London suburb. Clare didn’t get on with her sister-in-law, so

she didn't see as much of William or his kids as she would have liked. To Clare, it was all terribly normal and boring, but Janice found it fascinating.

As Clare and Janice waited for their desserts, the couple from the window table prepared to leave. The woman escorted her companion to the toilet and, while he was inside, loitered in the restaurant. She came over to Janice and Clare and said, "I'm so sorry." She spoke quietly, for their ears only. "He's not usually like this, but he's having a bad day."

Clare caught sight of the look on Janice's face as Janice replied compassionately. "It's fine. I understand. Absolutely no need to apologise."

Clare nodded her agreement, as much for Janice's sake as for the woman's. What was life with Janice's father like?

"Thank you," whispered the woman, offering them both a grateful smile, which Clare did not deserve.

The elderly couple left, and a slightly younger crowd began to drift in. They all ordered from the specials board and resolutely avoided the house red.

Clare's earlier suspicions about policy and practice were confirmed when, at the end of the meal, Lazlo politely inquired whether they would like tea or coffee.

"Would you? If you were us?"

Lazlo leaned in. "Personally, I would choose to go home and make something more to my taste. But that's just me, you understand?"

They understood and declined.

Lazlo beamed at them. “Good choice. The blend is cheap, and the cups are small. But I must ask, you know?”

Clare grinned, suspecting that she did.

They left a generous gratuity in appreciation as much of the things they had been steered away from as for the delectables they had eaten.

*

CLARE LET THEM into the flat and headed into the kitchen. She was suddenly conscious of the morning’s breakfast things in the sink and the remnants of a hasty lunch still out on the counter. She filled the kettle and then did a quick reorganisation of the dirties in a vain attempt to mask her lack of domesticity.

Out of respect for the time of day, they both had decaf coffee, which they took through to the living room.

Janice looked around with interest.

“I’m sorry about the mess,” said Clare and, for once, she was. She didn’t mind so much when she was home alone, but with someone else in the flat, all her procrastination and lack of housework were suddenly and painfully apparent.

Janice waved the apology away and said, “Honestly, I find it reassuring. Houses that are too clean and tidy make me feel twitchy and give me an inferiority complex.”

Clare warmed to Janice even more.

“You’ve got a lot of books,” said Janice. “And... Oh! What are you working on?” She pointed towards a plastic tub that was brimming over with yarn, knitting, and notions.

“That?” said Clare. “That’s my latest UFO.”

Janice raised her eyebrows.

“Unfinished object. It was supposed to be a cardigan, but I’ve lost interest. I’m thinking of ripping the whole thing back and starting over.”

Inspired by Clare’s DVD and CD collection, they discussed films and music. They put on an eighties compilation, which prompted them to reminisce about their youths before they moved on to talk about hobbies.

When the CD finished, they became aware of sounds coming from elsewhere in the building.

“What’s all the noise?” asked Janice.

“Noise? This is quiet!” said Clare ruefully. “I’m guessing the students across the hall are out.”

Clare took the lull between CDs to ask whether Janice wanted another coffee. “Or,” she said, “I’ve got a bottle of Merlot and a bag of Kettle Chips?”

The Merlot and crisps won.

*

HALF A BOTTLE in, they found themselves discussing the meet-ups and their fellow aces.

“Ollie’s a bit...intense, isn’t...aren’t...they?” Clare said. She was still getting used to the pronouns and the verb conjugations.

“I admire that.” Janice leaned over and helped herself to more crisps.

“You do?”

“Yes. Ollie has the courage of their convictions, and they stand up for what they believe in. I’m not sure you can say that about many people.” Clare tilted her head as she considered that. Janice continued, pressing her point home. “Ollie does what they think is right, not what is most convenient. That may make them difficult to stomach sometimes, but if they make the rest of us think and question our actions and motives, maybe that’s not a bad thing.”

“You make Ollie sound like they’re our collective conscience.”

“Maybe they are. All the noise and rhetoric aside, a lot of what Ollie says makes sense.”

“You like them.”

“You’re surprised?”

“Well, pardon me for saying this, but I got the impression you were avoiding each other earlier.”

Janice sighed. “I don’t so much like Ollie as I admire them. But I doubt that they feel the same way about me.”

“Why not?”

But Janice shook her head, and Clare wished she hadn’t asked. She tried to recover the mood by saying, “What do you think of Zoe?”

Janice took a sip of her wine and said, “Zoe the zombie girl who does Zumba.”

“She does Zumba?”

“No idea, but that helps me to remember the other details. She looks as though she might. She obviously keeps fit.”

“I think she swims.”

“Maybe she does Aqua Zumba.”

“Is that a thing?”

“No idea. Seriously, though, I don’t know her well. She’s only been to a couple more meets than you, and we haven’t talked much.”

*

MAYBE CLARE HAD changed since her first meet-up. Maybe the way they worked around to the conversation made a difference. Maybe it was because this wasn’t Molly but Janice. But when, three-quarters of the way through the bottle, the conversation turned to aspects of their asexual experiences, Clare found herself able to share.

“My most awkward conversation? My sister-in-law telling me how I should go about losing my virginity.” It was worth telling Janice that to see the explosive way the red wine shot out of her mouth as she choked. Clare didn’t even care that some of the wine landed on herself.

Janice gagged, coughed, and exclaimed, “Oh, my God! What did you—she—say?”

“I don’t remember saying much. I remember how the conversation made me feel more than the actual words.”

“How do you mean?”

“She made me feel inadequate and stupid. And I thought what she said was crap. I didn’t see any way that I would do...

that...with anyone I didn't love."

"What did she say?"

"The gist was that I should find a fuck buddy who'd had plenty of experience and get it over with."

"Oh, my God!" Janice exclaimed again. Fortunately, she had no wine in her mouth this time.

"Okay, your turn. Your most embarrassing conversation?"

Janice considered for a moment. "This isn't really a conversation, but... There was a guy at a New Year's party once. I'd have been about twenty. He was working the room, having a grand old snog with all the women. He got around to me, and I was uncomfortable even before he put his mouth over mine. He tried to prise my lips open with his tongue, and I remember how wet and slimy and gross it was. When I wouldn't let him into my mouth, he pulled back and asked whether I was frigid." She shuddered. "Nobody else minded. They were all up for a spot of casual kissing." She shook her head. "I still don't understand. Plus, now I think about it, that incident raises all kinds of questions around consent."

"H'm," agreed Clare.

"Then," said Janice, "there was the bloke in the pub..."

"What bloke? What pub?"

"Mick, I think his name was. I used to be into *Dr Who*. Even went to a few conventions. Anyway, there was a group that got together once a month at a pub in town. And, one day, he was there. He made a pass at me."

"What did you do?"

“I knew him by name, and that he was married. I couldn’t believe that he was propositioning me barely two minutes after we’d met, so I told him, no, and I told him that he should think of his wife. Do you know what he said?”

Clare shook her head.

“He said, ‘Don’t you think you’re being unfair to all of us married men?’ I told him he should have considered that before he got married. I thought he was awful, and I didn’t understand his lack of self-control. Afterwards, I sat down with the group I’d gone there with, and they were all sniggering. One of them asked, ‘How did he ask you?’ Turns out, they knew exactly what he was like, and what he was going to do. I was furious with them, and I demanded to know why they hadn’t at least warned me. They said, ‘We knew you could look after yourself.’ They thought it was funny.”

The echoes of Janice’s hurt and anger rippled across the years, but then her lips twitched, and she said, “I suppose it was. I mean, he hit on an ace!” More soberly, she added, “His wife divorced him soon after. Can’t say I blame her.”

“Speaking of awful chat-up lines,” said Clare, “I knew a guy in hall, in my first year of uni. He asked whether I would sleep with him because he was desperate to lose his virginity and he said, ‘I’ve already been propositioned by Rupert Delaware, and if you turn me down, I might have to say yes.’ He wanted me to save him from being gay! Or bi. Or desperate, or something.”

“Well, how about this, then,” said Janice. “When I was in the sixth form, I used to hang around with a boy at lunchtime. We got invited to someone’s party. There was a DJ and music.

And, at the end of the evening, he asked if I wanted to dance. A slow dance, you know? We managed to wrap our arms around each other. He was shaking, he was so nervous. The whole situation was awkward. Then he said something. I don't remember what exactly. Turned out he thought we'd been dating for the previous six months! But I'd had no idea. We hadn't even held hands, let alone kissed. All we'd ever done was talk. Mostly about chemistry class, from what I can remember."

When they stopped laughing, Clare said, "How can people read one another so wrong?"

"Do you think most people—sexuals, I mean—have similar problems?"

"No idea. And I've never felt comfortable enough to ask."

Janice said, "I've never talked to anyone like this before. Not in so much detail."

"Me neither. It feels..."

"Good?"

*

LATER, IN BED, Clare lay on her back, staring at the streak of amber light on the ceiling cast by the streetlamp outside, and thought about secrets and about with whom she shared them. There had always been parts of her life she had shared with some people and not others, and there had been parts she had shared with nobody...until tonight.

Tonight, Clare and Janice had been open and honest with each other. For a few hours, Clare hadn't had to filter her thoughts or words, and she hadn't had to exhaust herself

anticipating and calculating appropriate responses. Until she'd discovered asexuality, she had never realised how much effort she put into such things.

Should she have bared her soul to Janice, whom she'd only met twice? What if Janice told—?

What if she did? It would be a betrayal of trust, yes, but other than the meet-ups, they moved in different circles. Even if Janice did tell anyone, there shouldn't be repercussions. Besides, would anyone else finding out be so terrible?

But Janice wouldn't tell. Not the details, anyway. Neither of them expected anyone in the wider world to understand. They understood each other and that was beautiful. They had shared and it had been amazing.

And she was a little bit drunk.

Clare rolled over onto her side, snuggled her face into the pillows, poked her wrists and ankles out from under the duvet, and went to sleep.

Chapter Seven

THE INTERVIEWS FOR the new head of department took place towards the end of March with the post ultimately going to a precocious talent, thirty-seven-year-old Jolene Dookhran. Jolene Dookhran was a name. She had written numerous journal articles as well as three books and was regularly invited to appear at conferences. On top of that, she was one of the founder members of a must-listen podcast called *History Outreach*. After the podcast had garnered a handful of glowing reviews in the broadsheets and a mention on BBC Radio Four, Jolene had been invited to appear on one of the late-night quiz shows much beloved of stand-up comedians. That single appearance had turned into something more regular, and she was now almost as close to being a celebrity as an academic could get. She was as charismatic, and might one day be as famous, as Professor Brian Cox. Jolene Dookhran made Clare feel like an underachiever.

Atkinson, whose short-lived stint on Channel Four was passing into legend, was allegedly furious that he had, once again, been passed over for promotion; however, nobody was sure exactly how furious, since he avoided the office for two solid weeks after Jolene's appointment was confirmed.

Clare knew business as usual had been resumed when Atkinson's students began to knock on her door again. The pity was, for as long as Atkinson had put some effort into it, he had almost managed to pass himself off as a caring human being.

That things had reverted to normal became even more painfully obvious when Clare found herself interviewing with Atkinson, who was recruiting a new research assistant. The job on offer was only for a few hours a week, for a few months, but university policy demanded that at least two people sat on the interview panel, and one of them had to be female. Five people had applied, three of them short-listable. Two—both women—turned up for the interview.

On paper, one candidate outshone the other. Even Atkinson admitted that. The trouble was, when the two candidates presented themselves, Atkinson and Clare wanted different things.

“I think we should go for Jacinta May,” said Atkinson, after the interviews were over.

“Jacinta?” said Clare, puzzled.

“You know. Long hair. Short skirt. High heels. Long legs.”

Clare had expected the post-mortem to be a formality, and that they would agree on their decision in a matter of seconds. Clearly, she had been wrong. Everything about Jacinta’s attire had screamed inappropriate. Her skirt had been too short, her shirt too bright, her neckline too low, and her shoes too...too something. She had worn magenta nail polish on her fingers and toes, and her earrings and bracelets had dangled and jingled as she walked. In short, she had been the poster person for everything that careers’ counsellors said you should never wear for an interview. Jacinta made Louisa look sedate, and Atkinson had lapped it up—almost literally. In the interview, he had looked ready to salivate, even going so far as to lick his

lips once or twice. Clare had done her best to look past Jacinta's appearance, but she hadn't found much of substance.

"I know who she is," said Clare. "I just can't see why you want her. She barely meets the essential criteria for the post, and her interview was disappointing."

"She's attractive to look at, and she'll be pleasant to have around."

"As opposed to what?"

"Trousers suit and shoes," said Atkinson, describing the second candidate. "Ms Elizabeth Smythe is probably a feminist. Possibly a lesbian."

"What if she is? She's academically brilliant, and she's clearly an able communicator."

"I'm sure that Jacinta will be able to do the job."

"But she's not the best candidate. We should be looking for excellence."

"And you think your Betty woman is excellent? Or are you looking for a mini-me?"

Clare quashed her irritation and appealed to his self-interest. "It's your research project. Don't you want the person most likely to produce work that would enhance your reputation? Instead of the...eye candy!"

Atkinson paused for a moment but opted for Jacinta, anyway.

Clare snapped, "What the hell is the point of my being here, when you so obviously are not going to pay any attention to what I think?" She didn't expect an answer, and she didn't

wait for one. “All I can say is, thank God you weren’t on the panel when I interviewed here!” Clare gestured to her own attire, which, today, consisted of a pale blue shirt, black polyester trousers, and Doc Marten shoes. As usual, her makeup was minimal, and the lipstick she had applied that morning had long since worn away. “Do what you will. But I want it on record that I don’t agree with your choice.”

Her words were an empty gesture. There was nowhere in the paperwork that allowed her to record her disagreement. Atkinson laughed at her, a condescending, derisive laugh that made her skin crawl.

She’d had enough. She had to get out of there. She gritted her teeth and said, “I trust you can finish the paperwork on your own.”

She didn’t wait for an acknowledgement before she stalked out.

Damn it, she thought as she strode along the corridor.

Damn it! she thought later, as she prepared to leave for the day. She should have said more. She should have done more. Instead, she had made only a token protest, and she had rolled over and let Atkinson have his way.

Yes, she’d been disgusted by him. Yes, she’d told him that she didn’t agree with his choice. But what had that achieved? Nothing. She had barely put up a fight, and what did that make her?

Complicit.

She was ashamed of herself.

She carried her anger with her as she locked her office, left the building, and went to meet Louisa.

*

“OH, MY GOD, Louisa! Put your legs away!”

Louisa, who had commandeered a table pressed against a wall, was sitting askew to people watch more comfortably. Her position also meant that her elegantly crossed legs were ostentatiously displayed for the whole room to see.

In truth, there was nothing wrong with Louisa’s outfit. Although it rode up when she sat down, her skirt would hang barely above her knees when standing. The fabric was a smart navy, which coordinated with her white shirt, the neckline of which dipped slightly but didn’t reveal cleavage. In short, Louisa was dressed tastefully and professionally. Clare’s irritation reflected her overall mood.

Louisa had every right to be annoyed at Clare’s demand. Instead, she settled for something between bemusement and amusement. She raised her perfectly tweezered eyebrows. “What’s got into you?”

Clare set their drinks and her bags down. When she was seated, she said, “Not what. Who. Hugo Atkinson. We were interviewing for a researcher today. Atkinson went for the female with the sketchiest resume and the shortest skirt.” Clare flicked a glance in the general direction of Louisa’s knees, the view of which was now blocked by the tabletop.

“He sounds like he’s a bit of a dog.”

“Yeah,” agreed Clare. “And you know what they say about old dogs? He’s never going to change.”

“When’s he due to retire?” asked Louisa lightly.

“Could be years. Now there’s no set retirement age, he could go on forever. The university keeps him for his name. Even though he hasn’t done any ground-breaking research in years, his reputation still attracts students to the department. They only find out he’s never around and that they’ll never have anything to do with him after they get here.”

Louisa raised her eyebrows again. “He gets away with that?”

“He seems to.”

They drank.

Louisa said thoughtfully, “I wouldn’t be where I am today without the Hugo Atkinsons of this world.”

“That’s not true,” said Clare dismissively.

“Yes, it is. You know as well as I that I was hardly a stellar student. If I hadn’t flashed my assets, so to speak, I doubt I would have got a toe through the door of local government.”

“But you’re good at what you do, aren’t you?”

“Yes. But that’s not the point.”

“What is?”

“I didn’t look good on paper. I needed someone to give me a chance to prove myself. I didn’t have anyone on the inside, so nepotism wasn’t an option. But I did have my looks. If men are stupid enough to be taken in by a pretty face and a bit of thigh... Well. I might as well take advantage, right?”

“Are you trying to say that you’re empowered by dressing that way?” asked Clare, astonished.

Louisa shrugged carelessly. “Of course. Why, what did you think?”

“I thought you were pandering to a misogynistic patriarchy and perpetuating its uneven power relationships in the process.”

“I agree that it’s about power relationships, but I don’t agree about where the power is. I prefer to think that I’m subverting the power relations, rather than perpetuating them. I like looking attractive. I like the effect I have on men.” She glanced across the room. Clare twisted to follow her gaze and spotted Professor Leyton hastily looking away. “Some jealous women too. I don’t see what’s wrong with how I dress and behave, so long as I’m doing it for me and I’m the one in control.”

Clare took a drink and eyed Louisa dubiously.

“I’ve seen you wear skirts,” said Louisa, trying a different tack. “Miniskirts, even.”

“Years ago. I wouldn’t now.”

“The point is you dressed up. You wear makeup too. How is what I do any different?”

That was a difficult question to answer. “Maybe it isn’t,” admitted Clare. “Or maybe it’s all a matter of degree. Or maybe I did those things because it was expected. I bought into the idea of following fashion, even if I didn’t carry it off well or enjoy it much.”

“You didn’t enjoy it? What, never?”

“No?” said Clare doubtfully. “I could never find a way to sit elegantly in minis. They always rode up when I sat down.”

“That’s the point of miniskirts!” exclaimed Louisa. “They entice! They titillate.”

“I’m not bait!”

“Sure, you are, unless you don’t want to attract anyone.”

“But I don’t,” said Clare. “Most especially, I don’t want to attract anyone like Hugo Atkinson. I don’t like the attention.”

“But what about someone nice? Someone not like your Hugo Atkinson. Someone attractive?”

How interesting—how irritating—that Louisa had been the one to raise the idea of Clare’s asexuality, but still she had the knee-jerk reaction that Clare should want to attract a partner. Then again, aces came in all shapes, sizes, and romantic orientations, so maybe Louisa’s assumptions weren’t entirely unreasonable. There were so many labels, so many nuances to asexuality. Clare had, so far, shied away from examining them too closely, wanting to feel at home with the general idea before going into specifics. But the conversation had shocked her into another realisation; she wasn’t just disinterested in sex. Her lack of attraction went further than that. She wasn’t interested in flowers and chocolates, kissing and cuddling. She wanted friends, not romantic partners. All of that screamed aromanticism to her.

Aroace.

Clare said, “No?” She didn’t want to talk about her probable aromanticism, though. So, to divert the conversation, she said, “How can you ever know that you got a job because you were the best person on the day?”

“You assume that I care. Maybe all I care about is getting the job.”

“But that’s...”

“What?”

“Unfair?” said Clare weakly. “Do you honestly not care about being chosen because you are the best candidate?”

Louisa sighed. “In a perfect world, I would care. But the world’s not perfect and has never been fair. When I was starting out, I was desperate. Besides, being able to influence people...that’s part of what I do. If I can play them and get what I want out of it, maybe I am the best person for the job.”

Clare felt thoroughly disillusioned.

“If it makes you feel any better, these days my CV speaks for itself.”

“In that case, next time you go for a job, wear a trouser suit. I dare you!”

Louisa fidgeted uncomfortably.

“What?” demanded Clare. “What did I say?”

Louisa inhaled deeply. “I’m applying for a chief exec post.”

“That’s great!”

“I mightn’t get it. In fact, I—”

“You just said your CV speaks for itself, so you must be in with a good shot.”

“I suppose so.”

“And it’d be the perfect opportunity to prove to yourself that you got the job because of what you can bring to it, not because you’re good at taking advantage of some idiot man’s lustful leanings.”

“Lustful leanings?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I suppose I do. God, you’re such an idealist!”

“So... Trouser suit?”

“I’ll think about it.”

*

CLARE WAS AGAIN brooding about Tuesday’s interview debacle as she headed out for the meet-up the following Saturday. Clare had never much liked Hugo Atkinson, but her previous dislike now teetered perilously close to active loathing. How much was down to him, and how much was because he had left her with too many thorny issues and ideas to think about?

She had avoided sitting close to him in Thursday’s seminar, lest she had to make small talk, and she had barely bothered to acknowledge him on the rare occasions when they met in the corridors. She doubted that he had noticed, let alone cared.

She was behaving badly, even unprofessionally, her behaviour driven as much by her own feelings of guilt as by anything that he had done.

As she sat on the bus, she wondered, were all men so shallow? Were they incapable of using logic when faced with

an attractive woman? Were people really blinded by someone's beauty? If so, why? Or was it only Atkinson and the men who had interviewed Louisa who behaved that way?

Would Clare have given the matter so much consideration even a few months ago, before she'd had her epiphany and become hyper-aware of so many things that she had previously let be?

The meet-up distracted her from her spiralling thoughts.

As arranged, everyone had come armed with ideas of things for the group to do. Matt grabbed some paper napkins from behind the bar and began to list the suggestions. They included several things that Clare, despite all her years in the city, had never imagined. She had been vaguely aware that Manchester had a cat café, although she had never been. She hadn't known that the city had a Chihuahua café, though. The idea of all those tiny dogs with their oversized ears and needle-like teeth made her feel uneasy. Why not a labradoodle or spaniel café? She had seen pictures of Old English Pocket Beagles and she would happily pay good money to spend time with them. But...Chihuahuas?

There was a games café but what was the point of going there when they already played games aplenty at The Spinners' Arms?

The escape room sounded more promising if claustrophobic. Clare hated the idea of getting locked in anywhere. Other suggestions included axe throwing, go-karting, crazy golf, trampolining, a gin experience, and a street market.

Tristan offered to set up a Facebook page to help keep everything and everyone coordinated, and they resolved to have an informal outing to Levenshulme market in a couple of weeks for anyone who wanted to turn up.

Given that nobody had come armed with the idea of going away together, Clare wasn't sure where the suggestion came from. Somehow, however, the idea was out there, capturing everyone's imagination.

“Let's go to Ibiza!”

“Or Cyprus!”

“Amsterdam!”

“Iceland!”

“Scotland?” suggested Tristan.

“Scotland?” chorused Zoe, Ollie, Jack, and Matt. They were right to be sceptical; Scotland wasn't abroad, and after the other suggestions it sounded horribly mundane.

“I'll tell you what,” said Matt. “How about I look into options, and we can discuss them at the next meet? If people are seriously interested, that is?”

“It wouldn't hurt to find out more,” said Clare, unwilling to commit herself to anything, but intrigued, anyway.

“Right,” said Matt. “Anyone who might be interested in going away together, put your names on here. That'll help me to think about numbers and accommodation.” He held up another napkin, which he then signed and passed around. Tristan added his name, and Ollie and Jack did likewise.

When Janice's turn came, she paused, pen poised above the paper.

“Why are you hesitating?” Clare asked. “Is it your dad?”

Janice shook her head. “No. I'm sure I can sort something out if I need to. I... It's nothing. Way past the time to bury the proverbial, wouldn't you say?”

Clare had no idea what Janice was muttering about, so she said nothing. In fact, she wasn't even sure that Janice had been talking to anyone other than herself.

More loudly, Janice said, “Oh, what the hell?” and signed with an aggressive flourish.

Clare took the pen from Janice and added her own name to the list. There were only four other names on it. Which one of them had given Janice pause?

*

AFTER A FEW games, some chat, and a glass or two of Knobber's, the meet-up wound down, and Clare and Janice strolled together towards the bus stop.

“The look on Matt's face,” crowed Janice, “when you beat him!”

“I only won one game,” said Clare, her modesty belied by her smile.

“That was one more than he wanted to lose.”

“True,” agreed Clare with a chuckle. “Oh! I needed this!”

“This?”

“This afternoon. Today.”

“Oh? Tough week?”

“A bit,” agreed Clare, and she told Janice about Atkinson.

The bus arrived halfway through the telling, so there was a pause as they got on and found seats. Clare resumed and went on to describe the conversation she had had with Louisa, along with all the conflicting ideas and questions that had been plaguing her since.

Janice listened, considered, then said, “I think you’re overthinking things.”

“How so?”

“If the same set of circumstances arise again, what will you do?”

“Fight harder for the better candidate. Argue my case, do everything in my power to do the right thing, and make sure I can live with myself afterwards.”

“There you go. You did something you regret. Get over it. Learn from it, and make sure you don’t do it again.”

“That’s it? What about Atkinson, or Jacinta, or even Louisa?”

“You can’t control how they behave. You can let them know what you think, but the choice as to what they do is theirs. You shouldn’t let yourself lose sleep over that.”

Clare sighed. “You make everything sound so simple.”

“We all make mistakes and do things we’re not proud of. All we can do is try not to make the same mistakes again.”

“I can’t imagine you making a mistake,” said Clare.

“Wait until you get to know me better. You might be surprised.” But Janice didn’t elaborate, and Clare didn’t ask, no matter how much she wanted to. When Janice changed the subject, Clare didn’t protest. “I’ve been wondering, how did we get from cat café to going away together?”

“No idea,” said Clare. “Shame, though. I quite fancied the cats.”

Janice laughed. “If you’re not doing anything next weekend, maybe we could...?”

Clare grinned. “You’re on.”

Chapter Eight

“YOU’VE CHANGED,” SAID Louisa during one of their regular Tuesday sessions.

“What?” said Clare distractedly. “No, I haven’t.” The piles of unmarked dissertations awaiting her preyed on her mind. Should she have cried off this week? She hated marking, and by drinking with Louisa, she was only delaying the inevitable.

“Yes. You have.” Louisa took a sip from her second glass of the evening. “It’s not a bad thing. I can’t remember the last time you were as happy as you are now.”

Clare didn’t feel happy. She was stressed, the same as every year around this time.

“If you were anyone else, I’d say you had either found yourself a new romance or you were pregnant. You have that kind of contented glow about you. But this is you, so it’s neither of those.”

“Definitely not.”

“So, what’s going on?”

“I…” Clare had to think about her answer. The change had been so gradual she hadn’t been aware of it, but now she looked past the immediate work pressures, she decided she was content.

“Last month you were so angry, but you seem to have got over that.”

“Got past, not over. I still think Atkinson was wrong, but I’m trying not to stew over something I can’t change.”

“That’s a very mature attitude.”

“Don’t mock me.”

“I’m not mocking you. Not much, anyway. But that blip aside, you’ve been happier for a while.” Louisa tilted her head. “What’s changed...? Only the asexuality stuff...” She looked directly at Clare. “That makes you happy?”

“I suppose so. I feel more comfortable about myself. Like I’m not a broken version of everyone else. I’m me.”

“You thought you were broken?”

“Well, yes. The thought had crossed my mind. Sometimes.” Fairly often, if she was honest, but Clare wasn’t going to tell Louisa that.

“But you always come across as so self-sufficient and confident. I had no idea.”

“You weren’t supposed to.” What was she supposed to have done but plaster on a brave face when things got especially difficult? At least work had always provided a good distraction.

Had Clare tied up her identity with her career so tightly because her work distracted her from weaknesses in other areas of her life? She had always assumed her focus on her job reflected the pressure-cooker culture in academia, but now she wasn’t so sure.

Academic culture demanded that anyone who wanted to get ahead had to work all their waking hours. There was a burden of guilt attached to every play watched or concert attended, every hobby indulged, and every evening spent away from work-related activities.

Clare barely knew what her colleagues did for fun, although she had heard rumours that Colin Adams cultivated succulents, and she was aware that Ben Duncan kept an allotment. Hobbies and outside interests were barely acknowledged and even more rarely discussed, even in social situations, and most people kept their partners and children out of sight. Nobody ever wanted to admit that they were anything less than wholly devoted to their work. Clare had been given some advice when she had begun to think about doing a PhD: “You don’t need to be obsessed, but it helps. And never tell anyone if you aren’t.”

So, yes, being a career academic had always provided Clare with a great smokescreen to hide behind. Whenever anyone had asked her why she had never quested after a meaningful personal relationship, she had pleaded lack of time over lack of inclination. She had never considered her motives for answering that way before.

She was considering them now.

When Clare spent time with the aces, she stepped beyond the confines of academia and she was able to share her personal life, likes, and hobbies. In return, she had learned more about her new friends in a matter of weeks than she had about her colleagues in more than ten years. With the aces, she did not feel pressured to be wholly focused on work and she did not have to be brilliant all the time. She’d assumed that was what made them so relaxing to be around.

But she also never had to worry about their intentions or attentions. With them, she didn’t need to be distracted from

her own life or to hide behind smokescreens. With them, she could be herself.

“You look as though you’ve had a revelation,” said Louisa.

“I think I have.”

“Please share.”

Clare did. “We’re thinking of going away together,” she concluded. “I’m not sure that anything will come of the idea, but I hope it does.”

“Where’ll you go?”

“Not sure yet.”

“A trip would be good for you.”

“Yeah, it would. But I’ve got to survive exam season first.”

*

CLARE AND JANICE had a good time at the cat café, and their developing friendship blossomed in its aftermath to include evening phone calls and discussions of other places they might visit together.

Everyone, Clare included, who went to Levenshulme market declared the outing a great success. Afterwards, Clare told Janice, who hadn’t been able to get away, about the visit and regretted that the telling made Janice feel as though she had missed out on something special.

Janice wasn’t at the next meet-up, either, which surprised and hurt Clare; Janice had promised to be there. When Clare gave the matter more consideration, however, she grew concerned. Her concern morphed into full-blown worry when

she tried phoning to find out where Janice had got to and her call, along with a text, went unanswered.

Matt came to the meet-up laden with information, spreadsheets, and options, demonstrating an enthusiasm and penchant for organisation.

“I took the idea of Scotland and ran with it,” he said. “We could go to Glasgow or Edinburgh for a weekend, or there’s this thing called the North Coast 500 which takes in a whole chunk of the Highlands, and the route looks amazing. I’ll show you.” He opened out an enormous road map, which he tried to spread across several tables. When that didn’t work, he and Tristan attempted to hold it up. However, with the light behind the paper, nobody could make out any details. Eventually, they laid it out on the floor. Matt pointed and explained the route.

“You start in Inverness and go west...like so. Then you go up this bit of coast, across the top, and down the east here and back to Inverness. What do you all think?”

“It sounds good,” said Ollie, and everyone else muttered agreement.

“Okay! In that case, the next thing we need to consider is exactly how long we would be going for. At a push we could do the trip in about five days, but that wouldn’t give us much time to explore any of the places we’d be passing through.”

Nods all round encouraged Matt to continue.

“I’ve checked out the AA route planner. It’s possible to get to Inverness in one day—in about six and a half hours if you don’t stop. But I thought we might break our journey on our way up and coming back.”

They kicked the idea around for a while, but everyone was too polite to express a preference. In the end, Matt was forced to make an executive decision; he opted for a stopover in Glasgow going north and Edinburgh on the way south. They would travel to Glasgow on day one, Inverness on day two, and set off on the NC500 on day three.

Next, Matt produced a list of potential accommodations. Options included staying in camping pods, hostels, bed-and-breakfasts, or hotels. They would have to share, partly on the grounds of cost, but mostly because single rooms tended to be in short supply.

In the end, bed-and-breakfasts came out as the preferred option, simply because there were so many to choose from.

There were still details to be ironed out, but by the end of the afternoon they had some tentative dates picked out that suited everyone except Zoe, whose film commitment had to take priority, and a promise from Matt to investigate means of transport.

*

CLARE TRIED PHONING Janice again as soon as she got home, and this time she got an answer. “You weren’t at the meet-up. I wanted to check that everything was okay.”

There was a snuffle at the end of the line. “It’s Dad. He died. Last night.”

“Oh. I’m sorry,” said Clare inadequately.

“I found him this morning.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“I...I know it’s a lot to ask. But can you come over? The doctor’s been, and the undertaker has taken Dad’s body to the funeral home and... There’s so much to do and I...”

Janice didn’t need to say any more. Clare filled in the blanks. Janice was overwhelmed and didn’t know where to begin. She needed to sit and drink some strong, sweet tea to recover from everything that she had already had to deal with, and she needed someone with her, but there was no family to come together, and Janice was alone.

“I’m on my way.”

Clare didn’t stop to think. She grabbed her bag, headed out of the flat, and caught the first bus south.

*

CLARE MISSED HER stop, so when she got off the bus, she had to backtrack a hundred yards before turning into a leafy side road. She read off the house numbers until she found Janice’s house, which she hadn’t visited before.

Clare’s first reaction was one of awe. What impression must Janice have had of her meagre flat! For a moment, she felt a stab of envy, but she got over it before she’d reached the front door. The shrubs had lost their shape and needed pruning, daisies and dandelions grew between the paving slabs, and the things Janice had told her about how much work the house needed began to make sense.

Clare rang the doorbell and waited for Janice to answer.

The street noises dropped away as Janice closed the front door behind them. There was a quiet stillness in the air, and dust motes hung in a weak shaft of coloured sunlight. Clare

glanced around and took a second to admire some Edwardian stained glass.

“Come on through to the kitchen.” Janice sounded unbearably tired.

As she followed, Clare’s eyes darted around, taking in more of the house’s period features. There were dark wood floorboards, ornate plasterwork ceilings, and, in a window halfway up a flight of stairs, more stained glass. The faded stair carpet, with its swirling patterns, transported Clare to her childhood. The paint on the banisters was chipped and worn.

Like the hallway, the kitchen was an odd mix of original and not so old. An enormous SMEG refrigerator—the only appliance approaching new—was at odds with the flagstone floor, Sheila Maid, deep butler sink, and ancient Aga. The style of the kitchen units screamed 1950s, but their puke-green colour hadn’t become fashionable until about twenty years later.

There was a cluttered pile of ancient recipe books on a shelf, and mismatched crockery, stacked into piles according to size and function, shared a dresser with a pair of binoculars and a couple of dusty cacti.

Janice plucked two mugs off the drainer and said, “Tea? Coffee?”

Clare took a good look at her. Janice was pale and drawn, and Clare was tempted to offer to make the drinks herself. However, she didn’t know where anything was, and maybe Janice needed to be in control of something, no matter how mundane or unimportant. “Tea would be great. And can I get a glass of water?”

“Help yourself. Glasses are in that cupboard, and there’s a water dispenser in the door of the fridge. There’s ice, too, if you want it.”

While Clare got her water, revelling in the novelty afforded by the fridge’s frills, Janice busied herself with the kettle, mugs, and a tin crammed full of circular tea bags.

To distract her, Clare told Janice about the meet-up and the latest travel plans. Janice tried to engage with the topics, but her heart wasn’t in any of it.

“I’m sorry. I guess now isn’t the right time.”

“No, no,” protested Janice. “I want to know, but I can’t focus. I mean, there’s so much to do. I need to get a valuation for probate. I’ll need to get an estate agent in, and someone to value the house contents.”

“If it helps, I can ask my dad to do the house valuation. If he can’t do it, he’ll know someone who can. And he’ll know someone who’ll be able to do everything else.”

“Really?” said Janice, pathetically grateful.

“Of course. Do you want me to help you make a list of all the things you need to do? Getting everything down on paper might help you clear your head.”

“Of course, of course. Why didn’t I think of that?” Janice got up and found a large spiral-bound notebook, which she opened to a blank page.

“You talk,” suggested Clare. “And I’ll write.”

Janice nodded and passed paper and pen across to Clare. She remained standing and began to check things off on her

fingers.

“Register the death. Valuations. Funeral arrangements. Notify the bank. Put the house back to normal.”

Clare raised her eyebrows, so Janice elaborated. “Dad lived on the ground floor. We had a shower put in so that he didn’t have to go upstairs. We converted the dining room into a bedroom for him. All the dining room furniture is stored in one of the rooms on the second floor.”

After a while, Janice relaxed enough that she was able to sit. She slumped and bowed over in her seat, but at least most of the tension had left her body. Clare hoped the change was an improvement.

“Can I see?”

Clare handed the notebook over.

“Wow,” said Janice, taken aback, which was fair enough because what Clare had produced wasn’t a list of random items. She had drawn a mind map, arranging everything into a network of tendrils that spread across the page. Presented that way, the information appeared organic, almost decorative.

Janice turned the page around to read the writing. “This is great.”

“We’ve almost certainly missed things,” said Clare, “but we can add them in later. And it’s a start.”

“It’s more than a start.” Janice spoke as though a huge weight had been lifted. Clare felt ridiculously satisfied that she had done that for her.

“Do you want me to phone my dad?”

“He won’t mind? It’s Saturday evening, after all.”

“It’ll be fine.”

“Then, yes. Thank you.”

Clare took herself off into what turned out to be the living room, where she phoned her parents. Surrounded by pale, threadbare Persian rugs, and standard lamps with old-fashioned, dusty lampshades and frayed tassels, she sat on a sofa that had cushions compressed with age and springs ready to poke the unwary. She briefly told her parents where she was, and why.

When, furnished with the name and number of a local estate agency, Clare returned to the kitchen, Janice was sitting exactly as she had been when Clare had stepped out. Clare pretended not to notice as she sat down and held out a piece of paper. “Dad says to ask for Derek. They’re old friends, and Derek knows the local market.”

Janice took the note from Clare and, on autopilot, put it with the mind map. Then she began to speak, her voice hollow and desolate. “I don’t know what I’m going to do without him. He was needy and, as the dementia got worse, I found myself thinking that I was saying goodbye to him, one day at a time. But now he’s gone, I realise how much of him was still here. There’s a huge hole where he was, a physical hole, because he’s no longer in the house, and a huge gap here.” She tapped her chest. “And I have no idea how to fill it.” Janice’s voice quavered, and then broke.

What was Clare supposed to do now? She wasn’t one of nature’s huggers, more inclined to be the reluctant receiver of embraces than the initiator.

But if anyone ever needed a hug, it was Janice, although Janice would never ask Clare to put her arms around her.

Clare got up awkwardly and said, “C’mere,” in a gruff voice that surely wasn’t hers. She gestured for Janice to get up, too, and invited her into her arms.

Their embrace began awkwardly as, unpractised, neither knew where to place their hands. Then Janice leaned in, resting her head against Clare’s shoulder. Clare wrapped her arms around Janice’s body and tried not to notice the heaving sobs Janice sought to keep quiet. Clare wanted to cry in sympathy, and she screwed up her eyes, desperate to keep her own emotions locked in. They trembled with a terrible, powerful blend of grief and empathy.

Clare wanted to let go. She wanted to retreat and regroup. She held on tight and offered all the support she could.

*

CLARE DIDN’T KNOW how long they clung to each other. Probably not long at all, although their embrace seemed to drag on for an age.

Eventually, though, they broke apart. They took a couple of involuntary steps backwards and paused to stare as though they’d never seen each other before.

Janice looked away first. She cleared her throat, and her first attempt at speech came out as an incoherent croak. She tried again. “Thanks,” she said roughly. Then, her voice louder and higher than normal, she said, “I never finished making the tea. So... Tea?”

“Yes. Thank you. Tea sounds great.” Clare hesitated, then said, “When did you last eat?”

“I had some toast...I think.”

“If you don’t know, then you need something,” said Clare with a lopsided attempt at a smile.

“I don’t know what I’ve got.”

“I’ll order takeout for the both of us.”

Janice struggled through two slices of the resultant pizza, but that was better than nothing. Clare put the leftovers in the fridge and contemplated heading home. She didn’t feel good about leaving Janice, but time was getting on.

As if she’d read Clare’s mind, Janice said tentatively, “You can stay, if you want.”

Recognising that the invitation masked a request, Clare said, “Okay.”

Janice showed her to a room on the second floor, gave her a toothbrush, towel, and facecloth, and told her to help herself to any of the toiletries in the bathroom.

Before she went to bed, Clare glanced at the bookshelves, hoping to find something that would help her to unwind before she switched the light out; all she found were science-fiction novels, a collection of *Dr Who* annuals, and a couple of field guides to British birds, none of which were to her taste. In the end, she lay awake for a long time, staring at the ceiling.

*

OVER BREAKFAST THE next morning, Janice asked, “Can you...I mean, would you mind... It’s okay if you can’t, but...”

Can you stay a bit longer? Here, I mean. With me. Another night or two.”

Clare nodded. “I’ll need to grab a few things from the flat.”

“But you’ll be back?”

“Yeah. I’ll be back.”

“Thank you.”

Clare nipped home, wearing yesterday’s clothes, including the underwear she’d slept in. Was this the ace equivalent of the walk of shame? Was it possible to have a walk of shame without the sex? Was it a walk of shame lite?

At her flat, she showered, changed into a fresh outfit, and packed a bag with enough things to last her to the end of the week, just in case.

She returned to Janice’s in time to eat reheated pizza for lunch.

With offices closed until Monday, their choices of what to do were limited, so they settled on tidying and sorting things in the house. As they worked, Janice talked some more about her father, and Clare began to piece together more of her friend’s life, getting a clearer picture with each revelation. By the evening, a pile of black bags had accumulated by the front door, waiting to be transported to a charity shop.

*

ON MONDAY, CLARE went to work, while Janice went into the city to register her father’s death. By the time they met again that evening, Janice had visited the bank, a building

society, and her father's lawyer, and she had been in touch with the estate agent that Clare's dad had recommended. She had also talked to the funeral directors and had arranged a date for the cremation. She was almost her normal, competent self again.

Clare had bought food, and she fumbled her way around Janice's kitchen as she put a meal together.

They spent much of the evening phoning old friends and distant relations, advising them of the funeral arrangements. Then Clare and Janice brainstormed ideas for music, readings, and the eulogy.

"It's odd," said Janice sadly. "I knew him better than anyone, but I honestly don't know what he'd have wanted."

*

CLARE STAYED A couple of nights at Janice's but then made excuses for returning to her flat. She didn't want to abandon Janice, but neither did she want Janice to know about the work she was having to do late into the night and first thing in the morning because she was still helping Janice during the day.

Clare promised herself that she would slow down once the funeral was over when things would hopefully begin to feel less raw. Meanwhile, Clare hurt to see Janice move around in the fog of her grief, nonetheless managing to get through what needed to be done.

Surgical appliances got returned. Father's bed was removed upstairs, and the table was reinstated in the dining room. The estate agent came and went, Janice talked some

more to the funeral director and to a vicar, and the black bags disappeared.

Clare offered what support she could, thinking how awful she would feel if ever she had to face making similar arrangements, and made sure Janice ate and drank and slept.

The funeral was a melancholy affair, as much a result of how little impact Janice's father's passing had on the world as from the mere fact of its being a funeral. Despite all their phone calls and an advert in the local paper, few mourners attended the ceremony. Janice's father had had few friends left, and most of them weren't up to making the journey. A handful of neighbours turned up, more to show support for Janice than to honour the deceased. Clare felt like an intruder. She had never met Michael Galbraith and knew him only through photographs and the reminiscences of those left behind.

After the funeral was over, Clare took at face value Janice's reassurance that she would be all right on her own. With a blend of reluctance and relief, but not before making Janice promise to call if she needed anything, anything at all, Clare withdrew. Instead of checking on her, Clare began to wait for Janice to phone, and she turned her attention more fully onto her work.

Chapter Nine

CLARE WENT TO bed each evening anticipating—and then dreaming about—the dissertations and papers she would have to deal with next day. Exam season had arrived, which meant that she had to first mark, second mark, negotiate marks with colleagues, and then, occasionally, third mark a seemingly endless deluge of scripts and screeds.

As an undergraduate, she had believed each piece of work she had completed was the most important thing in the world. She had lavished love and attention onto every submission, and she had assumed that her professors would do the same. She had believed each of her marks had an accuracy borne from the application of precise science. Now she knew better; the numbers were barely more than the product of subjective alchemy.

Each individual piece of work blurred into a larger whole, fragments in a huge accumulation that had to be endured. Only the spectacularly good or spectacularly bad stood out. Everything else was instantly forgettable.

Clare hated the importance students and employers alike attached to numbers, seemingly oblivious to the facts: what one person might mark as sixty-two per cent was another marker's sixty-seven, and the external examiners wouldn't worry about variance unless the differences crossed the boundaries of degree classes, or the overall profile of marks was skewed.

At the end of the day, poor was poor, good was good, great was great, but attaching numbers to results gave the results a

spurious authority that Clare knew better than to trust.

She had talked about measuring performance with Louisa once and had been surprised to discover that Louisa understood her concerns. Talking about the work of local government, Louisa had said, “We have a long history of monitoring the things we can count and not the outcomes we achieve. Numbers aren’t always helpful.”

Clare had thought about the conversation for a long time afterwards. Louisa had been judged worthy of a lower second-class degree, but she had achieved great things since. How valuable had that early judgement of Louisa’s ability been?

For now, all of Clare’s brain space was taken up with the work she had to get through. She felt guilty when she was marking because she didn’t have time to lavish the care on the papers their owners no doubt thought they deserved, and she felt pressured and guilty when she wasn’t marking, although that wasn’t healthy.

In short, she was in a perpetual state of guilt.

Clare told herself that she and her colleagues would survive the exam period; they always did. She forced herself to make time to drink with Louisa, she took time to talk with Janice, and she went to the May meet-up, but her mind never managed to leave the marking far behind.

*

“HE ASKED ME out,” said Louisa happily as Clare sat down. From that, Clare gathered Louisa didn’t mind that she had arrived at the Quill almost half an hour late.

“Who?”

“The bearded guy sitting over there. The one who looks like a young Sean Connery.” Louisa pointed discreetly towards the window, where the man in question was sitting cross-legged, a folded newspaper balanced on his knee as he tackled a crossword.

“Professor Leyton? He doesn’t look anything like Connery.” Nor did he look like Louisa’s usual type.

“He’s got a beard.”

Clare shook her head.

“You know him?”

“I’ve seen him around,” said Clare. “We sat on the same short life working group last year. He looked as though he was asleep most of the time in the meetings, but then he’d wake up long enough to say something deeply insightful and pertinent. It was bizarre to watch, and disconcerting. He’s supposed to be brilliant. Social psychology, or something.”

“Professor, eh? He didn’t tell me that.”

“What did he tell you?”

“Only that he’d been thinking of asking me out for a while now. He’s going to call me.”

*

EARLY IN JUNE, the aces arranged an outing to see the latest blockbuster superhero movie. Clare couldn’t spare two hours to sit in a darkened room watching actors in silly costumes beat one another up and pretend to dodge explosions but, justifying taking the time away from the latest slew of exam papers on the grounds that she had to eat, she caught up with

them for a quick meal of burgers and fries once the film was over.

Clare met them outside the restaurant and, as they piled through the door, asked, “How was it?”

She had to wait for the answer while a server showed them to a table and furnished them with menus.

They made their selections and, while they waited for their order to be taken, regaled Clare with a blow-by-blow account of the story. The discussion about the merits of the film climaxed with Ollie table-thumping about the insertion of an unconvincing and entirely superfluous romantic subplot, complete with gratuitous bedroom scene. They concluded by saying, “Oh! I’m going to post something about that on my Twitter!”

On that cue, everyone except Clare and Janice got their phones out and began messaging one another.

Curious, Janice said, “What’s the point when we’re all right here?”

Clare glanced around hopefully, wanting to know the answer too.

Matt blinked, Ollie shrugged, and Jack, incredibly earnest, said, “Because that’s what people do.”

Ollie tilted their head to one side and eyed Janice. “That’s what *young* people do, anyway. Can’t speak for people old enough to remember life BSM.”

Clare frowned. “British School of Motoring?”

Ollie rolled their eyes. “Before social media.”

“Ah,” said Clare. “The good old days.”

“I don’t know how you coped,” said Jack seriously.

“Easily,” said Janice. “We made plans ahead of time and stuck to them. And we talked to one another. No phones at the dinner table.”

“Of course not,” sniggered Ollie. “The cords wouldn’t have reached.”

Janice ignored them. “We were—what do people say these days?—present in the moment. Maybe you should try sometime.”

Matt shrugged and put his phone, screen-side down, on the tabletop. “Okay,” he said, “consider me present.”

Jack hesitated, then followed Matt’s example. Ollie did not, and Clare caught Ollie squinting at Janice out of the corner of their eye as they continued working the touchscreen with their thumbs. Ollie refused to make concessions for anybody, liking to push boundaries when- and wherever opportunities arose.

The food arrived.

As the server put a beefburger in front of Matt, Ollie said, “Aren’t you vegetarian?”

Sheepishly, Matt said, “Only at home or when Tris is around. He’s the veggie, and it’s easier to fit in with him. But sometimes I crave meat.” He took a bite.

“Where is Tristan?” asked Clare.

Clearly, this had been a topic of conversation before she had joined them because Jack paused with his own burger

halfway to his mouth and answered for Matt, who was chewing with a blissed-out expression on his face. “He’s in London for a couple of days. He’s at a conference or something.”

Matt managed to nod through his rapture. He swallowed. “Wow! This is good!”

Clare glanced at her own burger. She’d taken her first mouthful absentmindedly, distracted by the conflicting demands of the conversation and visions of the exam papers waiting for her at home. She forced her attention onto her next mouthful and, yes, the meat was wonderful!

Janice pointed at her chicken barbecue burger and said, “It was worth sitting through two hours of explosions and terrible dialogue for this!”

“You said the film wasn’t bad!” said Matt accusingly.

“I lied,” said Janice blithely. “It was one of the most ridiculous things I have ever seen.”

“Of course it was. It was about superheroes. If you expected anything else, then your nerd credentials must be seriously lacking.”

“I’ll have you know there’s nothing wrong with my nerd credentials, thank you very much.”

“Prove it!”

Janice pursed her lips as she formulated an answer. Then she said, “I’ve been to a few *Dr Who* conventions in my time, and I’ve got signed photos from the fifth, sixth, and ninth doctors.”

The way Matt goggled at her made Clare want to laugh.

“And I’ve got all of *Buffy* and *Angel* on DVD, and—”

The conversation descended into a debate of all things nerdy, including an argument about the definitions of nerd and geek, and whether someone could be both. Other topics included DC versus Marvel, *Star Wars* versus *Star Trek*, and the merits (or otherwise) of *The Big Bang Theory*.

As she watched from the sidelines, Clare knew Janice’s nerd credentials weren’t in question so much as her own. She might have seen an episode of *Buffy* at some point, but she wasn’t sure, she didn’t know the difference between Iron Man and Captain America, and she had never seen *Star Wars*.

She half listened as Jack, exhibiting all the signs of a euphoric post-exam adrenaline high, extolled the virtues of the rebooted *Star Trek* franchise over the original.

Clare’s suspicions about Jack’s mood were confirmed when he loudly announced he had sat his last paper that afternoon and he was pretty sure he’d “aced” it. He laughed loudly at his own joke. Matt joined in, possibly out of pity.

The discussion wound down and, when they had picked their plates clean, Matt said, “By the way, I meant to ask, what would you all say to my cousin coming to Scotland with us?”

“Is your cousin asexual?” asked Ollie.

“No, but she’s broken up with Stephan—her boyfriend—and she’s devastated. She’s sworn off men, and she thinks that getting away for a while would do her good. Plus,” said Matt, throwing in the sweetener, “she has access to a minibus she says we’ll be able to borrow for free.”

“She can come along so long as she understands that it’s a sex-free trip, and she has to fit in with us,” said Ollie, speaking for everyone. Clare bristled at Ollie’s presumptuousness, but she didn’t disagree with the sentiment. Nor, apparently, did anyone else. Thus, the party of travellers grew from six to seven.

*

THE LAST OF the exam papers was marked. The internal and external examiners’ meetings came and went. The students’ results were posted, the papers were archived, and the academic session was over.

Clare celebrated by going to a bar with a couple of colleagues. They drank weak lager in near silence, too exhausted to talk. Then Clare went home, crawled into bed, and slept for twelve hours straight.

*

THREE DAYS LATER, so late on Sunday morning that it was almost afternoon, Clare was slouching on her sofa, still clad in her jim-jams and dressing gown, and scraping around the bottom of her cereal bowl, when the phone rang.

“Can I come over?” Louisa was breathlessly excited.

“What, now?”

“Yes, now. I’ve got something I want to tell you. A couple of things. I’ll be there in—oh—fifteen minutes.”

“No! Wait!” screamed Clare, managing to prevent Louisa from hanging up on her. “Give me at least half an hour.”

“Oh, all right. Look, I’ll go to the supermarket on the way. Pick us up something for lunch. And that’ll give you time enough to shower, dress, and hide the worst of the clutter in your living room.”

Louisa knew her too well. Then again, they had lived together for a couple of years, and some things didn’t change.

“Okay. Thanks. See you in a while.”

Clare was pulling on her jeans and T-shirt when Louisa arrived. She hadn’t got as far as moisturisers and makeup, and the clutter in the living room remained in situ. She buzzed Louisa into the building and, bare footed, opened her front door to let Louisa into the flat.

In honour of the weekend, Louisa had replaced her business suit with linen trousers and a floaty shirt, and her makeup, as expertly applied as ever, was soft and natural-looking. Louisa made even sweatshirts and sweatpants look stylish.

“Come in. I’ll put the kettle on.”

Louisa waved Clare away. “I’ll make coffee. You finish doing whatever you still need to do.”

Clare stacked journals and books into a Jenga-esque pile on the living-room floor and stuffed everything else on top of the plastic tub in which her UFO continued to gather dust.

Louisa made her first announcement through open doorways, her voice raised enough to make herself heard over the kettle. She had been shortlisted for the chief executive post she had applied for. She took Clare’s congratulations and good

wishes in her stride and said something about that not being her biggest bit of news.

By the time Louisa brought the coffee in, there was space on the table for the mugs, and the cushions on the sofa had been cleared enough for them both to sit.

Louisa's manner reminded Clare of lost days of their house share, all fizzy, bright, and bubbly, desperate to share the details of her latest romantic adventure. Louisa had been like this when she'd first met Luca and, later, when she had met Nick. Most recently, she had lit up incandescently when she had first hooked up with Gwyn, but with Gwyn disillusionment had set in almost immediately afterwards.

This was the first time in a long while that Louisa had been so excited about a relationship that she had not been able to wait until Tuesday to pick over it in forensic detail. That she had come over on a Sunday morning told Clare the date had gone more than merely well, and Louisa was falling hard—if she hadn't already fallen—for Professor Leyton.

Clare had never been entirely comfortable with all the confidences Louisa had seen fit to share. Today, Clare felt less comfortable than ever before. Possibly this was an I-now-know-I'm-ace thing; Clare no longer felt compelled to listen on the grounds that that was what “normal” people did. More likely, though, it was a combination of resentment—Louisa had got between her and a thoroughly lazy Sunday—and the fact that Clare didn't want to know any intimate details about a man she might have to sit with in faculty meetings.

“He took me to Moroda's!” exclaimed Louisa, unable to contain herself any longer.

Maybe Clare did want details after all; that was indeed impressive news. Moroda's was a quiet and exclusive eatery, located just outside the city boundary, in Derbyshire.

Clare had never eaten there, but she had peered through the window once. Moroda's tables were small and intimate, set with vases containing single red roses. The décor, including dark wood panelling on the walls and crimson drapes, welcomed couples into its warm embrace while discouraging anyone else from venturing through the front door. There were rumours, possibly apocryphal, that, to get a table for Valentine's Day, potential customers had to book at least six months in advance.

Moroda's was subtext for Leyton being serious about Louisa, and Louisa, who had been swept along by the romance, was now seriously interested in Leyton.

Clare listened to Louisa's descriptions of scallops, a roast chicken for two, poached pears, excellent service, a post-prandial riverside stroll, and a long and lingering, open-mouthed kiss, expertly executed as they leaned over the gear stick in Leyton's car.

“God, that man can kiss! I felt it all the way to my toes! I invited him in, but he was too much of a gentleman to take me up on the offer, at least on a first date. But we're going out again tonight, so who knows? As soon as we've finished lunch, I'm heading into town to do some lingerie shopping. A girl's got to be prepared! I wonder if he's into—”

Clare found her brain—and mouth—screaming, “Whoa! Can you go easy on the speculation? I don't want to think

about what someone I have to work with might be into! Besides—”

Louisa laughed. Then she frowned. “Besides what?”

“I’m happy for you. Really I am. But it’s enough for me to know you’re happy. I’ve never felt very comfortable hearing the more lurid details of what you get up to.”

They changed the subject, stumbling briefly as they moved to accommodate the subtle change in the dynamics of their relationship wrought by Clare’s admission.

*

SOMETHING HAD SHIFTED between Janice and Clare because of the hugging-in-the-kitchen incident. For Clare, Janice was suddenly another Louisa. Another best friend. She hoped that Janice felt the same way. Probably Janice did. She had no problem asking Clare for more help when she needed it.

Thus, Clare took a day off work, supposedly to assist Janice with the clear-out of Janice’s father’s things; however, they spent more time talking than doing. With the funeral behind them, nothing seemed so pressing anymore, and Janice downgraded having a clear-out from urgent need to good intention.

The quiet of the house was accentuated by Janice’s subdued manner. The woman who had been happy to argue and laugh about all things sci-fi a couple of weeks before had been replaced by a more introspective and sombre clone.

Had Janice backslid into her grief? More likely, the burger bar had been the anomaly, a temporary escape from a sadder

norm. Clare suppressed a sigh and wished that she could do more to help Janice through the mourning process.

Instead of sorting through the detritus of her father's life, Janice got ensnared in the memories, images, or prose he'd left behind and put everything back as they found it.

"One of these days," said Janice, as she shut the doors on a cupboard full of photographic equipment, boxes of slides, and sachets of prints, "I'll blitz this place properly." Clare doubted that one of these days would be any time soon. Was that a good or a bad thing? Was Janice using the extra time wisely to regroup and to consider her options carefully instead of doing things in a hurry that she would regret later? Or was she slipping into a state of inertia and depression?

*

ON THE FIRST Wednesday in July, the erstwhile travellers met for lunch in town to put together the final details of their trip. Janice was more cheerful again. Getting out of the house was good for her.

Matt turned up in a three-piece suit, looking impossibly establishment. There were no tight jeans or gelled hair today. This was the professional persona, and Clare, who had been watching the door, mistook him for a stranger until he waved at them.

"I got held up at work," he said by way of explanation. "Almost forgot to take off my wig!"

That was how Clare found out that Matt wasn't simply a lawyer specialising in human rights. He was a barrister, and he fought to uphold those rights in courts of law.

“Tristan is in London again, so he can’t be here. But I guess I can tell him everything he needs to know. Natalia’s coming, though.”

“Natalia?” asked Clare.

“My cousin.”

“Oh, right.”

They’d given up waiting and had ordered their mains by the time Natalia arrived, laden down with shopping bags, light on apologies for her tardiness, and overly eager to describe her new holiday wardrobe.

Matt narrowed his eyes and spouted dire warnings about luggage limits.

With a simpering giggle that made Clare wince, Natalia flicked her wrist to wave the warnings away and said, “Don’t be such a fusspot, Matt!”

*

ONCE LUNCH WAS over and arrangements confirmed, Clare went to Didsbury with Janice, where Janice had made better progress with the clear-out than anticipated. Clare helped to load Janice’s ancient Saab with bags and boxes for charity shops and a local recycling centre.

Janice’s positive mood lasted through the afternoon and lifted with every trip. Maybe shedding old, unwanted possessions was therapeutic or maybe Janice had turned a corner in the grieving process. Maybe she was simply having a good day.

They ate takeout Chinese for tea, trying not to let worries about salt and MSG mar their enjoyment.

“Just think,” said Janice. “This time on Saturday, we’ll be in Glasgow. I can hardly wait.”

Neither could Clare.

Chapter Ten

“SCOTLAND. THE FINAL frontier,” said Jack as Matt stored the first bags into the minibus. “These are the voyages of the Ford Transit. Its nine-day mission...”

Janice teased him. “*Star Trek?* You nerd!”

“We’re going to explore strange new worlds!” Jack bounced with excitement.

“It’s Scotland!” protested Ollie. “Not Mars!” But they were grinning too.

“Meet new life-forms,” said Jack.

“Scots! Scots are people, too, you know,” said Clare as she passed her suitcase to Matt. She moved out of the way to let the next person stow their luggage.

Despite Matt’s warnings about the amount of space and the maximum luggage each person was allowed to take, Natalia had turned up with double her allowance. Nobody dared to challenge her as she had known they wouldn’t. It was, after all, thanks to her that they’d got the minibus. However, the extra bags took space, and Matt managed to squeeze everything in only on his third attempt.

When he was done, Matt wiped his brow and said, “Right. Before we head off, I have something for each of you.” He reached into a small backpack and pulled out a bunch of envelopes. He passed them around, one for each person.

Clare took hers and turned it over. The envelope was white, unmarked, and sealed. “What’s this?”

“Open it and see.”

Clare did as she was told, only a few seconds behind everyone else. Inside was a single sheet of paper, which she pulled out. On one side was a set of instructions and, on the other, a list.

Matt hadn't restricted his preparations for the trip to itineraries and accommodations. He had also done extensive research into things to keep them entertained on the journey.

Clare looked up again. “A scavenger hunt?”

“Yep,” said Matt, popping the P, ridiculously pleased with himself. “Each person has a list of things to find or photograph. Whoever finishes their list first wins”—he dived into his backpack and held up a box of chocolates—“these! If nobody finishes before the end of the trip, whoever comes closest gets the chocs.”

Ollie had finished reading through their list while Matt was talking. “An alpaca? I'm not sure I even know what alpacas look like!”

“And remember,” said Matt, ignoring Ollie's protest, “we need proof: independent, eyewitness testimony, photographs, the object itself—”

“And a black guillemot. What the eff is a black guillemot?” said Ollie.

“It's a bird,” said Janice.

“What's it look like?”

“Black and white, I think.”

“That's a magpie,” said Jack.

Clare wasn't sure whether he was joking or not.

"There's more than one black-and-white bird, you know," said Janice.

"Is there?" said Jack. Either he was an incredibly good actor, which Clare doubted, or he wasn't joking.

"Oh, yes. There's, um, ring ouzel, pied flycatcher, razorbill, black-throated diver and, if we get to see one of those, I'll be ecstatic—" Suddenly self-conscious, Janice broke off her litany and said, "I brought a bird guide with me. They'll all be in there if you're interested."

"Show us, then," challenged Ollie.

"Later. The book's in my case." Janice pointed at the bottom of the luggage pile.

"Not much use in there, is it?"

"No. But I wasn't expecting to need it before we got to the Highlands. There's not a lot of bird spotting to do along the M6."

Clare's medley of apparently random items included a kilt, a deep-fried Mars bar, and a "Heilan' coo". She was distracted by Jack asking, "What's a wheatear?"

"Another bird," said Janice. "The name comes from the old English for white arse."

"Honestly?" asked Clare.

"Honestly," said Janice.

"How do you know that?" asked Natalia.

Janice made the facial equivalent of a vague shrug and said, "I must have read it somewhere."

"She used to teach biology," said Ollie. "Probably goes with the territory."

Clare glanced at Janice. She'd known Janice had been a teacher, but she hadn't known her subject; she was surprised Ollie did. Presumably, Janice had mentioned it at some point, but judging from her expression, she wished she hadn't.

"I didn't know you taught," said Matt, politely interested.

"I don't. Not anymore. Haven't in a while." Her tone discouraged further enquiry.

Matt pulled a clipboard that had some printed pages attached out of his bag. "Car games," he said, by way of explanation.

"Car games?" asked Janice blankly.

Natalia nodded and answered for Matt. "Our family's mad for them." She asked Matt, "Did you include Fortunately, Unfortunately?"

"Of course."

"Punch Buggy?"

"Yes. And the Picnic Game."

"I haven't heard of any of those," said Clare.

"Me neither," said Jack.

Matt looked shocked but recovered himself. Bracingly, he said, "You'll be able to pick everything up pretty easily."

Tristan chuckled. “You’ll have to if you hang around with Matt for any length of time.”

“Plus,” said Matt, “Tristan and I came up with a few new ones, so everyone’ll be in the same boat when we play those.”

Trying to get into the spirit of the moment, Clare said, “I used to love Pub Cricket when I was a kid.”

“Me too,” said Janice.

“I don’t know that one either,” said Jack.

“That’s not surprising,” said Matt. “The game’s gone out of fashion because you need to drive past pubs to play, and you don’t do that on the motorway. Obviously. Plus, loads of pubs have closed.”

As much as Clare loved history, she hated random moments like this, when something shocked her into realising her own past had become of historical interest. The last time that had happened, she’d been in a museum where the same type of computer she’d written her PhD thesis on, alongside a pile of floppy disks, was carefully preserved in a display case. She’d felt ancient, like she felt now.

Matt said, “Okay, everyone. All aboard. Let’s go.”

*

MATT TOOK THE first turn behind the wheel, navigating through the city with an ease borne of familiarity with the roads, lane changes, and filter systems. Tristan sat next to him, in the front passenger seat. Matt must have been concentrating on his driving because he barely talked to Tristan, only acknowledging his comments as grunts and monosyllables.

They had barely got onto the motorway when Tristan twisted around in his seat and, to Natalia's delight, suggested a game of Twenty Questions, which kept everyone occupied until Preston. Then, Tristan said, "Okay. New game. I'm going to give you some management jargon, and you have to guess what it means." Apparently, this game was Tristan's invention. Not only did he work for a firm of management consultants—hopefully not the same ones that had fleeced Louisa's council for the four Es—but he was also working towards his MBA.

Matt showed no interest in taking part. Possibly he had heard all Tristan's jargon before and believed he would have an unfair advantage. The rest of the group joined in eagerly.

"Okay, an easy one to begin with. Thought showering."

"Taking an imaginary shower. Like, you know, in your daydreams?" suggested Jack helplessly.

"Who daydreams about being in the shower?" asked Ollie derisively.

"I do," said Natalia. "Of course, in those daydreams, I'm not alone, and the shower is background for the—" Clare glanced at her, then stared. Was Natalia waggling her eyebrows suggestively?

"Natalia!" snapped Matt, who had been paying attention after all. "TMI! Remember what we talked about!"

"Talked about?" said Natalia vaguely. "Oh, yes. The don't-go-on-about-sex thing. But Ollie did ask."

Matt snorted. "Yeah, but you didn't need to answer!"

"Right. No answers. You got it, cousin."

“Any other suggestions?” said Tristan. “Clare?”

“What?” Clare pulled her attention back onto the game. Confidently, she said, “Brainstorming.”

“What the—”

“Why would you—”

“Correct!” exclaimed Tristan, overriding the protests, which only prompted even more consternation.

“How’d you get brainstorming from thought showering?” demanded Ollie, genuinely perplexed, and outraged at the same time.

“My friend Louisa told me once, that’s all.”

Tristan read aloud a brief explanation from his book. “Right. Next one: not enough bandwidth.”

Nobody got that one, which Tristan told them meant, “Not enough time.”

“What?” said Jack.

“They’re, like, completely different things!” said Ollie. “That’s stupid.”

“Who said jargon has to be sensible?” said Tristan. “In fact, the point of this game is that it isn’t.”

“This *game* is stupid,” said Natalia with a pout that reminded Clare of Louisa’s daughter, who had perfected her pout at age six and had grown out of sulking by the time she turned seven. “Can’t we play I Spy, instead?”

“No,” said Matt repressively, from the driver’s seat.

Natalia flounced as she crossed her arms over her Wonder Bra'd breasts and slumped in her seat.

Clare bit her lip. Was Natalia's company for a week going to be a price worth paying for the use of the minibus?

They continued, working their way with much consternation, laughter, and disbelief through "helicopter views" and "career-limiting moves". Even Clare was stumped by "boiling the ocean" and "wallpapering meetings", with most of the suggested definitions making infinitely more sense than the real ones.

After "putting on a record and seeing who dances", Natalia snapped, "Oh, come on! At least give us something we have a chance of knowing!"

"Offshoring," said Tristan.

After Clare had come up with a suitable definition, Ollie said to her, "You're good at this," in equal parts surprised and impressed. "Better than the rest of us, anyway."

After a while, Tristan passed the book to Clare and invited her to take over as quizmaster. "At least that way someone else will have a chance!" he joked.

Clare thumbed through the pages and offered, "Solutions opportunity."

*

TRISTAN LED THE enthusiastic cheering as they passed the "Welcome to Scotland" road sign, although the whoops and applause had more to do with stopping for lunch than crossing the border.

Minutes later, as Matt parked at the Gretna outlet village, Natalia's eyes lit up and she gleefully exclaimed, "Oh! Shops!"

Matt said, "There's no room in the bus for any more of your junk, so don't you dare buy anything!"

Natalia pouted. Again. Her lower lip jutting out, she said, "It never hurts to look."

Ollie muttered, "Wanna bet?" under their breath, while Matt said, "Fine. Go and look. The rest of us are going for food. And we're not stopping here for long; you'd better be back here by two."

Natalia returned to the minibus barely before two thirty, armed with a wide selection of makeup and a pair of strappy sandals.

They'd barely gone five miles when Natalia demanded they stop somewhere; she was starving.

Clare didn't need to see Matt's face to know he was scowling when he said, "No. If you're that hungry, you can eat your new lipstick!"

"Gum?" offered Ollie, pulling a blister pack of tablets out of a trouser pocket.

Natalia scowled but took a piece anyway.

Ollie proffered the blister pack around. Matt, Clare, and Janice shook their heads, Janice managing to look only slightly revolted at the idea, but Jack and Tristan both took a piece. Ollie, eyeing Janice slyly, smacked their lips, popped a piece of gum into their mouth, and began to chew ostentatiously.

Jack laughed at Ollie's melodramatics, and Clare found herself wryly asking, "Good, is it?"

The skin around Ollie's eyes crinkled with amusement. "Delicious."

Clare shook her head. "I don't see the point of gum, myself. A couple of minutes of flavour, then it's something tasteless you either have to keep chewing on or wrap up and pocket until you can bin it. Pretty inconvenient when you think about it."

"And that's why God gave us pavements," said Ollie, straight-faced.

Was Ollie serious? Clare glanced across at Janice, curious to see her reaction, but Janice had opted out of the conversation by staring out of the window. There wasn't much to see: only the hard shoulder and steep banks of untidy scrub.

"Gum freshens your breath," offered Natalia. "Good if you think you might be in with the chance of a snog."

Clare and Ollie both lifted their eyes heavenwards, and Ollie said, "Yeah, that's not high on my list of reasons for having a good chew. Anyway, there's no chance of you getting a snog with us lot."

Five minutes later, Natalia reverted to complaining about how hungry she was. She was still complaining ninety miles later, when they reached Glasgow.

*

JUDGING BY ITS façade, their hotel might have been grand in the nineteenth century. Since then, its interior had been

guttled of all its original features, robbing it of any period charm it might once have had.

In the reception area, there was a busy brown carpet that made Clare's eyes ache. Someone must have thought the painted walls were a good idea but, clashing as they did with each other and the floor, they were anything but.

After Clare, Janice, and Natalia were each handed key cards to a room on the fourth floor, they played sardines with their luggage and one another in a rickety lift. As she stood with her back pressed uncomfortably against a waist-high handrail, Clare eyed sceptically a sign that stated the lift had capacity for eight people.

There was more brown carpet in the fourth-floor corridor, but fortunately it didn't extend into their room, which overlooked a narrow, cobbled alley lined neatly with an array of bins. The only other component to the view was the wall and windows of an adjacent office building that blocked out most of the light. Only by twisting her neck at an unnatural angle did Clare manage to glimpse a few square inches of blue sky, high above them.

"Bagsy this one," said Natalia, from behind her, dumping her bags on top of the bed closest to the bathroom. Maybe that was why she chose it, or maybe she chose it as it gave her mastery over the room's heating and lighting; the bed was next to the air-conditioning controls and closest to a panel of switches that operated every bulb bar the bedside lamps. Or maybe she chose it as it offered the best view of the television set.

The latter, concluded Clare, as Natalia found the remote control and switched the set on.

Natalia flicked through the channels until she found a talking head on which she immediately turned her back. She opened her suitcase, casting its contents aside as she foraged for something.

Clare tried not to be fascinated by the haphazard pile of possessions forming on the bed, a melange of skimpy undies, T-shirts, a couple of hoodies, a pair of trainers, Lycra, a shop counter's worth of makeup, and a lot of sparkly fabric, the purpose of which Clare couldn't guess.

“Which bed would you prefer?” Clare asked Janice.

“If you don't mind,” said Janice, “I like being by the window.”

“No problem,” said Clare.

“I hope you're not thinking of opening it,” said Natalia, looking up from her clutter.

“You don't like fresh air?” asked Janice.

“That's what air conditioning is for.”

Clare sighed.

Clare and Janice tried to engage Natalia in conversation, but soon gave up. They talked to each other until Natalia shushed them. In the end, they grabbed their bags and escaped to the hotel bar, where they arrived an hour early for their rendezvous with the rest of the group.

*

“WHAT DOES ANYONE want to do for food?” asked Tristan once everyone was gathered.

Clare shrugged. So did everyone else. They shuffled their feet, and Janice and Jack muttered something about not minding and being happy to do whatever the majority wanted.

The collective indecision frustrated Tristan. “Italian?” he said, without a huge amount of enthusiasm.

“I love pizza!” said Natalia, who had put on her new sandals, bared her legs, and thrown on a glittery garment that was either a long T-shirt or a short dress. “Just the thing to set us up for a night of dancing. I’ve found some fabulous-sounding clubs that I’m dying to try! Anyone else up for a night out? No?”

“Not pizza,” said Matt. “We had pizza for lunch.”

“Noodles?” suggested Ollie. “I spotted a Wagamama earlier.”

“Too noisy,” suggested Matt at the same time as Natalia said, “Too spicy.”

“If you don’t like spices, that rules out Indian too,” said Tristan.

Natalia nodded.

“Chinese...? Tapas...?”

Eventually, they settled on hamburgers as being the least bad option, after which they found a bar, drank too much beer, and then split up. Natalia went clubbing; everyone else went to their rooms, and to bed.

*

NATALIA WOKE CLARE when she returned to the hotel at three thirty in the morning desperate for a cup of tea.

She woke Janice by falling over Janice's bed as she went to close the window that Clare and Janice, preferring the rumble of traffic to the hum and rattle of faulty air conditioning, had left ajar.

Chapter Eleven

JANICE CREPT INTO the bathroom, while Clare yawned, stretched, rolled over, and tried to pretend it wasn't time to get up. After the previous night's disturbances, Clare needed to ease gently into the morning.

As soon as Natalia awoke, she reached for the remote and turned the television on. Loud. Then she switched on the kettle and, without asking whether Clare wanted anything, began readying a mug for herself.

Clare hated breakfast television with an almost pathological intensity. Its presenters were unnaturally upbeat, and nobody should be exposed to that level of cheerfulness before consuming at least three cups of coffee. Could a hatred of glossy, smiling people sitting on sofas be programmed into a person's DNA?

"Can you turn the sound down?" Clare rolled onto her side.

"Won't be able to hear over the kettle if I do."

Did Natalia have a hearing impairment?

Clare did her best to ignore the talking heads' discussion about how to apply makeup that would survive the summer heat. She hadn't known that two-colour lipsticks were a thing, and now she did know, she didn't care.

The discussion moved on to single-use plastics, something Clare, under any other circumstances would have cared deeply about but that, today, she found too depressing and exhausting to contemplate.

Clare pulled a pillow over her head, closed her eyes, and let herself drift.

“...and now the weather.”

Clare lifted the corner of the pillow and squinted in the direction of the television. There was another unspeakably cheery person on screen, but at least this one had something useful to say.

“Today is the last of the settled weather...front coming in from the Atlantic, bringing heavy rain and wind...northwest of the British Isles most likely to be affected by localised flooding and disruption to travel. Looking ahead to the middle of the week...”

The next thing Clare knew, Janice was turning off the television, and she was feeling a pressing need to empty her bladder.

Sometime later, much more awake, and much more uncomfortable, Clare sat up and threw her legs over the side of the bed and groaned. “How long has Natalia been in the bathroom?”

“Thirty-five minutes and counting,” said Janice, glancing up from the novel she was reading. “And the shower’s still running.”

Clare muttered some heartfelt imprecations under her breath as she got up and threw yesterday’s jeans and a fleece on over her pyjamas.

“What are you doing?” said Janice, as Clare pushed her bare feet into her shoes.

“Going to find a toilet. I’m bursting for a bloody pee, and I can’t wait any longer!”

*

WHEN, AT LAST, Clare got her turn in the bathroom, she hunted around, then padded out again.

“What are you looking for?” asked Janice.

“Towels,” said Clare laconically.

Janice frowned. “They’re on the shelf over the bath.”

Clare shook her head.

“There were three sets. I used one last night, and—”

Together, their eyes fixed on Natalia. Natalia had one bath sheet wrapped around her waist and another around her chest. She had also purloined two hand towels, using the first to dry her hair and the second to rest her feet on.

Flouncing with anger, Clare plunged into her suitcase and extracted the microfibre towel she’d packed for emergencies. “I guess I’ll have to make do with this, won’t I?” she snarled.

Clare slammed the bathroom door shut behind her, but not before Natalia asked, “What’s up with her?”

By the time she re-emerged, washed and readier to face the day, Clare had calmed down a bit. As she dressed, Natalia said, “Janice says I should apologise.”

Clare quirked an eyebrow. “Does she?”

“H’m.”

“Is that it?”

“Is that what?” asked Natalia. “Hurry up. We’re late for breakfast.”

By the time they reached the dining room, the rest of the gang had long since finished their full Scottishes and had moved on to nursing mugs of tea and coffee.

“What kept you?” asked Matt, by way of a greeting. “We should have been on the road five minutes ago.”

Clare didn’t trust herself to say anything.

*

THEY SET OFF shortly after ten, this time with Tristan behind the wheel.

They made their first stop in Stirling. As Tristan steered them off the motorway, Natalia raised her eyebrows. “Call this a city? It’s barely a town! A small town. Where are the malls and the factories and the high-rise office blocks?”

“I like it,” said Clare quietly, as she tried to look out of all the minibus’s windows at once.

Ten minutes later, Tristan brought the minibus to a stop in the castle car park. From there, they trailed their way to the ticket kiosk, where Natalia nearly had a coronary at the entry price. Jack was also shocked, but he did his best to keep his opinion to himself. Unlike Natalia, who complained bitterly. “I didn’t budget for entry into places like this,” she moaned, as she reluctantly extracted a debit card from her purse.

“But you budgeted for shopping, clubs, and booze?” asked Janice blandly.

“Well, yeah,” said Natalia, her tone implying that shopping, clubs, and booze fell into the same category as food and water: they were essential to life.

Clare loved the castle, and she eagerly drank in all the details as they made their way through a range of buildings dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

After Clare’s umpteenth “Oh, this is brilliant!” Janice nudged her. “Anyone’d think you were a historian!”

“Sorry. I guess I’m getting carried away.”

“Maybe a bit.”

For Clare, the highlight of the trip was The Royal Palace. For everyone else, it was the cafeteria and cake.

The castle took more time to explore than they had expected, so they gave the Wallace Monument a miss.

Tristan pointed the minibus north. “Next stop: Aviemore!”

*

NATALIA SLEPT ALL the way from Stirling to Aviemore, only waking when the bus came to a halt in a supermarket car park and everyone else began to open doors. Natalia yawned and announced that she was going to stay in the vehicle and catch up on some more sleep; she’d had a rough night and needed to rest.

When they were barely three yards away from the minibus, Clare groaned in disbelief. “*She* had a rough night!”

“Please tell me that there are no nightclubs in Inverness,” pleaded Janice. “I don’t think I can stand a repeat of last night.”

“Why? What happened?” asked Jack.

Clare groaned again. “You don’t want to know.”

“Yes, I do.”

Between them, Clare and Janice gave him an edited version of events, ending with Clare saying, “Then she woke us again, sometime after four, to tell us that we snored and that we should have let her fall asleep before us, so we didn’t keep her awake.”

“And, by the way, she snores too,” said Janice. “Although she swears she doesn’t.”

“I’m not old enough to snore!” mimicked Clare, unable to stop herself.

“You talking about Natalia?” asked Matt, who had appeared alongside them.

“Um...” said Clare. Her cheeks burned.

Matt laughed, utterly unoffended on his cousin’s behalf. “She snores, all right. It’s family legend.”

“You might have warned us,” said Janice, exhibiting less rancour than Clare felt.

Matt demonstrated an unexpected evil streak as he said, “It’s more fun for the rest of us to watch you find out for yourselves.”

“Don’t laugh,” said Clare, wagging a finger under his nose. “Don’t you dare! It’s *not* funny!” But her lips twitched.

Matt laughed a lot more before they were done.

*

THEY ARRIVED IN Inverness late in the afternoon, where Tristan got confused by the one-way system. However, aided by some enthusiastic but inept navigation from Jack, a couple of pauses to consult his smartphone, and some restrained swearing, Tristan found the bed-and-breakfast after only twenty minutes of trying.

A very 1990s sign on the edge of the property pronounced that this was “Rosebank B&B, en suite and colour TV in every bedroom”. In the 2010s, colour television was a given and en suites largely assumed. The current boast of choice was free Wi-Fi, and even that was becoming the norm in many places.

A shingle hung below the sign, proudly boasting that there were no vacancies.

Tristan manoeuvred the minibus through an open gate and onto what might once have been a front lawn but was now a sea of gravel given over to guest parking.

Everyone clambered out of the minibus, several of them pausing to stretch and twist kinks out of their backs.

Clare turned to look at their accommodation.

Rosebank was a large suburban house that had been extended over the years, eating into what once must have been a generous garden. Now, all that remained was a narrow strip of grass, the expanse of gravel, and a few pots filled with brightly coloured annuals.

At least everything was neat and tidy. If the interior was as well-tended as the exterior, they would be comfortable enough. If not... Well, they were only staying for one night.

A woman came around the side of the house, shouted out a greeting, and waved at them. Mrs Pearce, owner of Rosebank, was built like a weightlifter. She had thick, curly hair that she wore in a short, practical style, a cluster of rings on each hand, short and unpolished nails, and a welcoming smile. Her eyes sparkled as she talked—and she talked a lot—as though she found joy and humour in everything around her.

As she chatted, Clare reflected that there was something disappointing about staying with a landlady who came from Preston; this was hardly the Highland experience she had signed up for. Even so, Clare couldn't help but like her. Mrs Pearce had the rare knack of making friends within seconds of meeting someone.

*

BY THE TIME they left Rosebank to go exploring, most of Inverness's businesses had closed for the day. They had to make do with wandering around, looking at the architecture, and peering into random shop windows.

Eventually, partly driven by hunger and partly by a need to keep themselves occupied, they went in search of something to eat.

They settled on Italian, eating in a restaurant that was part of a chain with which Clare was already familiar; the food offered little in the way of surprises. Despite the restaurant's mundanity, the quality was reasonable, the ambience pleasant, and the waiting staff attentive.

“When,” said Clare, after a waiter, wearing a name tag that identified him as Marius, had delivered their food, “do you think we'll meet an actual Scot?”

Before anyone got a chance to answer, they were sidetracked by Ollie saying, “Uh-oh.” In response to the curiosity around the table, Ollie pointed their fork towards a table on the other side of the restaurant. “Some bloke is on one knee, and he’s holding out a ring.”

The rest of the group rubber-necked to see what was going on.

“She’s going to say yes,” grumbled Ollie. “Someone at a neighbouring table will begin to clap, and we’ll all feel obliged to join in. Isn’t it amazing how some people insist on inflicting their romance on everybody else?”

“Spoken like a true aromantic!” said Tristan.

Across the room, the woman put her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide with surprise. The man reached for her left hand to slide the ring onto her finger. The woman launched herself at him and wrapped her arms around his neck in a way that had to be uncomfortable. Then they were snogging as they stood up and, yes, there was the obligatory applause. Plus, dammit, someone was wolf-whistling!

Clare hoped that nobody noticed how lacklustre her clapping was.

“And there you have it,” Ollie said. “Yet another example of allos assuming public space is theirs to use freely.”

“Are you saying that you wouldn’t object as strongly if it was—say—me proposing to Matt?” asked Tristan. “Is it the romance you’re objecting to, or the allo bit?”

“I...uh...” Ollie stumbled for a moment, then they said, “Both. But the heterosexualisation of space makes it worse. At

least if you proposed, you would be subverting the norm, bringing queerness into the open.”

“But, generally speaking, you don’t approve of grand romantic gestures?” said Tristan.

“Not when they’re inflicted on complete strangers, no,” said Ollie.

“What about the rest of you?”

“I...” Janice tried for tact. “I don’t have much experience of them. I suppose it’s different if you’re surrounded by friends and family—people you care about and who care about you.”

Clare nodded and chimed in. “Why would you make your grand gesture in the middle of a bunch of strangers? Who are you doing that for?”

“Matt?” said Tristan, unusually invested in their answers.

“I think they’ve got a point.” Matt gestured, taking in Ollie, Janice, and Clare with a wave of his hand. “I’ve nothing against being swept off my feet, but I’d want it to feel personal. To mean something. This—” He waved a hand to encompass the whole room. “—feels hollow. Like that couple needs external validation.”

Tristan said nothing more until it was time to order dessert.

*

“FIFTY MINUTES IN the bathroom this morning,” said Clare, as she carried her bags out to the bus. “That must be some sort of record.”

“At least Natalia didn’t use all the towels,” said Janice. “I guess my talk yesterday had an effect.”

Clare shook her head and, hating to disillusion her, said, “I hid ours.”

“You didn’t!” exclaimed Janice, amused and disappointed at the same time.

“After yesterday, I didn’t want to take any chances, and can you blame me, especially after she said she wanted a bath? At least I managed to get into the bathroom ahead of her this morning.”

Janice laughed, then said more soberly, “She’s getting to you, isn’t she?”

Clare scuffed her toes against the gravel. “Yeah. You can’t tell me that she doesn’t bug you too.”

“Well, yes,” admitted Janice reluctantly, “but things could be a lot worse.”

Clare couldn’t see how, but she didn’t ask. She had more immediate concerns. It was her turn to drive, and Matt was proffering her the minibus keys. Clare’s nerves made her stomach and its contents churn, which was a pity because Mrs Pearce’s breakfast deserved better.

Chapter Twelve

IF CLARE DIDN'T hate every minute of her turn behind the wheel, she hated every other minute.

The day began benignly enough, although Clare took a while to get comfortable driving something bigger than a small hatchback. Beyond Inverness, the roads were quiet, and they made reasonable time to Beaulieu, where they stopped to explore.

As they strolled along the main street, past banks, cafés, a florist, gift shops, and other emporia, they browsed in a few windows and dodged parked cars and moving pedestrians. The mothers with baby buggies, which they used to plough a furrow through the tourists, were particularly hazardous.

“Where’s the chewing gum?” asked Ollie suddenly.

“What?” asked Tristan blankly, speaking for all of them.

“There’s no chewing gum on the ground.” Ollie made a good point. Beaulieu’s pavements were free of the polka-dotted markings that were the norm in and around Manchester. “What am I supposed to do with this?” Ollie parted their lips to reveal a grey piece of gum held between their orthodontic-perfect teeth.

Repressively, Janice said, “Do what any house-trained person would do. Wrap it and bin it.”

Ollie’s eyes glinted mischievously. “I don’t have anything to wrap it in.”

That was a blatant lie. Clare had seen Ollie holding a packet of tissues not five minutes before; they were being

deliberately provocative. Why was Ollie so intent on baiting Janice? Come to that, why did Janice put up with it? At what point would Janice decide she'd had enough? Maybe Clare would ask if a suitable opportunity presented itself. Then again, maybe not.

Natalia led them into a shop selling scented candles in its front room and, tucked away in the back, everything Christmassy. If she had been on her own, Clare would not have bothered to go in, but at least it had novelty value and was more interesting than the newsagents or the shoe shop that Natalia had also insisted on investigating.

They picked up and sniffed a selection of candles and frowned at the prices. One candle was labelled friendship, prompting Ollie to say, "Jeez! If that's what friendship smells like, I don't want any more friends!"

Jack pushed another candle towards Ollie's face and asked, "What do you think this one's supposed to be?"

Ollie sniffed and wrinkled their nose. "Socks?"

Jack showed Ollie the label. Then he turned it around so Clare could see: Scottish shortbread.

"This place is hardly Yankee Candles, is it?" said Ollie, which made the others laugh. Behind the till, a shop assistant glowered.

To get into the back room, Clare had to step around a life-sized mannequin dressed as Saint Nick. The dim lighting, allied with the excessive use of reds and forest greens, was oppressive, and Clare barely gave the displays a quick once-over before returning to the front room, which Jack had never

left. After a couple of minutes, Janice rejoined them. They loitered, letting the scents assault their nasal passages as they waited for the others to be done.

“Don’t you like Christmas stuff?” Natalia asked Jack as she drifted by, not waiting for an answer.

“Or maybe you don’t like the idea of Christmas in July?” murmured Clare quietly, so that the irritable assistant couldn’t hear.

Embarrassed, Jack said, “Neither. I’m just...not a big fan of Santa.” He eyed the mannequin warily.

Clare quirked an eyebrow, inviting Jack to explain.

“I was terrified of Santa when I was a kid.” He shuffled his feet. “Santa and clowns. I was terrified of clowns too.”

“Clowns, I get,” said Janice. “Horrible things. But Santa?”

Jack sighed, as though this was a discussion he’d had too many times. He crossed his arms over his chest and lifted his chin defiantly. “He can break into your house. He spies on you all year to see if you have been naughty or nice. And your parents—your own parents!—make you sit on this old, fat man’s knee, which goes against everything they tell you about stranger danger. My parents have a photo of me screaming my head off as I try to get off Santa’s lap, and the smell of mothballs still makes me break into a sweat.”

“Nobody likes the smell of mothballs,” said Janice.

“I don’t think that’s the point,” said Clare.

First Matt and Ollie, and then Tristan, reappeared, and Clare began to hope that they might get to move on

somewhere else. Natalia emerged last, clutching her latest acquisitions: a small soft toy in the shape of an elf and a sign that read, “I love fat men bearing gifts.”

“Any fat men?” asked Clare quizzically.

“Probably,” said Matt, leaning in close, whispering in her ear, and startling her. Clare had meant the question to be rhetorical, and she hadn’t meant to say the words out loud. “She loves men who aren’t fat too. There’s a reason why the family call her The Barracuda!”

*

THE LOW-PRESSURE system the weather forecaster had talked about with such glee the previous morning manifested as driving rain carried on strong winds that pounded at the windscreen at a ninety-degree angle. Along with the rain came spray. The minibus’s wipers struggled to cope.

Clare hunched over, white knuckling the steering wheel, and soldiered on, her jaw clenched and her mouth a thin, tense line.

They turned off the A896 onto country lanes narrower than any Clare had ever had to tackle before. Nothing in her driving lessons, her test, or the years since had prepared her for the reality of driving along Scotland’s single-track roads.

Clare pulled the minibus to a stop, allowing Ollie to jump out and photograph a sign that read:

ROAD TO APPLECROSS

THIS ROAD RISES TO A HEIGHT OF 2053Ft.

WITH GRADIENTS OF 1 in 5 AND HAIRPIN BENDS

NOT ADVISED FOR LEARNER DRIVERS
VERY LARGE VEHICLES OR CARAVANS

AFTER FIRST MILE

Clare hoped fervently that the minibus didn't count as a very large vehicle.

Ollie got into the bus, letting a chilly gust of wind and rain in with them. They dripped on the floor and seats, and with disgusted awe announced, "It's foul out there!"

Clare drove into cloud as they approached the Bealach na Ba, which Matt informed them, guidebook in hand, meant Pass of the Cattle. Clare kept her eyes peeled on the road, which twisted and turned as though it had been laid down by a rollercoaster designer.

Matt read more from his guidebook. "'This is an exhilarating mountain pass offering stunning views.' Pity we can't see anything."

Matt might bemoan the lack of views, but Clare was grateful she couldn't see much beyond the edges of the road and didn't know enough to anticipate the horrors lying ahead. As it was, nausea threatened to overwhelm her as she steered and coaxed the minibus along, crunching the gears. Cars raced towards her with reckless abandon, and several times she had to reverse into passing places with the oncoming vehicles impatiently matching her slow progress until their drivers were able to put their feet down and squeeze past. She almost had a panic attack when she met two camper vans at once.

As they approached the top of the pass, Matt said, "There's supposed to be a viewpoint here."

“Can we stop?” asked Ollie.

“What for?” asked Natalia. “We’re not going to see anything.”

“I know we won’t get the view,” said Ollie, “but according to Instagram there are some interesting piles of stones. I’d like to take a look at them.”

Clare pulled off the road onto an area of tarmac that served as a small car park. Everyone except Natalia ventured outside to find the stones that so intrigued Ollie.

Ollie got out their phone and camera and took pictures of the sculptural stacks. The others scrambled back to the bus as soon as they discovered how not-waterproof their jackets were and waited impatiently for Ollie, who was apparently impervious to water and incapable of getting bored of the pebbles.

Back on the road, Clare cranked the heating to maximum and directed the fan to demist the windscreen. Inside, the minibus’s windows remained covered in condensation, but the streams of water outside meant that, even when they’d descended below the cloud base again and wiped the condensation away, nobody could see much further than the verges.

They reached “The Street”, and Clare took a unilateral decision to pull up close to the Applecross Inn. She needed a strong, restorative cup of tea.

“You’re doing brilliantly,” said Janice quietly, leaning forward and placing a hand on Clare’s left shoulder.

“Yeah,” agreed Natalia. “Rather you than me!”

“Thanks. It can only get easier from here, right?” Clare took a deep breath, pulled the key out of the ignition, and opened the door. She climbed out, waited until everyone else had exited the vehicle, locked it, and pocketed the key.

They headed en masse towards the inn.

Applecross Inn was a long white building, one and a half storeys high, with dormer windows in the roof. The inn had white walls and black detailing around the windows, and a currently unoccupied row of picnic tables that commanded views across the road and the water beyond. In the rain, the lead-grey sea merged into the lead-grey clouds, and there was no visible horizon line.

Inside, the inn was cosy, warm, and welcoming. Some walls were bare stone while others, along with the ceiling and the bar, were clad in wood. There were pictures and a bookcase, which invited visitors to stop and linger.

They caught a glimpse of the food other customers were eating and guessed that this would be a great place to have lunch.

“The seafood looks to die for!” moaned Janice in ecstasy as a server walked past with a shellfish platter.

“If I ate that, I *would* die,” muttered Ollie. “I’m allergic.”

“There’s plenty of other stuff on the menu,” Matt said encouragingly.

*

AS THEY WAITED for their orders, Ollie whipped out their phone and, head down, swiped their way through the myriad of photos they had taken earlier, mumbling and muttering all

the while. “Mm... Uh-huh... Nah... Ah-hah! This’ll look great on my Instagram!” They flashed the screen around to show the others.

“Nice!” said Jack appreciatively, while Tristan and Matt did their best to feign polite interest. Natalia looked bored. Janice... Clare tried to identify Janice’s reaction. Stoically long-suffering? Clare got that; she’d never bothered with Instagram either.

“Now all I need is a Wi-Fi connection and I’ll be good to go.” Ollie looked around and spotted a sign. “Yes! Free Wi-Fi!”

“They’re asking for a donation.” Janice gestured towards the notice.

“Yeah, sure. Whatever.” Ollie waved the suggestion away.

Clare caught the way Janice’s lips tightened.

Fortunately, their meals began to arrive, and the awkward moment passed.

*

AN HOUR LATER, their spirits lifted by food and warmth, the group set off again. Ollie furtively slid a handful of coins into the Wi-Fi donation box on the way out, almost as though they didn’t want to be caught doing something considerate.

When Matt offered to take a turn behind the wheel, Ollie took offense on Clare’s behalf, demanding to know why Matt thought Clare might want a big, strong man to do what she was so obviously capable of doing herself.

Clare told Matt that she appreciated his offer, which was true, and that she was happy to continue, which wasn't. However, she was touched by Ollie's faith in her and bloody-minded enough not to be defeated by the Highland roads. Besides, once she got today over with, others would take their turns at the wheel, and she'd be able to enjoy being chauffeured around with a clear conscience.

Happily, Bealach na Ba turned out to have been a baptism of fire, and nothing was so daunting or terrifying afterwards.

*

BY LATE AFTERNOON, the wind dropped, and the rain gave way to a curtain of moisture that fell somewhere between fog and drizzle. When they arrived at their next bed-and-breakfast, in Torridon, their host—a Mrs Colquhoun—called it Scotch mist. The mist masked and greyed out the landscape, and soaked their hair, skin, and clothes. Everything, from leaves to the minibus, was beaded in water droplets.

Matt negotiated with Mrs Colquhoun and returned with room assignments and keys. “You’re sharing with Janice and Ollie tonight,” Matt told Clare with a wink. “Thought you needed a break from my darling cousin!”

“How will that work out with everyone else?”

“I’ll share with Natalia. Jack can go in with Tris.”

“You sure you’re okay with that? Not sharing with Tristan, I mean?”

Matt gave a shrug that bordered on a squirm. “We sleep together at home. Don’t need to do it on holiday too.”

Clare hoped Tristan would be equally sanguine about the arrangements.

“Besides,” said Matt, “Nat and I have shared tents since we were five years old. It’s fine.”

“If you’re sure,” said Clare, still doubtful. Mentally, she crossed her fingers, hoping he wouldn’t change his mind.

“I told you, it’s fine. Why should you have to suffer all the time? Besides, she’s my cousin; I can’t help feeling responsible for how crazy she makes everyone else.”

“Thank you. Sharing with Ollie’s got to be miles better than sharing with Natalia.”

For some reason, when Janice learned of the arrangements, she didn’t share Clare’s enthusiasm.

One and a half storeys high, Mrs Colquhoun’s house was an odd blend of old and not so old, but nothing about it qualified as antique. Clare wasn’t keen on the busy wallpaper in the bedroom or its tricky door lock, but she liked the sloping ceilings, the dormer window, and the room’s generous size. Most of all, she appreciated the way Ollie didn’t make a beeline for the telly and said they didn’t care which bed they had.

In addition to their bedrooms, guests were offered the use of a living room that doubled as a breakfast room in the morning. The carpet had a loud pattern in a blend of blues, turquoise, and cream. The fireplace surround was decorated with pinkie-beige tiles and topped with ceramic figurines and animals. The pictures on the walls, culled from who knew where, were a mishmash of bland images in ill-fitting frames.

Lush plants, along with cereal packets, adorned a sideboard. The breakfast tables were Formica-topped gate-leg affairs that reawakened memories of Clare's childhood. When Clare, Janice, and Ollie went in to wait for the others, the tables had been folded and tucked against the walls, tidied out of the way for the evening.

“Old lady chic,” said Ollie with a smirk.

The comment discomfited Clare, although Ollie's affectionate and teasing tone robbed the words of bite. Besides, Clare had been thinking pretty much the same thing herself.

Mrs Colquhoun came to check that they had everything they needed and make small talk. She was a soft- and slow-spoken woman, who chose her words carefully. She had an accent that was easy on the ear, and Clare warmed to her. Here was her authentic Scottish host at last!

“So, my dears,” asked Mrs Colquhoun, “how are you enjoying your stay in the Highlands?”

“Good,” said Clare, “although today's weather has been... disappointing.”

Next to her, Janice nodded her agreement.

“I'd never seen horizontal rain before,” said Ollie, upbeat and exhilarated.

Mrs Colquhoun smiled tolerantly. “We get a lot of that around here. You get used to it. Still, the worst of the rain's off now, and the weather's set fair for the next couple of days. Mind, you'll be wanting to watch for the midges this evening. They'll be something fierce.”

At her guests' blank looks, Mrs Colquhoun said, "The moisture and the stillness'll bring them out."

Matt and Natalia arrived in time to hear Mrs Colquhoun's comment.

Natalia wrinkled her nose and jabbed her thumb in Matt's direction. "I'd rather let the midges eat me alive than smell that bad!" Somehow Matt had known to drench himself in DEET.

That prompted Ollie to say too loudly to no one in particular, "Does Natalia think she smells good? I want to gag on her perfume. Does she *bathe* in it?"

Natalia heard and glared. Ollie looked pleased with herself.

H'm. So, Ollie liked to bait other people besides Janice. Clare didn't know what to make of that, but, as Tristan and Jack arrived at that moment, she didn't have time to pursue the thought.

*

AS THE GROUP set out on foot to the local inn for dinner, Clare knew that she wasn't going to be good company; she didn't have the energy for it. The odd thing was, nobody else had the energy for it either.

The inn, about half a mile from Mrs Colquhoun's and hidden up a long, tarmacked drive, turned out to be a baronial pile, complete with turrets. Once seated at their table, Tristan made an effort to engage everyone in conversation, at least to begin with, but Matt didn't seem to want to co-operate, and Tristan lapsed into a sullen funk. As usual, Ollie was as happy

to commune with their phone as with anyone else, and when Janice asked, they didn't bother to pass the pepper.

Ollie deigned to join in the conversation only to make barbed comments either at Janice's or Natalia's expense. Under other circumstances, the sniping might have passed for friendly banter, but there were undercurrents that warned Clare that Ollie's teasing wasn't motivated by good humour.

Natalia remained oblivious, and Janice forbore Ollie's comments with greater stoicism than Clare would have been capable of.

Janice was withdrawn. She replied when someone spoke to her and sat in silence when they didn't, but she did nothing to initiate any conversation.

Where were the people Clare had come to know and like? Only Jack behaved anything like his normal, Manchester self.

All told, the meal was not a happy one. They paid the bill and left with relief.

On the way back to their accommodation, Natalia, fuelled by a couple of glasses of Merlot, was incapable of walking in a straight line.

"I didn't think that she'd had that much to drink," Clare said to Janice, "but she keeps veering towards Jack. Look, see? He's having to dodge out of her way."

"Maybe she drank more than we realised. She keeps reaching out to steady herself."

Ollie and Matt lagged some way behind them, deep in hushed conversation. At times, Tristan, unsure about what to do with himself, strode out in front, but then he would pause,

drop back, and hang on the edges of conversations that he didn't join.

When they reached Mrs Colquhoun's, Tristan suggested a game of Cards Against Humanity to round off the evening, but Matt proposed a round of Exploding Kittens instead. As the discussion showed signs of descending into a full-blown argument that would last longer than any game they ended up playing, Janice and Clare made their excuses and headed to their room.

Halfway up the stairs, with the raised voices from the living room still audible if indecipherable, Clare muttered, "Aren't holidays supposed to be relaxing?"

Janice made a noise that was either an acknowledgement or an agreement and said, "Come on. Let's have a cup of tea."

Clare battled with the door lock. "Damn, this is fiddly!" Janice waited patiently while Clare got the door open.

When Clare tried to shut the door behind them, the catch refused to...well...catch, and the door insisted on resting ajar. Clare shrugged, giving up attempts to close it as a bad job. "No point battling with it just now. I'll try again once Ollie's come up."

Janice pattered around, readying the cups and kettle, while Clare sprawled across her bed. Idly, she said, "What's with you and Ollie, anyway? They seem to go out of their way to annoy you."

"They do. Not that I blame them."

Clare raised her eyebrows. "Why not?"

"We have...history."

“You do?” Janice had mentioned something previously about knowing one of the group. But Ollie? Clare frowned and said, “You don’t strike me as likely to run in the same kinds of circles, ace meet-ups notwithstanding.”

Janice sighed. “I used to be a teacher.”

Clare guessed where this was going. “Biology, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. With a bit of chemistry thrown in for good measure. I was Ollie’s form tutor. As things turned out, I wasn’t a good one.”

“You don’t have to tell me.”

“I want to. At least some of it.”

At that moment, Ollie stepped into the bedroom and said, “You might as well know everything, Clare. I was...difficult. And troubled. And then I stole a rat.”

“Excuse me?” said Clare. “Did you say—”

“A rat,” confirmed Ollie. With studied nonchalance, they moved to sit on their bed.

Ollie must have heard them through the open door, and how awkward was that? Incredibly, judging from the way Clare’s cheeks burned, Janice fiddled nervously with the tea things, and Ollie sat ramrod straight, waiting for whatever came next. “I stole a rat,” they said again.

“From the biology lab,” said Janice.

“To...liberate it?” Clare asked. “Because that sounds kind of noble.”

“Oh, no,” said Ollie. “Besides, what would have been the point? It was dead.”

“Dead? I’m sorry... You kept dead rats in your lab.” Clare gestured towards Janice. “And you stole one.” She pointed at Ollie. “Why?” she wailed.

“I’d ordered them for the A level students to dissect,” said Janice.

“And I stole it. I was angry and hurt and confused, and I was acting out. As for what I did with it...”

“It wasn’t funny,” said Janice, but her lips were twitching. “And pickled rats...they’re expensive, you know.” To Clare’s utter bewilderment, Ollie and Janice looked at each other, sharing a sudden moment of mutual understanding and humour.

“My parents paid for it,” said Ollie.

“That’s true,” said Janice.

“Plus, he deserved it,” said Ollie.

“That’s also true,” admitted Janice.

Clare stared some more. The conversation was doing nothing to clear up her confusion.

Ollie’s expression and their posture softened at Janice’s words. “It was almost worth being suspended just to see the look on Geezer Grizewood’s face when—” They stopped abruptly.

“It’s been almost ten years, Ollie. Well past the statute of limitations on that sort of thing, I’m sure.” Janice turned to Clare and said, “Cuthbert Grizewood was the school’s guidance teacher.”

“Cuthbert?” exclaimed Ollie. “His name was Cuthbert?”

“Yes. So?”

“It’s... Well, it seems to suit him. Old-fashioned and stodgy.” For Clare’s benefit, Ollie said, “Grizewood was a bastard. He was a homophobe and a transphobe.”

“Xenophobe,” added Janice.

“Bigot,” said Ollie.

“Okay,” interjected Clare. “I get the picture. He was an equal opportunity hater.”

“Yes!” said Janice and Ollie in unison.

Janice said, “He hated just about any minority group, and he was the last person who should ever have been responsible for the pastoral care of students.”

Ollie glanced at Janice, stunned at the common ground that they had found. Janice nodded encouragingly at Ollie.

“One of my friends was being bullied, and he was self-harming. Grizewood sided with the bullies. My friend... Well, let’s say things ended badly, and I did what nobody else would. I challenged Grizewood and I tried to complain to the head, but it didn’t do any good. So, I left the rat in Grizewood’s desk, along with a note: ‘A rat for a rat.’ And...I put a noose around its neck.” For the first time, Ollie exhibited doubt. “That might have been a mistake.”

Janice explained further. “Grizewood and, ultimately, the headmistress said it was clearly a death threat—”

“Which it wasn’t! I wouldn’t have done anything to him. I only wanted to scare him. Like Toby had been scared.”

“The school wanted to hush the whole thing up, but Ollie plastered photographs all over the place.”

“This was before I got seriously into social media,” said Ollie. “Otherwise, I’d have made sure the whole affair went viral.”

“What happened next?” Clare asked.

Ollie answered bitterly. “Grizewood got off scot-free, and I was suspended.”

“And soon after that I got out of teaching.”

“And then, one day, when I thought I’d moved way, way past all that, she walks into my group, and she didn’t recognise me!” Now all the weird undercurrents and tensions that Clare had wondered about made sense. “Those events shaped my life, and she didn’t even remember. It didn’t matter to her! She didn’t care, and everything came flooding back.”

“I remembered,” said Janice sombrely. “I remembered you, but I didn’t recognise you, not to begin with.”

Ollie looked disbelieving.

Janice shrugged. “I have prosopagnosia.”

“What?” Ollie’s nose wrinkled with scepticism.

“Face blindness. Mine’s not severe, but it affects my ability to recognise people, and you’d changed your hair, and a few years had passed. By the time I figured out who you were, I thought it was too late to say anything. You hadn’t said anything either, and I didn’t want to make things awkward by bringing up the topic, so...I didn’t.”

“I see,” said Ollie. Judging from the tone of their voice, they not only understood but they might even have accepted the explanation. Clare relaxed as the tension in the room eased.

Janice said tentatively, “I did try to speak up for you at the time. But I should have tried harder, and I’m sorry I didn’t.”

Ollie nodded, accepting Janice’s words with a small, tight smile. “Thanks. That means something.” They paused, then said, “You said you got out of teaching. So, what happened?”

“A combination of things. I was disillusioned. Lipston Grammar was supposed to be a great school, and it was, if by great you mean its pupils passed exams. But Lipston didn’t produce happy, well-rounded people. It produced competitive go-getters, and after the incident I noticed too many kids falling through the cracks. The school had failed you and Toby, and it was failing others too. I went on a crusade to change things, but nobody wanted to hear what I had to say. By the time Dad got sick, I’d had enough, and I left.”

“But...you tried?” said Ollie, seeking absolute confirmation of everything Janice had told them.

“Yes. For all the good it did.”

Ollie nodded and said, “You tried. I... It helps to know that.” They mumbled something that might have been a slightly teary “Thanks.”

Janice pressed her lips together and grunted a repressed “Mmmm.” Clare was teary-eyed herself.

“So,” said Janice, after a few seconds, determinedly pulling herself together. “Tea?”

Ollie and Clare both nodded.

Minutes later, when they were all seated again, mugs in hand, Clare summoned up the courage to ask Ollie what had happened to them next.

“Like I said, I was suspended. Then the head suggested forcefully that I might be happier completing sixth form somewhere else.”

“Let’s be honest,” said Janice indignantly, “Ollie was expelled in all but name.”

Ollie agreed. “My schooling was disrupted, my parents were furious, and I went off the rails for a while. I was angry and ashamed, but I wasn’t going to let anyone know that, so I rebelled.” They smirked wryly. “I wore my reputation as a troublemaker like a pride badge. Out, proud, and loud. In hindsight, that was bloody stupid of me. I ended up in front of the magistrates a couple of times.”

“What happened then?” asked Clare. Janice leaned forward, also curious.

Ollie skirted around the question, which was fair enough. Probably Clare shouldn’t have asked in the first place. Grudgingly, Ollie admitted, “In the long run, I think things turned out for the best. I’d never been happy at Lipston. I never fitted in. But I finished my A levels at a further education college where I wasn’t forced to conform to anyone else’s idea of normal. I reinvented myself. Or I was encouraged to find ways to express who I truly was, and I began to settle down again.”

Chapter Thirteen

THE NEXT MORNING, Ollie woke Clare by opening the curtains and yelping, “Oh, holy crap!”

“Wha’s goin’ on?”

“Have you seen the view?” asked Ollie, presumably rhetorically. Nobody had been able to see much of anything the night before. “It’s amazing!”

Clare pulled herself out of bed. Across the room, Janice’s was empty. Clare went to join Ollie at the window. “Wow,” she breathed, transfixed.

Sometime during the night, the mist had cleared, and in front of them was a long stretch of water surrounded on both sides by rugged, rocky hills. Or were they small mountains? The sea loch twinkled in the sun, and the sky was clear and blue.

Ollie foraged around for their camera, then opened the window wide and leaned out to get the best shot they could. Clare was tempted to warn Ollie not to fall out but doubted they would appreciate her solicitude, no matter how well meaning. Instead, she ducked into the bathroom, deciding to get a jump on the day.

Not long afterwards, as Clare was getting dressed, the bedroom door opened, and Janice, glowing pink with the great outdoors, came in. “Ah-hah! You’re awake! It’s fabulous outside. I’ve seen ravens and oystercatchers and swallows, and the water looks incredible, and—”

Neither Ollie nor Clare waited to hear any more. “Want to go take a look?” said Clare.

Ollie nodded enthusiastically, already pulling on their boots.

“You’ve got half an hour before breakfast,” said Janice. “Enough time to explore.”

Thus, while Janice took her turn in the bathroom, Clare and Ollie strolled along the shoreline, talking quietly and getting to know each other better, and Ollie did their best to fill a memory card with Instagram-perfect shots.

*

CLARE AND OLLIE went straight into the breakfast room when they returned from their walk. Janice was already there, nursing a cup of tea, but she had waited for them before ordering any food.

Matt arrived next, on his own, which Clare thought was odd until she remembered that he hadn’t been sharing with Tristan.

When Tristan arrived, he frowned at Matt’s choice of drink. “Coffee? But we always have tea at breakfast.”

“Yeah, well, today I wanted coffee.” Judging from the way Matt was carrying himself, he didn’t just want coffee. He needed it too.

“Took me ages to get to sleep last night,” said Ollie cheerfully. “It was too damn quiet. I miss the sound of the drunks at chucking-out time. So, yeah, I’m on the coffee too.” They raised their mug in an odd kind of salute.

“Quiet?” said Matt. “It wasn’t quiet. There were sheep bleating outside our window at dawn, and do you know what time dawn is around here? I do. And there were some birds screeching like nobody’s business all night.”

“Oystercatchers?” suggested Janice.

“Whatever, nobody could sleep through that!”

Unable to stop herself, Clare said, “I did. Like a log. It was great.” She’d had the best night of the trip so far, and the day was off to an excellent start too.

Jack bounced through the door, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, wearing running gear, and hungry. “Five miles,” he said happily, “and I feel as though I could do five more, no probs. I might go out again, this evening.”

Clare was exhausted just thinking about it.

To nobody’s surprise, Natalia arrived last to breakfast, and she was not happy. “Ugh! These midge bites itch!”

“We can pick up some calendula when we get to Ullapool,” suggested Janice. “It’s supposed to be soothing.”

Natalia didn’t seem to appreciate the suggestion, preferring to scratch and complain.

“Maybe you should have used the DEET, after all,” said Matt.

Ollie smirked. “I read somewhere that eating lots of Marmite helps to keep the midges away. I’ve been eating it every day for the last two weeks.”

Janice lifted her eyes to the ceiling and said to nobody in particular, “Now Ollie tells us!” but there was no rancour in

her words, just wry amusement.

“Don’t worry. It didn’t work.” Ollie held out their wrist for the others to see. They had obviously been scratching too.

Mrs Colquhoun, overhearing the conversation, said, “I recommend Skin So Soft.”

“What’s that?” asked Natalia.

“A body oil that Avon—”

“Avon?” said Natalia sniffily, as though she wouldn’t consider letting anything less than Dior touch her precious skin.

“The foresters swear by it,” said Mrs Colquhoun.

That was the wrong thing to say. “You’re suggesting I use a product that men use? Lumberjacks?”

“Aye. I’ve got a few bottles here if you want to buy one.”

Natalia was torn between two evils. Did she want to risk being eaten some more or to purchase Avon?

Janice had no such qualms. “I’ll give it a go. You want to share a bottle?” She included Clare and Ollie in the invitation.

“Sure,” they said together.

Janice, Clare, and Ollie, having finished their meals, got up. Tristan moved to join them, looking at Matt as though he expected him to follow too. However, Matt said, “Go on ahead. I’m going to keep Natalia company.”

Jack didn’t seem to be in a hurry to leave either. In fact, he was helping himself to a couple more slices of toast and showed no signs of sating his hunger.

*

JANICE, TAKING HER turn behind the wheel, drove as she did so much else: quietly getting on with whatever life threw at her. Clare sat with Ollie, with Matt and Tristan occasionally joining in their conversation. Jack and Natalia sat together at the rear of the bus, finding an astonishing amount to talk about. Maybe they had fallen in together because they didn't fit with anyone else, but they were getting on surprisingly well. Thanks to Jack's sweaty attire at breakfast, they had found a common interest in running. Apparently, Natalia normally preferred to run on treadmills and keep her trainers a pristine white, but she was currently forcing herself to run outside as she trained for an upcoming charity 10K.

At the urging of Matt's guidebook, they stopped at Poolewe Gardens and, later, at the Corrieshalloch Gorge.

At Poolewe, Janice fell into raptures as she admired the plants, Clare marvelled at the way palm trees flourished this far north, and Natalia and the men grew, to varying degrees, bored.

Ollie tried to take photographs and sometimes succeeded. Matt had developed an unfortunate knack for standing in the middle of Ollie's camera shots, and each time Tristan caught up with him, Ollie had to shoo them both out of the way. Surely, they weren't doing it deliberately? They were being unexpectedly bloody-minded if they were.

The delights of the spectacular Corrieshalloch Gorge, a legacy of the last ice age, were offset by clouds of midges, Natalia's complaints, and the revelation that Janice didn't like heights.

Maybe Janice wasn't so much bothered by the height as the precipitous drops. She clung to the side of the nineteenth-century suspension bridge that spanned the gorge, only able to make it across with the encouragement of Clare and Ollie and by keeping her eyes firmly fixed on the solid ground beyond.

No amount of coaxing or excited whoops of glee persuaded Janice to step onto the metal lattice that comprised a viewing platform from which to admire the Falls of Measach.

Clare, Ollie, and Janice returned to the minibus with decidedly mixed feelings about the visit. One thing they all agreed on, though, was that buying the Skin So Soft had been an inspired idea.

*

MATT CHECKED INTO the next bed-and-breakfast while the others unloaded their bags. As he distributed their room keys, he reported that, in keeping with the impression he'd got when he'd made the original booking, the welcome he'd received from the proprietor of Broomside View had been perfunctory and impersonal. Then and now, the owner had warned him that the rooms were "basic". Clare anxiously picked up her bags and prepared to go inside. What would "basic" mean in reality?

She needn't have worried. The room she was sharing with Ollie and Janice turned out to be less basic than idiosyncratic. There were mugs and glasses, a kettle, complimentary sachets of tea, coffee, and tisanes, and even a mini fridge filled with bottles of water. The television had a cathode ray tube and integrated videotape and DVD players; it might have been state of the art some ten years before but was now dated. As

nobody had packed either videos or DVDs, the facility to play them was redundant.

In the centre of the ceiling was a combined light and fan fixture more appropriate to the tropics than Scotland. “I suppose it might be useful when the weather’s hot and humid, and you don’t want to let the midges in,” speculated Janice doubtfully.

“Surely the midges don’t get that bad,” said Ollie, their tone tinged with concern.

After they’d dumped their belongings, Janice drove the group into Ullapool. They strolled around the streets, where they admired white houses and tidy flowerbeds. They peered in the windows of a few shops, which had shut for the evening, and resolved to revisit the town in the morning.

They ate fish suppers—or, in Tristan’s case, just the chips—on the covered veranda of a sizeable restaurant, from where they watched the world go by.

As Clare ate her haddock, doused with salt and vinegar, and served with lemon wedges on the side, Tristan invented a game, which he called Tourist or Local. The rules were fluid, morphing as each player took a turn at deciding whether their marks were visitors and devising backstories to support their claims.

Neither Matt nor Natalia joined in, preferring to sit on the edge of the group and whisper quietly while everyone else found themselves laughing increasingly loudly as the game progressed and their plates and glasses emptied.

“What about them?” asked Ollie, pointing towards a couple who were glumly making their way along the pavement on the opposite side of the street.

Tristan tilted his head to one side as he weighed the options. “Tourists. They look too miserable to be anything else.”

Clare said, “You’re going to have to explain that.”

“I figure, if they were at home, they would find reasons to avoid each other. I mean, look at them. They clearly aren’t happy, so spending time together is a chore. But being on holiday is forcing them together. So. Yeah. Tourists.”

“Their dog is cute, though,” said Jack. There were nods around the table as the players all considered the adorable ball of fluff that trotted, tail up and wagging, alongside Mr and Mrs Miserable.

“I’m guessing the dog is the only thing keeping them together,” said Tristan. His phone rang. He fished it out of a pocket, glanced at the screen, and said, “I’ll have to take this. It’s work. Excuse me, everyone.”

“At seven in the evening? While you’re on holiday?” said Janice. But Tristan was already out of his seat. As he jogged away, presumably looking for somewhere quieter to have his conversation, Clare followed him with her eyes. He disappeared around a corner, and Clare redirected her attention to her companions. She hadn’t been the only person watching Tristan. Matt’s eyes were locked on the corner around which Tristan had vanished, and he didn’t look happy.

Clare focused on the conversation. Ollie was saying, “When I see people like that couple, I wonder why anyone thinks a relationship is worth the effort.”

“Don’t look at me!” said Janice. “I haven’t had a serious relationship in my life!”

“And the longest relationship I’ve had lasted nine months. But, if you measure it by the amount of time we actually spent together, I guess it was closer to five days,” said Clare. “Oh, my God!” She leaned backward so hard in her chair that she made the wood creak.

“What?” demanded Ollie, alarmed by Clare’s exclamation.

“I just realised something. I can joke about my abysmal dating history!” Clare wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. This, more than anything, told her that she truly, finally was comfortable with who she was. As epiphanies went, this one came a distant second to her realisation that she was asexual, but it was still amazing. She grinned. She’d told herself often enough that she wasn’t broken, but this was the first time she believed it.

Tristan returned, looking pleased with himself. He sat, ready to rejoin the game. “What have I missed?”

“Not much,” said Ollie. “Only Clare having a moment of life-changing clarity. Now, how about that bloke over there? Anyone?”

In the end, Ollie was declared the winner after they spun a highly convincing story of piracy and smuggling in The Minch. How else were they to account for the man with a

hooped earring and an eye patch, especially as he was carrying an inflatable parrot in the crook of his arm?

*

AS THE GROUP headed to their accommodation, Jack and Natalia made plans to go out for a run together, while the others discussed the merits of having a session of Exploding Kittens. Matt bowed out of the game, pleading a headache and preferring to go to bed, but the others agreed to gather in the spartan room that passed as a guest lounge.

Natalia jogged down the stairs as Tristan was dealing the cards out for the first game. She was wearing leggings, trainers, a vest top, and a baggy sweatshirt that hung off one of her shoulders. She'd put her phone in a cuff around her upper arm, and music blared from her headphones. She began to stretch while she waited for Jack, who appeared a couple of minutes later. He looked gangly and shabby next to Natalia, his clothes having been through too many dark washes in their long life.

There was something about the odd couple that held a peculiar fascination over the players, and the game only got underway in earnest after they left.

Jack and Natalia had not returned when, an hour later, the players turned in.

*

“OH, MY,” BREATHED Janice at breakfast the next morning, doing her best not to laugh. She leaned in towards Clare and Ollie, and in a conspiratorial whisper, she said, “I don't believe it! It's them!”

“Them, who?” said Clare, happy to be distracted from her undercooked bacon and overcooked eggs. Unlike Janice, Clare was sitting with her back to the door, so couldn’t see who had come in.

“Shush! They’ll hear you! Mr and Mrs Miserable, from yesterday. No! Don’t look round!”

But Janice’s command was in vain. Ollie—who was sitting next to Clare—had already twisted in their seat to get a better look. They turned back. “You recognised them? Even with your proso...your face-blindness thingy?”

“I recognised the dog. I’m not so good at faces, but I’m brilliant at dogs.”

“I can’t believe they’re staying here,” said Clare, her lips twitching.

The rest of the aces drifted in, taking up seats and greeting one another and attracting Mrs Miserable’s attention. When Natalia arrived—last as usual—Mrs Miserable’s curiosity burst forth. “Are you all travelling together?”

The question hadn’t been directed at anyone in particular, so it fell to Matt to answer. “Yes.”

“Oh.” Clare could almost see the calculations and questions running through Mrs Miserable’s mind. “How do you all know one another?” she asked.

The aces looked at one another, not sure how to answer. Natalia put paid to their collective indecision by lifting her chin into the air and saying, “We’re having an asexual meet-up.”

Clare's face twisted into a scowl. Janice took a deep breath and made a noise akin to an angry groan. Ollie swore and muttered indignant things under their breath. Indecisive they might have been, but how dared Natalia speak for them!

Oblivious to the reactions elsewhere in the room, Mrs Miserable said to Natalia, "Oh. That's nice, dear. What's 'asexual', then?"

Natalia hadn't thought her actions through. Most likely, she hadn't paid much attention to anything that Matt might have told her before they set off either. Her mouth flapped open, shut, and open again, as she failed to come up with a coherent answer.

Matt came to Natalia's rescue, saying resignedly, as though he would have preferred not to have been trapped by his natural politeness into having this conversation, "Asexuality is a sexual orientation." He proceeded to trot out the definition favoured by AVEN.

Mrs Miserable found the conversation fascinating, and she pressed for more information. Thus, between mouthfuls of rubbery scrambled eggs and gelatinous beans on toast, Matt explained about romantic orientations and the differences between sex-favourable, sex-neutral, and sex-averse aces. Tristan and Ollie joined in, trying to be helpful, when Mrs Miserable said, glancing at her husband, "How do you know if someone's asexual?"

Natalia quipped, "We should get some leaflets made up for occasions like this."

"Yeah," muttered Janice for Clare's ears only, "because I have these kinds of conversations all the time."

Clare snorted into her tepid tea and began to choke. Ollie helpfully thumped her on the back, while Janice said, “Sorry about that.”

By the time Clare had recovered, the conversation was over.

In their room again, Ollie said, “God, Natalia gets up my nose.”

Clare nodded as she put her pyjamas and wash bag into her suitcase. “My sentiments exactly.”

Janice, putting the final touches to her own packing, asked, “Did you see the husband?”

“No,” said Clare at the same moment that Ollie said, “Yes.”

“I think we might have destroyed their marriage.”

*

IN ULLAPOOL, CLARE’S mobile dinged as she was getting out of the minibus. On hearing the alert, Ollie and Tristan checked their phones, then looked around to see who the lucky recipient of a text had been.

Clare accessed her message.

Louisa! Of course! Louisa’s job interview was today, which meant she was probably fishing for good wishes while killing time before the selection process got underway.

Louisa had sent: *Hope u r having a good trip.*

As she began to peck at her screen to reply, Clare became aware of Jack and Tristan staring at her. Was it her texting technique that fascinated them? Clare had never got the hang

of typing with her thumbs, preferring to jab at the screen with her right forefinger. Ollie would probably describe her technique as old lady texting or something equally scathing.

Memorable, typed Clare, deliberately ambiguous.

Moments later, her phone dinged again.

Memorable good or bad?

Both. Scenery is fab. Single track roads scary. Good luck today. Let me know how the interview goes.

Thnx.

Are you wearing trousers? LOL. She pressed Send before she second-guessed the message. She immediately regretted it. Right before the interview wasn't the best moment to ask or tease.

Oh, well. Too late now.

The reply Clare got next was comprised of a single emoji of a face with its tongue sticking out. She wasn't sure what that was supposed to mean; she didn't know what a lot of emojis meant. How many meaningful variations were there on a simple, round, yellow face, anyway? Plus, on her phone screen, she struggled to distinguish between the emojis that had tears of joy, tears of sadness, and beads of sweat pouring down their faces.

Out of consideration for Natalia, they headed to a pharmacy. They didn't find any calendula, but they managed to procure some antihistamine cream, which Natalia proceeded to slather over her skin while they pootled along the street.

After browsing their way through a few gift shops, they found themselves outside an establishment calling itself The Cocoa Cavern. According to its signage, the shop specialised in hot beverages and chocolates hand-crafted on the premises. After peering through the Cavern's small windows, they went inside figuring that, as breakfast hadn't reached either Mrs Pearson's or Mrs Colquhoun's standards, a drink and a few sweets would be the perfect mid-morning snack.

The narrow storefront led into a dimly lit space with low ceilings. There was a dark flagstone floor and darker shelving against the walls. Only the tables and chairs, made of a lighter-coloured pine and, behind the counter, stacks of white crockery and a gleaming steel espresso machine, alleviated the gloom.

Three man-spreading cyclists having laid claim to a generously proportioned pair of squishy sofas, the gang had to make do with two tables so small that they all bumped shoulders when squeezed around them. They consulted menus that, in addition to listing all the goodies the shop had on offer, were adorned with an array of slogans designed to encourage gluttony.

Natalia nudged Jack and pointed at the menu with a perfectly manicured and glittery nail and whispered, "As if we need any encouragement to be naughty!"

Clare directed her attention toward her own menu. Its words whispered enticingly of "Homemade delicacies fashioned by the delicious Delora." Items included Tantalising Truffles, Ginger Jamboree, Luscious Lemon, and Berry

Bonanza. Clare had got as far as Luxurious Lime when Matt said, “Someone here sure likes alliteration!”

A waitress came over to take their order. Janice ordered first: a large cappuccino with a Velvet Violet, a Funky Fudge, and a Raspberry Relish.

Jack asked, “What’s a Scottish Surprise?”

“Either haggis or whisky, I’ll bet,” suggested Tristan.

The waitress smiled in a way that suggested she’d heard the quip umpteen times before. “Neither. It’s tablet. But, if you’re looking for whisky, try the Cranachan Crunch.”

By the time they were through, they had added a couple more coffees, a mocha, a hot chocolate, and a herbal tea to the order. They’d also requested a couple of Charismatic Caramels, a Proposal Passionfruit, a Blueberry Belle, several Strawberry Suckles, a Moonlight Mint, and some of the Luscious Lemons. Nobody ordered the Romantic Rum, although Ollie said, “I’d prefer an Aromantic Rum.” The joke flew over the waitress’s head; she responded with a confused look and a raised eyebrow.

Once the waitress had disappeared with their order, Clare began to pay more attention to her surroundings. The walls closest to the tables were lined with books, and Clare found herself twisting her neck every which way as she scanned their spines. She stood so she could pull a couple of titles off the shelves; she flicked through their pages before reshelving them.

Next to her, Janice picked something out, read the back cover, turned to page one, and began to read. She soon flipped

the page over and, by page four, she'd sat down again and was engrossed.

“Ahem.” Tristan tapped Janice on her forearm to attract her attention. “No books at the table.”

Matt nodded his agreement. “That was one of the unbreakable rules in our house when I was a kid. No books, magazines, newspapers, or toys.”

“But phones are okay?” asked Clare without rancour, as she returned to the table.

“Phones are different,” said Matt.

Janice forced herself to put the book aside. Clare glanced over, wanting to see what had so effectively grasped her attention. It looked to be a thriller, but it had a picture of a robot on the cover for some reason.

“Do you remember what holidays were like with no phones, no computers, let alone Wi-Fi, and you read paper books for entertainment?” Janice asked nostalgically.

“No,” said Matt, Tristan, Ollie, Natalia, and Jack in unison.

“Yes,” said Clare. “I'd go away with a couple of paperbacks, which was never enough, have to buy extra, and come home with bags that weighed a ton!”

“You should have used a Kindle,” said Jack.

“This was before Kindles,” said Clare.

Jack ogled, unable to conceive of such a thing.

“Hey! It wasn't that long ago!”

Tristan played with his phone and, after a few seconds, said, “Amazon launched its first Kindle in 2007.”

“That long ago?” Clare frowned as she tried to remember when she’d bought her first e-reader. Time really did fly...

“Two thousand and seven,” said Jack. “I was eight.”

“Aw, baby,” crooned Natalia in a sickeningly sweet voice, and she stroked Jack’s arm. He laughed nervously and looked as though he had no clue how to react.

Tristan’s phone rang. He glanced at the screen and, just as he had the evening before, said, “I need to take this.” He dashed outside.

Matt sighed loudly, but he perked up as the first part of their order arrived and he caught sight of the amount of cream and marshmallows on his hot chocolate. The sweets looked amazing too.

Tristan reappeared as the last of the drinks arrived, and he made a perfunctory apology as he sat. “Sorry about that. Work.” Then with a fake laugh, he added, “They can’t seem to manage without me!”

“Are your colleagues always this demanding?” asked Ollie.

Matt shook his head unhappily and answered for Tristan. “No. Not like this.”

“You should tell them to back off,” said Clare.

“So says the woman who regularly works sixty hours a week,” said Janice.

“Not on holiday, I don’t,” she said. She’d deliberately left her stacks of books and articles and her computer at home. The forced separation from her work email account felt slightly wicked and very liberating.

Tristan eyed the goodies in front of them and said, “Wow. This all looks and smells amazing!” He rubbed his hands together with gleeful anticipation, and Clare was struck by the idea that Tristan wanted desperately to change the subject.

Janice bit off the corner of her Raspberry Relish. “This is better than cake!” Her eyes rolled with pleasure.

Surely no chocolate could be that good!

Clare bit into her Luscious Lemon and emitted a small mew of delight. Her eyes drifted shut and a small smile crept across her face. She took another delicate nibble and rolled the confection across her tongue. Dark, bitter chocolate melted in her mouth...the tang of lemon, the texture of the mousse... Perfection. Exquisite, indulgent perfection...and she still had two more sweets to try. How was she supposed to stand such divine ecstasy?

Better than cake, indeed.

Chapter Fourteen

NATALIA DROVE WITH a lack of consideration for other people and a great deal of complaint. At least, with Natalia sitting behind the wheel, Clare didn't have to find excuses not to talk to her, especially as Jack was happy to sit in the front passenger seat, alongside her. Thus, despite Natalia's intermittent swears, excessive use of the brakes, and expostulations such as "Keep on your side of the road, arsehole!" Clare enjoyed the next stage of their journey.

Sitting across the aisle from Clare and Janice, Ollie switched their attention between the rest of the group, the views outside, and talking with Janice about photography. Since Torrison, Ollie had been behaving as though all the old hurt and angst had been wiped away, and Janice happily followed Ollie's lead. Now, stripped of much of their prickliness, Ollie proved to be entertaining company, which was more than could be said for Matt and Tristan. Matt was unusually quiet, preferring to gaze out of the window and watch the scenery go past instead of talking to anyone else, least of all his seatmate.

*

THEY STOPPED AT Knockan Crag. This was, Matt informed them, reading apathetically from his guidebook, a site of major geological significance where older rocks lay above more recent strata; how was this possible? Two geologists, Peach and Horne, had found an explanation, causing a paradigm shift in geological thinking in the process.

Just as Clare was thinking that Matt's heart wasn't in his guidely duties, Matt gave up trying to fake enthusiasm and closed his book with a snap. "If you want to know more, you'll have to visit the information centre and walk the trails."

"What is it about holidays that gets people interested in things they'd otherwise not care about?" mused Clare as she stepped from the minibus, trying hard to counteract the atmosphere. "Geology isn't normally my thing, but I'm suddenly desperate to learn all about it."

"There's a lot about the history of geology here. Maybe that's what's stirring your curiosity," said Janice.

"Well, I'm not interested," said Natalia, who was standing with her arms crossed over her chest and looking pugnacious.

"Oh, come on," Matt said, trying to chivvy her along, an attempt which, given his own moodiness, was laughable. "I bet the views'll be fantastic.

"What views?" asked Natalia warily.

"From there," Matt said, pointing. "On the top of the scarp."

Natalia's eyes narrowed and her lip curled. "You're expecting me to walk up there?"

"Yes."

"I hate walking! It makes my feet ache."

"But you run," said Jack.

"Running's not walking," said Natalia petulantly. "Walking's boring. And slow."

“Well, there’s bugger all else to do, unless you want to sit on your own in the minibus,” snapped Matt. “Why the fuck did you come with us, if you hate the great outdoors so much?”

“I thought there would be pubs, clubs, and whisky. We are in Scotland, after all!”

“We’re in the Highlands, not Glasgow or Edinburgh. So, get your arse in gear and come along.”

Natalia put her hands on her hips, glared at Matt, and hissed, “Just because you’re pissed off with your boyfriend, don’t take it out on me!”

Matt looked around and huffed a big sigh of relief when he spotted Tristan heading towards the public toilets, safely out of earshot. But then he realised how many people had overheard Natalia’s comment, and the relief on his face gave way to a stonier expression. “I’m not pissed off with—”

“That’s not what you told me yesterday!”

Matt took a deep breath. “Leave Tris out of it. Right now, I’m pissed off with you! Your constant whining. Your stunt at breakfast. Your...your everything!” He threw up his hands in disgust.

Ollie and Clare raised their eyebrows, and Janice said, “Let’s give them some space.”

Ollie allowed themselves to be coaxed away but acted as though they would have preferred to stay and watch the show.

At the information centre, Clare learned that, once upon a time, Earth had had a huge, single landmass. Then the landmass had drifted apart. There was a lot of information

about plate tectonics, something she vaguely remembered from GCSE geography.

They were still working through the information displays when Matt caught up with them. He was on his own: Natalia had won their argument and remained with the minibus. Jack had stayed behind to keep her company, and Matt was going out of his way to distance himself from Tristan.

*

THE VIEWS FROM the top of the crag were, as Matt had suggested, stupendous, offering panoramas over the surrounding countryside. Clare and Janice let the others go on ahead as they lingered to take in glimpses of the scenery they had to look forward to as they ventured further north. As she looked towards the fringes of Sutherland, Clare concluded that the climbing and scrambling required to reach this point had been worth every ounce of effort.

“Natalia doesn’t know what she’s missing,” breathed Janice in awe.

Clare suspected that, even if she had known, Natalia wouldn’t have cared.

Janice sighed softly. “These shapes, the landscape... Dad would have loved it here.”

Clare didn’t know what to say. After her grandmother had died, Clare would see something and think, “Gran’ll love this!” only to be brought short by the immediate follow-up thought: “Gran’s dead.” Months had passed before the thoughts stopped, and until they did each one had been a barbed reminder of her loss.

How much worse would it be when one of her parents died? How much worse was it for Janice, who had been so close to her father and so lacking in other family?

“I’m sorry,” said Janice. “We’re on holiday. We’re supposed to be having fun.”

“It’s okay,” said Clare, although it wasn’t. “Don’t worry.”

Janice took a deep breath, straightened her shoulders, and said, “Come on. Let’s catch up with the others.”

Clare didn’t argue.

*

THEY MADE THEIR next stop at Ardvreck Castle, a ruin on a small promontory in Loch Assynt. The ruin was picturesque and peaceful, belying the information panel warning of multiple ghosts, including one of a woman who had married the devil.

Ollie, on reading the notice board, waved their arms around and made sarcastic whoo-whooping noises. Natalia vamped being frightened, her theatricality making Jack laugh and play along. Ollie mimed vomiting motions behind Natalia’s back before wandering over to join Janice and Clare.

Ollie pointed towards Matt and Tristan, who were standing metres apart from each other, and said unnecessarily, “There’s trouble in paradise.”

*

ONCE MORE IN the minibus, Natalia announced loudly and firmly that she didn’t want to brave the single-track roads that would take them on a detour through Lochinver. Nobody tried

to persuade her to change her mind, and nobody volunteered to take over the driving, which spoke volumes about the underlying tensions within the group. Thus, in awkward silence, they took the shorter route, along the main road, towards Kylesku.

They stopped at the Rock Stop of which the guidebook had promised much but which in practice turned out to be little more than a glorified shed comprising toilets, a café, and an exhibition relating to—what else but—the rocks of the region. As they worked their way around the exhibition, Clare said, “I had no idea there was so much to know about sand.”

They moved on to the café, where the smell of freshly cooked food promised to plug a lot of holes, and the views of the village, its people, animals, and surroundings promised to be entertaining.

Then the arguments began.

*

“I’M NOT YOU!” Matt snapped at Tristan, from two tables away. “And we’re not at home. So, for once, I’m going to have what I want, and what I want is a gorgeous, thick, juicy Bambi patty, nestled in the middle of a white bread bun! I’m going to say, sod what’s good for me or for the planet, and I’m going to enjoy this!”

“But you never eat meat!”

“No,” corrected Matt. “You never eat meat. I respect your choice, and it’s easier to cook only one type of food at a time. So, when we’re at home, I don’t eat meat to accommodate you. But sometimes, like now, I do what I want!”

“You’ve never said anything before.”

“Well, I’m saying it now.”

“Looks like you were right about trouble,” murmured Janice.

“H’m,” agreed Ollie.

Overhearing Janice and Clare from the next table, Jack leaned over and said, not quietly enough to be discreet, “Matt thinks Tristan’s cheating on him.”

“Cheating!” exclaimed Janice, while doing her best to keep her voice low.

“I told Matt he should leave Tris. It’s not like theirs is a real relationship, anyway,” said Natalia as she joined the huddle.

Ollie’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean, not real?”

“You know. Because of the no-sex thing.”

“That doesn’t stop it being real,” snapped Ollie.

Clare and Janice both crossed their arms as they leaned back in their seats and glared at Natalia. Jack looked transfixed.

Natalia backtracked, lifting her hands in surrender. “I’m sorry. My bad. But you must remember, this ace stuff is still new to me. So, tell me, how does an asexual cheat on their partner if they don’t have sex?”

Good question, and Clare waited to hear what the others had to say.

“Emotional infidelity?” suggested Janice. “Romantic attraction to someone else?”

“I still don’t get it,” said Natalia. “For most sexuals, it’s okay to look. It’s the touching that matters.”

“Really?” asked Janice. “There’s been a lot in the media recently about micro-cheating and pre-cheating, and stuff like that.”

Natalia made a dismissive noise and wafted her hand through the air in a blasé gesture.

“Romantic aces like touching too,” said Ollie. “It’s the sex they’re not interested in.”

Natalia considered that. “But you’re not romantic, any of you?”

Janice shook her head. “Aroace, me.”

“And you?”

Clare fidgeted under Natalia’s scrutiny. “Ace, definitely. And I’m pretty sure that I’m aromantic, too.”

“You don’t know?”

Heat rose in Clare’s cheeks. “Not for sure, no. But the more I learn about it, the more it makes sense. And it would explain why... Well. Let’s say, it would explain my tendency to back off every time I’ve tried to date.”

“But dating’s easy,” said Natalia.

“Not for me,” said Clare.

“Nor me,” agreed Janice. “Nor for a lot of people. But, unlike Clare, here, I’ve never really bothered to try.”

“Me neither,” said Ollie. “I’m holding out for the perfect QPR.”

“Queens Park Ranger?” asked Natalia. “You’re into footballers?”

“Queer platonic relationship.”

“What about you, Jack?” asked Natalia.

“I’m...questioning.”

“Which means what, exactly?”

Jack shrugged and answered Natalia. “I’m not sure exactly what I am, and I’m still trying to figure things out.”

“If there’s anything I can do to help, let me know,” Natalia cooed, her eyes still locked on Jack’s face. Clare rolled her eyes, Ollie looked revolted, and Jack blushed.

Janice tried to shift the conversation back to its original topic. “So...Tristan’s cheating...?”

Natalia hesitated for a moment, as though she might refuse to say anything about it. Then, she said, “It started off as small things. Matt didn’t think anything about them, not to begin with. But after Tristan went to London, things began to change.”

“Change, how?” asked Clare, hating herself for her curiosity. It was none of her business. Or, maybe it was, since they were all being affected by whatever was happening between the two men, but both Tristan and Matt were her friends, and she didn’t want to be forced to take sides.

“Matt began to catch Tristan switching computer screens when he came into the room.”

“That’s it?” asked Ollie.

“There’s the phone calls, too, and we’ve all seen examples of those.”

Ollie waited expectantly for more.

Natalia shrugged. “I’m only saying what Matt told me.”

“In confidence, I’d bet,” muttered Ollie.

Judging by Natalia’s face, Ollie was right. But Natalia had obviously said something to Jack, and Jack had let the proverbial cat out of the bag, and now everyone knew.

The food arrived, and Natalia and Jack withdrew to their own table.

Clare gazed idly out of the window as she chewed, determinedly not paying attention to the way Tristan and Matt weren’t talking to each other. Conversation between the others was desultory at best, and nobody enjoyed their meal.

When she’d eaten as much as she could stomach, Clare left the table, heading for the ladies. Just before she turned the corner in the corridor, she heard Tristan’s voice, and he was on the phone again. She froze and found herself listening in. Eavesdropping was wrong. She should leave things well alone. She found herself rooted to the spot, straining to hear.

“Everything’s ready? You’re amazing... Thank you.”

It didn’t sound like the sort of conversation someone having an affair might have. Leastways, Tristan was not murmuring sweet nothings, and he wasn’t making any declarations of undying love. Then again, Clare didn’t know

what an affair was supposed to sound like, at least not outside of cheesy romance movies.

But, if the calls were all as innocent as this one, why did Tristan always have to sneak off to make or take them? What was he saying that couldn't be said in front of anyone else?

Clare forced herself to move, making more noise than normal. Tristan startled badly when he realised someone was coming, but when he spotted Clare, he exclaimed, "Oh, it's only you!" and placed a hand over his heart. As she went into the ladies, Tristan said, "No, everything's okay. It wasn't him."

Suddenly, the call didn't seem so innocent after all.

Poor Matt.

Chapter Fifteen

THE GUESTHOUSE AT Durness, which overlooked Balnakeil Bay, was gothically imposing. Although the original building dated from the seventeenth century, the property had been remodelled in the Victorian era. Not much appeared to have been done to it since.

Their host showed them around the public rooms before leading them upstairs to the bedrooms, all the while saying things like, “We haven’t got around to renovating this room yet,” as though renovations were a possibility. Clare might have believed his patter except that, by his own admission, Robert MacKenzie had been in the house for twenty-three years. If he hadn’t started on the improvements yet, she doubted he ever would.

“D’you reckon this place is haunted?” asked Ollie loudly, making sure that everyone heard. Clare wasn’t sure whether they were joking or trying to be provocative.

“My room’s got a view over a graveyard,” said Natalia, doing her best to look terrified. She put an arm around Jack’s shoulders. “But you’ll make sure that the ghosts don’t get me, won’t you, Big Man.”

Ollie didn’t bother to make vomiting motions again. They settled for rolling their eyes, but vomiting was implied.

By the time they had settled in, Clare had learned that the windows rattled, and the single glazing didn’t keep the cold out. There were airlocks in the central heating system, and the oil-fired Rayburn wasn’t up to heating the house. All light bulbs were sixty watts or lower, casting the rooms into a state

of perpetual gloom. At least that meant visitors couldn't easily see the dust that clung to the cornices. The guesthouse had a quirky charm, though, which Clare liked.

*

WITH SEVERAL HOURS to go until anyone needed to think about dinner, and with a need to escape from the pressure-cooker atmosphere that had been building all day, by tacit agreement the group split up for the remainder of the afternoon.

Ollie set off to explore the craft village they had clocked on the way to the guesthouse, while Janice and Clare resolved to potter closer to home. They didn't bother asking what anyone else was doing, or whether anyone wanted to join them.

Janice and Clare explored the walled churchyard and ruins that Natalia had spotted from the small single bedroom she had bagged for herself. All that remained of the old parish church was its outer shell. While the ivy-covered walls with their crow-stepped gables were still intact, its windows, door, and roof were long gone.

Clare walked inside. Where once there might have been a flagstone floor, there was grass. Any furnishings had been removed years—maybe even centuries—before; all that remained of the church's interior was a tomb adorned with stone carvings. Clare spotted an archer, a stag, and a skull and crossbones. She didn't linger long in the enclosed space, which she found oppressive and disquieting; possibly her reaction had something to do with the tomb's inscription. She

managed to make out the words: “Was ill to his friend, waur to his foe,” which made her wonder who its occupant had been.

Oddly, she didn’t find the graveyard as disturbing as the space inside the church. She found it tranquil. If there were ghosts there, they were surely benign. Clare strolled through the uneven, lush, daisy-pocked grass that grew over the graves. Their memorial stones, covered in lichen, ranged from modest to modestly ostentatious.

She might have lingered longer, but Janice had lost interest in the graveyard, lured by the siren call of the beach. Clare walked over to where Janice was standing.

They stood in silent accord for a few minutes, admiring the way the beach stretched out in front of them, a long strand that, thanks to the low tide, was currently exposed to its fullest extent. A light breeze bent the marram grasses on the sand dunes that, along with a couple of rocky outcrops, framed the bay. The bright afternoon sun made the sea appear a vivid turquoise. Overhead, cotton wool clouds patterned the blue sky.

Clare lowered her head, inhaled deeply, and closed her eyes as she concentrated on the sounds of breaking waves and screaming seabirds. She exhaled, took another deep breath, and stretched her arms and fingers out to her sides. The space and freedom offered by the bay released tension that she hadn’t been consciously aware of from her shoulders.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Janice said quietly, next to her.

“Mm,” agreed Clare.

Together, they headed down a footpath, onto the beach.

Clare took off her shoes and socks and waggled her bare toes in the sand which was unexpectedly warm.

Janice, seeing Clare's enjoyment, followed suit.

The dry sand was fine, almost powdery, so they headed closer to the water's edge where the ground was cooler, damper, firmer, and easier to walk on. Clare gave in to an urge to drop her shoes on the ground, roll up her trousers, and paddle out until she was ankle deep in the water.

The sea ebbed and flowed around her, sucking the sand away from underneath the soles of her feet. She danced out of the way of some of the bigger waves and laughed at how the cold water contrasted so strongly with the earlier heat of the dry sand. Everything about the moment was invigorating. Close by, barely beyond the water's reach, Janice held her arms out and twirled on the spot as she laughed, her earlier sadness forgotten, at least for a while.

After a few minutes, they calmed, gathered their possessions together, and began strolling along the water's edge.

Clare glanced along the beach and spotted Matt stabbing disconsolately at the sand with his boot heel. Attacking it. He turned and, head bowed, began to walk away from them.

Together Clare and Janice walked to the farthest end of the bay.

"It's beautiful here, isn't it?" said Clare. "Manchester feels a million miles away."

"I wish we could stay here forever," said Janice wistfully.

An odd longing crept into Clare's voice and made her words soft and regretful as she replied, "We can't. We've got jobs to go back to."

"A job I fell into. I could easily do something else," said Janice.

"You've got a house."

"I'm thinking about selling it." Janice pursed her lips. "Okay, so if we don't stay this time, how about we make a pact to come back?"

"We?"

"Would you come back with me?"

"Sure." Then, worried, Clare said, "You're not serious, are you?"

"No. But it's one hell of a nice daydream, isn't it?"

By the time they retraced their steps, Matt had disappeared.

*

AS THEY APPROACHED the guesthouse, they heard raised voices and found Ollie leaning against a wall, listening unashamedly.

Janice said, "That doesn't sound good."

Ollie shook their head, agreeing. Sombrely, they said, "It's Matt and Tris."

Clare strained and failed to make out any words. All she could clearly hear was anger. "You sure it's them?" But in the

pit of her stomach, even without being able to make out their individual voices, she knew Ollie was right.

Ollie nodded. “They’ve been at it for a while.”

The three of them walked towards the guesthouse’s driveway. The combatants, who were standing at the gate, blocking the footpath, came into view, and Clare was able to make out what they were saying.

Matt’s tenuous restraint had given way to a volcanic eruption of anger and hurt.

“You lied about going to London, and you’ve been sneaking around ever since.”

Clare, Janice, and Ollie hovered, not sure how to interrupt.

“Is this why you’ve been behaving like a spoilt shit?” Tristan asked, his chin jutting out and his hands, balled into fists, on his hips.

“Who is he!”

“You can’t honestly think I’d cheat on you!”

Matt wasn’t listening, his words overlapping with Tristan’s self-righteous disbelief. “Why couldn’t you have the decency to be upfront with me, instead of stringing me along?”

“I haven’t been unfaithful!”

Tristan sounded remarkably sincere, but Matt was having none of it. “See? You can’t even bring yourself to admit it, even now!”

“Because there’s nothing to admit! I’ve been asking and asking you what’s up. You should have said, instead of bottling everything inside.”

“I was waiting for you to be honest with me! I’ve been waiting for you to—”

“To, what? To confess?”

“To treat me with respect!”

“Respect! I’ve only ever treated you with respect!”

Matt snorted derisively, further kindling Tristan’s anger.

“Give me the keys!”

“What keys?”

“The bus keys!” barked Tristan, pointing towards the vehicle. “You’ve got them, haven’t you?”

Taken by surprise, Matt said, “Yes?”

“Give them to me.” Tristan clicked his fingers impatiently.

To everyone’s surprise—including, judging from his expression, his own—Matt found himself handing them over.

“Come with me!” Turning towards their audience, Tristan snapped, “You too. You might as well see this.”

“See what?” murmured Janice.

Clare and Ollie shrugged.

“Should I get Natalia and Jack?” asked Clare nervously.

“Do you want to?” asked Ollie.

Clare had had about as much of Natalia as she could take, so, no, she didn’t want to.

By now, Tristan was hustling Matt into the front passenger seat of the minibus. To Clare, Janice, and Ollie, he said, “I’ll leave you behind, if you don’t get in now.”

They hurried to clamber in. Before they'd finished fastening their seatbelts, Tristan had switched on the ignition and, with a spray of gravel, was steering off the driveway.

Tristan drove with a fury that struck terror into the hearts of his passengers. Clare found herself hanging on to the seat in front of her as he accelerated and braked with a mindless confidence borne of reckless stupidity.

Tristan tore through Durness village and around the bends beyond. When he deftly steered into unseen passing spaces, Clare began to realise he was already familiar with the roads. How? When had that happened?

Clare caught glimpses of small sandy bays and glistening sea that, at any other time, would have drawn admiring oohs and aahs out of her. Instead, she concentrated on staying upright, eyes forward.

Tristan pulled into a large lay-by above a small cove and yanked the handbrake viciously. He jumped out of the minibus, shouting out another impatient "Come with me!" before he slammed the door behind him.

He stalked across the road. Matt opened his own door, dropped onto the ground, and followed at a more cautious pace.

Clare, Janice, and Ollie trailed after them. They caught up in time to see Tristan pointing, stiff-armed, at something below. "There!" he cried, his voice almost loud enough to be a scream. "That's what I've been doing! Any sneaking around I've done has been because of that!"

Matt looked down, and then he turned toward Tristan. The expression on Matt's face was raw and sorrowful and happy and Clare had no idea what was going on. She and the others drew closer, wanting to see what had caused Matt's reaction.

At first, Clare wasn't sure what she was supposed to be looking at. There was a swathe of white sand, pocked by occasional boulders and framed by cliffs, one of which they were standing on. There were waves breaking along the strand, metamorphosing turquoise water into glimmering white foam. There was a footpath to the shore, and a grassy knoll at the far end of the beach on which someone had carefully arranged an array of pebbles to spell out, "Marry me Matt."

"Oh," said Janice.

"That's kind of sweet," said Ollie with an air of detachment.

Clare turned to look at the men.

Tristan was calmer now. He said intensely, "I would never cheat on you. I want to spend my life with you. I read about this place and how people used it to propose. I thought it would be a wonderful, romantic thing to do. But I'd never have done it, if I'd known how much I'd upset you in the process."

"You want to marry me?" asked Matt.

"Yes."

"Even now? After the last few days?"

"Yes."

Janice pulled on Clare's sleeve and said quietly, "I think maybe we should give them some space."

Clare nodded, and she, Janice, and Ollie quietly crept away.

"What now?" asked Ollie when they were about twenty paces distant.

Clare said, "We could wait in the minibus, but the beach is beautiful, and I'd like to take a closer look. What do you think?"

"Another beach?" said Janice lightly. "Wasn't Balnakeil enough for you?"

Tristan and Matt were embracing, holding on to each other tightly.

"It looks like we have time," said Ollie. "Let's go."

They made their way to the top of the path, where they paused as Ollie took some pictures of the water, the sand, and the message on the grassy knoll. Then they descended onto the shore. Ollie moved towards the water's edge, their camera out ready to capture the waves.

Clare and Janice strolled around the cove, stopping from time to time to examine the rocks or to admire the view.

When they reached the cliffs at the edge of the beach, they turned around and leaned against the rock.

Matt and Tristan had walked down the footpath and were now sitting together on the grass. Although hard to tell from this distance, Clare thought they were leaning into each other.

They were close enough to touch each other, and closer than they'd been at any point so far this trip.

“Looks like they've made up,” said Janice happily.

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DINNER WAS A light-hearted, celebratory affair, as everyone ate with enthusiasm and took turns to toast Matt and Tristan's engagement with Prosecco.

Later, as Clare lay in bed, she decided that all was right with the world. Matt and Tristan had made up. Janice and Ollie were getting along well and, if they weren't careful, might even end up being friends. The weather forecast for the rest of the week was mostly set fair, and tomorrow they would continue their adventure.

In the distance, oystercatchers screeched, and sheep bleated.

Clare fell asleep with a smile on her face.

Chapter Sixteen

SOMEONE WAS BANGING on the bedroom door. Nobody was shouting fire and there was no smell of smoke. What was all the ruckus about? Clare rolled over, rubbed her eyes, and propped herself on her elbow.

Across the room, Ollie grumbled, “What the hell!”

“Hurry up and open this door!”

“Tristan?” said Janice, mostly to herself. Janice put the book she’d been reading aside, climbed out of bed, and bustled across the room. By the time she had opened the door, Ollie and Clare were awake enough to sit up.

Tristan and, behind him, Matt hesitated, and Janice had to wave them in. Even then, they stood in the centre of the room, unable to articulate what had brought them there so early in the morning. Neither man was anywhere near as happy as people who had mended their relationship and become engaged the night before should have been.

Too loudly, Tristan said, “We have a solutions opportunity.” He was angry and serious and stern all at once.

“Solutions opportunity... That’s what normal people call a problem,” said Janice.

“Yes,” agreed Matt. “A problem.” He wore an odd expression that blended a smile that didn’t reach his eyes with worry. His whole body twitched with suppressed emotion.

“I was trying not to alarm you too much,” said Tristan, aiming for a levity he wasn’t feeling. “Because, you know, it’s potentially a huge solutions opportunity.”

“Translated, that means a huge problem, then,” said Janice.

“Yeah. A whopper,” said Tristan, and Matt nodded.

“Tell us,” said Janice resignedly.

Tristan and Matt exchanged glances. Matt took a deep breath and said, “The minibus is gone and... And Jack and Natalia are gone too. They left a note at reception.” He held up an unfolded piece of paper alongside an envelope that someone had ripped open. “Apparently, they’ve gone on an adventure of their own.”

Tristan couldn’t restrain himself any longer. “The bastards!” he exploded. “They’ve bloody stranded us here!”

Once they’d imparted the bad news, Tristan and Matt deflated, and no longer able to hold themselves upright, they plonked themselves down on the ends of Ollie’s and Clare’s beds.

“Jack said he’d bunk in the lounge last night,” said Matt. “Said that since Tris and I had made up we might want some time alone.”

Clare struggled to remember what the sleeping arrangements had been. Ah, yes. Matt had managed to book two triples along with the tiny single that Natalia had immediately claimed for herself.

Tristan nodded. “We thought he’d been considerate until...” He crossed his arms over his chest.

“I don’t get it,” said Clare. “How’d they run off like that? And why?”

“Why does anyone do anything?” asked Ollie dismissively. “People are shit. More importantly, what are we going to do now?”

But Clare wasn't ready to let her questions go. She wanted to understand. How had Natalia got hold of the keys when Tristan had had them last?

Jack must have lifted them when he'd gathered his things from the bedroom.

Jack, who didn't drive.

Jack...

“Well, fuck!” she said, her swearing making everyone else jump. “They had it planned!”

“Yep,” agreed Ollie. “Gives a whole new meaning to ‘Are you still up for running first thing in the morning?’”

“That's what they were talking about last night?” said Janice.

“You don't think so?” said Ollie darkly.

“I assumed that they were talking about going for a jog along the beach,” said Janice, and Clare nodded.

“I bet that's what we were supposed to think,” said Ollie.

“Could they be playing a practical joke on us?” asked Clare desperately.

“Maybe,” said Matt, but his answer was even more doubtful than Clare's question.

Tristan said, “I texted them both, just in case: *LOL. Good prank. You can come back now.*”

“But you’re not laughing, let alone out loud,” said Ollie.

“I was aiming for diplomacy. Or poetic licence. Or something.”

“Oh.”

There was a long pause while everyone took the implications in. Tristan asked, “What do we do now?”

For want of a better plan, they washed, dressed, and reconvened over breakfast, where they thought again.

“It might be a joke,” said Janice, once they’d gathered around a heavy, round table of the kind that made antique experts mutter darkly about brown furniture and being so out of fashion as to be almost worthless.

“Assuming it’s not,” said Tristan, “we need to think about how we can get out of here.”

“We’re supposed to be in John O’Groats tonight, but without transport that can’t happen. Obviously,” said Matt. Besides, suddenly nobody had any appetite to travel to anywhere that wasn’t home.

“There’s a bus stop by the post office,” said Ollie. “I spotted it yesterday. I think you can get a bus to Inverness from there.”

“Aye,” said Robert, as he delivered the first of their meals. “If you want to wait two days, you can.”

“Two days!” exclaimed Ollie.

“Bus leaves every Saturday at eight twenty-five, regular as clockwork.”

“Is there anywhere else we can get to?” asked Matt. “Anywhere useful, I mean.”

“The daily bus goes to Lairg. You can pick up a train from there.”

“And the trains go to...?”

“To Inverness. But,” said Robert, and five pairs of eyes turned towards him as he imparted more bad news, “today’s bus left an hour and a half ago.”

“Today’s bus,” said Ollie. “Seriously? There’s only one bus a day?”

“This isn’t the city.”

As Robert retreated into the kitchen to collect the next plates, they kicked around their options. They could stay another night and leave first thing in the morning or... In fact, unless they hitched, that might be their only option. But none of them were in the mood to stay.

The text alert rang on Tristan’s phone, and everyone else turned around to watch as he answered it.

“It’s from Jack!” he exclaimed happily. But as he read the message, his hopeful excitement gave way to something angrier. “No prank. *We’re in Inverness*. And he’s sent a photo to prove it.”

Only then did Clare fully appreciate how desperately she and the others had clung to the hope that Jack and Natalia had been coming back.

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IN THE END, Robert MacKenzie came up with an idea to get the group on the road. “Hold on a minute, while I make a call,” he said, and he trotted into his kitchen.

It was closer to ten minutes by the time he reappeared, looking pleased with himself. “I’ve got you a ride to Georgemas Junction, if you want it.”

This announcement prompted a wave of questions. Where was Georgemas Junction? How would getting there help them? And how had Robert managed to work this wondrous piece of magic?

Apparently, Robert had called a friend, who had suggested he phone another friend, who had put him in touch with an acquaintance of a friend and... “You’ll have to be packed and waiting in forty minutes. Think you can manage that? Murdo won’t wait.”

They immediately abandoned their meals, which they had almost finished anyway, and hustled to their rooms.

They stuffed belongings into their bags with reckless abandon, far more interested in getting ready on time than in folding anything carefully, and consequently were waiting on the doorstep when their lift arrived in the form of a pickup with a canopy over the truck bed.

“It’ll be a squeeze, and one of you, plus all your luggage, will have to go in with the ram,” said Murdo by way of greeting.

Possibly feeling guilty by family association, Matt magnanimously offered to travel with the bags.

Clare tried to ignore the odour of damp dog as she climbed into the five-seater cab, settling herself into the middle of the back seat. Janice and Ollie flanked her on either side, while Tristan sat in front. They were still fastening their seatbelts when Murdo put the truck into gear and pulled away.

While Robert appeared to have explained in general terms the nature of their predicament, he hadn't gone into detail. Thus, their journey began with an explanation of how they had been stupid enough to become stranded in Durness. After that, they fell into a gloomy silence, with everyone gazing out of the windows.

Clare recognised random landmarks as Murdo, with far more circumspection than Tristan, drove along the same road that Tristan had taken the day before. Clare couldn't decide whether it was out of consideration for his passengers—human and ovine—or whether it reflected his normal temperament.

As they neared the proposal cove, Tristan twisted in his seat to peer at the knoll. With something like satisfaction in his voice, he said, "It's still there."

"Aye," said Murdo, "an' most likely it'll stay that way until some other romantic bastard comes along."

Shortly after that, the road turned south, following the shoreline of a narrow sea loch that penetrated inland for several miles. Now that the joy had gone from the trip and they were facing the chore of getting home, Clare wanted the journey to be done. Every time she glimpsed a car on the other side of the water, frustration bubbled up inside her, knowing they wouldn't reach the same point themselves for another twenty minutes.

The drive became frustratingly slow. Murdo ducked into passing places that didn't seem big enough to hold the truck while an apparently endless stream of camper vans edged past.

"Is it usually this busy?" asked Janice.

"Only in the summer, and only since they launched the North Coast 500. The route has done wonders for the tourist trade, but the roads were nae built for it. Bloody thing's a nightmare. Worst thing that coulda happened up here."

Since they had contributed to the nightmare, they kept quiet.

Murdo proved to be a man of limited conversation, and when he did speak, his words were dour pessimism and lament. After Tongue, they gave up talking, happier to travel in silence.

After more than two hours, they arrived at Geogemas Junction where, Murdo assured them, they were in good time to catch the train to Inverness. They thanked him as he dropped them and their luggage off and waved as he drove away.

"My rucksack's damp," said Tristan as he shrugged it onto his shoulders. "I hope the wet isn't what I think."

Matt assured him that it was exactly what Tristan thought. "That ram had the bladder capacity of an oil tanker and, first chance I get, I'll be binning my shoes!"

The station was unmanned and comprised of a single platform, and they were still looking around for information when they became aware of an approaching train. It pulled up and they piled on. One by one, they stowed their cases in the

luggage rack closest to the doors and made their way along the carriage. Fellow passengers were few and far between, so finding seats together wasn't a problem.

They'd barely sat down when the conductor found them and said, "Tickets?"

"We want to go to Manchester."

"Manchester? You know you're going the wrong way, don't you?"

"What?" exclaimed Matt.

"Aye. We're heading north, to Thurso."

Speaking to the carriage's ceiling, Ollie said, "Whose bright idea was it to get on this train?"

Tristan said, "I followed Matt," which, given that Matt usually knew exactly where he was going and how to get there, had undoubtedly seemed like a reasonable thing to do.

"I followed Tristan," said Janice.

"I followed everyone else," said Clare.

"I don't believe it! On top of everything else, now we're on the wrong bloody train!" moaned Matt.

"You'll be fine," said the conductor. "We'll be right back where you started in about half an hour."

Relieved, they sighed in unison, and then Tristan and Matt began to laugh. The others, including the guard, joined in.

They stopped laughing when the guard told them how much the fare was.

"How much?" spluttered Janice.

“One hundred and forty-four pounds. Single. Each.”

“And with a railcard?” asked Ollie hopefully.

The guard quoted Ollie a figure, then said in a tone that was supposed to be helpful and informative but which, under the circumstances, was anything but, “You know that you can get cheaper tickets if you buy them before boarding.”

“The station was unmanned.”

“You can buy tickets online.”

“We didn’t know until this morning that we’d need to buy tickets at all!” snarled Ollie through gritted teeth, holding on too tightly to their debit card.

“Don’t mind Ollie,” said Janice. “We’re all having a horrible day.”

“You don’t have to apologise for me!”

“Sorry,” said Janice, raising her hands in apology. To the guard, she said, “Someone stole our minibus.”

“No!” gasped the guard, appalled. “Around here? That’s shocking!”

“It wasn’t anyone local,” Tristan said. “It was our friends.” He snarled the last word in a way that complemented Ollie’s earlier tone perfectly.

“Former friends?” suggested Clare.

“Probationary friends,” suggested Janice. “What? I don’t care much for Natalia, but I liked Jack, at least until today.”

The guard finished handing out their tickets. “That’s you all done. Enjoy your trip.” As soon as the words had left his

mouth, he was mortified. “I’m sorry. I mean...”

Matt interrupted the flustered apology. “Is there a trolley service on this train?”

“Sorry.” The guard acted even more apologetic than before.

Tristan scowled at his debit card and ticket for a few seconds. As he put them away, he said, “Fuck.”

“Bastards!” said Ollie.

“Fucking bastards,” said Tristan.

“Bloody fucking bastards,” agreed Ollie.

“I feel terrible about this,” said Matt. “I mean, if I hadn’t suggested bringing Natalia...”

Clare opened her mouth to say that he had already done penance enough by riding with the incontinent ram, but then she remembered the hit her bank balance had taken. Maybe a little more contrition wouldn’t hurt.

*

MATT’S MOOD LIGHTENED when he discovered Scotrail offered free Wi-Fi on its trains. He traced where they were and checked the next stages of their route. Ollie also took delight in the free Wi-Fi, and they set about tweeting a running commentary about their journey. “Jack follows me,” said Ollie. “I hope he reads about all the shite he’s putting us through!”

Matt and Tristan also followed Ollie, and they read some of Ollie’s tweets out loud. While Clare had never seen the appeal of Twitter, and Ollie’s passive aggression was doing

nothing to change her mind, she had to admit that, to anyone not directly involved, the tweets would appear amusing. As it was, “Our luggage smells of sheep droppings and Matt’s trousers stink of piss” was all too accurate. Worse, the smell was diffusing through the carriage, propagated by the train’s heating system.

The train made its leisurely way through the bleak moors of the Flow Country, stopping at some stations that served a couple of properties at most and barely slowing at others, which Matt knowledgeably informed them were request stops.

As the train paused at Helmsdale, Janice asked, “What time are we due in Inverness?”

Matt glanced at his phone. “Two minutes past five.”

Clare glanced at her watch, did some maths, put her head against the seat, and said to nobody in particular, “It’s going to be a long journey.”

Tristan suggested, “Cards Against Humanity, anyone?”

For the first time on the trip, they agreed.

They played as the train trundled south, earning disapproving looks from an elderly couple who found either the content or the volume of their conversation distasteful, and who, eventually, relocated into the other carriage.

*

THE TRAIN FROM Inverness was busy, so the group had to split up. Clare found a seat next to a young man who was engrossed in a book written in a language she didn’t recognise, and she spent the journey catching up on the latest episodes of

the *History Outreach* podcast. The voices soothed her, and she found her eyelids slipping closed.

She would have missed their stop if Ollie hadn't shaken her awake as the train approached Perth, and she had to rush to gather her belongings together. Only half-awake, she'd have lost her coat had Ollie not scooped it up for her.

At Perth, the station's coffee shop had closed for the day but, at Edinburgh Waverley, they managed to stock up on sandwiches, pasties, and soft drinks to keep them going all the way to Manchester. Matt also picked up a book of Sudoku, and Janice finished the novel she'd picked up in Ullapool; she offered it to Clare, who accepted it with a "why not?" kind of shrug.

*

ON THE MANCHESTER train, after trailing through several carriages, they found seats. Janice sat across the aisle from the other four, who'd managed to grab a table, and took the opportunity to doze. Tristan stared out of the window, watching the darkening landscape speed by. Opposite Tristan, Matt buried himself in the Sudoku book. Next to Matt and opposite Clare, Ollie made the most of the Wi-Fi to blog or message or something with an almost frightening intensity that blocked out the outside world.

As Clare settled into her seat, an unwelcome thought popped into her head: perhaps they should have tried to hire a car from Inverness. Not only would that have saved them a lot of waiting around, but it would also have worked out cheaper. Even two cars, if they had been unable to fit everything and everyone into one, would have been cheaper than the train.

But none of them had been thinking clearly that morning, and it was too late now. She opened her mouth to say something but shut it again. Perhaps it would be kinder to keep silent.

Unfortunately, Ollie didn't share her restraint. "You know," they said, looking up from their phone, "I bet we'd have saved a ton of money if we'd done the journey home by bus."

"Yeah, but we'd missed the bus, remember?" said Tristan.

"Ah," said Ollie, sticking a finger into the air, "well. We missed *a* bus, true. But we could have got home if we'd caught a bus to Ullapool and another to Inverness. Then we'd have had to catch another to Glasgow, and from Glasgow to Manchester."

Hearing about another alternative they hadn't considered made Clare's head ache. She needed a distraction; she picked up the book Janice had passed on to her and began to read.

As they passed through Motherwell, Tristan nudged Clare, pointed at Matt, and whispered, "He's so cute when he's got his Sudoku face on!"

Clare glanced up from the book, which was proving to be unexpectedly engrossing, the robot on the cover having precious little to do with the actual plot. Tristan stared at Matt, indulgently besotted; Matt's forehead scrunched into a frown as he chewed on his pen for a few seconds before lowering it to insert a series of numbers into some squares.

Clare smiled vaguely and returned to her reading.

Somewhere around Carlisle, they broke out the Cards Against Humanity again, but the length of the day had taken

its toll, and the game wasn't as funny as before. They soon put the cards away again.

They ran out of conversation around Preston. Outside, the night was black and boring, so they spent the final leg of the journey staring at nothing and willing it to be over.

Time crawled.

*

THE TRAIN PULLED into Manchester Piccadilly at silly o'clock in the morning.

Matt and Tristan ordered a taxi to their apartment. Clare, Ollie, and Janice opted for taking night buses home, and they walked together through the neon-lit night to Piccadilly Gardens. Despite the lighting, the company, and the surprisingly large numbers of people milling around the streets, the walk made Clare feel uneasy. She imagined muggers lurking around every corner.

At Piccadilly Gardens, Ollie peeled off to find their bus stand while Clare and Janice tagged onto the edge of a small crowd waiting for the number 41.

The crowd was mostly comprised of women who, judging from their pink jackets, headbands with cat's ears, and penis balloons, had been out on a hen night, despite it being midweek. Their raucous good spirits spilled over onto the rest of the bus queue as they offered around what they laughingly called, "Dick sweets."

"Why not?" said Janice, as she and Clare gingerly accepted a penis-shaped chocolate each. "Thanks!"

“You’re welcome!” tittered the woman with the chocolates. “C’mon! Anyone else for a penis? You know you want one in your mouth!”

The chocolate was surprisingly good, and Clare sternly told herself the sugar rush was doing wonders to combat her wilting fatigue and, yes, she would have enough energy to get home.

The bus came. The crowd piled on. The hens clucked their way upstairs, while Clare and Janice found seats downstairs, near the luggage racks. They made desultory conversation as the bus travelled through the city.

The universities were eerily quiet as they passed, and the shops and restaurants were shuttered and dark as the bus trundled along Wilmslow Road.

Clare got off the bus at Fallowfield. She yawned cavernously as she keyed the security code into the number pad to get into the apartment block. Beyond the front door, the lights in the hallway were harsh and uncomfortable, and the pile of junk mail and flyers was larger than normal. Clare let them alone, preferring to concentrate on lugging her bags upstairs.

As soon as she was in her flat, she dropped her belongings and locked the door behind her. She didn’t bother to switch on any lights, making do instead with the glow from the streetlamps that came through her windows. She groped her way to the bathroom. She peed and flushed with the door ajar. She went into her bedroom. She undressed, decided that any further ablutions could wait, threw on some pyjamas, and was asleep before she face-planted onto her mattress.

Chapter Seventeen

THE UNIVERSITY SLID into a state of torpor, just as it did every year in July. Campus cafés, restaurants, and bars emptied. Bus companies reduced the frequency of services along Oxford Road, and seats became freely available on the early morning services. The university library cut its opening hours. Many staff disappeared, and the few, like Clare, who stuck around sat in their offices, heads down, concentrating on their research and resenting any interruptions.

The biggest break in the summer routine came with graduation, when the department came alive as graduands, enrobed and dressed so smartly that Clare had trouble recognising them, streamed through, giving proud family and friends a highly sanitised version of how they had spent the last three years. They reappeared after the graduation ceremony for a reception of faux-champagne, strawberries, and cream. The ritual throwing of the mortarboards was carefully choreographed and photographed, and everyone was incandescently happy.

What was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for the students was routine for the staff, and some years Clare struggled to recapture at least an echo of the feelings she'd had at her own ceremony. Other years, like this one, she was aware of a spark of excitement. This year, the spark was because Sam was receiving her PhD.

Sam's boyfriend hadn't made the ceremony, which might have had something to do with the two-guests-per-graduate

rule or with work commitments. Sam was vague about the details.

Sam's parents had come, though, and Sam introduced them to Clare. They were a pair of softly spoken Welsh hill farmers who were incredibly proud of their daughter's achievements, even if they didn't fully understand what those achievements had involved and were almost overwhelmed by the rituals and pomp.

Clare was still harbouring a bit of a Prosecco buzz as she made her way over to the Quill for her Tuesday evening rendezvous with Louisa.

*

COMMUNICATION WHILE CLARE had been away had been limited to a couple of frustrated voicemails and a handful of misspelled texts, so Louisa and Clare had a lot of catching up to do.

Once Louisa had made herself comfortable, taken the first sip of her wine, and sighed contentedly, Clare asked, "Did you hear yet?"

"About?"

"The job."

"Oh, that," Louisa said, with a remarkably convincing degree of nonchalance. She shook her head. "There's another day of interviews next week. They'll make a final decision after that."

At Clare's urging, Louisa described the arduous selection process upon which she was thriving. She'd had to subject herself to some type of personality testing. There had been an

interview in front of a panel comprised of senior officials, councillors, and the chief executives of a couple of other public authorities.

“How do you think you’ve done?”

“All right. They haven’t sent me home yet, so that’s a positive. I’m still in the running. No matter how things turn out, it’s been great experience.” But Louisa was hungry for this, and anything short of selection would be a disappointment.

“How was the trip?” asked Louisa.

“Not exactly a riotous success.”

“Oh? Do tell.”

“What would you like to hear first? How the midges eat you alive? How Matt and Tristan were barely speaking other than to snipe at each other? At least that turned out to be a huge misunderstanding and they’re now engaged. Or what about the part where Natalia and Jack pinched the minibus and we had to make our own way home by sheep van and train?”

Louisa’s eyes widened. “It sounds...eventful.”

“It was definitely that. And bits were good. I enjoyed spending time with Janice, and once she and Ollie had made their peace—and that’s another story—Ollie turned out to be fun to be around. A bit passive aggressive, but fun. Some of the scenery was spectacular, and I had chocolate that was to die for. Oh, and I ate haggis. Honest to God, that’s a real thing, and not just for tourists!”

A glass worth of inquisition followed.

Clare tried to turn her adventures into a light-hearted tale of woe, but she couldn't hide her ennui. The trip's emotional highs and lows had exhausted her, and after some prodding from Louisa she admitted that she hadn't spoken to any of the other aces since her return. She tried to justify her withdrawal by saying, "I can't deal with any more drama."

When they settled down with a refill, Clare changed the subject. "I met our new head of department yesterday."

"What's she like? As entertaining in real life as on TV?"

"Not really, no. She's intimidating. She's young. Smart. Judgy. Professor well before the age of forty. She makes me feel like a massive underachiever." Clare paused before adding mischievously, "She reminded me of you."

Louisa didn't take offense. Most likely she took Clare's comments as a compliment.

"She's been calling us in to see her, one by one. She says she wants to get to know us, but I think it's more than that. She's supposed to be taking the department in new directions, and there are bound to be casualties. You should have been there. How much research money have I generated? How many peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, invitations to speak? So far, so standard. But then she wanted to know, when did I last review my research portfolio? What new directions do I have in mind? She asked me about radio, television, and podcast appearances, and she asked me whether I keep a blog, about my social media profile, and whether I'd ever consider having a YouTube channel. Then came the homily. I—like the rest of the department—need to keep at the cutting edge of endeavour; we need to find ways to innovate, and to attract

both students and money. It was like being savaged by a...a... wererabbit!”

“A wererabbit?” asked Louisa quizzically.

“Something that looks soft and friendly on first acquaintance, but that will most likely bite your leg off.”

Louisa threw back her head and laughed. Clare should have known better than to hope for any sympathy.

They were on glass number three when Clare asked, “How goes the great romance?”

“Which great... Oh! You mean, me and Bobby?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Brilliant, in fact. We’ve been out for a few meals. Went to the symphony... Had a few nights in. By the way, when did cat cafés become a thing?”

“You went to the cat café?”

“Not yet. Bobby suggested we go this weekend.”

“You’ll love it!”

“How do you know?”

“I went there a while ago. With Janice. Didn’t I tell you at the time? Must have slipped my mind.”

“You’ve been doing a lot with Janice, haven’t you? Socially, I mean.” There was something inviting in Louisa’s tone that Clare didn’t like.

“You make it sound like we’re dating!”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I know you better than that. I’m surprised that she’s got you doing so many things for fun.

That's all."

Had Janice got her doing things? Clare preferred to think that they'd been doing things together. With a pang, Clare realised that avoiding the people she had gone to Scotland with had included avoiding Janice.

*

A COUPLE OF days later, Clare picked up the phone to call Janice with a nebulous nervousness she struggled to account for. The conversation began awkwardly; however, it gradually settled into something more comfortable as they both relaxed.

"I've been offered a job," said Janice.

"I didn't know that you'd been looking for one."

"I wasn't. Not seriously, anyway."

"What is it?"

"Manager of the florist's."

"You'll be managing the shop? That's great!"

Janice laughed. "No. Not the shop. All the shops. All five of them!"

"That's... Wow. Congratulations! Are you going to do it?"

"I'm thinking about it. Sheila's husband had been talking about retiring for a while, and now he has. Sheila doesn't want to sell the shops, at least not yet, but they both want to travel. She needs a manager, and she's asked me if I'll take the role on. It'll be for a year, initially, which will give her plenty of time to decide what she wants to do, longer term. After that... We'll see."

“You sound pretty keen.”

“I think I am. I’m also terrified. But the money’s good, and it would buy me time to think about my options.”

Clare, who had been focused on a single career path all her adult life, found herself saying, “Exploring your options and keeping them open sounds like a sensible idea.”

Later, as the conversation began to wind down, Janice asked, “Have you heard from any of the others?”

“No.”

“Me neither.”

Had Janice expected to? Had Janice tried to contact anyone else? The idea that Janice might have wanted to connect with anyone ahead of her caused something sharp and painful to jab at Clare’s chest. She frowned as she hung up and tried not to think about what the aching emotion might mean.

*

THE FOLLOWING TUESDAY, Louisa hurried into the pub, bling jangling merrily, full of apologies. “The traffic was murder. Got stuck in a jam on the motorway. I dropped the car at home and then had to wait forever for a bus. Can’t stay long. Bobby’s staying over tonight and—”

Clare brushed the apologies away. “I got the first round in while I was waiting.” She gestured toward a full glass that had been standing long enough for condensation to form and dribble down its stem, and at her own, almost empty one. “You’ve got some catching up to do, though.”

Louisa took a gulp, shed her bags, and sat.

As Louisa had already mentioned him, Clare didn't bother waiting until glass number two before asking about Leyton.

"You and Bobby... How serious is it?"

"I've tried not to think about it. I don't want to jinx anything, but I think it might be something very serious indeed." To Clare's astonishment, Louisa's expression took on a dreamy quality. On anyone else, Clare would have taken it for a complete and mindless besottedness, but Louisa had never done besotted.

Until now.

Clare had seen Louisa involved before. She'd seen Louisa alight with excitement at the beginning of a new relationship, and she'd seen Louisa when she was doing the serious, long-term thing. But this dreamy-eyed joy was new. So was the way Louisa was talking. She mentioned this year...next year... Clare listened, and she heard far more than what was in Louisa's words. Louisa was in love, and she was making forever plans, something that she had never done before, not even with her husbands.

"What do the kids think of him?"

Louisa made a face that probably was meant to convey ambivalence. "They seem to think he's okay. Leastways, they don't hate him."

"Are they spending time with him?"

"Yes. Why?"

"No reason." But Louisa wouldn't introduce her kids to just anyone.

Louisa said, “I’m not sure how much I should take what they think into account. They’re barely home these days, what with all their clubs and friends and time with their father, and I’m only a few years off being an empty nester.”

But no matter how old they got, Louisa would never ignore the needs and opinions of her children.

“You know, you should come over to dinner with us sometime.”

“Really?” said Clare as she clocked this additional indicator as to how serious their relationship was becoming. “I’ll look forward to it.”

Having got the invitation out of the way, Louisa changed the subject again. “How are things with you?”

Clare shrugged. “Okay, I suppose. Back to normal.”

Louisa smiled sympathetically and said, “You sound as though you’ve got a severe case of post-holiday blues.”

“It’s more than that.”

“Oh?”

Clare bought herself some time by taking a sip of her wine. Then, still struggling to put her feelings into words, she said, “These last few months, I feel as though I’ve been on a journey. It’s been a rollercoaster. Exhilarating. Sometimes frightening. Everything’s happened so fast; I’ve been too busy to stop and think. Now I have time and I feel... I must accept things like... It’s hard to explain.”

“Try.”

“I’m never going to have kids.”

“But you’ve never wanted kids. Have you?”

“No. But they were always there. As an option. Now I feel like...I don’t even have the idea of them anymore.”

“And you think you’re feeling that way because you’re asexual?”

“You don’t?”

Louisa laughed, and Clare bristled. “Of course not! Well, okay, perhaps a tiny bit. Mostly, though, I think it’s your hormones. Your biological clock is ticking and it’s going to stop soon.”

“What?”

“Menopause awaits.”

“What? I’m barely in my forties!”

“Most women experience menopause sometime between forty-five and fifty-five.”

Clare stared at her, horrified.

With the kind of sympathetic sincerity she usually reserved for her offspring, Louisa said, “You’re blaming your mood on your lifestyle. But I think it’s a mix of your age and that you’ve been through a bad breakup.”

“No, I haven’t. Besides, Gavin was months ago!”

“Not Gavin!” exclaimed Louisa. “I’m talking about your new friends! These last few months, you’ve been happier than I’ve seen you in ages. Maybe happier than I’ve ever seen you. Now you’re avoiding your buddies, and you’re miserable.”

“I talked to Janice!”

“But you haven’t done anything with her, have you? Or with any of the others?”

Clare shook her head and frowned.

“Have you even messaged anyone else?”

“No,” admitted Clare.

“Didn’t think so,” said Louisa, pleased with herself.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Only that you’re so bloody predictable sometimes. You get upset or overwhelmed, you withdraw into yourself, you brood. Eventually, you do something about whatever is bothering you. You’d save yourself a lot of time and anguish if you cut out all the middle bits and went straight from upset to sorting out the problem. Stop overthinking this. You want to be happy? Go see them and put things right.”

Clare considered the possibilities for a few moments. Doubtfully, she said, “Some things can’t be fixed that easily.”

“And some things can.”

Chapter Eighteen

CLARE MULLED OVER everything Louisa had said, and she talked to Janice. On hearing Clare's ambivalence about going to the meet-ups, Janice simply said, "Why wouldn't you? Natalia won't be there, and you get on with everyone else."

That gave Clare something else to think about. Perhaps her instinct to distance herself from everything said more about Clare than about anyone else.

*

TWO DAYS LATER, Clare arrived home to find Louisa on her doorstep. She raised her eyebrows and said, "What are you doing here?"

"Hello to you too," said Louisa.

Clare made an apologetic gesture. "I didn't mean it that way. I'm just surprised to see you. Come on up."

Louisa chattered as Clare opened the door, dealt with the latest heap of discarded flyers, and collected her mail.

"I have news, so I called by on the off chance. I was about to leave when you turned up."

"News?"

"I got the job!" Louisa squealed and executed a child-like jump of joy. Clare admired the way Louisa made a perfect landing in her two-inch heels.

"You did! That's wonderful! C'mere!"

They hugged, a happy, celebratory hug, and climbed the stairs.

Clare let them into the flat, disarmed the alarm, headed into the kitchen, filled the kettle, and offered Louisa tea.

Louisa shook her head. “I only have a few minutes. Bobby and I are going to a concert. But I wanted to give you something.”

“Why? It’s not my birthday.”

“It’s a thank-you present.”

“I haven’t done anything.”

“Ah, but you have!”

Clare waited for Louisa to explain.

“Do you remember this?” Louisa reached into her handbag and pulled out a tatty old beer mat. Clare reached out to take it.

On closer inspection, Clare recognised her own handwriting. Ah, yes! She’d scrawled a list of P-words after Louisa had talked about the four Es.

“Your six Ps are one of the reasons I got the job.”

“You’re not going to use them!” exclaimed Clare, horrified.

“No. Although I think the council might have done, if I hadn’t told them the whole story.”

“What story?”

“I did a nice, glossy PowerPoint, all about the four Es. The interview panel nodded, clearly impressed. Then I whipped out the beer mat, passed it around, and I told them how my good friend had said the whole idea was stupid. I told them you had come up with your six Ps in five minutes flat, and I

said instead of wasting public money on consultants, we should ask our staff and customers what matters to them. We should develop our values based on what people want or need, not what looks good on a strap line. We shouldn't waste council taxpayers' money on trying to buy the emperor new clothes."

"That's amazing."

"And I got the job, so this"—Louisa lifted a shiny gift bag onto the kitchen worktop—"is for you."

"You shouldn't have." But she was grateful that Louisa had, and she was already exploring the bag's contents. She pulled out a bottle of champagne and said, "Thank you."

*

"WHEN I WAS a kid," said Janice as they travelled into town, on the first leg of their journey to The Spinners', "I'd lie in bed and, before going to sleep, I'd tell myself stories. I'd plan what I was going to do when I grew up. All the adventures I was going to have."

"Such as?" Where was Janice going with this? It was a very un-Janice-like topic to bring up, out of the blue.

"The usual, I guess. I was going to be a pop star. Or a great actress. Or a veterinarian. Or an adventurer, and I'd fight crime."

"What's your point?"

"No point, other than to wonder, when did I stop dreaming? I hadn't even noticed that I had until I started again. Now I'm dreaming about running a minor business empire."

“You took the job!”

“Yes,” said Janice with a happy grin. “I signed on an actual dotted line and everything. Sheila and I are going to have a month’s handover, and then it will be all me for twelve months.”

“That’s great!”

The bus travelled a hundred yards before Janice asked, “Did you always want to be a lecturer?”

The question took Clare by surprise, though maybe it shouldn’t have, given what they had been talking about. She shook her head. “I only had the vaguest idea of what that meant before I went to uni.”

“What did you want to be, when you were a kid?”

“Pop star...actress... Like you said, the usual. But most of all, I wanted to be a writer.”

“You do write,” said Janice.

“Yes,” conceded Clare. “But I wanted to tell stories. I wanted to write books that people would want to read. Books to get lost in. Not thick tomes full of erudition and references.”

“Why don’t you?”

“Life happened. I love history, and suddenly all these other avenues opened up, and I found something different to want. Even so, I sometimes wonder...”

“What do you wonder?”

“I wonder what my life would be like if I had done something else. My parents always worried about job security. They’d say, ‘Don’t forget about the day job, the one that pays

the bills. You can always write in your spare time,' which is pretty decent advice. The trouble is, the day job is all-consuming, and I don't have any time or energy left for anything else. So goodbye dreams."

"That's sad."

"I don't mean it to be. It isn't. I found something that I'm good at, and I made a career out of something I enjoy...most of the time. How many people can say that? But sometimes I wonder what it would be like to do something new."

*

PETE GREETED CLARE and Janice with a cheery wave. "The usual?" he asked, and Clare found herself feeling ridiculously warm and happy. Somewhere, in the last few months, she had become a regular and had been accepted. Why had she been stupid enough to consider staying away?

They paid and took their pints of Knobber's through into the snug.

When Zoe-the-Zombie arrived, the first thing she asked was "How was the trip?" Clare wished that Janice hadn't shared the secret of her mnemonic tricks. One of these days she was going to call her Zoe-the-Zombie to her face.

"Um," said Matt uselessly.

"Err," said Tristan vaguely.

"Good in parts?" suggested Janice.

"An absolute shambles," said Ollie, much more honestly.

"A complete fucking fiasco!" agreed Tristan.

"Where is Jack, anyway?" asked Matt.

“Probably too ashamed to show his face,” said Tristan, “after letting us all down like that.”

“Or perhaps he’s gone home for the long vac,” said Clare. “Students do that all the time.”

“Besides, what happened wasn’t entirely Jack’s fault,” said Matt. “Natalia has to take some share of the blame. Most of it, knowing Natalia.”

“Eh?” said Zoe, staring from one to the next and next and next. “Will someone please tell me what you’re going on about?”

They all talked at once, their accounts overlapping and jumbled. However, the story gradually became more coherent as they began to take turns speaking, jogging one another’s memories as they went.

The telling proved more cathartic than Clare’s conversation with Louisa had been, and by the end she was able to laugh, albeit slightly hysterically. The group’s collective mirth washed away the last of their anger, although Clare suspected it would take longer for the lingering resentment to go away too.

“So, what’s new with you?” asked Ollie, once they were all laughed out. “How did the film go?”

“Good. Plus, I’ve got some big news: I’ve been offered a part in a soap! It’s a small role for now, but it’s a recurring one, so who knows? The producers were visiting the set; they saw my zombie and figured I’d be perfect for the role.”

“What sort of soap opera has zombies?” asked Janice.

“I’m not playing a zombie. At least, I don’t think so, though with soaps you never know. The producer said he liked the quality of my performance, which he wanted me to bring to this role.”

“Which is?”

“Shop assistant in a newsagent’s. My character gets to serve one of the show’s regulars this week. I give them the wrong change.”

“Total zombie,” said Ollie.

“You think?” asked Zoe.

Ollie rolled their eyes. “I was joking.”

“Oh, right.”

*

IN APRIL, CLARE had been surprised at how little the group talked about asexuality. Since then, something had changed. No longer was Ollie’s a lone voice in the wilderness; they had allies in Matt, Tristan, and Zoe, who all talked of awareness raising, of visibility, and education. The meetings had become political, and these politics had nothing in common with the petty internecine politics Clare was used to at work. They were a crusading fervour for a cause.

Clare and Janice hovered on the sidelines as the others began making plans for Asexual Awareness Week, still almost half a year away. Ollie gushed about poster layouts while Matt talked about carpeting notice boards across university campuses and around popular venues across the city. Tristan suggested hosting a drop-in event, and Zoe contemplated a grand coming out in the tabloid press. “I’ll do it if I’m famous

enough by then to have an impact. If not, I'll wait until next year.”

As Clare sat on the fringes of all the passion and idealism, she wondered how she fitted in to any of it, if at all.

What would she have been like, if she had known in her twenties what all her feelings and aversions meant and had been able to put a label to them? The fact that she asked herself the question showed the need for more visibility, and she found herself envying those people who were younger, more confident, and more vocal than herself.

The conversation moved away from Asexual Awareness Week.

“Pride!” announced Tristan enthusiastically. “Who’s up for marching in Pride? Anyone?”

Ollie and Zoe didn’t hesitate before saying, “Sure!” and “I’m in!” at the same time.

“Pride?” said Clare, not because she didn’t know what Tristan was talking about but because it wasn’t something that she’d ever given much thought to.

“It’s over the August holiday weekend. The parade is on the Saturday. Matt and I thought it would be fun to take part.”

“We watched the parade and some of the music last year,” said Matt, his eyes gleaming with enthusiasm. “It was incredible! This year, we want to get more involved.”

“I don’t know,” said Janice, and Clare was grateful that she wasn’t alone in her doubts.

“Why not?” asked Zoe.

“I’m not sure how I fit in to the LGBT community,” Janice answered.

Clare nodded agreement, adding, “I would worry that I’m intruding on someone else’s cause.”

“Intruding?” asked Ollie, frowning. “Why?”

Clare struggled to put her concern into words. “Is Pride strictly for LGBT people, or is it LGBT+? And does that plus include aces? It doesn’t always seem to.”

“Which is a good reason to take part,” said Ollie. “To make sure that we get included.”

Again, Clare wished she were as confident, as certain about things.

Janice said, “Is LGBT a shorthand for anyone who isn’t straight, or is it a restrictive definition, reserved specifically for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people?”

Clare piggybacked onto Janice’s question. “I hate the idea I’m straight by default. I thought that way for so long, and I’m still coming to terms with the idea that’s not the case. If I’m aro and ace, how can I be straight? But I’m still not sure I fit anywhere in the LGBT community.”

Ollie said, “Asexuality is a nonheteronormative orientation. Therefore, it has more in common with other LGBT communities than with heterosexual ones.”

“Even heteroromantic asexuals?” asked Janice.

“Maybe not, but, if neither of you are heteroromantic, that’s not an issue.”

Zoe chimed in. “LGB has widened over time to include the trans community. I don’t think it’s asking too much for the abbreviation to stretch some more so it includes aces, too, do you?”

Neither Clare nor Janice answered.

Zoe tried again. “LGBT isn’t a single community. It’s made up of a whole bunch of different groups that might or might not intersect with one another, just as we might intersect with them.” She looked at Matt and Tristan.

Clare glanced at them too. How much easier was it for the two homoromantics to relate to LGBT groups?

Matt tried a different tack. “You could always join in as allies, if you don’t feel comfortable taking part as aces.”

Clare considered for a moment. The idea wasn’t a bad one, and Clare was flattered by how much Matt and the others wanted her and Janice to be a part of Pride. Nonetheless, she said, “I’m not sure how comfortable I feel about that either. Even if I am an ally, I’d still feel as though I was sneaking in by the back door.”

Janice nodded. “I think I feel the same way.”

Disappointed, Matt said, “Well, let the rest of us know if you change your minds.”

Matt, of course, had all the information about joining instructions and schedules to hand. Janice and Clare listened as the others firmed up their plans.

Ten minutes later, Tristan summed up the discussion by saying, “Matt and I’ll get weekend tickets. Do the official events on Friday, Sunday, and Monday, and we’ll do the

parade with Ollie and Zoe. Then we'll all meet to go to Superbia on Saturday afternoon. That way, there's something for everyone." He made sure that Janice and Clare were included in the arrangements.

Matt nodded. Ollie and Zoe followed suit. Clare exchanged glances with Janice, who shrugged.

Clare wasn't entirely sure how it had happened, but she was going to Pride, after all.

Chapter Nineteen

ON THE MORNING of the last Saturday in August, Janice called for Clare. They crossed the road together and waited for a bus into town. The sun shone. Small, fluffy, white clouds speckled the sky, and there was a light breeze. The fickle weather gods of Manchester had deigned to take pity on Pride.

A bus arrived. Clare and Janice stepped aboard. Clare brandished her pass and, while Janice paid for her ticket, she looked around the lower deck for seats. As the deck was almost full, they headed upstairs.

They found a double seat towards the front of the upper level. A pair of men and a young boy, who was excitedly looking at and commenting on everything he could see, occupied the seats in front of them.

The bus pulled up to let some people with rainbow wigs on. They pounded up the stairs, chattering and laughing as they sat towards the rear of the deck.

The boy squirmed around and stared avidly at the newcomers. He waved at them, and his grin widened when some of them waved back. Then he said to Janice and Clare, “Are you coming to Pride too?”

One of the men nudged the boy and chastised him gently. “Harry, what have we told you about talking to strangers?”

“Not to? But you said that Pride is a party and I talk to people at parties, so that’s different. Isn’t it?”

The man smiled ruefully, unable to argue with Harry’s logic.

Having won the argument, Harry proceeded to chatter merrily. “These are my dads. There’s a girl in my class who has two dads too. That makes us special. Daddy Mike”—Harry pointed to the man who had tried to tell him off—“says we’re going to Pride to celebrate.”

“That’s right,” said Daddy Mike. “You have two dads who love you, and a bio mum, too. You have three parents who love you very, very much.”

The boy beamed. “My bi’logic mum is a lesbi’n. That means she lives with a woman. Are you lesbi’ns?”

“No. We’re not lesbians.”

“You don’t live together?”

“No.”

“But you are going to Pride?”

“We’re going to watch the parade. Some friends of ours are marching in it.”

“Are they lesbi’ns?”

Maybe Daddy Mike caught the deer-in-the-headlights look that Clare was sure had popped onto her face as she tried to figure out how she might explain aces, aromantics, and homoromantics to a young child. Would his parents even want her to try?

Perhaps not, since Daddy Mike said, “All right, Harry. That’s enough. Leave these nice people alone.”

At that moment, the noise and enthusiasm from the rainbow wigs conveniently crescendoed into a loud cheer and applause and drowned out Harry’s protesting reply.

Harry turned to face forward and returned to pointing at things through the window.

The bus stopped and started, filling as it drew closer to the city centre, its passengers an odd mix of Pride-goers in party mood and others. Some grinned and laughed at the atmosphere, some were irritated at all the kerfuffle, and some looked mildly terrified.

The bus halted close to the train station on Oxford Road, where there was a mass disembarkation. “Come on,” suggested Janice. “We can walk the rest of the way from here.”

Clare and Janice tagged onto the crowd leaving the bus. “This way,” said Clare unnecessarily and set off, Janice falling into step beside her.

Clare marvelled at the number of people adorned in flags and makeup, who were claiming the streets as their own. They sported coloured hair and T-shirts, braces, face paint, rainbow-coloured shoes, and glittered skin. People carried banners and bags. Clare swallowed; how many people tamped down their identities and personalities in their day-to-day lives, and how free must they feel today?

Clare spotted a hen party garbed in matching black nylon jackets and pink sequined hats, and she laughed at the way they got lost in the throng. If anything, the hens looked understated.

Suddenly, Clare wished ferociously that she had something to wear or wave too. She didn't want Pride to be “their” day. She didn't want to be an onlooker. She wanted to be a part of it and say that Pride was her day too.

*

CLARE AND JANICE walked to St Peter's Square, where they found a good vantage point close to the Central Library. Around them, the crowd of spectators grew. There were parents and grandparents with pushchairs and children sitting on their shoulders. There were people of all shapes, sizes, and hues. There were people wearing T-shirts and shorts, headscarves, and skirts. There was laughter.

Lots of laughter.

“What time is it?” Janice asked.

Clare consulted her watch. “Almost half past twelve. They'll be setting off soon.”

The expectation heightened as time crawled past. The clamour of the crowd grew, then died away as people collectively strained to hear the first sounds of the parade.

In the distance was a cacophony of music and drums. As the noise grew louder, a cry went up: “They're coming!”

The police escort and stewards at the front of the parade came into view. Behind them came the first floats and banner-waving walkers. The stream of marchers flowed past, a riot of balloons, costumes, whistles, and hollers. There were pride flags galore, the rainbow flag predominant, but there were flags for bisexuals and trans people and others that Clare didn't recognise.

A brass band marched past followed by a float full of teachers and another from a supermarket chain. A handful of drummers strode by, and the noise of their beats ricocheted off the buildings.

The crowd cheered and clapped. Another band. More floats.

“There they are!” screamed Clare as Tristan, Matt, Ollie, and Zoe appeared, wearing their ace flags like capes. She and Janice jumped up and down and waved their arms above their heads to get their attention. Ollie caught sight of them and pointed them out to the others, who all turned and waved. Clare and Janice applauded them.

A ball of something clenched Clare’s gut. She wanted to scream with joy and cry. The surge of emotion hit her even more strongly than before, and a fierce ache of regret crashed over her because she wasn’t marching with them, right in the thick of things. Next to her, Janice grinned madly and wiped tears away with her fingers.

Before they knew it, Tristan and the others had passed out of sight and although more floats and walkers passed by the rest of the parade was an anti-climax.

*

“I DIDN’T EXPECT to be so emotional,” said Clare as they made their way, on foot this time, along Oxford Road. The experience had verged on overwhelming, and the world around her seemed brighter, louder, happier than usual. Around them, people waved, shouted, and whistled, a ripple of humanity spreading out from the city centre, dispersing now the parade was over.

As they headed south, they took turns pointing out shops, bars, and cafés that had decorated to celebrate Pride. Bunting hung from ceilings, and posters and balloons filled window

displays. How sad the trappings would all be gone by Tuesday!

*

FOR ALL THAT Clare spent most of her waking hours in and around universities, years had passed since she'd spent time inside a students' union. But, as soon as she went inside the one that was playing host to Superbia, she was thrown backward in time; everything about the union evoked memories from her own undergraduate days.

There were overcrowded notice boards plastered with overlapping posters that advertised everything from obscure bands, societies, and nightclubs to political causes and sexual health initiatives. There were overused, stained chairs and sofas, and bars that tried and failed to look trendy. Even the smells were the same. Clare and Janice found a café, bought themselves a snack and something cool to drink, and sat down to wait.

After about an hour, the others, drunken with euphoria, appeared. Tristan and Zoe were still wearing their flags while Matt and Ollie waved theirs around in the manner of bullfighters. They were accompanied by three people adorned in rainbows and glitter with whom they had at some point bonded.

Introductions were made, tables pulled together, more food and drink purchased, and anecdotes from the day swapped. The flags were brought to the fore, and people began to take photographs.

Clare found herself proudly holding a corner of an ace flag, Janice standing next to her, and all the others squeezing

together to fit into the picture.

“This is going straight onto Instagram!” crowed one of their new acquaintances.

Clare hadn’t considered that. How did she feel about having her face plastered on social media? And shouldn’t he have asked before saying, “There! Done!”

“What’s the hashtag?” asked Ollie.

The new acquaintance told them. A moment later, Ollie said, “Oh! That’s a great one! There. I’ve liked it. I’d like it a million times, if I could!”

“Let’s see,” said Janice.

Ollie held her phone out. Clare peered over Janice’s shoulder. The screen was small and reflective, but, yes, the picture was great.

“...And shared!” said Zoe.

“What?” said Clare blankly. “Where?”

*

THEY STAYED INTO the evening, sitting in on a couple of debates and taking in a comedy show. The participants in the debates struck Clare as young and painfully earnest, and the comedians were lewd and only intermittently funny. She laughed a lot, anyway.

The streetlights were on by the time they emerged onto the street again.

Clare had had a great day, and she promised herself that next year would be even better.

*

THE WEATHER GODS continued to be kind after Pride, and the promise of another fine weekend resulted in a lot of messaging around to see who would be up for a picnic.

Fletcher Moss Park was one of the city's prettier open spaces. There were tennis courts for those who liked that sort of thing, which Clare didn't, and attractive gardens, which Clare did, albeit not as much as Janice. Janice was in her element as she strolled along the network of paths threading through the sloping borders, planted with everything from the tiniest alpines to the tallest trees. The park also offered woodland walks and paths that led onto the banks of the Mersey. Maybe they'd explore those later. Now, though, having eaten lunch, Clare, along with Ollie, Tristan, and Matt, was content to relax in the sun.

There were other groups—families with small children, some with older children, and groups of adults with no children at all—similarly lounging on blankets and letting the world go about its daily business without them.

Tristan had brought Cards Against Humanity with him, but, so far, everyone had been too hot and lethargic to take the game out of the box. Another maybe later.

Clare lay back, laced her hands behind her head, and stared at the cloudless sky. Swallows—or were they martins or swifts? She had never learned to tell them apart and she was too lazy to find Janice to ask—soared and swooped against the blue. An ice-cream van chimed in the distance. Ice cream... That was a good idea. A third maybe for later.

She must have fallen asleep, since Janice was suddenly there and asking, “How are the wedding plans shaping up?”

Clare forced herself awake, shifted onto her side, and propped herself on her elbow in time to see Tristan feign frustration.

Clare asked, “What’s the problem?”

“His family,” said Tristan at the same time as Matt said, “My family.”

“How come?”

“We’d have been happy to get married somewhere small and intimate, with a few close friends and relations, but...” Tristan shrugged.

“But,” said Matt, picking up the story, “my family loves weddings and is congenitally incapable of doing anything small. Ours is morphing into an Event—capital E—with in-laws, out-laws, and a whole bunch of people neither of us know well.”

“Why go along with it, if it’s not what you want?” asked Ollie. “It’s your wedding.”

“Politics. Got to keep the ’rents and grand’rents happy. Plus...” Self-consciously, Matt said, “It’s not what we talked about or expected, but it is kind of fun.”

“And your parents are happy to pay,” said Tristan.

Matt held up his hand to forestall any disapproval. “He’s not saying that because we’re after their money. We’re not being greedy or anything. It’s about them accepting us. They want to do the same for us as they did for my brother and

sister. They still don't get our relationship, but they're trying, and they're making a point of supporting us in front of some of the naysayers elsewhere in the family."

"Matt's dad said he wasn't going to have his son skulk around in some dingy registry office or elope like some shame-faced ne'er-do-well—and, yes, he actually said, 'ne'er-do-well'. So, big event with all the trimmings, it is. You'll all get your invitations eventually, and you'd better come. We're going to need all the moral support we can get!" But he said the last bit fondly, and Clare suspected that somewhere deep down Tristan, like Matt, was enjoying the fuss.

*

CLARE'S MOBILE RANG, shattering the late-afternoon peace. She pulled the phone out of her pocket and squinted at the screen. She answered the call and said, "Hi, Mum."

Without any preamble, Mum screamed, "You, my girl, have a lot of explaining to do!" Clare winced and pulled the handset away from the ear that had been assaulted. "I don't care if you are a lesbian, but I shouldn't have to find out from Mrs Hutcheson!"

The others, who had overheard everything, smirked and did their damndest not to laugh.

"Mrs Hutcheson? The hairdresser?" Clare staggered to her feet and walked away to get as much privacy as was possible in the open park. "She thinks I'm a lesbian?"

"Yes! She got it from Mrs Guthrie, who was in for highlights. Mrs Guthrie'd got it from that son of hers, Toby—you know, the flamboyant one—who had seen a photograph

on something. Not Facebook. Another one of those social media things. I had to pretend that I'd known all along—”

“Known what, Mum?”

“That you're a lesbian, dear! Do keep up!”

“I'm not a lesbian.”

“Of course you are, dear. I've seen the photograph. You're draped in some hideous flag. Why couldn't you at least have worn the rainbow one? That one's so much more fetching—”

“Mum!” Clare tried again. “I'm not a lesbian! That was an ace flag!”

“And what's that, when it's at home?”

“It's—”

“No, don't tell me now. But I expect you here for lunch tomorrow. Your father, you, and I clearly need to have a talk. And you, my girl, had better have a damn good explanation for whatever you think you're playing at!”

“I'm not playing—”

But it was too late. Mum had hung up.

Clare stood for a moment, feeling shell-shocked, her mouth hanging open. She attempted to pull herself together before she rejoined the group. As she collapsed, weak-kneed, onto the picnic blanket, she said, “Oh, God...”

The others wanted details.

*

CLARE'S PARENTS HAD a passion for home improvements and decorating. Dad improved with a view to increasing the

value of the property; Mum liked to keep up with the latest interior design trends. Over the years, their suburban house had been extended upwards and outwards, and the reception rooms had been made over several times. The current dining room had been built since Clare had last lived there.

Mum didn't like clutter, and she disposed of anything passé or that had outlived its usefulness; as a child, Clare had learned not to get too attached to anything because Mum had given away all her clothes and toys as soon as she'd outgrown them. As a result, Clare's parents' house was curiously impersonal; it was a place Clare came to visit rather than came home to.

Clare was still trying to figure out what she was going to say when she rang the doorbell. She had tried planning the conversation out in her head, but no matter how hard she tried she hadn't been able to get much further than "Mum and Dad, I..."

Would she be ambushed as soon as she got through the front door? Or would Mum let her sit first? Would the inquisition take place before, during, or after lunch? Which scenario would Clare prefer? Did she want more time to prepare herself, or did she want to get everything out in the open as soon as possible?

The only reason Clare wasn't ambushed the moment she crossed the threshold was because Mum was in the middle of a tricky operation in the kitchen. However, Mum demanded answers as soon as they were all seated at the dining table.

"Now, Clare. What were you doing in that flag, and with those people, if you're not a lesbian? You must be. William

said I was wrong, but I'm not—”

“Wait,” said Clare firmly and with barely controlled disbelief. “You talked to Will about this?”

“Well, of course. He's your brother. He has a right to know —”

“No. He doesn't. If I'd wanted to tell him, I'd have told him myself. You shouldn't have said anything!”

They faced off against each other for a few seconds, neither one giving way or apologising. Resignedly, Clare said, “What did he say?”

“He said that I was wrong; if you were a lesbian, we would have realised by now. It's not like you ever even mentioned any women. But that was before, and now there's this Janice person.”

Clare sighed, an exaggerated, exasperated sigh. “Janice and I are friends, Mum. That's all.”

That was all? That was the same heteronormative crap that had instilled in her the notion that there was something wrong with her because she had never managed to maintain a relationship. Suddenly, she was as angry with herself as with her mother. By saying, “That's all,” she had betrayed herself and had betrayed Janice. Friendship was everything.

Anger and realisation stripped away the last of Clare's reticence; she had to tell them the truth.

“Mum. Dad. I need to tell you something. I wanted to say something before, but I didn't feel ready. I only recently figured things out for myself.”

“Figured what things out?”

“I’m...I think...I mean, I don’t think...I know...I’m asexual. Janice and I both are.”

“And what’s that when it’s at home?”

One painfully awkward explanation later, Mum said, “How’s that any better than being a lesbian?”

At his end of the table, Dad lowered the piece of chicken he had been about to fork into his mouth and said, “It’s not better.”

Clare bristled, but Dad continued, and she calmed as what he was trying to say registered.

“It’s not worse, either. This... Whatever Clare is... It’s just different.” He lowered his head and lifted his fork again.

“Either way,” mourned Mum, “I’m not going to get any grandchildren, am I?”

“Oh, for God’s sake, woman!” snapped Dad. “She’s forty-three! Surely, you’d figured out she’s not going to give you grandkids by now! Besides, we’ve got grandchildren. Will’s kids. Remember them?”

“I...well... But to hear it like this! Next, you’ll be telling me that you’re getting a cat! I don’t want you turning into a lonely old cat woman!”

“There’s nothing wrong with getting a cat. But, no, I won’t be getting one any time soon.” With a bit of devilment Clare was sure she would regret later, she said, “For one thing, according to my lease I’m not allowed. Janice could, though. Maybe I’ll run the idea past her.”

Appalled, Mum tried another tack. “You don’t want to be alone for the rest of your life. Do you? Shouldn’t you try to meet someone nice? Simply because you haven’t met anyone yet doesn’t mean that you never will.”

Clare gritted her teeth, thought about how she’d tried to date over the years, and forced herself to keep quiet.

“And, you know, lots of people don’t have sex often. Even your father and I don’t as often as we used to. We—”

“Mum!”

“I’m only saying, we don’t have sex as often as we used to, and that’s—”

“Mum! Lack of frequency isn’t the same as not being interested at all!”

“Not...at all?” For the second time in as many minutes, Clare had horrified her.

Dad, who was now wiping the last of his gravy up with a roast potato, said, “How many people in truly sexless relationships are honestly happy? I’d rather see Clare on her own than miserable with someone else.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Clare appreciated his support, even though she wasn’t sure he had grasped that she wouldn’t be the frustrated party in such a relationship.

As the meal progressed, the conversation rumbled intermittently, like a thunderstorm that refused to die out or move away. Mum asked, “Have you seen a doctor?” (No.) “Have you talked to a therapist?” (Hell, no!) “Where did we go wrong?” (Nowhere.) “Did anything happen to make you this way? Anything you didn’t tell us? We always told you that

you can come to us with anything, but you didn't come to me with this, so now I have to ask..."

When Mum went to get dessert, Dad leaned over and said, "I'm sorry, darling. She's been like a dog with a bone, ever since she came back from the hairdressers."

Mum put a pavlova on the table and began to serve. "Are you sure that there is nothing between you and this Janice person?"

"Why are you so eager for there to be something between us? Next, you'll be suggesting I've had unrequited feelings for Louisa all these years!"

"You haven't, have you?" asked Dad, disconcertingly intrigued.

"No!"

"How is Louisa, anyway?"

Grasping at the chance to change the topic, Clare opened her mouth to tell him about Louisa's new job, but Mum got in first. Glaring at Dad fondly, she said, "Now's not the time, dear."

After coffee, Dad's patience ran out. Exhausted by the conversation, he said he had to do something, and he retreated to his shed. *Traitor*, Clare thought fondly. At least he had tried to curtail some of Mum's obsessive concern.

When Clare took her leave, Mum followed her onto the front porch.

"Goodbye, darling." Mum pecked the air next to Clare's left cheek.

“Tell Dad I said goodbye, too, won’t you?”

“Of course. And, Clare? Don’t burn all your bridges with this asexual nonsense, will you?”

“I’m not burning anything, Mum. And it’s not nonsense.”

“You have options. You could be a lesbian, you know, if you wanted. Just without the sex?”

“Mum!”

Clare tried not to break into a run as she headed down the drive.

*

WHEN CLARE GOT home, she was exhausted, exasperated, and convinced of several things.

Mum didn’t get it, or if she did, she didn’t want this for her daughter, preferring to be in deep denial than to accept that Clare was asexual. As far as Mum was concerned, any other sexual orientation would be preferable. Mum might accept the “no sex” part of a relationship, but she didn’t understand how that was an orientation. As far as Mum was concerned, the lack of sex was something private, to be shared only between partners and some kinds of medical professional.

Clare was still trying to decide whether she wanted to phone William when he solved her dilemma by calling her. At least this way she didn’t run the risk of having to make small talk with her sister-in-law. She was sure that he was grinning mercilessly as he asked, “How was lunch with Mum and Dad?”

Clare groaned.

“That good, eh? I wish I’d been there! I want you to tell me everything in all its hideous, embarrassing detail.”

Clare barely managed to stop herself from groaning again.

“Let me guess. Mum gave you the third degree, and Dad sat through it as long as he could stand before he told her to shut up, let it go, or ran out to his shed.”

“You don’t need me to tell you anything. You obviously know everything, already.”

“Only in general. I want particulars. Was Mum painfully concerned for you?”

“Yes. But I’m not sure what bothered her most: that I hadn’t confided in her, that she learned about the rumour from Mrs Hutcheson, or that I wasn’t going to give her grandchildren.”

“She didn’t mind you being a lesbian?”

“Not too much, no. If anything, she was too accepting, like she was having to work at it.”

“But you’re not a lesbian, are you.” It was not a question.

“No,” said Clare. “I’m not.”

“Didn’t think so,” he said smugly. William had always been a bit of a know-it-all and was overly fond of being right.

“But you’re something, aren’t you?”

“Something, yes.” Clare’s hands sweated. Her heart thumped.

“Asexual?” ventured William.

“I—” Clare had been so busy trying to find the words she needed that she was blindsided by William’s matter of fact question. “How did you know? Let me guess, Mum showed you the photo, and you looked the flag up.”

“What photo? I haven’t seen any photo.”

“Pity,” said Clare unthinkingly. “It’s a decent one of me, for once.”

“Send me a copy?”

“Um...okay. So how did you know?”

“I know you. To be honest, I’ve suspected for a while.”

“How, when I had no idea?”

“Like I said, I know you.”

“But you never said anything.”

“Should I have done?”

“I—” Clare had no answer.

Chapter Twenty

TRIGGERED BY THE publication of exam results for the next intake of undergraduates, the department stirred for a few days of intense activity around the middle of August. However, only in September did those staff who had been absent during the long vacation reappear, bringing with them epic stories of long hot weeks abroad, new data sources mined, and conferences attended. Clare reluctantly dragged her attention away from her research and began to dust off her teaching notes.

Sam, when Clare caught up with her, did not have any epic stories to tell. She just had a single anger-inducing one.

Beans Are Us had changed hands sometime over the summer. Post-refit, the coffee shop was bright and noisy, and Clare hated it. As she sipped a disappointing cappuccino and listened to Sam, who tried not to cry as she spun her tale of woe, Clare vowed not to return.

“I’ve been asking Hugo Atkinson all summer whether I could pick up any teaching this year. Today, he told me he’s given everything to someone else. Do you know what he said?”

Clare shook her head, but the question was clearly rhetorical; Sam ploughed straight on instead of waiting for an answer. “He said, surely, I had someone—a partner, or something—who could bail me out in the short term. Does he think I have a fairy godmother?”

“Sometimes I doubt he thinks at all.” Clare hated herself for what she was going to say next. “Can’t Ricky...?”

“Ricky?” exclaimed Sam. “Bloody cheating bastard dumped me. We barely made the rent between the two of us, and I can’t afford it on my own.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m so sick of it all,” wailed Sam. “I’ve worked bloody hard to get here. I’ve been applying for every job going, all over the country, but all I’ve been offered are zero-hours contracts. I’m seriously thinking of chucking academia in.”

“What would you do instead?”

“God knows. Go home to Wales, at least for a while?” But it was obvious that Sam didn’t want to.

Things had been tough enough when Clare had started out. She had sometimes struggled to make ends meet, but she’d been lucky, although she hadn’t thought so at the time. She’d stayed with her parents until she’d eventually been offered a three-year contract and, on the strength of that, had managed to secure a mortgage. She hadn’t liked living with her parents in her thirties, but at least they’d been close enough to the university for that to be an option. Plus, when teaching hours had been particularly thin on the ground, she had been able to supplement her income by working in Dad’s estate agency.

She wished she could do something for Sam besides paying for the coffee.

*

“FUCK!”

Clare, after several hours of dealing with master’s students who were panicking over their dissertation deadlines, was heading out for the evening.

“Fuck! Fuck! Bugger, shit, and fuck!”

Curious, Clare tapped on the door of Ben Duncan’s office and said, “You’re very swearsy this evening. I’m guessing your day has been even more frustrating than mine. What’s up?”

“It’s this damned grant application!”

“Oh?”

“I’m filling in the online form. I’ve got to the part where I have to say how I’m going to find time to carry out the research within my wider workload.”

“Ah,” said Clare, understanding. “Let me guess; you’ve been realistic. You’ve said that you’ll be working sixty-plus hours a week—”

“Seventy-five.”

“—and the computer has helpfully told you—”

“—that my hours can’t be right. I’m only contracted to work thirty-five hours, and that’s the maximum the software will allow me to enter.” He looked at her. “You’ve come up against this before?”

“Yup.”

“How did you deal with it?”

“I lied. Welcome back, by the way. Did you have a good summer?”

“Great, thank you.” But as Ben regaled her with stories of America, she wondered what he wasn’t telling her.

*

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Louisa asked, “When am I going to meet the mysterious Janice?” Forecasters had promised that storms during the night would end several weeks of glorious weather. Meanwhile, Clare and Louisa were making the most of the last few hours of summer by sitting out in the Quill’s beer garden while the sun set.

“Sometime. Why?”

“I’m curious. You can’t blame me. You’ve been palling around with her for months now, and you still haven’t introduced us.”

“If it makes you feel any better, my parents haven’t met her either.”

“They haven’t? Why not?”

“I don’t want them to. If they did, I’d have more conversations I’d prefer to avoid.”

“About you being ace?”

“Among other things.”

“But I’m fine with it, so that’s no reason to keep Janice away from me.”

Louisa’s logic was faultless, but, even so, Clare didn’t want to bring the different parts of her life together.

“Are you all set for the new term?” asked Louisa, steering the conversation in a new direction.

Clare laughed slightly bitterly. “I’m getting there. I know what I’m going to be teaching, but there’s still a lot of prep to do. And Sam only found out today that she hasn’t been given

any teaching hours this semester. Atkinson promised them all to some new guy from Lancaster.”

“What new guy?”

“Darren...something. He’s in the final stages of his doctoral thesis. Sam was beside herself when she found out. She was going on about nepotism, misogyny, and how she was going to get the union involved. I don’t blame her, but, honestly, I’m not sure what anyone can do.”

“Does that sort of thing happen a lot?”

“Yes, unfortunately. There are too many postdocs and not enough secure jobs. Academia is bleeding young talent. People like Sam want a regular income, a mortgage, and security, and academia isn’t giving them any of that. The people who last are the ones with independent wealth, supportive families, or friends in the right places...like Lancaster guy. Rumour has it, he’s Atkinson’s nephew.”

“You can hardly blame him for using his connections, if things are as bad as you say.”

“I suppose not. But I can blame the system for allowing these things to happen. So much for widening access. It’s not fair. I used to love my job. Days like today, I’m not so sure anymore.”

“Would things be better anywhere else?”

“Probably not, not inside academia. And who, outside of academia, wants someone whose chief skill is being able to recite obscure nineteenth-century Acts of Parliament?”

“You’ve contemplated life beyond your ivory tower?”

“Sometimes. Rarely.” But more often, in the last couple of years.

Rumbles of distant thunder made them glance up, and they were startled to see how close the looming, dark clouds had come.

The first drops of rain fell as they headed onto the street. There was a flash of lightning and, a few seconds later, another rumble of thunder.

“Let’s not hang around,” suggested Louisa.

They said their goodbyes and went their separate ways.

Clare stood under the awning of her bus stop. She sniffed the air and caught the fresh scent of petrichor rising from the earth. Optimistically, she imagined the rain washing the city clean of everything that was unjust.

*

CLARE’S DELIGHT IN the clean, earthy smell vanished with her commute to work the following day. The thunder had continued into the small hours, leaving low pressure and falling temperatures in its wake. Now, stair-rod rain fell from leaden skies and bounced from the pavements and roads. Vehicles drove through puddles, soaking unwary pedestrians with dirty spray, umbrellas providing no defence against water that came at them from the ground.

As Clare scuttled from her bus stop to the department, she caught sight of Ben Duncan, who was coming from the opposite direction, gallantly sharing his umbrella with...was that Jolene Dookhran? For the briefest moment, Clare considered waiting for them to catch up to her. However, the

desire to get in the dry trumped any temptation to socialise with her colleagues.

Rivulets were cascading from her coat by the time she reached the building's foyer. Wet footprints and ribbons of water trailing into the building's interior had prompted someone to put out signs made of bright yellow plastic to warn the unwary about slip hazards. Clare picked her way through the puddles onto drier ground, and then, surer of her footing, she made her way upstairs.

*

MOLLY CAME TO the September meet-up. As before, Molly liked to talk more than she liked to listen. Molly told everyone about the cruise she had taken in May, the difficulty she'd had in finding a decent plumber in June, and the meet-ups she had been to in Exeter, Southampton, Wolverhampton, and Kingston-upon-Hull. Clare did her best to stifle her yawns, which were only partly induced by the conversation.

When Molly excused herself to "powder her nose", Ollie asked, "Who says that these days?"

Matt plunged into his backpack. He pulled out and began to distribute a wodge of envelopes. "Here. Before she comes back!"

Zoe eyed her envelope and asked, "What's this?"

Janice took the measure of the paper's quality and said, "Wedding invitations?" and glanced at Tristan for confirmation.

Tristan grinned happily. "The venue's confirmed, the deposit's paid, and the date is set."

Matt had one envelope left over. He tapped it against the fingers of his left hand and said, “I guess I’ll have to catch up with Jack another time.” He put the envelope in his bag.

Ollie, having Googled the venue on their smartphone, whistled faintly. “Wow. You’re going all out, aren’t you?”

Clare moved to peer over Ollie’s shoulder. She found herself staring at a photograph of an ostentatious country house. There was even a large fountain in front of its main entrance. If she had been given to that sort of thing, she also would have whistled. Instead, with a faux Southern belle accent that came out of nowhere, she exclaimed, “Oh, my! Whatever shall I wear!”

Matt laughed.

“I’m not joking,” said Clare, reverting to her normal voice. “The invitation says ‘dressy casual’, whatever the heck that means, but I can tell you right now that the closest thing in my wardrobe to dressy is my interview suit, and that’s long since gone saggy at the knees and elbows!”

Janice tilted her head to one side, considering. “If I have anything suitable, it’ll date from the 1980s and I won’t be able to squeeze into it.”

“Then why hold on to it?” asked Zoe.

“Oh, you know...”

“Wishful thinking?” said Clare sagely.

“What?”

“Louisa has a pair of jeans that she bought when she was eighteen. She calls them her Wishful Thinking Trousers.”

“I don’t get it.”

“She keeps them because she hopes that one day she’ll diet and miraculously be able to get into them again.”

“Oh, no,” said Janice. “It’s nothing like that. It’s more that there has always been so much room around the house that I find it easier to put things away than have a good clear out. There has always been more stuff waiting to be cleared than ever gets cleared. You see?”

Clare did. The clutter and the sense that Janice didn’t mind losing the battle against entropy were things she liked about Janice’s house.

Molly returned to the snug, and Ollie leaned over to whisper to Clare and Janice. “Her nose doesn’t look any different to me!”

Squeezed between Molly’s lengthy anecdotes, the group managed to banter, play games, reminisce about Pride, and firm up plans for Asexual Awareness Week. The trip to Scotland had passed into history, where everyone was content to leave it.

At five, Clare made her excuses, saying that she needed to get to Stockport. The hour of her much-anticipated meal with Louisa and Bobby Leyton was at hand.

*

LOUISA’S HOUSE WAS large, modern, and had more parking than she needed. Maybe she was future proofing against the time when her children were old enough to drive and would be hankering after cars of their own. She’d had the garden landscaped to be as low maintenance as possible, but

she paid someone to keep it neat, anyway. Currently, that someone was her teenaged son, who was developing a taste for extra pocket money.

Louisa had chosen this weekend to invite Clare over because the children were at Nick's, and dinner would be just the three of them.

Clare followed Louisa through the front door. The house, a perfect reflection of its owner, was immaculate. The cream-coloured furniture, cushions, and carpets should have been incompatible with family life, but somehow Louisa managed to make it work.

They walked through the hall, and Clare caught a glimpse of the large, light, and airy living room as they went past. The living room was furnished with oversized sofas, an enormous television, and a gilt and glass coffee table. Gold brocade curtains, tied back with gold cord, framed large French doors that led out onto an extensive patio.

Louisa's kitchen-diner was a showcase of gleaming black surfaces and chrome fittings. Thanks to a generously proportioned extension, the open-plan room was larger than Clare's entire flat. Like the rest of the house, the room appeared as though it had been plucked from the lifestyle supplement of a Sunday newspaper.

Louisa had already set the dining table with bone china crockery, pristine linen napkins, and sparkling glassware. Now she said cheerfully, "All I need to do is heat the food, open the wine, and we'll be all set. We're eating Indian. I got a selection of dishes for us to share."

That was another thing about Louisa. She made even takeout look elegant.

“Aperitif, anyone? I’ve got Prosecco in the fridge.”

With telling familiarity, Bobby Leyton opened the cupboard door behind which the fridge was hidden and got the bubbly out. The bottle opened with a promising pop. Clare picked up the glasses and held them as Leyton poured.

Together, they carried the drinks over to the breakfast bar, where they sat and waited as Louisa put foil cartons into the oven and put rice on to boil.

When Louisa was satisfied that everything was in hand, she joined them and raised her glass. “Cheers!” she said and proceeded to clink the elegant glassware with more force than Clare would have dared to use.

Clare yawned, then apologised.

“Not here five minutes,” laughed Louisa, “and you’re bored already!”

Clare apologised some more. “That has nothing to do with you. It’s my new neighbours. I haven’t had a decent night’s sleep since they moved in.”

“Oh?”

“Students,” said Clare darkly. “I don’t have anything against students in principle. I mean, I work with them. And I used to be one. But these guys are driving me mad!”

Clare’s complaining served as a catalyst for conversation. The ensuing chitchat—covering anti-social behaviour, deplorable music tastes, and how every parent dreaded their

offspring discovering pop—carried them through until the oven timer pinged.

They transferred food and warmed plates over to the table and sat down. On the back of comments Leyton had made, Clare asked, “Have you got any children of your own?”

“I’ve a son. Damien. He’s twenty now. I rarely see him, not since his mum took him to Canada when he was twelve. We used to be Facebook friends, but he unfriended me when he turned seventeen. Can’t blame him; at that age, I wouldn’t have wanted my old man to know what I was up to either. We still Skype occasionally, so that’s something.”

Clare thought that was sad. So did Louisa, judging from the sympathetic expression on her face. As Clare helped herself to some mushroom pakora, she watched out of the corners of her eyes the wordless communication that was taking place between her companions. Even if Clare wasn’t sure what “it” was all about, she could tell that Louisa had got “it” bad.

“That’s one reason why I like spending time with Lou’s kids so much,” said Leyton. “They help me to forget how much I miss my son.”

Lou? Clare would never have dared to call Louisa Lou. But Louisa revelled in the intimacy of the nickname. Whatever next? With an inward shudder, Clare prayed to a deity she didn’t believe in that they would wait until she left before they started calling each other snookums or lovebunny. The absurdity of the mental image she had conjured up made her want to laugh. The attempt to suppress her laughter made her choke.

The resulting activity as Louisa stood and thumped Clare on her back, and Leyton dithered around before fetching her a glass of water, ate up a few awkward minutes.

As they worked their way through generous quantities of jalfrezi, rogan josh, and tikka masala, and made inroads into a second bottle of Prosecco, the conversation meandered through politics, current affairs, favourite books and films, and the scandalous price of mangoes. Clare and Bobby found common ground in their distaste for what had become of Beans Are Us, and they all questioned whether broadcast television would still exist in ten years' time.

Once they were all sated, Louisa suggested they carry the rest of the drink through to the living room. Bobby volunteered to clear the table and stack the dishwasher, promising to catch up with them when he was done.

Was he always so helpful? Or was this a tactful ploy to give Louisa and Clare time alone?

The latter, Clare concluded, since, as soon as she and Louisa had sunk into the soft embrace of the sofa cushions, Louisa said, "What do you think of him?"

"He's...nice."

"He is, isn't he?" Louisa's besotted expression was back.

The crash of shattering crockery followed by some heartfelt imprecations drifted through from the kitchen. More noises followed: the clattering of a pedal bin lid; water running; sweeping.

"Oh, dear," said Louisa with a complete lack of rancour or impatience. "I'd better go see what he's done."

Clare waited, determinedly not listening, until Louisa rejoined her a few minutes later. “He broke a dinner plate, poor man. He was terribly apologetic of course; he always is. He’s such a butterfingers!”

Unable to stop herself, Clare said, “You’re not upset? I mean, your lovely plates!”

“Are just plates. Whenever he breaks something, I make a joke of it and tell him that he needs more practice in all matters domestic!”

That was unexpected. In college, Louisa had yelled at her when she’d broken a favourite mug. Clare had carried the associated trauma with her through the intervening years.

“Besides, and don’t tell anyone, I’ve been buying spares on eBay and in charity shops. He’ll have to do a lot more damage before I run out of dinner service!”

Awed, Clare said, “You honestly don’t mind, do you?”

“I really don’t.”

That night, fuelled by an excessive amount of Prosecco, Clare slept in Louisa’s spare room. Clare slept better than she had in over a week.

Chapter Twenty-One

“WHAT’S THAT NOISE?” Janice, at the other end of the phone line, asked, a few days later. “I can barely hear you!”

“The students next door. I’ve tried knocking and complaining. The management company has been on to their landlord. But nothing does any good. I was hoping they’d settle down once lectures began, but, if anything, they’ve got louder. I’m exhausted, and they’re doing my head in.”

“Can you complain to the council?”

“If I did, I’d have to declare noise issues if I ever sell the flat.”

Janice hesitated for a moment. “Do you want to come here?”

“Oh, my God, yes!” Then, more cautiously, Clare said, “If you’re sure you don’t mind?”

“Of course I don’t mind.”

“It won’t be for long.”

“You can stay as long as you need. I’ve got plenty of room.”

“I don’t want to take advantage.”

“You won’t. Besides, it’ll be nice to have some company around here for a change.”

“In that case, can I come now?”

*

JANICE GAVE CLARE the same room as before, referring to it as hers and making Clare feel at home in ways Clare didn't feel comfortable thinking about, and in no time at all they slipped into a routine.

As she had to go to the cash-and-carry and ready her stock before opening the shop at nine thirty, Janice was long gone by the time Clare got up in the morning. Sheila was on her travels—when last heard from, she and her husband had been somewhere in India—and Janice was now flying solo. Soaring was more like it. Janice was thriving in her new role, bubbling with energy and enthusiasm. Clare felt exhausted, just watching from the sidelines.

Clare usually left the house just before nine in the morning and, most days, didn't return until after seven. She looked forward to getting...home...to Janice, to them eating together, talking together, and spending time together before she retreated upstairs to work for another hour or two before bed.

One day soon, she'd have to return to her flat. In the meantime, she was enjoying her stay.

Elsewhere, Louisa was also bursting with energy and enthusiasm, partly because of how well things were going with Leyton, but also because she was getting ready for her new job. Even Sam had been happier since she'd managed to find someone to flat share with her; she had found a part-time job in central administration, and Ben Duncan had given her a few hours' work a week. The work he'd offered her was mindless data collection for which, ultimately, he'd get the credit, but at least it was relevant experience to add to her CV.

ONE EVENING, BARELY a week into her stay, Clare opened the front door to hear *The Archers'* theme tune. She called out to Janice, who replied with "I'm in here!"

"Here" was the dining room. Clare dropped her bags on the hall floor and went to investigate.

She stared at the mountain of paraphernalia Janice had assembled on the table and asked, "What's all this?"

"Dad's camera equipment. I hadn't realised there was so much of it."

Clare walked over to take a closer look. Judging from the number of bodies and lenses, his had once been a serious hobby. Of course, it had been serious. She had seen the piles of albums and the sachets of poorly sorted prints and negatives in one of the cupboards upstairs. Clare picked up a camera body: Nikon. It was surprisingly heavy and, judging from the lack of plastic in its casing, old.

"Most of this stuff is obsolete. I'm going to invite someone from the local photography club to take a look. See if they've got any ideas as to what I can do with it all."

"Good idea," said Clare.

"I think people collect this stuff. If I can get anything for it, I might buy myself a digital camera. I got some books out of the library, and Ollie said they'd be happy to give me some tips."

"That's great!"

"You think so?"

“Of course!” Not only was Janice looking for a hobby, but also there was no longer any doubt: Janice and Ollie were friends.

*

THE ACADEMIC SESSION’S seminar programme started on a high as Kyle Jones, making up for his last-minute cancellation the previous January, came to speak.

Something about the way Jolene and Kyle schmoozed before the seminar made Clare suspect they knew each other well, a suspicion that was confirmed when Jolene introduced him: they had regularly crossed paths while working in different parts of London University.

Kyle gave a riveting presentation that surpassed all Clare’s expectations, and the seminar flew past.

According to departmental tradition, Kyle Jones was invited to the staff bar. To Clare’s disappointment, however, he made his apologies, saying he wanted to get home to his partner and baby. Jolene offered to help him phone for a taxi.

“Are you coming to the bar?” Ben asked Clare as they left the room together.

“Just for a quick one. Then I need to get home.”

Ben raised his eyebrows.

What had Clare said to warrant that reaction? Oh, of course. She had never rushed home before. She had never had Janice and a promise of a shared meal to rush home to. Not that Clare was going to mention her current living arrangements to Ben Duncan. What would be the point of

fielding the inevitable questions when the arrangement was temporary?

“So, what do you make of our new head of department, now you’ve had a chance to get to know her?”

“She’s different to Buonamici.” That was an easy answer, bland, tactful, and indisputable. Buonamici and Jolene Dookhran were chalk and cheese. He had been given to flamboyant eccentricity. Jolene dressed as though she had stepped out of the boardroom of a FTSE 100 company. She had polished manners and limited patience with small talk. She was driven, successful, and if she had any interests beyond her work, Clare had yet to hear any whispers as to what they might be.

“You?” asked Clare, reflecting Ben’s question back at him.

“I like her well enough.” There was something in his tone—an underlying hint of laughter—that made Clare think he was enjoying a private joke.

“I’ve seen you come in together a couple of times. Does she live near you?”

Duncan twitched and blushed slightly. “Ah. I can see Jolene and I are going to have to be more discreet. Has anyone else noticed, do you know?”

“Noticed what?”

He beamed. “That’s the ticket! Thank you!”

“You didn’t answer—” The proverbial penny dropped. Ben Duncan and Jolene Dookhran... They were...together! They were having an affair. Were they friends with benefits, having

benefits without the friendship, or were they something more serious?

Clare shook her head to clear it. She didn't want to think about it.

Thank God, she had given him a tactful answer to his question.

Here was another reason to be careful about what she confided to him.

*

CLARE WAS DUSTING off the notes for the next lecture in her Introduction to Nineteenth-Century British History course when someone knocked diffidently on her office door. She considered pretending to be out, but responsibility overrode selfishness and she called out, "Come in!"

She put her pencil down and half turned in time to see her visitor enter and close the door behind him.

Clare recognised him, although she struggled for a few moments to put a name to his face. Jeremy...Gerald...Gerard. Yes! Gerard, known as Gerry, or Gezza to his closest cronies. He had taken Clare's first-year course the previous autumn, sitting at the rear of the lecture theatre with the cronies and paying questionable amounts of attention to what she had to say. At least he hadn't been disruptive. Plus, wonder of wonders, he'd managed to get a respectable mark in the exam.

Clare suppressed a sigh and plastered a not-entirely-unwelcoming smile on her face. "What can I do for you?"

"I want to change my options."

“You want to switch to my class?”

“No.”

Clare frowned. “Then, excuse me for asking, but why have you come to see me?”

“Because you’re here and my personal tutor isn’t, and I need someone to sign off on the paperwork before tomorrow’s deadline.”

“You couldn’t have seen your tutor before now?” asked Clare, her exasperation showing. “Instead of leaving this until the last minute?”

Gerry’s lips twisted; he was at least as exasperated as Clare. “I tried. I’ve sent emails, and I’ve been in every day this week, trying to catch him. At this point, I’m beginning to wonder whether Dr Atkinson is even a real person!”

“Ah,” said Clare, too much understanding bleeding into the single syllable than was professional. “All right. Let me see what I can do...”

Ten minutes later, when Gerry departed with a cheerful wave and grateful thanks, Clare was left with a profound sense of having been used.

*

IT TOOK CLARE another three days to pin Atkinson down, by which time she had managed to gather even more frustrations to vent. In the end, she resorted to looking at the teaching timetable and waiting for him outside a lecture theatre to ensure she managed to catch him when his class finished. No way was she going to risk him bypassing his office. Again.

“Hugo!” she called. “Can I have a word?”

“I don’t know. Can you?”

Supercilious bastard. She tamped down on her irritation. She needed to be calm.

“I’ve had more of your students come by to see me this week. Yet again, I’ve had to deal with things that you, as their tutor, should have seen to.”

“I suppose you feel you deserve my gratitude. Thank you. There. Does that satisfy you?”

“While I appreciate your thanks,” said Clare through gritted teeth, “that’s not why I want to talk to you. I want to tell you that I’m tired of doing your work for you. I want you to take your duties seriously. I’m fed up with your students telling me you aren’t approachable, you don’t answer your emails, and that you’re never in your office.”

“Of course I’m not. How do you expect me to get any real work done if students pester me all the time?”

“But it’s okay for them to pester me instead?”

“You don’t have to pander to them. It’s entirely up to you whether you do or not.”

Clare opened and shut her mouth as she tried—and failed—to find a suitable rejoinder.

“My advice?” Atkinson’s condescension made Clare’s skin crawl. “Work from home as much as you can. Also, never answer an email until the sender has sent you at least two reminders. Only the keen ones will do that.”

“No,” countered Clare. “The keen ones will have found someone else who’ll help them!”

“Then don’t be that someone.”

Clare gawked. “Did you know Paul Lathom’s mother has died?”

“Who’s Paul Lathom?”

“He’s one of your personal tutees! He came to see me yesterday because you hadn’t replied to his emails asking for an appointment!”

“You dealt with him?”

“Yes. I did. Because you didn’t. The poor guy is pretty cut up, and you haven’t helped; he thinks you don’t care. That the university doesn’t care!”

Atkinson hugged his lecture notes to his chest and peered down his nose at her. “I don’t have time to care, and neither should you, not if you want to keep your career on track. You know the rules of academia: publish or die. The students are simply an inconvenience that gets in the way of the real purpose of the university: research. Now, if you excuse me, I have important work to be getting on with.”

He left Clare, flat-footed and gaping, in his wake.

*

*HAD ROTTEN DAY so not waiting for you to start drinking.
Got our favourite table.*

Clare pressed Send and wondered whether she was getting too fond of wine. She had read something once that suited the situation: if you feel as though you need a drink, you shouldn’t

have one. She left her glass alone for a full three minutes before she picked it up again.

“How rotten was rotten?” asked Louisa when she arrived.

“Stinky rotten.”

“Any particular reason?”

“The usual, only more so. You look happy, though. I assume the job is going well.”

“Very.” Clare found her certainty and satisfaction enviable. “The first thing I’m going to do is rewrite our corporate outcomes. The ones we’ve got now are terrible. They’re shit. That, apparently, is the technical term.”

Stretching out the first syllable, Clare said, “Really?”

“Yes. According to the rumours, the two officers who drafted them were taking the mickey when they came up with them.”

“Oh?”

“They were down the pub, several sheets to the wind, and moaning about how neither of them wanted to be stuck with drafting outcomes. At some point, one of them said, ‘You know, we could think about this differently.’ ‘Oh?’ said the other. The first one said, ‘Let’s see how much shit we can get up to management. We’ll have some fun, and maybe other people will have a laugh too.’ They didn’t think they’d do any harm; they were sure enough people would want to meddle with whatever they came up with that the outcomes would get changed out of all recognition before they got approved. They put forward the draft outcomes...and nobody changed a thing,

even after they went to public consultation. And that's how the outcomes ended up in the corporate plan."

"You're kidding! Please tell me you're kidding." Clare laughed and marvelled at the power other people's blunders had to spread cheer.

"Nope," said Louisa. "Leastways, that's the story I've been told. The woman who wrote most of them left the council six months later. She now works the comedy circuit telling stories about life in the public sector and ekes out a living writing one-liners for satirical news programmes."

Chapter Twenty-Two

JANICE'S ENTHUSIASM FOR her work in the shops spilled over into other areas of her life. She spent weekends pottering around the garden, tidying ready for winter, and Clare grew used to hearing her mantra of "It's wonderful to have time to do this properly!"

As the days shortened, Janice turned her attention to the interior of the house; boxes stacked up in the enclosed porch, waiting to be taken to the recycling centre or to charity shops. Janice began to talk about repairs and improvements, and Clare, happy to join her in wielding a brush, helped to fill the house with the smells of polish and paint.

Clare knew, because Janice said so, Janice still missed her father. However, the bad days were becoming fewer and farther between, and Janice was finding it easier to remember how he'd been when he was younger, rather than just how he'd been towards the end.

Janice began going to the local photography club. One evening, she returned fired up by the idea of long-exposure, night-time photography. Another time, she came home full of ideas for close-ups of the flowers in the garden and yearning for spring.

Clare came downstairs one morning to hear Janice singing to herself in the kitchen. Clare hadn't known that Janice sang when she was happy. Clare listened, smiled, and suspected that she might be happy too.

*

AFTER PRIDE, CLARE had expanded her reading habits to encompass a wider range of LGBT+ literature. She didn't care much for the fiction she found, especially when it focused on romance, but she was attracted by queer theory. She was intrigued by how it had developed and how so many of its concepts defied easy description or categorisation. Queer theory's questioning of rigid social norms, acceptance of difference, and recognition that sexualities existed on spectrums rather than as discrete boxes explained many things she had puzzled over. Clare learned her previous mindset had been constrained by binary thinking and by shrugging off its shackles she liberated herself.

Clare soaked up information, and at the October meet-up she managed to hold her own in an argument with Ollie. Ollie celebrated Clare's new-found abilities by high-fiving her and letting Clare buy them a drink.

*

"KNOCK, KNOCK," SAID a voice, matching his words with a rap on the door jamb of her office a few days after the October meet-up.

Clare tore her eyes away from her computer screen and swivelled her desk chair around, searching for the source of the words and noise.

"Matt!" she exclaimed, in equal measure pleased and surprised. "What are you doing here? Come on in!"

Matt closed the door behind him, sat in the chair Clare indicated, and adjusted the creases in his work trousers.

“Would you like some tea? Coffee? Although all I can offer you is instant.”

“I’m fine,” said Matt, before lapsing into silence.

“What can I do for you?” The beginnings of a frown formed between her eyebrows.

“I’m not sure that you can do anything. It’s a long shot... Tris thinks I’m worrying about nothing, and that I should forget about it, but...”

“Forget about what?”

“Jack,” said Matt.

While an apology or a message would have been nice, Clare hadn’t been surprised when nobody had heard from him in the first couple of months after their trip. She’d assumed Jack had disappeared for the summer and that the new academic session had kept him busy in September. When Jack didn’t reappear in October, Clare had wondered, depending on how sex with Natalia had been, whether Jack might have reconsidered his sexual orientation.

Clare shook her head, more to clear it than in disagreement. “What about Jack?”

“I’m worried about him, and I thought inviting him to the wedding would give me a good excuse to try to get in touch. I’ve tried emailing, texting, and messaging, but he hasn’t replied.”

“Maybe he wants to be left alone.”

Matt shook his head. “I remember how things were for me when I was Jack’s age. I struggled, coming to terms with my

sexuality, and I think Jack was having some of the same issues. Then Natalia...! What happened was messed up. I'm worried about him. I'm still cross about what happened, but I blame her way more than him, and I want to know that he's okay."

"You want me to try talking to him?"

"You can try if you want. But I was hoping you might be able to do something else."

"What?"

"What I'm going to ask... You can say no. I'm not sure how universities work, and what I'm about to ask might not be entirely legal."

"You're the lawyer," Clare pointed out. "You tell me. Is it, or isn't it?"

"It's not my field of expertise." Matt's prevarication wasn't reassuring.

"Tell me what you want me to do, and we'll go from there."

*

CLARE WASN'T SURE whether Matt's request was legal, either, but it was the morally correct thing to do. Thus, next morning found her in Bobby Leyton's office, asking for a favour he didn't owe her and acting as shiftily as Matt had done the day before.

Housed high in a tall, new, double-glazed building, Leyton's office was far nicer than Clare's. His room faced

south, and the commodious space was flooded with light. His visitor chairs were also new, and comfortable.

Clare sat opposite Leyton but almost immediately sprang onto her feet. She took a couple of paces, turned, and retreated to her seat. She perched on its edge rather than relaxing against the chair's back. She glanced at Leyton, who was watching her with mild impatience.

"You wanted to see me," he reminded her. "I don't have much time, so perhaps you should get on and tell me why."

Clare nodded jerkily as she summoned up courage. "I... This is awkward. I'm here about one of your students. I'm not here in a professional capacity. Or, at least, I don't want to be. I'm here because he's a friend."

Leyton looked sceptical. Maybe he had cause to be. Clare was more than twice Jack's age, and friendships between undergraduates and staff weren't common.

"We met last spring."

Leyton's scepticism veered towards suspicion. What was he thinking? Oh, no! Surely, he didn't think she was a...a... cougar? Maybe he did, judging from the way he'd crossed his arms over his chest and narrowed his eyes.

Clare rubbed her hands together and tried again. "Here's the thing." She took a deep breath. "I'm asexual."

Leyton's expression didn't change. Was he surprised? Uncomprehending? Or was he simply waiting for her to get on with her explanation?

"Do you know what that is?"

“Broadly speaking. I’ve seen a few articles.”

“Good.” Her shoulders relaxed. “I’ve been going to meet-ups since last spring. And that’s where I met Jack.”

Leyton’s scepticism began to wane. “So, he’s asexual too.”

“Probably. Possibly. I think he’s more...questioning... which helps to explain what happened in July.”

“What did happen in July?”

Clare looked at the floor for a second. His office even had decent carpet; it was new, and it coordinated with the paintwork. She wrung her hands, looked back at him, and said, “I wouldn’t be telling you any of this, but we’re worried about him.”

“Who’s we?”

“Me. Another friend. An ace friend. From the meet-ups.”

“I see.” He considered her and uncrossed his arms. “If this helps, I promise that, without your express permission, whatever you tell me won’t go beyond these four walls.”

“Thank you.” Clare almost smiled with gratitude, a fleeting expression that disappeared as she asked, “How much has Louisa told you about the trip I went on last summer?”

“What makes you think she told me anything?”

“Because she laughed like a foghorn at parts of the story, because she can spin a yarn when she wants, and because she told me she did.”

Leyton’s lips twitched. “All right, yes. She told me a few things.”

“Like how most of us got stranded in the nether reaches of Scotland when two of our travelling companions pinched the minibus?”

“She might have mentioned that, yes.”

Clare settled into the embrace of the chair. Sombrely, she said, “One of the people involved was your student. Well, maybe not yours specifically, but he’s in the School of Psychology.”

Leyton sat straighter, all amusement suddenly gone. “Are you telling me that one of our students stole—”

Clare waved his outrage away. “It wasn’t criminal or anything like that. Just incredibly thoughtless and inconvenient. And possibly beside the point.”

“Then what is the point?”

“Jack went off with a woman. A heterosexual woman. Older and more experienced than him. As soon as they reached Manchester, she dumped him. We haven’t heard from him since. Frankly, we’re worried. Maybe we don’t need to be, and if he’s okay and just doesn’t want to have anything to do with us...well, fine. But if he’s not okay...” Clare sighed. “Matt has been trying hard to get in touch with him. Not only is Matt related to the woman Jack ran off with, which makes him feel guilty about what happened, he’s also getting married soon. He’s been trying to invite Jack to the wedding.”

The mention of a wedding confused Leyton, but he didn’t ask the obvious questions.

“The student’s name is Jack Beaton. He’s in his second year.”

“I don’t know him. I was on sabbatical for a lot of last year, so I didn’t teach any of the first years.”

“And this year?”

“I don’t recall the name, so I doubt he’s in any of my classes. All the second-year courses are electives this semester. I’m guessing he didn’t elect to take mine.”

“So, you don’t know him?” said Clare, although Leyton had already told her that.

“No.”

“Pity,” murmured Clare. “This would be easier if you did.”

“Why? What do you want me to do?”

“I’m not sure this is entirely professional of me, but could you...I don’t know...ask around? See whether any of your colleagues have noticed anything amiss.”

“You’re really worried?”

“Yes.”

Leyton took his time before he replied. “All right. I’ll see what I can find out for you.”

“Thank you.”

*

THREE DAYS LATER, Clare phoned Matt and said sombrely, “I have news.”

“I can tell from your voice, it’s not good.”

Clare made a noncommittal grunt. She didn’t have enough facts to confirm Matt’s fears, but her gut told her he was right. Bobby Leyton had given her enough information to persuade

her they had not been worrying about nothing. He had also extracted a promise that Clare would tell him how things worked out, and he had expressed a level of frustration with his colleagues that made her think he might be good enough for Louisa.

“Jack stopped going into lectures a few weeks ago, and he’s missed a couple of deadlines,” Clare said.

“Important ones?”

“Nothing that will count towards his final marks but enough to suggest he’s falling behind.”

Matt was more upbeat about this revelation than Clare had been. “He’s not past the point of no return, then?”

“Well, no. I guess not.”

“That’s good.”

“I suppose so.”

“But?”

“But if you hadn’t come to see me, and if I hadn’t talked to Bobby... Plus, we haven’t found out what’s going on yet.”

“You agree something is going on?”

“All my instincts tell me something is, yes.” Clare paused and took a deep breath. “I’ve got an address for him—”

“When do we go?”

Clare exhaled, relieved Matt hadn’t made her invite him along. “How about tomorrow morning?”

“Give me your address, and I’ll pick you up at nine.”

“He’s a student, and I’m not a morning person. Better make that ten.”

*

RAIN WAS FALLING steadily when Matt called for Clare. Judging from the way the gutters gurgled and the size of the puddles, it had been raining for most of the night.

Whatever Clare had expected Matt to drive, a lava orange, two-seater Smart car wasn’t it. She exchanged greetings as she climbed into the passenger seat and fastened her seatbelt. Matt programmed the address she gave him—72 Lorne Street—into the satnav, and they set off, heading towards the city.

As much to distract them both as out of genuine interest, Clare asked for the latest update on the wedding preparations.

“Good,” said Matt, as he stopped for a red light. “We’ve settled on the menu, and we’ve ordered the cake. The band we wanted cancelled on us, but one of my cousins has a friend who plays guitar and who might be able to help us out. The seating plan is a total nightmare. Half my family don’t talk to the other half, and Tristan is convinced his family won’t get on with mine. Neither of us would wish any of them on our friends.” His tone was fond, belying the frustration of his words.

Clare laughed. “You’re enjoying every minute of it, aren’t you? Admit it.”

The light turned green, and Matt moved off. “Okay, yes. And it’s good to know, if I ever get bored of law, I have a whole other career as an event planner to fall back on.”

The satnav interrupted them to instruct Matt to take the third exit at the next roundabout.

Clare waited until he'd made the manoeuvre and was heading straight again before she asked, "About the wedding, what's the dress code? The invitation said 'dressy casual', but I'm not sure what that means, and Google hasn't been very helpful, either."

"It means normal wedding guest attire. You know. The usual."

Clare sighed.

Matt tried again. "The men'll be wearing suits, and the women'll probably wear cocktail dresses."

"That doesn't sound casual to me," said Clare.

"That's where the dressy part comes in."

"I don't own any dresses, let alone a cocktail dress. And I can't remember the last time I put on a pair of tights!"

"My family—especially the women—like to dress up, so the dress code is more to keep them—mostly my mother—happy. You don't have to stick with it if you don't want. I already talked to Ollie. I think they are going to wear a jazzed-up tuxedo, and that's fine with Tris and me. The family might be shocked, but Ollie likes to shock, and it'll keep things interesting. Tris and I just want you there, and as far as we're concerned, you can turn up in a hessian sack, if that makes you comfortable."

Reassured, but not greatly enlightened, Clare let the topic drop. The satnav was now directing Matt through a network of

narrow cobbled streets, and they were almost at their destination.

*

JACK'S ADDRESS WAS in the middle of a long line of redbrick terraced houses whose front doors opened directly onto the pavement. Mid-nineteenth century, Clare concluded absent-mindedly, as she took in the lack of front yards and the peeling paintwork on a wooden-framed sash window. The front door of number seventy-two was dark blue, but the chips in the paintwork, visible even from the car, revealed a rainbow of colours underneath. It was the type of house that, in Clare's day, before cluster flats, private halls of residence, and raised expectations had become the dream stuff of developers, had been the norm for students.

For a moment, Clare reminisced nostalgically about her time as an undergraduate, of draughts, poor insulation, and shared downstairs bathrooms. Nostalgia gave way to realism. Had the option been available to her, she'd have chosen to stay in a modern building with a security system, double glazing, and an en suite.

A hundred yards further along the street, Matt managed to find a tiny space into which he shoehorned the Smart car. They got out, and Clare immediately deployed her umbrella. They huddled under its canopy as they scuttled towards number seventy-two.

Clare was about to rap on the door when Matt espied a neat, laminated card in the corner of one of its panes of glass. He nudged Clare and pointed. The notice read: "Please use back door".

Clare nodded, guessing that the front door led straight into what would once have been the living room but was now someone's bedroom.

Matt and Clare glanced up and down the road, looking for a gap in the terrace. They backtracked along the way they'd come, turned into a tight alley, and joined the back lane that separated two lines of houses.

The terraces might have once been identical, but time and rear extensions had individualised the properties. Some extensions were long, thin, single-storey additions that housed only a small kitchen, or maybe a bathroom. Others were larger, taking up most of the modest yards or rising two storeys. One extension even extended into the loft space, more than doubling the size of the original house.

They carefully picked their ways along the lane, avoiding the detritus left behind by uncaring residents. Aged plastic carrier bags, takeaway cups and cartons, and broken flowerpots were easy to spot, but the occasional dog poo required more careful surveillance.

Number seventy-two was labelled clearly on its gate. Clare lifted the latch, held the gate open for Matt, and closed it behind them. They crossed the paved yard. The slabs needed a good power wash, but otherwise the yard was tidy, and there were a handful of tubs that, at other times of the year, might add colour to the drab surroundings.

The doorbell Clare hadn't found on the front door was obvious at the back. She rang it, and together she and Matt waited. A steady thump-thump-thump of some unidentifiable music came from a neighbouring property, and unintelligible

dialogue from a television or radio drifted out from inside number seventy-two. Someone was home, even if they weren't answering the door.

Impatient, Matt reached in front of Clare and leaned on the doorbell for a good five seconds.

They waited some more and, after another blast of the bell, were rewarded by footsteps and the glimpse of movement behind frosted glass.

The door opened on a chain to reveal part of a face: one blue eye, a strip of tousled brown hair, an unshaven cheek, and a chin. "Yes?"

Clare tried not to let the stranger's grumpiness upset her. She pasted what she hoped was a reassuring expression on her face. "We're looking for Jack."

The part-face stilled. Its blue eye bore into Clare for a few moments. "What d'you want him for?"

"We want to check on him. Nobody's heard from him in a while, and we were beginning to worry."

"Oh." Part-face sounded relieved. "Hang on a mo." The door closed. There was a metallic clinking as the chain was released.

The door opened wider to reveal the whole person. He was wearing a once-white T-shirt that had aged perilously close to grey, boxer shorts, and thick sports socks. His thighs and shins were covered in fuzz.

Instead of inviting them in, he stepped outside, grimacing as his feet hit the wet ground. He pulled the door to, then,

softly, confidentially, said, “Thank God you’re here. Did his parents send you?”

Clare and Matt exchanged glances. “No,” said Clare. “Why’d you think that?”

The student looked disappointed. Instead of answering her question, he asked one of his own. “But you are here to help him, right?”

Clare said, “If he needs help,” at the same time as Matt said, “Sure.”

“Who are you, if his parents didn’t send you?”

“We’re friends. We all belong to—” Matt stopped abruptly. They didn’t know how much Jack had told his housemates, and the details weren’t theirs to share willy-nilly.

“We all went on holiday together last July,” said Clare tactfully. “But none of us have heard from him since. I’m Clare, by the way. This is Matt.”

Tension bled from the student’s shoulders. He held out his hand, first to Matt, and then to Clare. “I’m Dan. We—that’s me and the other lads—have been going off our heads with worry. We phoned Jack’s folks, but they don’t seem to think there’s anything to worry about. We’ve tried telling ’em something’s not right, but... They told us they’ve spoken to Jack, and he’ll get over it, whatever it is. But we’re not so sure. He seems to be getting worse. He stopped going into uni. Lately, he’s been staying in bed all day and he wanders around the house at night.”

“Can we see him?” asked Clare, her throat constricted and her voice small.

Dan nodded. “You’d better come in.” He led the way into the kitchen.

There were dirty dishes in and around the sink, along with a couple of clean mugs upended on the drainer. Opened packets of cereal stood haphazardly on work surfaces, and someone had left a carton of milk out. “Sorry about the mess,” Dan said unapologetically.

The mess—more clutter than squalor—continued in the room being used as a living room, where books, games, and magazines had spread from the coffee table across the floor. A bowl of soggy cornflakes balanced on the arm of the sofa, a talking head on the television, and a discarded afghan gave a clue as to what Dan had been doing before he had come to the door.

Dan talked, showing all the signs of someone who needed to unburden himself. “We were in hall together last year. Jack was a fun guy. A laugh, you know? But he’s different now. At the beginning of the term, we thought he was in a funk. He’d go to class and to the library, and then he’d shut himself in his room in the evenings. He said he was studying, but...I don’t know. We reckon something bad happened to him over the summer, but he won’t talk about it. He doesn’t go anywhere. He’s turned into a real Billy No Mates.” Dan rapped on the door to Jack’s room. “Wakey, wakey, Sunshine!”

“Piss off! I’m trying to sleep!”

“You’ve got visitors, so either you come on out, or I’ll let ’em in!”

There were the rustle and thump of a body moving around in bed, then silence.

“Don’t believe me?” called Dan. “Ready or not, here they come!”

Jack made a noise that might have been a squawk. “What? No! Shit!”

Dan pushed the door open, and Clare and Matt stepped into the room in time to see Jack bolt upright in bed.

The first expression to cross Jack’s face was horror closely followed by suspicion.

Clare looked around, giving Jack time to regain his composure and to rearrange his duvet to cover his bare chest.

She had been right about the front room being used as a bedroom. Three of its walls were painted a bland colour that might have been magnolia. Bold, old-fashioned, floral wallpaper covered the fourth, which included the chimney breast. The fire surround, now boarded up, had probably been fashionable in the 1950s. An ugly brown carpet on the floor matched with equally ugly brown curtains. Tired nets masked the street outside. On the erstwhile front door, a few letters lay amongst a collection of gaudily coloured flyers in the cage behind the letterbox. Jack, apparently, hadn’t been interested enough to check them out.

The room was spartan and there was dust on the furniture. Overall, though, it was tidy and organised. All the spines of the books on the bookshelf were regimented in a way that made Clare, whose own books were lucky to stand upright, feel twitchy. Clare guessed that the clutter they’d seen elsewhere wasn’t Jack’s.

By the time Clare looked at Jack, his expression had settled into miserable embarrassment. “What are you doing here? How did you find me?”

Not wanting to incriminate anyone, Clare and Matt carefully avoided the second question. “We were worried about you,” said Matt. How many more times would they have to say that? “You haven’t been answering our texts or messages.”

Jack slumped. “I didn’t know what to say.”

“A sorry might have been a start,” said Matt. His tone was gentle, without any hint of bitterness or anger.

Jack startled at Matt’s tone, and his eyes were suddenly wide and incredulous. “Of course I’m sorry! But—” He shut his mouth abruptly.

“But?” said Clare, doing her best to match Matt’s tone.

Jack bowed his head and fisted the sheet in his hands. “I blamed the rest of you for what happened.”

Clare glanced at Matt whose incomprehension matched her own. “You’ll have to explain that,” he said.

If anything, Jack’s head bowed even lower. “I told myself over and over that what I—we—did had nothing to do with you and that I was making excuses for myself, but...”

“But?” said Clare again.

“To begin with, Nat and I were thrown together.” He looked up, and his eyes were narrow and resentful. “You were all preoccupied with one another and with your own problems, and we were left on the edges of the group.”

Clare had been relieved when Jack had kept Natalia busy and away from her. She deserved every bit of his resentment.

“She was nice to me, and her attention was flattering. But then she started asking, how did I know I was ace? How did anyone know? And I thought that I didn’t know. Not for sure.”

“How did you go from that to stealing the minibus?” asked Clare, as if that was the most pertinent part of the conversation.

Jack shrank into himself. “I don’t know. It began as a joke, but then it became serious, and... It was reckless and exciting, and I regretted it almost immediately, but by then it was far too late.”

Clare was impressed at the way Matt nodded and accepted Jack’s answer as though what Jack had said made perfect sense.

“Since we got back, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about how stupid I was, and how angry you all must be.”

“Of course we were angry. You left us there,” said Matt, none of the anger he’d exhibited at the time showing now.

“Were?” asked Jack hopefully.

“Like Matt said,” said Clare, “we came here because we were worried about you, not because we’re still angry.”

Jack nodded, a small, abrupt movement, his expression no longer looking as pinched as before.

“You all make everything look so easy,” said Jack. “You’re all so comfortable in your aceness, and I... I’m not. Wasn’t.

Whatever. And I couldn't explain how knotted and confused I felt, and—”

Clare felt even worse and even more worthy of Jack's blame. “Oh, Jack! None of us have found it easy, and I'm sorry if we've made things worse for you by making you think that.”

“But you don't talk about it.”

“About asexuality?” said Matt. “Sure we do. Ollie bangs on about pride all the time.”

“You don't talk about what it has been like for you. About your...journeys.”

“I guess we don't,” said Clare. “I mean, I have talked about it, but not at meet-ups. I've talked to my friend Louisa a bit, and I've talked a lot with Janice. But you're right; we don't share experiences at the meet-ups, and maybe we should. Or at least make it clear that it's okay to ask.”

“And if there's anything you want to know, you can ask us now,” said Matt.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“HOW DID YOU know you were ace?” Jack asked.

“I didn’t know,” said Clare. “Not for a long time. I knew what I felt...didn’t feel...whatever. But I didn’t know there was a name for it, or that it was okay to feel this way. I sometimes think, if people didn’t talk about sex so much, would any of us need a hook to peg our lack of interest on?”

Matt looked at her. “You think that’s what asexuality is? A hook?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Finding out about asexuality was a huge relief; I had a name and an explanation for what was ‘wrong’ with me, for why things never worked out the way I believed they should and why I never found The One.”

“I’m ace, and I found The One,” objected Matt.

“Maybe you’re confusing asexuality and aromanticism?” suggested Jack.

“Probably. My point is, I’m in a good place now, but that wasn’t always the case. These days, I feel more comfortable about the way I am than I ever have before, and I choose to identify as ace. But, until less than a year ago, I didn’t know what that meant. Without any vocabulary to describe it, all I knew was I didn’t think or feel like other people. For years I tried to pass for normal.” She said “normal” bitterly.

“How?” asked Jack, looking as though what she had said had struck a chord. “How did you pass for normal?”

“By dating. Or pretending to date, anyway. Which, incidentally, never went well.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t feel the way I was supposed to. I do friendships much better than relationships. I’ve destroyed a couple of pretty good friendships by trying to be something more. I understand why now, although I didn’t at the time. Looking back, I wonder whether I led people on. I didn’t mean to, but...” Clare shook her head. “I feel bad about that.”

Jack frowned. “How do you pretend to date?”

“That’s hard to explain. Okay. Take Gavin. He was my last boyfriend.” Clare blinked as she realised what she’d said. Gavin was her last boyfriend. Not her latest or her most recent, but her last. The enormity of the idea and the feeling of complete acceptance that came with it was breath-taking. She pushed her reaction aside, promising herself that she would revisit, and enjoy, it later. “We went out for about six months.”

“You did? How’d you manage to sustain a relationship that long, being aro and all?”

“We did long distance, and we didn’t get to see each other often. We didn’t talk or Skype much either, which should have rung some alarm bells somewhere. But he was a useful excuse and—if I’m honest—an affirmation. I had a boyfriend, which validated me, and that kept most people from asking too many questions about my private life. That’s what I mean by pretending to date. I couldn’t pretend when we were together, and things came to a head last January, when I went to see him.”

“What happened?” Jack moved around, arranging himself into a position that suggested he was paying avid attention and that this conversation mattered to him a great deal.

“It was a disaster from start to finish. He was staying with his parents near Exeter. Had been, ever since he got a job there, about two weeks after we began ‘going out’.” Clare mimed quotation marks, reinforcing the idea that their dating had been a sham.

“Gavin got held up at work, so his dad came to pick me up at the train station. Can you imagine? I was nervous enough about seeing him after so long, let alone meeting his parents for the first time. And there was his dad, waiting for me on the platform with a cardboard sign! It was awful.”

“Awkward,” admitted Matt, “but not ace-related.”

“No,” agreed Clare. “But that helped to set the mood. We went to the house. Still no sign of Gavin. I got shown into the living room. Gavin’s mum said he’d be home any time, and she invited me to sit while we waited. They obviously expected me to sit on the sofa, but I didn’t want to sit with Gavin. So, I found myself choosing an armchair. I could tell they thought that was weird.

“At least they didn’t expect us to share a bedroom. I don’t know whether they’d talked sleeping arrangements over with Gavin, or whether that was their good ol’ Christian morals shining through, but I can’t begin to tell you how relieved I was when I was shown to a guest room! Again, not wanting to be with my boyfriend... That should have told me something, right?”

Jack and Matt didn’t answer. They waited for her to continue.

“The next day, we explored the city together. Took in some of the sights. And it was almost fun. Exeter’s a nice city and

the cathedral is spectacular. I managed to make sure we didn't hold hands; I was so scared that he might want to. We didn't try to sneak a kiss or two, like a romantic couple might. We were the most uncouply couple you can imagine.

“That evening, we went out for a meal. Italian. Two people, intimate surroundings. Food. Wine. What could be more romantic?” Clare dropped any attempt at levity. This was where the telling got difficult. Her cheeks grew hot, and she avoided their eyes as she said flatly, “We were waiting for our desserts when it happened.”

“When what happened?” Jack leaned forward with desperate curiosity.

“Gavin reached across the table to take my hand, and I flinched. I snatched my hand away. The look on his face! I don't know who was more shocked by what I'd done, him or me. And that was when I knew...”

“That you were ace?” asked Jack eagerly.

“No. That was when I knew we were finished. There was no use pretending that there was anything between us.” Now the worst of the telling was over, Clare's tone returned almost to normal. Wryly, she said, “We broke up over tiramisu. I had to stay another night; couldn't get a train north until the following day, which was awkward.” Clare smiled humourlessly and forced herself to look at Jack and Matt.

Jack's expression was tinged with a mix of recognition and sympathy. Matt was sporting his Sudoku face. Clare wasn't sure what that meant.

“I’m lucky I have only ever dated nice men,” said Clare. “Nobody ever put pressure on me to have sex, although if they had, I think I’d have forced myself to go along with it.”

“You would?” asked Jack, amazed.

“I think so. I wanted to know what all the fuss is about. And, I thought, maybe that’s what I needed to get over myself.”

Matt looked faintly appalled, but Jack was relieved. “So, you do understand!”

“Yeah, Jack. I think I do.”

Jack sniffed and rubbed his eyes.

“Are you okay?” asked Matt, worried.

Behind his hands, Jack nodded. “I think...maybe...I feel better than I have in a while.”

Matt turned to Clare, Sudoku frown still in place. “That was last January?”

“Yes.”

“You started coming to the meet-ups soon after. So, what happened next?”

“My friend, Louisa, happened. She asked me some uncomfortable questions, and she showed me an article about asexuality she’d spotted in a newspaper. Said it made her think of me. I did some research, and I realised she had a point. I also realised that Gavin was the latest in a list of failed relationships. There was a pattern to them. The only ones that lasted any length of time were the ones where we didn’t see

much of each other. I was the queen of long distance! I didn't like holding hands. I don't see the point of kissing."

Outside, the rain had stopped. The clouds parted, and the sun came out. Beams of light, diluted by the net curtains, bounced off the walls and bed.

Dan knocked on the door and, without waiting for any response, called out, "I've put the kettle on. Anyone for a cuppa?"

Clare, Matt, and Jack consulted between themselves, and Clare went to place their orders.

The offer of tea proved to be a ploy. "You've been in there a while. Is everything okay?"

"Yes. We're having a good heart-to-heart. I'm optimistic that everything will be fine now."

"Good."

*

"WHAT ABOUT THE other times?" Jack asked, when Clare returned with their drinks. "You said that there were other times, before Gavin."

Clare nodded. "A few. Not many."

"Why'd you go out with them, if you weren't attracted to them?"

"They asked me. Or someone set us up. I hoped that feelings might follow. I had no idea I wasn't attracted to them; I had no concept of how attraction was supposed to feel. If we kissed, maybe that would kick-start my emotions and we wouldn't be able to help ourselves, and we..." Clare took the

plunge. “There was this one guy. I thought we should be kissing because that’s what couples do, right? I launched myself at him, and...”

“And?”

“We moved over to the couch and lay down. I lay there and we smashed our lips together, and his moustache and beard scratched my skin, and I thought, I don’t see why this is supposed to be fun, I’m not enjoying this and, oh, shit, when’s he going to stop?”

There had been more to it than that, and the memories still stung and embarrassed her. How much more should she tell them? Had she already told them enough?

She remembered thinking, surely this wasn’t what kissing was supposed to be like! Wasn’t she supposed to be lost in the moment, taken over by the sensations, wanting to give in to hot and sweaty impulses? Surely, she wasn’t supposed to lie there, her eyes staring over his shoulder as his closed lips moved over hers, thinking, is this it? Maybe, if she prised his lips apart...inserted her tongue...

She didn’t know what she was doing, but all those long-ago teenaged magazines had reassured readers that kissing would come naturally when they tried it.

She pressed her tongue against his mouth. He didn’t give way, so she withdrew, closed her mouth again, and let him get on with whatever he was doing.

Eventually the kissing finished, and they separated. If her hair was mussed, it was from lying against the cushion, not from their depressingly chaste activities. Neither of them was

crumpled or breathless, and again she thought, this can't be it! Where was the electricity? Where were the fireworks? What was all the fuss about?

Was he spectacularly bad at this? Was she? Maybe he wasn't The One.

Relief had washed over her when he finally said, "Well. I'll...go to bed now," his voice conveying an awkwardness that twinned with her own.

*

MATT SNAPPED HER out of her reverie as he said to Jack, "By the way, I enjoy the kissing. Some cuddling and hand holding too."

Clare nodded. "I'm just telling you about what happened to me. I don't claim to be the poster person for ace."

"That's my point," said Matt. "I don't think there is a single poster person. Don't think you have to be exactly like Clare or me to identify as ace."

"And," said Clare tentatively, "don't feel as though you have to identify as ace at all, if you don't feel ready, or if you don't think that's you. We're here for you, no matter what."

Jack looked at Clare and said, "You dated?"

Clare nodded, even though Jack knew the answer.

"But you didn't have sex with any of them?"

"No."

"I slept with Natalia." Jack said it as though it was a terrible thing he had done, and that he didn't expect them to understand.

“We know,” said Matt.

“You’re right,” said Clare. “I didn’t sleep with any of them, but I think I might have, if they’d wanted me to. I went into some of the relationships, desperate to find out what the big deal about sex was. So, you see, we’re not so different after all. You did it. I would have if the circumstances had been different.”

“Do you regret...not...?”

“No. Not now. But I did. For a long time. The odd thing is, even though I wanted to know what all the fuss was about, mine was purely academic interest. I was never interested in them. Plus, my instinctive reaction is always to turn down men who want one-night stands. My head might want to know what sex is about, but when presented with an opportunity, my body revolts at the idea.”

There was a pause, and then Matt said, “Is there anything else you’d like to ask us?”

“What made you come out?” Jack asked Matt.

“I went on a training course,” said Matt. “We did an exercise that was designed to show us it’s impossible to have a conversation without participants interacting with one another. The trainer divided us into groups and said she wanted us each to take turns talking to the others about something that had brought us a lot of satisfaction and happiness. One person had to talk for three minutes, and the others had to listen without interrupting.

“The first thing that leapt into my head was that I wanted to talk about identifying as ace. But I couldn’t. That was far

too personal. What could I talk about instead?” Matt laughed humourlessly at the memory. “Caroline started talking. ‘That’s easy,’ she said, and she waxed lyrical about her lovely baby boy. ‘He’s two now. He’s so smart and cheeky, and he’s so clever’.” Matt parodied the dewy-eyed look that must have been on Caroline’s face and her soppy tone of voice. Mean satisfaction coloured his tones as he said, “Caroline floundered into silence after forty-five seconds. Next Jason got to talk, and he also talked about his kids. He had two of them, so he had twice as much to talk about. His kids were also smart and cheeky and clever and...and no matter how cute they might be, other people’s kids are never as fascinating as their parents think. Have you ever noticed that?”

Clare laughed. “Oh, yes!”

Jack nodded, which at least proved he was still listening.

“So, what did you talk about?” asked Clare, getting Matt back on topic, or so she hoped.

“Fan fiction. More specifically, I talked about my *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* novel, and how I could have popped out two kids in the time it took me to write it.”

Jack ogled at him. “And that was less embarrassing than coming out as ace?”

“That’s exactly what Tristan said when I told him what had happened!” exclaimed Matt. He sobered immediately. “I came out the next day.”

Jack’s stomach rumbled, making him blush and Clare want to laugh again. Then she realised that she, too, was hungry. She said, “How about we wash these mugs, and you go

shower? Put on some fresh clothes, and we'll take you out for some food."

"Food?" said Jack vaguely.

"Yeah. Food. Nosh. Grub. When did you last eat properly?"

"I...I'm not sure. I haven't been hungry."

"And now?"

"Ravenous."

*

THAT EVENING, AS they ate defrosted beef casserole at the kitchen table, Clare told Janice about the trip to see Jack. Their plates were empty by the time she finished, and Clare was relieved to find she'd talked herself into a state of calm. She said, "I told him almost everything. I've never told anyone so much before."

"You've told me—"

"—a lot. But it's been bits and pieces, and over a period of time. I've never sat down and... I hope I did the right thing."

"You don't think you did?"

"I don't know. What if he tells anyone? Uses it against me?"

"You think he would?"

"No?" said Clare, her voice small and doubtful. "But he might."

"Would it matter if he did?"

“I—” Clare stopped short. Her knee-jerk response was that it would be excruciatingly embarrassing. But why? All the people she cared about knew she was ace, and they already knew bits about what that meant. What would it matter if they knew everything? If they knew everything, wouldn't they know and understand her better, and wouldn't that be a good thing?

And who cared about what anyone else thought? Well, okay, she did, but maybe that was her problem, and she shouldn't.

Janice said gently, “Did the conversation help him?”

“I think so. He said it did and that we'd given him a lot to think about.”

“Maybe you should believe him, then.”

“We told him to contact us any time, if he had any more questions, or if he wanted someone to talk to.”

“Good. Poor boy. He must have been suffering so much to have got himself into such a state.”

“Yeah,” agreed Clare. “I guess it'll take time for him to fully recover, but at least he's made a start. He said something that's got me thinking.”

“Oh?”

“He said, we don't talk about how it feels to be asexual. We're good at talking about the theory and the politics, but not the rest. Not about how it feels to live it. He thought the rest of us found things easy, that we'd never struggled, or had doubts or fears.”

“I hope you put him right.”

“I think we did. But I think... I think we need to do more. We should let people know about our experiences...show people like Jack they're not alone.”

“How do you suggest we do that?” There was no scepticism in Janice's question, only honest curiosity. Clare was grateful.

“I don't know,” said Clare. “Maybe getting more involved with Asexual Awareness Week would be a good place to begin.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

OVER A WEEK had passed since Clare had thought about returning to her flat. She glanced around the living room and pictured the bedroom both she and Janice called hers, and she winced at how many of her possessions had managed to find their way into the Didsbury house. Moving back to the flat was going to require major effort. Clare dug out her diary and forced herself to think about logistics and dates.

She had barely started when her phone rang. She looked at the screen to see who the caller was. She swiped to answer and held the phone to her ear. “Hey, Jack. What’s up?”

“You said to call any time.”

“I did, didn’t I? How’re you doing?”

“I’m...fine. But I was hoping... Can I drop by?”

“Sure. When did you have in mind?”

“Now? I’m in the area.”

“The area?”

“Didsbury. Matt told me you lived in Didsbury.”

Pedantic, Clare said, “Janice lives in Didsbury. I’m just staying with her for a while.”

“Oh. Right. Can I drop by?”

“Sure. You need the address?”

“Yes, please.”

Barely five minutes later, Clare found herself answering the front door to Jack, who was standing with his weight on

the balls of his feet, looking nervous, like a mischievous boy who had been caught in the act of ringing a doorbell and running away.

“Come on in.” Since bribery couldn’t do any harm, she added, “Janice made cake this morning.”

Whether the cake was the clincher or not, Clare wasn’t sure, but Jack committed himself, nodded, and stepped forward.

Janice came into the hallway. “Hello, Jack. Come on in!” And, as if to reinforce Clare’s earlier promise, she said, “I’ve put the kettle on, and we have fruit cake.”

They made their way down the hall, Jack craning his neck to take in the details, reminding Clare of her first visit. In the kitchen, the atmosphere was even more cosy and welcoming than usual, thanks to the lingering smells of baking. Clare sniffed, savouring the scent of cinnamon and other spices.

“I’ll do the drinks, if you cut the cake,” Janice said to Clare. To Jack, she said, “Sit down. Make yourself at home.”

“You’ve got a nice house.” Jack sounded overwhelmed.

“Thank you,” said Janice. “Tea or coffee?”

“Coffee. Thank you.”

“Coffee, it is.” This was an occasion worthy of the real stuff, and Janice extracted a large cafetière out of a cupboard. As she scooped coffee into the pot and added water, she asked Jack, “How do you take it?”

“Milk. Sugar. Thank you.”

Janice carried the coffee, three mugs, and plates over to the kitchen table. Clare cut Jack a generous slice of cake and only slightly smaller pieces for herself and Janice.

“It’s lovely to see you,” said Janice. “But what brings you here, now?”

“I...I’m not sure,” said Jack. “I was in the area, and I wanted to talk with people who understand. Clare and Matt did say that I could call any time.”

“That’s true,” said Clare.

Jack smiled gratefully. “I came out to my housemates. They’ve been great. But they don’t get it, you know?”

“Don’t get what?” asked Janice.

“The asexual thing. I told them, and they’re trying, but I’m still not sure I get it a hundred per cent myself, so I can’t expect them to. I mean, I still feel...”

“Unsure?”

Jack nodded. “Today, I’ve been playing games with some other friends, ones I’m not out to. They were talking about sex. All their conversations... There was a constant layer of innuendo. I played along and laughed, but sometimes I didn’t get what they were saying. Hanging out with them was good, but also an effort. Eventually, everything got too much, and I needed to be somewhere where I wouldn’t be under so much pressure to fit in, you know?”

“Yeah. I know.”

Janice nodded. “The first meet-up I went to was a revelation. Halfway through the afternoon, I suddenly realised

that I was more relaxed in that room full of strangers than I'd ever been in my entire adult life. There were no sexual agendas, and I didn't have to navigate around any unwanted demands. I felt comfortable. And that's what kept pulling me back."

"Me too," said Clare. "I made friends faster than I've done with anyone ever. With most people, friendship is hard. With you guys, it came easily."

"I didn't know you felt like that too." Jack toyed with his mug, turning it around on the tabletop with the tips of his fingers.

"More stuff we don't talk about, right?" said Clare.

"Yeah," agreed Jack.

"We're talking now," said Janice. "Ask anything."

"To be honest, I'm happy not to talk. It's enough to just be here. This cake is fabulous, by the way."

"Thanks," said Janice.

Clare hesitated, then tentatively said, "Can I ask you something? You don't have to answer if you don't want to. You can tell me it's none of my business, but I'm curious..."

"What do you want to know?"

"What was it like? Sleeping with Natalia, I mean."

Jack was silent long enough that Clare thought he wasn't going to answer. However, when he spoke, she realised he was simply having trouble finding words. "It wasn't bad. Bits were pleasant. But I don't get why people make such a big deal about sex, and Natalia was bossy."

“Bossy?” said Janice.

“Yeah. She knew what she wanted and how, and she kept telling me, ‘Not like that!’ She was nicer before we...you know. Afterwards, she lost interest in me. She muttered on about how she should have planned things more carefully, that it was a hell of a long way to drive on her own, and was I sure I didn’t want to take a turn behind the wheel?”

“You didn’t, did you?” asked Janice, horrified, and Clare suddenly had visions of an uninsured Jack bombing down the motorway.

Jack shook his head, appalled. “I know I acted crazy, but I wasn’t that crazy!”

“No. Of course not. Sorry,” muttered Janice.

“Didn’t stop Natalia from trying to persuade me,” said Jack.

“Idiot woman,” said Janice.

“Yeah,” agreed Jack.

After that, they ate more cake, and the conversation turned to other things.

*

THE FOLLOWING WEDNESDAY, Janice greeted Clare in an uncharacteristically gloomy frame of mind. “I Googled ‘What to wear wedding uk’ and look at this!” Janice pointed to the article on her tablet. The headline read: *Guest Outfits You’ll Want To Wear Over and Over*. She scrolled the page.

“Ugh!” exclaimed Clare involuntarily.

“Ugh, ugh, and more ugh,” agreed Janice.

“Why are they all so...”

“Flouncy? Lacy?”

“Tailored. Frittery. Girlie.”

“Not to mention frilly and embroidered.”

“And what’s with all the flowery prints? Most of them look like the wallpaper in that B and B we stayed in. You know, the one run by”—Clare snapped her fingers—“Mrs Colquhoun!” She pointed at a geometric print executed in fuchsia pink. “This one’s giving me eyestrain!”

“Let’s face it. I couldn’t bear to wear any of these even once. What are we going to do?”

Clare mulled over their dilemma. “I’ve got it! Louisa! She’s got style. She loves shopping more than anyone I know. And she’s been dying to meet you. She’ll help us out!”

Sceptical, Janice said, “You think?”

“I know,” promised Clare. “I’ll call her now.”

*

THE FIRST TIME Louisa and Janice met each other was in a small arcade of prohibitively expensive and pretentious boutiques in the city centre. Janice, seeing the prices and styles, turned slightly green and asked Clare quietly, “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

Louisa heard. “It’s okay. We’re not going to buy anything here. Oh, good Lord, no! Not unless you want to second mortgage your house. We’re going to window shop so you can tell me what you like and don’t like, and then I’ll let you into my deepest, darkest secret.”

“Which is?” asked Clare.

“Where I go to buy stuff as good as this but at a fraction of the cost.”

Clare stared, while Janice asked, “Then why meet here?”

“Because,” said Louisa, “this is a great way to see a lot of things all in one place, and we can have a splendid time assassinating the characters of people who have more money than sense and who do shop here.”

A bark of surprised laughter burst out of Janice, who put a hand in front of her mouth in much the same way as she might had she burped. “I think I’m going to like you, after all!”

Louisa quirked an eyebrow. “There was doubt?”

“Probably not,” muttered Janice, who blushed fiercely. It wasn’t a good look on her. Her face and neck mottled with bright red blotches. “But the way Clare talks about you... You’re pretty intimidating.”

Louisa laughed. “I could say the same about you. A more insecure person might have worried that their status as best friend was under serious threat, but it only made me want to meet you even more.”

Clare’s face burned to match Janice’s. Exactly how big a mistake had she made in bringing the two women together?

“Fortunately,” said Louisa, “I believe you can never have too many best friends.”

Clare’s blush subsided in parallel with Janice’s.

“Let’s get down to business, shall we?”

Their first port of call was a small establishment called Blandishments, where the decoration—deep burgundy, heavy furniture, and floor-to-ceiling flounces—was more memorable than any of the clothes and accessories on offer.

They looked in the window of Frills and Fancies but didn't bother going in after Janice and Clare expressed in forceful terms their dislike of flared cuffs and sleeves so wide it would be impossible to squeeze them into a coat.

Beyond Pink's offerings belied its name. As Clare suffered through their visit, she feared she had fallen into a nightmare version of the Barbie's boudoir she'd had as a child.

They found more to their taste in Black and Blue, which offered classic tailoring, smart blouses, and a range of stylish scarves. Clare fingered one of the scarves, sighed admiringly at its softness, and blanched at the price. The scarf alone cost more than she'd hoped to spend on her entire outfit.

The Lion's Maine specialised in leopard print miniskirts and jackets, and they were flagging by the time they visited Zipped! They resolved that spelling alone was reason enough to eschew Eksentricity.

Louisa said, "I think we've done enough here. So, let's grab some lunch and recharge our batteries, and afterwards I'll take you to meet Gladys."

"Gladys?" asked Clare.

"You'll see."

*

PRELOVED AND LOVELY was hidden down a network of side streets in a small part of the city centre that successive

waves of regeneration schemes had managed to pass by. To Clare, visiting the neighbourhood was like stepping back to a time when many of the city's buildings had been unkempt, with peeling paint and roofs in disrepair.

There was a loud jangle when Louisa pushed the shop door open. Clare glanced up and, sure enough, above her head she spotted a small, brass bell on a strip of springy metal like the one old Mr Mason had had in his hardware store when she was tiny. The bell jangled again as the door closed behind them.

“Hello! Back again already, Louisa?” The light-hearted greeting came from a petite woman with untamed red hair that was barely held at bay by a thick band of material. She wore theatrical makeup and a kaftan that swirled as she moved. She waved, showing off emerald-green fingernails.

“I’m not here for me this time, Gladys. My friends are looking for clothes for a wedding.”

“A wedding! How lovely!” Gladys clapped her hands together. “Yours or someone else’s?”

Clare liked the utterly matter-of-fact way Gladys asked the question and found herself warming to her. “Someone else’s,” said Clare. “A gay, asexual wedding that’s going to be held in a grand country house.”

Gladys nodded and sent her mop of hair flying as though it had been hit by a hurricane. “What type of thing are you after?”

Louisa said, “We’re looking for something...” She began to reel off names of designers and descriptions of styles with the same facility Clare saved for obscure Acts of Parliament or

knitting yarns and Janice saved for plants. How had Louisa determined so many likes from their long list of dislikes? No pink; no flowers; no lace; no gathers; no trimmings to trip over; no skirts; nothing that flashed cleavage.

“This way, this way.” Gladys herded them past racks of wedding dresses, cocktail dresses—who knew so many sequins existed in the world?—and flamboyant print dresses of the kind that had sent Janice into a fit of depression only days before.

Gladys came to a halt next to an array of trouser suits. “This is our business formal section. I’m sure you’ll be able to find something here.”

“The dress code is dressy casual,” said Janice doubtfully.

“Pssh!” said Gladys. “Business formal. Dressy casual. They’re just words. Do you remember Venn diagrams from maths class?”

“Barely,” said Janice, while Clare said, “Vaguely,” at the same time.

“Think of dress codes like that. They overlap and blend into one another. Often you can wear the same outfit on a variety of different occasions.”

Clare nodded.

“If you choose something glaringly inappropriate, Louisa or I will let you know.”

“Thank you,” said Clare, feeling more optimistic about the task ahead.

Finding something proved not to be a problem. Being spoiled for choice was. As they explored the rails, Clare said to Louisa, “I have to say, I’m astonished, and I’m asking myself how I never knew this about you. But I’m incredibly impressed.”

“That I buy most of my clothes from second-hand shops?”

“Yes.”

“Whose fault is that? I’ve invited you to come shopping with me often enough.”

“True,” conceded Clare. “But I never considered that anyone, even you, could make shopping this much fun!”

In the end, after much trying on and laughter, Clare and Janice left the shop with clothes for the wedding as well as an impressive collection of other garments. Gladys took their money with pleasure and beamed brightly as they vowed to return. She winked at them and said, “I’m sure you will. Everyone comes back to Gladys! Come once, come again... and again...and again. That’s my motto.”

*

ONE SUNDAY IN the middle of November, Matt and Tristan managed to take time out from their wedding preparations to firm up arrangements for another major event that was due to take place in December: Asexual Awareness Week.

Janice offered to host a meeting along with a pot-luck supper, and even went so far as to clear the dining table for the occasion.

Had Clare and Janice not had the presence of mind to prepare plenty of salad, two varieties of lasagne, and garlic

bread, they and their guests would have dined on a bizarre combination of donated crisps, leftover Halloween candy, and soya burgers, the latter contributed by Tristan.

As it was, the vegetarian and beef lasagnes, along with the garlic bread, were scoffed with enthusiasm, and people ate the salad dutifully, knowing it was good for them. Tristan agreed to take his soya burgers home again, which led Matt to say gloomily, “Thanks a bunch, guys. Guess what I’ll be having for tea tomorrow.”

They left the Halloween candy out for people to pick at during the discussion that took place once the plates had been cleared, and Clare and Janice got to keep crisps enough to maintain a supply through the upcoming festive season and well into the new year.

Everyone admired the proofs of Ollie’s posters, and Ollie promised to get the final versions printed within the next week. Zoe announced she wanted to postpone her grand coming out for at least another year.

Jack reached across and took a foam banana from the bowl of candy.

“Nice ring,” said Matt.

Clare looked over to see. She caught sight of the black band around Jack’s middle finger.

Self-consciously, Jack said, “Thanks. I bought it after I came out to my housemates and my parents.”

Matt nodded. “It looks good on you.”

Had anyone else besides Clare picked up on the deeper meaning in Matt’s words? That Jack was openly wearing a

symbol of his aceness suggested he was coming to terms with himself, and Clare was happy for him.

“Has anyone else noticed it?” asked Ollie. “I’ve been wearing mine for over a year, and nobody has ever commented.”

“Same here,” agreed Tristan.

“Matt’s the first one. But wearing it makes me feel good.”

“And that’s all that matters,” said Ollie.

Jack looked at Clare. “You aren’t tempted to get one?”

“I don’t think so. I like this ring”—Clare pointed to the ring on her fourth finger—“and wearing something on the finger next door isn’t comfortable. At least, I don’t think so.” Backtracking to something Jack had said before, she said, “Wait... You told your parents?”

“Yes.”

“How did that go?”

“Not great. They’re sure I’m going through a phase, and I’ll grow out of it. They think asexuality is just some weird internet nonsense I’ll forget about when I find The One. But at least I told them, and they haven’t disowned me. Things could be worse.”

Tristan and Matt refocused the discussion onto Asexual Awareness Week by announcing they had booked a large room in the same students’ union they had visited at Pride. The room, which was more of a hall, was often used by local bands for gigs. It had a stage and would be great for a panel discussion.

“What are you planning on discussing?” asked Zoe.

“Asexual journeys,” said Tristan. “What people’s experiences have been. What they’ve learned along the way. What they wish they’d known. What resources are out there, and we thought we could ask the audience about what types of resources people need.”

There were murmurs of approval.

“Matt and I both want to take part,” said Tristan. “But we want the discussion to be more than a happy-ever-after tale of homoromantic love. We want to get as many different ace perspectives as possible. So... Anyone else up for taking part?”

Zoe shook her head, which wasn’t surprising, given what she’d said earlier.

“I’m in,” said Ollie. “I can talk about aromanticism, and how it feels to be ace and agender, and how they’re not all the same things.”

“Good,” said Matt.

Tentatively, Jack said, “I’d like to take part.”

“You would?” said Matt, pleased and surprised. “What would you say?”

“I’d say...it’s okay to question, and it’s good to talk. Don’t feel pressured to do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable, which is good advice under any circumstances, not just where sex is concerned. And I’d say I wish we’d had a panel when I was trying to figure myself out.” He added, “I’m still trying to figure myself out, so...whatever.”

Matt grinned. “You’re in.”

“Anyone else?” asked Tristan. “Janice?”

“My story isn’t interesting. Ask Clare instead.”

“Clare?” said Matt.

Clare glanced daggers at Janice. “What makes you think my story is any more interesting than yours?”

“At least you’ve tried to date! You have some great war stories.”

Clare considered the idea for a moment. She shook her head. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think I’d feel comfortable doing it. Not in front of a roomful of people.”

“Why not? You talk to rooms full of people all the time,” said Ollie. “It’s literally your job!”

“That’s different. That’s me talking about history.”

“This could help make history!” Ollie retorted.

“You did say,” said Janice, “that you wanted to make a difference after...” She tactfully didn’t finish the sentence.

“Yes,” conceded Clare. “But this isn’t what I had in mind.”

“What did you have in mind?” asked Matt.

“I don’t know. But not this. This is...way too personal. I’d have to come out to a whole bunch of strangers. There’d be no coming back from that.”

Matt tried not to look disappointed. “We can’t make you do it, but please think about it? The more varied the speakers the better, and you would bring an older person’s perspective to the table.”

“Cheers for that. Thanks for making me feel positively ancient,” said Clare.

“‘Older’ on AVEN is anyone over twenty,” Zoe helpfully reminded her.

“Now you can all feel ancient together,” said Jack.

Chapter Twenty-Five

JANICE AND CLARE considered using the shuttle Matt and Tristan had laid on to link the nearest train station to the wedding venue, but instead decided to take Janice's car. Janice offered lifts to Ollie, Jack, and Zoe, who were happy to share the backseat. Thus, on the first Saturday in December, Janice de-iced the Saab's windscreen, cranked up its heating, and, furnished with detailed directions and in great spirits, the group set off into darkest Yorkshire.

They caught up with one another's news as Janice navigated from Didsbury to the M60. Jack told Clare that he had almost caught up on the work he had missed, and that Professor Leyton had been quietly supportive. "I didn't think he knew I existed, but he's been great. The university cares, you know?"

Clare grunted noncommittally and didn't disillusion him.

Ollie announced they had secured a great contract and their art would be adorning the sides of the city's buses come the new year.

Zoe's work on the soap opera was going well, and she had signed up for another two years. The producers were promising great things for her character. "This time next year..." she said with a happy sigh.

"You'll be on schedule for your grand coming out?" asked Ollie.

"Maybe."

There followed a discussion about Asexual Awareness Week. Ollie was vocal in their enthusiasm. Jack's willingness to stand up and say his bit came a distant second. "I'm scared and excited at the same time. I can feel it right here." Clare turned in her seat in time to see him put his fist against his stomach.

Janice was focusing her attention on a tricky contra-flow as Zoe squealed, "Oh, I love that feeling! I get a real buzz every time I go on stage or on set!"

"Honestly? You like it? It makes me think I'm going to puke!"

"Not in my car, you don't," said Janice, who'd retuned into the conversation just in time to hear the comment.

By the time they reached Ashton-under-Lyme, the pace of the conversation had slowed, and they began to pay more attention to the scenery.

"Oh, my God," sighed Clare. "Will you look at that?"

"What?" asked Janice, keeping her eyes fixed on the road.

"There's a house on the right... December's only just begun, and they've already got a Santa ornament on the roof!"

"A hideous Santa ornament," clarified Ollie.

"I've seen a couple of Christmas trees in people's front windows too," said Zoe.

"Same here," said Jack at the same moment Clare said, "Must be artificial; otherwise, they'll shed all their needles by Christmas Eve, let alone twelfth night!"

“Not necessarily,” said Janice. “A real tree can last up to six weeks indoors.”

“So speaks the expert,” said Ollie.

“I had no idea,” Clare said. “Who knew?”

Janice said wryly, “People who use real trees?”

By way of an excuse-cum-apology, Clare said, “My parents always have artificial ones.”

“You’ve never had a real tree?” asked Janice, shocked.

“No.”

“But they smell so good!”

“I don’t think smell ever comes into it as far as Mum is concerned. The potential for mess and fashion does, though.” Perhaps that needed further explanation. “Mum is one of those people who change their baubles and colour schemes every year.”

“That’s sad,” said Zoe. “We use the same decorations every Christmas. Getting them out of storage and putting them up is part of the ritual. It’s like reconnecting with old friends.”

“Plus,” said Ollie, “reusing decorations year on year is much more environmentally sustainable.”

“There’s another Santa on the left,” said Jack with obvious dislike.

“Ugh,” said Ollie in a way that made Clare quirk an eyebrow.

“You don’t like Santa either?” she asked.

“Who does?”

“Me,” said Zoe.

“I liked him when I was a kid,” said Clare, “although he was always Father Christmas then. I can’t say I’ve thought about him much since I turned ten.”

“Maybe you should,” said Ollie.

“Oh?”

“He’s a symbol of the heteronormative patriarchy, which makes him a terrible role model.”

“And Ollie’s off,” murmured Janice affectionately. Clare suppressed a giggle.

“Well, he is! He’s a symbol of a western, heteronormative patriarchy! Santa is an old white guy—”

“I think he was originally Greek,” interjected Janice.

“—whose traditional values are increasingly out of step with twenty-first century norms.”

“Ollie has got a point,” said Zoe. “I grew up in a single-parent household. It was just me and my mum, but all the presents came from Father Christmas. How do you think that made my mum feel? All her hard work, all that scrimping and saving, and a bearded white guy got the credit and gratitude!”

“I read something last year,” said Janice. “Someone did a survey, asking children whether Santa could be a woman. The kids said Santa had to be a man.”

“What do kids know?” asked Ollie. “They only say that because it’s what they’ve learned to expect. The male Santa has been normalised. We need to find a new normal.”

“We’ve got a female Dr Who,” conceded Janice, “so anything is possible.”

“But,” said Clare, “if Santa is based on Saint Nicholas, he has to be male. Doesn’t he?”

“I don’t see why,” said Ollie. “Even if Santa was based on a saint, he isn’t Saint Nicholas anymore. By this point, he’s so far removed from the saint or anything religious we should be able to reinvent him any way we want.”

“Well said,” said Jack. “So, we’re agreed? Santa doesn’t have to be old, male, or white. And we can get rid of the rosy cheeks too.”

“I always thought the rosy cheeks were from the cold,” said Clare.

“Or blood pressure,” suggested Ollie. “A gender-neutral or gender-fluid Santa Claus would be a better role model.”

“I seem to remember there was a call for that a couple of years ago too,” said Zoe. “The idea never took off.”

“Time to revisit it, then,” said Ollie.

“I’ve never liked Santa, and now you’re giving me even more reasons to hate him. This is great!” said Jack gleefully. “Keep ’em coming!”

Thus encouraged, Ollie extemporised on the appalling example set by Mrs Claus. “On the rare occasions she appears in popular culture, she’s Santa’s stay-at-home wife. Santa goes to work while she wears an apron, looks after the home, and bakes ridiculous quantities of Christmas cookies. That, right there, is the heteronormative model of a secular Christmas.”

“Do you suppose,” asked Janice, “if Saint Nick was originally Greek and he relocated to the North Pole, he’s an illegal immigrant?”

“We’re questioning Santa’s immigration status now?” asked Clare.

“Why not? We’re questioning everything else, and he never bothers with a passport when he travels between countries. Also, are his elves unionised? Does he pay the living wage?”

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JANICE INDICATED, SLOWED, turned right past a picturesque lodge house and onto a long drive, and said unnecessarily, “We’re almost there.” Manicured lawns and gardens laid out in a style heavily reminiscent of Capability Brown stretched out to either side. Hoar frost had melted where the weak sun had reached it but still lingered in the shade of hedges, the ha-ha, and mighty trees, the skeletal shapes of which were silhouetted against pale sky. In the distance, the country house—now a hotel—stood on the brow of a low hill.

Ollie leaned forward between the two front seats to get a better look, while, awed, Janice said, “This is...”

“Isn’t it?” said Clare.

In the back seat, Jack said faintly, “I knew this place was posh, but...”

“Yeah,” said Zoe.

“It’s a bit...” said Ollie.

“Overwhelming?” suggested Clare.

“Intimidating?” offered Janice.

“...much,” said Ollie.

“Yes!” chorused the others.

“The last wedding I went to,” said Janice wryly, “was at Stockport’s Registry Office. We went to Gourmet Burger afterwards. This is...not the same.”

They lapsed into silence as Janice followed signs to the car park. She pulled up a space away from a shiny new Audi, whose passengers were spilling out. From their clothes and shoes, Clare guessed that they, too, were heading to the wedding. One of the men was lighting something handmade.

Janice opened the car door and climbed out. The others followed suit.

Clare overheard the man holding the roll-up say, “Want a puff? Might warm you up—and, if it doesn’t, at least you won’t care.” His laugh was shrill and knifed Clare more effectively than the wind.

“God, Rupert! Put it out!” snapped a woman.

The third member of the party—the driver, judging from the fact he had control of the car keys—shook his head, resigned. “Come on. This way.” Nodding politely in the general direction of the aces, he set off towards the house, his companions trailing behind.

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ONLY JACK, WITH the resilience of youth, left his overcoat flapping loose. When the others had bundled up, they followed

the signs to the hotel's entrance. Their shoes crunched gravel underfoot, and their breath plumed white in front of their faces as they walked around the building's perimeter, onto the front drive, and past the fountain.

Pictures hadn't done the water feature justice. It was big, round, sunken into the ground, and separated from the drive by a perimeter of grass that was currently white with frost. The fountain, itself, was comprised of several scantily clad, winged nymphs and sea serpents, which were spewing water out of their mouths.

Jack darted over to crouch and investigate. The others had to drag him away. He stood and retraced his steps, leaving behind him a set of perfect footprints in the frost. "I was looking to see if there were any fish."

"Were there?" asked Zoe.

"Dunno. The water's manky."

As they walked up the building's front steps, Clare felt warmth leaking out of the doors, which had been left open to welcome guests. Through them, she caught a glimpse of a softly lit interior.

"Good morning, ladies, gentleman," said the member of staff behind the reception desk. Ollie bristled at the obsequious greeting. "You may leave your coats on the left. The ballroom has been set up for the ceremony, after which canapés will be served in the orangery. The reception and dance will take place back in the ballroom."

"Thank you," said Clare politely, already looking around for the cloakroom.

They moved away from the front door and began peeling off their outer layers to reveal their finery beneath.

In the end, both Janice and Clare had opted for trouser suits with open-necked shirts. While Clare's shirt was an unremarkable pastel shade, Janice had gone for something bolder. Her tailored blouse sported a vibrant geometric print that looked unexpectedly great. As their major concession to dressing up, they had worn court shoes rather than more utilitarian flats.

Ollie had made no such concession, choosing instead to wear their usual blocky Doc Martens. The rest of Ollie's outfit, which reminded Clare strongly of something she had seen in *Preloved and Lovely*, and which they pulled off with aplomb, was a riff on a traditional tux. The jacket had a black sequined collar and cuffs and looked as though it might once have belonged to a lounge singer. Ollie had fabricated themselves a buttonhole out of black, grey, white, and purple sequins, which added a certain glamour to their apparel.

Zoe was wearing a cream minidress enlivened with brightly coloured chunky costume jewellery. Wearing thick tights and high-heeled boots, she would have been at home on the cover of one of the gossip magazines Mrs Hutcheson kept for her customers to read.

Jack wore an ill-fitting suit borrowed from one of his housemates, a buttoned-down cotton shirt, a crumpled tie, and a pair of brogues that didn't match anything. Slightly scruffy and underdressed, he stood out among the other male guests, who wore a uniform of charcoal suits, sombre ties, crisp, bright white shirts, and gleaming black leather shoes. Clare

thought Jack looked better than any of them, although she wasn't the best judge of such things.

They left their coats at the coat check and pocketed the tickets they were given in return.

None of them had come away from the unpeeling process unscathed, and Clare, Zoe, and Janice detoured into the ladies to rectify their dishevelment.

When Clare looked in a mirror, she didn't know whether to laugh or sigh. Her hair stood every which way, and when she tried to run a comb through it, it crackled with static.

"I'd give up if I were you. It'll settle down, and it doesn't look that bad," said Zoe.

"Plus, you should get points for trying," said Janice, whose short, coarse curls didn't have the same problems.

By the time they re-emerged, more guests had arrived, the hall had filled, and people were beginning to move towards the ballroom.

"Shall we?" asked Janice, gesturing towards the flow.

"Why not?" agreed Clare, and they tagged on to the end of a slow-moving queue.

"Tristan or Matt?" asked a bored usher.

"What?" said Clare uselessly.

More helpfully, Ollie said, "We're friends with both. In equal measure."

"Ah," said the usher. "Right-hand side. Anywhere not in the first five rows."

“Thanks.”

They ended up sliding into the seventh row where they found five seats together. Janice sat farthest from the aisle, with Clare next to her. Next came Ollie and Zoe, with Jack taking the aisle seat. A string quartet began to play something that Clare recognised but couldn't name.

Tristan's and Matt's families filled the front rows. She recognised Pete from The Spinners' Arms and waved at him. He waved back.

The mothers, aunts, and other female relatives had gone into competition to outdress one another. More than a smattering of fascinators and hats that would end up forgotten and crushed in closets or given to charity shops were in evidence. Some might even end up with Gladys for rehoming. The children were dressed in flouncy dresses or three-piece suits, outfits that the kids would have outgrown by New Year.

“Didn't we see that dress in the window of Blandishments?” whispered Clare, leaning in close to Janice and discreetly pointing towards a woman who was making small talk with Matt.

“Yes,” answered Janice, pointing at another woman. “And that one... We saw that dress too.”

“Along with that one. It wasn't in Blandishment's but in the shop with the terrible drapes and— Oh, my God. We're having a conversation about fashion! What's happened to us?”

Just when Clare was beginning to hope the chairs in front of Ollie and herself would remain unoccupied, two women sat, blocking their view of nearly everything. They wore hats with

enormous brims, bows, and artificial flowers. One hat was sunflower yellow, the other a vivid shade of aqua. Both cast coloured shadows over everything around them.

A shift in atmosphere, with everyone falling silent, took Clare by surprise. She squirmed to catch a glimpse of something—anything—around the monstrous headgear.

A woman said, “Hello, everyone, and welcome to Ribblethwaite Court for the marriage of Tristan Marcus Alexander Finch and Matthew Ralph Sevastopol Grieves.”

“Sevastopol?” mouthed Clare in amazement. Next to her, Ollie shook with laughter.

Yellow-hat twisted around and hissed, “It’s not funny. His grandmother was born there. It was a way of honouring her, since they could hardly give him her name, which, by the way, was Ludmila. Now, shush!” She turned back, oblivious to the people who were hushing her.

Unfortunately, the reprimand made Ollie want to laugh even harder, and Ollie’s laughter was contagious. Clare and Ollie sat with their fists in their mouths, turning red and eyes watering with the effort of suppressing their guffaws.

Oblivious to the mirth, the celebrant continued. “I must first of all mention that this place in which we have now met has been duly sanctioned according to law for the celebration of marriages, and if any person present knows of any legal reason why these two people should not be joined in matrimony, they should declare it now.”

Clare couldn’t see what was happening, but the celebrant must have signalled Matt and Tristan to stand, since suddenly

the tops of their heads came into view.

A few people stood to take pictures, and the celebrant had to tell the guests to stay seated during the ceremony except when instructed to do otherwise.

“Before you are joined in matrimony,” intoned the celebrant, “it is my duty to remind you of the solemn and binding character of the vows you are about to make. Marriage in this country is the union of two people voluntarily entered into for life to the exclusion of all others.”

Matt spoke, enunciating clearly, so his words reached the whole room. “Tristan... I want to stand by your side. I want to support you, hold you. I want to share a house, bills, chores, troubles, and triumphs with you. I’ll even eat the occasional tofu burger with you.” Matt swallowed, paused, and then with his voice cracking, he said, “I want to grow old with you, and I thank you for wanting to grow old with me too.”

Perhaps because Tristan lacked Matt’s courtroom experience, Clare had to strain to make out what he said in return. There was something about loving Matt...living with him... Clare missed the next bit, but it must have been touching since the front two rows sighed in a sentimental chorus. She had no problems hearing Tristan’s “If we both convert to veganism, we won’t just grow old together; we’ll live long enough to see in the twenty-second century.”

Next came the section of the ceremony that covered lawful impediments to the joining, followed by the instruction that guests should stand as Matt and Tristan each repeated the celebrant’s words: “I call upon these persons here present...” and they exchanged rings.

The celebrant ended the ceremony by declaring Tristan and Matt husband and husband, and someone in the front row shouted, “Kiss, already, dammit!” Presumably, they did as someone, maybe the same person, wolf-whistled amidst the general applause. Clare cursed the hats. Even she would have liked to have seen that.

Chapter Twenty-Six

THERE WAS A bottleneck in the ladies as the women in Matt's family hogged the mirrors, touching up their faultless makeup in readiness for photographs. They raised their voices to be heard over the noise of running water, and their conversations bounced off Edwardian tiles. Trapped in the room with them, Clare found herself listening in.

“At least they kept the ceremony short. None of those ridiculous poems or songs some people like. At my niece's wedding, they read a verse out of a greetings card!”

“That verse was from the first card Gregory ever sent her, and she'd kept it. It was sweet.”

“It was a greetings card! Why couldn't they have gone with Elizabeth Barrett Browning or a nice sonnet?”

“You're a snob, Aunt Flora.”

“I prefer to think of myself as cultured.”

Clare tuned into another conversation. “Where are all the flowers? It's not a wedding without flowers or a bouquet to throw.”

“There's no bride to throw one.”

“But there are plenty of women wanting to catch one.”

And another...

“They're going to have a city break in Paris now and have a proper honeymoon next summer, in Thailand.”

Behind Clare, a woman said, “I hope their marriage lasts longer than mine. We're still paying off the loan and we've

been divorced for two years. At least The Barracuda won't be able to destroy this one!"

Barracuda... Barracuda... The name tickled the back of Clare's mind. Something about it was familiar. Matt had mentioned something about The Barracuda during their Scottish adventure. Natalia was The Barracuda. A wave of something that might have been anxiety or nausea washed through her.

"She'll get her claws into someone by the end of the evening. She always does."

"She's not coming."

"That'll be a relief to most of the women here."

Clare included herself among them.

"Some of the men too!"

"Speaking of The Barracuda, how is your divorce coming along?"

By the time Clare caught up with the others, she would have been cured of all desire to get married had she had any to begin with.

*

ORANGERY TURNED OUT to be a fancy name for a conservatory, albeit a big one. It might have been delightful at other times of the year but, in December, condensation streamed down the windows and the portable gas heaters barely made inroads against the chill.

When Clare rejoined the rest of her group, she found them struggling to make small talk with some of Matt's relatives.

An artificially ash-blonde woman was saying, "I'm Euphenia."

"Daddy calls her Phee-Phee," interjected the child standing next to her, whose puffy dress had incorporated an entire bolt's worth of shimmering pastel pink fabric.

Euphenia glanced down at the child and said, "And I hate it. I only tolerate it from him because he's Daddy." She looked at the aces and gestured. "This is my daughter, Theodora."

Theodora crossed her arms over her chest, scowled, and said, "My name's Teddy!"

"Teddy's a silly nickname. If you must insist on having a nickname, you may use Dora. Teddy is out of the question." Euphenia apologised to the other adults and said, "She'll grow out of it."

Ollie smiled at Teddy. "Or maybe Teddy has already grown into it."

Euphenia pursed her lips.

Teddy beamed at Ollie and announced, "Mummy calls Daddy Fuzz Face."

Euphenia struggled with her emotions, almost managed not to roll her eyes, and swallowed a sigh.

A bearded man with a child too old to be carried balanced on his hip came to a halt next to Euphenia. Euphenia danced out of the way as the child reached out, grabbing for her necklace. "This is my husband, Godfrey, and our son, Jeremiah."

"I call him Jerry. Or, sometimes, Puke Face," said Teddy.

"You know you shouldn't call him that. That's naughty."

“But he is a puke face! Like in the car, coming here—”

“He gets travel sick,” said Euphenia. “Poor lamb. It’s not his fault.”

“You don’t have to sit next to him. It’s gross and it stinks. He stinks. My brother is a stinky puke face.”

“Theodora! That’s not nice! What must these people think!”

Clare was sure none of them was channelling the sort of appalled shock Euphenia was hoping for. Janice’s amusement matched Clare’s. Clare couldn’t see either Jack or Zoe from where she was standing, but she heard a stifled laugh from one or other of them. Delightedly, Ollie grinned at Teddy.

Teddy responded in kind and said, “I hate dresses.”

Ollie’s grin stretched even wider. “I don’t like dresses much, either.”

“Do you like bows?” Teddy twirled around to give Ollie a prime view of the one that covered her entire lower back.

“That’s huge!” breathed Ollie in horrified awe.

“It’s horrible,” said Teddy sadly.

“Nonsense. It’s adorable,” Euphenia said briskly.

“It’s something,” said Ollie.

“She’s got to learn to dress appropriately for these occasions. And that dress and bow are appropriate.” Euphenia eyed Ollie disapprovingly before turning her attention to Jack, Janice, and Zoe. Only Zoe managed to pass muster.

Eyeing Clare, Euphenia said unenthusiastically, “That’s a lovely trouser suit. I had one like it last season. From Rafaelo’s, of course. I rarely shop anywhere else. His styles are divine.”

“Of course.” Clare did her best to keep a straight face.

Teddy, growing restless now the focus of attention had moved away from her, tugged at the tails of her bow, and growled with frustration as it refused to come undone.

Euphenia smiled with satisfaction. “It’s sewn in place. You can’t undo it.”

“What you need,” said Ollie to Teddy with a wink, “are some scissors and a willing accomplice.”

“What’s an ac...omp...lish?”

Euphenia had had enough and barely bothered to make her excuses as she dragged Teddy away from Ollie’s corrupting influence. Ollie shook their head and muttered something disparaging about parents. Then, with Zoe and Jack in tow, they went in search of nibbles.

To go with their canapés, guests were offered either mulled wine or, for the designated drivers and the more abstemious guests, a “mulled drink”. Even after sampling the drink, neither Clare nor Janice had any idea what it contained beyond chunks of orange and a mystery ingredient that had given it a maroon hue. Nor were they sure it was supposed to taste so overwhelmingly of cloves.

People milled around and made small talk to strangers, their conversations regularly interrupted by calls for the next cohort of guests to be taken to the official photographer. One

by one, groups disappeared outside, only to return later, shivering, complaining about the temperature, and bringing a blast of Siberia with them. When the turn of the aces came, Clare learned why. The temperature along with the sun was dropping fast. At least, as they stood on one of the lawns, with the house forming a dramatic backdrop behind them, they all wore jackets; many of the women had opted for short-sleeved—or even sleeveless—shifts, bare legs, and sandals.

Matt and Tristan were still managing to smile, although the cold was getting to them, pinching their cheeks, making them glow. Matt muttered through a rictus. “Can we get this over with before I lose my toes to frostbite?” Tristan jumped up and down, clapping his hands together while the photographer set up the shot.

Ollie leaned into Janice and Clare. “Let’s hope the photographer touches up the pictures, else Matt and Tristan are going to be immortalised as frost-bitten cherubs.”

*

BY THE TIME the wedding guests made their way to the ballroom for the reception, the sun had set.

“Nice!” said Ollie as they caught sight of the new layout. “Do you reckon the family knows why Tristan and Matt chose this colour scheme?”

Clare tilted her head. Her first impression had been of whites and greys, but on closer examination she made out black and purple accents. She approved of the lack of soft pastel shades; the décor they had chosen suited the two grooms perfectly.

Janice, who had wandered over to look at the seating charts, returned. “We’re somewhere over on the far side. Table six.”

They wove their way between other tables until they found their places. When they looked at the name cards, they discovered that the five of them would be sharing the table with three strangers. Their tablemates, two men and a woman, joined them a few minutes later. Stripped of their outer clothing, Clare didn’t recognise them as the occupants of the Audi until they spoke.

The two groups stood as they introduced themselves. They tried to reach across the table and chairs to shake hands but soon abandoned the attempt, settling for raising their hands to half-mast as each introduction was made.

“...and this is Constance,” said one of the men, who, moments earlier, had introduced himself as Jonah.

“Inconstant would be more accurate,” said the other man, before introducing himself as Rupert.

Constance glared at Rupert, but when she spoke her words were directed towards her new acquaintances. “You can call me Connie.”

“Groom or groom?” asked Rupert, who found the question hysterically funny. There was the shrill laugh from the car park; and Clare found herself wanting to cut out his larynx with a steak knife. Perhaps it was just as well they would be eating fish.

Jonah and Connie had clearly heard this joke too many times already because they both grimaced. Jonah said, “He’s

asking whether you know Tris or Matt.”

“We know them both,” said Ollie.

“What? All of you?” asked Rupert. “How?”

“We’re friends.”

“What? All of you?” said Rupert again.

Jonah looked long-suffering; Connie rolled her eyes. It was going to be a long meal. Only Ollie, who enjoyed strife, looked content.

“What about you?” asked Janice with enviable politeness.

Connie smiled, a social smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “We work with Tris.” To Ollie, Connie said, “I love the way your outfit coordinates with the decorations. Was that by design or a happy coincidence?”

“Happy coincidence,” said Ollie with a smirk.

Connie said sorrowfully, “You’re lucky. I clash terribly.” So did Janice, but Clare didn’t hear her complaining. Probably, Janice hadn’t even noticed; if she had, she didn’t care.

They sat and waited for the food. Rupert continued to giggle and make terrible jokes, causing Clare to question Tristan’s taste in work friends. Connie was nice enough, but Clare struggled to find areas of common interest with her; maintaining a conversation proved to be a challenge.

Under other circumstances, Clare might have tried to talk to Jonah, but he was more interested in chatting to Zoe.

Rupert appreciated the starters and entrées when they arrived, and Clare was delighted when he switched from cracking jokes to shovelling food into his mouth. He would

have had seconds, thirds, and fourths, had the opportunity presented itself.

“Constance and Rupert used to go out.” Jonah listed towards Zoe, who recoiled. Clare was sure that his breath had to stink of garlic, trout, and wine. “She broke up with him. I think his wacky baccy had something to do with that. Now she’s going out with someone from our legal department. Rupert won’t show it, but he was gutted. Plus, this is a wedding, so that makes him even more desperate than usual to get off with her.”

Zoe twisted away and asked with an innocence that she didn’t possess, “What has this being a wedding got to do with anything?”

“Oh, boy... Tristan put me on the ace table, didn’t he?”

“Yep,” chimed Ollie cheerfully, popping the P.

“Bastard! I’ll get him for this!”

Blithely, Ollie said, “If you want to get laid, you’ll have to go pull somewhere else.”

After that, Jonah couldn’t spare any time away from his self-appointed tasks of entertaining Connie and keeping Rupert under control, and by the time coffee came around, the table had retreated into two factions, the aces on one side and the colleagues on the other.

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AFTER COFFEE AND dark chocolate mints, waiters came around with filled champagne flutes in readiness for the speeches and toasts.

The speeches involved a lot of thanks and a selection of tame anecdotes, which made a few people titter. The story of Tristan and Matt's proposal wasn't mentioned, most likely because, even with its happy ending, it involved too much drama, shouting, and angst. Clare, who had some experience in the art of spinning out sketchy facts enough to fill a lecture, found herself awed by how long the speakers managed to make their meagre material last.

Eventually, the speeches ended, the last toast was made, and the glasses clinked together for the final time. Clare drained the dregs of her champagne and relaxed into her chair.

There was a second or two of quiet in the room before the buzz of conversations picked up again and the band began to play. The colleagues made a dash for the bar. They didn't invite any of the aces to join them.

"Oh, well," said Janice philosophically. "We tried to be friendly."

"Ladies and gentlemen...and assorted others," said the band's singer, mic in hand, "it gives me great pleasure to announce the happy couple's first dance!"

Clare clapped politely, as did the others. They twisted in their seats to watch Tristan and Matt shuffle around the dance floor to a song that imparted the message that you didn't have to "touch it"—whatever "it" was—to feel love. Clare wanted to laugh. Ollie and Zoe looked delighted.

Gradually, the dance floor filled with other people. When they lost sight of Matt and Tristan, they turned around again.

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“SOMETHING’S BEEN BOTHERING me,” said Ollie abruptly.

“What?” said Janice.

“You and Clare. Neither of you have ever struck me as being in the least bit fashionista, but you turned up wearing those.” Ollie gestured, waving their hand to take in Janice’s and Clare’s outfits. “I’ve seen the way you’ve been enjoying the compliments, but then you laugh as though you’re sharing some enormous joke. I don’t get it. Unless...” Ollie’s eyes narrowed, and their lips twitched. “You went to Preloved and Lovely!”

“You know about Preloved and Lovely?” asked Clare.

“Of course. The owner’s my godmother.”

Clare found she wasn’t surprised.

Further conversation was derailed by Teddy’s arrival, who, despite the encumbrance of her meringue-like dress, managed to clamber onto the empty chair next to Ollie. Teddy had broken away from Euphenia and had sought out her new best friend. She tugged on Ollie’s sleeve to attract their attention. The two of them began to whisper conspiratorially. Ollie looked up and said, “Anyone got some scissors handy?”

When nobody had, Ollie and Teddy settled for whispering some more.

Matt and Tristan, who had begun doing the rounds of the guests, appeared at table six. Teddy slid off her chair, making room for Tristan, and disappeared. Matt stood behind him, resting his hands on Tristan’s shoulders.

“How did you get on with the guys?” Tristan asked, gesturing towards the abandoned seats.

“Fine,” lied Zoe. “Rupert was high.”

Janice’s eyes widened. “Oh, my God! That’s what was wrong with him?”

Zoe and Ollie laughed good-naturedly, while Clare said, “Even I’d got that.”

Everyone looked at her.

“Oh, come on! I did a bit of pot in my student days. I know what a joint looks like!” She also knew what they smelled like, and the smell had made her feel almost nostalgic, but she didn’t bother mentioning that.

“How does it feel to be husband and husband?” asked Zoe.

“Good,” said Tristan, grinning at Matt, who nodded. “Although I don’t suppose it changes anything. We were living together, anyway.”

Matt shook his head. “It changes a lot of things: pension benefits... inheritance...authority to act as next of kin...”

“Yeah,” said Tristan. “All that stuff. But it won’t change us, right?”

“Right,” said Matt. “But marriage confirms who we are. And what we are to each other.” Matt and Tristan gazed into each other’s eyes.

“You two are such saps,” exclaimed Ollie, uncharacteristic warmth in their accusation. Clare, pleasantly fuzzy, only partly from the alcohol she’d drunk, agreed.

Then Jack bolted out of his seat and exclaimed, “Oh, God. What’s she doing here?”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

JACK STARED. CLARE, along with everyone else at the table, twisted around to see who had shocked him so much. Her mouth formed a big, silent, “Oh,” as she spotted Natalia. Why had she needed to look at all? Who else could have provoked that reaction?

Clare turned in time to see Jack give himself a good shake and pull himself together enough to sit down again, although maybe that was a charitable interpretation. More likely, his knees had given out. “I didn’t think,” he said. “I should have realised, but I didn’t... I mean... I didn’t expect to see her here. She wasn’t here earlier, was she?”

“What? Who?” asked Zoe.

Ignoring Zoe, Matt said tightly, through gritted teeth, “No. She wasn’t. She said she wasn’t coming.”

“Who?” demanded Zoe, a bit louder and more insistently this time.

Jack moved to stand again. “I shouldn’t be here!”

“Yes, you should!” Matt protested.

“But she’s your family, and me being here is all kinds of awkward.”

“You have as much right to be here as she has,” said Matt firmly. “More.”

“Are you sure?” said Jack. He sounded younger than he had done at any time since his reconciliation with the rest of the aces.

“Of course,” said Tristan, and with such authority that Clare wanted to hug him. “You’re our friend. We invited you because we want you here. Natalia is Matt’s family. We were obligated to invite her.”

“Plus, you didn’t RSVP no and then gatecrash the party anyway,” Matt said grimly. “I’m going to find out what the hell is going on.” He strode off.

Clare looked around again and found herself staring at Natalia. Natalia’s skirt was shorter than anyone else’s, and her neckline plunged far lower. Her dress showed off acres of skin that hinted at hours spent in a tanning salon. She glittered and twinkled with an abundance of costume jewellery. Her heels were high, her carefully coiffured hair hung in large, loose ringlets, and she was simpering, pointing, and pawing at a male guest, who was terrified by the attentions she was paying him.

Clare continued to watch, weirdly fascinated, for a few more moments before she used all her willpower to drag her eyes away.

She studied the others. Janice’s face was scrunched up as though she was trying to solve a tricky puzzle, Ollie was whispering and gesticulating frantically to Zoe, no doubt reminding her of the events of last July, and Jack was trying to look somewhere—anywhere—else, but his eyes kept being drawn towards...*her*.

“Is that what flirting is supposed to look like?” asked Janice doubtfully.

“Flirting?” asked Clare, glancing at Natalia. “Is that what she’s doing?”

“I think so,” said Janice.

Clare spotted Matt as he collared his mother, an aunt, and someone Clare thought had been introduced to her as a cousin. With Matt’s back to them, Clare couldn’t see him speak—not that it would have helped if she had. She didn’t know how to lip-read. Nor did any of the others. She did, however, see his aggressive arm movements and the angry set of his shoulders as well as the placating and cajoling gestures of the women, along with his mother’s not-at-all contrite expression.

When Matt rejoined them, his face was like thunder. “I’m sorry,” he said to Jack, the words out of his mouth before he’d drawn to a halt. “I never told the family exactly what happened last summer; I didn’t want to upset them. I still haven’t. Not today. Not in detail, anyway. I didn’t need to tell them before the wedding since Nat said she wasn’t coming. But apparently, she heard Stephan was here, and her evening suddenly became free.”

“Stephan?” asked Clare. “Oh, the ex-boyfriend.”

“Yes. She wants him back. Aunt Flora and Mum decided to play matchmakers. Mum said it would be fine for Nat to show up. They thought getting the two of them together at a wedding... What could be more romantic?” said Matt bitterly. “Mum and Flora arranged everything with the hotel. Didn’t bother to tell Tris or me, of course. Mum thought it would be a nice surprise for all concerned.”

“It’s certainly a surprise,” Jack muttered.

“Natalia is already more than halfway to drunk. I think she fuelled herself up with Dutch courage before she arrived.”

“I assume Stephan’s the one Natalia’s pawing,” said Ollie.

“No,” said Matt.

“No? Then where’s Stephan?” asked Clare.

Tristan pointed discreetly. “Over there. Tall, dark, broodingly handsome.”

Clare looked at the man Tristan was indicating. He was standing unnecessarily close to a brunette who was enjoying the invasion of her personal space.

“Also,” said Matt, “very hetero and very sexual. Very not Tristan’s type.”

“And, at the moment, very into my cousin Veronica,” said Tristan.

“Which is why Natalia’s making such a fool of herself with Kelvin. She thinks it’ll remind Stephan of what he’s been missing.”

Clare shook her head. People—some people—sexuals—some sexuals—were weird. Or maybe it was just Natalia.

To Jack, Matt said in a tone that was meant to be reassuring but that barely touched on being hopeful, “There are enough people here that you don’t need to have anything to do with her.”

“Plus,” said Janice, “you’re with all of us. You can still have a good time, even if she is here.”

Jack didn’t look convinced.

“C’mon,” said Zoe. “Let’s go dance. That’ll take your mind off things.” Ollie nodded, and they each grabbed one of Jack’s hands.

As they were about to head towards the stage, where the band was playing something with more beat than melody, Ollie turned around and said imperiously, “You too,” to Clare and Janice.

Janice tilted her head to one side, looked at Clare, and mouthed, “For Jack?”

Clare nodded infinitesimally and tagged along behind the rest of the group.

Clare lasted two and a half songs before her innate self-consciousness got the better of her. By that time, Jack was looking better. More than that, flanked by Ollie and Zoe, and jumping and flailing around, he might even have been enjoying himself.

Clare pantomimed some gestures to the others, trying to convey that she was going to go to the bar before heading back to their table. They must have caught at least the gist of the message since Zoe, Ollie, and Jack all nodded, and Janice followed her. By the time Clare glanced around again, Jonah, Rupert, and Connie had filled the space created by their departure.

Clare rested her hand on the bar, and as she waited to be served, she said to Janice, “You didn’t have to come with me.”

“I wanted to.”

“You looked like you were having a good time.”

“I’d be having a better one if I recognised any of the music.”

“I’m not sure I would. Dancing isn’t my thing. But at least I wouldn’t feel so ancient.”

“I’m not sure it’s an age thing,” said Janice, “so much as a cultural disconnect. Perhaps if we listened to a few more music stations and a little less Radio Four...?”

Clare laughed wryly. “Cultural disconnect, eh? Yeah, that’s a much more flattering interpretation than us growing old.”

They ordered drinks—Diet Coke for Janice and sparkling mineral water for Clare—and, on impulse, settled on bar stools, rather than retreating to their table.

Peter, from The Spinners’, said hello to them as he came to place an order and whispered that, in his professional opinion, the lager tasted like piss. He asked for a pint of the piss anyway.

“Has anyone seen Stephan?” shouted a female voice from nearby. The speaker giggled, and the hair on the nape of Clare’s neck prickled. Clare turned her head and spotted Natalia accepting a large balloon-shaped glass, filled with a clear liquid, ice, and lime, from one of the bar staff. Natalia took a hefty swig and wailed to anyone in earshot, “I’ve been looking all over for him. I wanna dance!”

“Stephan?” said another woman with polite disinterest, who was waiting to be served. “He’s around here somewhere.”

“Last time I saw him, he was with that relative of Tristan’s,” said her companion. “They’re outside, on the veranda. They were too busy keeping each other warm to worry about the cold, if you know what I mean.”

Even Clare knew what she meant.

Natalia tossed her head, flicking her hair over her shoulders. “Well! If he can hook up with a stranger, I’m sure I

can too!” She scanned the room in a predatory manner, drained her glass, set it down with a clatter, and strode off.

“Now what?” said Janice.

“She finds someone to have angry, meaningless sex with?”

“Oh.” There was an uncomfortable pause, and then Janice said, “So long as she keeps to strangers, and stays away from Jack.”

Relieved, Clare saw Natalia bypass the dance floor and make a beeline towards a cluster of guests that had congregated around the top table. Natalia barged into the group. Clare and Janice sat for a while, sipping on their drinks and watching as Natalia tried to work the crowd she had infiltrated. Natalia placed her hand on a man’s forearm.

“Looks like she’s got her claws into someone else,” said Clare.

“Phew,” said Janice, and Clare had to agree.

They let their attention drift onto other things. Sitting at the bar afforded them a reasonable view over the room and, as people came to claim drinks, they overheard snippets of conversation.

“What were they thinking, serving trout?”

“I like trout.”

“Chicken’s a much better option. Followed by profiteroles. Where were the profiteroles?”

“Uber for midnight...”

“Band’s pretty good.”

“Too modern for my taste.”

“What would you prefer to hear?”

“The Macarena. YMCA. Agadoo. You know, the classics.”

“I said they should have got a DJ...”

“Zoe’s not being interested in you has nothing to do with her—any of us—being ace! Not interested is not interested. Period.”

Clare hadn’t noticed the personnel change on the dance floor, so Ollie’s voice, from barely six feet away, made her jump. Judging by the expression on Janice’s face, Janice had also been taken by surprise.

Clare and Janice looked around to find Connie and Jack trying to order drinks while Ollie and Jonah faced off against each other and Zoe and Rupert looked on.

Clare and Janice listened for a few moments, long enough to catch the drift of the argument.

“But you’re not interested in anyone, any of you, are you? Without partners... intimacy...you must feel incomplete,” said Jonah. “You have no purpose in society without sex and reproduction.”

What was Clare supposed to do? Run away? Avoid getting involved? Continue to watch from the sidelines? Give Ollie moral support?

“Come on,” said Janice, sliding off her bar stool.

“What are you doing?” hissed Clare.

“Joining in.”

Clare and Janice hovered on the outer fringes of the group until Jack and Zoe stepped backwards to widen the circle and let them in.

In the end, neither Clare nor Janice needed to say anything, although they nodded a lot to reinforce Ollie's arguments.

Ollie stabbed the counter with their left forefinger as they hectored their audience, punctuating every point they made.

"If—and that's a huge if—we feel incomplete, it's only because society makes us feel that way. We shouldn't feel compelled to produce babies if we don't want to!" Ollie leaned forward, vehemence narrowing their eyes, their cheeks flushed, and enunciating so forcefully that beads of spittle exited their mouth with every vocal stop. Their Ps were particularly pronounced and wet, and Clare spotted two people, their faces wrinkled with distaste, try to discreetly wipe themselves down with the hotel's expensively heavy paper serviettes.

"Reproduction is a biological imperative of the species," said Jonah. "Don't you agree?" He leaned in close to Zoe and batted his eyelids at her. Apparently, despite his earlier lack of success, he'd returned for another go at pulling her.

"Who says we can't have babies if we want them? Some asexuals have sex so they can have a baby," said Zoe. Oh, dear. That wasn't going to help discourage him. Then again... "They mightn't enjoy it," continued Zoe, raking her eyes up and down Jonah's body disdainfully, "but it's a means to an end. Plus, there is always IVF, which takes away the need for a man entirely."

"Artificial insemination?" asked Connie, interested.

“Turkey basters?” shrilled Rupert.

“There’s also adoption,” said Jack.

“Not everyone has to reproduce,” said Ollie. “In fact, I think we shouldn’t. The world is already grossly overpopulated. Humans are a plague upon this planet.”

“God, you’re hot when you argue,” said Rupert, which shut Ollie up for all of three seconds.

“Ugh,” said Zoe, with a visible shudder.

“Wanna dance some more?” Rupert asked Ollie.

“No,” said Ollie tightly. “I’m going to sit down. A long way over there.” Ollie set off for table six.

“At least Ollie has managed to take Rupert’s mind off Connie,” said Jack, which won him a few appreciative chuckles.

Ollie heard, contorted their neck to look over their shoulder, and glared with enough intensity to wipe the smiles off everyone’s faces.

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“DID YOU ENJOY your argument?” asked Clare mischievously, once she and the rest of their group had caught up with Ollie.

Ollie glowered. “I walked away. I never walk away from an argument! I should go back and—”

There was a scream from somewhere across the room, followed by a screeching, female howl of “Theodora! What have you done!”

Everyone who was still sober enough to notice turned to see what the fuss was about. Several people, Clare and Ollie included, got to their feet and craned their necks to get a better look.

They got a glimpse of Euphenia dragging Teddy out of the ballroom by her wrist. As they reached the door, Teddy glanced backwards and gave someone a big grin and a thumbs-up with her free hand.

For a moment, Clare could have sworn Teddy was looking at her, but she realised who was far more likely to be worthy of such gratitude. Clare twisted towards Ollie, who was suddenly looking delighted, all argument-related angst forgotten. Trying, and failing miserably, to look and sound stern, Clare said, “What did you do?”

“Nothing much. I simply suggested, if we couldn’t cut the bow off that dress, Teddy might make sure they had to change out of it. It’s such a pretty dress. A large quantity of red wine down the front would soak and stain it beautifully.”

“Ollie!” exclaimed Clare and Janice together.

Clare added, “That’s terrible,” but Ollie wouldn’t be able to hear any censure in her words and wouldn’t have cared, even if they had.

Ollie shook their head. “What’s terrible is the way Teddy’s mother is trying to gender stereotype that child. If Teddy chooses to be female, that’s fine. But right now, Teddy is a fantastic tomboy, and they should be allowed the freedom to explore what that means, rather than being told how wrong it is to want to play with trains and footballs.” Ollie spoke with so much heat Clare was sure they were projecting their own

past hurts, a suspicion that was confirmed when Ollie said, “I hated dolls and pink when I was small, but my mother chose my bedroom’s colour scheme for me and didn’t listen when I said I wanted a cowboy outfit for Christmas.”

“What did you get instead?” asked Jack.

“A disgusting pink princess costume, its bodice covered with thousands of bloody sequins!”

Clare quirked an eyebrow. “Surely you can’t have hated sequins that much. I mean, look at you now!” She waved up and down, gesturing towards Ollie’s tux.

“This,” said Ollie archly, “is different. Those sequins were on a pink princess dress!”

Maybe one day Clare would ask what had upset Ollie most: that the present they had received hadn’t been a cowboy suit; that it had been a princess dress; that it had been pink; or that their mother hadn’t paid any heed as to what Ollie wanted. But today wasn’t the day to ask.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

THE EVENING PROGRESSED. Ollie, Jack, and Zoe returned to the dance floor. Janice and Clare stayed at their table, occasionally making small talk with other guests but more often happy to spend time on their own.

Clare said, "I need some fresh air."

Janice nodded. "Me too."

They wove their way to the French doors that led onto the veranda. Clare had to wrestle with the handle of the door, which she held open for Janice. She closed it behind them, and suddenly the fug of the ballroom was replaced by bitterly fresh air.

The double-glazing muffled the band; the cacophony of voices muted to a dull roar.

Janice shook her head experimentally. "I hadn't realised how loud it was in there."

"Me neither." Clare's ears buzzed with the aftermath of the noise.

Clare moved further into the darkness. As her eyes began to adjust, she saw they had the veranda to themselves. What had happened to Stephan and Veronica? Had they rejoined the party, or had they gone upstairs?

"The stars are beautiful," said Janice.

"H'm," agreed Clare vaguely, but her attention had been caught by the lingering scent of weed, the sound of running water in the fountain, and the distant bark of a dog. She didn't

form actual words, preferring to savour a few minutes of relative peace before venturing into the fray once more.

They stayed on the veranda until the chill got too much for them, at which point they headed inside.

When they returned to table six, all the original chairs were occupied and a few extra had been pulled over too. Ollie was holding court to a dozen or more guests, some seated and some standing.

“What do you think’s going on?” whispered Janice.

“Let’s find out.”

They moved over to stand next to Zoe, who acknowledged them with a nod, and began to listen.

“So, tell me, how does Santa alienate singletons?” demanded a member of the crowd.

“He is usually depicted as a married man, and he panders to families, particularly those with young children,” answered Ollie. “But, even for them, he’s hardly a great role model. Look how badly he treats Mrs Claus. All she’s ever allowed to do is stay home and make cookies!”

“Maybe she’s happy to stay home,” suggested someone. “Have you considered that her role as homemaker might be a positive lifestyle choice, not something imposed on her by society—”

“—or a coercive husband!” cried a second voice.

“Maybe Mrs Claus should have the balls to stand up for herself better!” shouted someone else, which provoked a few gasps and some laughter.

“I tell you,” said Ollie, “that heteronormativity is pervasive and invalidates us as people.”

“You’d like to see an asexual Santa?” That was Jonah’s voice.

“Or a gay, Black, female, or trans Santa, yes,” agreed Ollie, nodding.

Clare glanced at Janice. “You’ve got a weird expression on your face.”

“With a goofy smile,” interjected Zoe.

“What’s on your mind?” said Clare.

“Oh... Nothing much,” said Janice. “Only that sometimes Ollie says things that I didn’t know I’d been thinking.” Her smile widened into something close to a full-blown grin and her eyes twinkled. “Until this moment, I didn’t know how much I want an asexual Saint Nicola on top of my Christmas tree this year.”

By now, the crowd had swollen so much that the argument began to fragment. Clare caught disjointed snatches of conversation, but they made it hard to follow everything that Ollie and their opponents were saying.

“...doesn’t Santa have something to do with Sir Christmas?”

“Iceland doesn’t have Santa... Thirteen Yule lads, which must save Santa a few visits on Christmas Eve...”

“Didn’t Santa start out as a nature spirit?”

“...got sanitised into someone more palatable to the Christians...”

“Snowflake!”

“I’m not a snowflake. I’m just more woke than you!”

“Oh, my God!” gasped Zoe, catching Clare’s attention. “Did you hear that? Someone white, male, and over sixty said he was woke!”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” asked Clare at the same time as a woman behind her said disparagingly, “Must be a *Guardian* reader.”

Teddy reappeared. She was now wearing jeans and a T-shirt, and she looked happier, even if her T-shirt was pink, had frilly capped sleeves, and sported a glittering unicorn motif. She sidled up to Ollie and slid a small hand into Ollie’s larger one. Ollie glanced down and continued arguing.

Next to Teddy, Jeremiah held on to his sister’s other hand and sucked on his free thumb.

“Do you mind if I join you?” asked a voice from close by. Clare identified the newcomer as Kelvin. “I need to get away from that woman.” Clare followed his finger with her eyes; he was pointing at Natalia, who was hovering on the opposite edge of the crowd. Clare shifted slightly to make room for him next to her.

“This is silly. We were discussing what Santa represents, but now you’re discussing him as though he’s real,” said Connie, exasperated. “Santa’s not real! He doesn’t exist!”

“Santa isn’t real?” The wail came from Jeremiah and sliced through the hubbub like a cleaver through melted butter.

Into the silence came Teddy’s lofty, big sister voice. “Of course Santa’s not real. Only babies believe in Santa.”

This time, Jeremiah's wail took the form of an incoherent sob. He wrenched his hand free and ran away, screaming for his parents.

"Uh-oh," said Teddy, more exhilarated than repentant.

When someone mentioned Brexit, Santa's sleigh, and custom's controls, Clare knew the argument was running out of steam and began to lose interest.

As she took a step away, she was lured back by an angry woman snapping, "You've been a wicked girl! How dare you tell your brother that Santa isn't real!"

Euphenia had arrived, and she'd brought reinforcements in the form of her husband.

"They started it!" Teddy protested, gesturing towards the assembled adults.

"You didn't need to finish it! It'll be coal in your stocking this Christmas, and you should consider yourself lucky to get even that!"

"Mum!"

Euphenia scoured the crowd with angry eyes. Her gaze came to rest on Ollie. "I should have known you would be involved!"

"All I did was start the discussion. It's not my fault so many people joined in," said Ollie happily.

"Ladies!" yelled Gerald, which earned him a scowl from Ollie.

"I'm not a lady!" they snapped.

"That's for certain," grumped Euphenia.

There were a few sniggers and mutterings, and Gerald grew even angrier. “Time to break it up, everyone.”

“But we were just getting started!” protested Rupert, looking mutinous. Clare caught Ollie looking at him with something akin to admiration shining in their eyes.

“I said, ‘Enough’!” bellowed Gerald. Everyone stopped in their tracks. With the strains of a ballad from the 1980s playing in the background, Gerald lowered his voice and said, “You’re upsetting the kids. I’m all for a bit of spirited debate, but now’s not the time. Or place. So, please, save it for your bedrooms, journeys home, or Twitter!”

Chastened, the crowd began to disperse, but Natalia lingered. She leaned in close to Jack and cooed, “What did I miss?”

Jack stepped backwards, shrugging her off. Natalia stepped forwards. They looked as though they were taking the first steps of a rumba.

Janice intervened. “Jack, you promised me a dance...”

A flash of surprise flitted across Jack’s face, closely followed by understanding and relief. “Oh, yes. Come on then!”

Jack and Janice made a dash for the dance floor, leaving Natalia standing, flat-footed and scowling, in their wake.

Jack and Janice, faced with having to execute a slow dance, awkwardly held each other. Their postures rigid and a good six inches separating their torsos, doing their best not to look in each other’s eyes, they shuffled awkwardly among the other pairs, who were melding themselves together, bodies

squishing tightly, touching cheek to cheek or, in several cases, mouth to mouth. Some couples weren't even bothering to move their feet, settling instead for gently swaying, oblivious to the beat.

Janice and Jack endured two smoochy songs before returning to the table. By then, the first guests had left.

“Another drink, then go?” suggested Janice. Everyone agreed. Jack, Ollie, and Zoe took orders and headed for the bar.

“Uh-oh,” said Janice a few minutes later. “Trouble brewing at twelve o'clock.”

“What?” asked Clare.

“Natalia. She's making another beeline for Jack.”

“Doesn't that woman know when to give up? Should we do something, do you think?”

For a moment, Janice was torn, but she resettled into her seat. “It looks as though Ollie and Zoe have things covered.” Indeed, they drew closer to Jack, flanking him. Ollie crossed their arms over their chest and thrust their chin out. Zoe was only slightly less belligerent. Ollie and Zoe were letting Jack speak for himself, though, and he was doing a reasonable job of it. However, as soon as he had sent Natalia packing, and her back was turned, he took a long, deep breath. His bodyguards moved closer and began to rub his shoulders sympathetically.

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BY THE TIME they'd finished their drinks, the guests had thinned out noticeably, and those that remained were beginning to flag. One of Tristan's aunts, a lady with fat calves

and no ankles, had kicked off her pumps to air and ease her stockinged feet. Next to her, another relative had put her feet up on a chair; she had folded her hands over her ample stomach and closed her eyes and was managing to nap despite all the activity and noise. Her mouth hung open, ready to snore.

The group gathered their belongings and wedding favours, and, pausing long enough to say goodbye and thanks to the grooms, headed towards the exit.

There was a queue at the coat check, which made it easy for Natalia to corner them. “Where do you think you’re going, darling?” she purred as she placed a manicured hand on Jack’s shoulder. “I hope you weren’t trying to sneak out on me.”

Jack startled badly, but he tried to regain his composure. “Go away, Natalia. I told you, I’m not interested.”

Clare, Janice, and Ollie glared at her. Zoe stepped close to Jack and looked positively territorial.

“Wanna dance?” Natalia said. “I’m a great dancer.”

“No,” said Jack. “We’re leaving.”

“Come on.” Natalia grabbed his upper arm and began to pull. “The night is shtill...still...young. You can shtay a bit longer. One good smooch for old times sh..sake.”

“I said no,” said Jack, his voice rising, “and no means no!”

People began to stop and stare. They’d reached the front of the line, and Clare and Zoe, hoping for a quick and clean exit, grabbed everyone’s coats.

“No didn’t mean no last summer, did it?” Natalia asked, leaning in and breathing her words against his cheek. “I wore you down then; I can wear you down now.”

“No! Leave me alone!” He jerked away. His unexpected move, her high heels, and too much alcohol combined to unbalance Natalia, and she stumbled. She had to grab hold of the nearest person to stop herself from falling to the ground. Unfortunately, the nearest person was Ollie, who shoved Natalia away. Natalia staggered some more but managed to stay on her feet.

As Clare and Zoe handed out the coats, Janice moved in to flank Jack. The others closed in too. Their solidarity made Natalia laugh nastily.

“Let’s get out of here,” said Janice firmly. Rather than taking the time to put them on properly, they left their coats undone. Venturing out into the cold inadequately dressed was infinitely preferable to sharing air with Natalia any longer than they had to.

They jogged out of the front door and down the steps, wanting to get away without making the scene any worse, but anything remotely approaching subtlety was lost on Natalia. She followed them.

“Aw, c’mon, Jack. You know I’ll show you a good time!” she crooned as she scuttled alongside him. Jack tried to ignore her, but she continued her drunken wheedling as they reached the gravel. “We’ll have fun. Like before. You know you want to.”

As they neared the fountain, Jack stopped abruptly. He spun around, getting in Natalia’s face. “No!” snarled Jack.

“We won’t have fun. I don’t want to and, even if I did, I don’t think you are anything like as amazing as you seem to think.”

Natalia stopped cajoling and instead began to shout as his words got through to her. “How dare you! What do you know, anyway?”

“I don’t have anyone to compare you with, but I talked to my housemates and—”

“Ask anyone here... They’ll tell you...”

“He knows a lot, from the sounds of things,” said a man to Clare’s right. “The way I remember it, you were all take and no give.”

“Yeah,” chorused two or three others. The contretemps was attracting a sizeable audience.

“My God, Natalia!” exclaimed the man’s companion. “Are there any of the second cousins you haven’t slept with?”

“She’s done a few of the in-laws too,” said a female voice from somewhere towards the rear.

“She’s the reason we’re getting divorced!” announced a willowy and unnaturally blonde woman, who gestured between herself and the man beside her.

“Pity you didn’t mention that before they organised the seating plan. Or, better yet, before the invitations went out!” sniped another female voice.

As they rounded the fountain, Natalia grabbed Jack again, desperate, or desperate to save face, or something.

“Stay. Away. From. Me!” Jack pushed with all his sinewy might. For a second time, Natalia had to fight to regain her

balance. She tottered backwards until her heels hit the stone edge of the fountain. She teetered, her arms pin wheeling as she tried desperately to stay upright. Her efforts were in vain, and, with a splash, she toppled over into the water. The skin of ice smashed beneath her weight. She screamed.

Chaos ensued.

A few more gallant guests rushed forward to help her out of the water. Others ran towards the house, screaming for blankets. Someone—a man—called out for coats. “We need to keep her warm...get her inside...”

Nobody rushed to donate their clothing to the cause. Instead, people glanced from one to another, each hoping someone else would give up their garment.

After an age, Clare took off her overcoat and stepped forward.

“Thanks,” said one of Natalia’s saviours. He wrapped it around her shoulders, which were juddering with cold. Her hair was wet and plastered to her head. Water streaked her make-up and green sludge clung to her skin.

“Oh, well,” muttered Clare to herself, “I never much liked that coat, anyway.”

Further assistance arrived in the form of several hotel staff, and the crowd doubled in size as more guests came out to investigate the uproar.

Clare rubbed her arms against the cold. Perhaps, instead of waiting around for her coat’s return, she should abandon it. Could they make a run for it before anything else happened?

Matt's mother arrived, rounded on the aces, and began to yell. "How dare you cause a scene at my son's wedding!"

"Now, hold on a minute! We didn't start it! Natalia did!" said Janice angrily.

Jack looked ready to bolt, but he held his ground to apologise politely and profusely. However, before he'd finished forming his first sorry, Janice wagged a finger at him to make him stop. "Don't you apologise! You have nothing to apologise for!"

A volley of conflicting opinions came from the crowd, some in support and some against.

"How dare you!" shouted Matt's mother again, now rounding on Janice. Clare stepped in close, offering moral support. Throwing her vitriol more widely, Matt's mother screamed, "How dare any of you!"

Matt and Tristan came running and immediately got the measure of the situation. "Shut up, Mother! Shut up!" yelled Matt. "It's not Jack's fault! Believe me when I tell you, Nat had it coming!"

There followed more screaming and yelling, more accusations and acrimony. Someone swapped Clare's coat for a couple of blankets and held it out. Clare took it gingerly, sure it was now unwearable, and tried to hold it away from the fabric of her suit.

Flanked by staff, Natalia was led away, and the crowd began to break up.

Ollie's uncharacteristic silence throughout the whole debacle was explained when they lowered their phone and said

joyfully, “That’s going on YouTube!”

“Come on,” said Janice, with a sigh. “Let’s go find the car.”

*

THE SAAB WAS covered in swirling, feathery patterns of ice, and Janice had to run the engine, crank the heater to maximum, and scrape all the windows and the windscreen.

Clare dumped her damp coat in the boot and shivered as she clambered into the front passenger seat. She leaned forward to warm her hands against the air vents.

They closed the doors and buckled up. Janice put the car into reverse.

Janice was manoeuvring around the building when she had to stop to make way for some pedestrians. As they drew level with the car, Clare recognised Natalia, who was wrapped in a hospital ward’s worth of blankets, flanked by a couple of her relations.

Natalia recognised them too. She glared for a second and began to shout. Her words were muffled by the glass, but her body language and her contorted face screamed obscenity. The carload of aces laughed uproariously at her impotent rage, which only made the string of epithets worse.

Janice set the car into motion again, crunching gravel beneath its tyres. Jack rolled down a window, letting Natalia’s “Fucking bastards, the lot of you!” into the car. He gave her the finger, and if that finger happened to be the one wearing his ace ring, that made the moment even sweeter.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“YOU WENT TO a gay, asexual wedding,” said Clare’s mother during their next phone call. The conversation, which was going about as well as Clare had expected, made Clare want to tear her hair out.

“Yes.”

“With Janice.”

“Yes.”

“A gay, asexual wedding.”

“Yes!”

“Well? Which is it? Was the couple gay or asexual?”

Clare took a deep breath. She enunciated every syllable more carefully than necessary. “Matt and Tristan are homoromantic asexuals. They have romantic feelings for each other, but neither of them is interested in sex.”

“Homo...romantic.”

“Yes.”

“And you...?”

“Aromantic asexual.”

“But you’ve been staying with Janice for ages now. That has to mean something.”

“It means Janice and I are friends. We have separate bedrooms. There’s no kissing or cuddling, although there may be the occasional platonic hug.”

“You’re not a closeted lesbian?”

“No!”

“You’re sure about that? We wouldn’t mind.”

When Clare managed to get off the phone five minutes later, she gratefully accepted the glass of Merlot Janice poured for her.

“Everything okay?”

Now the call was over, Clare no longer had to contain her frustration. She managed to sigh, groan, and shrug in one exasperated gesture. “Mum wants me to be a lesbian. Actually, she’d like me to be married to a lovely man and pop out lots of cute grandkids. But if she can’t have that, me being a lesbian would be better than me being nothing.”

“She thinks you’re nothing?”

“I think so, yeah.”

“She’s wrong. You’re a lot of things, and nothing isn’t one of them.”

Clare wasn’t sure what Janice meant by that, but when she tried to ask, Janice brushed away her questions with a wave of her hand.

*

DESPITE HER RECENT adventures, Clare still wasn’t out at work and didn’t want to be. Fear held her back, but she wasn’t sure what she was frightened of. What she did know was that her fear made her approach Asexual Awareness Week with all the stealth and cunning of a guerrilla fighter.

She set her alarm on Monday morning for a full hour and a half earlier than usual, and she made it to the university by

eight o'clock. Defiantly, sneakily, she made her way along corridors and between buildings, thumbtacking posters onto pin boards as she went.

By eight forty-five, she had exhausted her materials. She bought herself a well-deserved coffee from somewhere that wasn't Beans Are Us and arrived at her desk around her usual time.

As the day progressed, Clare grew more satisfied than she would have believed possible; seeing people reading the posters gave her a frisson of nervous pleasure. She smiled to herself.

She had done this.

She. Had done. This.

She was proud of what she had done.

She was still feeling in a celebratory mood when, late that evening, she met Janice at Morreli's.

They had returned to the restaurant a few times since their first visit, so Lazlo greeted them with the genial familiarity he reserved for his favourite regulars. He showed them to a table next to a radiator and recommended the steak and ale pie from off the specials board.

Once they were settled, wine and starters—soup for Janice, and terrine and toast for Clare—in front of them, Janice said, “There's something I've been wanting to raise with you for a while. Ever since the wedding. Before even.”

Janice sounded unusually tentative, which made Clare worry. “What is it?”

“Our living arrangements.”

“I’m sorry. I should have moved out weeks ago.”

“No!” exclaimed Janice, her adamant protest taking Clare—and the people at the next table—by surprise.

“What?” said Clare blankly.

“I mean,” said Janice, flustered, “we get along okay, don’t we? You like staying with me, don’t you?”

“Yes! Too much. That’s why I’ve been procrastinating. I’m too comfortable at your place.”

Janice beamed. “I thought so!”

“You don’t mind?”

“No. I’ve been thinking. Maybe we should make the arrangement permanent.”

“Permanent, how?”

“To be honest, I can’t imagine living in that house without you.” Janice leaned forward and spoke with a quiet sincerity. “I want to promise to love you in a totally platonic way, to be a good friend, to never kiss or have sex with you, through sickness and in health, till death us do part.”

“That’s the most delightfully aromantic thing I’ve ever heard!” declared Clare, and a burst of warm emotion bloomed in the middle of her chest. She wanted to laugh and cry. Tears of joy pricked at the corners of her eyes.

“That’s a yes, then?”

“Yes,” said Clare, suddenly and intensely serious.

“So, it’s official. We’re in a QPR?”

“I think so.”

They stared at each other for a few seconds. Why did everything feel exactly the same between them when everything had changed? Clare blanched and said, “Oh, God. Now Mum’s never going to believe we’re not lesbians!”

They laughed hysterically and for long enough that their neighbours glowered and began to mutter deliberately loudly about manners and the impossibility of eating in peace.

*

THE POSTERS WERE still up next morning, and seeing them again reignited Clare’s pride, only now that happiness was mingling with the joy she got from her domestic arrangements.

Her good mood lasted well into the afternoon, when she went to collect some printing from the departmental office. Her mood soured slightly when she bumped into Hugo Atkinson in the corridor close to Ben Duncan’s office and curdled further when she caught sight of what he had in his hands: a wodge of the asexuality posters, which he had ripped down. He held them out and shook them in Clare’s face.

“Have you read this rubbish?” Atkinson didn’t wait for an answer. “What is asexuality? Someone who feels no sexual attraction. We used to call women like that frigid, and tell ’em to get over themselves. All this political correctness... I call bullshit.”

Clare pursed her lips and, while she tried to formulate an appropriate response, Hugo continued, “We shouldn’t mollycoddle students who can’t be normal. That’s not our job. That’s what the student counselling service is for.”

“So,” said Clare carefully, “you’re telling me that we shouldn’t care about our students. They should be ‘normal’, whatever that means, and everything that deviates from ‘normal’ is a matter for counselling?”

“She gets it,” said Atkinson, slow clapping Clare mockingly. “Besides, this isn’t even a real thing!”

“What do you mean?” asked Clare with forced calm.

“It’s not one of the protected characteristics. It’s not enshrined in equality legislation.”

“You’re saying, if there is no law covering it, it can’t be real?”

“Exactly!” exclaimed Atkinson, with the satisfaction of someone who believed he had won an argument.

“Following that line of logic, you’re saying that homosexuality didn’t exist until someone wrote a law about it.” Clare ploughed on, not waiting for him to answer. “Of course homosexuality existed! Just because asexuality isn’t yet recognised in law doesn’t stop it being real!”

“Rubbish. Everyone wants sex. It’s human nature. In my day—”

“In your day, gay sex was illegal, racism was acceptable, and Britain ruled over a mighty empire. Got it,” said Clare drily.

“Don’t try to be smart. It doesn’t suit you. Besides, I was born in 1963, years after the partition of India, and well after the empire had had its day.”

Clare suppressed an urge to laugh; his denial hadn't been much of a denial. His objection was based on dates, not because her assessment of his values was fundamentally wrong.

"Anyone would think you condone this garbage!" He brandished the posters again.

"I do." She braced herself. "I'm the one who put them up. I don't appreciate your removing them. Asexual Awareness Week isn't over yet."

"You put them up? Why?"

Clare raised her eyebrows. "Why do you think?"

Atkinson stared at her. His expression shifted. Clare thought the proverbial penny had dropped, but then he said, "You can't face the fact you're too ugly to have sex, so this is your way of justifying why nobody wants to do it with you."

"How dare you! Not that it's any of your business, but I've turned down my share of offers. Besides, there are plenty of 'ugly' people who find people to have sex with!"

Why was she arguing with him? How had he managed to get under her skin so easily? His opinions were beneath contempt. They didn't matter, except they did. His opinions didn't exist in isolation. Others shared them and, for years, she had unwittingly taken them on board and allowed them to undermine her self-worth.

Atkinson stood in front of her, a physical manifestation of the heteronormative hegemony wrapped in a big, bright, misogynistic bow, the manifestation of everything she had spent the better part of the last year learning to rebel against.

He, and people like him, were part of the reason why she'd needed to plaster the notice boards with the awareness posters in the first place.

He was the enemy.

Something deep inside her broke free. "You, and people like you, are exactly why we need to celebrate difference," she declaimed. "Why we need to educate people, to promote visibility, and to support our students who might feel confused, isolated, or alone. The ignorance of people like you is why we need things like Pride and, yes, Asexual Awareness Week."

"I can't believe even you would buy into this claptrap." He rapped the posters with the knuckles of his free hand. "It's a fad put about by the millennials."

The hour bell rang, announcing the end of lectures, and the corridor filled with people, all in a rush to be somewhere else. Clare stepped sideways to let them pass. Atkinson mirrored her movements and, without missing a beat, they continued to argue. She stepped forward, thrusting a finger towards his chest. She was leaning into him. He was leaning into her, his eyes narrowed, his chin jutting out, and tiny bits of foam caught in the corners of his mouth. She couldn't tear her eyes away from the spittle, fascinated and revolted in equal measure.

"I'm not a millennial. But you know what? Even if all this asexuality stuff is, as you put it, a fad of the millennials, I for one will be forever grateful to them. They've helped me to find self-understanding and acceptance. I wish I'd known years ago what I know now."

“Denial isn’t understanding, and that’s all this is. You’re hiding behind a label, instead of facing up to a deeper problem. You need medical help or therapy or—”

“I can’t believe you! Society is changing! Our understanding is evolving! You’re supposed to be at the cutting edge of radical thought, but I doubt you have entertained an original idea since 1986!”

“How dare you!” spluttered Atkinson.

“Easily!”

“Quiet! The pair of you!” Jolene Dookhran had come out of Ben’s office.

Clare snapped her mouth shut in midsentence and noticed belatedly several doors that had previously been closed were now ajar, and her colleagues were peering around them. A dozen students were also standing, flat-footed and open-mouthed, staring at Atkinson and Clare.

Her face burned.

Jolene grabbed Clare’s sleeve and pulled her into the office. To Ben, she snapped, “You calm her down. I’ll take care of everyone else.”

Jolene stomped out of the door, and Clare heard her shout, “All right, everybody! Show’s over!” before Ben closed it.

*

“OHMYGOD, OHMYGOD, OHMYGOD!” Clare stood, her hands jangling at her sides. “I just outed myself!”

“Yeah, you did!” Ben crowed delightedly, raising his hand to offer her a high five. “Best show the department has seen in

years!” Clare glared at him, giving him what she hoped was a withering look. He refused to be withered, but he did lower his hand. “You know, sometimes I wondered whether you were your typical closeted lesbian feminist, but this is so much better!”

“Better?”

“Not so clichéd. I should have known you’d do something original.”

Was that supposed to be a compliment? “Everyone heard!”

“Maybe not everyone. Don’t worry, though; I’m sure anyone who missed out on your performance will hear about it by morning.”

Clare’s glare grew fiercer. “You’re. Not. Helping!”

“You make it sound like it’s a big deal.”

“It is a big deal!”

“Oh,” said Ben, drawing out the syllable as though that surprised him. He began to think beyond his own amusement. “I’m sorry. Sit down and I’ll get you...something. I’d offer you coffee, but you’re wound tight enough already. Glass of water, maybe? A paper bag, in case you need to hyperventilate?”

“Water sounds good...”

“Water. Right. I’m on it.” He trotted off, leaving Clare alone. His office was quiet and still, and the silence was uncomfortably loud, blotting out everything else. She slumped into his ancient visitor’s chair, rested her head against its backrest, and closed her eyes.

She had almost stopped trembling by the time Ben returned, and her hand shook only slightly as she took the glass he offered her.

He squatted beside her and peered into her face. He waited for her to take a sip and lower the glass before he said, “Better?”

She nodded. “I think so.”

“Good. I’ve got a message. Jolene wants to see you in her office at nine thirty tomorrow morning.”

Suddenly, Clare found she needed both hands to hold the glass steady.

*

AS SOON AS Clare had recovered sufficient composure, she left the department.

Janice knew something was wrong as soon as she realised that Clare had got home before her. She didn’t even put her bags down before she asked, “What happened? What are you doing here at this hour?”

“I—” Clare didn’t know how to begin.

Janice considered her carefully. “What’s wrong?”

“I—” Clare tried again. “I’m in trouble.”

Janice nodded and said, “I want you to tell me all about it, but can you hold off long enough for me to make some tea? You look like you need it.”

“Can you lace it with whisky?”

“I hope that’s a joke,” said Janice, worried.

Five minutes later, armed with tea and biscuits, they made their way into the living room. Janice sat in her favourite chair. She waved at Clare, inviting her to make herself comfortable on the sofa, but Clare was too tense to sit.

“Okay, so what’s got you so het up?” Janice eyed Clare over the rim of her mug as she drank.

Clare’s explanation was hesitant at first, but, after a few sentences, words poured out of her. While Clare paced back and forth along the hearth rug, wringing and waving her hands, Janice drank and nibbled on several of the I-hope-these-will-make-you-feel-better ginger nuts Clare had yet to touch. Clare told her about the posters, about her confrontation with Atkinson, and about her subsequent conversations with Ben.

“I asked Ben how long they had been listening before Jolene intervened,” Clare said morosely. “He said, ‘Long enough.’ Bloody man grinned, like it was the funniest thing he’d ever heard. His eyes twinkled!”

“What do you think’ll happen now?”

“If Ben’s right, Atkinson’ll get sent on an equalities training course. Again.”

“And you?”

Clare collapsed into the huge fireside armchair that Janice still thought of as her father’s, and said, “I’m going to get fired, aren’t I?”

“Why? You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Yelling at a colleague in a corridor isn’t wrong?”

“It’s not like you hit him, is it?”

“No. But I got in his face.”

Janice’s eyebrows rose. “That I’d have liked to see.”

“Not helping,” muttered Clare.

Janice lowered her eyebrows, considered for a moment, and said, “Fair enough. Okay. Try this... You didn’t assault him, so what you did probably wasn’t gross misconduct.”

“Probably?”

“I’m not an expert, so I’m guessing.”

“You think I need an expert?”

“I think you need to wait and see what happens tomorrow and then, if you need it—which I’m sure you won’t—get expert advice.”

Clare wanted desperately to believe her. She needed to grab at any and every scrap of reassurance available to her.

“At most you’ll get suspended while there’s an investigation, and you might get a warning or something. But I don’t see the university firing you. Even if it did, it wouldn’t be the end of the world.”

“It’d be the end of my world,” said Clare gloomily.

Janice shook her head. “You’re being melodramatic. Look at Ollie. Their world didn’t stop with suspension from school. If you believe Ollie, it was the making of them.”

“I’m a bit old to reinvent myself, don’t you think?”

“Nonsense. I’m older than you, and I’m a born-again shop manager. I wouldn’t have dreamed that was possible even six

months ago. You'll be fine, no matter what happens tomorrow."

"Thanks." What would her life be like without the university at its centre? But Janice was right. Whatever happened, she'd get through it.

Maybe Janice read her mind because she said, "Whatever happens, we'll get through it together."

*

CLARE SLEPT BADLY. At seven o'clock, she gave up tossing and turning, and got up. She made herself some tea, which she didn't finish, and some toast, which, once on her plate, she couldn't stomach. She paced around the ground floor, nervously killing time until she needed to head out.

She spent the bus ride into town chewing nervously on her lower lip and tangling and untangling her fingers. Her vital organs played tag with one another.

Her heart was racing when, at nine twenty-nine, she forced herself to brace her shoulders, straighten her spine, and knock on Jolene Dookhran's door.

"Come in," said Jolene.

Clare crept forward into the room.

"Sit." Jolene waved towards a low-slung armchair. The chair, its twin, which Jolene favoured for herself, and the coffee table were new since Buonamici's day. So was the rest of the furniture and, even after a couple of month's occupancy, Clare fancied the smell of fresh paint still lingered in the office.

Once they were both seated, Jolene said, “Tell me, where do you think your career is going?”

Clare groaned. “I was right. You are going to fire me.”

“That’s not what I had in mind, no,” said Jolene.

Clare’s head jerked up. “You’re not going to fire me?”

Jolene shook her head, and Clare’s disbelief—and confusion—grew. Jolene’s lips twitched with the hint of an amused smile. “The university wants to set up a multi-disciplinary research centre. Something around orientation and gender studies. I’d been wondering who to nominate from the history department as co-director. Then, yesterday...”

There was a pregnant pause while Jolene waited for the implication to sink in. Clare’s mouth opened and closed wordlessly. “You mean...” She flapped her right hand around, gesturing vaguely towards herself.

“You. Yes. I’d been thinking I might have to do it myself, but I think you could bring the passion that the role needs.”

“But...I’m still new to all this...queer...stuff. Surely you can get someone more qualified than me?”

“You’re open-minded. You’re a trained historian. Your current research is a bit stale. I’ve already hinted at the need for you to develop a new specialism. I can’t think of anyone better. Can you?”

Clare opened and closed her mouth once...twice...a third time. Then she clamped her jaw firmly closed so it wouldn’t drop a fourth time.

Her immediate instinct was to refuse, to say she had nothing to contribute. But she had been reading everything about queer theory she could lay her hands on, hadn't she? She had been listening and watching and learning and experiencing and... And she had been wondering about the direction in which she wanted to take her research next.

She thought about her colleagues. Who else was there to represent the history department, if not her? Not Hugo Atkinson, that was for sure.

Clare wasn't certain she was the best person for the job, but she wasn't the worst, either. "What would it involve?"

Jolene explained, and as she talked, Clare not only relaxed, but she also found herself feeling enthused in a way she hadn't in months, years even. Maybe she hadn't been this excited since she'd fallen in love with the subject of her PhD research.

Well before the end of Jolene's speech, Clare knew that she was going to accept the role.

"...so, I'll put your name forward, shall I?" said Jolene. It didn't sound like a question, but it didn't sound like a command either. It sounded like an inevitability.

"Yes," agreed Clare.

"Good."

"Now, about yesterday..."

Clare tensed again, but she told herself, whatever was coming, it wasn't going to be anything like as bad as she had feared. She had a job, and it was even better than the one she'd had before.

“I think I owe you an explanation,” said Jolene.

“Huh?”

“I could have stepped in earlier, but I wanted to hear what you both had to say.”

“Why?”

“I’d never heard anyone call Hugo out on his bullshit before.”

“Oh.”

“It made for a refreshing change.” Then Jolene said, “I’m bi, of course.”

“Are you?”

“I don’t broadcast it, but I don’t hide it either. So, when you talked about difference and education and pride, you were speaking for me as much as you were speaking for yourself. I might not approve of how you said it, but I love that you did.”

There was another pause while Clare let Jolene’s words sink in. She dared to say, “I have the feeling you used me.”

“Perhaps I did. A bit. I’m sorry about that, but it was in a good cause.”

Clare lifted her eyebrows, wordlessly asking for a better explanation.

“For a long time, Atkinson was a name. But his reputation has been declining in recent years, and now he’s more of a liability than an asset. His attitudes and behaviour yesterday made that clear. It helped me to bring my concerns into focus, and it brought his failings out into the open. As you must know, one of the reasons I was appointed was because I sold

the powers that be on a vision that involves reconfiguring the department and reinvigorating our research strategy. Atkinson needs to shape up and deliver if he wants to stay. If not, and if I can create a solid case for change, I may be able to make Atkinson redundant.”

Jolene stood and walked over to her desk. Was this Clare’s cue to leave? Apparently not. Jolene picked up a wad of paper and returned to her seat. “I’ve been looking at these.” She placed the paper on the coffee table and pointed. Clare recognised the pile as the posters Hugo had confiscated the day before. “Now, tell me about this panel.”

So, Clare did.

“Are you going to talk?” asked Jolene.

“I wasn’t planning to.”

“You should.”

*

“I’M SORRY WE ruined your wedding,” said Jack the following evening.

Once again, the aces were gathered around Janice’s dining table. Ostensibly, they’d got together to put the final touches in place for the discussion panel. However, all they’d done so far was eat too many mince pies and listen to and gasp at Tristan and Matt’s stories of Paris and their close encounters with the *gilets jaunes*. Now they were turning their attention towards the fiasco the wedding had turned into.

“Are you kidding?” said Tristan. “You didn’t ruin anything. We got to say our vows in front of friends and

family. The food was amazing. And, thanks to you and Nat, everyone'll remember the wedding for years to come."

"Yeah," said Jack morosely. "For all the wrong reasons."

"Nonsense," said Matt. "Besides, what wedding goes off without a bit of drunken mayhem?"

"Most of them?" suggested Janice wryly.

Tristan shook his head. "If you think that, you've been going to the wrong weddings. Seriously, though, between Matt and me, we've got siblings and cousins coming out of our ears. It's extraordinarily hard to make weddings memorable in our families."

"An asexual wedding isn't memorable enough?" asked Clare.

"No," said Matt. "But a ding-dong fight about the existence of Santa, the revelation of a host of family scandals, skeletons escaping out of closets, and a man-eating cousin landing in a fountain? That's memorable. Okay, so Euphenia and Nat may never speak to us again, but that's no real hardship. Some of the photos on Instagram were amazing, and a couple of videos went viral."

Ollie grinned. "I've never had so many likes or shares in my life."

"Well, if you're sure," said Jack, still doubtful.

"We're sure. Although, we're curious to know what you're going to do for an encore."

"I have no plans."

They all laughed.

“In other news,” said Janice, “Clare’s been having an eventful week.”

“We both have,” said Clare.

“True, but all I did was invite you to enter into a QPR. You had a slanging match at work. And—”

“Wait,” interrupted Tristan excitedly. “A QPR. You two...?”

“Yes,” said Clare. Her cheeks warmed.

When all the ensuing hugs and congratulations were exhausted, Ollie said, “Now tell us about the slanging match!”

“I thought Jolene was going to fire me,” said Clare at the end of her account.

“But?”

“She offered me a promotion instead. Well, kind of. Typical university, there’s no extra money, but it comes with a lot of prestige and a reduced teaching load.”

“What’s the job?”

“Co-director of a new research centre. By the way, I changed my mind.”

“About what?”

“About the panel. If it’s not too late, I want to be on it.”

*

PLASTIC CHAIRS HAD been set out in neat lines in preparation for the arrival of the audience. Tristan, Matt, and Ollie had managed to coax the antiquated audio-visual system into operation, and Clare still hadn’t worked out what she was

going to say. How would she begin? Was there any way to start with a joke?

As the audience drifted in, Clare took her seat on the stage. She spotted Bobby and Louisa, who were standing at the rear of the hall with Jolene Dookhran and Ben Duncan. Apparently, Bobby and Jolene already knew each other, which, given they undoubtedly ran in similar professorial circles, shouldn't have been surprising, and they introduced their partners to each other. As Janice walked past, Louisa snagged her arm and introduced her to everyone else.

More people filed in. From their ages, Clare suspected a high proportion of attendees were students. She recognised a few faces, but most were strangers.

Clare had invited her parents. She had hoped they would come, and she would be able to combine the opportunity to educate them with the news she and Janice were now in a QPR. However, her parents had claimed they had a prior engagement they were unable to cancel at such short notice. Clare promised herself she would tell them everything later, when she had the energy to have yet another "Yes, Mother, I'm still asexual; no, Mother, I'm not a lesbian" conversation.

Maybe Mum would be happy for her, anyway, because she had found someone to spend her life with.

Bobby Leyton had come because he wanted to learn more and because he wanted to support students like Jack. Louisa, who had been with Clare on her journey of self-discovery from the start, was more curious about Clare's friends than about asexuality. Jolene Dookhran had come as an ally, and

Ben... Ben had most likely come along hoping to be entertained.

Clare glanced sideways at Matt, Tristan, Jack, and Ollie, who were sharing the platform with her, and at Zoe, who was hovering in the wings.

Clare experienced a moment of vertigo as the different parts of her life, which she had juggled to keep separate, came together. No longer would she show people only fragments of herself as she had done for so long. Now she could be fully herself with everyone she knew.

Janice closed the double doors at the back of the hall and gave the panellists a double thumbs up. The house lights dimmed over the audience, and spots lit the stage.

Matt stepped forward to introduce the session and kicked off their presentations by describing his experiences. Next, Tristan talked. Then Jack, who spoke with confidence and conviction, stepped up.

At last, it was Clare's turn.

She stood and walked to the mic. She looked out across the sea of faces. Through the glare of the lights, she saw Louisa and Janice wave. Clare smiled, and suddenly she found her words.

“Hello. My name is Clare, and I'm here to tell you why next year is going to be the best year of my life.”

Afterword

Friends without Benefits is set pre-Covid, in and around fictional versions of Manchester and Scotland.

While some of the story's places and organisations exist in our world, most do not. For example, while research groups at universities in the area focus on aspects of the LGBTQ+ experience, the group mentioned in this novel is not modelled on them. Similarly, all the characters are fictitious, no matter how much I wish some of them were real.

AVEN, The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (www.asexuality.org), does exist in our world, though, where its forums have upwards of 145,000 registered users. And, yes, when I first posted a message on the site, I was deluged by virtual cake.

Asexual Awareness Week is also real, although it takes place in October, not December.

The meet-up group in the story is a figment of my imagination; however, meet-ups happen across the UK and beyond. Thanks to meet-ups, I have taken part in activities I might not have otherwise considered, marched in several Prides, and made new friends. If you are tempted but nervous about reaching out to your nearest group, I heartily recommend giving it a try.

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About Evelyn Fenn

I lived in five different cities, spanning two continents, before leaving crowds and commuting behind and settling somewhere that official statistics describe as “Very Remote Rural”.

I have made up stories for as long as I can remember, and I have been writing them down for almost as long. I cut my creative writing teeth on fan fiction in the days of paper fanzines and, later, online. I had fun but eventually grew tired of playing in other people’s sandpits. Turns out, it’s more fun to create sandpits of my own.

I have worked in the public, private, and voluntary sectors, with roles ranging from number crunching and lecturing to mucking out cowsheds and toilet cleaning. I currently hold down a day job while daydreaming of writing full time.

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